Abstract—MERCY in LOVE:

Mercy In Love is a group of five novels—219000 words— which group’s fundamental theme is love; an infinite condition creation holds within its breast, speaking to us with compassion; universal love. Each novel is like a chocolate brownie—short but rich, and like a chocoholic you will want another one. The volumes are multi-cultural, character driven, and often linked to metaphysical concepts and current events. The underlying elements are philosophically Eastern, such as Zen or Taoism, written in a Western voice for a Western audience. The author's prose is unsparingly honest. Mercy In Love fits well in literary, inspirational, and literary leaning towards mainstream. Additionally, using an angel as a strong constant protagonist to alter the mundane reality of life can be speculative and mysterious fantasy in fiction without being dark; in such a respect, a significant portion of this work is positive speculative fantasy. The prose flavors are poetic, jazz, and metropolitan.
MERCY IN LOVE; VOLUME ONE:

The Net Worth of Max

Greenbaum
AUTHOR'S NOTE

In memory of artist David Roth; AKA Big Dave, Hot Dog Dave, The King of Sunset Boulevard, Saint George.

Limited portions of James Baldwin's dialogue were culled from multiple news media sources filmed and broadcast internationally between the 1950s and his death in early December of 1987.

I'd like to say that there are no such things as mean streets. They simply witness. I am here simply to witness. The street knows no race nor religion. It is not an issue of Black or White. It is the choice we face to teach our progeny love or hate. I am here to discover my truth. But what is discovering one's truth worth if you cannot shout it from the rooftops and share it with your fellow sojourners?

As my spiritual friend and mentor, eden abbez [sic], often said, "May manifold divine blessings be yours, and, may you dream the dream that the dreamers dream."

YB
Los Angeles, California, 2022

DEDICATION

For those younger than I, you are born worthy and inherit greatness. For She Who Spreads Light, when I was nothing, had nothing, you cleaned me up, sobered me, and brought the will to live to my immediate attention.
EPIGRAPH

". . . Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
...And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume? . . ."
~Excerpt, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot

"Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge." ~Paul Gauguin
"What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, literature." ~Henry Miller
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DESPERATE QUOTES—1

*Life,* Jimmy thought, *is all about forgetting.* Throwing one leg loosely over the other, angling his frail rickety-stickety frame in the chair, Jimmy continued reading a book of poetry by Maya Angelou. He read moving beautiful large, soulful, brown eyes cast like deep wells in thin skin blacker than asphalt. A turn of the page. A grin, wondrous and toothy. No grin without teeth. No teeth without lips. Creation ringing. All things begetting all things according to the universal design; from seed to forest, note to symphony, the single cell to the sentient being, from the simple to the complex, creation ringing.

"Why indeed..." Jimmy spoke to the mist, "am I in my right mind, baby? Reading. Really, marvelous stuff." He rang clear. Not metaphorically unblemished, but actually empty of mortal waste, a literal clarity of the corpse he once fashioned in high rise America, dusty Istanbul, foggy Paris by the Seine. Inhaling each cigarette and drink, throwing every temper tantrum, accepting each hand-out, every loaf of bread, using all fights won and lost he wrought his body, cutting into it, drawing the map inroad by inroad connecting himself, one light composed of an infinitude of cosmological luminosity. He perceived only as Jimmy then, an aspect of the universe spying on itself, forgetting that he was the complete universe playing a game, dividing itself into the observer and the observed, its map a lifeline between two pieces of a broken whole, as we all play universal aspects composing and navigating the great map.

Another turn of the page and a full-relaxed breath. *Clarity,* he thought, *is better late than never.* Being a creature in concert with the all and everything, clarity often hung out of reach, an impossible corporeal demand for his entire mortal existence. The ofay world claimed insignificantly brief periods of peace, but a brother, if another brother were beaten and imprisoned or worse, usually worse, possessed no birthright asking for a personal moment of
intelligibility; the situation being that desperate, the human corpse arriving and leaving as an historical body born from the cosmos, not into it; a phase surviving as part and parcel of the all-inclusive intention, not a foreign body trapped within.

Adrift in the distance, his energy signature still burned, a presence barely felt. I'm not absolutely clear. I never feel absolutely good. I am not God. An angel, perhaps, and that's debatable. He glanced up. "Hello?"

A sweet female voice spoke. "You're up, Jimmy. Good luck."

"How's my chances?" He received no answer. He didn't expect one, and standing he shoved the poetry book into his rear pocket, a pocket sagging and shapeless from a lifetime of holding this book or that. Jimmy ambled through the mist vacant of particular direction knowing full well where he'd end up. He arrived at a white window frame freely suspended, and whatever shone outside of it appeared the same to him as what occurred inside. He found a chair, testing it with shiny black ice cream stick fingers.

Pop stood facing the window, a Black gentleman at ease, large hands gently clasped as though holding a raw egg between his palms. He turned slowly wearing an evening tux, an imposing figure, a broad genuine smile with whispering gray about the temples.

Jimmy trusted in Pop, in his silent understated strength, his warm fatherly tone, the tops of his Satchmo cheeks squeezing his eyes until sunshine cracked in them and he needed to speak or bust. "James, my boy, good to see you!" He paused, measuring words certain to float between them.

Jimmy long believed. Watching Pop stand in contemplation, he remembered himself standing as a boy wonder, a child preacher of the pulpit disseminating Pop's wisdom at Sunday go-ta-meetin' time, the boy's future plotted out, pinned to the wall. They called him a nigger, thinking it acceptable. An uncle. An aunt. His best friend. His worst enemy. They buried him nose deep in it, forcing Jimmy to proclamation or annihilation. The more hopeless this cesspool became, the closer he alleged justice must be hiding. Youthful someday faith. The stuff one believes in darkness until falling asleep, the kind of mad clinging faith that disappoints a man who discovers life is exactly as it purports itself while in the interim he's matured.
Jimmy searched his mind, investigating intelligent space. The proclamation still burned, forever altering his journey. *I am as Black, worthy, and unfathomable as life's deepest mystery,* he thought. *I'm picking up my pen, baby. Shame on you. Hunting and pecking on my Smith Corona. Shame on you all. You've made a sad mistake, America. You, posing buck-naked in front; really, you have pissed me off!* Jimmy wrote page upon page, reams of linguistic iconography, and these symbols, often-archetypal concepts, acted as powerful inroads on his life's map dictating his journey as he created it.

"You seem at peace these days," Pop said, shaking Jimmy from his thoughts.

Jimmy thumped a finger on his knee. "Well, yes and no. I find myself restless, still desiring. God knows."

"Yes, of course, I know. Is it the business of an unfinished novel? No? A play then?" Pop leisurely fell into his seat behind a desk. "You know, James, when you first arrived I thought to myself, all that passion, that anger, all of that unrequited love, what can we do with it? How to direct it? I wondered, will this cat adjust to the scene or will he blow to Hell?" They laughed. "I've had a bug up my ass for awhile now," Pop said, rocking in his chair. He spun quickly like a child, a full turn, stopping himself, grabbing the edge of the desk, placing his hands on its surface to brake the swiveling motion. "That's why I called you today. I believe we can help each other."

"Expound, Pop. Anything for you."

Pop rose stepping pensively to the window. He stared out holding his chin in one palm and supporting that elbow with the other palm. He tapped his fingers along a narrow jaw, his waist jutting forward from the hips. "My children, my light, my eyes, have forgotten the Christmas spirit."

Jimmy craned his neck from his chair trying to see through the window. He saw no children. He didn't see anything. "Oh, well, it's a difficult life, you know, I'll grant you that. There's certainly enough raw sewage in their arena to make a man bitter sniffing the stench of it."

Pop skewered Jimmy under one of his all-knowing reflective glares, cutting him loose by a chuckle.

Pop groaned. "Isn't it? It's October. It's snowing. Muggings and armed robberies are up twenty percent. People are using their frequent-flyer miles taking their own lives and others with them!"

"I'm sorry, Pop."

"The suicide rate is skyrocketing! They either have too much and their lives are empty of purpose or they can't afford a tree, a commode, or a handful of rice, never mind gifts for the children."

Jimmy shook his head, commiserating while thoughtfully digging out a crushed package of French cigarettes from a silk shirt pocket under his corduroy coat. He removed one, a thick one tapping it repeatedly on his knee, the lifelong smoker's ritual. Lowering sad eyes he lit it and inhaled deeply, picking a speck of tobacco off the end of his tongue. "That's not what it's all about." Smoke poured from Jimmy's wide nostrils.

Pop whirled around in front of the window. "Ha! Tell it, James. Tell this old man what it's about. Be righteous, son."

"Love, Pop. It's about love."

"Love?" Pop arched an eyebrow. "How succinct. A dog loves its master and such as that. Love conquers all. Make love not war. Let us live on love. I was hoping for loftier stuff from a thinker such as you. Something idealistic, yet, down to earth."

"I'm not speaking of dogs, although I might be speaking of their masters. Ever heard this one, baby? 'Without love the master becomes the slave.'"

"Ah, and just how does a human being love one who has taken the life of a son or daughter or friend? How can the faithful, James, justify not making war?"

"An end to war? That's not a happening thing. And can you blame them?"

"No, I cannot. I do not," Pop proclaimed. "Although I can ask, who are the murderers? Where did they come from? Were they dropped from the moon? No, sir! They evolved out of a life that allows for inaccurate, untruthful, dangerous perceptions of what makes a civilization
acceptable. Civilization, in this sense, is a killer given birth to and by its brood, turning its back and pointing its guns as if it were not responsible, as if somehow it was not holding the gun on itself."

"War, James? There are times when one's back is against the wall. Don't accuse me of not being a realist. However, if the truth of the universe, right perception of what a civilization is and how it plays its part as an expression of universal light, were taught from the start, would they then spawn the social illness and heinous criminals that in the end must be eradicated to insure civilization's survival?" Pop stared at James and he breathed with fiery methodical, intelligent indignation—the mark of the Southern Baptist.

"You ask the impossible, Pop."

"You think so? I think the churches, synagogues, schools, governments, and a multitude of institutions are doing a fine job of disseminating misinformation through indoctrination. I don't want to see the factories torn down. I am not an anarchist. I'm asking for a re-tool. General Motors can build a family car or a military tank. Civilization is resourceful, and willful! The civilizing of humanity is a dynamic process."

Jimmy deliberated deep and silent. He blew a smoke ring. "I don't see anything through your window, but I know what's down there. I understand where the dynamic process begins; a world of absent-minded humanity. They've forgotten their inheritance, the right to free will. They won't do what they choose, really, they're desperate doing what they feel they must, what they're compelled to do by law, by the convention of those before them who failed to choose. A dream is something you chase, not something you catch. Infants are born of the same source as the seas and stars, earth and the heavens. Humankind is born worthy, unknowing with a lifetime of possibilities ahead."

Jimmy, working up a head of steam, didn't dare pause. "Yet, a boy is acculturated, indoctrinated, you know? Slowly his dreams are stolen from him and respectable realistic goals substituted. A material timetable that can never be met is scribed in corporeal stone, the map, and now the young man wriggles against the wall inconsolable. He's failed to meet the demands of his grandparents, parents, teachers, clergy, employer, government. He's failed to achieve his
dream or anyone else's for that matter. Never knowing, he wonders if he's failed in the eyes of his god."

"The middle-aged man," Jimmy raised a single finger of exclamation, "arrives home from his office one afternoon confused, no grasp on the truth of his being. 'There was something I wanted to do a long time ago. What was it?' And when his wife, whom he professes to love, makes yet another impossible demand, looks at him plaintively one more time, he stares back beaten and pulls out a gun shooting her and turning it on himself. Who can say why?"

Jimmy laughed, but without a shred of humor. "The police are baffled. He was a nice man. Never broke the law. Not a spic, you know, or a spade, or a dago. White middle-class society is momentarily stunned by this case of maladjustment. Only a person of color has an excuse to do away with himself."

"No one ever told him that he's born worthy, that he should love himself, value his dreams because he is the one universe dreaming. Really, he can't wake-up on Christmas morning and love Jesus or God or Buddha, revere life and pray deeply for peace on earth hoping for good will towards men. Can he, Pop? How can he celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus when he's never celebrated his own birthday?"

"James, will you help me?"

Jimmy breathed, spent over his diatribe on humanity. "I think I'm the one who needs help." He tossed his cigarette into the mist, propping his feet on Pop's desk.

"You've got more love in you… Why, you need this, man. You're full of the stuff."

"Mister Charley thinks I'm full of it, all right. Frankly, I just don't know."

Pop paced deliberately around his desk. "Bring love to one soul, motivate one man to exceed his own expectations. Show me you've learned to direct that passion of yours and I'll sign your ticket to move on, to finish your work."

"Who'd you have in mind? Some hunky funky nigger junkie in Motown? One of those hip-hop rapper cats who like to tell it the way it is? When will the kids realize that true art owns the power to change the way it is?"
"His name is Max Greenbaum. He dreams but doesn't remember, James. He's forgotten who he is, and I fear he's not very pleased with what he's become."

"Greenbaum? A Jew-cat?"

"Perhaps. You find that distasteful, James?"

Jimmy, smoldering, his earthly career weighing in the balance, bolted out of the chair.

"You create an impossible proposition. You want me to exorcise the demon of bitterness from this cat's soul? This is the price of your ticket? You want me to preach to some honkey Jew 'bout the meaning of Christmas? Those people have audacity! They think we've got something in common. But they're the ones collecting the rent while we pay it. Listen, baby, I don't presume to tell you your business but, damn you!"

Pop, sitting behind his desk, folded his hands and smiled. "'All men are brothers. That's the bottom line. And if you can't take it from there, you can't take it at all.' James, didn't you say that long ago?"

"You steal my fire, Pop."

"I know good stuff when I read it, baby."

***

No blood in her nose, Max thought. She's so symmetrical, I wonder, "Do you ovulate on both sides simultaneously?" Max Greenbaum curled a knobby finger behind the Windsor knot of his red necktie and yanked. The cosmological vacuum settled thick today, sucking at his flesh, dragging everything down. Sitting next to his wife, Julia, in the shoe department his crusty face hung there, a wall of peeling paint, a barnacle tough profile. Flesh of his grandfather's Ruskie flesh from Chagall's Vitebsk, Max pulverized more than a few razor blades easing them over hills falling into the lifelines of dour cheeks.

"Do I what?" With bells, buzzers, and piped in music, Julia hadn't quite caught it.

"No, nothing. Thinking out loud is all." Max listened with specific numbness to the sounds of another Christmas in Winn's Department Store. "...Oh come ye, Oh come ye to
Bethlehem…" and after twenty years of numbness training he eyeballed the public, accepting of his place in the unalterable solar system.

Julia fixed her make-up while Max listened to a fuss across the aisle in the toy department.

"A spacemans, Daddy. I wanna be a spacemans."

"William, we discussed this. Your mother and I feel you have a marked talent for microscopic surgery. Look at those hands!"

Glass and stainless steel reflected gold and silver tinsel draped across a high marble facade. A mime frowned trailing long lines down his chin, fighting his way out of an imaginary box. The crowds rushed by. Cash drawers banged open and slammed shut. Cosmetics girls stood stocking footed behind their stations. Perfect waists, perfect breasts, and perfect smiles all in a row. The mime bounded nimbly from one to the other poking fun.

Max took it into his head that they were all facets of one quintessential girl, nineteen and a half years old from corn country, now anorexic in L.A., waiting for her acting agent to call or a mass murderer waving a tattooed palm to slash her throat. The mime dropped on the floor squirming like a worm.

The universe, as Max viewed it, lay fallow. A hollow struggle, a spurious vacuum sucking out the whites of humankind's true eyes. Air conditioning, however, comforted him.

In Winn's, everyone appeared younger than Max, this adding to his silent ever-present sense of rack and ruin. One of the fluorescent lights flickered. "That's a bad starter," he mumbled while Julia spread her lipstick. "They'll have to fix that." Air conditioning grazed over the top of his slowly balding head. Max didn't want to remember what happened earlier. In fact, it never happened and that was that. His mouth quivered and he felt a knot in his throat. He stuffed it deep into his guts. After lunch, in the men's room everything would come up anyway. Staring at the ceiling, it split before his eyes cracking under the weight of what happened. Somebody turned off the air conditioner. He played with his shoes placing them parallel to one another. Max felt like a child urinating alone in the dark. Walls breathed expanding and
contracting, and he prayed to God someone would turn on the air. "Jesus, my balls are frying in my shorts."

"Yes, dear." Julia, a Leo in her fifties with unsparing triangular features, didn't dare yield an ounce of understanding for fear her face would shatter. She dyed her hair blond, and for all of her yesterdays and tomorrows she looked like Heidi Klum, didn't appear Jewish, and that's why Max had fallen into lust with her. "Thirty years ago," as he once told the tale to his son, "I was no different from any other Jewish kid looking for a long-legged, tight-assed shiksa I could bust my balls on, a whore at whose breast I would cum and confess. Your mother was the next best thing."

"That's not right," he said playing connect the dots with the ceiling. "That cracking. That's not right at all. They'll have to fix that." He rubbed the back of his thick neck with a hairy hand.

Julia poked through her day-bag. Dissatisfied, she spilled the contents of her bag onto the seat between them searching for Max's pills. The mime dragged himself along the floor through a trampling crowd. No one noticed him, and in a final dangerous break from convention he opened his mouth wagging his deep pink tongue screaming like a gutted fish.

"...and when I told her we were out of her size she—" Max barely squeezed the words out, admitting he'd felt it, felt anything. "She spat on me." He paused, sighing. "I slipped on the ladder again. Maybe I popped another disk?" He searched Julia's face for comfort. None. Zero sustenance from the vacuum. "She spat on me, Julia. I'm forty-nine this year." His eyes watered.

"Maybe not, Max. Maybe it was just some spittle when she spoke." We stayed together for the children, she thought, but now they're gone.

"For Christ's sake, the bitch hocked a lugy in my face!"

Julia fumbled with Max's Ativan bottle. "Okay, Max. All right."

"I waited on someone else like nothing happened. Here, look, I wiped it on my tie."

She opened the bottle with sharp manicured nails extracting a pill. "Take it, will you please, and do try to get along. I have to leave. I'm meeting with my animal rights group for lunch." She scooped the contents back into her bag, rose from her seat smoothly, flawlessly
turning. Max stared after her, watching his wife's long determined legs, listening to the consummate clicking of her heels against cold marble as she walked away. He pulled out his stress list, because he should've written something on it, although it slipped his mind while Julia's diamond calves disappeared into the crowd. Being spit upon, belittled, and emasculated slipped his mind. Max swallowed the Ativan.

***

"Eduardo, someday you'll marry a humanitarian woman like my wife." Max and Eduardo, a tortilla soft Latino youth, lurked in shadows behind curtains in a close aisle of the stock room. Max peeked through a narrow slit in the curtain, stealing a last long glug from his pint bottle of Cutty Sark. Eduardo smiled, scratching his dense black hair.

"I've got this damned inventory thing," Max said peering at the low ceiling. "Looks like I'm going to be tied up back here."

"You are okay, my friend?"

"Peachy, just peachy." Max dropped the bottle into a wastebasket by his leg.

"You are not looking like the peach, Max." Eduardo's full lips pouted at their corners. Abruptly, his smile returned and he clapped his pudgy hands together smacking them with a rub then shoving them into his trouser pockets.

"Is there something else?"

"Mister Max, I will tell you the story of the Angel of Guadalajara."

"For crying out loud." Max wiped his face, pulling at his nose, crushing his lips against his teeth, and in one motion his hand ripped at the short hairs on the back of his neck. In spite of it, he liked the kid and escaped the gesture showing a wearily patient smile. "What about the Angel of Guadalupe?"

"The Angel of Gaud-a-la-jara, Max. She watches over us."

"Does she?"
"In Mexico mi familia lived on the streets in Guadalajara. You know about eating off the ground where the turista walk?"

"I don't go for that poverty crap."

"We used to stand outside the big restaurante. Hundreds of us. We watched them from the windows every night. First the big food, then coffee, then the big smoke. I watched and prayed to the angel."

"Is this another of those tall taco tales, because come sundown I'm outa here. Comprendes?"

Eduardo appeared immune to Max's racist sarcasm. He intently pursued his train of thought, knitting his brow, figuring out the words. "I am here now and look at this!" He patted his round belly tugging at his belt. "It was the angel. She can help you too, if you believe."

Max believed in solid reality, only in concrete manifestations of universal mind, not in theoretical mind itself. When he prayed, it was for a stiff drink and an exhaustive bowel movement. "Look, Ed, I'm not speculating on your angel. Theory is so much bullshit. But I'm glad it works for you. I mean that."

"You do not believe. I know this. I feel it. America is a pisser town, Max."

"Fine, I'm gonna waste a minute on you because you're a scarce piece of flotsam; you give a damn." Max expanded inhaling deeply. "Years ago America had angels. Men who stood up and were counted. Men who cared. Know what they got for their truths? Shot. The vacuum sucked those bastards clean of everything they had to give and then wasted them. My angels are dead, Eduardo. Brains splattered on the pavement. I have no angels, no mentors, and no heroes. Ever heard of Henry David Thoreau?"

"No."

"What do you kids learn in school now-a-days? Eduardo fidgeted on his spot. "No school."

"Well, Thoreau was a man of prophetic insight. He said most men lead lives of quiet desperation. You and me, we're most men. We're not going anywhere fast." Max caught sight
of his reflection in a piece of broken mirror glued to the stock room wall. He fingered his thinning scalp. "And I'm going nowhere too fast."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know, Ed. I don't care."

At that, Eduardo wedged himself between Max and the mirror on the wall. "Max Greenbaum, where do you want to go?"

"Look, it doesn't matter. All right. I wanted to be a painter, an artist."

Eduardo's eyes bulged and he trembled, his potbelly erupting frijoles and lard. "You must ask the angel! To be an artista. To show peoples the beauty. This is a noble thing, my friend. It comes from inside." He laid a soft idealistic hand over his heart. "From in here. The angel must help."

Of course, the kid's right. Someone's gotta help soon. "This whole conversation's moot."

"Que?"

"Meaningless." Max bore down into Eduardo's face. "Without meaning or importance. Not worth discussing. Moot."

"What about Roosevelt?"

This threw Max, and the thought of professing ignorance to a foreigner irked him.

"Teddy or Franklin? Hell, they were before my time anyway."

"When I was learning English, I read it in a magazine. Eduardo said, 'Better to have dared and failed, than never to have dared at all.' "

"I know all about it. I'm asking you who said it, Teddy or Franklin?"

"I do not remember, Max."

Max motioned towards the curtain. "I'll split the difference with you. Go make a living."

Eduardo shuffled towards the selling floor. However, before disappearing through the curtain, he turned. "Max, you think these things. I know how you think about me. But if my back is wet, it is that I was not happy watching everyone else jump into the water. You are going like you say, nowhere fast. I have gone somewhere. I had to make a choice, to jump, to go very fast. It was for my life. If it is Teddy or Franklin it is like you say, moot."
Darkness enshrouded Max at his cluttered desk in the stock area. The shadows coddled him, existence playing a minor chord, and Max sunk back peacefully into his chair. He longed to turn out all lights. After store hours he slumped in front of his computer entering code numbers into its terminal. He stared at the monitor tuning out a ray of light from his small lamp. The monitor's light fell across scattered pieces of paper, resentful notes on empty shoe phenomena, wholesale-retail cost extensions, re-order fill-ins, short runs, two memos from the executive offices; one requesting employees to switch from sport coat and slack combinations to full business suit attire, and another telling Max that his suffocation was his problem, and no, they wouldn't turn up the air conditioning. Those particular memos sat yellowing, decomposing on Max's desk since nineteen eighty-five, seeping negative ions into the musty cardboard atmosphere. He lost focus on the monitor and glanced away rubbing his eyes. A cockroach scurried across the desk making tracks for Max's Styrofoam coffee cup.

Pulling out his desk drawer against a slightly protruding gut; a sticky half empty bottle of Jim Beam, paper clips, little dirty red and green rubber bands, and an old S&W thirty-eight special lived quietly in that drawer. Calmly he reached for the weapon. Max set the gun on his desk, slid the drawer shut and slouched in his seat, hands in his lap. Bitterly tired, only with painfully intense effort could he lift an arm dragging his fingers across the desk, placing one limp hand a quarter inch from the gun. He picked up the destructive nickel-plated steel weighing heavy and solid in his palm squeezing its wooden pistol grips. He put an ear to the vacuum yet heard nothing. Carefully sliding open the drawer, he returned the gun in its place next to Jim Beam. It lived in a dark compartment only Max accessed, and why he kept it there he couldn't say, except to continue knowing that the option awaited him.

He flipped the switch on a vibrating lumbar pad and feeling minimal relief swiveled in his chair to reach a stack of cost reports. The roach flitted across the back of his hand. Max
grabbed a stack of paper slamming it down habitually without a blink. For years bugs the size of baby rhinos ran the place.

"Good evening." Jimmy fired up a match turning shadows to amber light, and cocking his head with eyes three-quarters closed he touched the flame to the end of a cigarette. Sitting on top of a packing crate, he held the match allowing it to burn down. He exhaled smoke watching the fire dance. Just short of charring fingertips, Jimmy shook it out. "Really, you're not very polite. I did say 'good evening', didn't I?"

Max, stunned, dropped his papers. "What? Who are you? How'd you get in here?" The dead roach rolled over into a crevice between the desk and wall joining a collection of cold fat roaches.

Jimmy simply smiled.

"Listen, I'm sorry, fella. We're closed." Max nervously scrambled for an ashtray shoving it at Jimmy, whose ash grew by the second. Jimmy set the ashtray on a crate, and still grinning he held out his cigarette tapping it along one side, encouraging the ash to break floating toward the floor.

"Didn't you hear the P.A. announcement? The store's closed, sir. I'm sorry, but I have to insist."

Jimmy fished in his ragged rear pocket and came out with a dog-eared copy of Go Tell It On The Mountain. He turned pages, bending them back, creasing a worn paperback spine. His cigarette gently burning in one hand and his book in the other, he read out loud, "No child ever wept with such tears as he wept with that morning on his face before Heaven, under the mighty tree." Jimmy's voice resonated flatly, exuding eloquent dignity and anger, the pitch rising and falling in lightning strokes and Max didn't know what to do. "They came from deeps no child discovers, and shook him with an ague no child endures. And presently, in his agony he was screaming, each cry seeming to tear his throat apart, and stop his breath, and force the hot tears down his face, so that they splashed his hands and wet the root of the tree; Save me! Save me! And all creation rang, but did not answer."
Jimmy, risen from his crate, stood over poor spasmodic Max quaking in his chair, his eyes twitching. "What are you doing?" Max asked.

Jimmy threw the book on the desk behind Max and loomed over him pinning Max to his chair, looking him dead in the eye. "Lightening your burden."

"This isn't a race thing, is it? Because, I mean, it's 2015, and the store's closed." Max trembled.

Jimmy backed off a few feet turning from Max. He gazed heavenwards laughing, shouting at the low ceiling and beyond. "Lord, I haven't had this much fun in ages!"

Max's blood pumped fearfully. The vacuum settled as a haze inside the tiny space. He strained his lungs for each breath. He reached for his back pocket with trembling fingers. Max shook his wrist and tried desperately kicking off his shoes. "Look, here's my wallet. I, I've got a watch, a ring, only please, please don't kill me." Sweat dribbled down his face and neck. Rivulets of salt stung his eyes. "They're new. The shoes are new. For Christ's sake, are you listening? The shoes are new and I can get them off. I swear!"

"How's that, baby?"

"Aren't you—"

"Heaven forbid." Jimmy blew smoke like an overheated engine. "You were going to kill yourself. The gun, remember?"

"It's none of your business, and no I wasn't. Please, just take the money and run."

"Is that what you think? Two thousand and fifteen, huh? Too long. Too long, you know, to still be making those assumptions." Jimmy held onto the cigarette butt pinching two fingertips and sucked, and it glowed in the shadows. He tossed the stub down stepping on it, sitting on his crate. On Jimmy's side no vacuum existed, only open space providing the advantage of understanding over Max's limited mortal circumstances, the illusion of Max's estrangement from the dynamic process.

Jimmy's cosmological position reigned unique. Having lived as a mortal he gained hindsight, and arriving where Max was going he possessed foreknowledge. The question of the hour remained how far to press his lead. Suffering, he knew, played a part in becoming, of
constantly creating one's self in the image of all that transpired, using one's self to transcend one's self, and then an unknowable Sad Sack quality about this White cat evoked sympathy. They all have it, Jimmy thought. People, trying to connect with something larger than themselves. But what it is, they can't recall. They theorize and then... but they don't know.

Presently, in the silence resting between them, Jimmy found a niche in his heart for Max who shook with confusion, who pressed on in life through a small part of himself, unaware of the value of wholeness. He spoke to Max quietly. "I'm not here to rob you. I'm here because I love you, baby."

My gawd, he's gonna rape me. "Help! Rape!"

Jimmy grinned. "How do the young brothers lay it down now? I believe the idiomatic is 'chill'? Max, old friend, we have a lot of work to do, so, why don't you chill. It's cool, you know. Really."

"How did you know my name?"

Jimmy extended his hand. "It's a pleasure, sir. I'm James Baldwin."

Max ceased shaking. All breathing stopped. Oxygen became unnecessary. He raised his hand meeting Jimmy's, but halfway up Max dropped it into his lap.

"Too fast for you perhaps? Which part of, 'I'm James Baldwin', don't you savvy? You know, Henry Thoreau was offered this assignment."

"He, with you, and he—"

"I'll tell you this, Max, no one will ever accuse you of verbosity. Anyway, before your eloquently stated interruption, I was saying, Henry turned it down. Said you were hopeless. Tell me something, is this your masterpiece?"

"What?"

"Is this the picture you wish to paint?"

"I..." Max clutched the armrests of his chair popping a slow smirk then chuckling.

"In a word, Mr. Greenbaum, I'm your angel."

Max rocked with laughter. Jimmy smirked uncertain of Max's reaction and Max sputtered trying several times to force a response. "Okay, you guys. Where's Ed? That
enchilada put you up to this, didn't he? Didn't he?” He swiveled around yelling out the curtain. "Eduardo! Come out now. The cerveza's on me."

Jimmy, in a small act of compassion towards this befuddled powerless White man, stooped picking up his smoking butt and deposited it in the ashtray. "You're correct of course, about the ashtray. I really am James Baldwin, you know? My friends call me Jimmy."

"Prove it." Max crossed his arms indignantly. He felt courageous.

"I don’t play that game. You need my help. You're a bitter, arrogant, narrow-minded bag of excuses. Not without reason, but without justification. Besides, you called us."

"Called you? What are we doing here? This whole thing's ludicrous!"

"Remember the dream? You were sitting on a bench in the middle of a field."

"And I realized my life was shit," Max said, his eyes growing. "That I'd been knotting my necktie around my balls. I remember. But when I opened my eyes it was gone. Like I had something and then lost it."

"I know the feeling," Jimmy said.

Max eyed Jimmy for a pregnant moment, during which the vacuum gave way a hair's breadth. Just enough clarity, space for Max to breathe, an awareness of breathing, his frame of mind expanding slightly, as if mind lived a dynamic being reporting back to the narrow personality that trapped Max Greenbaum. Again, the illusion of their being two, Max and universal mind. It grew from childhood, an escape-proof illusion, because if reality were of a piece, then the illusion was as real as anything the world offered Max.

The illusion is not the problem, Jimmy thought. It's their dogged ignorance of it. Humanity is asleep.

This moment made Max aware he'd reached a position in time he had hoped to avoid, a position of choice. Before now, excuses ran rampant and easy. He told himself there were no choices. This absolved him of the responsibility of free will. A rush of sadness enveloped him. How did I waste all of those years? Time's a ruthless son of a bitch! "I wanted to paint."

"A fine aspiration," Jimmy nodded, "although, a difficult one."
"No, you're not listening! You don't understand. I wanted to paint like Claude Monet; I wanted to paint light. I wanted to paint like Van Gogh; I wanted to sacrifice my spirit. I wanted to paint like Matta; I wanted to paint violence."

"And?"

Max closed his eyes hanging his head. A mortal anvil weighed on his beaten shoulders. "I wanted to dig in and grab life by its balls, like Gauguin! I can't do that now. I don't see light anywhere. Everything is as it is. My youth is spent. On my best days life is acceptable, and Jimbo, that's as good as it gets."

"Max, it gets better than that."

"I had plans," Max said.

"Listen to me, Max. I need to get back. To write. I have plans and you're my ticket."

"Are you telling me to quit my job and paint?"

"I'm telling you that Pop loves your ass and wants to give you a Christmas gift. Max, your cry's been heard but you have to seize the answer. You have to accept the gift."
"It's not my holiday. I didn't ask for anything and I'm not so sure it's a gift." Walking a long dingy hallway hidden from the selling floor, they twisted themselves between stacks of cartons, THIS END UP or USE NO HOOKS, from China. Max paused every few feet training his ear for rats, an integral piece of the eco-system keeping down the roach count. When he didn't hear any he tiptoed forward holding back a burst of oxygen.


"No. I'm a shoe salesman. I don't have any," Max whispered.

"You're old, Max. Ancient."

"Do tell."

"No. I mean you are born of the mother-cosmos. Max Greenbaum is born of elements older than this planet; elements like carbon and oxygen traveling here through the space blanket from billion-year-old stars. Think of it. The universe creates itself through intelligence, baby. It takes direction, Max, from the simple to the complex." Jimmy looked away lost in thought, his eyes suddenly catching fire. "And memory. Nothing is ever forgotten. The universe heals deep wounds, overcompensating, using intelligent logic, leaving a scar or a stronger muscle strand. Reality is mapped with memories like my black body was mapped with veins, passages I know I will never forget." Jimmy scratched his jaw in wonder. "The nature of that infinitesimal piece of consciousness you know as your self is composed of cosmological memory and intelligence. Yes, intuition can be the result of obvious logic or a kind of memory so yawning and long ago that we can't track it, we can't put into words why we feel what we feel. Yet, it speaks to us across eons, warning and prodding us. Intuition enables you to sense the immediacy of an
insight greater than words. Everyone has it, though a lot of folks would certainly like to plead ignorance."

"Yeah, well, my intuition tells me this whole thing's a crock. You're a crock."

"What can I say to convince you that I'm here for you, Max, that a power greater than your own awareness exists for your benefit? Not everything makes apparent sense. Obvious logic can't explain primordial intuitiveness because that's the quality of an infinite mystery. You and I are both part of the same mystery. We share the same mother, Max. Oh my, what do you think about that?"

Max shook with other concerns. He'd heard the familiar rodent squealing. "Right, a mystery. Look, we're going to stop here and stand still. We're going to wait. That's what we're going to do, just wait, and maybe while we wait you'll disappear."

Jimmy lowered his voice. "It's preconceptual, baby. Before religious dogma. Intuition is proof that reality exists before you choose sides. One gift. The original. The universe whole, utilizing God-given interdependence—"

Max gave the high sign to advance.

"—until you people conquered it with your philosophical concepts of right and wrong, your geographical incisions of here and there."

"You people?" Max tensed. I wondered when he'd get around to the Jew business.

"You broke things up into the landed aristocracy, and my church and your church, and itsy-bitsy parcels of real estate, and your holiday and mine."

"I knew it," Max said.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, God promised my people real estate." Max flung an arm in the air throwing a finger straight up. "If you were an angel, you'd know that. No. I'll tell you what, you're a figment of indigestion. A raw piece of beef."

"The other day we were discussing land, you know, and Pop said 'I don't know why they're fighting down there. You take an Israeli and a Palestinian, and there's not a helluva lot of difference between them.' "
"So, now I'm an Arab? Is it my imagination or have I been having strange conversations with my imagination? Today is not making any sense. It's the booze. Gotta be."

Jimmy paused lighting a cigarette, feeling a minor triumph having crawled under the landlord's flesh. He concentrated on the flame, taking his time standing in front of the freight elevator, listening to it hum. The empty car echoed through the shaft passing each floor, drawing closer. Arriving, sheet metal doors clanged a thunderous roll and a final bang, and Max stepped inside leaving Jimmy blowing smoke on the concrete loading dock.

The battered car descended. A small window in the door threw alternating bands of shadow and light into the compartment. Max spaced-out mesmerized by the passing of floors, clackata clackata… Abruptly he spun around on his heels losing equilibrium. "I think they're a bunch of violent camel humpers who've never advanced past killing for water rights."

He faltered dumfounded, desperate for air.

"I didn't say it, baby. He did." Jimmy leaned one shoulder against the corner of the car, his thin frame jiggling loosely with the ride.

Max, speechless, stomped on the wooden floor. He pounded rusty steel walls keeping one frozen eye on Jimmy. He felt positive a rat couldn't have squeaked by. "Okay, all right. You're James Baldwin and you're an angel." His eyes turned liquid and burned while his ears pounded and flushed. Max listened to his blood pressure skyrocketing.

At times like this, when nothing made sense, he pulled out the stress list. A tool, his doctor said, to help him adapt. "I'm not here to adapt," he'd told the doctor. "I don't want to adapt to everyone else's insanity." The last time nothing made sense, ten months ago, he visited his doctor. That's when he received the list and Max remembered the conversation like it occurred yesterday.

"What do you think is wrong, Max?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm here. I feel as though I'm losing control. When I was six I wanted to do something practical with my life. I played with a chemistry set. I wanted to enter the sciences. Now, I'm forty-nine and married with my seed long gone from home. Now, I want to be a cowboy."
"I see."

"No, you don't see. I have a burning desire to roll my own cigarettes and pee on a cactus."

"Try the stress list."

"I don't think it'll help."

Today he stood toe to toe with James Baldwin. Oddly enough, it seemed correct. He returned the list to his pocket.

"Don't be redundant," Jimmy said. "We both know who I am. It's your life. What are you going to do?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Max's atmosphere coagulated transforming into salt water.

"Is this your—"

"Masterpiece? No. I don't know. Hell, Jimbo, I have debts, responsibilities. What about Julia?" He salivated iodine.

"You'll work it out."

At the thought of her Max tried not retching while the car rattled down the shaft, clackata clackata, urine backing up in his brain. He heard himself speaking, "Honey, guess what. No? Can't guess? Well, it's like this, I quit my job. Isn't that great?" Uh-huh, right. I see it all now. Clackata clackata… shake. Max looked up bracing himself by his rubber band joints, something going wrong, something happening to the car. A near death experience. Afternoon talk shows. I've heard about this sort of thing. There was that woman from Cincinnati.

"You'll work it out, baby." Jimmy glowed a yellow aura and the elevator car bumped and hesitated, and bumped again stopping between floors. The ceiling light fizzled. Jimmy's aura drained energy from available atmosphere and the bulb sputtered. Jimmy lit the car, his golden aura dripping like honey through the cracks. He stretched his possible legs, shook the memory of his arms, feeling more solidified on the corporeal plane, longing to strain against his supposed flesh. "This is where I get off," he said.

The salt water dissipated, leaving Max grappling with transparency, not an unpleasant feeling. Fresh. Available to the future. Thinking over and over again, Why not? I'm dying
anyway. The upshot of this whole deal is that I'm losing cells on a daily basis. He's right about creation. I can see its direction. Max reconsidered his position evolving from a no choice, to a negative maybe. "You can't just turn my entire life inside out and leave," he said.

Jimmy glowed brighter developing a blinding silhouette. The silhouette began shrinking.

"Wait, there's something I have to know."

"Yes?" Jimmy's voice resonated delightfully in Max's ears.

"Does a human possess a soul? I mean, what are you made of? Are you a soul or an angel, or is an angel a soul? Is the soul angelic?"

"I can't speak for all humankind but I'll show you what I've got to contend with. Lord knows, sometimes it's really too damned much." Jimmy's luminosity formulated itself into a brilliant blue ovoid. The ovoid flattened into a single living beam of violet light. Max pasted himself into a corner. Slowly, the beam spun branches of light giving birth to twists of fine glimmering arteries webbing the car in a cocoon. Max slid against the wall held by strands beaming through him. Golden hairs passed behind the metal walls. He reached the tiny window and peeked into the shaft. Billions of fine strands passed throughout the elevator shaft and beyond.

"Where do they go?" Max asked. He gawked down at himself, at the light arteries shooting through his body and lifted a hand whacking at branches.

"Where don't they go?" Jimmy's disembodied voice answered. "When I was a man, the things that tormented me the most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, that had ever been alive. I wrote this map word for word, line by line."

The atmosphere exploded into a ball of flame scorching the metal walls that buckled and popped in front of Max's unbelieving eyes. He swallowed. "How do you live with it inside of you?"

"In life, I took rage as my creative fuel. I didn't know then that the universe remembers. Now, sometimes I cry," Jimmy said. "There's no escape. We map a life. We map many lives. We are the universe creating our existence. I wet the root of the tree. It puts the fire out for a little while. And, like you, I survive. It might have been different had I listened to that voice
from long ago and far away, that intuitive whisper. Later, Max." The ball of flame dissolved to a pinpoint, held its position in space, and disappeared.

Max felt his temporary clarity slipping away. Admitting to any hallucinations would be irrational; to act upon them, madness. "I can't do it. I'm old. I waited too long!" Squeezing his eyes shut against the vacuum, he pounded metal walls swinging thick fists. *I'll lose the house*; he beat the wall; *We'll starve*. *I haven't saved a buck since I can't remember when*; he beat the wall; *Gawd, I'm scared!* He beat the wall until his bones bruised. *Julia will leave me... There might be a plus in this after all.*

***

A pink 57' Caddy bounding on tail fins and under-inflated tires screeched wide circles around the bottom floor of the parking structure. This way Max warmed the transmission before hurdling the big hump spilling out on Wilshire Boulevard into L.A. Out there with one hand he drove, oozing down the street between headlights, tearing open small bottles with his other hand, Cutty Sark, Harvey's Bristol Cream, a glove compartment overflowing with insulating potions.

*The Islamites are behind it*, Max thought. He swung north in back of a Rapid Transit bus onto Fairfax Avenue. He would've made the far left lane but some sonuvabitch shined his brights in Max's eyes. *It's never this cold in L. A. I heard they've got chemical weapons and a weather machine. The terrorists are sticking icicles up our collective ass. Why do I sound more like my father every day?*

He picked up a screwdriver inserting it into the steering column, flicked his right signal and pulled over in front of Halevi's Book Shop. Traffic on Fairfax slowed, thinning, disappearing. He'd caught himself thinking like the old man, blaming it on "them," and this meant he had to take pause. *Julia doesn't like it when I go there.*

Inside, shop lights burned. An evening Torah class hunkered in their chairs, pencils in hands, noses in holy texts, a group of pious young men at long library tables. "They're entering a
path they know not." He drank and watched. Youth growing duck down payess and chicken shmaltz livers. Already they appeared old, born old, two-thousand five-hundred years old.

He pulled out his stress list scribbling, "Religion." He crossed that out and rewrote, "My religion," and shivering under the cold of sitting still he added, "Islamites."

Killing the engine and cracking open his window, Max listened for sounds hoping for a warm slice of life to come his way. Two old men, Hassids cloaked in long black overcoats and black hats, sat at a corner bus bench arguing through white rabbinal beards. One of the men jumped to his feet raising his voice while the other gesticulated shaking elbows and knobby wrists, and although they argued in Polish, Max knew it had to do with an ancient Talmudic bone of contention, where to slaughter the lamb, perhaps whether it was in the spirit of God's law to charge interest percentages between Jews? In a peculiar way their white flesh and red noses warmed Max's historic cockles. He felt vaguely ashamed, as if a deserter of the cause, a gift, an honor. Max recognized his bond to a history he never lived and the words haunted him briefly flitting through his thoughts, playing Hide and Go Seek, *We are born of universal stuff, and the universe has memory.*

The religion, he knew, spawned a constipating doctrine neatly finished and contained. God floated in his morning cornflakes as omnipresent perfection. He, God never borrowing the feminine, prescribed for His people a strange and exclusive code for inner as well as outer life and that was the be-all of it. To lose the code meant non-secular assimilation. To become *trayf* like mold. The days followed one another endured by six-hundred and thirteen laws. A boy buried himself in study, a man buried himself in work. The future loomed predestined with little credence given to chasing dreams. Worse, for a young artistic Max the stigma grew burdensome of lives decimated by the Fuhrer, voyages in rags to begin life anew without a shekel. He told Jacob, his father, at their last Seder together, "Our history's a bitch. A shambles saved by glomming onto the Torah and the bitterest sweatshop coolie work ethic. But why lay it on me? Dad, my shoulders are only as broad as a man's." During adolescence the welt and wail of an historic intellectual machine fell upon him like a biological warhead. "Max Greenbaum, we
expect you to succeed, to help us get even with every syphilitic gentile cocksucker that stalks the earth. You must use your mind, Max, we must use your mind!"

"But my generation," he naively asked in sixty-seven, "shouldn't we be using our minds for peace?"

"Peace is a wonderful thing. Adonai, blessed be He, wishes peace for all His children. The world," Jacob said, "should be at peace, so long as it helps us wipe the floor with THEM!"

The beginning of the end of my light? The birth of the vacuum? Max wondered, drinking, mortified at the weighty proposition.

An aluminum-rolling door clattered down in front of the last open market. The old men at the bench called a truce. They hugged one another going their separate ways. Fairfax, blowing its trash over sleeping cooing pigeons, snoozed alone and silent.

He reached for melancholy visions drowning the last few hours of shock. As a child he knew the open markets, the flies landing on navel oranges sitting in pinewood crates. Yellow peaches and nectarines blushing red in the afternoon sun. At the beginning of his life, Max's consciousness bathed itself in color, cobalt blue paper used to pack tiers of orange melons, red apples, waxy green cucumbers, yellow bananas, and grapefruits.

He witnessed light then: Fairfax automobiles, loud obtrusive chrome bumpers, their grillwork making hideous faces at him. The child's universe breathed. Machinery on the street or rutabagas in the shade, the basic nature of it all revealed itself to Max, the manifestation of hue and luminescence, a primary gasping intelligence inhaling eastern Europe and spitting its shlock-shop legacy forth onto new shores.

He turned his key, hit the gas and the 57' grumbled while he peered into Halevi's shop where lights no longer burned. The place seemed deserted. The old ones seeing through young faces—each born, an enemy by his side—disappeared. And how, Max wondered, do you triumph over a birth like that?

He swung another right out of the old and into the putridly hip, avant-garde, nipple rings, and Hitler youth boots Melrose Avenue punk shops: The Sonic Burger Café, Spoils of War, and Your Mother's Leather Things. A graffiti artist spray-painted a liquor store wall near an alley.
"Five foot two, hair of blue
Love those spikes and your tattoo
And oh, those boots, Gestapo gal!"

_Downright mean_, he thought. _They're either mean or religiously pathetic_. Max picked a red light out of the other lights. Slamming his brakes, the 57' lurched and hissed. A dirty face rattling loose teeth pressed itself against his windshield. He should have run over the face. Seeing the spray bottle and rag, he cursed himself for missing and cracked open the window.

"Hey, man, I'll do your windows for anything." The smiling face lisped between two dark gaps in its mouth.

"Go away."

"A quarter, anything. I almost got my rent."

"Sleep in the fucking park for all I care!"

"But, but, I've got an abscessed tooth."

"I don't support poverty!" Max rolled up his window lurching forward into a late night drizzle. Neon lights rippled through the wet windshield. He drove high, a warm boozy insulation. Whatever the mean pathetic goings-on out in the street, he avoided entanglement. No worldly plague would drown his defended being in the evil abyss. Such that living absolutely required vulnerability, involvement, and entanglement eluded him.

Cruising Fairfax before the last turn, Max computed life in terms of linear time. Almost forty years ago he discovered a demonic force in the universe, meshugge mishpocheh, the lunatic family, sucking the sanity out of him, draining his youthful self, deserting him for brain-dead. Through the slow process of emotional retreat, of selling short the gestalt of volunteering for life, he'd managed hanging onto a bare thread of sane continuum. _I haven't felt anything in so long, only Julia, and our whole thing's gone to hell in a basket of shit_. Approaching his left turn, he rehearsed to the dashboard. "Julia, I quit my job."

"Uh-huh," she would utter distantly.

"Julia, what would you say if I—"

"No."
That's the unwritten law of a successful marriage, Max reminded himself, never ask or answer a "what if" question.

"Honey, we need a vacation." That's it. He'd sell it as a romantic project.

"Julia, you castrating bitch," he sighed forlornly, "what happened to us?"

***

Max walked undisturbed through the rain up the drive, its quaint old grass parkway running down the center. He concentrated, bending slowly at the knees pulling open the garage door. Inside the wood framing smelled damp and pulpy, and a string dangled from the rafters. He tugged on it lighting a bare bulb. Turning, he looked out at the street, at the rain, at the 57' deciding to abandon it to the elements. Sometimes he let a little thing go, like the car. He'd walk away from it forever, and in this way turn his back on everything, feeling momentary relief. He hoped they would come by late tonight and steal the car, and tomorrow he might greet empty space, considering himself a lucky man owning one less problem. Max noticed the dark backyard through the garage window. So many years living in this old Victorian house with Julia and playing with the children, Tag, Blind Man's Bluff, yet he hadn't committed any shapes to memory, no trees or bushes. A cloud burst drenching Julia's flowers and Max stared into the glass at his reflection.

***

In 1979, Jacob wore boxer shorts and black socks to dinner. Rain bludgeoned the dining room window and Max, a painfully thin seventeen-year-old, argued with his father in front of the family while television blared from the study. "…where radical Iranian students seized the United States Embassy in Tehran today. . ."
Ruth, Max's mother, left the study door open keeping an eye on her infant son in his playpen. She whispered seriously to Max's sister, while the men shouted at each other across a table of greasy lamb chop bones.

"I'm old enough to do what I damn well please and you can't stop me!"

"Old enough, Max? You think you're a man?" Jacob shook his finger at the television. Every night he shook the weapon. "Those are men! They're fighting so you can grow up in the most powerful nation on earth! So you can use your mind! So you can become something!"

"A pants presser?" That's it. I just kicked him in the teeth.

Jacob's neck pulsed. "Let me clue you in, mister, you couldn't make a pimple on a man's ass!"

Max pushed his plate away for the third time in a week. "That's not the way I see it."

"Oh, that's not the way you see it?" Jacob turned to Ruth. "That's not the way he sees it."

"Jacob, please," Ruth, ever the nurturer, soother of storms, tried smoothing it over.

"You said talk to the boy." Jacob shrugged his shoulders.

"... hoping to block an American-backed return to power by the Shah. . . ."

"That Jane Pauley is so pretty," Ruth said.

Jacob inhaled his food with an open mouth and a shit-eating grin, "Lesbian."

Ruth pushed aside an area of dishes and took Jacob's hand in hers. "I said talk to your son, not argue with him."

"Who's arguing? Not me. Mister 'I got the clap' is arguing." Jacob reached behind the table into his smoking rack and yanked out a pipe cleaner. Forming it into a small perfect circle, he pushed it in his son's face. "Next time use this. It's cheaper."

Ruth snapped it up. "Not in front of your daughter!"

"Sima doesn't understand," Jacob shook his head.

"I know what that means," Sima said, "and I'm old enough to need..." The little fool never did know when to keep her mouth shut.

Ruth quickly jumped in,"Shhh. I've told you before, don't interrupt your father when he's talking." And whirling towards Jacob, "Go ahead, dear."
"...at the president's State of the Union Address..."

"You think you got all the answers? That you can smoke that shit, paint, and screw around with your shiksa whores?"  
Max bit his cheek picking up a fork, tapping it repetitively along the edge of the table. He didn't look up. He'd written off his father long ago.  
"When your mother and me were first married we almost starved. I put food in your mouth and paper in the toilet because I'm not too proud to press other men's suits to support my family! And you shame us with this. This!" He leapt up grabbing the crotch of his boxers, dancing around in black socks half delirious with fury while the family watched. "This doesn't make you a man. Hell, gooney birds in the jungle fuck! Animals without brains know where to put it and how to move it around! You're better, right?"

Ruth fidgeted with plastic flowers in the center of the table. She hummed. She used to keep live arrangements but when they died she'd sink into paroxysms of depression.  
"Is that right!" Jacob yelled. "Don't tell me you're better than a fucking monkey because you can move it in god-damned circles!"

"There's a young lady at this table!" Ruth fidgeted, humming to save her life, although short bursts of words escaped. "Control yourself!"

Sima stood and projected as if addressing a school assembly. "Fuck; a loathsome, ignorant, blue-collar expression meaning to copulate or procreate. Used popularly to coerce others." She thought about it for a moment, shaking bangs off her forehead. "Like you're using it now, Daddy, to coerce Max."

At that, Max dropped his fork and looked up beaming from ear to ear. "Dad, I believe she's got a solid grip on the vernacular."

Jacob and Ruth paused stunned, Jacob absent-mindedly still holding his crotch. "Where in the hell did you learn that?"

"Reading, Daddy."

"We'll have no more reading! And you," he spun on Max, "I'm cutting off your penicillin. What do you think of that?"
"But the doctor says—"
Jacob leaned in nose to nose with his son. "They should shrivel up and fall off!"
"The doctor would be upset," Max said. "He wouldn't have anything to grab for the test. That's okay. He made me nervous anyway."
"Really, Max? Trust issues with the doctor?" Jacob turned to Ruth. "Cause he doesn't seem to have any trust issues when the neighborhood whore is yanking him off!"
"…in answer to the question, the president denied any involvement in Iran's governing issues. . . ."

***
Max gazed at the rain, into the darkness until a tiny piece of memory broke loose. He rummaged aimlessly, cautiously at first pushing aside a few old Hills Brothers coffee cans. Opening wooden drawers. Slamming them. Fighting with them. Max threw his whole body into it, shoving rusted shipping trunks and stained boxes this way and that. Dust balls flew. He wheezed with effort, the search continuing. Behind an old set of Samsonite luggage he found his black portfolio. Quickly clearing a space on the workbench, he wiped away bottles of nuts and bolts waving both arms, and using an old rag he rubbed down the wood, leaning over it, blowing away bits of grit, picking at them with a fingernail until he felt satisfied. Bending from the knees he grasped the overloaded portfolio heaving it onto the bench. His fingers worked slowly untying knots, and after those came a zipper which he peeled around the edge. Painful warmth radiated in his chest, an uncertain tremor, something he wanted to do long ago. His breathing hardened and Max doubted. Again, he heard Jacob.

"Painting, ach! Does it pay? How much does it pay? Can you use it to make money? To get even? They dragged the old men away by their beards! Treblinka! You think you're an artist? Paint four-thousand years of terror! Pant Dachau! They cooked them in cattle cars. How good are you? The best? No? Better give it up, boy. My cousin died in the labor camps. This is her photograph. Look at it, look at it! This is her family, your relatives, Max. She was seven
years old when one night they pulled out her womb. They used our flesh for lampshades, and
you dare to dream?"

God, please, I don't want these memories.

"You're a lucky shit," Jacob said. "The Goyim only had one Jew who died for them. You
got six-million and counting."

"I'm not a failure," Max mumbled to himself. "I'll take out the drawings. It's just that
other more important things came up."

Max studied the yellowed sheets of charcoal sketches. Hands. Hundreds of hands. He
flipped over each drawing slowly prolonging the process; thousands of fingers, bent, curled,
tense wrists. He'd thought of them from time to time sitting in that case. Soft black powder,
remembering them as an anatomical investigation. Now brittle, the entire individual present in
the etched line of a palm, they took on the ancient parched yellow dust of spiritual research, a
map working its way back to the original moment, never lost. This one, he held it up at a
distance, it's at least a Rembrandt.

"Slick, baby. Very fine."

Max jumped. Jimmy ambled around the workbench moving his slight body in a beige silk
shirt with European rolled sleeves and baggy corduroy slacks. "Not bad. What happened?"

"Life." Max carefully stacked his drawings. "Enough already."

"Life's not an excuse, it's a gift, remember? And the mundane phenomena that are given
to us form pathways helping us touch our spiritual whole. You look at a drawing and you touch
that moment long ago. It lives now."

Max dragged the zipper roughly around the portfolio's frayed edges. "How philosophical
of you. How courageous. As for myself," Max said tying knots, "not that I'm scared, there's
more at stake here."

"Fear?" Jimmy sat on a trunk. "I find it to be an absorbing subject, you know, because
in a sense there are only two things to be afraid of, survival and death. Not that you're afraid, but
the rest of humanity happens to be. They're afraid of survival because if they don't accomplish it
properly they'll die. They're afraid of death because, well, because it's something as a secular
culture they don't believe they've ever done or they won't do it more than once. At best, they
don't remember having done it." Jimmy half grinned, "But then there's me, of course. After
you've been through it, it's nothing. I wish I'd known then that we don't pass over as much as we
shift planes of perception. We always live life and death simultaneously because in reality the
two are one. All the mundane crap that happens to you in your life is consciousness training.
Life is a practice, Max. It's a practice at being spiritual, at touching that spiritual quality that
imbues the universe with dynamism. When I was alive I was pissed at all those rich White kids
that had time to play at consciousness expansion games. I didn't know then, that to a point they
had something. Some folks think they have to be deceased, passed over to be a part of it. Max,
you're already a part of it. Always have been!"

Jimmy stared out the window at Max's dark backyard. While he cast no reflection, he
took it on faith that Max viewed him much as he appeared in life, as he viewed himself.
"Perhaps, as artists we communicate too much. We work at breaking down the common barriers
of the objective world, that passionate surface view of our lives. I've often thought we're trying
to communicate with the primal creature, paint or write or compose an inroad that will allow us
to feel the deep prehistoric moan of humankind. However, that kind of truth, that's too much for
any civilized creature to handle. We write it or paint it or worse, we sculpt it out of steel, wood
or plastic, and realizing what we've given voice to, what we've allowed to enter into our
consciousness shakes us up. Then we've wasted our lives cowering in fear and it's too late to
accept our lives as a practice."

Jimmy turned examining Max's nose, his cheeks, his entire face and body down to his
shoes, and Max not knowing what to think, looked into Jimmy's face, his eyes. His face read
like an open ponderous volume on the phenomena of James Baldwin's personal space and time.
"I been scared, baby. Welcome to the human race." Jimmy returned to their window.
"Is that supposed to help, Jimbo?" Max asked.
"If you mean, is that supposed to alleviate your insecurities, no. Really, you keep waiting
on the day when you're no longer afraid, and that's not gonna happen. If you've a brain in your
skull, fear is immanent. The question is, are you going to live someone else's fears or choose your own?"

Max shared the window. "When we were young, just married, Julia and I struggled. We almost starved. I wasn't too proud..." His diaphragm froze. A man wearing white boxer shorts and black socks ran across the backyard dancing and sliding along the wet grass like an idiot.

"I don't know what on earth you've got to be afraid of," Jimmy said, unaware of Max's vision. "Listen, writing is like swinging from a rope. The filth and degradation foisted upon my brothers and sisters. The rapes and whippings. The hangings. Every time I sit down at that machine I feel the scratchiness of a noose tightening around my Black neck. I've got to write it fast, baby. Very prolific, you know, before they realize what I've actually written. I've got to create something a White New York publisher approves of. Not too offensive. However, it's got to be venomous enough for the brothers to appreciate. Digg? I sit down, lift my fingers, and all I see are demonic nightmares hanging from strange Southern magnolias, tarred and feathered, burnt to a crisp. We were a people once. You know, I represent the only race that never asked to come to this land? Me! A Black homosexual! Pressure, baby? I had to leave the fucking country because I was afraid to walk down the great American boulevard without my head stuck up my ass. Afraid of what I might see. Afraid if I was refused one more glass of water or one more hotel room, why, I'd have no choice but to commit a murder! Pop chose me to write for an entire race. I did and I'm proud."

Jimmy closed his eyes furrowing his brow. He wanted to get the words precisely. Max still searched night through the window. "Art, Max, the genuine article takes a leap of faith. The ability to start over each time you do it. The universal map remembers, and we use that memory and build upon it, each in our own way. We add to that memory. We use this corporeal existence to transcend this very existence. Art is part of our phenomenal-spiritual practice. Art is seeing life through beginner's eyes, where anything is possible in spite of all you think you know. Each creative act grows out of a moment of immediate insight, a piece of the gift."

Max rubbed the portfolio with his hands and smiled. "You're right, Jimbo. Painting is an intuitive act. We read the entire cosmological map and then add a dash of cad yellow, a stroke of
cerulean blue to some yahoo's nose, and not because it belongs there, it doesn't, but because it helps to make a statement about the subject! I want to paint because I want to connect with everything, to everyone. But don't let it get around."

Jimmy grabbed the windowsill hanging on Max's words. He thought he might own a pair of hands, and using one he touched Max lightly on his cheek. "You've been listening, Max. Here I was certain…"

"I'm glad one of us is certain, because I've spent the better part of today discoursing with a ghost, and Buddy-Boy, I'm not certain of anything. Except, as each minute passes I feel stronger, more focused. I'm going out of my mind. I know that. But it feels great! James?"

"Yes, Max."

"I'm about to face a few long buried demons. Of course, I'm not sure what demons look like."

"You know," Jimmy tapped his fingertips at the air, "when I begin typing I want to make the world I leave a little better than the world someone left me. Do you have children?"

"Yeah, they're grown." Max, his head cast down, became all chin.

Jimmy turned back to the window. "To be an artist, really, is an aggressive act of bravery."

Lifting his eyes, Max realized he saw nothing outside the window. The idiot in boxer shorts disappeared, and returning to his workbench he found himself alone. An act of bravery. Can I still be brave?

Sheets of rain flogged the streets overrunning the gutters. Another cloud burst. Thunder rolled in waves with shocks of lightning following in five-second intervals. Halfway to the front door Max paused and cocked back his head, opening his mouth catching raindrops. He'd forgotten to close the garage against the elements, to extinguish the light. The air is electric, he thought, midnight blue, crisp, and electric.
THE QUASI- STELLAR REVLO N BITCH—3

[quasi-stellar object, (kwa' zi), adj. /n. comb. Extragalactic object. One of the most distant objects in the universe. ~Webster's Dictionary]

A beam of light escaping Joel's bedroom streaked across the entry. Max balanced his weight on one foot shining the instep of his other shoe, rubbing the rear of his pant leg like a cricket in heat. He spied through the crack of his brother's door. Joel, a younger man in his late forties with a shaved cue-ball head, paced back and forth along the bedside lifting one bony aesthetic hand holding the hem of his ochre robe above the floor, cautious not to defile the holy garment under foot of his ragged sneakers. At the head of the bed Joel dropped on one knee praying furiously in Hebrew. He rose, continued pacing, pulled a set of sandalwood beads from the folds of his garment, and sat half-lotus position on the mattress. Chanting loudly, "Aum, aum, aum…" running the polished beads through fingertips, he counted, feeling the passing of each round spiritually charged sphere.

Max couldn't figure him. Joel never mastered survival, never earned a living wage. Early in life he'd grown concerned with broader truths, esoteric truths; truths Max the empiricist dismissed as a crock. Max thought the stink was due to Joel's arrival as a late-life baby. Jacob and Ruth, being exhausted by their struggle, vegetated, defeated by existence when Joel popped out. The baby never received coddling during his early morning cry. Max crept up the stairs confronting his arduous end of the day climb. He heard Joel switch to an impassioned, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare…" Obviously a dysfunctional plea to be held, Max thought.
He knew Joel was counting. *God knows, it's easy enough to lose your place*, and Max plugged one heavy foot in front of the other advancing up the stairs. "You got all the bases covered there, Joel? Buddy?" he shouted back down to the entry.

"Hare, Rama… Oh, shit! Hey, you made me lose count!"

Climbing, Max sneered. At the top step he paused studying his own bedroom door. Pulling the pad out of his coat packet, he flipped through his stress list. Julia's name appeared prominently emblazoned across several pages expressing deep angry protest. He slipped it back into his pocket and raked his fingers through the top of his scalp, moving them around to the back of his neck, scratching behind his ears though they didn't itch. He grabbed loose fat under his chin rubbing it. Focusing on the challenge, he tugged the flesh. "Max, is that you?" she called in a quiet hollow voice, a distant tone. This last, her distance from him, left him eternally sad.

***

At one a.m., Julia reclined on their bed, knees drawn to her chest, straining her arms to reach her toes. Holding a foot firmly in one hand, and committing fanatical devotion to detail, she brushed on nail polish using the other hand. Her chin resting squarely on her knees, she drew her eyes together zeroing in on the task, painting each stroke of color, overlapping the previous one with a tiny flick of the brush at the end of the nail, and then retracing steps she methodically blended strokes together, melding them into a single thin film of hard lacquer. Julia proved the most exacting tightly focused woman Max ever knew. When she spoke, her jaw moved imperceptibly. Her smile gleamed calculated to show a precise even number of front teeth. Everything about the woman screamed tightness. Anal sex with Julia Greenbaum, when she opened up enough to let him screw it in, was constricted bliss. He stared in awe of how she moved her toes that way, in separate directions spreading her foot like a claw.

"There's no dinner left," Julia said, running over Max's hello.
"Thanks for keeping dinner warm," Max heard himself say simultaneously, though no one else in the room heard it.

"I didn't know how late you'd be." Her eyes never left the brush.

Max struggled out of his coat, yawning, and tossed it on top of the bed. Concentrating, Julia winced irritated at the motion. He removed his tie tack and wristwatch, a gold nineteen-fifty Omega automatic, and grabbing a heavy set of keys from his pocket, he dropped these items on an old Empire bureau, on a worn spot where the trinkets slept every night for years. A set of hinged picture frames sat on each corner of the bureau, and before retiring Max examined them. One set, recent, showed photographs of the children grown in their late teens. Their son wore a business suit and their daughter a graduating cap and gown. Both inherited Julia's perfect teeth. The young woman owned Julia's high cheekbones and the young man already showed traces of Max's Slavic nose. On the other corner sat two old photographs of a youthful couple. One, a wedding picture, a re-enactment of Max breaking the wine glass under foot with Julia's parents standing in the background, everyone too contrived to suit Max's taste. The other pictured a robust Max and innocent Julia barely out of their teens. They stood side by side in bright sunlight on the front lawn next to the familiar split driveway. She held a newborn baby girl in her arms, her long blond hair brushing the baby's face. Max, squinting into the sunlight, cradled the boy in his arms. He picked up this last photograph, ruminated over it, and then placed it back on the bureau. In those days he found just the words exciting; husband, father, and his favorite words; my wife. He remembered thinking life, specifically their marriage, flowed like a deep mysterious river; bountiful, carrying a myriad of reflections to be discovered with Julia, the river goddess, at the center of their journey.

"We were good parents, you know that?" Sitting on the edge of the bed he performed a ritual tug o' war fighting his trouser legs over his shoes. He jerked the trousers off one leg at a time lifting his knees to his stomach and straining his back, because it was the way his father and grandfather wrenched their backs.

Julia, behind him engrossed in her pedicure, still refused to look at him; however, a wistful smile crossed her lips. "You were a good father, Max."
Max didn't catch the smile. He stood facing their closet, hanging his coat and unbuttoning his shirt wrinkled with ten hours of sweat soaking the collar. He peeled it off his back. "We were good. Strange, you know, how some things come to an end. And when they do you think, no, you wonder, what now? Then the alarm clock rings and you know you're gonna shit 'n shave and everything's going to be the same. Understand?"

"No." She blew on her toes. "Can't say that I do."

"I thought to myself, my life's over, not in terms of death, but by reason of having no purpose. No direction. I said to myself, yesterday I understood the plan of my life, the responsibilities, the challenges, but why am I here today? Why am I still putting up with the same structure when the reasons for it are gone, grown and gone? It's just different, I guess. The house seems different. More space. And what's in the space doesn't speak to me. It doesn't reflect my thoughts. It doesn't answer the question; why am I here?"

Julia slanted her eyebrows pursing her lips. Against her will she understood to a point. "I'm aware that I'm not enough for you, Max. You don't have to throw it in my face."

Back on the edge of the bed, Max snapped at his shoelaces. He stopped suddenly. Staring down at a pair of ten and a half extra wide oxfords, he saw them for the first time. They shone cordovan, the color of deep red wine fronted in round plain toes and soled using heavy black slabs of leather. Inside, the leather aged from butter yellow to deep beige. Some areas decayed to brown and smelled warm. Max flipped one over feeling the heft of it in his hand, surprised at how heavy it hung in his fingers, and he examined the worn spot on the heel. This spot consumed him. *I remember it, the old man clunking and dragging, echoing through the outside hall after work. Throwing one foot out, scraping the other.* Escaping his train of thought grew hopeless because the heel appeared worn at an identical angle. *They're his. When I was a kid he wore shoes just like these, workingman's shoes. He made me polish them, the bastard.*

*Tomorrow I'm going out. I'm going to buy new shoes.*

"Honestly, Max, you're such a whiner."

"I had to work over. We lost another supervisor today."
They were both horizontal with nothing to say or do, and since this exemplified her life with him, Julia decided to be charitable, to extend herself. She sounded interested if it didn't demand vital body fluid. "Hawaii?" She selected a nail file from her beauty case.

"Galapagos. He was a young one. Not forty."

She shaped her fingernails blowing on them and striking them with the file; phew, strike, phew, strike. Time passed and she looked at Max. He'd lapsed into silence. "I see, well..." her voice sailing into the distance.

Joel's Tantric chanting filled the house. Max stretched out a leg kicking their door shut. "Why does he do that?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Joel's your brother."

"He's always been like that; lost. Pathetically weak willed. A compulsive joiner. The guy's forty-something years old. Belongs to eighty-two organizations. Eighty-two! He would've made eagle scout this year if he hadn't shaved all his hair off." Clowning, Max pulled his hair back tight throwing himself in Julia's line of vision. She giggled then laughed and Max knew he'd won her over. He milked the moment, jumping into an impression of his father grabbing the crotch of his boxers and dancing around the room. In a fit of exotic inspiration he stripped off his boxers, leaped on the bed, hairy genitals in the wind, and standing above Julia he work his shorts onto his head over his ears with the leg openings tossed behind his neck.

"Gawd!" Julia roared. "Is it really you? Is it Larry of Arabia? Where are your sunglasses, Lar?"


"Really? How's that, Larry?"

"Please, lady with ripe casabas who call me Larry, it big desert. Bery, bery big. Not many camels."

When Max ran out of shtick he smiled at her, and her laughter subsiding, she smiled back. Not an empty gesture. Not a distant one. Max climbed into bed. Julia laid her cosmetics aside, joining him under the covers, pulling up the blanket offering her toe nails atmosphere.
They lie next to one another studying the ceiling. Julia wiggled her toes. She blew on her fingers.

"Were they all we had, Julia? The children, I mean. Were they the sum of our relationship?"

"It's over, isn't it?" she asked. They rolled closer, Julia nestling her head in the hollow of Max's shoulder. He stroked her soft hair with thick fingers.

"It must be sad," he mused. "I feel sorry for Joel. To go through life never knowing who he is. Not knowing his own mind, his soul."

"Max, are you all right?"

"Peachy. I'm thinking. Just thinking, that's all. How about I collect some disability on my back? Take life easy for a while. I'm thinking, paint," and he spread his hands in the air over their heads as if the word presented itself on a holy billboard above their bed. PAINT.

The wind shifted. Julia sprang to the other side of the sack. "You don't think. You never think."

"Honey, that's a terrible thing to say. To tell the man you love he doesn't think!"

"Love's on shaky ground here, pal. Shaky."

"I think. I dream. I postulate." Max doubled his pillow, propping himself up on one arm. Julia leaned in for a split second sniffing his breath and he clutched at her hand. She tried pulling it away but Max wouldn't give. "Remember when we were young? We thought we knew it all. Honey, it was you and me against the status quo. There was a certain charm in that."

She glared at him.

"Julia?"

"Postulate?" She repeated the word as if severely insulted. She'd never known her husband to theorize. Never known him to grasp for anything beyond the credible.

"Sure, Julia. Why not? Why not look to the future and wonder? Why not reach?"

"Honestly, Max, you're a jerk."

"How can you say that?" Her hand felt bloodless. He allowed it to slip from his.
"How can you talk about quitting your job to go off and paint when half the world's starving and the other half are fighting just to survive? Did you know Letterman suffered a heart attack, I think. Or was that some time ago?"

Max slapped his hands flat on the sheets, raised his eyelids until they touched the top of his forehead, and exploded in ironic laughter. "It's election time so of course Julia is thinking Letterman. Let's take stock. We're being led through a war against terrorism against half the world, the half we've been selling weapons to for years. We lost, I don't remember, six-thousand civilians in New York city. We lost the war on drugs because it was a war against our own CIA that kept leaking our play book to, I suppose Bogata, Latin America and everything south. Our government threatened a shutdown because our president is Black and they thought they could get away with it—imagine what they'll do if Hillary gets in, imagine what we'll have to contend with if Trump, a sexual deviant tax evader gets in! We have a third world nation demanding rap music anarchy under our noses. Africans are murdering each other. Eastern Europe and the Middle East are on a suicide mission, and everyone else is murdering everyone else, and yes, some time ago Letterman did have a heart attack from chain smoking fifty-dollar cigars stuffed in the rear of his limousine with the windows shut while the middle-class vanished. Unpaid writers and teachers are standing in food lines while our children can no longer read. Oprah is watering a front yard the size of Yellowstone National Park while the rest of us are pissing on our weed patches because we can't afford to flush our toilets, and uh-huh, as always, your grasp of world politics is astounding. You've got a finger on the asshole of the nation. You're a woman with a natural proclivity to gravitate towards importance. You should run for president. At least you'd be honestly ignorant."

"If you ask me, you're a whining, self-centered, irresponsible, immature, oh! An artist! I can't believe after all these years with our marriage on the rocks we're having this argument."

Turning from him, Julia cried.

Max flattened his pillow staring at the ceiling. "You think that's what this is about? You think it's about my being an artist? It could be about becoming a doctor, a lawyer, a fry chef. This is about survival. My survival. My becoming. You know, I'm just beginning to understand
something; the universe works from an intelligent perspective. That is, it has direction. We, you and me, are part of that direction. What the direction is I don't know yet. But I know it’s a process and I have to get in the game. If I stand on the sidelines I have no vote. I don't mean to sound like some idealistic New Age kid with his head in the clouds, but there's something to this."

"To what?"

"To understanding that I'm part of everything that's happening. I'm not an outsider and I don’t have to let life pass me by. This is about my becoming. I'm looking past middle age, Julia. I just blinked an eye and I'm fucked! Half my life is gone. And all my life's been about was my father's survival through his son. Your survival through a husband. The children's survival through their daddy. The company's survival through an employee." He vomited words like throwing off a disease. "Don't I have the right to survive? Because I'm not surviving, Julia. I'm dying."

"I think you should see a doctor."

"Earth to Julia! Why don't we talk anymore?" Max hung his face before her, his chin resting on his chest like a hound whose head is too big and heavy. "Remember when we used to lay in bed every morning and share our dreams?"

"Oh, Max, that was so long ago," and she rolled towards him with wet cheeks.

"I had a dream, honey. A wonderful dream. I dreamt I was traveling along this dirt path through a forest."

Julia ripped the sheets off her body and duck waddled across the carpet taking care not to muss her wet toenails. She waddled into the bathroom and planting herself in front of a mirrored wall cabinet she wiggled her toes balancing on her outside arches. Opening the cabinet revealed a half-dozen narrow shelves of cosmetics, conditioners, and skin cleansers. Beginning at the top Julia took pains working with expertise from left to right down the shelves, applying each product to its correct location on her upper torso. Creams required dabbing and lotions needed rubbing in circular motions. Julia knew what to do, precisely, and Max watched her doing it while he talked.
"And then I came to a clearing. A tremendous field. The kind Dorothy had to cross to get to Oz. Only the road forked and there at the crossroads sat this bench. A thinking bench. A place where a man could sit and rest and take stock of himself. Julia, are you listening?"

"You go right ahead, Max. Talk to Julia. I'm listening."

Max, feeling vaguely as if confessing without coming first, an annoying feeling, knowing the Revlon bitch was patronizing him, watched her patting lotion over lightly freckled breasts while he spoke. "I remember trying to touch different parts of my body."

Julia reeled around wearing turquoise gook on her face and hands. Clumps of paste stuck to the insides of her nostrils. "Hey, I was here. I offered. Don't blame that touchy-feely crap on me." Having said so, she returned to her business.

"That's not what I mean. I mean, I couldn't find myself. I'd forgotten who I was. I knew the crossroads was an important place. I wanted to paint the field and I came to the realization that my life sucked shit. But here, being given a second chance I feel myself wanting to paint, to live."

Julia flipped off the bathroom light and waddled back to bed. She grabbed a tube of hand lotion from the side table squeezing a dollop into her palm.

"It was enlightenment," he said. While she rubbed in the lotion, Max leaped out of bed and paced burning up the rug.

"Enlightenment? Why, of course. Anyone can see that. Share with Julia."

"A rebirth. I don't mean some mid-life crisis. It's only a crisis if you don't see the answer. The answer's a whole new beginning!"

"I'm glad you shared that with me, Max. Why don't you come to bed?"

"Don't you get it? It can be the way it used to be. You and me in a new universe. Honey. Together we can make it!"

"Is that it?"

Max smacked his hands rubbing them together. "That's not the best part. In the morning I'm going to do it. I quit. I'm gonna paint. It'll be okay. The angel said so."
The quasi-stellar Revlon bitch stared at him poker-faced without exhibiting a clue as to how insane she thought he'd become. She rolled over on the mattress kneeling and shook her blond mane. Julia aimed her smooth ass high and stared back at him with far away lunar eyes, half closed and taunting. "Max, come to Julia …and bring Big Daddy with you."

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Jimmy strutted in front of the chalkboard speaking to the small assembly, cajoling them, stepping the length of the board stooping and bowing, and throwing himself back like a black shiny rooster welcoming all comers. His shirtsleeves rolled, and chalk in his hand, he searched for a heavenly sucker to take the odds. The board was marked, MAX'S ARRIVAL TIME, and Jimmy only stopped moving long enough to wipe out numbers with his dusty palm and insert new ones in columns. The close-knit circle debated heatedly.

Jimmy pulled down sharp on his visor, loudly clearing his throat. "Gentlemen, and ladies, that's giving all present the benefit of the doubt," he critically studied one massive woman sprouting clipped hair and the jittery jowls of an English bulldog, "you're a sorry collection of literary snobs. Wagering for one ticket of passage will soon draw to a close. Hem, you're the biggest braggart up here."

A thick-boned man pulled at his wool turtleneck sweater, a big game hunter growing a spiky tough silver beard and answering the charge through whiskey breath, "The broad stabs him in his sleep. He dies tonight. And now that it's settled, let's have a drink. I'm certain you gentlemen," Hemingway sneered at the bulldog woman, "would like to wish me a bon voyage."

Jimmy scribbled it on the board as the debate raged with one old gentleman twirling his mustache in agitation, spitting cigar juice out the side of his mouth. He checked his pocket-watch squinting through exacting eyes and returned it to his vest. Lighting his cigar, training one eye on the board, smoke curled and wound like the great Mississippi river disappearing into his shock of white curly hair. "Care to wager?" Jimmy asked.
"On what? Whatever, whoever's down there isn't worth my time! Besides—Ckaww!" coughing up tobacco phlegm, Sam Clemmons pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket, finished his business into it, and continued with thumbs hooked behind his lined lapels. "Why, it won't happen that way. Tain't natural that a female mule ruins the male mule, no sir. That is, lessen' the jackass's accounts are in arrears."

"He's broke, baby. Flat busted." Jimmy grinned. "A week to week, hand to mouth wage slave.

"Hmm. A cattle prod in the unmentionables. One week," Sam predicted.

The bulldog woman shook her square head adamantly, pulling a man's pocket-watch out of the folds of her dress where it hung buried on the end of a long brass chain. She noted the time and shuddering her jowls she spoke to herself more than to anyone else. "Whether, is not the question, but when and how can any of us know? It's what I always say and I've said so many times."

"So and so and so!" Hemingway bellowed. "Who the hell let her in here anyway?" He rattled his fist in Gertrude Stein's vinegar face. "I shoulda, oughta, and I just might…"

Sam Clemmons stepped between them blowing cigar smoke in Hemingway's eyes. "You, sir, ought to mind your manners around the ladies. I'll have you know that Gerti and I are friends, and I'll ask you kindly to refrain from raising your fist!"

"She's no lady, sir."

"Quiet! Quiet, please!" Jimmy shouted. "That's better. I believe Mr. Miller would like to take a shot at it. Henry?"

A bald gentleman wrapped in a robe and house slippers crept naughtily over to the edge of an awareness cloud and peered beyond. "I don't know. Tough to make out." Shortly he rejoined the group. "Being a contrarian, and just to play the devil's advocate, I say he kills her. And I'll tell you, I'm going to the gate and hang around. She's got great legs, don'tcha know?"

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Max banged repeatedly on the window, embarrassed at the way she'd strewn his belongings across the front lawn. He felt neighbors peeking from behind their curtains, though he kept banging on the glass until the front door opened and he ran for it, his bare feet sliding along wet grass. More clothes hit him in the face. "No! Julia!" Max's thirty-five year collection of baseball cards hit open space as if autumn leaves sailing to earth. He long-jumped for them landing on his knees. The Babe floated down three feet in front of him in a puddle. "Oh, for Christ's sake," Max sulked, "not the Babe." A bad omen, his historic hero with his uniform knickers soaked. He stumbled crawling over to it on his knees, picking it up by one limp corner and then dropping it. Becoming cognizant of his prostrate position in front of greater Los Angeles, he stood this time stomping a deep path to the window determined to shatter glass. "Julia!" he banged. "Julia! I thought you understood."

Her figure appeared behind the glass-reflected trees. Max couldn't see her face clearly, but Julia's distraught, tearful anger cut clean through the glass, through space, above branches and leaves, beyond his flesh. It became Julia in front and the neighbors from behind, spying on him and his empty existence spewed across the lawn. He lifted one finger tapping on the pane. He tried a ca-ca grin. "I understand!" she shouted. "You don't care about us! You don't love me anymore!"

"But last night. What about last night?" He put his mouth closer to the glass. Julia, against her better judgment, cranked open the window an inch. Max whispered so the neighbors wouldn't hear. "It was, it was incredible. I thought—"

She slammed the window shouting, "I told you last night, Max, you don't think!" She beamed like the Cheshire cat. "Last night belonged to me." Max glanced around knowing they'd been heard. His grin melted. She cranked open the window full speed into his chin and shouted again. "Your performance stunk!" That devastation, the Julia touch, the match, the flame to the struggling pissant. Max disintegrated, his ego charred beyond recognition. He spun his back on the house hearing the door fly open. Joel landed on the grass. In short order a set of beads flew through the air landing beside him. He picked himself up and bending silently, ineffectually he
picked up the beads. "Brother, I don't mean to insult your corporeal hospitality, however, I can't live like this. The spirit must be nurtured."

"I understand, Joel. Does this mean your leaving home?"

"I have no choice."

Max shook his head from side to side biting the inside of his cheek. "What can I say? What can I say except, shucks." Max ran back to the window. "Listen to me, you bitch! You whore! Half this house belongs to me!" Julia stood like a statue behind the glass. He spread out his arms and screamed.

Julia screeched through the window. "Fine! You know which half you can have, you broomstick with teeth!"

Max turned in pain, realizing nothing remained left between them but time spent. He circled the lawn picking up his baseball cards, squeezing them out, searching for a sunny spot on the pavement to dry them. He didn't notice when Julia opened the window. They no longer occupied the same emotional space. He couldn't be hurt any worse. Exhibiting a deaf ear while she yelled to the world, her syllables rang hollow for him. He'd left her.

He laid his soggy cards on a warm dry spot; Mickey Charles Mantle, Center Field, 536 Home Runs, 365 Average, Most Valuable Player of 1956; Ty Murry Raymond Cobb (The Georgia Peach), "The Georgia Peach!" Max shouted. Let the neighbors hear that! Outfield, 367, 4,191 Lifetime Batting Average; Ted Williams (The Splendid Sprinter)… and Max smiled beatifically glancing up. "The Babe. The Babe," Max mumbled it like a prayer, as if he could see the ball soaring out of the park clearing the vacuum.
Max occupied himself teasing a gray mouse that sniffed the air lifting its black head and whipping a pink tail. The creature darted in swift figure eights around his new Nike cross-trainers sporting blue and white stripes. He taunted it, pushing a half munched Snickers bar in front of the mouse's speculative nose, then snatching it away. It twitched its whiskers while Max dragged the candy wrapper along a slab of cold ground. Finally, tired of the game, he allowed the mouse to nab the candy from his fingers. "You like that, eh?" Max contemplated the garage, his half of the arrangement. "Okay, game plan. We're alone but free. We can paint anything. Understand? Life is our canvas, our glob of clay."

The mouse sniffed at the fresh rubber toe of Max's shoe. It peeked up at him.

"But what do we paint? We can't paint just anything. We have to paint something. A masterpiece has focus. It marches across the canvas with purpose. It might be abstract without geographical direction like a Jackson Pollock." The mouse begged standing on hind legs sniffing the air. "Yet, there's a design in Pollock's chaos. The lighter colors recede and the bolder colors stand forward. And the rhythm! The spots don't sit on that canvas, they run through it. No matter how abstract, there's always an intent, a scheme." Watching both of them, the great and small, one assumed a teacher-pupil relationship. One thought the mouse actually listened hanging on every word, until the creature whipped its tail and ran.

"I take it then, you don't like Jackson Pollock?" Brooding on the edge of an old army cot, he huddled under a thin wool blanket draped over his head. *Fuck 'em. Van Gogh rotted in a hole.* The whole point being, at last he uncorked his Russian nostrils wide, breathing freely, his sinuses deflated, eyes twinkling and the oppressive gravitational mass of his life broke down going nova, ingredients heretofore trapped now absconding on the wind, cutting new passages
along the face of Max Greenbaum's map. Forgotten areas of the universe received passage through the guard posts of Max's narrow personality. Max reveled in forgotten odors of damp cement, the oil, gasoline, and musty cardboard boxes, the sappy pine framing and black tar paper, and he delighted in a hint of fresh air blowing from between high rafters. Emanation bit at the goose flesh on his upper arms, and the memory of his little girl watching Daddy at the workbench tinkering with one of her busted skates, a flooding of the illusory time stream, memories through eyes and ears and nose, via the pores. All of Max's yesterdays existing now in a single moment. Julia and he kicking at the ground and knocking on walls, studying the ceiling, wondering if they could afford the place. All of this recorded, awaiting inhalation like dust particles floating willy-nilly in a beam of light.

It struck him that time did not answer a linear call, his life no longer a sequence of events, rather a coexistence of activities, breezes blowing in the north, leaves falling in the south, existence flourishing through itself, reality not as a freestanding affair to be experienced. For a brief moment Max realized transcendence as himself, not something "other" to be acquired. However, it saddened him that at the instant he discovered this miraculous indivisibility, he crashed smack into his own mortal limitation. The fruition of his humanness, as he came to grips with it, was to sleep through it all, at best, to process only a fragment at a time. He sensed the sentient trap of tunnel vision reducing infinite being to a series of moments, each empty of its past and bereft of any future. The past used to be now, in the present it existed as a memory, and the future must only be considered now as a possibility. Duped into believing he lived along a time line upon which one's progress is evaluated, it crept upon him, a spider on his shoulder, a thought that until now he'd been living scared, afraid he'd failed the time line test.

Max filled his lungs inhaling cold drafts. *What is the focus of my masterpiece?* Another quality, one he couldn't put his finger on, one he couldn't inhale filled the space already teeming with memory and possibility, a transactional blip to cast off the crap of generations, own nothing, a pleasure blip, touchable if he fought through Jacob's ghost to get there, and where he would admit that at the moment, I must know nothing! This being an insecure position, not like Max Greenbaum, who lived through the corporeal incomplete knowledge of life. *If every moment is
the same as this one, I've never had a handle on anything. I mean, everything's already passed and nothing future has happened. Hell, I don't even know if I'm going to take the next breath! They must have been wonderful, those things that happened with Julia and the kids, but who knew then? Not me. Somebody typed.

Max peered high into the loft's shadows. Sitting on a rolling chair by a battered wooden desk, Jimmy typed furiously on Max's ancient Smith Corona. "This desk will do fine," he shouted, never missing a beat. A cigarette dangled from his mouth, acrid smoke pouring into his eyes, ashes flaking off into the keys, another cigarette stuck behind his ear. Jimmy jockeyed the chair, a seasoned pro sucking smoke from one corner of his mouth, blowing ash off the machine out of the other corner, pounding away, brutally smashing the return lever. "These old work horses can take it, you know?"

Max glared at him. Finally, Jimmy paused looking down. "Really, I can't possibly work with you gawking at me like that."

"What are you doing? What-are-you-doing?"
"Going through the motions. Getting ready, Max."
"I don't want you here."
"You were lonely." Jimmy, an intellectual bull, blew a thick curl of smoke through his nose.

"No, no, no! This place is the last bastion of a man's paradise. My paradise. My freedom. My desert island. My house alone on a mountain top." Max cast his eyes downward, momentarily resigning himself, throwing his arms upwards.
"Of course, you're lonely."
"Jimbo, my man, you're not listening!"
"You need someone to love, baby. I'll tell you this, you need someone who'll love you."

Jimmy pivoted in the chair, squeaking, examining his surroundings. "Not so bad. Reminds me of a hotel room in Paris. There were a lot of us in those days. A lot of people running." He bounced up from the chair circling the desk. "It seemed as if they all ran to Paris, to my room. Some returned after awhile. They ran from Paris like they ran from the States.
Went back to the family businesses. Some that I loved, and some who loved me but were afraid, made loveless marriages."

Max's eyes opened, two saucers of cream in the dingy light. "I don't have those problems, if you get my drift."

"You don't have to be homosexual to have problems. I wasn't inferring anything like that."

"And my marriage, not that it's any of your business, was not loveless, Jimbo, not at the beginning."

"All I'm trying to say, Max, is that some stopped running. They stood their ground. They faced their demons."

"I don't have any demons."

"You told your wife you couldn't find yourself. How do you know you have no demons?"

"Fine." Max stretched out on the cot throwing the blanket over his face, blotting out the world, speaking in muffled tones. A moment ago things opened, however, that feeling dissipated. "I guess I can't keep you from being here if here's where you wanna be. Just stay off my back. I listened to you and look where it got me."

"Feeling a shade poor, are we?"

"I..."

"Don't do the poverty bit? Of course, I forgot. Got any food around?"

"No." Max's arms fell to his sides over the edge of the cot. The backs of his large hands trailed on the cement ground.

"Just like..." Jimmy breathed deep and let go a sigh.

"Paris, I know." Max shot up ripping the blanket off his face. *No peace for the trodden.* "Look, I'm hungry, and I've got a wad here." Max pulled his wallet from a trouser pocket flashing the contents at Jimmy sitting on the loft stairs elbows on his knees, chin resting in his upturned palms. Each time he appeared his body felt a bit more on the solid side.

"I'm going out and get something, and I'm going alone," Max said.
Jimmy brightened, lifting his head, breaking a smile. "There's this little aromatic Italian place on La Cienega; hot bread sticks, pizza, romance." His black eyelids would've turned up at the thought if they weren't so wide and impenetrable.

Max, buried asshole and elbows, plowed through a tremendous pile of mildewed clothing behind the cot. Grunting breathless he shot up for air, red in the face grabbing a moth-eaten overcoat and winter muffler. He wrapped himself in these and jabbed the coat with his nose sniffing around the armpits. He'd be okay. He opened a small side door and the winter night gusted in. Max patted the breast pocket of his shirt. It was missing; perhaps his stress list lay soggy on the lawn. No matter. "Italian, huh?" He spoke to Jimmy without looking back,"You coming? I need to know, so when you show up at the table I won't piss my pants."

"You go. I'll be along later." Jimmy grinned at the back of the door after Max slammed it. He gazed up at the rafters, smoking in long artful drags, "How'm I doing, Pop?" blowing white mysterious rings. Watching the rings dissolve, he recognized the solidity of bone and flesh belonged to him. "You know, I'm a romantic fool."

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Frowning critically through a long picture window, rubbing his thumb in a half moon along the glass, he gestured that her Santa Claus should be fatter. Santa stooped, buckling his boots over an already rotund stomach. She stood back on the pavement, a well-used paintbrush jammed between her teeth, hands on her hips considering the layout. It appeared perfect and while she wasn't certain what she thought of her critic, she believed the virtuous position towards him must be feigned indignation. Reaching for a towel, she dabbed at the water drops on her face. After all, a perfect stranger, a man sitting on the other side of the glass obviously warm and comfy drinking his hot coffee, eyed her while she worked in the rain… and what did he have on his mind? Not that he wasn't cute in a gruff unshaven sort of way, but what did he have on his mind? And then people looked, of course, even if they did not. The only proper thing was to protect her virtue regardless of what he had on his mind.
She separated her booted blue-jeaned legs at shoulders width, a gun fighter drawing her finger, zapping him with the dekko, one eye closed, the other open raising its eyebrow. She shook her finger at him.

Max sunk into a maroon vinyl bench seat drinking black coffee, taking in neon signs on La Cienega. He sipped off the edge of the cup under dim lights, watching a young woman in her twenties on the other side of the window shaking that finger. A familiar gesture. It sparked the rebel. Again, he ran his thumb around Santa's belly, insistent, pressing harder than before, and without the hint of a smile he quickly became a pain.

She took up her brush dipping it with determination into a pot of white paint, ignoring him and signed the layout, Bohemian Ann, signaling its completion. What did he want? He gestured her to come in out of the rain and join him. She shook her head wiggling that fingertip at his nose. Max needed to grow on her. Everyone grew on Ann indiscriminately. He resumed drinking his coffee, and Ann, aware it was happening again, watched him for a moment lifting the cup to chiseled lips. Blowing gently. Sipping. The way he held the cup… He has strong hands, she thought, although strength alone did not make a man attractive. The gentle things a man gave rise to, with his strength, caused Ann to study his eyes, professing a discovery of great depth in them. He placed both hands against the cup warming square palms, and a tiny shiver ran up her spine between her shoulders. He didn't turn to look at her after that. Disappointed, she worked bending down, cleaning brushes. Ann wondered if his voice sounded recondite, or inviting penetration, or soft or high. She showed hostility towards men with high voices. She hoped he wasn't as grumpy as he appeared, but she liked the way he favored her father, lost, and this was how it started. She empathized with stray dogs and lost men.

Reaching up to the ledge for another brush, his hand pressed a napkin note against the window, "Facing my demons. Help!" An older man, craggy, definitely vulnerable, and not that any of this mattered. It just must be so nice and warm inside. She wrote rubbing her grease pen across the glass, "What sort of help did you have in mind?" Ann stared directly at him, wondering about their making love, firm in her approach while noticing his eyes and thinking, 

*Look at all those little lines. I'll bet he's interesting.*
Inside, Max cocked his head and twisted his eyes deciphering the reversed message through the glass. He scribbled on his napkin, "Coffee?"

She wrote hers before he finished writing his. "I'm not that kind of woman. I'm not coming in." It won't do to take in every stray. She knew that.

Max crumpled the first napkin and started another. "Okay, you're not a coffee kinda woman, and you're definitely not coming in. I was only humoring your obvious interest in me anyway." It hit the pane and her resolve melted. She found his hopelessly misdirected ego heart rending.

Max stood. Bohemian Ann walked nervously over to his table. She nattered incessantly, stripping off layers of cold weather clothing. Max's mind went blank. He couldn't recall a moment previous to the melody of Ann's voice. "This is very nice of you. I'm soaked to the bone. Do you ever get that way?" pulling a sweater over her head, "I mean, whatever you feel you feel it to the bone. And who expected this weather anyway?" Shit, she thought, me and my mundane mouth. "I don't appreciate critics, however, in your case I'll let it pass."

Max introduced himself watching in amazement while Ann, gargling more words and phrases, "...and I'm supposed to be pleased to meet you?" shook the water out of her clothes in the middle of the restaurant creating a puddle at her feet. "It's hell on my paints. In the summer they run and in the winter they freeze, and me, I get so cold, and when I get cold, I'm cold to the bone." Pulling and yanking frantically at two sweaters and a flannel over-shirt. "I guess I said that, but you don't talk much. How come you're so quiet?"

"Well, I..."

"And it's the same way when I'm hot." She ran out of room spreading her stuff across the back of their booth and so spread to other booths in the vicinity, dripping on other people. She'd gone from cold to hot unlayering herself in a heated restaurant. "Tea."

"Pardon?"

"I drink tea, Max." She kept on her large floppy hat and a man's thermal shirt. Max stared as she crossed her legs half-lotus style in the booth, another familiar gesture. Ann smiled
back studying him over the tops of her lavender wire-framed spectacles. Determined to stop her mundane jabbering, she tightened her jaw. *I'll get to the bottom of this guy immediately and when he doesn't have any substance, I'll drop him.*

"So," Max said, "how did you get that name, Bohemian Ann?"

"So, I've never been asked to help a man face his demons before."

He stared into her brown eyes and smiled. "You first." His eyes traveled the room searching for the waiter. More than that, he wondered if anyone noticed the beautiful young woman sitting with him.

"My parents were sort of, you know, that generation that named their children Rainbow, Moon, This 'n That."

He'd spotted the waiter and still smiling threw up an arm.

"I guess you'd know all about it, I mean, being older." *That was terrible. Awful! What was I thinking, calling him older?* The words hung between them. They sat in silence.

The waiter, peering down his nose at wet clothes all over his station, poured Max another coffee. "The lady would like a cup of tea, please." Max's smile waned.

"Peppermint, if you have," she said.

"Earl Gray," said the waiter.

"Chamomile?"

"We serve Earl Gray here, Miss."

"I better try that then."

*Why*, Max thought, *am I sitting here feeling like a balding psychedelic dinosaur?* He felt constrained. Her young eyes fawned over him and he didn't know what else to say.

"About being older, is that bad?" She looked pointedly at him.

"It doesn't feel bad," he said. "It feels better."

"Better than what?" Ann asked.

"Better than youth. Youth is angry. It's furious and scattered. It's not that I'm fulfilled. I'm not. There are still things I want. Goals I find myself setting. I'm dissatisfied, but through the discontent something is creeping over me. Slowly. A kind of mellowing out. It's just
sometimes. I just notice it's there and I believe it's part of my maturation process. I'm looking forward to becoming more philosophical with age." Great. I just told her I'm dead. "I'll tell you what though, I still do three-hundred push-ups every night. What twenty year old does that? I still believe the body is God's temple!" He pounded his chest.

"The universe," she said, "is God's temple. I think we're caretakers, not just of our bodies, unless we think of the universe as our bodies. I've talked to people who believe just that. I try not to analyze the human situation, just live it. I have something inside, oh, call it what you will, that tells me when I've taken a right turn or a wrong turn, and I go with it. Listening is less complex and takes less effort than analyzing, and if you're a good listener you arrive at the same destination."

He paused, weighing her words, tapping on the table. "Okay. Whatever you said. I'll say this, I care about the god-damned trees!" It felt that long since any woman desired him. *I have to come up with something environmentally passionate. She's sitting in a yoga pose. She's got that Zen-California state of mind. Maybe whales?*

Lost, Ann thought, turning, watching neon lights.

"What's wrong, trees aren't big enough?"

"Yeah, I suppose they are. There are whole forests of them, jungles of them. But you don't really care about them, do you, Max? It's not how big the tree is. It's not how big anything is. It's how deep, how wide your feeling for anything is. The rain forests are popular to care for about now. Last year it was the whales."

"Shouldn't I care about trees?"

"You should genuinely care. I should care. Do you really care? Have you allowed anything larger than yourself to touch you? 'The body is God's temple' means more than what you feed it or how much you exercise. It means you ought to put it where your ideology is. It means the body is an aspect or a power point of God, and what you do with it, as well as to it, is a responsibility to be aware of. It means that your body owns the power to effect changes in peace and war, in growth and destruction."
"Didn't I mention my extreme long-term commitment to the whales? Oh, Gawd, I forgot to mention it. I'm very involved! I go out there, you know, I actually go out there and I watch. Long-term." Max was a wreck. *First conversations don't go like this.* "Look, Ann, I made a mistake." He trembled blurtling it out, ashamed of his honesty.

Vulnerable men. Ann empathized with vulnerable men and vulnerable dogs. First encounters don't go this way. She fell, still gazing into his eyes. "You took a wrong turn. That's all right. We'll go back, retrace your steps. We'll find the demon."

"No. I mean, I made a mistake asking you to join me. I guess when I saw you, well, you're beautiful and I wanted to feel good, you know?" He leaned in. "I haven't got the faintest idea what we're talking about here. I was a shoe salesman. No ideology. Shoe salesmen don't exist in a universe. We lie too much. We don't deserve one. Shoe salesman, attorneys, and auto mechanics, we all share this little pissy spot outside the universe. It's hell." Ann leaned back in the booth realizing he wasn't anything like her father.

"But I'm not a shoe-dog anymore. I've recently quit. I'm an artist."

Shit, he's having mid-life crisis. I don't need this. Max, stop looking at me that way. You can't love me immediately. It never works. "Is that so important, being an artist?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so. Though nobody else seems to think so. Young people don't understand art. They don't digg it. Art is power. Art defines the way we perceive life. It changes cultures, develops civilizations. True art is the vanguard of justice in the jungle. They're calling rap music art. But when Snoopy-Icee-What's His Name is asked to defend lyrics glorifying rape and murder, all he can say is, 'You don't know my world. That's the way it is, the way I'm tellin' it.' See? He missed the point. Because, if he were an artist, he'd be telling his generation, his peers, not to accept the way it is. To change it! True art is the power to creatively right wrongs, to change the status quo when the status is wrong! Just telling it the way it is, is to just give up. Now, that's not art."
He gloried at her eyes, wanting to make love with her, to hold and be held by her. "Ann, my wife threw me out. We're separated." He examined a few auburn hairs falling across her forehead, wondering how she'd take the news.

All right, she decided, but don't blame me when you get hurt in the end.

"You're scaring me, Ann."

"Walk me home, Max? I think I know your demons." She smiled at him and his face flushed.

"You're not going to exorcise me are you?"

"I'm not into religion," she said. "It's too confining. I'm spiritual."

Spiritual; the word rang perfection. It fit everything about her. Max breathed richly, drawing in Ann's transparent flesh, his macrocosm rupturing, shattering at its seams. He inhaled the backs of her hands, her fragile neck where fine soft down lay. Holding her bags of brushes and colors, they hiked in the rain past old Angelino houses, Spanish houses south of La Cienega.

"She threw you out. So, you have nothing. You'll have to start all over from the bottom."

"Hey, I'm not at the bottom." He stumbled through a puddle. "I'm in transition. A man can weather these changes. I've experienced a turbulent life." He slipped dropping one of her bags and Ann glanced back at him. Max quickly straightened his posture. "Go with the flow. That's me." He took giant strides catching up to her side. Hell was dissipating, and his universe expanding.

"Well..." she mused.

"You're beautiful," he said. The only certain objective, hearing these words emerge from a bottomless abyss within, was that he desperately did not want to waste another earthbound moment.

"Please, don't say that."

"Why not? I didn't mean it in the paternal sense. I'm not your father," and he shifted the bags, slinging a free arm around her shoulders. Kneading the thick padding of her coats and sweaters, he squeezed her, letting her feel his intentions.

"I didn't think you were." She looked up at him.
"I find you attractive."

"I know." Ann peeked away for an instant, then again turned her head towards him. "I know you do." They stood in front of her door, one of the city's older duplexes. She twisted from his grasp, jiggling the key in the lock. The door opened and she invited him in.

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"You shouldn't be surprised," he said. "I'm a guy, you know? Just a guy. A regular type of guy."

"You're married."

"She threw me out!"

They sat at opposite ends of her sofa-bed sipping wine from a bottle and two glasses arranged on a Victorian footed bathtub painted and covered by a sheet of glass strewn with books and magazines.

"I have my standards, Max."

"Fine. I won't press it. But why on earth did you invite me in at sunset, sit me on your sleeper, and serve me wine?" For the first time since he sat down, Max noticed stacks of books running amuck. He pondered how female motivation remained an esoteric doctrine, a wedge between genders. He sipped his wine. An aging poster on the wall announced Cesar Chavez calling a grape boycott. Next to that hung a framed book cover, *Just Above My Head*, by James Baldwin. Jimmy's face bore down at Max, reading his thoughts from the rear of the flyleaf. "Is there no escape?" Max mumbled.

"I like you, Max. I do. I thought, but then other things are going on with you. An unresolved marriage. Now's not the right time. I want it to be right and I want you to know who you are, to feel good about it. You know, there's lots of stuff that can happen between 'Let's try a separation' and 'Let's get a divorce.' It doesn't feel right, does it?"

"Trust me, I'd feel great about it." He deliberated over the book cover. Max forced himself off the sofa leaving his wine on the bathtub table and Ann watched him crossing her room. Light traveled along the far wall shifting shadows in its course; a car buzzing her house in the rain. His steps creaked heavy along the soft wooden floor. She imagined what he might
weigh, the warmth of his flesh and muscles, and she poured another glass of wine. "That's a nifty coffee table," he said, walking his fingers through her bookshelves. "When I was a kid, we used to plant flowers in empty toilet bowls. Now, that bathtub, that's sophisticated. I digg it." Ann could see the two of them together.

"Look," she said "I've had some shows. I know people. Let me handle your portfolio. I'd like to help." Max returned to the sofa, taking her hand, squeezing it gently, flusterling her. "This doesn't mean… Things like this take time, Max."

"Of course. Time," he said, protecting her tiny hand between both of his.

"And patience," Ann, said.

"Patience, right." He picked out a slim volume from the stacks on the table. "I'll read you one of my favorite stanzas by T. S. Eliot, and then I'll have to leave." Max flipped pages back and forth showing an easy intimacy with the work. He closed it on his finger. "It's called The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, and the first time I read it I guess I must have been fifteen. Of course, I had no idea it was literature."

"'And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet';"

Ann recited with him from memory;

"'There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate';"

Max ceased and listened to Ann against the silence;
"'Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.'"

A car sped along the wet street. Max felt teary-eyed, barely articulate. What is there left to say? "I'm not moved," he said, and she allowed a disappointed sigh. She'd hoped for more. "I'm genuinely moved," he added.
A FRAUDULENT HAND—5

"How many cards?" Jimmy asked.
"A real man plays the hand he's been dealt." Hemingway combed his fingers through his beard scratching at spiky gray hairs. He considered five cards fanned in front of him, his beefy arms resting on the square green table. Hanging over the familiar players, a light illuminated their faces in the midst of darkness. Stars floated far below their commentary, and how these spirits comprehended the domain they passed judgment upon struck Jimmy as a curious matter. However, being only the dealer, he kept mum. Hemingway slapped the table with his free hand. "He was on easy street. Tickling some broad's toes and getting paid for it. Besides, you can't paint the hunt. Hell! You can't even write about it! You've gotta get out there with a gun and shoot the son of a bitch. Nope. He was on easy street, I tell yuh."

Henry Miller, impatiently shaking his bald head, rubbing two cards, tossed them in and Jimmy snapped his wrist dealing two more. "You're big on the hunt, so let me put it to you this way," Henry said. "A hunted, perilous, and fear-ridden life is preferable to that of a salesman. It's Max's life, Max's misery, it's his own misfortune, so he's all of a piece. In doing what he likes, he's preserved his freedom, you see, even if it's his freedom to starve and suffer." Henry laid down his cards, and shoving one hand in the pocket of his terry cloth robe, he smiled tweaking a prominent earlobe, sniffing through his Germanic nose. He experienced some distant recollection. The game lagged secondary to Henry, a raconteur's table across which he bantered the themes of a beggar's lifetime. "Don'tcha know, to Max the world's a struggle. He was never on easy street. The guy wants to be of it, but not in it. He wants to be above the world."
"Good, let him join us! That'll put him above it. I'll even pull the trigger. It's not like I haven't done it before." Hemingway reached for his scotch swirling an ice cube in the glass. His humor, never good at these games, grew increasingly vituperative by the hour.

"Escape's no good," Henry said. "He's got to accept everything miserable and miraculous that belongs to his world and then, through his art, show there's something more. To be alive and to know it! It's the highest statement a man like Max Greenbaum can make."

Hemingway, thick, albeit not a poor fish, was familiar with insult by intimation. A shot of booze ran warm down his throat. "How's he gonna do that with a brush? I tell yuh, the guy needs a gun and I don't give a whore's ass which direction he shoots it in! How's he gonna paint it, this something more? God-damnit, a blast of powder, now that's legitimate expression." He nodded down at the felt, peering at his knuckles, feeling the inadequacy of his defense.

"What can I say?" Jimmy said. "You're a real tough White man." With that, he moved to Gertrude Stein. She glared into her cards stone-faced, decisively flicking down all but one. "I shall have four, four being as good a number as four can be." Then without warning, "A painting!" she barked at Hemingway, bellowing with such force he fell backwards in his chair, "has its own vitality, and not here but down there certainly somewhere vital people, that is people who have vitality, will like to look at it. People are supposed to look outside themselves to stave off boredom. Presidents of America are all of the time watching baseball games but in the end that's not suitable and they're bored anyway and they're boring anyway. A painting then is continuous. One is surrounded by a painting."

Hearing this, Hemingway dispensed his glass and plunged straight for the bottle.

"And how's he going to do it with a painting?" Gertrude asked, assessing everyone's attention. "Well, a painting is a real thing, vital, which looks like something else, another real thing but it's not that thing, not that thing at all. Although my favorite thing is seeing a painting continue beyond the edges of the canvas into the real thing which is not what it is itself. I know because the feeling I have from a painting is real but not like the feeling I have from the real thing. The painting shows it as something more, and that is what a painting does, taking the real
world and showing there really is something more. Hemingway," she avoided looking at him, addressing her remarks to Henry Miller, "doesn't understand this because he is a dolt."

Hemingway deliberated distant nothingness sporting a killer grin, gulping his drink. He turned to Henry's other ear. "What she's raving about, is that through his painting, Max can show the inner-space, the light, if you will, which is the pregnant pause between the things of this world and the reality people assign to them."

"Why, Ernest, you do have a brain," Gertrude said.

Momentary silence filled the atmosphere and then,"Piss off!" he shouted. Scotch running over his tongue, rinsing his cheeks with it, he sunk completely. Gertrude and Hemingway had been friends long ago in Paris, in another life. He rose from the table stepping away. Thinking better of it, he returned grabbing his bottle, and then Hemingway, surprisingly dense for a spirit, shuffled into the foggy night. Lacking Ernest's mass, the table's gravity shifted.

Henry covered Gertrude's hand with his own sympathetic one. "It appears you and I were born under a lucky star. Merry and bright I always say." The game continued.

***

Several weeks passed since his night with Ann, Max obsessing about her. Like a moon drenched adolescent, when he envisioned Ann his light radiated. When he heard Ann's voice, realizing she wasn't there, he occupied a space beyond sad yearning, knowing he'd be with her when the divorce finalized. Max experienced a sense of satiation anchored to the soil, fulfilled, being in touch with a greater sublimity than meets the eyes and ears. He painted in anticipation of their coming days.

Wearing baggy chinos, an old shirt and sandals, he triumphed spraying down his canvas armed with a water-filled atomizer. A swaying movement signaled the beginning thrust of his creative engines. Max soaked the canvas, then stood back waiting. After a few minutes wet pinewood perfume filled the emptiness. The stretched canvas, over its wooden bars, began
shrinking and tightening, and the pinewood bars bowed and creaked, a full-blown symphony to Max's ears.

"You've sprayed it too much, baby." Jimmy's voice floated from above as he turned from his typing.

"Trust me," Max said.

"You've created quite a stir up there, with my friends, I mean." Jimmy leisurely descended the loft stairs. "A man like you, an ordinary man, makes a desperate bid for freedom and it stirs up the airwaves, like throwing a stone into a still pool, it sends out galactic ripples, you know?"

"It's your doing, don't look at me."

"Not my doing, Max." Jimmy patted his chest digging around his pockets for a package of smokes.

"Well, it was His idea, and your advice, and—"

"And your choice. Why the preparation? Why not just paint?"

"Preparation?" Standing together, Max slung an arm around Jimmy's shoulder in front of the blank canvas, sitting atop two coffee cans leaning against the wall, a large canvas five feet square and ominously white, a beginningless silent screen, and Max had no idea what to paint into its maw, knowing only that it dared him. Jimmy smiled at the weight of Max's arm.

Contact.

"This is not preparation, my friend. No. This is ritual." I hope he realizes I put my arm around him, that I'm happier then I don't know what. Christ, I hope he doesn't get the wrong idea. "This is painting. That is to say, the painting has begun. What I do before I apply color is paramount to the method called painting. It's ceremony, a method that's been handed down through the ages. It's doctrine." Max quickly removed his arm. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"The creaking. Oh, man, the creaking! That's the continuum between Gauguin, Van Gogh, and me. It's the spiritual connection, brotherhood of Les Nabis through time." Max turned towards Jimmy, an intense awareness beaming from behind his eyes. The blues of his
irises shone like young sapphires. Years of servitude to his own fears fading, Max found himself eager, grappling with terms, the responsibility of fresh beginnings, a clueless white canvas. Max picked up a tube of paint, *cad yellow's the way to go here*, squeezing it directly on the canvas. Chop-chop, he grabbed a pallet knife and scooped up the excess laying it two inches away. Using his other hand, his eyes fixed on the canvas, he reached for a linseed oil soaked rag, wiping this across the paint diagonally, a decisive scream of color slashing white silence. The process miraculous exploded, the stillness ruptured. The universe beckoned. Max Greenbaum answered. "That connection is all in art that I can call my own. I give up the canvas after my first stroke. When I sign it, that doesn't make it mine. It just shows I've met the challenge of the ritual. My frontal attack is abstract, dictated by a whim, maybe a wasp buzzing around the window, but the doctrine, well, that's eternal, running all through the thing."

"And what about the light? Do you see it again? Can you see it, Max?" Jimmy asked.

Max didn't look at Jimmy, and he didn't answer because he had no answer. Just doing this much evidenced courage. Max still vacillated over his past, furious at Jacob for what he considered an irreparable betrayal. Max felt rejected out of hand, that his father never took time to understand the boy.

Jacob let him know every day of their lives together his son's certain destiny as a failure; "My son, the gutless wonder! My son, the idiot! My son, the quitter!" Knowing the time arrived to take responsibility for his fears, understanding he needed to annihilate imagery, the filmed footage of the camps, bones behind barbed wire, and Jacob in his undershorts yelling like a tyrant; "The boy should know! He should know! It's where he comes from!"

He regarded the canvas. *What father forces his son to watch something like that?* he thought, dispassionately easing the distance of years between them. The old light blown out, Max speculated. *Is there only one light? No looking backwards.* Max examined the canvas, reading between threads, focusing microscopic vision. *I'm my father's son,* though it disturbed him to think it. *I was his canvas.* No! *If I admit that, I am nothing more than what others have painted, I lose all power over my life.* There, I took my first wrong turn. *If now is the only real*
moment and the rest is all memory and hope, I have the right, the responsibility to select my memories, and it is my choice how much reality I assign to memory and hope.

"You're using your past to transcend that past, baby. Causing those galactic ripples again." Max heard the voice, however, Jimmy was not to be seen.

Next, cerulean blue, thick and oily, and Max wiping it with the side of his hand. In the middle of the stroke he angled his bare palm forcing a narrow ridge of paint, this rising off the canvas journeying across the yellow, mingling, evolving into an imperfect green streaked mountain range. He observed his hand, smelling the paint. "I made the right choice." He turned, but Jimmy disappeared.

Max noticed movement through the small window. He saw them out of the corner of his eye while painting. Julia let a tall lean male figure into the house. He heard them laughing. Worse, now he didn't hear them. His prevailing attitude, I'm above these trifling distractions. Yet he suddenly flung paint at the canvas simultaneously creating visions on his mental screen—upsetting visions, visions that leached their own inertia, their own physical properties from the higher map Max only three seconds ago began drawing. Aiming a tube of mars black dead center, he punched it. He noticed the tall lean male figure owned a full head of hair, thick. It burned Max. To hell with the high road. He grabbed a fat stiff bristle brush and scrubbed roughly at the pigment. He threw the brush down. Painting is struggle.

***

The mist settled unclear between steel and glass skyscrapers: still, early morning gray, creeping along black asphalt. Max shook in line outside the state disability office, studying brown-skinned maids in quiet desperation boarding buses. The buses squealed to a stop and the maids pulled themselves up, borne down, grasping heavy purses and shopping bags, and the busses huffed and roared attacking space, gobbling it up, spewing dark garbage disappearing into the mist rolling into Beverly Hills. Max's stomach felt queasy. Maybe it's just too early. Maybe it's the fog.
Bohemian Ann sipped hot tea smiling sleepily at him. She lost herself in the fog. Across the boulevard, barely seen, hung a tungsten girder suspended against the sky from an orange crane. The twelve-ton girder balanced delicately at a precarious angle about to fall fourteen stories into the dirt lot. "Isn't it wonderful?" she said as they stared into the mist. "Kind of like there's no end to the universe. Like we live in a constant state of beyond."

"It's going to fall." Max wiped the back of his neck with his hand.

"What?"

"That girder. It's going to fall."

She tried blowing smoke rings exhaling into the cold air. Max danced to keep warm. The big guy behind him breathed hot air over his head. George reeled over Max, immense in a surplus jungle jacket, wearing wool gloves with holes that his fat fingers wriggled through, and he curled one hand into a fist pounding it repeatedly into his giant palm. He blew out and winced, the smile lines around his eyes crinkling and volumes of warm breathy smoke pouring from between his cheeks. Max felt the heat behind his ears. George pulled a wool watch cap down over his forehead and to Max's chagrin tapped him on the shoulder. "Lord Paddington here," he grumbled in a phony-baloney British accent. "Just diddled thirteen boys from Bombay on a fine morning and feeling fit as a fiddle." The voice didn't jibe with the bulk. Speaking to Ann, his tone dropped. "Annie, did you's verse our friend here—"

"Max."

"Right, Max, on the finer points of this delicate operation?"

"I thought you should do that, George." Ann shot him the once-over. He towered above her, ugly-handsome, lumbering, a sixty-year-old street hipster whom Ann thought was not without his dark attractiveness.

Using one move, George swung in front of Max blocking his view of God's earth. If the girder fell and the planet trembled on its axis, nobody would know. Huddling his six foot nine inch frame over Max, he bore into him with one good eye, the other, the glass eye, trailed lazy following one step behind. He pointed to the disability office doors and then cupped his hands puffing into them. Inside, a city worker washed windows systematically running down each
section with a rubber squeegee; bending, stretching, dragging the long aluminum pole. "You's can't do a god-damned thing. Remember that. You're not capable of anything. Nothin'."

Max watched the worker quickly towel off his squeegee at the end of each stroke.

"Nothing?"

"Stick with me and I'll teach you's the ropes. I know from whence I speak." George flipped up the pocket flap on his jungle jacket digging for a package of Gauloises. He removed the pack shaking it, sprinkling an ashy selection of thick French cigarette butts into the palm of his glove. He smiled.

Max turned imploring Ann, exhibiting a tortured expression.

"I picked up a carton of these smokes in Clichy last week, Mack."

"It's Max. You were in France?"

Ann interjected. "Max, George is my friend. If he says he was in France, we believe him."

"Okay, France."

"I'm an artist," George said.

"Really?" Max raised an eyebrow.

"That's how Annie and me met. She came to one of my shows."


George strutted the sidewalk. "You'll see my stuff sometime, Max."

"He's an inventor too." Ann tugged at his jungle jacket. "Tell him, George. Go on."

"I've tooted my horn enough," George said. "I don't like to brag about my achievements."

Max refigured first impressions. George's childlike eyes flashed. The big lug lit a butt inhaling slowly, smoke rolling and curling off his tongue. He smelt the burning end. "Back to business. Look, they're not here to help you's with your problems, see, even if they're legit."

"But I've got papers," Max said.

"You's got shit. It's not their job to prove you's need help. It's their job to prove you's don't need it."

"So what's the deal?"
"The deal's if you can focus one eye and piss straight, they'll reject your claim. Believe me. When I got outa the bug house I had to learn this game the hard way." His one good eye traveled. "Possession is nine-tenths of the law. You's worked your whole fuckin' life, and every month of every year they took a percentage of your dough. They claimed they were savin' it for you. Guess what, Mick? They got your dough, n' you're standing in line broke. The government calls this the distribution of wealth; they get wealthy, and, well, you don't. Now, you's tell 'em you want your dough back and they're gonna make you's feel real guilty. They're gonna turn your neighbors against you. The neighbors are gonna think you're collecting their dough. The distribution of wealth is a war of lies, propaganda. Lie, Mitch …or starve." Max wondered if the glass eye ever fogged. "Speaking as one who's been through the system, if it was me, when they open those doors I'd make myself a vegetable." But if the glass eye did fog, Max reasoned, George wouldn't know the difference. It wasn't as if he could see through it. George pointed to his own head. "Lima beans."

Ann poked Max's head. "Spinach," she said, and she had to leave. "I've got this window uptown."

"When will I see you?" Max asked. She didn't answer.

Later, inside the office a sour matronly clerk handed Max a sheaf of papers. He dropped them on the floor and stared vacantly straight ahead like a cold bucket of succotash.

***

They weighed him on the scale and Max made certain they worked at lifting his hairy bare feet onto the platform, as if he'd forgotten how to do it himself. After that, and a vial of blood, the orderly led Max into a tiny white room, dropped him in a chair and exited. Max ran a fingertip under the ledge of the desk. He frowned at it, sniffing the tip of it critically and mumbling to himself, "Clean, Doc. Antiseptic." He examined the walls. Blank. No Norman Rockwell prints. A barren ashtray sat on one corner of the desk near his chair. The doctor entered without acknowledging Max, and instead quietly seated himself behind his desk
straightening his white lab coat, tugging at a regimental striped tie. Max took an immediate
shine to the man because he wore wire-rimmed glasses and was bald like Gandhi. Briefly
glancing into a manila folder he shut it slipping it inside his top drawer and tapped a regarding
finger on his jaw ascertaining his approach. He seemed suddenly aware that a patient occupied
the other seat and he measured Max as if extrapolating the hidden truth from Max's good looks.
"Hello, Max. I'm Robert Abrams."

Max sat still.

"Doctor Robert Abrams." He played granite. "However, there's no need for formality. You can call me Bob."

Max crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap grinning. "You know, Bob, your
wife should read Cosmopolitan. My wife reads Cosmo and she's great."

The doctor's eyes widened, however, he checked this reaction laying it to rest in his solar
plexus. He folded his hands on the desk, professionally inexpressive.

"Julia has multiples," Max said. "Cosmo says a woman should have multiples if the man
she's banging is worth his balls. Damned magazine nearly caused me sexual dysfunction last
year! What about your wife, Bob? Julia says it's no longer valid of me to ask if it was good. I'm
supposed to ask if it was the kind that rolls in waves. I need this media pressure, right, Bob?"

Max recrossed his legs staring at the doctor. His bottom lip curled carrying a question mark
across his face.

Doctor Abrams groaned removing his glasses, huffing on them, wiping them clean on the
hem of his lab coat. He held up the lenses to the ceiling lights, frowning, squinting at them,
clearly agitated by an infinitesimal speck. Blowing sharply, he held up the glasses again. This
time he smiled. They settled back on his nose and he fidgeted with his face until they rested in
position. Max glared into the palm of his hand. "Max, are you on any medication at this time?"

"Relax, Bob. You're sitting there like you've got a stick of dynamite behind your fly.
Not that I blame you. I mean, we're men, right? I know I could blow a testicle just thinking
about it, multiple orgasms that is."

"Medication?" The doctor looked at Max over the tops of his wire-frames.
"Xanax and Ativan."
"Good, a breakthrough. I ask questions, you answer them. Let's try to continue in this vein. Does the Xanax appear to be helping?"
"Sure. I guess. I don't know."
"Any hobbies, Max?"
Max desperately searched the room until his eyes rested on a metal cabinet holding loose files, a book on how to market your services as a clinical psychiatrist, and a copy of Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. "Stephen W. Hawking."
"How's that?"
"Just trying to make theoretical sense out of him. I'm up for theories. You have any, Bob? Listen, chew half a bottle of Xanax or Ativan and you can read Hawking and it's just like reading Daffy Duck. Trust me." Max twisted his head. *Okay, asshole, time to play hardball.* Max sneezed and then again, loudly.

The blood drained from Doctor Robert Abrams' face. He ripped a tissue from its box and another and another. One tissue per sneeze. Wiping the desk frantically. The sneezes continued. Max coughed. The doctor snorted sharply.
"Doc, you seem agitated. Should I call a nurse?"
"I call the nurses, Max. Thank you."
"Power trip psychosis? Control issues? You know what I think? I believe doctors are like lovers. Once they stick a finger up your ass they think they own you." Max studied his feet. "I take lots of beta-carotene, did I tell you? Look at these tootsies!" He showed the doctor the bottoms of his bare feet. "They're yellow!" He reached across Doctor Abrams' desk grabbing a wad of tissues, placing them in front of his mouth. Doctor Abrams watched twitching in uncontainable anxiety. Max sucked in filling his lungs and then hocked long and hard, "Chhhhhaaaaackkkk!" The doctor peeped involuntarily, repeatedly like a baby chick.

Doctor Abrams rose from his seat smiling pusillanimously, attempting to restrain his nervous peeping. Taking short fast steps he moved across the office stumbling behind a door. Max heard running water. The doctor reappeared holding a can of Lysol spraying the room using
large sweeping motions, chasing away the evil spirits. He no longer peeped. He hummed and Max swatted at the air waving both hands, opening and closing his fists catching flies. "Is insanity found in air-born germs?" Max wanted to know. "I ask as a fellow scientist."

Doctor Robert Abrams postured a long time in meditative silence. Sometimes he wiped his nose and wrinkled his chin, other times he pulled on his regimental striped necktie. It dawned on him that the patient being evaluated seemed desperate enough to risk a prison term for fraud. He leaned over the desk. "Why, Mr. Greenbaum?"

The space turned warm, even intimate, and Max sighed tired of the game. He longed to share with one human being how he felt about this being his last chance to make it as a man amongst men. Instead he settled. "I need this, Doc. I've worked like a beast of burden afraid of the whip all my life. I just need to buy a little time. You want the truth? I can't give it to you. I'm not sure I'd know the truth if it hit me in the face. But if I can't buy an inch to breathe, well, then I don't know."

Doctor Abrams scribbled on his note pad. "You know what I think, Max? You're schizophrenic. A maniac. You can't hold a job. If the mental hospitals weren't so overcrowded, but they are, so, I'm going to have to cut you loose on the street as a ward of the state of California. You're a miserable wreck of a human being." He looked up at Max showing rare sincerity. "Sometimes a man gets lucky." Doctor Abrams laid down his pen and removed his glasses. He stuck the end of one temple piece in his mouth and thoughtfully chewed.

Max knew it was time to leave. Before exiting through the door, he knocked over a trashcan catching his foot accidentally on purpose. In the hall, Max stood staring into space, and from the other side of the office door he heard a muffled scream then the pzzz… of aerosol spray.
Today they'll evaluate themselves, she thought, each according to what they carry. The shopping concept moved her to shudder. Ann stood still. Her bad luck, they paved the boulevard; men in yellow hats and day glow plastic vests cracking dusty lungs, busting asphalt.

"Fongul!" gutter sniped a tattooed bicep thrusting its dirty finger upwards pointing to a soot-ridden industrial sun. Ann's toes gripped the insides of her boots while she white knuckled Max's portfolio. The finger rode high in the cab of his Peterbuilt truck belching black crud.

One of the workmen took pity on poor Ann, holding a stop sign in the air, halting traffic in every direction until she crossed. In front of the Beverly Center she dropped the heavy portfolio feeling it lean against her legs. She shook an arm opening and closing her fingers, stretching each one individually. She detested the Beverly Center, its futuristic exposed escalators ensconced in diagonal glass tubes crisscrossing the side of the structure, transporting the human herd blindly towards economic slaughter. A sudden blasting accosted her brain, rattling her spinal column, exploding her private space with soaring chunks of rock, and her eyes vibrated focusing on a protruding gut quaking like jelly doing flip-flops over the top of his jackhammer.

Pulling a scrap of paper out of her bag, she unfolded it. Ann previously scrawled a list of a half dozen galleries. Five names showed lines slashed through them. The last one, Mo-Dern Beaux Arts, grew behind her, a towering green onyx building with Notre Dame de Paris gargoyles perched on both corners of the roof.

Ann's last boyfriend promised they would see France, laying together, his arm around her in their basement apartment ruminating out loud about how they'd stroll the Seine. They poured
over huge coffee table picture books describing Paris cafes, reading Hugo and Colette, wondering at cathedral gargoyles, Brassai's Paris, the cathouses, the balls, an artist's Mecca. They never arrived, fighting instead, bickering over a thousand pointless points of contention; whether it is proper to leave the shaver standing head right side up or upside down in the mug; denigrating each other's character over specks of insignificance until the relationship devalued, lingering, too easy for either one to call it quits. A small light flew suspended over the building. Ann glanced up at the name of the gallery in green copper letters and the small light darted away. They never arrived and she might die not ever experiencing Picasso's studio or Miller's Villa Seurat.

Returning the list to her bag she aggressively hiked up everything and then tugging and pulling down until each piece of clothing lay dutifully adjusted. Bearing the heavy portfolio under one lithe arm, Ann swung open the glass door. The small light followed her in.

She stood still for a few seconds breathing in silence, examining the spacious white room and its high ceiling, the only furnishings being two leather upholstered benches in the center of the gallery where one sits contemplating sculptures strategically placed on marble pedestals.

A Marino Marini bronze bust of Igor Stravinsky rested heavily on a post. Ann gradually approached it reaching out, stroking its scarred surface. She dug a nail into a chiseled barbed wire line following it with her thin finger from the pronounced bridge of Stravinsky's nose in a slashing motion out to the side of his cheekbone. Two large Marini paintings hung at opposite ends of the room, both semi-abstract horses bucking, threatening to throw their riders. She circled the area running her hands over a work of bronze or poking repeatedly at a piece of sun-baked terra cotta from New Mexico. Ann pondered a rusted bent metal bar on a long table against one wall. A spotlight above cast the bar's shadow along the table and across the floor. Pressing the end of her soft nose, she shoved it around. Thinking too much about particular concepts, she decided, drove her crazy: life, philosophy, and conceptual art she would never understand. She supposed the bar represented validity and a strong man must have bent it like that. However, she refused to appreciate the bar. She perceived herself as a woman of strength with her yes and her no, who wouldn't be bamboozled.
A strong man, she thought, that's comforting. The small light floated near the ceiling. It was his fault she'd decided. He'd opened her eyes to Paris, promised, then left her kicking the wall, fucked in L.A. The rest of the gallery remained conspicuously empty and the wooden floor softly moaned under Ann's shifting weight from one boot to the other setting down Max's portfolio. Many men. A lot of hollow relationships.

Ann's eyes rested on a wall relief, an abstract calendar. She thought often of how there would be no more vacuous affiliations because this year belonged to her alone; a time set aside to rest from love affairs and define herself away from days and nights of male pulchritude. Ann, reflecting, forgot where she stood for the moment, tapping her knuckles on the edge of his portfolio. Max exuded an air of simplicity, honesty and confusion, and the year waned towards its end.

"Is this one dead? Miss?" The curator's resonant speech echoed through the long room.

She missed him at first, standing still next to an Art Deco clock. "Oh, excuse me?" He moved, crossing his lips lightly with a finger, sizing up the situation. "The artist whose work you have there, is he dead?"

"Actually no, he—"

"Not interested." The gentleman, pirouetting like a ballet dancer in a suit and tie, displayed his back to Ann. She faltered, as many times as this happened, and then asserting an upright posture she strode defiantly to a long blank wall.

The curator twisted, contorted from the waist up, surprised to see her there. Usually, that does the trick, he thought. Usually, the beggars leave in a puff of smoke. There's nothing more universally understood than turning one's back. Besides, words are so messy. Ann untied the portfolio case and the curator, true to his functional vision, maintained distance and silence.

She faced the wall not daring to glance around and one by one leaned Max's studies against fresh white plaster.

"Young lady, what are you doing?"

"I'm showing you his work."
"I've just said…" The small light floated down from the ceiling dancing over the curator's shoulder, its glow increasing, although no one noticed.

"Look at his work," Ann said. "Come over here and look at this. Oh, well, okay, so he's alive! If you could only meet him, talk to him." She felt a warm presence close behind her and spun around. The curator stood a few inches away facing her while Jimmy's soul light, unseen by the both of them, increased in luminescence.

"I simply can not help you."

The light shined brilliantly.

"Try to understand," he felt strangely sympathetic to her plight, "this is an investment gallery. Whether or not the work is good is immaterial. Is the artist dead? How much is he worth? An artist, my dear, is worthless unless and until he's sucking up rich soil. I noticed you looking at the Alfredo Bonza. Isn't he marvelous?"

"It's not a he," Ann said, afraid he would attempt selling it to her. "It's an it— a metal bar."

"You're not paying attention. That is Bonza. The essential Bonza. Ultimatisimo de Bonza! He's left us, I'm sorry to say, and there's only so much Bonza to go around and there you have it."

Ann's head tilted and her chin jutted forward a bit. For a scant moment she hesitated, and then, "I can get you more of those from the vacant lot down the street, if you’d like."

The curator feigned interest again crossing his lips with his finger. "Can you get me one worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars? I do have some artists warehoused who are alive. One who's overweight and smokes fifteen fat cigars a day, and another, an eccentric old Indian, a drunkard whose liver they say is bound to go. One only hopes." He twitched a nostril at Ann's obvious disgust. "And after all, my dear, where would I be if I handled only art that met serious criteria? Good art? Why, I'd undoubtedly be where you are, beating the pavement with pockets full of hope and nothing more." Guilt crept into the corners of his eyes and he knew the young lady didn't think much of him, all of his due consideration being most unusual.
Ann leaned over picking up studies. He placed an arm in front of her. Both paused examining the canvas boards and sheets of heavy paper. "Slides?"

"Yeah, but you're not interested, are you?"

He stepped back crossing his arms and the light followed. Carefully, he walked the length of the wall. The light expanded caressing his body. The curator smiled not knowing why. "They're really quite good. They have field depth and rhythm. They have composition and mood. Now that I think about it, I do have a friend. I believe he'd enjoy these." Crossing to his desk, he picked up a cell phone punching in numbers quickly from memory, cupping one hand over the mouthpiece. "He's got a new gallery. You'll love it."

He removed his hand. "Mr. Peterson, please. Thanks. Pete, yes. Fine. A feast. I ate until I was sick."

"Petey, I want to send you a young lady. I think she has some wonderful work here. Right up your alley. Her name?"

"Ann," she whispered, "representing Max Greenbaum."

"Ann," he said "representing Max something or other. Yes, good then. But we won't talk now."

Ann quickly gathered the studies fastening the portfolio. *You're a plastic bastard,* she thought. "That was gracious of you."

The curator laughed. "Yes, I suppose it was. By the by, this Max fellow, how old a man is he?"

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Max struggled yanking on a masonite panel he'd left out in back for the birds to naturally beautify. He dragged it along the icy grass. None of his work contained a message. No themes. This would be a short departure, a hidden agenda. He harbored quiet pride in the fact that no one knew they lined up on telephone wires chittering with excitement, crapping themselves into states of birdie euphoria. Max, feeling empowered by his dirty little secret, hauled the panel
sopping with early morning dew and stiff turds into the garage where he set it up and began painting.

A blue muscle car eased into the driveway and a male, dark and gaunt sporting an iron jaw swung his legs out. Jesus, Max peeked through his window, the son of a bitch doesn't wear socks. When he got out of the car and took a second, Max saw the rest of it; a purple Hugo Boss suit tossed over his body, hanging loosely from his shoulders and hips, wearing an open silk shirt and a knit scarf thrown around his neck. Asshole; pretty-boy-goy; fucking Miami Vice-Sonny Crockett wannabe. Max couldn't tear his eyes away. They followed him to the front door where Julia answered. Max tried desperately to see how she dressed, if she bothered to dress, however, it happened fast. They disappeared. He stared at the door.

Green! Grabbing the tube squeezing the pigment. Yellow! He punched it, flattened it, heaped every last ounce of it building a mountain of gook on his pallet.

Red with white! It's okay. It's peachy. "Forty-eight degrees outside," he muttered, "and that's all right too." He picked up the pallet, running at the panel, hyperventilating. "Forty-eight cock sucking degrees. No socks!"

Max's fingers curled and cramped. Doing it, on his mental masonite he saw them doing it in detail, the Hugo Boss suit hanging over a chair while they squirmed around on the bed, definitely doing it. After a torturous eternity, her long legs squeezing his hips, during which Max felt his hair follicles loosening and remembered her body glistening the way it does afterwards. He heard them turn on the music.

"Outstanding!" yelling out loud. He mashed the pallet against his heart plastering it to the painfully hollow spot. "Right! Great! Is that it? This is it. Brilliant! I'm not supposed to know because there's music?" He grumbled suffering that way, conjuring sexual images of his stiff nippled wife being violated by an elephantine penis, uncircumcised, more virile than his could ever hope to be, until the phone rang.

He picked it up feeling an unerring sense of dread. "Hello. Yes. So? So, so, look. In a few days. What do you mean late before? Never. No way." His chest heaved. "Can't we discuss it?" his terror a precursor to seething anger. He slammed down the receiver diving to the

Julia, in a state of undress flew out of the house with her man taking long strides behind her. She jogged barefoot, afraid something happened to the garage, a fire, a major piece of her security, her power up in smoke. An "attachment," they called it on her insurance. She wondered how much the attachment was worth. And then, of course, poor Max. "Max!"

For his part, Max planted himself calmly at his easel brush in hand. The garage door banged open, Max appearing perfectly composed, an expression he learned from her. "Hello, dear. Thought you might want to know the bank just called. They're foreclosing on the house." He pretended to notice the gentleman for the first time and spoke to him. "Isn't she special?"

Max turned picking up a pocket booze flask hidden by a pile of paint tubes and brush jars. Raising it in toast, he stole a long swallow swishing the warm booze around the insides of his cheeks. He understood how a disciplined muscular expression seeps through to the insides of a man. Julia's expression, the distance of it; he'd made it his own.

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Max squirmed at the hubbub of papers being shuffled. Shuffled on executive desks. Shuffled from department to department. Heels clicking against linoleum as paper shifted along from the loan department to new accounts and from new accounts to the vault. Insidious little paper cuts, ouches and licks and bifocals being pushed upwards along noses by middle management fingers pointing definitively to the paper shredder. In the end, no matter the digital files, paper still traveled. Lines crept towards clerk windows, and Max soaked all of this banking business in through nervous knees, periphery vision and in again-out again hearing. He sat huddled, his coat on his lap, disheveled, grass-stained from sleeping in the park, speculating at why he cared and all at once he didn't. Lately, moments of clarity beckoned minutes, sometimes hours when Max Greenbaum didn't give a shit, times when the burden of existence ceased to exist. Max accepted that the worst case scenario of his life was death and that death held no
qualitative meaning, positive or negative, because he lived as more than the physical sum of his parts, or those parts of physical existence that he felt intruded themselves upon him. He breathed ethereal, spiritual, a universally cooperative bit of immortal ectoplasm forming a subfigure in the multifaceted gem of life. If his cooperation as a human ended, he might recycle himself into wood pulp. Simply by breathing he saw himself as giving birth to the revolutionary cytoplasmic process. Deathless a day at a time. Right or wrong, this vision dulled his fears allowing him to fall asleep at night in a public park.

He glowered at the young man sitting across the desk from him. How do they put a kid without peach fuzz in a position like this? And here it comes, infant pearls. "You see, sir, the bank sympathizes with your position. However, you have no tangible assets. No employment. You're a poor risk." The kid paused checking a spot of crusted Cream of Wheat on his necktie. "How can I say this so you'll understand? Mr. Greenbaum, you have no net worth. Understand?" This much proclaimed without an ounce of remorse.

Max grew in the chair, a fine network of vodka veins crawling in his cheeks and burning over the top of his nose. "Understand? How old are you?"

He had the kid on the run, bopping his head this way and that, aware of the constriction of his clothing. "I fail to see—"

"Son," that tiny word evolved over a number of years slowly repositioning the balance of power; not so much the word itself, but how he practiced saying it; "son," as if Max had just called you a piece of worthless shit; "son," and you realized your life must be a sad joke. "You wanna know about net worth? You take away a man's job, his house, his car, all of his worldly possessions, take away his wife and kids, you take the god-damned fillings out of his teeth and repossess the toilet from under his ass, then," Max sprang to his feet, "you get to know his net worth!" People stared. Max sat. "Jesus?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Could Jesus get a loan from this bank?"
"We're a secular institution, sir." The kid looked down again at his tie scratching it with a thumbnail. He thought if he cooked the cereal a little longer, next time he might avoid starchy lumps.

"The lazy son of a bitch got tired of hammering wood one day and walked off the job," Max said. "No visible means of support. An unemployable rabbinical guru with nothing but a prophecy. Would you refinance his sheep skin?"

"It's not relevant, sir."

Max sat waiting for a better answer. A dream to dispute a humankind still in its infancy. A vision to provoke man to exceed his greatest expectations. A sharing of the milk of grace, all of this beginning within the creative soul of one man. A gamble against the system to disengage the world from its shackles. The Jesus mortgage question not merely rhetorical, but meant to pierce one kid's higher consciousness. "Oh," Max groaned like a ghost honored by hindsight, "the chains we forge in life. What on earth could be more relevant!"

"Okee-dokee," the kid dripped. "He wouldn't qualify."

"You've got gall judging Jesus and myself as poor risks. You're looking down your nose at integrity. You folks are looking at the best risk this world's got. I'm an honest man. Me and Jesus H. Christ, we're both honest men." Max scooted his chair close, placing his dirty hands on the edge of the kid's desk. "You're looking at hope. Me and a few other piss poor risks are safeguarding your hope." He examined the young man, his eyes, nose and the pores of his skin. They shone nauseatingly clear.

"I see. Well, it's getting late, sir."

"I'm holding open the door against the day you throw your suit into the bonfire, son. Hope. Remember it. When you've given them twenty grueling years and they've stripped you clean, hope is your net worth."

***

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"
"Eating a candy bar." Lying on his sleeping bag in the park, Max peeled off more wrapper and tossed it a few feet away from his ankles. "I'm eating a Mar's bar. What's it to you, bub?" He searched the moon, drifting, lost in its yellow-white disk through the trees and listening to a cacophony of crickets; the crickets were just easier to take than Julia's search for another body.

The bum with his bloodshot eyes and scroungy face edged in. He found Max annoying. "Are you aware that you threw a candy wrapper right here? Right here," poking his finger hard into the grass, "in my living room."

Max rose from his dream of a starry night staggering behind a tree and urinated. "Sorry."

"What? I can't hear you." The bum appeared wounded, his privacy violated. "You're standing in the bathroom. How can I hear you if you're in the bathroom? You're a thoughtless sort. After all, I got a big spread here." Max made it back to his bag and climbed in for the night. He looked at the bum who examined him first in silence but then continued, "Above the living room is the, the atrium. You're new at this, aren't you?"

"A temporary reversal of natural selection." Max extended his hand. "Max Greenbaum."

"I've heard that one. I've heard 'em all," and he waved Max's hand away. "Say, better watch that sack of yours. Some dishonest bastard might steal it. Night, night. Don't let 'em whiz in your ear."

"Right." During a long silence Max swore he'd heard a distant cry for help. "You know what the problem is, bub?"

"Naw. Sleep now."

"They don't wanna know you. I mean the core. The real you. The real me. They wanna know what I can do for them. What can I give them? How much can I give before my balls shrivel?"

"I've heard that one," the bum said, giving up on sleep.

"And how much is it worth? Whatever my product is worth, that's what I'm worth. See?"

"Yeah! Naw." He rolled over facing Max. "It's complex crap. I've got to admit, fella, you caught me off guard. Sleep?"
"I mean, if just suppose," but he paused once again for that cry in the night. "Suppose I was a doctor and I didn't care about my patients? I charged exorbitant fees. I committed Medicare fraud. Performed unnecessary surgery?"

"My wife had her ovaries removed."
Max furrowed his brow. "That's not the point. You're married?"
"Well, she did."

"All right, fine. I'd take them out twice. I'd be a well-heeled member of society. I'd be worth what a doctor's worth. But, if I were a shoe salesman it wouldn't matter what a fine human being I was. My core self, the real me could be a compassionate kind of guy. A real diamond. Help old ladies and all that, see? What would I be worth?"

"I don't know. I've never sold shoes. Though, it's a thought."
Max propped himself up on one elbow picking at the grass then pounded it with his fist exclaiming his point. "I'd be worth what my product's worth, sixty-nine bucks and change! Married, huh? What happened?"

The bum rotated his eyes. "Life."
A thought struck Max, a piece struggling to escape, an amorphous cloud below the surface. "Life's not an excuse. It's a gift."

"No kidding? And who's been yanking your dick?" He rolled in closer looking Max in the eye. "I was a surgeon. Believe that?"

Max, deep in thought barely heard him. He concentrated mulling over his life, the last few weeks, how deep into the abyss he'd found himself, how much better. I have absolutely nothing. How wonderful. "Really, a surgeon?"

"Mash unit. Sixty-four. Vietnam." The bum examined his hands, bent his fingers slowly closing them into a fist and then stretching them. The joints creaked oozing cheap wine.
"Another life. Another…" He leapt slamming his body on top of Max's, making it impossible for Max to breathe. They fought. The bum screamed holding firm. "Incoming! Incoming! Incoming! I've gotcha, boy!" He cried in big salty tears that Max tasted as they dropped onto his face. "Don't die! They're gonna leave us out here to rust, boy."
"I'm not going to die!" Max yelled, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He worked one arm free and reached up touching the bum's grimy unwashed hair, studying his features. His breathing rushed in stinky sweet alcohol bursts and he glared past Max's head into the night. "It's okay. I'm not going anywhere," Max said softly. The bum dropped his head whimpering. His breathing slowed. He rolled away. "You okay, bub?" Max rubbed his nose clearing the stench from his nasal passages. He panicked, wondering if the bum had body lice.

"Scared. Can't sleep."

"Why did you do that? Jump on me like that?"

"Why?" He looked at Max in disbelief. "Because life's precious." His breathing back to normal, the bum realized Max was gawking at him. He felt self-conscious. "What the hell are you looking at?"

"Nothing," Max said quietly.

"I told you I was a surgeon," he said, having no recollection of what transpired between them.

"So?"

"So, can I have a piece of your candy bar? Am I worth that much?"

"Hey, bub." Max pulled a fresh bar from his sleeping roll and tossed it. "Incoming, doctor."

***

He awoke, mud splattered over his face, alone with a jogger bouncing past. Max sniffed the air like a blind gopher smelling waffles and hot coffee. Across the street sat the Racket Club Café. Max ambled over standing in front of the window watching people eat. Leering at them, both hands against the glass and his nose glued to the pane, he watched them wiping their mouths and lighting cigarettes. "That's right," he garbled like a homeless schizophrenic, "now the big smoke." Tourista he thought. A young couple passed him on the sidewalk and Max snickered out loud.
Having enough of that, he crossed to the bus bench where he sat warming his unshaven face under an early crisp sun. One of the commuters tossed her newspaper and Max snatched it up between dirty fingers. Today he read his paper calmly and then folded it neatly, jamming it between bench slats for the next guy to come along.

At the park he visited the rest room. Standing in front of the mirror, pulling on bags under his eyes, he yawned. The stench of urine soaked Max’s pores. He tasted it. Somebody in one of the stalls vomited and Max heard a bottle of fortified Thunderbird crash against the floor. He never looked. He knew Thunderbird came in a thick square bottle that sounded a thud when it struck cement. Often, under cover of darkness, he could tell what brand was being passed around by its smell and the sound of the empty being discarded. Dragging over to a stall, working his pants loose, Max planted himself on the cold seat. His intestines ached. He hadn't produced a decent bowel movement in a month of Sundays, nevertheless, Max studied his shoes listening to the comings and goings of others, considering the irreversible damage done to his life. He struggled to relieve his body, pushing, filling the commode with blood, and wondered if now was the time to make a deal with God. Last time he'd pushed so hard a piece of his insides shot out. Through high louvered windows the morning delivered sun, melting dew, and chirping birds. Rain temporarily cleansed the air and squirrels chased one another through treetops. In time, sitting there, Max Greenbaum cried.
The Program—7

Tugging on the belt, sniffing and twisting it, his nose met gray paint and he stared into a carved swastika. The oxygen to his brain thinned, straining, the pressure behind his eyeballs mounting.

"It'll never work."

He took a short break and opened the stall door. Jimmy, dressed in a natty green corduroy suit wearing a soft cap cocked over one eye, leaned against a row of dirty white sinks.

"Go ahead," Max croaked, "tell me He won't let me into heaven this way."

"Fine." Jimmy put up his hands. "You want to hang? Hang, baby."

"Then I'm in?" His flesh grew purple around the gills. He tugged again.

"No, Max, you're not in. You don't get in. Nobody gets into heaven. It's not a matter of geographical entry. It's a kingdom of realization. Either you're mindful of it or else ignorant. I've often wondered why humanity thinks of its pearly gates as a port of entry. It makes one wonder if the human animal is spiritually bankrupt."

"Bottom," Max rasped. He squeezed the belt with both hands for one final all out yank playing with his fingers, lifting them, pressing them, wrapping them around the leather insuring a firm grip.

"Say what?" Straining to hear, Jimmy cupped one ear with his hand.

"I've hit bottom." Max let the belt slip from sweaty palms, his heart hammering in his ears. Plasma and serum backed up in his brain. For a few seconds he broke down blind.

"Oh, that? That's nothing. Bottoming out happens to the best of us. I'd float you some, but I don't support poverty. Sometimes it happens to us because we're the best."
"What the fuck have I done to deserve this!" Max pleaded, pained by a measured battering inside his skull. The sound of his voice made it horrific.

"You're asking me? When you've lost faith, when all your values are shattered, really, where do you go for an answer?" Jimmy looped around, examining himself in the mirror.

He ran a hand over his cheeks, testing flesh, licking his lips hoping to taste salt. Jimmy questioned why he had been damned with wide nostrils, remembering time spent on the school bus comparing them to other boys' nostrils, being ashamed of them, and later being ashamed that he'd ever been ashamed. His memories of existence rang bitter, often frightening, and he doubted for a moment whether he desired return. "You can't bring yourself to ask the Father, because for the bitter one no Father exists. Or, He dangles your dream in front of you like the forbidden fruit in front of Eve. He tempts you and then when you go for it He has the audacity to punish you with lifelong distress. Anything you create will be brought forth in misery. Your banished, an outcast from the garden of your peers. Oh, I savvy the situation, Max. A god like this is not one you can talk to. Worse, you can't ask your fellow man, because you feel betrayed. It's a frightful furious predicament." Jimmy washed his hands.

Neither man nor spirit spoke for the longest time. Striking the big button on the automatic air dryer, he rubbed his knuckles briskly against one another surprised he felt warm air. Time was closing in and the day drawing near. He listened to Max's sniffing in the stall. What have any of us done to deserve it, Jimmy contemplated. "At the age of sixty I asked myself, because, really, there was no one else to ask, what is it the White world wants me to reconcile myself to? I figured I wasn't going to live another sixty years and your people always had a pat answer; 'It takes time.' I thought about it. It's taken my father's time, my mother's time, my uncle's time, my brother's and my sister's time, my niece's and my nephew's time. How much time did the ofay world need? I found myself spending an inordinate amount of time reassuring White folks that they didn't see what they saw. Of course, this was utterly futile, since they did see what they saw, and what they saw was a disastrous condition which menaced them, and for which they were responsible. I felt betrayed, my friend, with no hopes. I read about the riots in Los Angeles, in Little Rock, and Selma. I watched them on television and I knew what the
Mercy in Love / Roth

White sheriff had done for his desserts. All I could do was write. I couldn't order a glass of water in a restaurant, but I could write about my ludicrous hell. I never did understand what I'd done to deserve it."

"I'm ready to go." Max didn't give a second thought to his sitting naked from the waist down conversing with an angel. "I mean, there are mornings I open my eyes and I know the universe is insane. I wonder about what I've done and I think it would be easier to lay myself across the train tracks. You could write about it, well, at least that's something, but I can't paint it. How do I paint the idea of being alone?" A desperate sigh escaped. Neither one was certain who it belonged to. "If you have any power," Max said, "take me."

Jimmy lit a cigarette tossing the match into one of the sinks. "When I was incredibly young, younger than anyone has a right to be, I was sitting in a dump in Greenwich Village with a friend of mine and we were talking and he asked me, 'What about love?' His question threw me off guard and I snarled. 'Love! You'd better forget about that, my friend. That train's gone.'

'You're a poet,' he said, 'and you don't believe in love.' And he put his head down on the table and cried. I really didn't, then, as far as I knew, believe that love existed, except as pain."

Jimmy hopped up on the edge of a sink and planted himself, dangling his cigarette hand between his legs, watching ash grow. "He wept and I sat there, and by and by we walked out into the streets. This was the last time we really spoke. A very short time after this his body was found in the Hudson River. He jumped from the George Washington Bridge."

"Sounds like he hit it right." Max's headache subsided leaving him fuzzy-brained and depressed.

"No. He missed it entirely. Being spiritually bankrupt is receiving the call to investigate within. Where else, who else is there? For you and me, Max, the introspective search is the beginning of our art and somehow we have to be lucky enough to reach there before we die."

"Cut my throat, I don't feel lucky today."

"That's because you've bottomed out. All beginnings start there. Life begins on the ocean floor. God knows when a man possesses nothing, not belief nor title, the world exists as one huge possibility. It's only when you have nothing to call your own that the universe truly
belongs to you. There's a profundity within that you need to tap, to bring to bear upon the outside world, to transpose the clatter, the ceaseless noise and bullshit of life. And when you can do that, when you can take the ugliest insult and convert it to fodder for creative experience, when you can make this life your own, then you can call yourself an artist." Jimmy's feet hit the floor walking towards the exit.

A cold day struck him in the face, and the sun rested clear and high in its heaven causing him to squint. "Is this the last picture I'm going to have of you, baby, a broken man on the crapper with his pants down around his knees? I don't guess I'll ever get my book written."

***

George half lumbered, half raced, pounding down the squalid sidewalk in East Hollywood while a flock of giggling children chased him. A cherub-faced boy rode with both arms wrapped around George's good leg. The other leg, braced to the hip, swung in a stiff straight line delivering a shock along his vertebrate every time his shoe struck solid ground. The big man wove giant strides arcing his good leg with the boy into the air, cutting a wide bite out of the universe, the boy screaming with delight. George, acting out of a state of amphetamine delirium, lived for these instants. Max watched from down the block, an involuntary smile crossing one corner of his mouth. "Max!" George yelled above the screeching kids, "You's look like bird crap. Let's go children, faster, faster! Follow us, Max. Run children!" Saint George galloped waving his crutch in the air, a big angelic pirate like Long John Silver brandishing his menacing crutch, riding his Treasure Island peg leg into the horizon.

Afternoon produced evening and they all crowded into the church inside George's humble room behind the chapel, all watching a red sun sink behind telephone wires, and pigeons, and the backs of billboards outside George's window. The children piled on his bed, sprawling bare scraped knees over the edge onto the floor. Max straddled the only chair next to George's drawing table and above the table hung a single throw lamp. George whispered in the dark, "…and Davey Jones inquired, 'Who stole my golden arm?' " He sought their wide-eyed faces.
'Who stole my golden arm? Aye, then, which one of ye stole my…' inhaling, sucking up every last ounce of air in the tiny room he bellowed, 'You's stole it!' The children screeched, some too scared to move, others jumped, all of them suddenly silent until George laughed and then they all laughed, and George, still in character, demanded, "Ah, Max, you ugly sod! Do you's not have a drink fit for poor ol' George, now? Aye, children, what say we tickle this scoundrel dog until he holds forth with his flask."

After they left, after the last little girl pulled on George's coat whispering a secret, the men lingered, George on the bed and Max by the table under the light. Max examined George's drawing equipment; T-squares and French curves hanging on nails, and colored benzene markers stacked in coffee cans. "George, what happened to Lord Paddington?"

"Oh! So, what brings you round to Paddington Castle? Eh, what?"
"I thought I'd visit the East side. See how the other half lives."
"Slumming it is then? No free tea here I'm afraid."
"What kind of work are you doing?" Max examined a large illustration board plotted with an African style mask of layered geometric forms and curves.
"I'm gettin' ready for a show at the bug house. Course, it won't pay, but the crazies digg my work."

Max rocked back in the chair, exhausted, vanishing as an independent entity, uncaring and for the moment melding with his environment. Max could as easily be a mountain as he could be Max. A slice of emotional peace from the derelict park, he considered his survival proof of a miracle, sustenance from the black hole mutually beautiful and ignoble. At such times as he felt decipherable he accepted himself for who he was and more. I don't truly exist, he thought, except as an aspect of the world spying upon itself. A chair, the terror of the park, George's room where everything felt warm and safe; this moment brimmed over and Max grew sleepy.

"George, something's happening to me."
"What's that, Mick?"
"I don't know. I'm tired. I'm going crazy." He watched his hands, wondering when they'd begun shaking. George's painted images leered at Max from the crumbling church walls. Tribal masks frowned in garish colors cackling through missing teeth and drawn down eyes. Max became anxious, his arms numb and breathing labored. He searched. Against one wall hung a blueprint of an exploded diagram. He trailed his fingers along its surface.

"I designed it for a buddy of mine, an amputee. Poor bastard got his legs blown off. It's a pneumatic lift." George paid Max the once-over from behind, his grass stained pants and white shirt streaked with dark gray sweat, the bottom of his neckline shown thick with white flecks of oily dandruff falling down his back like soap flakes. "Want to crash here? In the church? I've got a loft and a shower."

"Thanks, George, but I've got this room with a view. Lots of trees."

"Good then. Just thought I'd offer."

"However, just so happens it's cramped. Just so happens I'm looking around. I've been kicking around a move." Max worked at being mobile, circling the room, rattling his shoulders, loosening his arms.

George flipped sideways on his bed, lifted one tree trunk leg like an old Saint Bernard passing gas. "Since my leg went bad I had to move downstairs."

Max rubbed his hand across the back of his neck. He wasn't sure he wanted to live with a dog. "I insist on paying rent," Max said.

"Well now, Matt, that's good to hear, 'cause I don't give nothin' away to nobody."

He made a pretense of drifting off. Max couldn't afford to emphasize money. He fixed his attention on a small bookcase holding only two shelves. Selecting one of five ancient leather volumes he opened it, his eyes running down a yellowed page of thick Hebraic letters.

"Belonged to my old man," George said. He laid straight out, feet dangling over the edge of the mattress, throwing back ham hock arms and cradling his head on them. "He brought 'em over from Vilna. You's can imagine I'm not religious, but they're important. They're all I have left of the family. I can't read a word of Hebrew, but sometimes I just walk over to the shelf and pick one up. I hold it. I feel its vibrations. It's strange, the god of the Torah was arrogant, a
tough unforgiving old bird. But when I hold one of the books, I feel warm. My dad was warm. He was a good guy." Above the shelf a wall sagged under the weight of humanitarian award plaques and letters of commendation. George collected door to door for refugee Palestinians because he used to like the way Arafat smiled through his beard.

"You raised funds for the Arabs?"
"What the hell? We're all camel humpers."
"So I've heard," Max said.

***

Max followed George down a damp hall through a heavy velvet drape and George flipped on the lights leaving both men standing in a miniature chapel containing old oak pews and a small stage and podium. Max shivered uncomfortably, Christ being tortured on the cross above his head. "You know, as symbols go, I've never understood this one," Max said, pointing up.

"You don't understand the old rebbie?"

"Oh, hell, I understand. What I don't understand is children and women, and men too, wearing a gold replica of a man being hideously tortured to death. This whole Judeo-Christian proclivity to keep the torture close to one's heart is something I don't understand. Those films, those films..." Max shook his head with the death camp memories.

"I know the ones."

"...that I was forced to watch, they never increased my spiritual zeal. I class them along with the crucifix. We all know what we all know. We don't need reminders hung around our necks or thrown in our faces. New York got plane-bombed and, you know, there are still enough old ones dying with numbers tattooed on their wrists. Man's inhumanity to man is no secret."

"This is where I pass the collection plate every Sunday morning," George said.
Max frowned scratching his chin.
"Don't give me that look, Mitch. Man doesn't live by good deeds alone. Besides, I provide this wine bottle, bedpan neighborhood with a service; structure. What respectful Christian church is gonna allow a bunch of filthy stinkin' winos in from the streets? They send 'em to the other side of town, to their missions. They dry 'em out and pull 'em down, and tell 'em twelve ways from Sunday their essentially worthless and then use 'em for slave labor in their thrift stores. Charity my ass. Once they get 'em sober enough to follow orders they degrade whatever self-image these poor bastards have left."

George's one good eye glazed over as if remembering some pain. "Go to the back door of the Salvation Army sometime and ask for a sandwich. Go ahead! Tell 'em you're a hungry man! I don't preach much about the Lord or surrender. They've surrendered enough. I'm like Moses. I got me up to the mountain and got me a program, Max, one to fit the situation."

Max couldn't shake the feeling of Jesus looking down at him. He sat in one of the pews stretching out an arm and a leg, making light of the location but never forgetting where he was. He toyed with the idea of excusing himself for being a Jew. Though, if he excused himself in front of Jesus, in front of one dead Jew, he'd feel compelled to apologize to his bountiful Paulist followers. Now that would be a long process, he thought. Better just to be what I am and fuck 'em.

Saint George confidently, arrogantly, took the stage standing behind the podium under a spotlight. He raised his hands and lowered them easily hushing the imaginary congregation. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted a small packet of tin foil. Unwrapping it with intricate care, he popped two innocuous white pills into his mouth.

"You look like Elmer Gantry," Max said.

George glared down at him disapprovingly. "Tonight, my friends, we welcome brother Max Greenbaum into our fold," George said walking slowly out from behind the podium to the front of the stage. When he left the podium, Max thought for a giant man he appeared vulnerable in the open air. "Welcome to Saint George's Church of Divine Inspiration," and he clasped his hands signaling the start of business.

"Thank you. It's good to be here," Max said. He looked around at the empty seats.
"Then I stand up here for fifteen minutes or so and I say something impressive, somethin' downright moving. I never know ahead of time what it's gonna be. I just look out into the pews," he stared hard at Max, "and I see their faces and I ask myself, 'What matters today? Love? Hatred? Hell-fire and damnation?' " George continued giving Max the fish-eye. "Or is it vision?"

"Tell it, my brother!"

George heard this from the back of the room where he noticed a threadbare skeleton of a man, once a man now a dirty rag sitting in a pew waving last week's racing form in the air. Finally, he held it still in his bony lap. George shaded his eyes staring past the spotlight.

"I'm Injun Dave, a full blooded Cherokee, but I won't shake your hand, brother George. We don't do that. Want me to grab your arm? We do that." His flesh shined and he habitually shook one knee rattling his racing form.

George studied him closely thinking he must be afflicted, suffering a nervous condition. Max turned but saw nothing. Before he knew what happened, George pounced off the stage like a peg legged pirate reaching into Max's coat pocket, stealing his booze flask. He maniacally thumped his way back up the platform and reaching the stage he uncapped the flask pulling a long swallow, licking his lips. He replaced the cap examining the flask, tapping it with his fingertips, holding it up to his ear. "Sterling? Very nice. Our brother, Injun Dave, will put this in the collection plate!" and he slipped it into his pocket. George strained his eyes ignoring Max's agitation at having his pocket picked.

The congregation arrived, an impoverished soiled audience sitting on their racing forms. Max didn't have a clue. George raised his hands quieting down the parishioners, considering the situation in silence. Why doesn't Max see 'em? He pondered this point, allowing it to provide direction for his remarks. As usual he had no idea what to say, however, he figured it was time he opened his mouth."God, my friends, did not just give man sight, he gave man vision. Marv, do you's have vision?"
"I don't know," Max answered, wanting his flask returned, reconsidering his position, deciding he'd be better off in the park. He sulked, no longer feeling like sharing in the charade. He shifted in his seat, embarrassed at being taken.

"Sight makes us ask, 'Will this painting make 'em cry? Will it make 'em laugh or wonder?' But vision is seeing one's tear stains on a blank canvas and hearing the sound of one's own laughter."

George popped another little white pill and salt water beaded across his brow. He strutted the wooden stage as Ahab before him stomping a whalebone leg upon the Pequod's deck, sending out a succession of echoing knocks.

"Vision," George continued," is a feeling from the heart. Vision is Ray Charles at two A.M. Vision is Afghanistan at six and riots in Soweto and L.A. at eleven. Men of great vision have always known the world ain't round, it's everything! Vision is love, it's digging the broad strokes that bind you's to the suicide bomber. Vision knows God is the voice that asks if we're doing the righteous thing, for those few seconds before we turn it off. Vision accepts responsibility! Vision is when it's so right it hurts. Vision is knowing it ain't so when everybody who's anybody says it is so. And if you's care enough to inform the world of what's in your heart, that's vision."

The big man paused assessing his speech thus far. He waxed pleased with himself, thinking he might deliver it on Sunday. George looked down at Max quite seriously.

"I guess that's why I help Palestinians, Max. Because that's just the way I see things. An ordinary man," he said, glancing over the pews, "in this world must be capable of extraordinary vision." The jubilant shouts of his congregation filled George's ears. "He must realize the way of survival is the way of grace, the way of helping one's fellow. I ain't telling you's to love unconditionally. We're from off the corner, we know that's garbage. I'm saying, don't judge another based on a crowded passion. Come from a position of strength. Commit actions based on what's right for the family of humanity. When we have a choice to make about helping someone, it's really a choice about everything, the world."
Max sat in contemplative silence too spent to maintain any substantial level of anger over being robbed. He twisted his head and Jimmy sat in the seat next to him. Max remained silent, thinking he should be angry, he should be furious. He perceived Jimmy as the crux of his problem. Jimmy smiled throwing a leg up and over the seat in front of him.

On stage George pressed at his eyes with giant hands covering them and wiping them, considering how best to close the sermon. "It's not easy being true to your vision. A soul gets tired, Lord, after a lifetime of playing the black sheep." He looked directly at Jimmy, fear and then a peaceful smile crossing over George's face.

"He sees you!" Max blurted out.

"He's earned it in his own way," Jimmy said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

George stepped back behind the podium hunching over it for support, knowing he ought to tie matters up; a congregation of winos, meth freaks, bookies, and three time losers don't possess a long attention span. He figured it was time to close his mouth."I too am mighty tired. I guess, I just don't know what more there is to do. Except to say, I've been the best George I know how to be." Again, he regarded poor exhausted Max and felt a mortal weight lifted from his own shoulders now that Max would be living at the church. "Never wait for love, Max. Make love. Never wait for revelation. Seize it! The Promised Land is a different promise for every man. Heaven's here for the taking. God has given you's a gift. Accept it."

Max eyed Jimmy.

"Don't look at me, baby. Listen to the man."

George gestured with his arms. A shot of fortified Ripple might ease the pain, he thought. "Will you all please stand and sing Rock of Ages. And now, we'll pass the plate."


Pabulum. *Not creative fodder mind you, just plain old Pabulum,* Max thought. He lingered at the threshold talking to Ann, smiling. "The house was foreclosed on last month."

"Hmm." Leaning casually against the doorjamb, she blew a wisp of hair off her forehead away from her bedroom eyes. She stood barefoot and Max looked intently at her feet, her delicate ankles, one possessing a gold bracelet, and those toes.

"I junked the car." I mean it's crazy. I'm no college kid, for Christ's sake. *One of those toes should be rubbing circles around my balls.* He stiffened.

"Oh?" She pointed a toe lifting her long loose dress another inch off the ground giving him a finer look. "I kind of liked the old thing with a back seat the size of a living room sofa."

"I'm crashing with George now."

Her eyes sparkled. "That's nice!"

He imagined himself pushing her dress over her thighs. "I signed the papers. The divorce is under way."

Ann smiled. "Would you like to come in?"

Max didn't answer directly. He intended to conquer, to seize power. "I filed the papers. I'm calling the shots."

"Are you?"

"Listen, carpe diego!"

Without laughing at his lousy Latin, "Meaning?"

"It's French for 'I'm coming in,' " he puffed up, "and that's that."
She concealed her affection, moving aside because he'd ordered her to and this was serious male bull, the kind of bull she found endearing.

***

Ann closed the door. Max scooped her up burying his head in her breasts. She wrapped her legs around him and an electric current traveled from the middle of her solar plexus up through her chest and spiraled deliciously downwards ending at her toes. She felt his mouth on the nape of her neck, his teeth biting the valley of soft flesh ending in her round bare shoulder. And now his hand between her legs caressing and rubbing her, squeezing her firmly. Her thighs trembled. He whispered something and then again, "Wait."

"What's wrong?" She grabbed his hand, curled her pink tongue around two of his fingers sucking and lowered them, guiding them inside. A soft moaning escaped her lips.

"Wait. Not here."

"Yes, here," she said. She gripped him between her thighs. "Now, here."

Something about "now here" reminded him of Julia and an expression of anger flashed across his face. Ann knew. She hadn't meant it as an order. She stroked his face with her hands and kissed him flicking her tongue over the rough planes of his cheeks and nose, begging gently, "Please, Max, I need you."

"I say where. In twenty years I never picked where." He carried her into the shower. The space filled with warm mist.

***

Four bragging yellow moons sizzled on the griddle and Ann quickly sliced strawberries, maroon red and juicy fresh, yielding a clean sharp knife. In one move she splayed them around the moons like a sprinkle of planets. She listened contentedly to the sounds of Max shaving in
the bathroom. Hot water whooshing on and off left Ann secure. *His hands are older, larger. They hold me, support me. His eyes are penetrating.*

Max examined his reflection, pulling at flesh. A wrinkle cut just below the eye yesterday. He swore he remembered it, but it disappeared. He recalled those hours during the night, as if they lived in his mirrored image, when Ann and he held each other and he encountered her body, its dips and clefts, the wells of her soul. He wanted to tell her then that he loved her, but frightened of scaring Ann away, he kept this to himself. When they kissed long and hard he craved becoming a part of her never to be alone again. However, Max couldn't admit this much, that he'd been lonely.

Ann stretched high straining her shoulders reaching the top shelf. A glass jar sat recessed four inches from the wooden ledge. Jars of preserves and liquors, and tins of blended coffees constantly appeared where she couldn't possibly have left them. She glanced down at the yellow moons on the griddle. They were beginning to solidify and she worried. Max enveloped her with a hairy arm from behind and brought down the jar. "What's this?" he asked, letting go of her little by little.

"Strawberry liquor." She twisted off the cap, sloshed some on the griddle, dipped in a finger and offered it to Max for licking. "Try it. It's a special Christmas recipe."

"You're a little early." He reached for her hand bringing it closer to his mouth. "Mmm… pechy."

"No, strawberry."

It melted leaving a trail of heat running the roof of his mouth down along his throat.

"What proof is this stuff?"

"Holidays should always be celebrated for at least a month. I never have a birthday, but I always have the most wonderful birthday month, so, I'm not really early. I don't know the proof. I ferment it until it tastes right or it explodes."

He laid a cautious hand on his stomach sitting at the table. Ann rushed over balancing two steaming plates of Sunnyside-up eggs covered in strawberry sauce and a quarter loaf of
home baked brown bread, hot and soft and moist, dripping melted butter. She searched his face for approval. "Oh! I almost forgot."

She hurried to a low shelf over the sink removing a blue Bauer pottery bowl thick and heavy, brimming with assorted nuts, seeds and grain, and placed it in the center of the table. Swinging open the kitchen window, Ann allowed in a shock of cold air. Max frowned at the weather intruding on his morning after. Forcing a smile, he reached for the bowl. "Well, this is different." She slapped his hand. "What?"

"Shhh. Talk softly, and those are not for us. If you touch them he won't come."

"Who's coming?" he asked. "Should we set another place?" A heavy, threatening, black crow flew through the window landing on the table. It cocked its head scratching at the bowl, trapping Max with one round eye. Max, dumbstruck, remained planted in the chair. The bird fired a loud abrasive squawk. Blood drained from Max's mortified face and his jaw dropped. Secure that it had put Max in his place on the pecking order, the crow displayed its back strutting around to the bowl, pushing and picking at its breakfast.

"Morris," Ann called to the bird. It snapped up its huge head sharply, a string of shredded wheat dangling from its long beak, "say hello to Max."

"Morris?" Max managed. The bird hopped around rushing him, squawking wildly, flapping its outsized shiny black wings. The bird's spread grew covering the table and Max found himself astounded by the angry attack of this wild brute creature. He picked up a fork playing with his food, praying Ann wouldn't sense his fear.

"Max, I'd like to introduce you to Morris Bean. We've been friends for about a year."

"It's a horrible thing," was all he could say. The crow drew back its wings circling towards Ann, who held a peanut half in her lips. Approaching cautiously, it stood in one spot twisting only its head three-hundred and sixty degrees in one direction and then in the other rotating its round eyes, spooking Max. "The damned things carry lice." Ann chuckled dropping the peanut, however, Morris snatched it from her. The crow carried the nut to a lonely corner of the table pecking the shell to pieces. "Diseases. They spread disease," Max proclaimed authoritatively. Ann bit into a hot piece of bread and laughed.
Patches of dark gray clouds floated over Griffith Park. Max and Ann hoped to catch the afternoon soccer matches. The field ran slick with ice and the teams canceled. "The Cubans have all gone back to Coo-bah," Max showed his teeth, "and the Puerto Ricans have all gone back to Puerrrto Rrrrico," he rolled off his tongue. "No games today."

They strolled behind ancient municipal bleachers and every few yards Ann stopped to feed a squirrel. Max, again at peace with his environment, again felt odd, of a piece with his world. He soaked in the park, becoming a mountain, a winding path, and then a particularly large California pine. The wind rustled through his branches leaving him saddened.

"What's wrong, Max?"

"Trees. They're not stupid. They know when they're being pissed on."

"You're a strange man."

He gained a different perspective, an extended body of possibilities; today he became more of himself. Yesterday he believed in humankind's unique ability to feel that which exists outside of itself. Today, standing amongst the shivering mountains, he realized for the first time that nothing exists outside of Max Greenbaum. I am a mighty tree, he thought, while watching Ann feed another squirrel. Two more appeared scampering around a stump leaping on each other's tails. They froze standing on their hind legs sniffing at the air.

"Squirrels have incredibly poor eyesight," Ann said "but they know I'm here. They can smell me on the breeze. That one," and she tossed it a nut, "is Nutsy Bean. And that one's Sylvia Bean."

"Sylvia?" Max repeated it.

"I named her after Sylvia Plath. And this fellow's name is Lawrence Bean."

"Lawrence Ferlinghetti?" Two joggers in heavy sweat suits clunked by and Max grabbed Ann's arm yanking her out of the way. "Why Bean?" he asked.
"These guys I lived with in Santa Cruz loved beans and rice. They were vegetarians. That's a complete protein, you know? Beans and rice. Of course, the human body doesn't have multiple stomachs like a cow or a goat. We're not cows or goats. We can't assimilate protein the way they can. But the vegetarians won't admit it. Oh, well, its some kind of industry, what with non-meat treats that look and taste like meat, and diets of non-meat meats, books about non-meat meat eating, and special non-meat meat doctors, and healthy vegetarians are dropping dead all over the country. Scads of them! Really! They're just piling up the bodies. You read about it in the papers. I do. 'Mr. Smithers, a well-known life-long vegetarian has passed on. He is survived by his daughter and his dog, Rex, who is one hundred and forty in dog years and eats beef chow.' They're piling up the bodies and all you can say is, he was a good vegetarian." Ann giggled.

The weight chewed through to Max's chest, set upon by a major crashing blow so that he barely caught his breath. Not a guy, but guys plural had lived with his Ann. That she'd lost it long ago was never a question, though it hadn't come up in conversation. He anguished knowing some monster ejaculated between his virgin's legs before he'd gotten to her. A slow rage welled in the pit of his stomach. He kept smiling.

"So, I always had a pot of black beans on the fire. I loved the smell."

"I'll bet. Tell me, just out of curiosity, how many of them smelled?" He needed to torture himself, to know the whole truth. He wanted an exact count. "Two? Four? Six smelly guys?" He ground his molars. Max existed as pain. "Or is stench more the word we're searching for? All those beans, all those men, all that healthy vegetarian exercise. I'll bet it really stunk." He begged suffering. Max never ceased grinning. And did they all take you at the same time, or were you a lady? I thought that these vegie guys were supposed to be less aggressive."

"Oh…well, not exactly." Ann stood eyeing him, twitching her nose with displeasure. "I call all my favorite friends 'Beans'." She read his thoughts. "Stop it, Max."

"Stop what? There's nothing going on here and would you like a piece of my gall bladder as long as you're twisting the knife?" Ann stared at him. His agony acute, she balanced on her toes reaching up wrapping her arms around his neck. "No. Don't do that. Shove the knife through my intercostals and then hug me."
"But you're sweet, Max."

"No, I'm not. I'm not sweet."

She ran circles with her finger around the back of his neck and Max's eyes slowly closed. *She's a killer. An ex-vegetarian killer.* "How many have there been?" he asked. The torture wasn't complete while he felt he could squeeze out one more drop of painfully useless information. His eyes remained shut.

"Hundreds," and she nibbled on his chin. Between bites, "Thousands. I've lost count."

"Oh, fuck." He opened his eyes shaking his head.

"But they pale next to you, Max."

"Really?"

"Sure." She bit him on the ear and they continued walking.

"I'm a fool."

"I might have a show for you," Ann said. "For me also. I told him you'd be ready."

"My life's been such a wreck." A jet thundered overhead. They stared up at it flying so low they could count rivets on its silver underbelly. Max continued shouting over the noise." I'd given up. Thought I was kidding myself." The roar of the engines faded and the plane disappeared. Max dropped his head. "I thought I was just having this silly dream."

"When will you begin another canvas?"

"Tonight. I've decided to express my transpersonal transformation."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the wind is blowing and I'm cold because I've been pissed on."

"You're a strange man. Very strange. Are you a vegetarian?"

"No," he said. "I'm passive-aggressive."

***

The Veteran's Hospital cut off his morphine for night pain, and meth for awakening, and increasingly difficult days passed for George, hobbling about at four in the morning, preparing
breakfast for the children. He found dragging a load of steel and plastic from the hip more than a man is able to bear. They'd hooked him leisurely in the military hospital during the Korean conflict and then sent him home. After forty years, the Republicans cut him loose into the throbbing ionosphere of pain. Illegal dealing became the only way to score painkillers, and he agonized sweating out ramifications, living in fear of prison. He sucked up Darvon and opium for his leg; and methedrine against the Darvon and opium; and acid, when he could, to forget about the Darvon, opium, and methedrine. The sheer quantity of junk in his veins destroyed his sanity hastening the onset of paranoid schizophrenia.

He sat under the light at his drawing table creating a monstrous totem face, working with straight edge, triangle, curve, and ink pen squeezing out the last remaining drops of a once cogent life. No one understands my cancer, my polio. I've got no asshole left. It takes a whole roll of toilet paper to clean myself, and I'm dying from diphtheria.

At their last conversation, George sulked on his bed. "Let's get out for a walk," Max said. "How can I? They follow me wherever I go. Can't you hear the voices? The motherfuckers wired my clothes! Max, they're after me. As God is my witness, they're gonna do me." Communication grew impossible. The big guy was losing it. He drew a long line down the center of the board carefully sliding his ruler each time he reached the end of its edge. "And now the motherfuckers are after me because I know too much. They won't leave me alone. Arsenic! Motherfuckers! They're pouring it through the ceiling! Into my bed! Into my clothes!" The pain throbbed charging through his knee joint and George laughed. "No breakfast tomorrow. Not until I figure a way to stop getting messages from this high-tech crap they put in my shorts." He yanked off a gold wristwatch holding it to his ear. Smacking his lips in dissatisfaction he tossed it out the window into a rainy November night. "Thank God, I never killed anyone. Never. I shot over their heads. We all shot over their heads. I wasn't angelic, I was seventeen. How was I supposed to know I'd wake up dead? Fuck 'em. I still wouldn't of shot 'em."

George moved his hulk back from the table swaying in front of the open window, examining his work at a distance, his shirttails blowing in the breeze. "Mickey!" he shouted at the ceiling. His friend didn't answer. He shoved his head out the window. "Max!"
"What!" The answer floated down on the night wind.

"If I die will you's take care of the church?"

"Yeah, okay. Stop shouting."

"Don't forget we're a full service institution," George said quietly. He hit the switch on his lamp casting the room into darkness and stumbled to the bathroom. He lit a candle watching the flame. Reaching behind the toilet, George grabbed a piece of surgical tubing and his syringe. "Children!" he shouted. "It's every man for himself!"

***

In the loft, Ann sat naked and still while Max painted. He preferred silence, quietude helping him journey inward, guiding him to touch something of himself that he desired to share with others in a silent way.

Ann considered it her duty to enforce a steady stream of interesting patter. Artistic reflection, she'd let him know at the beginning of their session, was simply an excuse to withdraw, a dangerous position, she thought, given Max's gift for antisocial behavior. He'd been out-rationalized, compelled to listen, even responding, and as if that wasn't enough hardship, every few minutes she'd throw in a question checking his attention.

"Tell me about Julia?" she asked.

Max wiped a brush using a rag soaked in linseed oil. The act being meditative, he barely heard her query. He lost his mind in a thin film of oil insinuating itself along the bristles. He wiped the oil down the ferrule and around the wooden stem so he'd feel it against his palm and fingers as he painted. "Julia?" He took a breath. "Even other women stare at Julia." Max painted.

"I see."

"She can make a roomful of men erect." He wasn't considering Ann's emotions or the effects of his commentary. He painted and for the first time he thought back dipping into the colors on his palette, regressing.
"I get the point," Ann said, sorry she asked.

"We were young. Things got complicated. Children. I lost sight of my goals. It was as much my fault as hers. I can see that. I was afraid to go for broke. Father and husband always playing it safe. I became bitter and I blamed her."

This is going better, she thought. "You did the right thing. Now you're both free. If you ask me, it was a wise move."

He mixed titanium white into his colors, toning down, building distance. "Wisdom is in short supply. Julia always said I don't think." He glanced up from the canvas. "Hell, even a shoe-dog, a cop, a garbage man, anyone, Christ, you've got to ask sometime in your life, what's it worth? We're ninety-eight percent water, two percent memories. She didn't get it. I only wanted my two percent to count for something." He glanced at the canvas, took a step back smiling at Ann. "Now."

"What?"

"Now you can move," he said.

Ann broke her pose, stretching her arms in the air while Max watched her breasts rise. He made a pretense at being a gentleman and handed her a robe. She didn't believe in pretenses and slung it over her shoulder. Max found her natural audacity seductive. He studied her intensely while she circled his work like a cat. He wanted to catch her first expression. He watched her eyes. They focused and traveled, apparently focusing again, longer this time. Ann understood how to look at a piece of art. Max felt threatened.

The interminable silence continued and Max, feeling the space thickening, had to ask, "How does it feel?"

"I think—"

He grasped control. "No. Don't think. How does it feel? 'What a piece of work is man; so noble in reason.' I don't want your reason. What does your viscera report? Fuck nobility! How do your guts bleed?" At that moment, a long scream seeped up through the floorboards from the room below, and then a muffled thump.
George's nose bled north and south, and in a moment of glory the deed was done, his eyes open. One might expect terror or fright, at least a struggle. However, his open eyes stared outward unafraid, instead as if before departing he'd marveled seeing directly inside space, being beckoned by the final truth. Nothing unexpected, more like Saint George had been waiting for his bus to the Nickel at 5th Street where they all drank before he caught his next bus to watch the horses run at Santa Anita, and he got taken out. *Of course,* Max thought, *it's none of that, but it looks that way.*

Max gathered his wits. George's body lay stretched on the bed, his feet dangling over the edge, and Max, having taken a seat in the chair examining his friend's last piece of work, did not yet call the coroner because for George time suspended itself there, irrelevant. He meditated over the body.

They'd shared a Highway One painting trip together through Big Sur two weeks before George's mental loss became apparent. Max recalled how bitter cold winds blew on the mountain overlooking the Pacific; salty, crashing on the perilous rocks below. The two of them painted and shivered in equal parts, and George painted creatures from an ancient mariner's edge of the earth nightmare. Max made out nothing approaching reality on George's canvas then, and he mulled this over, staring into George's ultimate totem face, considering the conversation they'd had while this same face now glared at him from the drawing board.

"I'd like to know," Max asked in Big Sur, "the breadth of your imagination. How do you extrapolate these wicked creatures from this beautiful ocean?" Waves roared in their ears. Max filled his lungs with salt air.
"They're the first ocean. The first stage in man's evolution." George continued painting free uncaring strokes like a child finger painting. "The way I got it figured, first man wondered at the ocean and explained it asking, 'Why is there water? Why are there waves? What makes a fish a fish?' Easy. God! Or gods. That's why the primitives were into mythology. As Jews, we chose to worship one impersonal god. But there were lots of gods around to choose from, a slug of Egyptian divinity. The crusty old bird in the Torah never said I'm the only god. He said 'I'm the only god you are to worship.' We're the product of all that. Sun god. Moon god. Fish in the deep blue sea god. They're the beginning of our present minds, and that mythology is still with us inside our skulls. Nothin' dies. I know that way back when, our god was impersonal, because the Kabala says, 'Nothing happens outside the body of God.' So, God is everything everywhere, infinite.

Next, we got the philosophers. They're the second ocean. They looked at the water and figured, like Aristotle, why it worked, what rules governed the fish.

Now, somehow, you's got to reconcile the philosophical with the mythological; Talmud! Here comes method, how the gods make stuff work: scripture, rabbinical infighting, and the ethical code that evolves from why and how.

The third ocean, the third stage of man, is when you's see the universe in the light of scripture."

"Theology?" Max asked.

"But then you's get further away from the source instead of closer. The scripture separates God the infinite from man the finite. It convinces us of our differences. God can do all this shit, create the universe, but man can't fix a fuckin' hangnail. We can only stare at the ocean God created and piss in it," George's eyes bugged open and looking below, he stepped dangerously close to the misty edge opening his fly, "and ask why and how. To tell you's the truth, I don't really think we are finite. When I paint basic geometric faces, kinda monster-like, I'm appealing to the mythological in man because it's primitive. It's the closest I'm gonna get to something common I know is there, a map we all share, but that I can't prove or describe through philosophy or science."
"How do you know something's there?" Max moved back from the cliff's edge, hoping George might follow.

"I've had a tough life. But somehow, no matter what's happened to me, regardless of what garbage I've brought on myself, I've always felt intuitively that I'd survive, that something greater than the separate parts of my world was watching over me, greater even than the day to day crap, the finite crap. Sometimes I've felt it touch me. How can I say it? It's just a knowing and I can't read the map, so, that's gotta be good enough. Max, someone up there loves me even though I'm a loose turd," and he zipped up.

"Maybe it's just your own will to survive that you feel."

"Don't you's believe in a force greater than yourself, or that yourself is greater than you're aware of?" George focused sadly on the distant pale horizon line, as if Max's answer would make or break his own beliefs.

"If you'd asked me a few months ago I would've said no. Now, I don't know. There's a possibility of God, or indigestion, or that God is all there is and each of us is an aspect of God, able to look upon God by looking upon ourselves, our world," Max said. "I'm in love and that's a power greater than myself, and it expresses a greater self."

He watched with panic as George loomed closer to the edge, weaving, attempting to smell the salty mist. Max swiftly reached out grabbing George's shoulder, "I believe in love."

"Hey," George glanced at the spot where Max's hand clamped his body, "I'm not gonna jump." Max eased his grip. George touched the brush to his canvas working his shoulder around in circles, massaging the muscle where Max's fingers had dug in. "Love. You's might as well be talking about the tide. The love of a good woman. Love of God. I can only touch one of them, I can't figure either of them, and too much of both makes my head hurt. We shouldn't do anything Aristotelian here. No analysis. No rules. No shit that gets in the way. I think the plan of attack is to take it on faith that love exists in the universe and then bury it. Forget about it and go on with your life."
Those were the last sensible words George uttered. After Big Sur he ranted about how they were coming for him, trying to bump him off because he'd been to the shores of Merkabah, God's throne in the seventh heaven, and now he knew too much and needed silencing.

George passed. The madness disappeared. The odd part for Max, sitting in the tiny room, feeling the atmosphere, infinity had separated wheat from the chaff; kindness lingered a sweet scent in the air. George's simple acts of giving lived on corporeal. Max knew he could touch them, that they would forever ring through a temporal universe.

At Vinnie's coffee shop on Hollywood Boulevard, he spoke to Max about death. "It's the one thing we all need." George looked around suspiciously, his glass eye trailing as though on the lam. "I don't want it. But we need it. I need it. I don't know about reincarnation and all that hocus-pocus. I s'pose stranger stuff has happened. It's just that it drives me crazy thinking I've gone through all this crud without a resolution."

After a few silent moments of understanding these things, assessing these thoughts, Max decided the death rested as it should be. He dialed the telephone.

***

Max and Ann sat together in the first pew, both holding a thick white candle in one hand and a scrap of paper in the other. Ann read first;

"May the infinite spirit prevail in this universe nourished by none other.
May possibilities open into possibilities into his days and into the day of us all.
Thanks be.
May the infinite spirit prevail throughout eternity.
Blessed, recognized, blessed, accorded its due, blessed, like water may we use it, and blessed
like water may it replenish itself.
The spirit unchanging is our anchor, our constant, our comfort.
Thanks be.
May we live yielding like the infinite tao.
Thanks be.
May we bend like saplings in the wind and grow, and lose our leaves and wither with age.
Thanks be."

Max read;

"Infinite spirit that nourishes receive to rest in your way our brother George who now resides with just cause and compassionate method, sheltered by his own abode, and hold him to tarry not that he may continue his blessed journey.
The spirit be his bounty.
Thanks be and Amen."

The sun set at six thirty-two P. M.

***

Ann, embraced by a black veil, waited in a taxi outside the red brick gate in front of Los Angeles Memorial Cemetery. She loved George. Viewing the covering of his coffin seemed more than she could handle.

Max watched her from the gravesite through a gusty shower of brown crinkly leaves. He stood alone listening to birds and the sound of dirt being bulldozed over wood. Sticking it out for the entire burial, when it finished and the men in their yellow Caterpillars rode away, Max turned from the grave trudging to the taxi. This was like putting a building into the ground.

He stopped and twisted around, again regarding the grave from a distance. He had a rolling perspective of all the graves, all of the bleached white headstones on the flatlands and
extending beyond his horizon over the low hills. He stood against the wind, the only one. Eleven o'clock crept around finding not a mourner among the dead, as if graves laid hollow, their lives never lived. The space showed itself clear and open and breathable, yet something remained wrong. Did none of these souls touch anyone? Max felt a presence.

"Why didn't you save him?" He looked away from the sight of all those graves.

"Get hip, baby," Jimmy said. He stood, hands shoved low into his beige trench coat pockets, which he wore open over a black suit. "The man was a junkie. A sweet junkie. Nothing more, nothing less. I mean, it's a big universe, and in the scheme of things, really, he wasn't important. Some men just aren't worth saving. And the economics of the situation; look at all the food a big man like that eats! If he's going to die, he'd be best to just do it."

Max stood under a tree, blood filling his cheeks, pumping into his eyes, blurring his vision. He shook with a rage that no man can know, and he cried without blotting away his tears, dampening the ground. "Do you know what that man taught me?"

"Why, no." Jimmy appeared completely at a loss.

"Every human being on the face of this earth has value. I have value. My so-called enemies have value. I have vision. You know what George's vision was?"

"I wouldn't know that," and Jimmy scratched his chin, glimpsing back in the direction of George's grave.

"He gave all his money to the street children, the crippled, the refugees. The son of a bitch couldn't afford to put himself in the ground. Let me tell you something, mister, I'm diminished by his death. We all are. You see a junkie, I see a man of great importance. He was a piece of us all, and we are all a piece of George. You have a hard heart!"

Jimmy stared at Max, shock written over his face. Max noticed for the first time that Jimmy's eyes stuck wide open. "That so?" Jimmy asked.

"Don't talk to me over his grave about importance in the scheme of things!" and Max paused struggling, catching his breath. "And, while we're on the subject, who needs you? You can tell Pop I don't need his gift. My dream's my right. My vision's my power, and nothing can
stop me." Max waited in silence for Jimmy's reply. He'd already decided that regardless of what that reply might be, he would punch Jimmy in the nose.

Jimmy glowed. "Good-bye, my friend." Those heavy eyelids appeared and in a moment he vanished.

***

Pop backed away from the window. "That so, Mr. Greenbaum?" He sat at his desk grasping the telephone receiver in three fingers and dialing with a fourth. "Yes, operator, it's time. Yes, I'll hold."

He leaned back in his chair tossing his feet up on the desk, one Italian loafer on top of the other. "Hello? I can't hear you. Hello?" He tried tapping the receiver on its side. "Hello? That's better. American Express? I'm going to be sending one soon, and I was wondering, if I use the card is there a discount? Is there any way to avoid going through corporate? I know I did. You don't have to get insulting."

Of course, it's always my fault and let me ask you, young lady, where will it all end? That's rhetorical. I don't want answers. I don't give them and I don't care to receive them. Last time I gave an answer, Rome formed a committee to evaluate it, to answer the answer. It pains me just thinking about it."

Pop hung up the telephone spinning himself in the chair one quick turn. "My! What must I have been thinking? Bureaucracy, an idea whose time has passed."
A couple stood conversing in front of Max's large canvas while he strained an ear. The middle-aged White man speaking to a young Persian woman fascinated him. "It's got this tremendous field depth," the man said. "What do you suppose his intentions were?" Max's colon spasmed during this analysis.

"Of course," Max interjected, "I don't know much about this kind of stuff, but it looks as though his wife was fucking the daylights out of some cock in the next room while he painted it. I mean, the artist was obviously pissed off. I would be, wouldn't you?" Ann poked him sharply in the ribs.

The man looked askance at Max, raising an eyebrow and bowed away. "You can see directly into it as opposed to—"

"His handling of the female form is vulgar," she cut him off. He raised both eyebrows when the Persian woman offered an opinion. "Worse than de Kooning. Worse even than Picasso. I'm sorry, Efrim, I just don't see it."

"Don't you see? You're sensing only the surface value."

Max interrupted. "Pardon me, Efrim. If you folks like this one, you'll love that one above the piano." The couple gravitated towards this new painting, a work with gobs of texture dripping down the board. Max raised his voice, "It's titled When Birds of a Feather Flock Together. Lots of texture. Don't miss the texture. You can touch it, it's okay!" He waved them on sipping his champagne, smiling, and returned to Ann who glared at him.

The crowd on the fourteenth floor high above the Sumatsu Bank mulled in tight cliques, crucial little groups of writers, unimportant elitist groups of film producers, hip insignificant groups of musicians concerned with themselves under track lighting, overly avant-garde, each
wretched little group presuming to rise above the other wretched little groups. Some mulled gloomy, fringe hangers-on to the almost famous.

Pete Peterson arranged the opening; a full bar with bartender and a baby grand piano boasting a pianist who looked like Bobby Short, who played a cool Girl From Ipanema. Max's huge canvases covered the walls along side Bohemian Ann's futuristic window designs. Five of George's tribal mask faces hung against a temporary dividing wall in hexagonal tribute to mythological insanity.

Max and Ann, both leaning against a window, sipped cheap champagne, Max grinning politically while Ann nodded appropriately at passers-by. "Imagine," Max said lowering the glass from his lips, "half my life's over. I don't know why it took me so long to get here." His eyes roamed clusters of tuxedos and sequined cocktail dresses. Beneath the facade, contempt ran rampant. "Not that here is anyplace worth aspiring to."

"I think it's fun," Ann said.

"Like brushing your teeth with needles," Max said.

"I don't love you tonight, Max."

"Oh?"

"I thought you should know." There lurked the hurt of realizing she hadn't transformed Max Greenbaum from one animal into another, not entirely, though Ann took credit for his wearing a tuxedo and mistreating people in a pseudo-civilized manner, rather than assassinating them, heaving salvos of blatant aggression. She nursed her drink thinking about their future, doubting the full-bloodedness of their love, the impossibility of his metamorphosis, and in the next moment castigating herself because she refused imagining life without him. Ann's nose wrinkled at the bridge steeped in thought and all of the little groups disappeared. Max disappeared. The pianist who looked like Bobby Short disappeared.

"Annie! Dear-heart! Don't you look divine." Pete Peterson, curator, stepped back folding his arms. He studied her dress, a white on white, with white stockings ending in black suede ballet slippers. With gushing flattery, he'd saved Ann from obsessing over the obstacles of love. "I'm adoring it, yes. It's so… What about you, Max?"
"Absolutely." He looked away.

"Oh, don't say," Ann said. "Thanks."

Peterson snapped his head glancing sideways at Max's rented tux. "If we run short on staff, you could serve hors d' oeuvres."

Max studied his shoes, buying time. He couldn't decide whether to launch a full-scale homophobic queer attack, discuss the weather, or demonstrate restraint saying something along the lines of decency to secure his future representation by Peterson. "The shoes are rented. I'm afraid they're a tight fit."

Ann felt it brewing.

"Good comments on your work, Max," Peterson said.

"Look, Pete..." Max began. Ann winced sipping her drink. Max smiled at her lovingly and continued speaking to Peterson. "I meant to thank you for all you've done. The show and everything."

"I know good art when I see it. Well, except for that one over the piano."

"When Birds of a Feather Flock Together," Max said.

"Oh? Oh! Now I see it. Must go. Must mix. Mix, mix." Max grimaced as Peterson flew away amongst the little groups.

"I could love you if your luck holds out," Ann said.

"I'd say that was pretty good just now." Max grabbed another champagne from the tray as it flew around and looking across the room his eyes narrowed.

"What's wrong, Max?"

"She's with her significant driving force," he felt a sudden drop in the mercury, "and of course everybody watches," his teeth chattered. Julia glided effortlessly across the room, tall in a skintight black floor length gown slit up one leg to just below the hip, her hair piled on top of her head with a single loose strand falling along the side of her cheek and her lip-gloss shining richer than Max remembered it. She took the lead, this exactly as Max remembered it, with her new man, Homo-Primo Erectus, trotting behind; first three shirt buttons open, silk slacks, and no socks. Max stumbled unable to rip his eyes from her body. She closed in on him. When she
moved within striking range, Julia's lips parted and she tensed her thigh muscles smiling that smile which said, "It's everything you recall, but it's not yours."

Ann, feeling invisible, watched the expression on Max's face. His eyes dazed. "You're with me, remember?" she whispered.

Julia and Homo-Primo Erectus arrived before he could reply. "Max, how nice of you to invite us."

"You. I invited you."

"Yes, well, I never introduced you to Franco."

Franco extended his hand. It's not a real hand, Max thought. He shook it. It's a prosthetic device. Probably cut from Italian marble. Worse yet, Franco never looked at Max. Instead, he smiled at Max's Ann; Ann, whose knees quaked in front of Franco chiseled from Italian marble. "Hello, Max. I am Franco."

"I know that. I'm not stupid."

"And who," Franco inquired, still pumping Max's hand, "is this astonishing young woman?"

Julia pouted and then smiled her second smile of the night. "Franco, darling, Julia requires her drink." He trotted to the bar.

"How's his training going?" Max asked. "I understand these laser-guided jobs are really something. Did you show him the trick with the Life Savers?" He turned quietly to Ann, "Lemon flavor. File that for later." Then returning to Julia, "How rude of me. Julia, this is Ann."

"I'm so glad we have a chance to meet," Ann said. Intimidated by Julia's stature, Ann concentrated on her breathing.

"How nice for you," Julia said, looking over Ann's head into the distance and then down at her, through her.

"I think, if you'll excuse me..." Ann crumbled.

"The little girl's room?" Julia asked.
Max polished off his drink working on a pleasant light headiness, watching Ann weave her way through the crowd. "I knew you two would love each other." Julia didn't care to reply.

"I'm glad you came."

"Really, Max?"

"In a way, I wanted to share this evening with you."

"You meant that." Julia stifled a sarcastic laugh.

Max reached for one of her hands. "Yes, I did mean it."

"It's good to see you again. I guess I didn't understand." She studied his paintings; canvases of broad dark gashes against bright yellow backgrounds, pigments thrown on, stuck like violent mud pies sliding down brick red walls, and discovered to her surprise that they amazed her. "I don't understand, Max." She wondered if she was responsible for his wrath.

"Perhaps that's the problem. I never really understood."

"Is this an admission?" He relished a twinge of triumph.

"Does it matter? I'm saying, good luck."

*Fine!* he thought. An admission of guilt makes this whole thing much easier. In his mind Max stood resolutely within a new and different life, a plane of diminished anger, a cosmology foreign from that manifest in the work now on the walls, a fresh change of oxygen. He'd invited her to reconcile his past, to love Ann fully by making his peace with Julia or finally discounting her altogether. He sucked in a few huge wafts of air through his nostrils. Julia saw this, becoming acutely aware that Max's speech time arrived. "It matters," Max said. "It matters that I never confided in you until it was too late."

"Why, Max, are you apologizing?"

"Does it matter? The point is we can't go back. There's no return and I don't want to return." Julia stiffened her lower lip. "I invited you here to tell you that I'm aware of having made some mistakes."

She froze. "Well, I don't know what to say. You're being humble."

"I'm not perfect," he said.
"You're new humanity suits you." She thought carefully, drawing a momentous decision. Julia stepped closer speaking quietly to Max. "I've made many mistakes, Max, and I haven't learned my lessons very well," a slow grin came to her shiny lips. "Then, I don't care to."

"I've been through a few changes, Julia."

"I can't change," she said.

"Well, I can, just a little. Remember that portrait I painted of you in Berkeley? You had a flower in your hair. I always liked that painting."

"I was young and idealistic." The space between them grew warm, intimate; however, when Julia realized the immediacy of the moment she grew stiff again. "I never liked that portrait. I loathed Berkeley." She peered through the crowd at Ann talking to an elderly man. She watched as Ann folded the old man's handkerchief adjusting it in his coat pocket. "Does she make you happy, Max?"

"Yes."

She felt an unexpected tightening in her chest. "Do you love her?"

"Yes." He saw Julia's eyes cloud and he understood that some bit of left over space, some time that time forgot would always live between them. He touched her perfect cheek and stroked the invisible trembling of her jaw. "She's an angel, Julia."

"Oh, Max…" Her eyes teared.

"But she'll never have the advantage of my innocent youth. That was just for us."

Franco rushed his way back from the bar. "Laser guided penis. He never needs directions, never slips out. He's what I need, Max. About the Life Savers," she half smiled to keep from crying. "I never did that with anyone else."

He moved around looking over at the piano where a group gathered under the able leadership of Efrim, who led them in a communal groping and rubbing of the painting, When Birds of a Feather Flock Together. Max gently let go of her hand. "Good-bye, Julia."

***
"They're beautiful from up here, aren't they?" Ann said. They stood on the church roof overlooking the city.

"Unless you know what's down there, what the lights look like close up." A siren screamed disappearing into the distance and Max shoved his hands in his pockets. Trails of headlights like electric bugs pushed each other in starts and stops along the streets below. Max stared at one area high on a hill to the north where lights stopped dead in a directionless heap and wiggled, a few breaking through, joining long lines inching their way down the hill. "The Hollywood Bowl let out," he said. "I was thinking about George."

"He's at peace." Ann gazed up as though she could feel George's presence and she played reaching for a star, stretching on her tiptoes.

"There's a reason we meet people. Get to know them." Max rested a hand on her tiny shoulder, stopping her game. "There is a god, you know," he said. "I don't know whether it's a he or a she or an old man with a long beard sitting over a tribunal in the sky, or whether God might just be the source that can't be seen, the unimaginable infinite. But I do know that God is the cause of my meeting Jimmy and you and George."

"Jimmy?"

"An angel, who I'm angry with at the moment."

"I believe in angels," Ann said.

"It figures."

"They're very romantic," and she hugged him. "But what about poor George?"

"Purgatory's con man?" Max laughed. "He rose above it. He knew how to love."

"Maybe that was the god in him," Ann said, and while they both stood watching, a giant Christmas tree on top of Winn's Department Store lit up one strand of lights at a time. "Max, look!" The atmosphere misted and in a few minutes it drizzled. Max harbored no desire to rush in out of the rain.

"The god in him? Like the god in the burning bush? It's taken the better part of my lifetime to realize I'm part of something greater than myself. Now, when I listen, it speaks to me."
"What does it say?"

"It says the universe is infinite; all here, all now. Science talks about alternate universes. Bullshit! It's infinite. No separate alternate universes. Unmapped ground, well, okay. You and I are aspects of infinity. It says, 'Max, you can chase a dream. Max, you can fall in love.' And it says, 'Max, it's all right to love yourself.' I've been searching for love all my life. Without it I thought I was being punished. Now, being with you, knowing George, hearing Jimmy's story, I feel there must be a certain merciful teaching to be experienced before one may meet love, shake hands with it, make love one's own. Maybe God is love. The idea of love that we first learn, that we begin with, that's pitifully insufficient. You're so much younger than I am. But I found myself completely unprepared for you, Ann."

***

As he understood the process, in a little while he'd remember nothing. Jimmy, feeling strange, stood in front of Pop's desk. Time, he knew, lingered in front of him once more, though it didn't really exist and Pop explained to him that he could conceivably live a life in the wink of God's eye, or a hundred lives for that matter, or a thousand. He dressed in a beige suit holding a leather valise in one hand and a Panama hat in the other. Pop, sitting on the edge of his desk, beamed with pride. "Bless you, son." He tucked a ticket in Jimmy's coat pocket.

"Thanks, but I'm worried, Pop. How will I remember the reason for my existence?"

"Remember it? You won't remember it. You'll have to ask me and listen for my answer. To do that you'll have to learn my universal language or your universal language and appeal to your inner-self; it's all the same. You'll struggle to find out. You will live on the lean and fat of compulsion. You might be deceived into thinking you have something to teach when in fact all you can do is ask questions, conduct a search for answers."

Jimmy settled in a chair, resting his hat on his lap, dropping his valise on the floor. Even now, he couldn't remember what was in the valise. He wanted to open it, to peek inside but he felt that might be construed as a trespass.
Pop paced slowly up and down the length of the office and this seemed odd because Jimmy never noticed the office having boundaries. "Life is a game plan, James. You begin with no hair and no teeth. You don't know who you are or even that you are. You only know what's in front of you. If it's not there it doesn't exist and you're clear, reflecting nothing until the next thing makes an appearance. Later, your hair gets thick, your teeth strong. You sustain images and reflect thoughts about images of things not necessarily in front of you or within your grasp. You develop feelings and sustain emotions. You learn to theorize, and one day you think you have a copyright on all the answers. Just before your hair begins thinning and the enamel on your teeth starts yellowing, say about forty years into the game, you experience a divine revelation."

"What's that, Pop?"

"You never had any answers. None. Zip. You realize you've lived your youth as an ass and in the same breath of inner-space you discover your life's always been about a single question; why am I here? You eat the question, sleep the question. You answer the queries surrounding and supporting the question. Why am I here? Suddenly you care. You see your life progressing and you genuinely give a damn! Why am I here? Why am I here? Why am I here! You can't mow your lawn, drink your coffee, or relieve yourself at three in the morning without the incessant wondering; why am I here? I provide you with illusory motivation to search for the answer. I put up walls that I hide behind so you can't find me. I decree a time limit, death. Soon the question grows as an implosive device within your belly. It's a humbling little thing. Really brings you back down to a planetary position. And if you were certain you knew all the answers, if you had an exceptionally high flying youth, this little question is a baseball bat to the shinbones bringing you screaming to your knees."

"Middle age does that to some folks," Jimmy said gowing uncomfortable in his seat.

"If you're in California," Pop said, "you might want to move to Oregon to avoid the question. If, God help you, you're in New York City, you might run to Connecticut, to the woods to seek Me, the true life. But God knows, you're only running from the question. Why am I here? Cowboy hats don't help. Fast cars won't find you the answer, and young women
want your undivided attention; however, you're in the throes of it now, why am I here? And, you can't spare the attention because part of the illusion is your belief that all of those things are taking you further from your search, when in fact they are all part of it, part of Me."

Jimmy stretched out an arm pushing Pop's ticket back at him. He didn't want to go. "I don't want it, baby. Take it. I've reconsidered my position."

"I haven't gotten to the best part—the end. If your lucky, you live a long life expiring the same way you entered; no hair, no teeth, and a question on your lips."

"Why am I here?"

"No. You mistakenly believe you've answered that question. Your new question is, 'Where am I going?' Of course, if you'd seen through the illusion and answered the first question correctly, you'd never ask the next one."

Jimmy heard a train whistle and steam brakes squealing to a stop just outside the office door. The racket deafened him. He looked at Pop. "Who are you?"

"Don't you know?" Pop yelled above the screeching.

"No."

"Those are yours," Pop pointed to the valise and hat, and Jimmy picked them up standing staring at the train, "and that's your train. You don't want to miss it. Whatever you do, don't loose that valise."

Jimmy looked down tightening his grasp on the leather handle. He walked out of the office stepping up to the platform, onto the train, and the whistle blew long and hard.
WHY WE ARE HERE—11

Ann climbed back into bed deliciously hot and sweaty, extending legs, arching her feet, pointing her toes. Max ran his fingertip between her breasts trailing it to the navel. He followed his finger blowing a stream of air over her neck, shoulders, and working his way slowly down along her stomach. During their time together he ravaged her completely, but this last, this blowing to cool down her hot flesh grew as an act of affection. Max wanted to give Ann the world. Outside, raindrops beat against loft windows, while inside the two of them cozied up in front of the television, she stroking his legs using her bare feet as they listened to a special news report pre-empting *The Late Show*. A reporter wearing a loose trench coat stood microphone in hand. The peeling crackling skeleton of a building roasted a short distance behind him. Max made a grab for Ann's foot tickling it and her laughter filled the room.

"As you can see," the reporter coughed breathing in smoke, "two blocks behind our cameras is the—" Ann laughed wildly, "Sumatsu Bank Building where—" Max dropped her foot. He thought he hadn't heard it. Max crawled over the bed searching for a remote control. He hit the volume button twice. They both listened. "The shame of it is that the Sumatsu, part of the Rebuild Downtown L. A. Project, is a new development."

"No!" He clutched Ann's arm.

"To give our viewers an idea of how hot these fires become, we've learned that the vault, which was built to withstand temperatures—"

"Shit! No! Shit!" Max shook Ann.

"Max, you're hurting me!"
The reporter picked up an electric feed line swinging it out of the way, stepping aside to
give the camera a clear shot of a blazing skyscraper lighting up the night. Smoke billowed in
thick black buckets. Max couldn't tell where charred concrete and steel girders ended and sky
began.

In the corner of the screen live video from sky news-choppers showed groups of fire
fighters in heavy asbestos jackets and metal helmets stooped over forming fast columns,
unwinding thick white hoses, running with them, crisscrossing and climbing over each other like
angry ants, yanking on the lines, bringing them closer to the fire. Others erected metal ladders
leading directly into flames, and screaming engine companies arrived from every direction on a
hasty path down the cordoned off boulevard.

A crowd of teenagers gathered in front of the camera waving and shouting. The reporter
spoke over the crowd. "They're moving ladders, escape tubes, and safety nets into position for
evacuation of the fourteenth floor where Peterson's Fine Arts was having an opening tonight. I
understand that while it's late, there are still a number of persons trapped on that floor. We're
trying now to move our camera van in for a closer—"

Max would've hit the ceiling when he leapt yelling out of bed, except one of his legs
ended up wrapped in a sheet. He struggled to his feet bleary eyed and depressed after this initial
bout of clutching fury. Ann, rubbing her sore arm watched him quietly as he picked up a shoe.
She wasn't surprised when Max hurled it into the television.

The loft went dark and silent. It would've been crazy to try and reason with him. Ann
curled up on her side stuffing a pillow between her head and shoulder and she fell asleep. Max
stood in the darkness facing a shattered mass of circuit boards, fighting his way out of a familiar
stupor sucking him in deeper by the minute.

***
A ray of morning warmed her face and like a lily she heliotroped towards the sun. For a few seconds, Ann wondered if it had all been a dream, and then she heard sounds from the studio below. She remembered. The image of Max staring into space lingered by her bedside.

Scrounging amongst his easels and equipment, Max searched for a particular flat head bristle brush. He worked all night making up for canvases burnt, fighting the urge to donate his brain to the vacuum. He painted, blocking it out of his mind, the all-consuming static that his life and times represented failure with a capital F. Locating the brush, he calmly held it up to the light, inspecting bristles, tapping at them with a finger. One rebellious hair hung off the side. Max snipped it with a nail clipper from his pocket. He hummed while dipping the brush in linseed oil. The trick was imagining himself as a clear vessel holding no particular thoughts. Nothingness.

Ann, wearing only Max's shirt, wandered sleepily out on the landing above and observed him. She hung over the railing young and unaffected by last night's tragedy. In her way, she understood the implications, yet she hadn't stumbled through as many years as Max. Ann grew conscious now of how much more time she had available to invest in fulfillment. She studied the top of his head where a small bald spot shined, and listened to him as the hum broke into a whistle. He picked up an open beer from his cart standing back from the canvas. Why, she wondered, does he paint for five seconds and then study the work for ten minutes?

He pitched the beer can, foam flying in the air, sending it sailing across space. Ann stood glued to the landing. Max struggled like a spider stuck in a hornet's nest. After an intense internal battle he kicked his legs free, losing no time storming the studio knocking down easels, launching wet canvases over his head, tossing paints and brushes onto the ground, grinding them into the cement with his stocking feet, raging, assaulting everything outside the confines of his body. Max felt compelled to break through the flesh, to maim and cripple and lay waste to his world. He gathered sketchbooks with methodical insanity tossing them through windows from left to right, laughing at the sound of breaking glass. "Out!" he ranted at pages of drawings, ripping them from their bindings. Ann flew down the metal stairs frantically throwing herself between him and whatever was left.
"No!" he hollered.
She waved her arms blocking his path, "Max, please!"

"No!" He broadsided her, shoving her away, hoping he wouldn't hurt her, however, unable to control himself. She leapt on his back wrapping her arms around his neck, hanging on for dear life.

"Jesus, Max! Stop it!" She pummeled his shoulders repeatedly beating tiny fists, yelling in his ear, "Jesus Christ!" Max kept steam rolling, swinging, looking for solid pieces of environment to obliterate.

"There's no God! I hate you, God!" He found a gallon bucket of red latex house paint and in a single motion scooped it up heaving it using hurricane force through the chapel doorway. Red pigment flew in liquid curtains splashing off the floors and walls along its passage. The bucket rested on the empty stage near the podium, where wooden Jesus dying on the cross now bled in living color. Max, spent, dropped to his knees crying. Without thinking he wiped his red soaked hands across his shirt. Ann sat on the floor in the doorway with him, stroking his hair, pressing herself against him. She stroked his forehead, massaged his chest, and Max cried until bereft of tears. Like a mother, she held him.

***

He awoke in a darkened studio, alone. The instant Max's eyes opened, his breathing labored under a weight of loathing bitterness. He stood shaking his legs, taking stock of the strength left to him, wondering if this was it; asking himself, Have I lost the battle? I've lost the battle.

He needed oxygen, and while climbing the stairs to the roof he noticed the canvases he'd thrashed re-hung along the ascending wall; as if someone, an elf, understood what he would do, where he would go when he awoke. He paused in front of the last piece, thankful she'd saved it. "This one's a peach," he mumbled.
In the loft, broken plastic chunks of computerized, digitalized television crunched under his feet and he sat in a chair in front of a small table with Jimmy's typewriter on it. He pecked at keys ignoring a message coming in over his answer machine. Max heard Ann but was not in the mood to talk, not in the mood to extend himself exerting necessary energy to form words. The heaviness in the air and his sense of doom immobilized him. "Max? Max? Max, if you're there pick up. Max, it's important." He pecked the keys, breathing through dried sinuses, eyes towards heaven.

***

_The Greenhouse Restaurant_ housed no booths, only row upon row of exposed tables, each covered using white linen and set with the flower of the day in a small crystal vase. Not a place to dine in privacy, it was a Sunset Strip eatery where the beautifully fortunate and privileged went to be seen, the way Pete Peterson liked it. Ann and he sat at a rear table talking over two garden salads and sharing the trademark yesteryear _Greenhouse_ courtesy table telephone between them.

"Oh, he won't answer," Ann said leaning in. "He's very depressed. When he saw it on television…" A waiter took the phone away and Ann smiled up at him. "When he saw it burning across the screen…"

"He should've called, Annie. I would've told him."

"You know the way they report things. It looked as though the whole building had gone inferno."

Peterson cut into a section of crisp lettuce angling the side of his fork. "As I said, only the bank. It was all so exciting. Ladders and sirens, television!" He examined what he'd speared on the fork and slipped it into his mouth taking a moment to chew. "What publicity. It was simply marvelous." His cheeks swelled like a chipmunk. "Now, listen, Annie, Dear—"

"Max will be so happy to hear." Her salad rested untouched.
Holding a butter knife, Peterson clinked the side of his wine glass. "Attencion, Annie," and he reached into an inside coat pocket bringing out two envelopes. Peterson edged them across the tablecloth. "This one's yours and the other is Maxwell's."

"Maxwell?" she chuckled.

"Can you believe it? The savage sold three major pieces last night. I've decided to honor him with a touch of civility. This is only the first installment."

"Oh, Petey, I have to go. I have to tell Max!"

"There's enough in there to purchase the savage a tux that fits." Peterson held up his empty wine glass for the waiter to see, clinking on it, drawing sufficient attention to himself.

***

On the roof, Max stood perilously close to the edge, relieved, imbibing cool night air through his pores. He flipped the big switch turning on a huge neon cross just for tonight, the one that flashed on and off "KEEP THE FAITH" in purple light. Tonight settled in different from all other nights of the year. He looked below, between buildings where cooing pigeons echoed onto an empty boulevard and neon buzzed. One yellow taxi roamed lost in the grid on Christmas Eve.

A gunshot rang out from the east. Max half-paid attention when he heard it crack through the night. He wondered what to do with his life and just as quickly he spun around. His eyes scanned the roof's shadows between purple flashes. A young Black man in his twenties wearing a Panama hat and carrying a heavy leather valise smoked a cigarette a distance away on the other side across from the bell tower. Max stood his ground gripped by a feeling of free-floating anxiety; the youth lingered awfully close to the ledge. At the same time the young man sensed Max's presence and turned. A strong wind blew between them and Max yelled out, "Who are you?"

The young man appeared agitated and angry beyond his years, as if he'd already lived a lifetime of dissatisfaction. "I might ask you the same question."
Max moved in a few feet where he felt more comfortable. "I live here. My name is Max Greenbaum."

"Live here? You live in a church? If you'll pardon my reflection," and he gestured towards Max's ledge, "you look like you're fixin' to die here."

"That's your brilliant reflection on my situation? What would you know about it? Who asked you anyway?"

The young man now straddled the ledge, his head cocked down towards the street. He quickly smiled back at Max. "Sorry, you can't jump from here."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because I got here first, Mr. Greenbaum, and I'm jumpin'. See that spot down there?"
The young man grinned.

"Yeah, I see it." Max soured.

"That's my spot and I'm jumpin' tonight."

Max casually advanced a few more feet. "If you'll pardon my reflection, why would you pack a bag like that? It's easier to travel light." He prayed the young man would ease off the ledge and walk away from it. He wanted to tell him that beyond all else life is a gift to be used, not discarded into the senseless vacuum; that to jump would not change the fact of his universality and wouldn't change the world. However, man rarely seizes that truth until he's hit bottom.

"The valise?" He knew perfectly well what was in it. The man swung one leg over to the safe side rising from his seat on the ledge. He dragged the other leg over, and planted on the side of life once again he moved in a few feet. "I guess I was on my way home to see Mother and my sisters. I'm a writer, man. But I ran outa bread and my novel's not finished. I was gonna make it big in the city. Now I guess it'll never be finished." He patted the valise with one hand, certain it contained gold. "All my love is in this book, the reason for my journey."

"So?" Max asked.

"So, how could I go back home a failure? Shovel shit on a farm the rest of my life? I can't do that, Mr. Greenbaum. Though I don't guess you'd understand."
"Got a girl?" Max smiled at him.

"What's that gotta do with anything? No." The young man walked towards Max. They stood close enough to shake hands. Max examined him sadly, curling his lip, considering his situation.

"Why, you haven't even fallen in love yet." Then he grew angry. "Who the hell do you think you are to cheat love?"

"Love? Man, that ship sailed in the night." The youth took off his Panama hat wiping down the inner band with a handkerchief. He left it off feeling the cold breeze graze his forehead.

"So, you've got the soul of an artist. It's a waste. Unless your book's any good. It's probably not. No man's conceived an original thought since Aristotle. You're right. Go ahead." Max whipped his backside around returning to his spot by the ledge. "Go ahead!" he yelled out.

"Stupidity before truth. Jump, sucker." He waited, hoping, rooting on the side of youth.

The young man didn't move. "Still haven't told me why you're jumpin'?

"I'm an artist. All of my paintings burned up in a fire."

"So?"

"So, at my age I feel as though time has let me down. Or maybe I let me down. It's a cinch I won't make it as an artist at this late stage of the game. I guess I feel robbed, son."

The youth took a moment chewing on this and then beamed from ear to ear. "Well, Mr. Greenbaum, if painting is the only reason you think you're alive, then I guess you've lost more than I have. Why don't you go ahead."

Max ambled over to the young man's side. "I don't know. I've got this church. Well, it's sort of mine, but not exactly. I think it's time for me to be shoving off and I'm going to need someone to watch over it."

"Does this someone have to live on the premises?"

"Why?" Max asked.

"Landlord threw me out."

"I thought you were going to jump? A writer, huh?"
"Yes, sir."

"I've got this old typewriter," Max said, "that was used by a famous author. You could finish your book on it. Naw, you'd want a computer." Max circled the young man, thoughtfully sizing him up. "Tell you what, you watch over the church and finish your book. When it's done, you let me read it. If it stinks… Well, if it stinks, I'll push you off the roof myself."

"Then you're not jumpin' tonight?"

"Let's just say I'm going to hold open the door for you. Just until you're on your feet. You know, until you can establish your net worth." Max extended his hand and the two shook on the bargain.

"James. My name is James."

"Thank you," Max breathed deeply.

"For what?" James put down his valise.

"I wasn't talking to you," Max said.

***

"They didn't burn! Max!" Ann burst onto the roof.

The two men, getting to know one another the way men do, spoke guardedly, not saying anything of lasting importance. With death no longer weighing in the balance, the conversation degenerated from the meaning of life and love to whether or not Germans brewed the best beer.

"What?" Max said. "Calm down."

He wanted to introduce her to James, but Ann swallowed air building up enough steam to talk a blue streak. "I've been with Peterson." She handed Max his envelope of money struggling to catch her breath. Ann's eyes met James. "Hello," she said, and they both watched Max.

He opened the envelope sniffing at it like a Russian bear. Soon, he wiped the back of his neck with his hand, and coming out of the gesture, he laughed while Ann and James looked at each other. The Christmas tree on top of Winn's Department Store lit up one strand of lights at a time.
"That's what it's all about," James said pointing to the envelope. "The bread. The do-rey-me."

Max wiggled his fingers picking at a hangnail, concentrating on it. "No, money isn't what it's all about."

James crinkled the brim of his Panama in his hands. "Toss it over then. Go ahead."

Max snatched James’ hat from his hands and threw it spinning over the side into darkness.

"Hey!" James mourned his hat floating out of sight. "I meant the money, Max!"

Bohemian Ann shook her head.

"Oh, that," Max said. He carefully folded the envelope three ways stuffing it deep into his pocket. END
MERCY IN LOVE; VOLUME TWO:

A CHANGE OF SEASONS
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CHAPTER 1--WATCHING FLORA

Mother named me Thalia and I'm a writer. Though as material and earthly as any, I remember when I was not; not a writer, not Thalia, not even a twinkle in my mother's wise eye; yet unborn and unnamed. Why I'm blessed with these long ago and far away memories, when once in the body most women must speculate according to faith, I don't know. I do recognize, now being embodied, and witnessing the garden's moonlit nights, that it helps to write my memories, to compose the query of my spiritual and human sojourn on paper. Also, I'm aware with the passing of each year my questions far outnumber available answers, that my paper stacks breed like a wall of mad weeds crying for sun. At twenty-four I've already stripped clean a forest of trees, my sin to live with, and it is this paper quest to understand that creates a life worth living.

The mortal expedition keeps me awake nights while my husband sleeps breathing heavily, rhythmically, and I sit chewing on a strand of hair, writing, filling the pages of my umpteenth notebook. I curl my toes under a soft quilt remembering that She—the self-created One who gave birth to the universe as a womb for the ten-thousand things—called me to witness when the time for my personal birth lay at hand. "Nothing happens outside My body," She said. "You will soon be born into the garden as My eyes and that aspect of My personality wishing to create and change according to judgment. Watch and listen, and let's decide together if this family feels like a good fit for you." She, the Divine Mother and One without a second, beckoned me. "The seasons are changing, and your time is close at hand."

I recall watching Flora, not below exactly, and myself not above precisely. I abided nowhere, but simply aware, as beautiful gray Flora, never cognizant of me, exercised her fading eyes.

She told me to watch, listen, and learn, and never feel pity or sorrow for anyone, because She in Her straw sun hat, grasping farm implements in Her firm yet gentle hand, was going out to plow the north forty, preparing the ground to grow a soul. And I must write this, that She
mentioned a compost pile, a dung heap out of which Her best work arose greeting the days in search of light.

Flora, whose continuum overflowed with her journey, emanated light more strongly than others. It glowed from her bony old shoulders and knobby knees, a tiny calcified frame, delicate, a bit dry enduring eighty years, red at joints still longing for a fast game of hopscotch. Flora held strong opinions concerning the compost heap, expressed long ago towards a wounded family previous to her embarkation for Tibet.

"Women struggle, but to suffer, well that's another story, a bent of mind I find inappropriate to the purpose of living. To embrace life, rip into the challenge, to struggle joyfully and in wonder, this builds depth. But suffering, pounding the earth in misery? For what end? That all of God's children are born to be ill, merely bearing life. My dears, that's a Judeo-Christian crock of shit!"

Compassionate beyond measure, Flora, who traveled one last time from her husband's and child's home in New York, to the Idaho farm where she was raised, felt twinges of pain in her solar plexus when she noticed her mother's hands shaking, pink eyes watering, and that evening she thought, *Mama, please*. Thirty-five year old Flora grasped her mother's hands squeezing them, "It's about my life. Don't you see? It's not enough to know how I got here, how any of us got here. If it happened by the grace of God or some biological accident, does it matter?"

The old lady's eyes raged. Her nose scrunched up, and she offered the appearance of a dried potato.

"I've been reading a book by Madam Blavatsky, not that I believe any of it. It's just that the issue is so much more—"

Flora's mother yanked at her hands. Flora held them prisoner. "Your purpose," her mother pronounced, "is to be a good woman!"

Deep in Flora's chest a fist gripped her heart. "What does that mean, a good woman?"

"You take care of your husband. You raise your child, hopefully, to be better than you are!"
"I'm sorry, Mama, Papa, it's not enough. I want to know why I'm here. Why the universe exists at all. I can't remember a time when my soul didn't plead with my intellect to find out. If I could only make you understand. The life I'm living here, now, it's not enough."

"No man," Flora raised her voice to her father sitting in the next room, "is breaking down my door with the answers. And why should they? Men are such pathetic creatures. Show them an inch of flesh and it's like tossing a bone to a mutt. Sexual relationships are mindless, and men are inane."

Flora's father glanced away uncomfortably lighting his after dinner pipe while his daughter continued her diatribe.

"They're fun at first, until your belly swells and you experience the joy of childbearing. I was so filled with the joy, I vomited every morning."

The old man coughed loudly, picking up his evening paper.

"Not that I put blame on any instinctual creature so weak as a man," Flora said. "All I'm saying is that I have to be the one taking the initiative. The responsibility for my life belongs to me, and I am leaving to find out."

Flora, determined, rose from her chair, stepping into the next room, stretching forward one hand crushing the newspaper into the old man's lap. Smoke curling from his pipe wafted around her face. The sweet fruity odor of tobacco clung to his flesh and this smoke forever comforted her. When the old man made his presence known, Flora heard the draw of his pipe and felt secure. After nine years of marriage, at the age of thirty-three, Flora became pregnant to give her father a grandchild.

Staring at her blankly, he worried about a disease attacking his chickens while she kissed him affectionately on the cheek.

Her parents, Russian immigrants turned Idaho farmers, listened sadly to the ranting of their only daughter who harbored desperately unhappy feelings concerning her arranged marriage, yet their faces remained sullen and silent. Flora, they knew, had never been chased by Cossacks, nor beaten the dry cracked clay soil pummeling her fists until they left blood in the dirt only to watch a handful of horrible little leeks break ground, freeze, and ruin.
Their little girl lived a charmed life blessed by her parents, leek farmers who escaped Lenin's revolution and worked, prospering at a time when farming grew the U.S.A., while the Grange stood as the backbone of a nation. They'd delivered Flora's blessing by strength of wits and aching muscles, but now they listened in weighted silence.

Flora Stravinsky, born on American soil, was not Russian. They accepted the fault and finally dared not speak to one possessed by evil. Besides, they were beset by other troubles, farming issues. The north forty had not produced the kind of crop hoped for.

***

The night is quiet as I journal, and next I remember watching Flora fifty years later. I watched Flora's light in the emergency room at Our Lady of All Saints Hospital in Los Angeles. I witnessed it illuminate the ER, spread past automatic glass doors through the frantic lobby where a gentleman pleaded with an L.A. cop, while a bloody young man flew, wheeled screaming through large doors, and Flora's light struck the walkway, the ramp, the parking lot outside: radiant, insinuating itself deep into city foundations, the mummified forgotten roots and dank timber of a once small river town, causing long buried cellars of the twenties and thirties to shine, the little wooden houses of Boyle Heights leaning against one another to illuminate their cracked sidewalks, spreading like golden fingers across the city past dead rusty railroad yards, burning monolithic buildings, purifying gang graffiti, glaring up at the World Trade Center, engulfing the Bona Venture Hotel, electrifying the Pacific Stock Exchange, booting up computers, computers, computers, igniting freeway loops of steel girders, and humankind rushing they know not where with great determination; Flora's light leapt in flames spreading outwards on the wind, up onto cosmopolitan roof tops, to gardens, the helicopter landing pads, and finally like a warm supremely favored burst enveloping the universe, where we watched and She laughed.

"Imagine it," She said, "that they assumed this beautiful daughter was possessed by evil!" She laughed so hard I thought She'd become hysterical, barely managing to say that every so
often one special child of the compost heap rises above the putrescent dung, a child blazing with incandescence lighting the breadth and width of the great north forty.

In the ER lobby, an anxious driver of a produce truck implored a police officer to understand. The pasty white officer, pathetically bored, listened writing his report while the driver stinking of day old romaine lettuce from Salinas spoke sweating over his upper lip, wiping the back of his brown neck swirling a stiff handkerchief. "Please, the old lady, she came outta nowhere. She turned left against the red light onto a one-way street goin' the wrong way! I feel terrible, but there I was, and there she was, and where was I gonna go?"

"Okay," the officer said, "so, you hit her."
"She hit me!"
"Right. The two of you hit, she spun, and then?"
The produce driver lifted his arms shrugging his shoulder. "Then she rammed into a parked car. Thank God, that stopped her."
"When she hit the parked vehicle, was she still proceeding in the wrong direction?"
"What the hell kinda cop are you? The lady smashed into my truck and hit another car!"
"Right. I'll need to see some proof of insurance." The officer flipped a page in his notebook, yawned, and continued writing his report notes.

"Insurance?" Carlos clasped his hands loosely behind his back turning towards a large window. "Say, look at that. The sun's gonna peek out from behind that cloud after all.
When I was delivering my load of artichokes and lettuce to the central market, this morning, you know, I drove all the way in from Salinas and I looked at the sky, the clouds, and I thought to myself, Carlos, man, it's gonna rain today, no sun. But there it is. Bright as bright can be. Watch out, man!"

Paramedics rushed by bumping the police officer. The patient, a young boy whizzing through on a blood soaked gurney, sustained multiple gunshot wounds.
"L.A.'s a tough town," Carlos said to the officer.
They heard the young boy screaming from the other side of two glass doors.
"You gotta tough job. Me, I'm just a grower. It's safe, unless—well—unless something happens. Like for instance, let's say I was to lose my truck. Man, may the saints protect me." He lifted a necklace dangling a medal, offering it a quick kiss.

The officer smirked shoving his visor cap back off his pasty white forehead. "You don't have insurance, do you, Carlos?"

"Don't say that. I might. There's so many different kinds of insurance. It gets confusing. I have fire insurance on the casa. And then there's major medical. That's where they really suck the frijoles outta you—sweet Mary, mother of Jesus." He crossed himself. "I wonder if the old lady's okay? One of us should go and check on her."

"Let's narrow the field," the officer said. "Let's talk about automobile insurance. Do you have automobile insurance, Carlos?"

"Automobile insurance? No."

"Are you aware that it's against the law to drive without insurance or a bond?"

Carlos moved one leg in circles on the floor, staring down at his shoe. "Honestly, I'd have to say I wasn't aware of that law, that particular law. But there's so many laws, you know, it gets confusing. And then the coverage. By the way, you would know, what type of coverage should I have?"

"The type that started before you ran the old lady off the side of the road into a parked car." An orange and blue ambulance pulled to a screeching halt outside where its siren died. The pasty white cop reached for his handcuffs.

Insulated from these goings on, behind glass doors at the end of a long white hallway in the ER, Flora sat on the edge of an icy exam table. She wanted to move her head looking up, but bright lights hurt her soft eyes, so she stared down at red knees and white spindly legs swinging freely back and forth. Flora, occasionally checking her bruises, waited alone behind the curtain. She felt the fleshy backs of her arms spring out in tiny goose bumps from the sterile cold hospital air.

_It's coming_, she thought. When almost naked, as she sat now, Flora tried sucking in her protruding tummy. She exhaled sharply, but nothing happened. _Too little too late_, she thought.
Flora Stravinsky—born out of the Corn Belt in 1930, who believed since earliest childhood, life is more than chasing chickens on her father's farm—concentrated on breathing, allowing thoughts to float, fragments, bits of ideas she didn't bother building upon or completing, allowing the process to simply play itself out, witnessing but not attaching. Eventually, her mind cleared. A subtle energy, that which permitted lending an original motivation to the process, materialized as the ground for all activity, a placid lake, still. Each thought tossed itself like a stone into the water causing ripples, though Flora easily sat as the ripples subsided. For a time, the placid lake. For a time, ripples. At this moment, and in this place, the placid lake became impossible to sustain.

The thought entered, *Soon I'm going to die*. She grew aware of a vague sadness, people she would miss, and the garden that nourished her life. Again she felt pressure in her chest. It traveled below her solar plexus down her thighs. She found her toes bending with hollow anxiety.

"But how," I asked Her, "Does a woman alone, a farmer's daughter, like Flora, come by such a composed philosophical disposition when facing her mortality?"

I remember, She asked me to watch and listen to my earthly lineage, soon at hand, being sculpted like a Rodin with its scars and crags, while Flora discovered her spiritual path.

Next, I recall seeing Flora in the mountains of Tibet where she lived dispassionately without attachment to judgments of good and evil, ugliness and beauty, one thing over another, and one person above another. Listening to the cacophony of existence using equanimity, greeting the ten-thousand things with equal wonder as having all arisen of the one source came easily while sleeping in a cave, and Flora believed only through meeting life using creative dispassion could she witness the core process. However, in the city, and for years since her return, she understood the necessity of judgment, of critical reflection upon numerous dualities. As the century progressed she accepted worldly attachments, the attending struggle with relationships and materialism as a part of her process, the hierarchical variety of the garden, a blessing of existence that must someday be left behind.
After all, she thought, a flower is a flower, but also it is the field—the field manifest as a flower.

Once long ago, a misshapen monk stopped her when they chanced to meet on a treacherous high path. The thin air whispered around them cold and clear while the monk studied Flora through bright black eyes. He stood resolute, a walking staff in one hand, a flower in the other, and lifting the flower he demanded, "What I hold? If you say 'flower', you blind. If you not say 'flower', you blind. Speak!"

"I find your manner insulting. I don't have to answer your silly question. Let me pass."

"Why?" asked the monk.

"Because, you wretched little man, I've traveled half way around the world looking for a teacher, and I won't find him standing here arguing with you!"

The monk, breaking a crooked toothless grin, stepped aside on the narrow path. Flora felt his eyes. She turned. The monk stood where she'd left him shouting, "You stupid woman, I am teacher."

Her teacher, the wretched little man, warned her the evening of her departure for the States, "Practice what you learn. Careful. In city, philosophic fool not survive. Never. A mountain is not just a mountain, but also, it is just a mountain."

Isn't it all so exciting? Sitting on the table, she no longer felt cold. She envisioned herself dancing on the edge of a precipice, leaning over on girlish toes. Soon, my dears, I'm going to find out!

Fifty years later, in the ER, a pair of strong square hands pulled aside the curtains. The same hands patched Flora's bruises a half hour ago. They were, Flora saw then, clean hands moving heavy fingers wearing well-trimmed nails. The doctor rounded his broad shoulders hunched over a small sink when Flora asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm washing my hands."

"Why don't you not?" Flora said.

"But the risk of infection?"

"Risk it. Take a chance, young man. Live a little."
"I'd rather not," the doctor said.
"My, what a fun date you must be."
"I'm married."

Flora had a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I don't see how that happened. Would you
care to explain it to me? I'm Flora Stravinsky, and would you mind smiling?"

"What have we here, Flora?" the doctor asked exploring her wounds. "I'll need to know
how old you are."

"Of course, I haven't got twenty years of schooling and a medical degree, but I think
when they turn purple and blue and yellow like that, they're either bruises or I've been blessed by
a rainbow, and not that it's any of your business, I'm eighty-five, can still kick butt, but I'd rather
give yours a little squeeze. Is it smooth?"

The doctor discovered himself immediately defenseless surrendering to the game. "Like a
baby's bottom, Flora. Like a warm whoopee cushion. Like a hot water bottle filled with milk.
May I do my job now? Please?"

"I just love it! You and I are going to be wonderful friends."

"No, Flora, we're not. I'm the doctor—you're the patient. I'm a professional." He circled
behind her muttering, "At least I was when I walked in here."

"But we must be friends."

Gently at first, the doctor placed his hands just inside the open back of Flora's hospital
gown. "Breathe for me and tell me if this hurts your ribs or under your arms. Why must we be
friends? I find the thought of us, you and me being friends, most disturbing." He pressed both
sides of her rib cage under his fingers.

"What kind of a girl do you take me for? I have my standards, my rules, and you've seen
me almost naked. Any time a man with unwashed hands sees me naked we always part best of
friends. I have many, many friends. After all, they're my standards."

"Ouch!" Flora giggled. "When you squeeze me that hard, yes, it hurts, but not in a bad
way."
Thirty minutes later the doctor, whose dark eyebrows met in the middle of his forehead, pushed a rolling stool underneath himself. He dropped his arms in his lap for a moment of thoughtful silence and then looked up at her. "I've just consulted by phone with your regular physician, Flora."

"That's Doctor Max. He's a nice gentleman. A good friend."

"How long have you known? Were you aware of your condition before renewing your driving license?"

Flora shifted on the table, pulling on her clothes. "My condition?" She looked at the doctor innocently, twisting her arm through a blouse sleeve.

"Yes, Flora," the doctor spoke softly. "Your dementia."

"Get out of town! Dementia?"

"Doctor Max explained it to you. Hardening of the arteries. Decreased blood flow above the shoulders. And I'm sure he mentioned to you, no operating a motor vehicle."

Flora hopped off the table like a sixteen-year-old grabbing her purse and adjusting her floppy hat, the one she wore when driving. "I must have forgotten. My head doesn't hold much these days. I've got dementia, you know?"

The doctor stood. He leaned against the doorjamb examining Flora's face, staring down at her. He witnessed light, a soft aura. However, working a succession of fourteen-hour shifts with three-hour sleep breaks, he discounted it as illusion, silently prescribing for himself a long vacation. More than the boy with multiple gunshot wounds, more than hundreds of stitches, broken bones, and incisions over the past three days, Flora touched him and now was leaving. He stepped out of her path when at the door she glanced back. "You're staring at me, and I'm no longer young and pretty."

"Please don't drive. As a favor to a friend."

"You're sweet," and she scurried into the hallway.

In the lobby, Flora recognized the truck driver being handcuffed by the pasty white police officer. She wedged between them. "Put those things away, officer. You're not arresting anyone."
"Lady, this guy ran you off the road into a parked car, and he's driving without insurance. I intend to arrest him, confiscate the vehicle—"

"Did I report an accident?" Flora asked.

"No, ma'am. I took the paramedic call. But you'll have to fill out a report."

"No, I most certainly will not have to fill out anything, but you will. About ninety minutes worth of paperwork. And then there's the court time."

Flora turned to Carlos the truck driver, "You're not going to let the system take away your license, and confiscate your truck, and fine you an exorbitant amount of money, and throw your ass in jail because you're a brown-skinned man living in an institutionally white, racist, police state? Well, are you?"

The officer rubbed his eyes. Carlos joined Flora by her side. He puffed out his chest like a bull. "I'll fight this thing to the death!"

"This is all jim-dandy," the officer said, "but what about the other guy who got hit? The parked car? Where's his justice? Somebody's—"

"The truck driver will gladly pay the damages," Flora said. Carlos inched away.

"He will?" asked the pasty white officer.

"All the damages," Flora said. "Mine and the other car, the parked one."

"I will?" Carlos stammered, certain he'd been swindled.

Flora glared at him, reminding him, "Incarceration, you'll lose your business; and have a large debt, and no way to pay it."

Carlos shrugged. "I will," he said. "But I want to know, why if I'm fighting for my rights in a white society, and you, lady, broke every law in the driver's manual, I'm paying the bill?"

"What's your name? I'm Flora."

"Carlos."

Flora winked at Carlos and smiled. "It's a damn miracle," she said, wrapping both her arms around one of his. They strolled out of Our Lady of All Saints Hospital together. "I'm glad you're here, Carlos. I need a lift to the impound garage, and then there will be a charge, I'm sure, to get my car out. It's good to have friends."
"I suppose, for some people."

***

It feels like just yesterday, as I recall Flora returning home from the impound garage. I remember an odd sense of Flora's house being alive. "The ten-thousand things," She taught me while we observed my grandmother-to-be, "are all aspects of Me."

Flora hung her hat on an agreeable wooden rack by the door and stood for a moment. Her eyes roamed well-traveled oak floors which shone deep soft reflections of her furnishings, much too much crammed into a small dusty space: tea tables from Turkey, carved idols from the African continent, cushions, beads and trimmings from the Far East, all holding tales to tell, and the cottage style house kept itself warm using old fashioned floor heating that constantly ran summer or winter and banged and creaked like an old woman's knees. *I should really clean you, and I suppose now I'll have to. After all, one can't have guests into a house like this.*

Along one wall the sofa stretched itself lazily covered in dirty sheets with old throw blankets, woolens she'd befriended during her stay in Ireland, where for three winters she'd lived in a tiny cold water flat at the end of a narrow road hidden by a rock divide.

Her worn green velvet easy chair rested patiently in front of a fifties television cabinet which refused to utter sound or show even a test pattern. The set long failed to operate. Its electrical entrails vanished through the years. Dust over the top of the mahogany cabinet lay thick and soft as down. Flora never watched television; however, she entertained the notion that if she didn't own one a visitor might think she'd lost her mind and turn her over to the authorities. She kept the empty cadaver just in case.

In the tiny dining area a small blonde pine table with a worn cane chair waited for her every evening at sunset. The table held a brown Bakelite radio with a frayed cord that always played Mendelssohn. No matter where the dial was tuned this particular radio enjoyed only Mendelssohn. This settled in fine with Flora, who sitting watching the sunset and drinking boozy mint tea found the romantic sweeping crescendos of Mendelssohn's Hebrides spiritually
transporting. When she first took possession of the house, before enough time passed for it to welcome her home, for its walls to speak to her in her own language, another radio lived there. It played the news. No matter how she struggled with the dial, it liked only the news, weather, and sports. Flora accepted every day as a good day, rain or shine, the weather being irrelevant. Sports, according to radio, were games played to massacre one's opponents until they hung their heads in shame dragging themselves off to the locker room, a suicidal admission of physical and emotional defeat; not a pleasant thing to hear. Eventually the radio began acting violent, killing people in Southeast Asia, blowing up nuclear reactors, poisoning children's milk. One evening the radio opened gunfire on highway 101. Seven died and fourteen lay injured, and Flora ran at top speed dragging the radio over to a friend's house.

"I must take steps to protect my peace of mind!" They dropped it in his trash compactor smashing it to smithereens. "Technology has no right to do that," Flora said to her friend, "to invade me in that way, to rape me. There's a part of me longing for harmony. What radio has the right to steal that from me? To hell with the thing!" Her friend climbed down from the attic holding another radio for Flora; the radio that loved Mendelssohn.

When she arrived home at sunset the radio wanted to play for Flora, so she turned it on, and while it played the Hebrides, a mist of relaxation enveloped her. She considered starting a compost heap because in the spring she wanted to plant roses. She decided to stay. On a piece of plank board a friend painted the words "Rose Cottage" and hung the sign over Flora's porch next to another sign reading "Abide By Love." Both of these signs rested under the shade of yet another sign reading "Protected by Angels."

Now, in the kitchen heating a pot of water on the stove, Flora turned up the flame and for a moment stared at it. Her slight fingers held steady while removing a tea bag from its porcelain container in the cupboard. She dreaded this room, and while waiting for the water to boil she realized she'd have to scrub the brown rusty sink until it gleamed, and wash the floor, and scrape the grease off the walls, all of this before her guest arrived. Flora couldn't think why she hadn't found time to clean since the summer of seventy-nine, except that the endless impossible task of keeping one's environment dust free must be the heaviest link in the chain of enslavement to a
mundane existence. Housekeeping, considering the odds against any permanent success, impressed her as nothing short of lunacy. *The goal, she thought, is to transcend dirt.*

She poured steaming water into a large French coffee bowl dipping a tea bag and adding a spot of sherry with a few drops of vanilla extract and coconut cream. She cupped the hot bowl in both hands agitating the mixture while holding it under her nose, and slowly bringing the bowl's edge to her lips, she sipped the heavenly concoction. At teatime Flora paid close attention. The bowl was lifted and brought to rest on a precise spot each time. She used her arms and hands in flowing yet strictly practiced fashion, though the tea never tasted the same twice; habits learned long ago and far away.

When she reflected back it seemed like another lifetime that her teacher, the wretched little man who owned only his bamboo flute and squatter's rights to his cave, shouted incessantly while she prepared the strong green tea they drank together. "What you doing? You sleep? You sleepy-headed woman, sleep your life away. Who you? Speak!"

"I don't know. I don't know! Do you want tea or not?"

"No, no. You make tea wrong. Phew! Terrible stuff."

"But—"

"Dog stuff!"

"It's the same way you asked me to make it before."

"You not making tea before. You making tea now. Don't worry. I like you. Make tea again. Correct this time!" The wretched little man picked up his flute stretching his fingers, preparing to play.

Flora waited until he began a series of clear lengthy notes. She then threw out the old water, muttering under her breath, "Nothing is ever the same twice in a row. I'm catching the next flight. I'm going back to Idaho. I don't know anything because I can't learn anything."

Hearing this, the wretched little man reached over quick as a gnat thwacking her on the leg with his flute. "You angry? Okay!" he snapped. Flora spun around. "Better than sleepy-headed woman, now you know nothing woman." He motioned with his hand for her to sit. "When I boy, I hear teacher play shakuhachi flute. He think each note and blow. He think. He
play. I hear. I feel something. I feel something more than he think. I feel something more than he play, more than I hear. He think, play. I hear. But I feel more than all things coming before."

The wretched little man's flute flew through the air following his waving arms. "Oh, yesterday, yes! yes! Yesterday why we here now. But, now we must to throw yesterday out like old tea water." He shrugged noncommittal and his neck disappeared. "Okay, no, but, we must to think okay throw away what came before. Each day fresh. We fresh. Meet each day that day. Each day more than together all days. Each moment more than together all moments." Her teacher stared at Flora for a long time, then, "Wake up! Yesterday ugly storm on mountain—problems solved. Who you? Today sunshine on mountain—fresh problems. Speak!"

"I am know nothing woman." Flora knelt bowing expressionless, however, as she raised herself from the waist a smile spread across her face. "Like a clean slate knows nothing. Like a clear glass knows nothing."

"Speak!"

"Like a babe in the woods knows nothing! Like a fool on the mountain knows nothing!"

"Okay! You ignorant fool," said the wretched little man, "and your life worth only old tea water, until you make fresh."

When Flora turned away for the boiling pot, she thought she heard giggling behind her. Quickly she flew around. The wretched little man hadn't moved and displayed only his dour face. In a quiet even voice Flora said, "You will pour the water."

"What? I am teacher!"

"That was yesterday. Today, you are still my teacher, though you are something more."

He stood, bowed his head and poured.

Now, at home after tea Flora examined the kitchen carefully. It didn't call to her. Perhaps the cleaning could wait. After all, so what if I haven't cleaned since seventy-nine? Life is more than the sum of its dirt.

She stepped into a private room. No friends had ever seen it, though they often speculated about its contents, dropping hints, attempting to pry information out of her. Windows in this room never opened, curtains never allowing in daylight. In winter the room shivered at fifty
degrees and during summer it sweltered at ninety. Once inside, Flora sat breathing and ceased being happy or sad. She became no one's daughter, no one's mother, no one's wife, not good Flora or bad, only breath, a dustless mirror. In this room Flora breathed slowly until it seemed as if she weren't breathing at all. Her last lingering thought was after living in this house for over twenty years she'd finally have to clean it.

When she finished breathing, Flora left the room with its door closed, and stepped softly, calmly over to the hall telephone. Examining a small photograph peering at her from a cubbyhole in the wall, she placed a call.

Early in her travels she'd spoken to the photograph, but it never offered a word in return, and this above all weighed as her anvil. Once she searched for a man she'd read about, Zorba, the Greek who'd grown very old, become famous; Zorba, the illiterate, undignified, filthy wise man whom Flora hoped might enlighten her as to why we are here. When she found him they got drunk on Retsina under a cobalt sky and he danced praising the heavens, spinning himself in circles by the Mediterranean, naming constellations as if he'd been lost at sea and raised by sailors, until he fell to the sand spent, and gazing at her he said, "My pretty Flora, I'm a stinking old man. What can I know? We are here to dance; dance and die, and anything God gives us in between is a blessing to be protected with our lives!" Then Zorba passed out.

Flora removed the photograph from her sandy coat. She cursed it. Anything God gives us, she thought. Anything God gives us. For the first time the photograph spoke rebuking Flora, transforming her guilt to unbearable pain, a lightning bolt from the heavens shredding flesh from bone, gutting her frail body as if she were a trout.

Zorba lifted one thick eyelid long enough to reach out an arm touching her cheek with his leathery hand. "I feel your pain. A great pain. But not a pain to suffer; only to let us know we are alive. I am an old man, and I ask you, why do we old ones feel more pain? Because! Because, because, we feel the weight of a full life. That's why! Nothing is ever left behind. I mean, we leave it, toss it back to the sea, but the tide carries it in and it follows us for the rest of our days. This is a full life, the weight and pain of it."
Zorba hacked congestion from his ancient Retsina soaked lungs until he could speak.
"Still, the sun rises each day, as if it must be the first day. The pain is not because we are dying, but because we live! Many mornings I awaken on this sand holding my sore head—too much Retsina—and I say to myself, I say, 'Zorba, you have a choice on this new day. Yes, sacrifice your weight to Neptune, tow it into God's ocean and be done with it!' Or, maybe first make love with a woman I know in the village, and then she must listen to my burden. And afterwards I think, you know, life is damned good! I mean, pretty Flora, it has its moments."

She stuffed the photograph away never speaking to it again. That picture of a child lived in seventeen countries, befriending many, carousing with heads of state, starving like a beggar, and at last journeying home. She studied it now in the hallway by the telephone considering deeply the distance traveled. *Life is a trade-off, my long ago one. Something is always sacrificed. Zorba, if we are to move forward, take chances, discover the meaning of our dance, something or someone will always be left in the sand unprotected.*

At the end of the hallway Flora's bedroom glowed bathed in soft light. She gazed out the garden window from where she stood. Roses beckoned rooted in the garden for twenty years: Floribundas and Highbred Teas, Antique and English roses, Albas and Climbers, whites and pinks and reds, Mister Lincoln, Queen Elizabeth, and between them grew purple Salvia and Four O'Clocks, and Martha Washington geraniums, all vying for space and sun and Flora's expert attention. One corner of the garden burst into color and hue marched over by an army of quickly multiplying Bearded irises. Flora's cinder block walls crawled with green ficus and small stone angels, and the first green thing she'd ever planted to remind herself of her own roots, a Wandering Jew. The Wandering Jew called to her, yet was the most difficult to plant.

She'd given up the politics of religion in search of broader spiritual truths. It happened only when she began adding ingredients to the compost heap that the thought struck, *A flower is historical. People are historical. We are born of the compost heap, a history both beautiful and profane. Perhaps an auspicious place to begin my garden would be with a Wandering Jew, and then to go on from there, to develop a garden which includes that Wandering Jew, and which is so much more.*
She remembered precisely when she'd given up religion; in Israel riding on a bus between Netanya and Tel Aviv. It was, she recalled, the one-thirty P.M. bus along the coastal highway and she rode next to an old man. The bus breezed effortlessly along a modern artery sprinting past cotton fields and tangerine orchards above a pristine blue sea while she and the old man struck up a conversation about God. "How do you feel God?" she asked. "How do you know who God is? What God is? I often wonder if God is."

The old man glowered speaking fiercely through his great white beard. "The Torah tells me who is God! The temple tells me who is God! And I am here to do God's will, and this is all I need to know! To ask such questions? A woman!"

"Then you can only know God's will, God's mind and heart through the mundane minds of the temple hierarchy. You do their bidding. The damn temple controls you.

"Flora frightened the old man so; he took to spitting in his beard eventually choking on a hairball, changing his seat. It was while riding on the one-thirty bus that Flora decided any religious community and any spiritual individual must be at war with one another. To experience spirituality is to know God. To experience religious doctrine is to know about God. It happened on a Tuesday.

Another construct like a sinister haze clouded her consciousness, that one day soon she would look out her window not recognizing where she is. Doctor Max had no way of predicting how far dementia progresses case by case. She wondered if she would remember friends. Who would tend the garden?

For twenty years she'd woken imbued with serene transparency knowing the garden as a panacea, no longer asking, "Why?" The question shriveled like dried petals gently floating in the wind. The way, Flora discovered, was to live like a rose, to blossom as witness to mystery. Without asking, "Why?" The garden mysteriously nourished her like a dearest old friend. It called Flora in her morning robe to cast seed for sparrows and nuts for scrub jays and squirrels. Afternoons she spoke to her flowers that intently listened through the seasons while her garden silently tendered its part in this mystical dialogue.
A healthy garden, it told her, is not only accepting of seasonal changes, but at the same time recognizes its own power using everything at its disposal to flourish: the soil, precipitation, sunlight, and the cycle of the moon. It does not grow in one spot, but extends itself to the sky above as through the earth below.

Flora witnessed the process miraculous, adopting this as her metaphor for living, a metaphor of acceptance and empowerment. When a rich bud blossomed from a green thorny vine Flora would gently cup the petals in her fingers sniffing its fragrance. *This intelligence to flower is so silent, and powerful, and perfect. I'm holding truth in my hands, and it comes alive every moment.* In her garden, Flora tramped among seeds, pollen, spores and eggs, each one containing the virtual power to become, a power often so encompassing that while kneeling in the flower beds she'd spring to her feet staring at her reflection in the cottage windows, her gray hair, large eyes, even the liver spots forming subtly on her cheeks, and she realized that she too possessed spiritual power, the virtue to become.

In these moments she arrived at understanding an expanding virtual universe, a universe which in order to survive must hold the quality of creative allowance; space for everything to become. *What am I to become?* As if a devout Christian praying to be saved, she'd drop again to her knees in the flowers, shove her hands deep into moist earth and breathe the breath of her dear old friend.

The garden became a connecting point between Flora and creation. When planting in spring she felt dirt against her flesh, digging with shovel, spade, and trowel, at first aware and uncomfortable, stiff knuckled in the morning cold, then losing awareness digging until work loosened her joints. Working the garden Flora eventually ceased focusing on herself as the center of a prevailing experience. She no longer looked out at the garden from behind her eyes. Flora and the garden melded, becoming a single moment of experience, of co-origination, each bringing to the moment their integrity of being. *The mystery of being,* she thought, *is that the ten-thousand things are not themselves; they are each other. The garden evolves with direction from the seed to the shoot to the plant to the tree, from the simple to the complex, each stage of growth*
containing the previous growth, and transcending it. Existence, for Flora, occurred of a piece, the universe a whole living entity.

Occasionally she played at holding a flower while shouting to the birds, "Call this a flower and you're blind! Fail to call it a flower and you're blind! Speak!" It had been almost half a century since that day in Tibet. Now, by way of answering the wretched little man, Flora spread her arms embracing the universe without uttering a word.

Still, beyond all luminous spiritual truths, Flora lived with a dark uncertain voice whispering within. Lying awake at night or passing the photograph in the hallway she felt the anvil's weight crushing the life out of her.

Gazing out the window she experienced disappointment in herself for not rising above differences people have, for not inviting her parents to see the garden before they died. It was not something she could bring herself to do, nor had she the courage to invite her daughter, at that time an adolescent. These relationships lingered far too painful. Flora wasn't ready then to add pain. Rose Cottage's garden grew as a resting place where Flora nurtured that which she had traveled so far to learn, and attempted rising above that which she regretted ever learning. Back then, the thought that a garden is not stagnant but ever evolving had not yet taken root. Over the years, time spent in the garden proved more productive than traveling. Flora blossomed until one early morning when the walls, ceilings, and floors of Rose Cottage spoke to her demanding she rectify her grievous error.

The telephone on the other end rang. Flora, a woman of considerable knowledge, held her breath terrified. An answer machine took the call and she spoke to it. "Hello, I'm Flora Stravinsky. I feel strangely pressed for time and I'd like it if we could become great friends."
CHAPTER 2--WATCHING DICE

"Someone is dead.
Even the trees know it..."
~Anne Sexton, 'All My Pretty Ones'

The crickets have ceased chirping. A single bird sits on my bedroom windowsill, and light is barely visible. Soon, I'll set aside this journal and make our morning coffee. But first I'd like to relate my memories of time spent observing my soon-to-be mother, Dice Stravinsky.

I asked Her why I needed to see all of these events and come to know all of these people. "Because," She said, "your birth is a cooperative effort. The birth of all events in the universe is essentially bereft of singularity while expressing singularity; this illusion is so you may learn a step at a time. The work of learning imparts meaning to the process. Further, I create crises and a sense of time in your life story. In this way, you are motivated towards discovery. Finally, when the time is right, you will recall everything, all memories, and realize that you have never truly been alone in your flesh or seeing through your eyes; I have always, and will always, be with you—we are one energy. Only when you remember what a moment is all about, will you return angelic to My spiritual kingdom. So, I am giving you a voice now, in this moment, to help determine your future; this is how I work! Some people remember earlier and some later, but you are not born in a vacuum. You are not born into the universe. You are born out of a whole that is essentially empty of selfness. You are born to remember, and I am giving you that moment and all of your future moments now, and I am allowing you your voice. Shall we watch?"

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These people are not happy, not at all, not one little bit. Judge Estes contemplated the room. He smiled the same way the man in the moon smiles from an incomprehensible distance, mysteriously and slowly bringing his chin to rest on his open palm, propping an elbow upon the desk. I would like to take them all golfing.

He raised sleepy brown eyes past the railed area into the large dimly lit courtroom where three modest groups of people huddled far away from one another. Members of two groups root bound themselves on long wooden benches—a murderer’s family—an aging mother whose eyes swelled spilling never ending tears, who stared into her trembling lap at a pair of arthritic hands; bulbous red knuckles and bent fingers quivering in sharp pain. A Germanic father whose immigrant trousers broke low over scuffed shoes wore his only sport coat with yellowed armpits, exhibiting no discernible expression through his dense mustache. A parish priest wearing somber flowing robes topped by a dark cap waited silently on the end of the bench; uninvolved, a pale harbinger of imminent emptiness, he laid a white hand on the father's knee.

On the other side of the room, a young widow dressed in black mourning clutched balled up tissue and stared at a blank sidewall.

He's not coming back, Judge Estes wanted to tell her, and I feel your pain.

Her little girl, all clean and soft nestled on her lap looking up at her, stroking her mother's cheek with a tiny hand. Her boy, a perpetual smear of crud around his mouth, played with a toy truck on the bench next to them. They sat alone.

In the last group, law enforcement officials already having testified remained for the jury's verdict and so did the coroner, all of them coughing, sniffling, and whispering into ears.

Like the silhouette of a single sunflower, I alone sit above them, the judge glanced around. It's a rotten trick! He'd stayed awake until the wee hours reading, researching, feeling old and pressed for time, losing faith in any resolution to his life's quest—a humble answer for an explosive query—what is the nature of true justice? Throughout the multifarious activities
of Her universe a single principle functioned giving birth, imparting order and reason to the ten-thousand things. She lent the universe direction; wonder transcending itself, including itself in the next miracle towards an evolution of spirit.

Judge Estes, however, studied a never ending parade of fear-gripped humanity short on wonders crossing his forty years on the bench, because it seemed to him that no sooner had challenges and problems of the former wondrous period been solved, then a new unfolding of additional complex wonders ushered in more complex problems, and this the judge called history; David slew Goliath slinging a rock and the giant collapsed. An easy case to adjudicate, the judge felt.

However, last week computer trained terrorists abusing highly technological jet planes as bombs acted out of an acculturated insanity, only possible because humankind is an ever-evolving animal. Deep from the rubble, doctors using micro-surgical techniques saved valuable lives that would have been lost five years ago. Judge Estes waited quietly in fear, knowing eventually the big one would cross his bench rendering him speechless and this he called the making of civilization; legislating ancient justice in current events.

She is not good. She is not bad. She is not easygoing. She is; and She often reminded me the north forty is a work in process that has its moments.

For Franklin Estes, silver haired and jowly, the garden consistently appeared as wonder opening into wonder, the astonishing miracle being the perfection and justness of the apparent inconsistencies, the imperfections of his life. His personal fortunes, losses, and misfortunes cultivated a firm, empathetic man. Life's imperfections created an insightful being motivated to use every table scrap tossed his way, extending himself for quality.

What is the nature of true justice? This question kept him tossing in the darkness. It formed his professional judicial style. Judge Estes ruled according to extensive truths, the spirit of the law and the intent of a harmonious, prosperous society. When ruling he sat in his chambers searching mind and heart, sifting thoughts, listening for the voice of verity, of reality in a perplexing jungle. He heard the voice rarely, usually entering the courtroom, according to his
understanding, on a wing and a prayer that civilization would be served and history make sense, feeling he hadn't the true mental capacity to sit above anyone.

Most mornings the court brimmed with incandescence, the noisy hustle of attorneys, clients who showed late, which witnesses required standby, clients who skipped bail, and sleepy Judge Estes who would rather not be in court dispensing warrants when the early sun beamed wide rays through high windows warming the large room. However, this morning the courtroom remained sealed to those not directly involved with the trial. He nodded a silent affirmation to his clerk, an exacting woman in her fifties wearing short hair, who perched fingers curved and ready over her computer below a massive mahogany structure supporting the judge and a witness chair.

The bailiff, a tall transplanted Texan in a tan uniform, approached the bench balancing two pitchers—one hot coffee, the other ice water—setting these before the judge who barely uttered a thank you, not wishing to disturb his attention now fixed on a sheaf of legal briefs, other cases, requests for continuations and requests for warrants. The light seemed dim for reading. He lifted his eyes once more assessing the unusual quietness.

Would you all like to golf? Swing the irons around. Loosen the knees and shoulders. We'll all golf and there will be no more crime. He saw past the three groups, the vacuum between them, envisioning gently sloping green hills of the ninth hole. He often supposed if land were his jurisdiction he'd turn the great north forty into a golf course. Ah! You people don't know what you're missing. No muggings on the course, no murders, no rapes, no politics, religion or power plays, only the open air and smell of fresh sod. Sometimes I don't even play the game. I just stop wherever I happen to be and put away my clubs and breathe, and watch the gardener ride around on his mower doing figure eights. Occasionally, migrating geese fly overhead. It's darned peaceful.

Judge Estes' eyes rested on a tall authoritative figure, a woman wearing a navy blue business suit. He scrutinized her. She stood one hip jutting out, leaning against a long hardwood table, examining a yellow legal pad over the tops of her glasses, stern lips moving slightly as she read to herself. No lint on that jacket, and the way it lays perfectly flat without a wrinkle. No
creases in those pumps. Oh, my, look at that brooch; an American flag for the jury. She's fastidious, a stickler for detail.

Dice fought her own darkness until the wee hours reading, writing, preparing for battle. The judge studied her cold gauntness, high cheekbones and her hair. The hair didn't agree. It fell in long brown waves, soft, incongruous to the rest of her. She slashed out a word waving an orange pencil, tossing it and the pad on the table in front of her co-counsel, a younger man who read the pad and looked up nodding at her. D.A. Dice Stravinsky paced confidently, almost defiantly along the length of table. She turned perusing Judge Estes. She's in great shape for a forty-five year old broad. Bet she's got a mean swing. He searched her hazel eyes.

"Frank," she whispered, "what are you waiting for? He's guilty. Let's do it so we can go to lunch."

"Lunch?" He'd agonized since the case first appeared on his docket. "You're going for the death penalty. Doesn't that mean anything to you, Dice? We're going to take this man's life."

She moved away for a moment and then stepped forward. "What a tragedy. The Nazi's in a jam. Well, he should've thought about that first."

"The tragedy here is that we have thought about it, and we're going ahead with it anyway!"

"We're not here to act morally," Dice argued in a low voice. "We're officers of the court. The people have entrusted us to carry out the law."

"You're right," the judge said. "You're always right. We're a machine, you and I, a bureaucratic conspiracy. We've thought about it, planned it, instigated a cultural philosophy that allows for just such an occasion," he ran his finger tips over the surface of his gavel, "voted professional speakers into power who'll rally the people to support it—"

"Do you have a better answer?"

"I don't. But I'm damned well not going to hurry it up so we can go to lunch! This is a no win trial. There's no victory here, yours or anyone else's."

"You're talking like it's over, Frank. In school, you taught us it's never over until the gavel strikes three times. I might lose."
"Ah, you'll win." He leaned over and down whispering, "I taught you how." Judge Estes frowned pushing his gavel away.

"We'll wait then." Dice returned to her table.

A uniformed guard escorted a thirty-year-old male Caucasian prisoner in handcuffs and ankle cuffs through a side door into the courtroom. A young woman on the other side of the rail reached for him but he shuffled inches away from her desperate grasp. She sobbed. He glanced back at her through three days growth, fighting his bright orange getup, unable to use his bound body, unable to demonstrate a final gesture of love.

The guard shoved him, leg chains sounding mournful notes, to a table and dropped the man by one arm into a chair next to the state appointed defense attorney; a short hunchbacked man with large ears and a double chin, a sweaty gnome digging elbows high through a worn leather satchel bursting with another half dozen cases. At his feet sat a luggage carrier with four briefcases and yet another satchel holding fifty more cases. He rested a hand on his client's shoulder mumbling in his ear. "We did our best. Look, the evidence was overwhelming. In the end, what could I have said that would've made a difference?"

The attorney glanced over at Dice, then pulled his necktie tighter. "The lower court already ruled out insanity. You didn't use a glove. You're not wealthy, and you don't play ball. All I'm trying to say is that we did our best."

"I'm going to ask the judge," said the attorney, "to let you speak before sentencing. Show remorse. Tons of it. Shitloads of remorse. You'll turn. You'll face the widow. You'll beg for forgiveness. Remember, there's no excuse for what you did." He shook his crooked finger. "You took a life."

The prisoner wiggled a pierced tattooed tongue. "Sure. What the fuck. I'll crawl on my belly up the aisle. You'd like that. A real show, huh?"

Judge Franklin Estes caught the tongue action. He zeroed in on a tattooed swastika, revulsion overrunning his body and mind. Cautious, though provoked, he called the court to order.
Closing arguments and statements were brief. The hunchbacked defense attorney strolling in front of the jury played the sympathy factor, the accused pleading remorse. At the close of the prosecution's speech, Dice Stravinsky faced the jury adjusting her lapel with the American flag brooch while speaking. "...So, there is no denial from the defense. Their admission of guilt is clear, and the prosecution has proven its case beyond all doubt.

Still, this is a murder trial. A guilty verdict can mean only one thing, the death penalty, and we are requesting just that. Perhaps some of you on the jury feel that we, as a society, are too enlightened, too well educated to play the game of an eye for an eye. I would like to remind you of history, because I'm certain you'll all agree that history strangely repeats itself."

Dice, leaning in, laid both hands on the railing in front of the jury box. She sensed Judge Estes' eyes admonishing her to tread cautiously. Her palms perspired; fingers squeezing the wood at the same time chills gripped her body. Through force of will she fought off sudden nausea continuing her speech.

"In the 1920's, thirties, and forties, Germany ranked as the most literate, educated nation on the face of the earth, yet they failed in their moral obligation. The German intelligentsia scoffed, and the people went about their lives in denial of what the Volks movement had become, and without a struggle Adolf Hitler rose from the rank and file. He took power because the Germans, by doing nothing, by sending no messages to the contrary, handed him the power. No one tried to stop Hitler until it was too late.

Ladies and gentleman of the jury, your Honor, we have the chance today to exercise a firm position as a nation." Dice turned her back on the jury long enough to approach the defense table. She stood resolute pointing a stiff finger at the accused, and turning only her head she raised her voice shouting while a long vein in her neck pulsed. "Let us not be deceived into thinking that the man sitting in that chair faces this court alone. We have only to read our morning papers to know his numbers are not small, not weak, but growing here, now. Let us not fail to return a guilty verdict and send a message loud and clear; not ever, not in America!"
"Your Honor!" the hunchbacked gnome shot out of his chair like a crouched missile. "The district attorney here is characterizing my client, a sanitation worker, as the leader of the whole Neo-Nazi movement! This is not a history class nor a political forum, and we demand—"

Wham! The judge smacked his gavel. "Your client is not in a position to make any demands, and you've already had your chance with the jury. Now, sit down and silence yourself!"

Wham! Wham! "This court is in immediate recess," he turned to Dice shivering in her seat, sweating salty bullets, "for lunch in my chambers Ms. Stravinsky." Wham!

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They sat across from one another at the judge's desk in chambers picking at two paper plates and a huge deli sandwich between them, turkey on rye with Russian dressing. Through the window Dice watched a dependable giant sycamore blowing wildly in an afternoon high wind as the sun started the western half of its arc through a clear sky. Like a yellow fireball it threw its heat against the glass pane.

She'd watched trees through the judge's window often over the years. Only this sycamore remained in the new blazing white cement courtyard sprouting slick enameled steel benches. Today it stood like an ancient gray lady, the wind rushing through her tussled hair of maple shaped leaves. Dice watched her branches swaying one hundred feet in the air, bending individually and in groups of gold and green with each gust and breeze. Other trees fell bald in seasons past, their stiff branches broken by wind, but the sycamore danced. Its shadows shifting, never a broken arm or leg, it reminded one of a malleable ballerina, fluid like rainwater, nothing could harm it. Occasionally she ate lunch beneath the sycamore where benches sat installed around its roots. At times she fed pigeons and sparrows converging at her feet. Afternoons passed when Dice was certain the tree wanted to speak with her, but she never heard it and so brushed this feeling aside silently ridiculing herself for holding ludicrous notions, warning
herself to finish lunch and get back to the business at hand. *I am the only intelligence in the universe*, she'd tell herself. *I am all I've got to depend on.*

Inside his chambers she felt warm. "Are you okay?" Judge Estes asked.

"Now I am, but something happened out there."

"I'll say." The judge shifted nervously in his chair. "We shouldn't be having lunch together during the trial. I shouldn't be speaking to you." He leaned in over the sandwich. "But I'm getting old, and we're friends, and I don't give a rat's ass. I'm worth a fortune. Did you know that?"

"One assumes."

"The way you were working that jury they would've thought we were trying Eastern Europe."

"We are!" Dice struggled keeping surface rage under control. "I am." She found her depth of disgust surprising, priding herself on consummate professionalism.

"We're not! Not in my court!" The judge's outbursts startled neither of them. Like a father, he'd been scolding Dice since her school days. Their history began with Professor Franklin Estes throwing a set of mock briefs back in her face, embarrassing Dice, a second year law student in front of the entire class. She remembered the slow flush of blood heating up her neck and ears like millions of tiny pinpricks as she sat in a chair wondering why she tried so hard to gain access to his class.

"This is crap!" he'd shouted. "You'll never make it to the Supreme Court if you can't write an excellent brief. We're talking about the exercise of logic, negotiating and political skills, not to mention English. This stuff's barely coherent."

"What if I just want to pass the bar?"

Professor Estes leaned over Dice's desk. "You don't study fifty hours a week and work part time at a cash register, and show up for my class because you only want to pass the bar, and I'm not going to let you down. That's a promise."

"How did you know?"
"I shop at that store. I've seen you falling asleep on your feet. I know what it takes just to pass the bar, Ms. Stravinsky."

In chambers, Judge Estes handed D.A. Dice Stravinsky half of his sandwich. They pushed aside stacks of paperwork and she picked up a plastic knife and fork. This year, she thought, she stood to be elected attorney general. Then she'd buy the sandwich. "You kept your promise, Frank."

"What promise?"
"Never mind."

The judge stepped slowly to his coffee maker where he poured them both Styrofoam cups of black bitter liquid with grounds floating at the bottom. He wasn't facing Dice when a smile broke across his mouth. "I know," he said. "My word is my bond." He returned to their lunch. "Problem is, the best teacher can't give you what you don't already have." The judge didn't bother with conventions: no fork, knife, no lap napkin. He picked up his half sandwich, greeted the turkey with a salute, "For those birds who have died in the service of man, I honor you," and opened his mouth like the whale swallowing Jonah.

"What do you mean?"
"I mean, sometimes you frighten me, Dice. My god, we've known each other long enough, and I guess you must understand how I feel about you."
"Frank, your mouth is full."

The judge swallowed. "I never had a daughter. I admire you, respect your achievements. But I've often wondered how you feel."
"About you?"
"About anything."

"How can you say that? You, of all people, know how I feel about everything." She stabbed a piece of sandwich with her fork and worked it with her knife. She struggled keeping bread on the fork with turkey, lettuce, and a bit of tomato. No matter how hard she tried, Dice usually finished with an empty piece of hard bread sitting on a slick square of paper on a wet cardboard plate.
She looked at the judge sitting in front of his sunny window. She squinted seeing only the silhouette of his chewing jaw.

"No. I know what you think about things, not how you feel. This morning, when you couldn't wait to get on with the verdict so you could go to lunch; I'm sorry, Dice, but I wondered if you have any feelings."

Dice calmly picked up her coffee sipping at it, washing down the sandwich. She found turkey too dry for her taste and Frank consistently ordered it. "I don't wish to pursue this discussion, Frank."

"No, of course not. Any time we approach a subject that begs more of you than your intellect you shut down."

"At the moment, I'm feeling not myself. Is it hot in here?" Dice perspired under her blouse. She chalked it up to digestion working overtime. Judge Estes didn't answer, and after an eternal moment of silence Dice locked gazes with her oldest friend, her only friend. "I'm dead, Frank."

"What?"

"I'm dead. I've been this way for as long as I can remember. I feel no love, and life and death leave me cold. I feel no sympathy when someone dies, and no empathy for those who struggle and fail. I don't care enough to be disappointed, and I expect nothing from life or from myself. There is one feeling I'm intimate with, that I've always known; rage. It churns in the pit of my stomach day in and day out. I control it, barely."

"But you've strived, you've accomplished so much. I thought with the attorney general campaign and all—"

"I'm driven by anger, hatred at society, at the system. I'm compelled to show that I'm powerful. It's all power. Control. To amass enough power never to be at the mercy of anyone. Not a decent, moral, ethical motivation for anything I've ever done, except for our friendship. I love you, Frank. I swear it."

"Thank you. That means a great deal to me, but I'm sad for you, Dice."

"Why? I'm not sad for myself."
"What about marriage?" the judge asked. "Or not. What about just sharing your life with someone special? A gentleman friend. Would you think me less of a man if I admitted to you that my wife helps to empower me? A good mate can be very powerful in one's life."

"I don't have time for that these days. I'm busy mating with politics. I'm in bed with my constituency, Frank, and loving it." Dice reached for a gold compact and lipstick out of her handbag. She flipped open the mirrored compartment twisting the cap off a lipstick tube. Judge Estes watched as she folded her lips back, curling them over the edges of her teeth, stretching them thin like rubber bands.

"Why do women do that?" He cringed. He'd decided to stand back allowing the election campaign to resolve itself. "Why do they end a perfectly beautiful moment like this, a wonderful repast, by spreading their lips like chimpanzees in heat, and then smearing carnauba wax all over themselves? How much of that garbage do you suppose a woman must eat in the course of her life? Ah, well, maybe that's why women live longer than men. Perhaps there are vitamins in the stuff. Preservatives."

"Good. I can use some preserving. Anything for an edge."

"Okay, I'll give you an edge. Inside information. That power which carries the most just force is power inherent in the momentum of a given set of circumstances."

"Aristotle?"

"Hm..." he smiled. "Nothing so brilliant as Aristotle. Only Estes. It is a power constantly at work in our lives and it doesn't need our meddling. Not that I'm a fatalist, oh no! Merely that on occasion to aggressively do nothing proves the best way to work with power to insure natural justice."

Dice, unimpressed, picked a speck of lint off her lapel. "The reason I'm in a hurry to wrap up this case is because I have to fly to Sacramento next week. I'll probably rent an apartment."

"I hear the crime's escalated in Sacramento. Hear it's not safe for man or politician. Not the nice homey little town it used to be."

"That doesn't faze me, Frank."

"Before today," he said, "I might have thought you were brave."
That evening at the office it hit her again. During the celebratory post trial party, a caterer circulated through the crowd balancing a tray of cheap champagne. Dice reached for a glass to cool herself. For over an hour she fought hot and cold flashes rolling the glass across her forehead sitting in a folding chair next to a wall vent. Victories ceased meaning anything personal long ago. She stepped on successes as she would the rungs of a ladder. Obligatory networking parties held after splashier trials became tiresome.

She watched people huddling, their drinks in hand, pairing in cliques, laughing and joking, and others who gravitated towards the corners of the room, who sat talking closely with one another where lights dimmed. She didn't find their discussions relevant. Besides, what could she say to interest anyone? No one said anything of remote interest to her for as long as she could recall. Dice never experienced the phenomena of conversational common ground. *People are a bother, she thought, an intrusion. What I wouldn't give for a private life, away somewhere on a mountain, alone.*

She left her chair, slowly crossing to a large plate glass window, showing her back to the room. Dice touched her palm to the cold window glass. She examined streets and boulevards below dotted with thousands of lights. Earthworms of lights on the 110-freeway overpass inched along crushing each other. The temperature dropped. Rush hour in Los Angeles.

For a moment she caught herself questioning choices. She was, after all, not headed for a lonely mountain, but instead plunging into the thick of dangerous political ozone, the kind of pollution that eats stalks, turning healthy leaves yellow and diseased. As attorney general she'd wield a powerful axe in state government. It would not be a contemplative existence.

"Hello, Dice." His throaty voice cornered her. She realized she'd been pinned down by six foot-three, blond-haired Senator Bill Titan—"The Impalor"—or as women referred to him, "The Organ Grinder."
Dice spun around shooting a quick glance over the top of his head. In heels she stood taller than Bill, and wanted him to know it. She sipped at her third drink. "Hello, Bill. I see you left your umbrella and monkey at home."

"You're funny. Is that any way to talk to a man who came over to congratulate you?" He extended his hand. "I'm talking about your election as attorney general."

Dice, taken aback, shook his hand. It felt massive against hers, though they both carried the same height. *He wears a tux better than Pierce Brosnon.* "Thanks, but your congratulations are a bit premature."

The senator angled in close allowing his hand to fall out of hers and brush her thigh. "I don't do anything premature, Dice."

"I'll bear that in mind. Will you pardon me?" She slipped into the crowd. Standing in the center of the room examining bodies, the great dynamo of hatred turned off its turbines. The constant hum of anger ceased. Dice found herself numb, fighting exhaustion. Not feeling the hate machine, fatigue was the nearest she came to feeling good. When numbness permeated her mind, all things and all people in the universe faded. She felt blessed by a moment of peace. If left undisturbed, this lasted until morning when she'd awaken with the same first thoughts that propelled her through all mornings, *I wonder why she did it? Who the hell needs her anyhow?*

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I remember that She lingered near, Her breath all around us. "Dice feels deserted," I said. "She feels as if dropped upon the earth, on its surface. She feels no connection, no history, and no continuum of process. She thinks a lot about survival, landing on her feet, but she doesn't feel a connection to that upon which she's landed."

"Nothing in the field stands alone," She said, "not a grain of soil, a rock, a weed, or a flower. All are the field. My children are one human nature. Through division and adaptation they are acculturated variously, so that each one expresses and receives the one human nature through a slightly different lens, yet they are all one. What Flora failed to do for Dice is as
prominent in her life as anything that anyone does. The force of Flora's nature resounds in her daughter. It can rain and feed the vegetation, or not, and the vegetation will thrive or go thirsty. Both conditions tie the vegetation to the whim of nature. There is a process, a cord. I am the cord. The cord is never cut."

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The red message light flashed on Dice's machine in the dark apartment. It was cold and quiet, and she turned on a lamp which hung over the telephone in one corner of her living room. The beam softly filtered out to a sparsely furnished area. She'd rented the place furnished, moved in her clothes, a few boxes, and lived out of those boxes for the last ten years. She never planned on settling into the space. She didn't belong there, so why invest any effort making it comfortable? Eventually she would move. The place presented itself as if she'd signed her lease yesterday. She ate meals out, never invited friends in, and seldom pursued any activities other than reading or sleeping. She resented the telephone, her message machine, and could easily live without them if she were not on call. She owned no television or radio. Her one concession to the outside world and her profession was taking delivery of morning newspapers, national and foreign, and her subscriptions to *U.S. News and World Report*, *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and the *ABA Journal*.

Dice sunk into a cheap red vinyl easy chair removing her pumps and staring at the machine.

*My beautiful numbness, my aloneness, is about to be shattered.* She recalled the last episode seen before leaving this evening's party. It occurred in the copy room where she'd gone for her coat and bag. Senator Titan grinned leaning against the photo unit with his slacks dropped around his ankles while this young thing knelt between his legs. Dice calmly picked up her coat and bag closing the door.

On the drive home she'd fought the image but it kept rerunning like an endless loop of film. *Be honest about it. You keep bringing it back.* Also the other image; the one that assaulted
her at red lights, alone in her office, or while soaking in a hot tub, and sometimes unable to read without the image overpowering her. He would wipe all of her papers and equipment off her desk with one swipe of his heavy arm, taking her there; spreading her legs she felt his weight crushing her, rocking her. She thrilled at the broadness of his shoulders as she wrapped her arms around him. She never saw his face. Dice tried for fifteen years, but he remained a mystery. Perhaps his hair is brown with streaks of gray, she wasn't sure. He wore a white long-sleeved dress shirt appearing naked from the waist down, straining muscular tanned legs with bare feet.

Nauseated, she pressed playback on the machine not bothering with a pen and note pad. *Maybe I'll forget who called.* The first message came from her real estate broker in Sacramento. *It's even colder there this time of year,* her mind drifted. A beep and another message from her dry cleaner. A beep ...and the dynamo turned on. Turbines hummed. The room came into bright, sharp focus. "Hello, I'm Flora Stravinsky. I feel strangely pressed for time, and I'd like it if we could become great friends." Dice's muscles constricted. She couldn't sit, so she paced from the kitchen to the bathroom to the bedroom and back to the living room, stomping hard on stocking feet mashing her heels, making them sore, desiring pain, hoping pain would consume the hatred. Her mind raced.

Dice picked up the phone, yanked the antenna, and carrying it she punched buttons moving swiftly through the apartment. She blew into the kitchen, when a voice came on the line. "Hello, this is Flora."

Dice lost her footing. The voice trembled with age. She remembered her mother sounding young and clear, a single pure note one followed through eternity. "I don't know what to say. I really don't," Dice said. This was not what she planned on saying.

"Then why did you return my call?" Flora spoke calmly.

For Dice each word exploded. Syllables and sounds fried her brain like tiny sparks. When Flora finished a sentence Dice panicked, worried she'd never hear the voice again. The silence cut like a glass shard. Dice tried remembering the voice. Something in it, a slight edge rang with familiarity. Long ago and far away was all she could fathom. Dice decided she owed the stranger nothing, while feeling compelled to listen to the voice.
"I saw your face," Dice said. This is all wrong. You should be here with Daddy. The three of us together. Should I tell you that he died in morphine madness? Quietly, with pain, the same way he lived. Would you care?

"That's it? After all these years you can still see my face? What must it look like?" Flora asked.

Dice collapsed on the kitchen floor, her knees drawn into her chest, her back against the wall. She found herself searching through recesses of memory for meaning, though for the life of her she couldn't understand why she cared. "Yes. I've always seen your face. It's young and beautiful; not that I give a shit. Do you hear me?" She wondered what this old woman must look like. "I don't care, you know. I'm sorry, it's the truth. I don't know why I called you back. I suppose I was going to tell you that I hated you. That I hated your message on my machine. Insinuating yourself into my life that way. But now I'm just exhausted."

You never wanted Daddy and me. You never returned and I didn't give a damn one way or the other, except that afterwards, when Daddy faced the truth, when he lost all hope, he lived as a broken man, and I had to grow up witness to his spineless introversion. You ruined the first man I ever knew. I'll never forgive you for that. "If you have something to say, say it." Dice shut her eyes.

"As for my face, it's no longer young and beautiful. It's old now, and wrinkled, and sorry about all of the mistakes it's made. I didn't call to bring back the past, to discuss anything that happened, because I can't change any of it. Although, I knew when I called that it would bring back everything for both of us, and there's nothing I can do about that either. I hope I don't hurt you, Dice, when I tell you that I would not choose to change my past."

Clinging to that long piece of the voice, Dice felt a little fuller, calmer. "You don't have that power over me. You can't hurt me. You're not my mother."

Dice stood looking around. A roll of paper towels sat on the counter for eight years. She noticed gleaming white tile and white walls. No notes or photographs hung on the refrigerator door; no children's finger paintings. She wondered if the icemaker worked. Dice suddenly realized no clock hung on the wall. She felt alone. Time stood still.
"Why," Dice asked, "did you call? What did you expect to find here?"

"My dear, we have something in common. I hope, no, I pray that you can find it in your heart to understand, it's causing me untold sorrow."

"What's that, Flora? Not a past, I hope. I can tell you, I feel nothing. Did you call here for your baby? Who did you think would answer this phone?" Dice heard sniffling on the other end of the line and then a heavy silence.

"I also, have always seen your face," Flora said.

She smiled at the phone measuring each word, allowing the pain. Flora picked up the photograph smelling it. "And it has always been young. And it has always been beautiful. You're my child, Dice," Flora cried softly, "and I want you back."

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Afterwards, Dice sat in the dim apartment listening to a distant screeching sound wallow in the empty dark spaces between buildings. She nursed her scotch and soda not certain whether she could bath and sleep. Gun blasts rang out. Tonight they came nearby and she straightened in the red vinyl chair. She agreed to dinner with Flora before the week wore out. Dice resolved to achieve completion, to speak about the death of Flora's ex-husband, about life for the two of them after Flora's departure. We'll have dinner and that will be the end of it, at last.

Dice held her drink in her lap, both hands wrapped around the glass, closing her eyes. She visualized a young girl tearing barefoot through the back woods of Connecticut faster and faster. Golden trees and streams of melted snow passed into a blur until she reached her father's workshop.

After Flora left them, her father decided to move away from the Corn Belt and begin a new life. In Connecticut Dice lingered for hours patiently watching her father build furniture. Even now she could smell the lacquers, glues, resins, and stains that sat in metal cans on his wooden workbench. She'd spend time turning heavy handles on his vices and clamps, listening, waiting for him to break his silence with a piece of sage advice. "Never be greedy, Dice, and life
will have its rewards. And remember, always wear good shoes, common sense shoes." She wondered whether he knew she was a girl while he mumbled pragmatically through penny nails clenched gingerly in his teeth. He extracted them one at a time as needed, holding each nail immobile with his right hand and driving it home with two and a half whacks of the ball hammer in his left fist. He never required a claw hammer. It became a silly thing; a point of pride for Dice to know her father's nails, once driven, always reached their mark. As if knowing this thread was all he had to offer a little girl, he would pick her up and sit her on the workbench, and closing one eye, balancing the hammer in his palm, he spoke quietly with a stiff jaw. "When doing a thing in life, anything, we focus, we consider, we aim straight and true, and when we act..." he brought the hammer down as if it were weighted with lead.

The last thing Dice remembered was her father pulling an antique 1927 Rolex oyster from his pocket, shaking it next to his ear, and seeming satisfied returning it to darkness. The two then locked the tiny backwoods workshop and hiked home along secret dirt paths Dice believed only her father knew existed.

Now she moved across the room through shadows outside on the balcony under the light of a full moon. A jet soared overhead blinking it's wing lights in the dark sky. No golden trees to signal the coming of winter. No streams like Connecticut. When he finally realized I wasn't coming home, he stopped making furniture. He stopped everything.
CHAPTER 3--FOOD, SEX, AND DEATH

"...Repeating then is in every one, everyone then comes sometime to be clearer to someone, sometime there will be then an orderly history of everyone who ever was or is or will be living..."

~Gertrude Stein, Lectures In America

"Menopause? It's a bad time. Is there any way we can postpone it? I'm about to take an important turn in my career. There'll be certain stresses to be dealt with."

"It's a change of life, Dice. Not the end of life." Her doctor closed the file folder in his hands, dropping it on his desk. They sat in his office on the seventeenth floor overlooking a brown hazy skyline. The man smiled distantly, unable, Dice knew, to truly understand her predicament.

Anything askew about her history up to the present would certainly be misconstrued, twisted, and used against her by an opponent. He might say she's insane or perverted or in failing health. "At the least, men don't go through menopause," he'd remind the citizenry, manipulating the media, casting aspersions on her ability to carry out the duties of attorney general, the evening news making it appear nasty, as if it were her fault, a disease contracted through sin, the sin of being female.

"Any test results, any information has to die right here in this office." Her jaw tightened.

"Understood. I'm prescribing Premarin MT for your symptoms. I want you to stick with the dosage for a month. Let's see how it goes. We might get lucky right out of the starting gate."

On the elevator her consciousness drew a blank. By surprise she discovered herself sitting in the driver's seat of her maroon Jaguar. She stole a moment of silence smelling the leather
upholstery—burnt butter—adjusting mirrors, sensing the power of the wealthy sleek cat preening its fourteen-karat gold detailing.

She slipped a pair of glasses out of the glove compartment reading her prescription and folded the small square of paper, slipping it into her matching maroon leather agenda. When Dice reached for the glasses on her face she caught sight of herself in the rear-view mirror. A middle-aged woman peered back. They studied each other closely. Dice examined this woman's skin, that it was not quite young, certainly not old. She grazed her neck with her fingers. In a prophetic, self-fulfilling state of mind, the two women melded.

She'd known for weeks about this menopause and thought the day she heard it from a doctor she'd react angry and fearful. To age, become unattractive, to eventually die. "Only a fool grows old gracefully," she'd heard it said.

"Embrace your change of life!" a women's liberationist proclaimed.

"Who's to say that men grow distinguished while women age?" Dice read in the waiting room from Cosmo while waiting to hear she'd aged, lived half her life, wasted it, and she bit her lip wondering how to enjoy the magazine without holding it, not touching the brainless braless child on the cover.

"Life is what happens while you're making plans," song lyrics sang. Dice questioned who is helped by these philosophic meanderings about life?

After all, we are each our own bags of flesh and gristle, bile and disease, and our lives are our own to deal with, or not, on our own terms. What might possess one bag to think that it knows another bag well enough to suggest a living philosophy viable for two or more bags?

She remembered her father's final commentary on life after they'd butchered him, removed a lung, and piped his larynx with a voice box. Dice leaned over to kiss him and he grabbed her by the arm, pulling her close to the device in his throat. She smelled the hospital sheets while he inhaled and buzzed out, "You're born alone, and you die alone."

"No, Daddy. I'm here for you. I've always been here for you." She waited, certain he'd dropped off for a nap soon to awaken.
After his death, a restless discontent nagged between her long shoulder blades for months finally surfacing. Why am I here? If death is a certainty, does anything I do in my life matter?

Today, she tossed magazines on the pile as a receptionist peeked at her from behind an office window. Menopause? None of you knows how I feel! I feel used up. Rarely fucked and mostly forgotten. And not one of them was worth my body. Not one strong man in the bunch.

However, Dice did not recoil in anger or fear when examining her body. She didn't feel unattractive. Neither did she sense a youth filled with inexplicable rage. A subtle peace enveloped her like a moment following the perfect dream. The turbines slowed. Perhaps, she thought, the doctor having pronounced sentence gave her permission to let go of an agonized blooming period. She'd envisioned herself seething at time slipping away. Instead, Dice felt release cruising the long haul down Wilshire Boulevard to Rodeo Drive, ruminating between red lights about the first half of life.

While the cat crept up muscles rippling alongside a stuffy Mercedes Benz, Dice's breathing froze high in her chest. She threw the stick into gear demanding immediacy, leaving the Benz hacking behind; an old phlegm-weighted German.

The first half didn't go very fast, she thought ... and I was hoping it would end. I should write the doctor a thank you note.

Traffic slowed. Afternoon sun burned through the cat's windshield and other thoughts forced their way in: calcium loss, Dowager's hump, losing her teeth, developing a mustache, and the big "C". Further introspection produced an anxious and empty state requiring Dice examine her past. She picked her way through a web of synaptically connected strings. Early friends experienced bad marriages and devastating divorces; she'd heard about them one by one through the grapevine; using their misfortunes to justify her push for a career and her sacrifice of any meaningful relationship; she cell-phoned the doctor asking if she could still become pregnant.

"Is it safe?" she inquired.

"Safe? Safe is relative. Yes, I suppose so. But at your age, why would you want to?"

"I don't know," Dice said. She stayed out shopping Rodeo Drive for as long as possible, because going home meant being alone.
The thrill lay in cracking crisp one-hundred-dollar bills of the top of a thick stack out loud, finding a male who wouldn't be impressed. She walked into a shoe salon and sat crossing her legs, her skirt tightening around her thighs. Male bodies stopped. Three older women turned away in repugnance showing a touch of sadness. Dice gloated. *Life doesn't get better than this.* She sat staring at the door waiting with baited breath to see if he stood strong against the light, the one who would walk away, who didn't give a damn.

A young man with acne, a too long, too wide necktie, baggy pants, and a belt pulled lean to the last notch broke away from the little group of young men that leered hungrily at her. He approached grinning. "Can I help you, miss?"

She motioned him closer, and breathing hot into his ear she whispered, "Ask me again in a few years, after you shave and grow pubic hair," and she walked out the door. He had not arrived in the shoe salon.

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They faced each other, the way people do when uncertain of one another, not ready to commit to anything past hello, alternately eating and defending privacy zones, utilizing forks as weaponry pushing at the air, waving the prongs declaring individual space. Flora avoids restaurants displaying formal white tablecloths. She enjoys watching her legs disappear in darkness beneath the table, but this evening a sheet hung down over the sides of the table settling on her lap, rendering the view impossible. Dice glanced at Flora, a virtual stranger, and then returned to work on her plate of spinach in butter sauce.

"You're much taller than I pictured you, Dice." Flora pulled out the small photograph, sliding it under one finger over the tablecloth.

Dice glimpsed it without a trace of recognition crossing her face. She handed it back picking up a cold glass of Chardonnay. "Yes, Flora, I would be taller than that after all these years."
Flora bowed her head. She couldn't tell which was worse, being called Flora, as if a stranger to her own child, or sharing the most important piece of paper in her life and having it handed back like a gum wrapper to be tossed.

A busboy, a waiter, and a wine steward rushed across the room just as Flora finished her spinach. All at once hands filled glasses and stacked and cleared first course plates. Then an odd thing occurred. The waiter, a tall dark Argentine man, mustached with a space between his two front teeth, set down two small plates of vanilla sherbet. Flora looked up. Tugging on the waiter's coat she asked, "Have we done something to insult the establishment?"

"Of course not, madam."
"Is dinner over? I hardly feel as though I've eaten."
"Your entrée will arrive shortly. Is there something wrong with the sherbet?"
"Well, my dear, I'm not accustomed to eating dessert in the middle of my meal. Am I getting the bum's rush?"

"Flora?" Dice looked up from her sherbet and smiled for the first time that evening.

The waiter's mustache drooped. He exhaled a serious sigh. "Madam, nothing could be further from the truth. Believe me when I say, your patronage, ladies, honors us."

Flora sat resting her hands on either side of the sherbet plate, her eyes darting to one side and the other. Flora's innocence pulled her daughter's heartstrings and Dice brought her napkin lightly to her lips holding it there.

The waiter selected a spoon from the table handing it to Flora who stared up at him. "You don't have to call me "madam." My name is Flora Stravinsky. What's yours?" The unaffected nature of Flora's person filled Dice with immediate joy, a rare experience that tickled her spine and the back of her neck, compelling her to laugh in delight dropping the napkin.

"I'm Robert," the waiter said, "and I'm going to share a secret with you, Flora." He shot Dice a knowing glance and turned his attention back to Flora. "The sherbet is my favorite part of the meal. I always eat a small scoop just before my entrée to clear my pallet. It establishes a frame of reference for what comes after. One might say it orders the taste buds to stand at attention."
Flora, uncertain though willing to adventure, dipped her spoon into the sherbet and nibbled a bit. "I'll be damned! I believe they are standing at attention. Thank you, Robert."

After he left, Flora leaned across the table. "He's a very nice young man, and we're on a first name basis. I could fix you up. Are those tears on your face, Dice?"

"No, Flora." Dice dabbed at her cheeks and under her eyes with the napkin, then returned it to her lap. "It's strange, you know, I was so young when you left. I have so little to remember, but somehow I did remember. I remembered that you were like this. Just this way. Why did you leave Daddy? I can't see him as an overbearing mate."

"I never knew a gentler man. I left him because of who I was."

"I don't know who you were. I haven't got clue who you are."

"Do you want to find out?" Two new waiters brought the entrée, a selection of dishes: small plates of cooked carrots, and two large plates of apricot duckling stuffed with snow peas and crisp water chestnuts. One of the waiters poured ice water and lit a candle that flickered against the wall.

"No," Dice said. For her, the tender moment passed. "Yes, then. This could be mildly entertaining."

Flora chewed, mesmerized by the flame. Her eyes opened wide and then narrowed in deep consideration. "To begin, growing up in Idaho, in this country, I was sheltered. The wars were always somewhere, over there. Never here. Never in my back yard. Oh, I lived through a depression, but never any famines, no marauding Cossacks." She poked at the duck with her knife. "No family members ever disappeared in the middle of the night, except for your great aunt. Yes, quite often she'd vanish, but she'd show up the next day three sheets to the wind. The woman was a juicer. The family curse, you know. A parade of men and back alley abortions."

The two ate silently for a few moments and Flora looked once into her lap out of habit to watch her legs beneath the table. The cloth still covered her, breaking at the knees. When she looked up, Dice chewed and swallowed staring at her. "You still haven't told me."

"Told you what? Farming was our life. Plant, harvest, plant, harvest. Year in and year out. I just thought, as soon as I grew old enough to think, there must be something more. I
realized a small piece of myself, my body and mind a miracle, at the least a wonder, and I found it increasingly difficult to believe that the purpose of my valuable priceless life was to squat and plant vegetables. Of course, in those years women were schooled, only in so far as it was necessary, to become good wives and mothers." Flora shook her head remembering. She sipped a glass of ice water.

"Well, your schooling didn't take," Dice said. "How did Grandma react when you said you didn't want to farm? I envy you that day."

"Envy?" Flora clutched at her fork squeezing it.

"Yes. At least you had the chance to rebel."

"You mean like you're doing now? A little dig here and there?" Flora smiled.

"You owe me," Dice said. She extracted a tortoise shell pillbox from her handbag and popped it open. Placing a small tablet on the end of her tongue, she sipped at her water while Flora watched. Dice's hair stuck matted against her forehead and sweat beaded up rolling down the sides of her face. She looked back down at her plate continuing to slice her duck.

"My parents," Flora spoke slowly, "were not the ones to ask about the meaning of life. For them, being able to farm and worship without the threat of death hanging over their heads was miracle enough. 'It's proof of God!' my father used to say. He was a religious Jew. A devout man. Or possibly a fearful man. I don't know. From watching him, I caught the idea that religion, at least the way we Westerners come by it, is inextricably connected to our deepest fears. Fears he would never talk about. The terrors of the old country. Oh, it was a hard life all right, but it wasn't my life. I never faced life through fear, not that kind. You know, I believe I was born embracing life, all of it, the good and the bad. Yes!"

"You'll pardon me if I mention that you ran out on your child. Not very embracing, would you say?"

Flora concentrated, moving food around her plate without eating, the remains of her duck getting cold. "I remember him praying the Jewish prayer, thanking God he was not born a woman."

"Who?"
"My father. Aren't you listening?"

Irritated, Dice threw down her fork and picked up her napkin.

"Well," Flora continued, "I'd been growing away from the farm, and my parents, and everything they believed in, and when I heard that prayer, it was just too much. I ran out of the house as far into the fields as I could, and when I was certain no one could hear me, I screamed bloody murder at the crows and corn."

"You're still angry, aren't you?" Dice asked.

"Wouldn't you be? I've never forgiven Papa for being that kind of man."

"You've never forgiven?"

"What?" Flora asked.

"You just shouldn't be angry," Dice said. "That's all."

"Don't get me wrong. In his own way, I knew he loved me. I loved him dearly. Both he and my mother, but they'd taken the fall." Flora paused searching Dice's eyes. "They were no longer perfect in my eyes, and by then I'd lost faith in Judaism entirely. That's when I began to read.

First, I read the New Testament thinking I'd become a Christian, thinking that would piss off the old man! But the more I read of Christian values, and the more I became aware of the chasm between their values and the way Christians actually lived—they were never very charitable to me, if you get my drift."

Dice studied Flora's face, the way she moved her hands and the texture of her skin. She pictured Eastern Europe. Flora's blue veins triggered visions of rivers, the Volga, bitter ocean voyages to America. The culmination of generations past lived in her mother's eyes, and Dice found it strange how she'd looked in the mirror so many times yet never seen any history.

"I realized," Flora said, "that the entire mode of Western religious thought created few truly fulfilled human beings. I may have been young and stupid, but I yearned for fulfillment. I wanted to know why I was alive. Finally, I came across an obscure piece in a book; which book I didn't understand, but that one piece made sense; when the earth was first formed, the necessary elements for life did not exist on this planet. Ancient heavenly bodies exploded sending pieces of
themselves careening through space, and these pieces crossed the earth's path and deposited the elements that would become life's building blocks on our planet."

"It suddenly struck me that my birth was ancient, as old as the stars, that I was born out of the universe, not into it! And so it was for all of us, that this ancient birth was a quality all life shared in common. For the first time I saw a fragment of the mind of God directly and I realized how deep my search had become, and would continue to become, because it was a search to know God directly. I'd crossed from the exoteric doctrine to the edge of the esoteric truth. And, my dear, I wanted off that goddamned farm! What are you smiling about?"

"You. I could almost warm to you if I weren't furious."

"You shouldn't be," Flora said.

"Don't pull that crap. We're not talking about the same thing."

"A grudge is a grudge." Flora's eyes traveled across the room. "Well, anyway, I guess in the throes of my adolescent depression I was still an optimist. I just knew that I was born for some great good stuff!"

Words glued themselves together in Dice's throat where she thought she had no feelings.

"Why did you finally leave after you had me? Why not before? And getting married? And to compound matters, knowing how you felt, getting pregnant? I respect the search to find yourself, though I've never felt the need for it." Dice tapped her finger hard on the table. "But what you did was wrong. They sat silently until a dish dropped in the kitchen. "The way you did it was wrong. You hurt me and you hurt Daddy, and yes, he was a good man, but never a strong man. You knew that."

"It's all true."

"That's all you can say? Well, Flora, there's nothing you can do about it now. You know something, I don't think you even care."

"That's not fair," Flora said, feeling hopeless. "Do you know how difficult this is for me? To sit across from my child knowing she hates me." She lowered her voice. "Why don't you just cut my throat?"
Witnessing her mother's distress only increased Dice's quiet rage. "There are laws," she said, "against that sort of thing. Besides, I don't care enough to hate you that much."

"Oh, yes, you do."

"Why did you leave me! I needed you!" Dice's fingers tapped wildly without direction. "What on earth do you think you can say today to make the difference?"

"You can't know, Dice. Women didn't have the options available that you have. You sit there judging me, but you can't know."

"Perhaps. And if I weren't angry I'd listen." She casually waved a hand in the air signaling for more wine. "So, go ahead. I'm listening."

"We were raised to believe our sole purpose in life was to make a home. Women were not raised to assess challenges and overcome them. We were not raised to examine our lives. I had to hide my philosophy books from my parents. What could philosophy or comparative religion, or books on faraway lands have to do with scouring an oven?" Flora shut her eyes watching ideas and bits of memories running for their lives.

"The worst part was that my parents never really became Americanized. The old way was the only way, and they'd already selected my husband for me. Of course, my dear, I couldn't possibly love a man who'd even buy into such a scheme! I fought bitterly with my mother who said love was a folk tale, and that in time I'd grow content. Women did not walk the earth unescorted. It wasn't like your world. We were not warriors. To be single was to be stigmatized. And, I'll tell you this, not to be a parent and a grandparent, well, a woman was ostracized."

Dice shook within.

"For myself I didn't care," Flora said. "Perhaps I always knew it wasn't meant to last; the marriage, I mean. Still, every time I went to visit my parents, they'd look at me with this simplistic hope in their eyes. You must understand that with all of their faults I loved them. I was angry at them and I loved them, and so often I felt my actions were driven by confusion rather than well conceived. I can only say now that they were victims of their time." Flora stared directly at Dice. "As we're all victims of our time."
"It doesn't make it better to find out I wasn't conceived out of love. I'm a product of cultural victimization? What are you trying to do to me!"

"Tell you the truth! I owe you that. I owe you more. To tell you that when you were born I loved you deeply and completely, and that also is the truth."

"No." Silent tears welled in Dice's eyes.

"But my own life," Flora said, "was not without serious reservations. It reached a point where I didn't feel I was worth much to myself or to you. I knew your father was a good man and that you'd be well cared for. I only intended to leave for a short time. Just to clear my mind. It wasn't my intention to leave you for all of these years. For you to grow up without a mother."

"Not your intention? Did you have intentions for me? Did you think about me? I guess there's no point in my asking if you ever loved Daddy."

Quick hands cleared dishes and poured two cups of hot coffee. Dice barely noticed.

"I guess he was a kind man, your father, but he was never my man. We hadn't chosen each other. He never professed his love."

"I didn't know it was arranged. He never told me he loved me either, but he gave me the best he could manage. I assumed—I know he missed you. Daddy never stopped missing you."

"When—" Flora began.

"Five years ago. Cancer," Dice said. "Please, don't tell me you're sorry." She stirred two sugars into her coffee gazing at the swirling liquid. Again they maintained silence for a long time.

"I did what I did for others for as long as I could, and then one day I just couldn't do it anymore." Flora's voice dropped an octave. "I had a baby to carry on the family name, to make my father a proud grandparent, to help me to believe I felt more for my husband than I really did. Perhaps, that he felt more for me. I had you for all the wrong reasons, and I was seriously distressed at what I'd done," Dice clenched her jaw while Flora spoke," and I was awed by this helpless infant in my arms. So perfect. So beautiful. You were a piece of my soul looking up at me with the largest eyes I'd ever seen."
"I'm not getting it," Dice said. "There's a missing piece. My whole life there's been a
missing piece."

"The missing piece is that I went from my parent's farm to my husband's house. I had no
idea what it meant to be alive, to live, and I was selfish, Dice. It seemed to me that every breath I
took was for someone else, never for me. So, I left. And one day I was in Paris—"

"But you had me. You made choices."

"Listen to me!" Flora pounded the table with her tiny fist. "A mother doesn't choose to
leave her baby. What I did was a desperate act to fill my lungs with something real before I
asphyxiated in a life of mediocrity!"

"You rationalize your actions like a criminal," Dice said.

"Do you think I had it easy? My dear, the moment I acted on a thought of my own I
became a cultural anathema. Not only did I lose you, but I lost the love of any man."

"Why any man?"

"Because, men are not so strong after all. In the end, after leading their campaigns to
struggle for existence, they're only victims of their time. Victims of their own narrow vision. I
was never on a par with men, and they had nothing whatever to say to me. I was there to do for
my man what I could no longer do. I cast myself out and I was cast out. And in Paris, one day I
was sitting in a café drinking bitter coffee and reading Socrates, something about man's various
states of delusion and the unexamined life not having any value. I decided then that I would
continue on to my original destination; Tibet. Politically and culturally the country was still in
turmoil, and women did not travel unescorted. But I wanted what I wanted, so, I went."

Dice saw a deep purposeful quality growing in Flora's eyes. She supposed that the details
of Flora's time in Tibet were still fresh as her mother spoke. "I believed—and I hope you can
understand this—that if I gave up everything I knew, or thought I knew of the world, I would
find the truth unclouded by convention. That if I found that truth, everything and everyone would
be the better for it. I thought then I could come home and make a real difference in your life. At
least that's how I pictured it at the time. I'm not saying I wasn't wrong. And, I'm not saying I did
it for you, that it was a selfless action." Pausing, she bit her lower lip. "Only that the culture, the
world I lived in then, was not an excuse, but a set of extenuating circumstances, and," she smiled, "District Attorney Dice Stravinsky, I ask you to temper your judgment not only with the letter of the law, but as a wise woman, with the spirit of the law. The people rest." Flora giggled.

"Who am I to judge your life, Flora?" Dice talked herself into believing it for the moment. "I suppose I have no man. I'm anathema to good men because of my position. God, it's hot in here. Let's just go on with our lives. Can we do that?"

"Dice," Flora leaned back in her chair signaling a busboy to clear the cups, "when did it begin?"

"What do you mean, it?" She wiped a strand of hair off her forehead.

"You're pre-menopausal, dear."

"It's apparent?"

"You know," Flora said waiting for the busboy to leave, "a woman now may live as she wishes, commit the crime with a free conscience, but the sentence will always be the same. Over and over: birth, menopause, death; birth, menopause, death; birth, menopause, death."

"That's all I have to look forward too?" Dice took the napkin off her lap and threw it on the table.

Flora grinned. "Well, in between there's sex and love, sex and money, sex and exploitation, or just sex. And then there's you."

"You're funny. I really should have read more of your writing. Every now and again a gardening piece pops up."

"Oh, don't feel bad. I only wrote a piece now and again, when the money got lean. Not anymore. I'd much rather garden than write about it. But what about you?"

"Me?" Dice asked. "I would say I've chosen accomplishment, self discipline, and tenacity. The will to power."

"Madam President."

"You think my life's a joke? Flora, I'm about to become the next state attorney general."

"I apologize. Your life is certainly not a joke. You've accomplished a great deal."

"Then why am I—"
Flora jumped, "Don't say it. Never say 'unhappy'. It's too damned ambiguous. Always be precise with yourself. Hard on yourself. Force yourself to look within for a direct answer."

"Then why am I, empty and alone?"

Flora spoke without hesitation. "You're already fulfilled and complete, you just haven't recognized it. You were born out of this world, a fertile product of the soil, the mulch of human history, amazingly complex and deep." She leaned in close, "Although, a good stiff might open your eyes. I'll bet it's been awhile, what with your rise to power, dear."

"Flora!" Dice's hot flash evaporated. *She's not the woman I remember.*

"Oh my, that must have been my dementia talking."

Dice stared at her.

"Which," Flora said, "brings me to the purpose of my wish to invite you into my life. I'm dying."

"What do you mean you're dying?"

"I mean sometimes I forget things, like what I'm talking about or where it is I'm going or where I am. I mean that my kidney function is low, I have hardening of the arteries, my blood pressure is creeping up, my parts are wearing down; I'm dying."

"You bitch." Dice stood at her seat.

"What?"

"Bitch!" She picked up her handbag flinging it over her shoulder. "What did you think you were going to do? Seduce me back as your daughter and then die on me? Once was enough."

"Dice, sit down, please."

"Fine, lady," she sat clutching her bag, squeezing white knuckles, "but when this evening's done, it's over."

"Any guilt I have, any remorse, can't change what I've done. But I can do something for you now. There's something you need that I can give you. That I want to give you."

Dice remained a slab of cold granite.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me what it is?"
She only folded her arms looking off into the room. Candlelight flickered at all the tables. The street outside had grown dark. Dice had grown dark.

"I want you to have my garden."

"Thank you, I don't have time," Dice said.

"You have a great deal of time," Flora said. "However, my dear, I do not. You also have a great deal to learn and I can help you to learn it. I need someone to live with me now that I'm in this predicament. I'm afraid about putting water on to boil. Or I might go out into the garden and end up lost. Driving myself around on errands is out of the question."

"Learning to plant won't help me win an election. And as far as taking care of you? You've got your nerve. Where were you when I needed you?"

"You need me most now, and I'm here for you. Learning to garden is more than planting, and it's exactly what you need. If ever a woman lived who needs to garden, it's you."

"This is ludicrous. I should never have come here tonight."

"I might have a year, Dice. Give me that year. I'm your mother! Allow me to be here for you. Give Rose Cottage a year."

"I've done fine on my own." Dice stood again. "I'm leaving. Good-bye, Flora. Thank you so much."
CHAPTER 4—ASK FLORA


Q. Dear Flora:

In a previous column—I've been a fan since your Santa Rosa days— you peaked my curiosity with a statement; "To work with virtue is to never be alone in Her garden." Would you care to elaborate?

Signed,

Her

A. Dear Her:

First, I was a star. Later, I crawled out from the ocean or from under a rock, as you wish. Oh, and then I became a huntress. In those ancient times it was my virtue, my nature to live for the moment. As you can see, I was constantly evolving. Evolution is my natural virtue. I grew to desire continuation, a future. I became a part of the universe that possesses a self-nature wishing to sustain its life. This takes planning. Quite naturally, planting and waiting to harvest became as important as the hunt; tomorrow became as important as today, and I became a farmer. It became my virtue to tend the garden.

At this time, to garden is my true nature, and just as a flower must bloom, I must dig, compost, seed, and nurture. The garden is open to my activity, my energy, allowing me to invade the privacy of its soil to create change. In turn, I am changed to more intuitive a grounds keeper, if I have allowed the natural process to invade my private self. Nature, whether a flower or a human being, exists as an act of cooperative evolution.
Each morning I feel a deep compulsion to throw on my old mud encrusted gardener's duds and begin the day by walking the garden, by touching, smelling, seeing, partaking in the experience of the seasons, sloshing along in my rubber boots listening to the morning harmony of sparrows, jays, and the occasional dove.

My American birth to Russian born farmers may have been a coincidence, but I'd rather think of it as the choice of an unborn soul to land close to the ground, the infant soul of a virtual gardener. Perhaps the word "virtue" has been misused as a moral quality and should instead be defined pragmatically; a thing being what it is meant to be, a person working as they are meant to work. Virtue, in the natural world, is not a stagnant quality, but a force from within driving the evolution of anything and all things to become what they virtually are.

Each winter when my roses hibernate, and my trees lose their leaves and stare at me through my windows like bony old men, and all of my efforts seem for naught because my bushes do not bush and my trailing vines cease to vine, I still walk the garden, the skeleton of a once lush bounteous affair, and with numb toes and cold hands I try to remember I'm not alone; that this plot of barren land is alive with a silent powerful virtue. I tell myself to feed and weed, and turn the earth no matter how cold and thankless the task, because by following my nature, what I call living virtuously, I allow and assist the virtue of the garden.

Ask Flora!

Address your letters to: Flora Stravinsky/Rose Cottage
P.O.B. 2649
Los Angeles, Calif. 90327
CHAPTER 5—MEN; SOME ARE GOOD, AND SOME ARE GOOD FOR DOORSTOPS

Judge Franklin Estes, wearing his drug store cheaters half way down his nose, lounged below the giant sycamore reading The Register, a legal newspaper which he folded in half vertically concentrating on one column at a time. In his cotton driving cap and golf sweater, sleeves pushed above his elbows, he appeared to be stopping in Los Angeles along the Western States Masters Golf Tour. His dry lips barely moved absorbed in the text of a new amendment concerning immigration—squinting and scratching—when a body settled next to him on the bench. He never looked up while reading The Register, a torture he endured efficiently.

"It's a fine amendment, Dice. Completely unintelligible. Wide open to interpretation. It could be about persons, chimpanzees, or fruit. Wonderful! It leaves me free to pursue the spirit of justice unfettered by law. Why, by the time the A.C.L.U. figures out whose rights I've encroached upon, I'll be debating justice with the Devil. I like it!" The judge grinned still reading.

"It's that bad?" Dice settled in feeling a gentle breeze and watched the pigeons land and take off again.

"Atrocious. I can't decide whether it's about immigration or importation. Let's see..." He unfolded the paper, struggling, turning pages in the lazy wind. "Huh, the obits. Now, these I understand."

"Don't tell me you're checking for your name. I've heard old men do that." She flipped up the corduroy collar of her jean jacket.

The judge noticed her sneakers out of the corner of one eye. "You're not working today?"
She feigned interest in the classifieds on the back page. Judge Estes snapped his paper tight. "For me, reading the obituaries is like doping out the racing form. I have a system. I compute the number of bodies and their ages, and then I divide the body count into the total years. This gives me the average age of expiration, and then based on my own age I can figure the odds of my waking up tomorrow morning. If it looks good, I call Marty, my golf partner, and tell him we'll tee-off." The judge's lips twitched, one hoary eye opening wide. "Shit!"

"Did you trim your toenails last night, Frank? That's how they tag you, old man." Dice laid a hand on the judge's shoulder. "They'll tie a string around your big toe."

He bared his teeth growling under his breath. "I'm an optimist. I'll call Marty anyway."

He creased back the pages, rolled up the paper and held it in his lap. Silently he turned towards her. The judge trusted in silence. It stood alone as his favorite technique for drawing people out, allowing humanity to reveal themselves or hang themselves. Silence dangled a long rope, a weapon, a known method of criminal interrogation or a friendly hand used with great love, if one really cared. Today the judge sensed a friend batfouled by a sand trap. Being a pro, he extended himself allowing a silence that begged to be filled.

He unwrinkled a brown paper sack on the bench and pulled out a slice of white bread. Tearing off small pieces, working in circles beginning with the crust, he tossed them a few feet away onto the ground where gray pigeons strutted pecking at dirty paper and foil bits. No talking. Not a whisper. Not a sound from the judge. A good jurist, he thought, is aware that the desire to fill empty space, to organize it with meaning relative to one's life, is deeply embedded in us all, and all there is to do is to wait.

"Frank, you're driving me crazy!" Dice blurted out.

"Don't blame your pre-existing condition on me," the judge said, still smiling and tossing bread.

"Are you calling me insane?"

"You called me old! Say, look at that one. He's brown and white. Probably a homer. When I was kid in Flatbush, I raised homing pigeons on the roof." The judge lapsed back into silence having given up as much advantage as he dared. A strong wind rushed and subsided,
blowing leaves across the ground, scattering breadcrumbs and knocking around the large birds like bowling pins. The brown and white pigeon strutted figure eights away from the group, dipping and stretching his white-ringed head, cooing, playing his game close enough to steal leftovers.

"She called," Dice finally said. The judge stuffed the bread back in the bag and twisted it. He turned taking her hand. "We had dinner. She's dying, Frank."

"Dice, I gave Flora your number."

"I don't understand."

"I belong to The Antique Rose Society and I ran into her, this must be several years ago, at an A.R.S. exhibition in Griffith Park. She reviewed the show for a local publication. I didn't know who she was at first, and then we started talking and introduced ourselves. One thing led to another. Flora and I took in a show together at the planetarium. A nice evening. A different kind of woman, your mother. Not odd. Just—well—different."

"You knew? You knew my mother lived twenty minutes away and you never said anything? Didn't you think I had a right to know?"

"I didn't feel it was my place."

"But you gave her my private number."

"I knew you'd want me to." He shook his finger in her face. "Call me a meddler, but I've known you a long time. I knew, even if you didn't. Flora though," Judge Estes removed his driving cap running his fingers through strands of hair, "she's another matter. I didn't know how she felt. However, she wasn't dying at the time." He slapped the cap back on his head ripping it a sharp quarter turn. "Anyway, when you never mentioned her calling, I forgot about it." Judge Estes stuffed his rolled newspaper under one spindly leg. He rocked forward on the bench, gripping the metal seat with both hands and glanced away.

"She wants me to inherit Rose Cottage. I've never even seen it." Dice reached into the judge's brown bag and pulled out a slice of bread. Depressed, she tore off a corner chewing it dry.
"I drove her home once," the judge recalled. "It's an unobtrusive little number over the hills in the valley." He brought his attention back around to Dice. "The kind of place you'd drive right by."

"How's the garden? She expects me to drop everything and take care of her and her garden. It's a heavy responsibility. Old people—" Dice caught herself, "Seniors, I mean, they're so needy."

"She invited me in for tea," the judge said, exercising eyes as wide as two saucers, remembering an amazing incident. "Asked me if I enjoyed Mendelssohn and turned on the radio. Asked me first if I liked Mendelssohn and then turned on the radio. Now, that was odd. It was playing Mendelssohn." He slapped the bench with both hands.

"There's something else you should know. She's the worst housekeeper I've ever seen. I was afraid to drink anything out of her cups. We shared the garden, and then I ran before nature called, so I wouldn't have to see the bathroom. For some reason, from Flora I didn't mind all that. The garden? The garden was lovely; though your question is sarcastic I'm sure."

"Did you hear what I said, Frank? She wants me to live with her, take care of her. She thinks she has about a year. I can't afford the extra weight. If I take a year off now, I give up the election." Dice brushed crumbs off her skirt realizing when the pigeons ran, wings flapping boldly around her new white sneakers, that she'd made a mistake.

The judge laughed.

"I've achieved a certain stride in my career," Dice tried ignoring the birds. "I'll be breaking that stride. Besides, I don't know the woman. She was never there for me. Why should I care? You may not believe this to look at me now, but there was a time I could've used a mother."

The judge sat mum.

Dice stared at him, waiting, but nothing seemed forthcoming from the old man. She turned away pointing her chin into the wind. "I don't care and I'm not going. So, she dies. So what?"
The judge twisted craning his head skyward first and then stared at his feet. All the pigeons cozened up on Dice's side. He laughed again.

"Will you just say something already?"

"I have two sons." He moderately shouted, "Jason, after my father, and Frank Jr. I know they're my sons because I have a vague memory of them growing up in my house, causing trouble the way boys do. Giving their mother heartaches and headaches. But, they were her problems. My job was to pay the bills. I studied law days and worked for the department of sanitation nights and early mornings. I wallowed in other people's garbage and I paid the bills. Between all of that, I clerked, and then I graduated, and then I litigated, and I paid more bills. Then I taught. I taught you and I'm proud of that. And I paid more bills, and then one day I found myself sitting on the bench, a stock portfolio, older, staying home nights and weekends."

"I wanted to play with the boys, but the house grew quiet. Boys become men and they leave, and I tried calling them on the telephone, but the conversations were painfully lackluster. Forced. They didn't want to know me. They were young men and they didn't need to know their father. They felt no need to fill in the blanks. I bought them the finest education, though I never took the time to personally impart one ounce of my hard-learned wisdom."

"I'm sorry."

"Let me finish." The judge yanked the newspaper from under his leg smacking the roll on his lap. Dice felt he might cry. "I haven't seen or heard from Frank Jr. for fifteen years. We had an argument. He accused me of not caring, not being available to him. He disappeared after his mother died. Sometimes I stare at the telephone. I hope it'll ring, but I know that it won't."

"And the other one... Jason is in a white collar prison for selling office buildings that were not his to sell."

"Couldn't you help him?"

"I paid for a comfortable cell. He's guilty." Judge Estes took a deep breath and sighed. "I confused education with wisdom. I confused making a living with helping others to live."
"I want my boys back, Dice, and I'll never have them. What I did is unforgivable. I must be a miserable human being. I must deserve this, this being alone. A jurist is a listener. I wasn't listening."

Dice hugged the old golfer. "You're a very good man who made mistakes. We all make mistakes. Your sons are responsible for their lives, not their father."

"Thank you. You know, often I've thought that my own father made mistakes, and that I just had to find the personal strength to rise above them. 'We all make mistakes,' holds little compensation. The only solace I find is in rising above our mistakes and the mistakes of others. I believe, after three-quarters of a lifetime, I've discovered a tidbit of truth. The justice in erring is the strength gained, if we're so inclined, to take advantage of the opportunity."

***

Senator Bill Titan sunk into his sofa tossing a pillow onto the coffee table for his beefy feet. He'd just stepped out of the shower wearing a heavy brown monk's robe with a hood he never used; given as a gift from a lady friend who entertained religious fantasies and whose only request of Bill was that he take a vow of silence whenever they got together.

Bill too, understood the value of silence—silence on the senate floor while others offered up their careers like raw meat to the media during televised debates. He drank his way through silent liquid power lunches with fellow legislators, dazzling them, using quiet genius until they proposed a "can't lose" strategy, and he'd smile confidently congratulating the table for coming around to his way of thinking.

Bill's political career witnessed its shining on the stooped shoulders of his father's political maxim, delivered to his son in the slow drawling dialect of the Alabama region. "Sir, never make a public decision, and for God's sake never act on one, and you will be known as a gentleman of great accomplishment."

Sitting in his Brentwood living room, jockeying the television remote, the senator faced a decision. This he found impossible. He pushed buttons furiously twitching his muscle bound red
thumb, the pressure of choice building inside his veins, pulsing in his shoulders, and he might have blistered his thumb, however a drop of water rolled down the back of his neck. He slapped at it just when the doorbell rang.

Dice casually swung a wine bottle by its neck, dry yet creamy, a libation for sealing the door on an old life or christening a new one. She agreed to live with Flora; her sentence, a year at hard labor in the garden. She would spend this last night fucking the Impalor, a man who truly didn't give a damn, not that he represented strength, intelligence, or possessed any quality worth being confident about. Senator Bill Titan functioned as every woman's doorstop. He reminded her of a waiting dog.

Posing first in the threshold with dark mysteriously hollow bedroom eyes, hair flowing freely down an ivory white neck; touching it softly she brushed past the astonished senator finding the kitchen. He stood at the door while she searched his drawers for a corkscrew and cupboards for glasses, and she called to him, "Why don't you sit down on the sofa, Bill. I'll be a minute." He heard the atonal clink of ice cubes dropping into their glasses. "What were you watching on television?"

"Television? Oh, I don't know." He closed the door and turned to view his living room. "Too much cable. Too many stations. I oughta trash the whole thing: television, cable, the antenna, and the dish thingy, all of it. Donate it for a tax write-off. So, honey, what about me finally broke down your defenses?"

She worked the cork elbows high, however, that question stopped her cold. She dropped her arms looking up at him over the service counter.

Bill stood at the other end of the living room in the shadows, his hands shoved into his robe pockets. He faced her quietly waiting, soon realizing his mistake; if he worked as hard on her for as long as he had, it didn't say much for him. Walking over to the sofa he plopped down while Dice uncorked their wine. For the moment Bill decided on happiness.

Dice moved barefoot padding over thick carpeting, squeezing wool between her toes, and carrying two full wine glasses. "You don't want to give up on TV just yet," she suggested. "You might find you have time to read a book, and then what would you do?" She set the glasses on
his coffee table and moved slowly out of the senator's field of vision, though he sensed her proximity without turning his head.

"I know that was an insult. You're not stroking my good side, Dice."

"Don't worry, I will," came a voice from behind him. He buzzed, feeling her long fingers running through his hair, massaging him, and she guided his head down against the back of the sofa kissing him with her moist half opened mouth. He felt her warmth across his face like a soft breeze on a hot summer night. "Were going to do this, Bill," she whispered, "and then we'll never do it again."

Bill reached over his head grabbing his prey, pulling her around the back of the sofa to land beside him, her head in his lap. She slipped a hand beneath his monk's robe lightly scratching his flesh with her long nails. He thought for two seconds, Works for me, knowing they never come back, except for the one with religious fantasies, and he was under oath.

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That she owned little to pack, and walking through room after room of boxes still sealed frightened Dice. She found no transition time, no excuse to put off moving for a few weeks while gathering things together. Her existence spread itself out in anticipation of immediate departure, a new life before inhaling.

The bed laid unmade, sheets twisted, the closet doors flung open and dresser drawers pulled out. In subdued afternoon light, she searched for a beginning—which objects hard or soft, square or irregular in shape to place in the brown cardboard carton sitting at her feet. She allowed herself the freedom to live in the tiny bedroom, to imbue it with her nature, though not many things symbolizing her life shown on the shelves.

She chose her first object; a framed black and white photograph of young Flora standing high above the horizon line in a crowd smiling and waving from behind a railing. Dice examined the picture and for the first time observed carefully the hand on the rail. Her mother did not wear a wedding ring. She wondered if her father knew that day at the docks when they'd gone to see
Flora off. Dice only remembered the bitter cold sky and she recalled with effort the red painted railing. Had they engaged in conversation? She sat on the edge of the bed feeling the frame, trying to remember.

Her mother's voice, pure as a thin brass bell, spoke across the years, "I don't know, my dearest little one. But when I get there I'll write telling you how much I love you." Then Dice stood below a tall man, below his knees. Grabbing his fingers and looking up she saw an expression pass between him and Flora, and Flora disappeared into the crowd weaving her way up the long gangplank. Everything in Dice's mind existed in black and white except the red railing.

Dice couldn't remember what she felt at the time, although, now staring into the picture she saw a woman who offered the appearance of being there while her eyes betrayed a great distance already traversed.

Dice recalled sitting in a coffee shop later that day. The table rested just under her chin and she watched her father pour cream from a shiny steel container with a lid that flopped up and down on its hinge. He stirred a teaspoon of sugar into his steaming cup and sipped at it. He calmly observed her and she heard herself speak. "What now, Daddy?"

"Well, what do you mean, what now, Dice?"

"When will Mommy be back? Will she cook dinner for us?"

Her father smiled an eternally sad smile leaning his elbows on the table. "Kid, it's you and me. Mommy's gonna be gone for quite a while, I suspect."

He added more cream and stirred again buying a reflective moment. When next he searched his child's face, it was with grave concern wondering how far he might push the envelope, explaining to one so young why people do the things they do. Dice saw it now, the dark tired stubble on his cheeks and neck as he drew his large face close to her small one. "People like me, we take life as it comes," he said in an even-tempered voice, "and if we manage to ride out the waves we're satisfied. Of course, that's all we get out of life is satisfaction. Now, people like your mother, well, they're special. They go looking for life, searching for it. They jump head first into the ocean."
"Did Mommy jump into the ocean?" Dice thought the ocean must be a cold place.

"Did she ever. And is she ever special. We have to hope Mommy finds happiness."

"How do you know you're special?"

"I don't know, but she knew. She knew it for a long time. It's just as well she's gone. Our situation wasn't right for her. You see, your grandparents wanted the American dream for us. But Mommy has a different dream. I can't say I understand it. She's left me no choice but to accept it."

"Daddy, can you cook dinner? I'm not allowed to touch the stove."

Dice searched her drawers for the only other thing to remind her of Flora; a letter from the East speaking of sure-footed burros, mountain passes, and secret villages with temples, along with a "wretched little people" whose eyes closed against the wind. Her eyes fell upon the last two lines, lines that struck her oddly since childhood. "We will meet again, as if for the first time, and you will be much older, and I will be younger. You will be the mother and I will be the child, and we will need each other because that is the way with mothers and daughters."
CHAPTER 6--DIGGING THE MOON

"...I cleared myself
I sacrificed my blues
And you could complete me
I'd complete you...

~Joni Mitchell, Court And Spark

Dice cringed behind the wheel of her Jaguar driving slowly, peering out the side window, seeing only third-hand automobiles strung together by rusted bailing wire and parked in the dirt; the spirits of gas-guzzlers up on blocks on front lawn, after front lawn, after front lawn. Children played running among broken machines, some hiding and smoking and drinking beer, while in odd crumpled cars people slept. Fords functioned as living rooms and Chevrolets bedrooms.

Hideously ugly. She neared the end of East Town Street. A new misplaced yuppie development stuck out of the neighborhood like a wet fresh lump of gray clay, someone's idea of a tax advantage, worse, and a political notion to save the city. Driving at a glowworm's pace, a dog ran in front of the Jaguar. Dice slammed the brakes screeching six feet to a stop. An old black and cream-gray shepherd stood dazed, appearing confused at Dice's windshield in the middle of East Town Street. She swore it smiled, and struggling with hip dysplasia the animal hobbled another few feet collapsing on the spot, laying itself down to nap its belly against the sun baked asphalt.

Pulling over to the curb, the end of the dirt where actual pavement sprang into being, Dice released her seat belt and breathed. She sat examining the San Fernando Valley neighborhood, straining to see through people's windows. She attempted reading stylized graffiti
on a worn beige block wall running between the yuppie development and a leaning ticky-tacky
stucco house. Fuzzy black spray paint ate into her viscera, feeling dangerous, possessing
violence of its own design like an angry painting by Mata—she'd viewed one mounted at the
Museum of Contemporary Art briefly on her lunch hour—and whatever they meant, the words
violated the neighborhood. They raped the wall. Dice, hiding in her Jaguar, felt psychologically
violated and vulnerable, helplessly trapped, immersed in a fathomless depression.

She inhabited the wealthy universe above these things below; the grounding of L.A., the
City of Angels at night. She wondered if these people, these groundlings experienced depression.

This, she thought, is the kind of neighborhood where people get murdered. Since Flora's
call, a long-closed door squeaked open. Dice did not welcome the change.

"The city can be criminal," he'd caught her lost in graffiti, "a mine field, the killing floor,
a thing impossible to read unless you have eyes for it. Of course, there are always dogs. You get
a dog and make a life for yourself. It's a beautiful little thing we do." A gaunt swarthy gentleman
attired in a black sport coat thrown over a black heavy tee-shirt, flexing long arms and longer
legs placed one arm on top of her car leaning his perfect face to the window, shades hiding
serious dark caves, he grinned using fluid lips, shining white teeth through a gentle close cropped
beard, ebony hairs turning gray. Dice jumped a little, relaxed just a little. The stranger, a sapphire
gleaming in his smooth ear, smiled sink down into your leather seat gorgeous. "My dog, Shep,
thanks you for letting him live. There are those who would have kept on going." He spoke deep
and soft and rhythmic, as if producing sound were an art.

"My god, why would they do that?" I care. I really do. And—I mean—aside from your
animal, you're a half-gallon of strawberry ice cream, rocky road flesh. With one hand, you could
have me.

"He's been known to kill chickens."

Dice laughed, but soon realized the man's serious expression.

"I'm in earnest," he said. "In this neighborhood they're religious about, umm, their
livestock. Like mother India, only waving a sombrero."

"You're not zoned for livestock."
"That's cool."
"No," Dice wanted to laugh, "that's not cool at all. It's a violation of zoning codes."
"Who are you, the district attorney? Don't tell anyone and we'll affect your escape. You'll have to leave the Jag behind though."
"What?" Dice's jaw dropped.
"I'm joking," he smiled. "I'm Sebastian Moon, and you must be here to see Flora."
"Should I ask how you knew? Not that I'd understand your answer and I don't mean to be rude, but has anyone ever told you, you have a different way of communicating?"
"'Different' is a word I've come to loath. Some things we get past, some not. Some things grow in one's life. 'Different' I don't care for, and if I had weed killer I'd use it. As to the other, you're parked in front of Rose Cottage. No one ever finds the place unless they're searching for it."
"Well, I didn't mean to offend you, Mr. Moon, but I am here to see Flora, so if you'll excuse me?"
"'Interesting'." He rubbed his beard. "That's the other word you need to know that I don't care for, that ought to be stricken, sweetheart, from every diseased, mite infested lexicon of English ever spoon fed to the great uncreative masses. 'Your poetry is interesting, Mr. Moon. Your vision certainly a different one.' And what do those words mean? I ask, and no clues are ever forthcoming. After forty-nine years of being different and interesting, you'd think I'd have learned to leave well enough alone."
"Yes, I've sacrificed my blues so that we might move along. I'm finished now." His easy smile returned. Shep yawned stepping lazily over to the curb, standing beside his master. Sebastian Moon scratched Shep's head gifting the dog with blatant unashamed love, and grabbed his snout kissing it. Shep yawned a high-pitched whine. "If you don't wish to love me, at least love my dog," Sebastian proclaimed.
"I love your dog," she said.
"You know, sweet thing, am I nuts or do you understand what I'm saying? Because I don't sense vacancy here. Often, I lose people. The fact that you haven't knocked me down and bolted I find shocking, even promising."

"No one is more shocked at this moment than I, Mr. Moon."

"We could go for coffee. Later, I mean."

"You realize," Dice said, "that you're a mental case. That I believe I'll regret this."

"Trust me, I'm holding it together nicely. Shep loves me. We'll sit on opposite sides of the table. We'll talk intimately maintaining great distance between us. What's your name?"

"I'm sorry, I should've said something. I'm Flora's daughter. I'm Dice."

He noticed luggage in her back seat. "You're here to stay? To take care of Flora?"

"Yes. That is—I think so. I'll try it."

"Please, call me Sebastian." He opened the door and collected her luggage. Dice noticed his sure fingers easily controlling the heft of her suitcases and sensed a casual restraint of strength. When she swung her legs out of the driver's side, Sebastian appeared sweeping in a natural stride reaching for her hand, grasping it genuinely and performing with a warmth Dice found electric.

Sebastian Moon did not strike her as a predator nor a financial equal, not an uncaring man. He exhibited none of the qualities she regarded in men or thought she looked for, because as of this moment nothing remained valid.

She studied the neighborhood, Rose Cottage, and Sebastian. The time arrived to cast dry skin, to throw away yesterday like old tea water. In the past few minutes this gentle man made her feel fresh. Sebastian and she ambled along the pathway towards Rose Cottage. "You don't seem to belong here, Sebastian."

"Semantics again? The word 'seem'.' He paused mid-path turning to her. "Did I tell you that words are an invasive procedure? That the correct word, the truthful word leaks into a person? Seem. Nothing is as it seems, not here. In the City of Angels we are all schizophrenic cross-dressers. I, Sebastian Ricardo Tomas Moon, am a Latino, but! ...I think," he whispered in low tones checking over his shoulder, "that I am an American. A Californian. An Angelino, and,
because my flesh is lighter than my brothers', on odd numbered days of the month I am certain that I am white and living in a stolen car; stolen from Mexico so long ago its identity is confused. It believes it is a 56' Gringo Coache."

He rubbed his beard with a free hand considering the brilliance of his own metaphor, deciding to use it later in an epic poem. "Do I wear a poncho and huaraches, or sneaks and an Armani jacket? The African-Angelinos want to know; the Vietnamese-Angelinos want to know; the Italian-Angelinos want to know; the Aussie-Angelinos want to know. The Russian, Polish, Latvian, Armenian-Angelinos are dying to find out! Which clothes belong to us? Which cars? Which neighborhoods do we 'seem' to belong in? Perhaps we are not ourselves alone, not as individuated as we're led to believe. The race nationalists are wrong and we are not a fragmented society. The leftist liberal old line 'my parents were plain brown wrapper Socialists' are correct. We are soup and salad and stew, but when I examine the common man, the daily desperation of the American-Angelino masses, I find no comfort in being lumped in with them, so, I might as well not seem to belong. Maybe I'm better off. Digg?"

"Perhaps we'd be better off if you just didn't speak," Dice said. They continued along the path.

Winds blew growing warmer day by day. Dice felt sun on her face. "The seasons are changing."

"Change is what seasons do best," Sebastian answered and letting the luggage slip from his grasp he knocked on the door.

Attorney Dice Stravinsky stood waiting, thinking, feeling as if she'd lost some point of law, that constant point which imparts meaning and order to the changing elements surrounding it. The case, rule, law, the ethic. I've never lived on the ground like this. Which face do I show? How do I conduct myself?

Sebastian knocked again. "She must be home," Dice said, "She's expecting me."

Sebastian Moon pushed his shades a bit further up the bridge of his nose. "Flora used to always answer her door on the first knock. But lately she's been disappearing a lot."
Dice rapped using a steel doorknocker attached below the sign reading "Abide By Love." The door opened showing Flora on the telephone. She motioned them in.

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"No! You mustn't," Sebastian said to Dice. She twisted the doorknob on Flora's special room.

"Oh, just a second, Bebe." Flora excused herself on the telephone calling into the hallway, "It's all right, my dears. I've fixed it up for you, Dice. I thought you might have a change of heart."

Flora pushed herself deeper into the afghan sofa throw. "Anyway, Bebe, what do you mean, you thought? How many times must I tell you, never think! That's how you get into trouble. Don't think, just do it. When you take that meeting tomorrow, come from a position of strength. Desperation doesn't baud well with you. It's aging you before your time. ...Oh, I'm not saying never ever think, not really. What I mean is, there's a time to act swiftly and decisively, as though you were willing to give up your life. A blow delivered by a woman in such a frame of mind is lethal. ...I know. I know. Yes, Bebe. I know. ...Remember, living is a practice, not a sure thing. ...A great deal of pressure. ...I love you too. Give your husband my best. Good-bye." Flora hung up shaking her head.

Dice, standing in the middle of the small room off the hallway, asked Sebastian, "Have you ever been in here?"

"Many times in the house, but never in this room. It's not allowed. However, I've often felt something must live in here." He stared at the ceiling. "We—all of your mother's friends—felt something must live in this place." He lifted his palms feeling vibrations; trying to feel them. Giving up, Sebastian's arms dropped dangling at his sides.

"You mean, you've heard noises?"
"No. Flora has brought us things from this room, diamonds, gems, little riches. Often, I've left here a wealthy man. But it wears away like thin denim. Such is the animal." He shrugged his shoulders.

Dice pressed a finger to her lips eyeing Sebastian critically. "May I change my mind about our having coffee together?"

"Absolutely not. It's an interesting room." He spun around, his mouth agape. "What? Oh, my heavens, I've used the word! I meant to say it has monastic charm. A single-sized bed?" He adjusted his shades high on his forehead allowing them to rest like antennae still hoping to collect something invisible.

The room waited clean, miracle of miracles, for several weeks in anticipation of Dice's arrival. Old uneven lath and plaster walls had their cracks filled, and they'd been washed and painted white. Daylight filtered in through two adjoining corner windows covered with simple Japanese bamboo blinds. The only furniture was a small teak writing desk and a hard wooden chair. Several sheets of paper lay stacked on the desk alongside a cheap ballpoint pen, and on the top sheet was scrawled:

Dice:

When I was young, in the mountains of Tibet I came across a man sitting outside of his cave on a rainy afternoon. I asked the man, "Why on earth are you sitting in the mud, in the rain without so much as a hat?"

He answered, "I used to live next to a wide and dangerous river, and every day I would watch the currents from the shore and wonder what was on the other side of that river. I decided to build a raft, and I worked on it for years because it had to be strong to weather, yet yielding in case it collided with the rocks. I wanted a tough raft that would bend but not break. Finally, the day came when I crossed the river and stepped on the far shore. Not wanting to lose my raft, I carried it with both arms supporting it on my head as I explored this new land."
I was surprised to run across an old man and I told him of my river journey. He asked me how I liked it here on the other side. 'Fine,' I answered, 'except for this damned headache.' I asked him if he knew of a cure for my pain.

'You might try leaving your damned raft back at the river,' the old man said. I have since never worn anything on top of my damned head!"

Tomorrow will be your first day in the garden. Her laws are different from the laws you're accustomed to in the courtroom. This is the beginning of your life in a new land.

Mother

"Don't worry," Dice said glancing at Sebastian, referring to the narrow bed against one of the barren walls. "It's the last you'll see of it." She began tearing the paper. Thinking better of it, she let it slip from her fingers coming to rest on the desktop.

"You'll be replacing it with something more suitable? Very cool."

"No. It's just the last you'll see of it."

"Bullshit!" He dropped his shades down in front of his eyes grinning at her.

Dice only half heard his remark. She turned her back mulling over the story on the desk. "I don't appreciate games," she called out to the living room, "and I'm not some naïve schoolgirl. I've paid too many dues to be a beginner." No answer. Sebastian grabbed her shoulder pointing her toward the windows. Through the blinds they viewed the shapes and colors of a magnificent garden holding a center island of flowers and a stone Victorian bench. Flora sat on the bench oddly, her back in perfect alignment above her hips, small hands resting lightly in her lap. Her eyes, half closed, stared at the grass a few feet in front of her.

"She'll be like that until late," Sebastian said. "How about coffee? How about you let a deprived poet drive the Jag?"

"Fine. I don't feel like driving." Dice picked up a suitcase yanking it, throwing it at the bed. Witnessing Flora in peaceful repose caused a tempest to swell within Dice's solar plexus.

"I can handle it," Sebastian said.

Dice grabbed a zipper and ripped open the luggage.
"I don't mean the Jag," he spoke clearly.

***

I remember watching Dice, my mother-to-be, clean Flora's house for weeks. The days grew long with the change of seasons and I asked Her why Dice slaved over the house. "Why shouldn't Flora clean up the mess?"

"The only mess," She said, "in Flora's life is her pain concerning the abandonment of her daughter. Flora, for all of her travels, the length of her journey, and all that she has collected, is at last like an empty vessel ready to receive and just as pleased not to receive anything. Burn down Flora's cottage, destroy her garden, and I tell you she'd move into an apartment the next day, stick a philodendron in a pot by the window, and be perfectly content. Want to see?"

"No," I said. "That won't be necessary. I'd feel sorry for her even if she didn't feel sorry for herself."

"Now," She said, "Dice is a different case. If her gold hubcaps were stolen off that machine of hers, she'd go berserk on Me. Dice's house is full of it. As she stands at the moment, I can't give her anything. I'd like to show Dice her virtue, the Dice she's meant to be, but I need space to work with. The space will come through forgiveness. She won't touch Flora, will not come to know her as a mother in any other way. I'm not asking Dice to clean her mother's mess. I'm asking her to clear a space, make an inroad, forgive; however, she can't rise above her own mess. So, I get tough, force her to make a connection, to scrub her mother's insides."

***

Evenings, Flora wrote and meditated. Dice retired after long days of cultivating earth, digging holes, and scrubbing twenty years of soot off walls. Entering her room at night she'd cross directly to the teak desk looking forward to Flora's nonsensical scrawl: "What is the sound of a rose blowing in the wind?" Or, "In the mountains of Tibet, I once heard stone growing in a
Or Dice's favorite, "If we are too cold to garden, or too hot to garden, how then do we garden?" This last one consumed her days and nights and she found herself becoming contemplative and focused.

Dice spoke less to Flora, working quietly in the garden or the house. Instead of tormenting herself in the center of a life-long abandonment storm, she remained for Flora, though Flora never stayed for her, and Dice now thought, How do we garden when it's too hot? Too cold?

One afternoon Flora and Dice tilled the garden while She and I watched. "It's too hot to do all of that planting today, Dice. Of course, if we don't get them in the ground now, we'll miss the season. It's a shame after all of that preparation you've done, the hours you've invested."

Flora turned back to the house.

"I'll be god damned if I'm going to let this go to waste!" Dice shouted.

Flora stopped in her tracks. Without looking at Dice she calmly asked, "How do you expect to garden in this heat?"

"I dig, I sweat," Dice replied.

"That's all?"

"The process," Dice said, "works if I work it."

Flora smiled disappearing into the house.

"Bring the girl a bucket of ice water," She said. "She's earned it. Hallelujah!"

I remember that afternoon, and from that time Dice became more than an observation. She told me never to feel sorry for their condition; however, I felt Dice's tempest, the one she'd hidden. I felt a bond born of emptiness. I wondered what it would be like to touch her skin and I believe, on a particular level, she knew I stood in the garden watching, hoping for her, caring. Sometimes she'd stop work, look up, and I'd see her eyes searching. I thought they were searching for a bird or squirrel scampering across the telephone line or they might be studying clouds, the position of the sun to judge time, or they could be searching for me.

***
Late one night, after Flora passed into sleep, Sebastian and Dice walked the garden. The moon shone full and luminous, and leaf and vine, petal, thorn and stem crawled along the walls, dark forms welcoming mist settling in the air. Soil fell loose. Dice labored for months turning it, composting, raking and watering and turning it again. Now it lay deep and black, rich and soft below the surface where earthworms shed castings.

"Everything is asleep," Dice whispered. They sat on the stone bench. Sebastian laid an arm around Dice's shoulder. They held hands. "The beetles and butterflies; the moths and caterpillars and ladybugs and leaf hoppers—I never knew they lived here. Never cared. Strange. When I was a girl I lived in the country, in the woods. I remember being curious then."

"Are you going soft on me, counselor?"

"Try anything and you'll be spouting poetry without teeth."

"I think you're full of shit," Sebastian said, and he kissed her and she grew hot under his touch, feeling his hand brush away the hair from her neck while his lips left her mouth. She felt his beard crushed against the flesh below her neck and his teeth on her bare shoulder. Dice separated, pushing him away. "I want you to leave," she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I can't comprehend it. I can't imagine our being together. Half the time I don't even understand you!"

"No one understands this. It's like a personal poetic. Like liturgy in Latin. You feel it in your soul, in your toes, in your ears if you like, or your tongue, but no one understands it. I'll leave."

"You'll come back?" Dice wasn't certain whether she asked a question or made a statement.

"Am I going or coming?" Sebastian laughed quietly.

"You're going now. Tomorrow you're coming back." Dice still didn't know for certain if she was asking or telling.

"And they call me crazy."
"I've never committed to anything in my life, Sebastian. Do you understand?"
"I don't recall asking you for a commitment."
"What if I'm offering one?" she asked.
"I'll see you tomorrow."
CHAPTER 7--BURYING THINGS IN THE GARDEN

"...Children reach between your teeth
for charts to live their lives..."
~Maya Angelou, Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well

Pruning shears sporting bright orange handles dangled out of a nylon loop, and wearing white-gray hair tied in a bun she stretched an hour after sunrise in denim overalls two sizes too large, reaching one delicate arm high up the stone wall, struggling on tiptoes in dirty canvas shoes. She greeted the day blinking sleep filled eyes and calling, "Perry! Rocky!" shaking her hand back and forth rattling a breakfast of raw nuts.

Inside sipping black coffee, shivering under an early chill Dice watched standing in a long cotton nightgown and heavy white socks in front of the French door. The patio, with Flora at the far wall waving her arm high, appeared soft through glass panes covered by a film of dust and dirt. Old paint between the glass flaked at Dice's touch. She witnessed short quick movements rustling the highest branches of an oak whose lower branches hung over the wall, barely sweeping the top. A high leaf cluster swung and bounced with a small round compact body hanging off it, dull brown fur swishing a bushy tail. The body danced at the sound of her name, swiftly running, leaping from branch to lower branch. At last Perry, the squirrel, dropped onto the wall's top edge. She darted this way and that, chattering, waving her thick tail defending her section of turf against possible intruders. "Perry, calm down!" Flora scolded holding out a nut pressed between thumb and forefinger. Flora barely reached the top edge. Perry, utilizing great nibbling care not to hurt Flora, snatched the nut between her teeth. She sat on her haunches in front of Flora, trusting, rolling the nut round and round in her tiny front paws, inspecting,
testing its nut-like integrity, taking quick tentative bites. Perry, having one split ear, reigned as food chain matriarch and Flora thought she'd given birth to Rocky.

Rocky, an adolescent, scampered along the top edge after Perry ran away. He appeared smaller and his fur shined. Rocky leaned over for his nut, then scurried away to bury it. Flora watched Rocky scamper into the garden.

Even at this early hour the sun rose above the trees and a section of garden basked in strong light. It cut yellow sunshine slices across wet green lawn breaking up the shade. Flora flinched covering her eyes with a hand, irritated, preferring to garden in the cold.

Rocky fumbled courageously down the wall rooting in a flower bed at the base of Flora's favorite rose, a potential eight footer, Mister Lincoln, her first rose bush now growing thickest and strongest. She'd pruned Mister Lincoln until his brownish-green canes reached up stiffly like an old man's open hand.

Flora whistled a series of short airy notes while slowly scuffling over to a heavy birdcage hanging from its black wrought iron fixture. The cage, kept a respectable distance from the squirrels' feeding area, hung partially rusted. Flora meant to paint it or ask her friend Sebastian Moon to paint it. She stopped whistling long enough to call, "Bee-Jay!"

Tossing three small peanuts into the cage which remained ever open, she whistled again. Now she sat a few feet away on the green garden swing pressing her hands between her legs, warming them and waiting. Momentarily a large blue scrub jay swooped down flying several passes before landing on the bench's arm, announcing itself, squawking harshly. Bee-Jay returned fatter than the year before and a bit gray. He pranced up and down eyeing the birdcage with suspicion true to his virtue as one of Her nervous flighty creatures, critical until the end. He cocked one eye glancing downward and chortled softly under his throat feathers. Flora understood prolonged chortling to mean the bird felt satisfied, even conversant. Occasionally,

Flora spoke to Bee-Jay, who hopped on top of the cage or the wall or the grass, and listened with intense interest for fifteen minutes. Bee-Jay snapped his head erect and flew into the cage where he hopped around pecking at nuts. He plucked them in his beak one at a time,
knocking them on the bottom of the cage testing the shells' hardness. Finally selecting one, he balanced on the edge of the door, twisted his head sharply and took flight for the farthest trees.

Flora disappeared into the shed. She soon reappeared dragging her yellow rake, sweeping fallen nuts and seeds. In Her garden where animals, birds, and insects abound, Flora valued cleanliness, a casual order bespeaking of a natural plan, flowerbeds which appeared sprinkled down in perfect harmony by Her hand. Ant trails she left undisturbed unless the curling veins of busy insects ran too close to the cottage. Flora meddled amongst the plan just enough, blueprinting and taking notes in her daily journal. The garden became not simply any garden, but an English garden growing out of Flora's years of research and constant adjustments according to color, height, and texture—an expatriate planting of the British on American soil. Upon awakening she sipped tea listening to Mendelssohn on her radio and perusing pages in her journal. She realized today she and Dice would dig, separate, and plant new bulbs in the iris patch.

Dice blew gently on her hot coffee. Impatient to get warm, she'd burnt the tip of her tongue. When Dice first arrived at Rose Cottage she argued incessantly with Flora, unable to get a grip on the environmental status quo. "Why work so hard to keep a neat garden but live in a pig sty?" she asked Flora, later realizing while Flora slept indoors she lived in the garden.

In the kitchen Dice rinsed her empty cup setting it carefully in the sink. Through the window she watched a hummingbird pause mid-air in front of a hanging red plastic feeder. The bird's highly efficient aerodynamic design, its clean iridescent lines a glittering rainbow in the morning sunlight caused Dice's thoughts about throwing open long closed closet doors, dark mysterious nooks 'n crannies, allowing fresh air to circulate and light up their dusty forgotten shelves.

Flora complained about a lack of space, although she refused any shelves above shoulder level. Today Dice felt efficient. Like a hummingbird she'd hover, organize and hover again, one closet at a time, from space to space.

A quiet thought nagged Dice, tugging at the back of her consciousness. She stood staring through the window where two hummingbirds chased each other in circles. The sun completed
its rise. East Town Street awoke, people rustling in their tiny stucco houses, preparing breakfasts of heated corn tortillas with butter, frijoles, and huevos. Inside of a week, Dice thought, Flora will have things the way they were, because this is Flora's virtue, to live as a reprobate scatterer for all seasons; a sometimes collector of objects small and large, colorful, textural, of woods, metals, and cloth squirreled away like nuts in a garden. Dice heard her knocking around in the shed and softened towards Flora, if only for a fleeting second, considering she lived like her creature pets.

She opened the kitchen window breathing deeply, allowing herself the pleasurable odor of hot corn tortillas wafting from the little house next door. She watched for a few minutes while her neighbor sat at his kitchen table in a white sleeveless undershirt. He genuflected, said a quick prayer and began eating. He spread a slice of butter on his tortilla and rolled up the flat circle grasping it between his fingers. As he brought it to his mouth the melted butter leaked out of the end of the rolled tube. Dice turned away remembering last night.

When Flora was unaware, Dice studied her sleeping on the living room couch wrapped in an afghan with long straight hair spread evenly under the side of a cheek, and she could feel golden heat emanating from Flora's body in repose, a light filling whatever space Flora occupied. The light infused Dice with warmth and security, a feeling all must be right with the world.

The connection threatened her, resentful of being subject to anything positive from this woman; afraid of Flora's touch, a spiritual opening, that her journey's foundation of bitterness and blame could be stolen like wrenching out an arm. Often, when exposed to Flora's light, Dice shut herself in her room sitting on the edge of the bed holding herself.

After throwing on an old pair of pants and a loose blouse, Dice opened the hall closet slowly at first, afraid of what handbags, hangers, hatboxes, and harpoons gathering twenty years of dust mites would tumble in an avalanche to her feet. She imagined rats and roaches crawling along the floor, hanging from ancient polyester housedresses. She opened the closet another few inches certain to realize her worst fears.

Only a closet dark and musty. She sifted through its contents: newspapers from the late sixties, greeting cards, boxes of Christmas and Chanukah ornaments, tangled strings of lights, a
hookah water pipe from Pakistan, post cards of the Great Wall of China; standing in the rear corner, a hand carved shilalie from Ireland—to beat off the rats with, Dice thought, and on a waist level shelf sat a flat purple art pottery dish holding a yellowed envelope. The purple glaze uneven and splotchy, and the ceramic chips and cracks sparked buried memories of children playing at tables with clay-covered hands wiggling purple fingers. She peeked out from behind the closet door aware of how strangely silent the house felt.

At first, Dice didn't disturb the envelope, but removed the shelf's contents from around it. If they were open pages Dice wouldn't have cared; however, there it lay, a thing begging to be investigated.

She crept into the bathroom spying out a window at the garden.

Flora knelt digging in iris bulbs. Still, she might have gone into the house to pour herself a glass of wine—she never began a new planting without toasting the project's future—though, pausing on hands and knees, the soft dirt yielding under her shin bones, she felt instinctively Dice needed time alone in the house, that the cottage in its own way held something in mind.

This was how Flora perceived her universe: stucco and wood houses housed; rumbling automobiles drove; sign posts told; pavement paved the way; clouds clouded; radios and televisions spoke, laughed, cried, and played music; the dirt nurtured, the grass greened, the sun heated, the moon illuminated, stars twinkled; high rise buildings of glass and steel grew out of the earth ascending to heaven; small paper weights held down, rubber bands and staples held together; marbles, rubber balls, and jacks had fun at games; chess sets—she kept one in the house somewhere—thought critically taking their time; old scarves and warm blankets covered, pillows slept; shoes walked; water glasses drank— the larger the thirstier; old worn furniture stuffed and tattered around the edges held itself together offering experienced comfort, couches couched, and love seats cuddled. Flora did not impose qualities upon the ten-thousand things; she observed them.

"Her universe," she observed, "is wholly animate if one awakens to the fact; deathless, alive with virtue, each thing being, and each thing being a part of the other." Flora determined long ago—if her vision of virtue rang false—that shoes must not walk. "Everyone knows," she
once said, "that one never walks in good shoes, but that good shoes take one where they need to go."

Flora exercised a lifetime listening to trees talk, feeling when a plant emoted sadness, or sharing in its joyousness. Once she'd heard stone growing in the side of a cliff. She never turned on the radio unless it wished to play Felix Mendelssohn, and she was never mistaken. When the house told her to stay away, Flora listened.

Dice returned to the hall closet and hiding behind the door she pinched at the closed envelope blowing into it. She removed its contents, several sheets of delicate yellowed paper handwritten in wide lined swirling script and loops using watery blue ink. The writing shone barely legible as if the writer had written on their soft lap rather than sitting at a desk. She looked up listening. When even the birds fell silent she allowed her eyes to rest upon the faded page.

***

Dear Dice:

I hope that your father will deliver this letter into your hands when you are old enough to understand. Where in God's name do I begin? Let me tell you what Socrates said, that the unexamined life is not worth having been lived, and I am not certain that is precisely what he said, but I am certain that is what he meant. I'm telling you this because I want you to know that my leaving had nothing to do with your being born. Please believe me, I welcomed you out of this world with an open heart, and if any bitter persons tell you differently, don't believe them for a minute, not for a second! And before I go any further, I want you to begin with the knowledge of your birth, because I did not have the faintest idea of my own for so many years. Knowing you are of the universe, that you come out of this world rather than into it will save you untold bitter tears. Depending on your age, you may not understand what I am about to write. However, it is enough to know that knowledge is power, wisdom is peace, and if the knowledge is not understood now, you will come back to these pages at a wiser time.
Question a theologian and he will tell you living is a manifestation of God, Allah, or Elohim.

Inquire of science, and you find that existence is an extrapolation of a little known theory just now being discussed called The Big Bang, and evolution, and the great star nova that keeps on giving.

Scratch a philosopher, and all of the above coalesce as the tao, buddha nature, and the transcendency of being.

I will take a giant leap confessing that I intuit this much; the universe is infinite, therefore ancient in its history, yet simultaneously ever fresh in its becoming. It is transcendent, using all previous activities to create itself and become a bit more than the sum of those activities in each present moment. This self-propelled transcendency is Her face, the face of God, buddha nature, the great star nova that keeps on giving, and as proceeds the universe so you and I are born.

My dear child, would it surprise you to learn that you have three births?

Our first birth is Spiritual Genesis. It is spiritual because our original face is Taoistic, virtual, an energetic quality presupposing our consciousness of space and time. It is the quality of allowance to become.

Our second birth is Cosmo Genesis. This Big Bang—born of the allowance to become—produces earth, a potential home sphere for life. However, the elements necessary for sustaining life on earth are not yet our song. They are creations of the mist, the starry heavens. A celestial body is born and one dies, or goes nova. The star implodes as She brings Her gravity to bear and sends its elements out into space, showering upon earth Her primordial life soup. And so, we are born of the stars above and the oceans below. We are molecular miracles crawling forth from under Her rocks and out of Her tide pools. She works within this transcendence of becoming, recalling in our every cell, our marrow, our souls, our dynamic spiritual genesis; we are alive, but also, my dear, we are more than alive. As a song is more than the sum of its notes; it is what it is, and also, it is what the listener brings to it. She has composed an infinite symphony which awakens us crying not into the world but out of it.
This final birth is our Individual Genesis. We have individuated from the universe, yet we evolve in the wonder of Her luminescence, and each of us spreads Her light as we recall Her universal process being the Great Mother within us all. We individuate from the universe in attribution, yet in essence She and we are one. The Great Mother creates, sustains, and nurtures us. So, you see, my dear, you came unto me a miracle!

You must be wondering why a woman would leave a dear husband and a miraculous child. Sitting here, my monastery room like ice, I wonder myself. I've been sent here to pick up supplies and send and receive any mail, and then it's back to the caves. It feels strange to write this letter, knowing that as you read it you might very well be the same age I am now, give or take a year or two. What will you look like, I wonder? Of course, I know you're beautiful, but as much as I love you and miss you, I yearn to unlock a truth greater than the both of us. I feel I have begun an amazing journey which will change all our lives. You see, I do intend to return and tell you about it, though these things take time. I don't know how long that time will be, but I've come too far to turn back prematurely.

I have a picture of you that your father sent me and I look at it every night. In a sense, you journey with me, and whatever I learn I will teach you. We have something in common, you and I. We, all of us, regardless of our station in life are on this journey. We are searching for our true selves, or as my teacher says, "Lady, you search buddha nature? All people search buddha nature! Very sad. We blind. Look everywhere like look in mirror, but we not see buddha. Why?" Half the time I can't understand this wretched little man's English, but I understand it enough to know that he is right. I am part of the great process called God, yet I'm lost to myself. All my life I have felt blind, searching for a teacher that might help me to see. I read many books and came to the conclusion that there was no one in Idaho, and likely, no one in America who could cure me of my blindness. If there were, I wouldn't need to leave my own backyard to see the truth, because like my teacher says, everywhere, everything, everyone is a mirror of truth, my truth, my true self. But at this point, you must understand that I am like a blind woman holding a hand mirror, and it just so happens that those special ones who can teach me to see are in lands far
away from our country. Dice, would you deny me the gift of sight? There are questions, my dear, which plague humankind—questions which no book can answer.

Perhaps you hate me by now. You must think I'm a terribly immoral woman, but morality is only doctrine, fixed and rigid rules to live by, only one can't possibly do that because life is not fixed or rigid. It flows like these mountain streams (I wish you could see them. They're so dramatic, and freezing cold too!) and no matter how many times I fill my teacher's bucket, the water is never the same. I'm searching not so much for religion as for faith, and faith in the unknown is very tricky. I'm afraid my teacher thinks I'm not doing well with it.

They're sounding the bell for meditation and I have to run. Too many meditations. I don't believe they're helping, however, when in Tibet do as... I will finish this up later.

I have some time today and I will try to finish this important letter. Getting back to Socrates' "unexamined life," I feel, and I cannot remember not feeling, a great lack of concern on the part of others as to whether I ever learn who I am, why I am, or not learn anything at all about myself. I have been taught all of my life by my parents and schoolteachers, and then your father, what is expected of me, how I am to lead my life, with no regard for the ultimate purpose of one's being endowed with life. I have told you of my blindness, but I will also confide in you that until now I have felt so empty and purposeless. You know that I love you with all my heart, but the truth is that I asked myself if having a baby is the only reason I was brought out of this world. My dear, sweet child, did I bring you out of this world so that you might grow up vacuous of any deep truths only to produce an offspring of your own?

I am afraid, and one of the reasons I left to pursue these questions is fear. I ran. I'm afraid that we are purposeless, willy-nilly, all of us spawning like fish with no plan, no God, nor even an impersonal force; our lives empty, my life empty, all of us spawning simply to spawn some more. One moment I believe I understand Her face, the next moment I lose all faith. What an overwhelming sense of tragedy I feel when I think of it! I am desperate for goals and for reasons, for "the" reason, none of which I have been able to define. I cannot live like this, Dice. I simply can't bear it. I have this picture of myself on my deathbed, an ignorant old woman without a clue as to why she ever lived. Allow me to change that picture for myself, for us. I have always loved
you. I will always love you. I pray, to who or what I know not, that this letter has answered some questions, and that we will be together soon.

Love,
Mother

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Dice sobbed wondering why the letter was never sent. With trembling fingers she inserted the pages into their envelope and wiped her eyes and nose with the backs of her bare hands. These she wiped on her pants. At the moment she meant to replace the letter she noticed the purple dish contained a child's handprint embedded in it and the name "Dice" scratched into it in large letters. She didn't remember making the handprint, however, she did remember standing beneath a high counter at the post office, her father adjusting the wrapping on a box he called "their" box. In retrospect she decided her handprint must have been inside. He told her that it would be delivered by burro to the top of the highest mountain in the world and she felt strange after they'd mailed it, as if this place didn't exist and the box would vanish into space.

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"Why this family?" I asked Her.

She rested one finger across her lips with consideration. "You will arrive a bit different. You will be able to remember, and hold onto those memories. You will be able to sense a finer mist, a different plane. You will experience a more complete living journey. It is important that you be raised by those who understand you. Dice is not like you; however, having opened her heart to Flora, she will be ready for you, and falling in love with Sebastion, Dice will accept you for who are, with your difference. Your purpose will be to impart a meaningful growth, to complete the cycle of a spiritual gestalt by interacting with Dice and Sebastian. You will all learn from one another."
"Understand, Dice?" They knelt together in the iris patch while Flora pointed with her hand trowel at lines of bone meal she'd sprinkled mapping the quantity of space each species of bulb would consume and making certain Dice noticed the wooden markers stuck in the soil at regular intervals with names and colors of each variety. Behind them in the sun sat several brown paper sacks filled with odd shaped bulbs, round, round-shouldered squares, and long horizontal root sections.

Dice swiped at a strand of hair hanging between her eyes. "These are without a doubt the ugliest things I've ever seen. I don't want to touch them. They look dead." She picked one up, sneered at it and dropped it back in the bag.

Flora brought it out. She rolled it around in her hand and it shed a minute amount of dirt in her palm. She held it up. "It's a German iris, or we call them Bearded irises. If you stop being blind you'll see a number of brilliant green blades transparent in the sunlight. Also," and she pointed to the air above the wrinkled bulb in her hand, "I'm sure you can see the color saturated flower?"

"Yes." Thinking Flora forever lived on a momentary cusp of lunacy, how could Dice dare answer no?

"Really? How wonderful! Notice that there are six petals." Flora intensely studied a flower that only she saw. "Now then, imagine that. Six petals that know their business! These are standards. That is, we call them standards; they're not really called anything. And we call them—" she pointed at Dice.

"Standards?" Dice asked.

"—because they stand! Now, these other three, you see them?"

"Uh huh." She makes sense, in her way, Dice thought. But I can't shake the feeling that she's walking in two worlds more each day.
"They fall from the crown, gently, easily like your beautiful hair, dear. Or with a little imagination we could say they look like a..." Flora scratched her chin leaving a smudge of dirt.

Dice scrambled desperately for the answer, afraid if she didn't have one demented Flora would go berserk with the trowel. "A beard?"

"Excellent! Oh, by the way, what color is that flower?"

"It's purple."

"Simply lovely," Flora said. "To begin with, they need to be buried. They need the soil's nutrients. They'll need water, and later sun and air, and of course love. Everything in the garden requires love to help it achieve its true virtue."

"Are you serious? I can't love these, Flora."

Flora wrinkled her nose and stuck the trowel in the ground where it stayed. "You can't love them because you haven't been listening to me describe the wonder, the absolute perfection of the flower within."

"Is there a flower here, Flora?"

"In practical terms, no, not yet."

"You don't see a purple Bearded iris there?" Dice asked nodding towards the sky, breathing with relief.

Flora squinted. "For Christ's sake, woman, get hold of yourself." She watched Dice for a moment and then held out her hand with the root section in it. "What do you call this?"

"A Bearded iris."

"No." Flora giggled.

"A German iris?"

"No!"

"A bulb then?"

"No, no, no!" Flora rocked back and forth, with laughter, on her bony old knees.

"Flora, I'm going back into the house."

"This," Flora said, "is called, sky-cloud-rain, soil-nutrient-sun, air-insect-garden, Bearded iris in all Her glory."
Dice picked up a marking stick and etched lines with it into the ground. At first she thought their exchange had been a matter of poor blood circulation. She drew in silence. Not a word passed between the women. Finally, Dice looked at Flora. "Everything in the garden goes into this iris, doesn't it?" She smiled and cast a glance at the ground beneath their knees.

"You are never alone in the garden, Dice," Flora said. "The ten-thousand things are a part of you. Nothing I've done, nothing I can do, will ever take that from you."

Dice did not respond but began digging.

They both began digging and planting bulbs, and sometime later Flora looked over at Dice and hooted clapping her hands.

"What?"

"You," Flora said, "were not a pretty sight. You came out of me a red, wet, wrinkled fetus. I was hoping you wouldn't stay that way."

"And?"

"You're stunning," Flora said, and they continued digging, burying their hands deep in the soil when Flora looked up again. "Do you remember that poem I taught you when you were just a tiny thing?"

"Sorry," Dice said.

"The earth is my body
The rain my tears—"

Dice sat in the dirt facing Flora, remembering. She joined in.

"Wind my breath
Flowers my spirit—"

Flora now kept silent, tears running down her cheeks while Dice finished in a quivering tone breaking between words.

"And you
You are my mother."

"Can you," Flora asked, "call me Mother?"
Crying into each other’s tears, the two women embraced and Flora examined Dice’s face noticing faint lines of middle age, brushing a stray hair off her daughter’s forehead. Dice held Flora’s cheeks gently cradling them in dirty hands and she said quietly so that none of the ten-thousand things heard, "I love you, Mother."

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When the air turned chilly Flora slapped off the mud and stepped indoors to make a cup of tea. Dice worked another half hour planting a few last irises. She called to the house hoping for Flora’s final comment on the day’s work, but Flora didn’t answer. When Dice entered the kitchen, Flora stood over the stove staring at the flame under the kettle. It stopped whistling when the water boiled out and the stainless steel sides glowed red-hot. Flora stared vacantly while Dice ran over and turned off the gas. At last Flora looked up at Dice. "Is the water ready?"

"I’ll make you a fresh pot, Mother. Why don’t you sit at the table?" Dice watched Flora sit and then filled the teakettle at the tap.

"This is very nice of you," Flora said behind her. "Tell me all about yourself, and how did you get into my house? Are you making tea for everyone in the neighborhood? Am I your first stop?"

Dice ran the tap until water bubbled out of the kettle top. She turned the water off taking a deep breath. From the kitchen window she watched porch lights turn on along the far side of the street. Soon, moths fluttered and the sun settled like a California orange low and round in the sky. I am here to manage Rose Cottage, and to ease you into death.
CHAPTER 8--NOURISHING THE BUD

"...Clouds pass and disperse.
are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
is it for such I agitate my heart? ..."
~Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*

"We make love, and you claim in the heat of passion to love me, but what's that? I'm a white conquest, that's all. I wonder sometimes, afterwards, do you know me? Do I hold an attraction for you beneath my flesh?" Dice pleaded the question dropping her hands to her lap. She and Sebastian sat next to each other in one of the old booths at Tiny's Coffee Shop. "I have a lot at stake here emotionally, and if I don't feel like we're moving forward, I feel like I'm being conned." She stared glassy-eyed through a large window at the deserted drive-in bays. Trash blew in the wind. In the sixties the bays sparkled bright green. Now they sat empty and dirty, paint flaking off curbsides. "Listen to me. Why do I even care? I wasn't looking for this. I definitely wasn't looking for you."

"Me?" Sebastian tapped his fingers on the table, not nervous, but keeping time to his own rhythm.

"Yes, you; a middle-aged Latino retro-beatnik."

"Ah, you don't digg," he tapped it out, "my style. Well, now..." He removed his shades cleaning them with a napkin. "I'm hurt, I have to say."

"It's not that, Sebastian. I love who you are, and that leaves me feeling uncertain." The first time she voiced her emotions about him out loud Dice felt shook, disconnected from reality. The word "love" tripped from her tongue and she couldn't pull it back. It rested between them, an
incendiary device. She thought she'd made a terrible mistake. *Perhaps love is not the truth.* "I'm not ready. I'm not good with relationships, and I can't comprehend why you would want me. Tell me. I need to know. Seriously."

"That you venture to query is evil." He left his shades resting on the table allowing her to examine his brown eyes and below the booth he took one of her hands in his. "I love your evil. Of course, you're a white conquest, but a brown-skinned woman would be passive and wouldn't dare ask. A Mexican woman wouldn't assert herself except to be what I wanted her to be. Brown-skinned women, expressionless moral Madonna's, waiting for men to love them only so that they will be filled by some crazy Catholic sexual morality, seed that really comes from God above, that they're subject to. They like to feel they have no choice in the matter, and we señors, we like it that way.

Except that I was born different," Sebastian slowly sipped the last of his beer, "not a señor, but a poet. I was born to step outside my culture, to transcend it, so that I'm very much a Mexican, and still something more. To be a poet is to give it up in front of the world for your audience. It's machismo cracking, breaking down."

"I think you're macho," Dice said, hoping he wouldn't stab her in the back with her admission that she'd found an attractive quality in him.

"Do you?" He let go of her hand silently motioning the waitress for beer. A pause followed while Sebastian poured watching foam. He salted his glass and sniffed breathing heavily through his nose. Sipping off the frosted rim he faced Dice. "My father was a man who bore his pain in silence. Very stoic; to live with your emotions like a locked trunk. I remember walking down the street with him on Saturday mornings and bumping into his friends. The señors would smile—everything was fine. Stoop labor in the fields was fine. What could be better? Fresh air. Sunshine. But everything was not fine. My father's back ached for fifty years. He suffered bursitis in both shoulders from repetitive picking and dragging and lifting. Things unspoken. Whispers in the wind between bell peppers. Melanomas on the backs of necks and hands and arms. In those days, there were no portable commodes in the fields. The men and women peed in the dirt like dogs and cats. Still, it would've been a greater loss of dignity to let
them get to you. Not to crack. Bear the pain until you grow old with it and your face looks like a cinched up sack of rotted vegetables. That is our ludicrous machismo. My father got lucky in the field. Cardiac arrest and he died face down in a shallow crate of strawberries. Finally, when they laid him out straight in his coffin, his back ache went away."

Dice remained silent feeling vague shame, feeling white. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking any law and she understood not laboring in the fields, not knowing, could never be a defense. She admitted to no spiritual belief, however, if God or some force existed, she knew now was the time to feel ashamed in God's presence. Her law had been broken. For the first time since they'd met, Dice realized she was sitting next to a Mexican. They stared at one another. She reached over and stroked his cheek. When at last she spoke, it happened so quietly he barely heard the words. "You are a brilliant man. I don't know what we'll be to each other, but I know that you're special."

"I talk too much," he said, "but when I'm with you I want to tell you everything. I want you to know me better than anyone has ever known me. Nakedness is love."

"There it is again. Love. You want to tell me everything? Tell me why you love me."

"The first time we stood in your casa you glared at me, telling me I would never see your bed. Your occasional aggression I find exciting. Occasionally! Don't ask me to tell you that you're a goddess. Octavio Paz said, when the Mexican woman is passive she becomes a goddess, the earth, universal virginity. I don't want a damn goddess. I want an evil white woman to fuck with, and so what if my love grows from my passion. I'm passionate about something under your flesh, beyond your flesh. In my culture this conversation would never take place. That you have the effrontery, even in secret, to imagine that you might not be the woman your culture means you to be, that you have the gall to believe it's your right to question and change, to assert, and to a man! To the señor! Yes, there's something under the flesh which will never change and that I love about you. I call it your evil. I call it your whiteness. What does it matter what I call it? I must have it," and he slid his hand between her thighs below the table.
Dice trembled not knowing where to look—his truth disturbing. *His words are fingers,* she thought, *crawling over my body.* No man ever spoke to her exuding such fire. "You frighten me. You're intense. I feel sometimes like you're invading me," she said.

"No," he whispered close into her soft ear, "this," and he slid his hand under her panties, "is an invasion."

"No!" she whispered though she felt the small of her back arching. "Christ, pay the bill. Quickly."

***

Dice gently turned her key in the lock of Rose Cottage at two in the morning. She slipped off her shoes and checked on Flora who breathed imperceptibly. She tried each window lock three times compulsively and then crept to her room. Out of habit she threw on a cotton nightgown, white socks, and padded over to the teak desk. Flora, writing nothing in recent weeks, finally penned a short work. This morning a fresh nonsense story appeared on the paper.

Pish said to Posh, "The ten-thousand things are contained in the one. If not, not so."
Posh replied, "Tell me then, my brother, what is the sound of one hand clapping?"
Pish immediately blurted out, "Not so!"

To make matters worse, Posh lifted one hand and smacked at the air saying, "Can you not hear it?"

In the end, the brothers had to agree that the garden is essentially empty.

Dice climbed between the sheets. She lie with one long leg stretched out in a state of complete satiation having given herself without fear. Closing her eyes, visualizing his naked body once again hard, moving over her, engulfing her, she crawled pawing upwards along the ridges of his biceps and shoulders while feeling him entering her below. He moved slowly using long strokes and when he lifted his head from between her breasts she saw his face.

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"What is the sound of one hand clapping?" I asked Her.

"I create the creatures and things of life to work in concert, not alone," She said. "No thing in the garden exists of itself. I have to laugh when I hear someone say, 'I think, and therefore I am.' Will they never learn, the great north forty is, only therefore do I think! 'I' is an empty phenomenon, a localized delusion, a non sequitur."

"So, a clap needs two hands to be made whole. And a woman needs a man to complete her?"

"No," She said. "It's a genderless process. My children need everything and each other to make their consciousness whole, to complete the garden. They're empty of selfness. A woman alone is not a whole woman, as a being alone is not a whole being. She doesn't need a man anymore than she needs a rock. But under rocks certain creatures thrive, and without these rocks the nature of the garden changes substantially. Some of My best works have crawled out from under a rock."

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"Mother, to be honest with you, I had other things on my mind."

"When gardening, my dear, you can only think about gardening. If you're digging a hole, but day dreaming about sex—"

"Mother!"

"—then the hole will come out too big, or too small." She lifted her head pursing her lips and thought for a few seconds. A distant bird warbled and cold air grew tinged by a rising sun. At this hour the compost smelled fresh; later, it always smelled rotten. "Well, it's happened to me. I have a life, you know? Anyway, I've noticed you don't get along with the plants."

Flora and Dice sat on the patio under the cedar overhang. They talked while Flora cleaned her pruning shears in bleach. "Do you love him?" Flora asked.

"I don't want to," Dice said.
"You're afraid, aren't you?" Flora carefully dipped the blades in chlorine solution watching it work magic on the steel. After a few seconds she wiped down each blade with a cloth until the steel shone surgically clean.

"I've never been afraid of anything in my life!" Dice said crossing her arms.

When she finished the last blade, Flora looked at her daughter and smiled. She stared out at the garden where a scrub jay swooped down from a tree. It landed on the lawn and poking the ground with its beak drew out a dark worm. She followed the bird with her eyes as it flew back into a neighbor's oak tree overhanging the property line. She observed the bird feeding the worm to its young. Flora inhaled deeply and turned to Dice. "You're afraid of the insecurity of it all."

"I want to fall in love. Hell, I've had men in love with me. Rich men."

"Oh, how stupid I am. I thought you were in love. Or what we are so quick to call love."

"I..." Dice released her arms allowing them to hang. She examined her nails stretching out long fingers.

"You're afraid to let love in, but love does what it wants, my dear. It's already taken you. It is overwhelming. In my time, I've thought many things about men. That they're ugly, beautiful, brilliant, and stupid. Sometimes they desert you, move away or die, but that impermanence, the insecurity of not knowing, that's underneath even the most rock solid relationships. It's what makes every moment of love precious." Flora selected another rag and smoothly rubbed down the blades and springs with safflower oil. "And love, when it is there, and when it is past, is what makes life fulfilling. The happiness and tragedy of love impart a depth of realization to one's life you don't want to miss. You know, we're not really here, except for the affect we have on others and the affect they have on us. Love is mutual affection. Love makes us whole."

"That's all well, Mother. But for love to succeed in this world one must be a realist. That, if you don't mind my saying, is not one of your strong suits. Relationships take a certain pragmatic frame of mind, and, Sebastian is not exactly what I planned on."

"There is a saying, 'Woman makes plans, She laughs.'"

Dice watched her mother and considered how anatomically correct she appeared holding a pair of pruning shears in her hand, how day or night she expected to find Flora in the garden.
"It seems strange to me," Dice said deciding to change the subject, "that for someone who wanted so desperately to get away from the farm, you ended up a garden journalist."

Flora polished a set of blades with her oily rag until they shined and then began on the next set. "I traveled so far to find myself, but after a time, the books read and the people met, and the various experiences one has with life seem to mature. A composting takes place where everything melds." She glanced away then brought her eyes back to her task. "I mean, it all breaks down, and there are no longer separate elements to refer to, only a general knowledge. I think I was vaguely aware of this composting. I just watched it on and off for a long time, and I identified with the natural process of it. I suppose I came to feel like a garden of sorts. Settled by nature. Correct just the way I was. Just the way I am. I stopped desiring to escape, or to go in search of myself, because I realized my self was the melding process. There is no single true self to find. My self is the journey. A rose is not a rose, it is everything, but let's not be ridiculous, it's also a rose."

"Before we started spending time together I never questioned certain things." Dice picked up a another pair of shears and an oil soaked rag. She started rubbing the blades. "I knew I was smart, and that I wanted to be in control. I had no control over you leaving, or over Daddy dying. I don't recall ever searching for myself. I always knew I wanted to be a professional, and that was that."

"And now?"

"Now? Oh, Mother, I don't know. I feel a connection, not necessarily to the garden, but somehow to life in general." Dice held up the shining blade pleased with her work.

"You're losing your fear and allowing life in," Flora said.

"I told you before, I've never been afraid of anything in my life. If I've felt anything, I've felt nothing."

"I disagree. You shut yourself off from the limitless possibilities of life. I deserted you, and you were afraid the rest of life would desert you."

Dice's jaw tightened. "No." They worked quietly. My mother knows me, she thought, and found this comforting. "Perhaps," she finally said.
Flora leaned in close taking the shears out of Dice's hand. She squeezed her daughter's hands between her own. "To have faith in the unknown takes courage. I wasn't there to teach you, or if I had been, perhaps you wouldn't have been ready to learn."

"Mother, you can't teach courage."

"A good teacher knows that understanding is the key to courage. When you understand that the unknown is part of the process that is you, you lose a great deal of your fear. Never all of it. We are, after all, human. But when we gain this understanding, we no longer feel as though we were dropped here. We understand our part. For the first time we feel at home in our lives no matter where we find ourselves living and working."

"Why do I feel like an adolescent around you?" Dice stared into her mother's eyes.

"Because you never got the chance until now."

"Mother, I can't be like you. I can't see life through your eyes. And I have to say it, I don't think love is in the cards for me."

"Nothing is inevitable, my dear. Love is not inevitable. Nothing about it is written in blood. It's an adventure. Then, of course, we don't fall in love, even though we call it that. You haven't fallen in love with Sebastian. We become fast friends. We fall into lust. We discover one another on many levels. We decide to commit, and we build a love. You must see some fine qualities in that man which you're not admitting. Qualities that tell your senses here is a man worth committing my energy to. And, somewhere inside, you know that the feeling is mutual. Now there's nothing to do but commit to an unknown adventure or walk away from a man you know is special, and this decision frightens you."

Flora remained still for a few moments allowing her mother-daughter teaching to awaken a space inside Dice. Dice felt a truth slowly creeping in. It was not mystic. The truth did not take Dice over. It was, however, a small bit of something honest that was not mystic, just honest. An honest seed Flora hoped would soon bloom for her only daughter who lived in fear of the holy human connection. Flora continued. "Although nothing is inevitable, let's assume you live a reasonably long life, and that the discovering and losing of love is a natural part of that life."
Well, in that case, my advice is you might as well jump in. However, if it doesn't work, you didn't hear it from me."

Dice slipped her hands away from Flora and sat back in her chair. She sighed. "Right. I'll just take the plunge. I don't think so. You're right though. I just realized, I'm afraid. Fraidy cat with a capital F. Look at that."

A gaggle of panicked chirping cries escaped from the scrub jay's nest. "It's attacking its young!"

"What? No. I don't think so," Flora said, "though, it may be prodding them to take the big leap. They need encouragement. They don't know what it feels like to fly. They don't have the self-awareness to decide that at times like this a gentle but circumspect faith in one's self, one's feelings and intuitive knowing, is called for."

The birds quieted. Dice listened to the sound of her own breathing. An inexplicable quality of peace enveloped Rose Cottage, and Dice found herself spending an increasingly greater quantity of time sitting in silence communing with a part of herself she'd never felt before: something silent, and temperate, and empty spreading beyond the confines of flesh. 

"Maybe I've always been afraid. I've always clung to what I know I'm capable of doing. I've always thought of myself as what I know I'm capable of becoming. I may have fooled myself into thinking that I was powerful. Perhaps I'm just a scared woman with a narrow existence. Could I have gone into law because I craved the structure?"

"Did I tell you, I never created new case law? In all the years I practiced, I never blazed any trails." Dice stood slowly, pacing the patio. I stood there putting on a show—valiantly defending that which other minds, those before me, had the courage to usher in. I called myself a prosecutor. That made me feel powerful! But I never really poked any holes in anything." She leaned against the garden wall behind Flora, speaking to the back of her small gray head. "Is it that easy to jump into anything? I hated you for years. But I had some sense of what you did, and I admired you for it. Perhaps I was jealous of your strength."

"Life," Flora said without turning around, "and you and I are certainly a part of it, and it's a part of us, is dynamic." Dice closed her eyes listening to Flora speak. The words seemed to
emanate from everywhere around her. "It moves and flows in torrents and trickles. It's not natural for it to cling to what it's been, or where it's been. It carries no preconceived notions of itself or its purpose. It simply is. It simply moves. Not courageous. Not afraid. Only moving ceaselessly, without thought." It felt to Dice as though a message was being carried on the breeze, as if Flora were no longer present. "Well, my dear, we think, and we should. But, perhaps we think too much."

Dice spoke with difficulty, shaken by an uncanny sense about her mother. "This must all be mundane bullshit to you. My insignificant perplexities. As though you're somehow enlightened. Of course, you're not."

"I've caused suffering and I've suffered. I've had my crosses to bear," Flora said. "Though, I'll say this, I never paid my suffering an undue amount of attention. If you wish to call that enlightenment, go ahead. I call it being balanced. Some call it foolishness."

Flora's blade collection numbered twenty different shapes and sizes. She separated two smaller ones with narrow blades in order to work her bonsai. The bonsai forest at Rose Cottage grew out of an arrangement of shallow pots staggered on shelves under the overhang. "They each grow in their separate pot," Flora said, "but together they create a forest. If I take one away..." she carefully lifted one from the center of the grouping and moved it out of their line of vision. "There. Now we have a different forest. Perhaps two forests." She examined the new situation and frowned knitting her eyebrows. "We have another problem. This young one will burn when the sunlight moves between those wooden slats overhead. The one I moved away was providing shade." She returned the missing plant to its position.

"They're beautiful," Dice said.

Flora reached under the bottom shelf struggling with a new planting in a pastel green glazed pot. Dice reached down helping her and together they placed it on Flora's worktable. She motioned for Dice to sit at the table on a high stool and handed her a narrow-nosed pair of shears, a penknife, a scissor, and a roll of malleable copper wire. "It's a Satsuki azalea. It's just like the ones in front of the house. Tough. That's why I saved it for you, Dice."

Dice frowned. "Are you saying I'm a klutz?"
"Remember the roses?"
"We pruned them to look like hands," Dice said.
"I want you to expose the tree in this azalea, dear."
"Tree? I don't see a tree here, Mother."
"This is why you don't get along with the plants. You don't listen to them. You don't see them. Sit here, quietly, with your mind focused on one thing, the tree. When it appears, carefully cut away everything else."

Dice raised the shears, but Flora, demonstrating unexpected strength forced her arm down on the table. "Wait," she said, "until you see it."

"But—"
"Don't move from this spot until you see it. Do you hear me?"
"Yes." Dice dropped the shears on the table and sat on her hands staring at the azalea. It sent out masses of deep green leaves, each one thick and strong on the ends of brown branches. She looked around.

Flora disappeared into the yard. She knelt in one of the flowerbeds in the sun with her back to the patio.

Dice squirmed freeing her hands, allowing them to rest in her lap. "I don't see anything. I'm beginning to feel awfully stupid!" she shouted.

"You can't hear with your tongue moving, and you can't see the tree if you're looking at me!" Flora shouted back. "You missed something, I'm certain."

"I've examined the whole—" but when she returned attention to the azalea she noticed a single pink flower, delicate in contrast to the thick leaves surrounding it. She studied the flower regarding its tendrils, long and thin and white with a dot of red on the end of each one. Dice counted nine. "I found a flower. Mother?" Dice looked in the yard but Flora had vanished.

An answer came quickly from inside the house. "Stay with it, my dear. I'm going down to the garden center for some seed."

"Maybe I should go."
"Don't be silly. It's one bus there and back, and they know me down there." Her voice suddenly drew closer. "They know where I live, if that's what you're afraid of," she stood behind Dice holding her handbag and wearing her large floppy hat. Dice spun around. "You see," and she snapped the brim of her hat, "I'll be just fine."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Now stay with it. I'm glad we had this chance to talk." When Dice first moved in, the women never touched. Now they kissed. Flora left through the garden stroking each plant on her way out. She shut the gate behind her without looking back. Dice studied her azalea.

For a fleeting moment she saw within the formless plant the shape of a tree, instantly it receded into the bush. Formlessness giving birth to form, form giving birth to formlessness. She stared at the flower. Perhaps the flower will be the top of the tree and from there it'll grow downwards. Or, she examined the base of the plant, the tree will grow upwards and the flower will crown it. She drifted thinking about her past life as an attorney, conversations had with Judge Estes. She recalled her father, then remembered the task at hand. Her mother said, "When gardening think only of gardening." She returned her attention to the tree. The tree. There is a tree here. Where is Sebastian? A tree, here, now. Why hasn't he called? I'm waiting, bush. Looking, listening, and waiting. I don't hear you. Bush. Bush. A tree...

Dice rotated the plant and her stool so she faced the garden, so that she viewed the garden in the background through the foreground of the plant's foliage. The sky is beautiful behind the leaves, the air whispering through them. Find the tree. It's right here in front of you. The tree.

Breathe in, Tree...
Breathe out, Tree...
Breathing Tree...

Slowly, without losing sight of the Satsuki azalea, breathing tree, Dice selected a small slim stainless steel rake from the table. She scratched the soil, the way the tree grows, raking bits of earth away from the thickest surface roots exposing gnarls, v-shaped fingers grasping firmly,
sinking their tips into the dirt. *You are a wise tree,* she thought, *your hands are old and experienced.* She traced the hands upwards into what she now realized as the tree's trunk. Dice alternated between a pair of long handled shears and shorter trimming shears with large looped grips. She snipped excessive growth, complex patterns of twigs and leaves and acquired an awareness of the plant through her tools.

Dice discerned a thick branch, an old and hardened branch from a young green shoot tender to the touch of the tool. She achieved a sense of weightlessness, of lightening the tree's burden, cutting away its arthritic joints allowing breathing space for fresh growth. The plant communicated to her as though increasing in strength from each snap of the shears. The trunk exposed itself wide and tugged at the base, tapering gently, developing with a slight bend towards the top. Dice developed an intense intuition that the tree had been at long last released, freed from bondage. Joyous.

She stopped, laid down her tools and sat with dirty hands and a dirt mark spread across her left cheek. *You are a tree, a wonderful tree.* She ran one finger under a young moist branch listening and the tree conveyed its profound gratitude; of this she felt certain.

Dice worked until late afternoon trimming, listening and then integrating the Satsuki azalea into the forest. She regarded its placement carefully, not believing it respectful of the tree to position it more than once. When she finished, Dice stepped back and shook her arms and stretched her legs. She called into the house, "Mother!" but heard no answer. Dice walked the cottage twice. Sunset exploded in the west and Dice sat on the sofa watching the interior light dim. In an hour the explosion lost color and she found herself sitting still in darkness. Flora did not return.

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By the time Sebastian arrived hysteria set in. She tried controlling it. "I'm envisioning the worst things," she said and then laughed. "Isn't that stupid? I know that's just ridiculous. Isn't it?"

"Calm down, sweetheart. This won't help."
"You don't understand," she covered her face muffling the sound, "She's losing it. The poor thing is wandering the streets," her shoulders bunched and she shook sobbing, "lost somewhere."

Sebastian reached out unlocking her arms, uncovering her face and he looked at her sternly disapproving. He held down her wrists.

She gazed at him plaintively, salty tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh, my god." Suddenly the flood of tears stopped and Dice's bloodshot eyes opened wide.

"What? What?" Sebastian threw his arms in the air and then dropped them allowing his hands to slap the sides of his jeans. "What is it?"

"She could've been mugged. What if she was tortured? You have to go out and find her." Dice tore through her shoulder bag for the keys. "Take the Jag. I called the police. I have to wait for them. They're bending the rules for me. We came to an agreement."

Sebastian studied Dice's hunkered down posture. "What's that?"

"They're supposed to wait twenty-four hours to take a missing persons report. So, I told them who I was. When I get back, I'll make sure none of their cases 'got lost.' They'll be here within the hour to take a missing persons report." She threw the keys at Sebastian's chest. Dice stuffed herself into a corner of the sofa. She rubbed her chin and lips with one hand and turned away. He stood over her slipping the keys into his pocket, feeling helpless.

"Prints?"

"She's not a criminal. She won't have anything on file."

"What if she's in a hospital, Dice?"

"Really? You need the speech now?" Dice turned towards the wall. "If she knows her name, they can report it immediately. If she came in as a Jane Doe, they'll give her emergency treatment and try to place her in an appropriate institution. If they can't do that they'll turn her loose on the street... with the other two-thousand people in this city that don't know their fucking names! That don't have any food to eat! That don't have any fucking place to sleep!" A million times. I've heard that speech a million times. I never thought...
Sebastian sat down removing his shades. "What makes you think she doesn't know her name?"

"I caught her standing over the stove staring at the flame. She didn't know what world she was in. Then she comes back," Dice gave the air a dismissive wave, "then she goes out again." Dice trembled. Her voice, normally strong and assured, grew high and weak. "I've been a terrible daughter," and she shook her head repeatedly. Her fingers twisted and her hands shut into tight fists pressing against one another.

"That's not right, to say it or think it. You never knew she was here. She never told you."

She snapped her head around glaring at him. "It doesn't matter whether or not it's right! It's the way I feel! Go. Take the car. Go!"

"What about calling the hospitals? What about digital data bases?"

"Data bases are for the dead, not the living. She was on the public bus. She could have gotten off anywhere. We have four-hundred hospitals and eighty-thousand beds to check. We have over two-thousand people walking the streets who don't know who the fuck they are. I'm a district attorney. Remember? I'm powerful... I called my clerk." Dice folded her legs underneath herself, shook her head, and clapped her hands. Then she spoke softly so the ten-thousand things would not hear. "He's working on it."

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Early morning sunlight melted over her face like a bath of warm clover honey. The woman awoke out of a dream in bed curled under fresh sheets, a soft pillow cradling her head. Carrying a tray, a young blond nurse in a starched striped uniform brought steaming oatmeal and orange juice. The nurse's white crepe soled shoes walked in silence, and when the woman opened her eyes seeing the silent figure approaching, she thought an angel descended. The nurse pushed a button. The bed vibrated lifting so that her patient sat. "Thank you, my dear. How sweet of you to bring me these things." She peered at the tray confused, lifting a finger and pointing at each item. "But where am I?"
The young nurse sat on the edge of the bed brushing the woman's long white hair from her eyes. They squinted against the light. "My name's Carly and I'm your nurse. I've been assigned to your section. Can you tell me your name?"

The woman studied Carly's face, the rose blush of her cheeks. *This girl's no blond*, she thought. *Look at those rosy cheeks and that turned-up nose. She's red-haired and Irish, I'll bet.* My name? "I'm sorry," she said, "I can't tell you my name." She reached over touching the hem of Carly's uniform rubbing it between thumb and forefinger. "You're a nurse, aren't you? Am I in the hospital?"

"Did I mention that I'm a nurse?"

"I had a dream. I was riding on a bus, the entire route over and over. It never ended. I remember sitting on the seat. It was an older bus with tattered vinyl seats. The inside of it was long and empty. Green and gray metal with rivets, and I remember wondering why I was riding on the bus. I didn't recall boarding, and I had no idea where I was going. I just kept riding around and around, reading long narrow lines of advertisements above my head: condoms, decongestants, a drawing of a nose with a sock on it, and—oh, yes, a gorilla and something about visiting the zoo, and I remember thinking that I could sleep on the bus, that it would be alright because I paid my fare. And then I woke up and you came in with the tray." The woman bit her bottom lip. "Some other thing. In the moment of awakening I was worried about the flowers."

"Do you have flowers? Do you grow flowers?"

"I don't know. They're pretty though, aren't they, the flowers? There's something very wrong here."

"Here?"

"Yes. Here, in this room. Those wire grates on the window. There's a great sadness here. A violent separation from the outside world. It's oppressive, don't you think?"

"I have to go now." Carly paused for a moment. "Who am I?"

"You're my nurse. I only have to be told once. You'll come back, won't you?"

"Of course." Carly smiled grasping the woman's arm reassuringly. "You're lucid, you know? You really don't belong here. Are you sure you don't know who you are?"
"I never said that. I said I couldn't remember my name."

"Take it a day at a time."

"If you like, dear. I'm sleepy now." The woman drifted off.

"I'll see you later," Carly whispered, creeping quietly away, locking the door behind her.

Outside the woman's window, hidden in the highest treetop, a sparrow warbled habitually without understanding why, its melody calling to others while it attached to a branch swaying in the wind. The bird turned its head pecking at its feathers fluffing itself. Without reason other birds answered in chorus.

Later that afternoon Carly returned rolling a wheelchair and she glided the woman along heavily waxed linoleum floors down a long white hallway into a small office with a cluttered wooden desk in the center. Doctor Dieter, a middle-aged gentleman suffering thinning black hair, wire-rimmed spectacles, and a spotless white lab coat sat on his side of the desk, his nose buried in a folder. The woman waited for Doctor Dieter to notice her and when she felt she'd waited long enough she said, "Hello over there, from someone over here."

The doctor looked up closing the folder. He laid it on the desk placing his hands on top of it gently, as if something fragile rested inside, a piece of valuable reportage that might break.

"Pardon me, Miss, what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't."

"I see. Well, I was just going over your file."

"Wonderful! You must know more about me than I do. How incredible it all is. Science. To know more about me than I know about myself."

"Oh, yes. We're quite thorough here." He opened the folder again. "Blood pressure readings every two hours since your arrival. Weight. Urine volume. Did you know you have a bladder infection?" He stared at her.

"Is it serious?"

He smiled. "I doubt it. You also have a prolapsed mitro-valve. Not important really. This is not very interesting stuff is it?" Doctor Dieter removed his spectacles chewing thoughtfully on
the end of one temple piece. He beamed a practiced break-the-ice grin. "You had wine shortly before you were admitted."

"I've only gathered a few pieces of information about me since I've arrived," the woman said. "I guess I'm not trained in the scientific method. I guess it's safe to say I'm not a physicist or anything like that."

"You're not afraid, are you? Most amnesiacs are terrified at some point early in the trial," he swiveled his chair, "but not you. Why do you suppose that is? You wake up in a strange place, and you don't know any of the faces. You realize quickly that you don't know who you are. I'd be scared shitless. It's okay, you know?"

"You mean you don't have the answer to that in your file?"

"I do not."

"Do you know that I like flowers? Or that I love waking up with the feeling of warm sunlight streaming in through a window and splashing me in the face?"

"No."

"Does the file tell you that I can feel things through my skin, through my finger tips. Cotton seems to make me feel very relaxed and secure. Paper, on the other hand, is cold and impersonal to the touch. I had to sign a form earlier. I put a squiggle down, for what it's worth. Does your file tell you that I prefer walking to riding in a wheel chair, that I feel intimately connected to the earth when my feet are touching it, and that connection seems to be important to me? I don't like grates on my windows. Separating within from without. Impossible!"

"It's not that kind of file."

"It's not a very good file, is it, Doctor? Not the kind of file that will help me in a practical way to find out where I came from."

"Nor will it tell you where you're going. But that doesn't devalue the scientific approach."

"I can tell you where I'm going." The woman examined her hands running her fingers along the ridges of her veins and wrinkled flesh. "I'm going to pass away like autumn dust. Even I can see that I'm old. Is that why I've forgotten my name, my past? I'm not afraid. I am, however, distressed."
Doctor Dieter nursed a vague feeling he was being robbed of his professional edge. "Listen, you can see your reflection in the mirror as well as I can. There's no sense in my trying to convince you that you're not your age. But a person experiences several ages. You also have a psychological age, and a social age. I suspect that in the next few days you're going to be making assessments, looking at yourself in a way you never have, or at best don't remember having done. Bear in mind that your attitude has an age. It can make a world of difference for you in terms of recovery." It irked him that this woman spoke without fear as if they were equals. "Does the thought of death disturb you, Miss?"

The woman opened her eyes wide and the doctor noted her slightly yellowed whites, the pupils a bit cloudy with distance as if she were already gone. "The question causes me to think," she said. "Strange. The question of life and death is the only true question, yet, I want to say that it's irrelevant."

"I don't understand?"

"Because it's the only question, it's irrelevant. I'm sorry," the woman said, "I don't understand it myself. But right now, I have a nagging sense of purposelessness. Sitting here, my death seems purposeless, almost as if it were a sign of my life, a life I can't remember, as though it were never lived. But it was lived." The woman shook her arms and felt her legs. "It must have created an entity greater than its experience because that's all I have now. I must have owned purpose, and loved with intention. But what was it? I can't remember my life, yet here I am. I don't know. I just don't know. I want to tell you something odd. I feel deeply that all of my life I have been asking and answering the question of life and death. I understand now, thinking about it. That's why it is an irrelevant query. Because my life itself is the inquiry. Being here is the question and the answer."

Doctor Dieter pushed his spectacles back onto his shiny nose. He reached into his pocket for a pen and scribbled notes on a blank yellow legal pad. "You're obviously an intelligent woman. Perhaps you've lived as an artist or a philosopher, a person of some high degree of personal achievement." The woman, he had come to feel, deserved respect. Doctor Dieter
became aware of a pervasive calm within the room. "At any rate, I would postulate just by
listening to you express yourself that your life has been a meaningful one."

The woman sighed deeply shaking her head. "I'm at the end of a journey that I can't
assess or evaluate." She searched the doctor's eyes. "It's depressing. I guess because while I'm
more than the journey, that journey is very much a part of me, and at the moment, that part is
missing."

Doctor Dieter reached for his telephone, dialed, and spoke into it swiftly running words
together. "Doctor Dieter. Patient file 176924. This patient has the beginnings of Korsakoff's
syndrome. While there does not appear to be any withdrawal or substance abuse, there was
alcohol in the patient's blood, and noticeable capillary damage does exist around the tops of the
cheeks and tip of the nose. I question the patient's consumption pattern; I believe it to be long
term. The patient's EEG shows some abnormalities, a sustained degree of arterial sclerosis with
the attending onset of primary dementia. Level of alertness is high, cooperation is high, judgment
and insight are high. Order cognitive function and mental status examination after another forty-
eight hours orientation. How much of what we're seeing is dementia versus Korsakoff's is
difficult to say without any real baseline. Order MMSE and Mattis. There does not appear to be
any trauma. I believe the patient is experiencing some natural degree of memory deficit due to
senility. The patient's crystallized intelligence is intact, intellectual functions normal. There is no
neurosis or undue depression. The patient is not delusional. The patient is motivated and
articulate. Begin the patient on a thiamine program observing activity of secondary dementia,
and release from lock-down." Doctor Dieter glanced at the woman and winked, "Note: the
patient likes flowers. Have a dozen carnations delivered to the patient's room." He hung up and
leaned over his desk.

"I have every confidence that you'll regain your memory. To what degree I couldn't say,
because I don't know what kind of shape you were in before this episode. If this episode is
cleared up will there be further episodes, or have there been previous episodes? I don't have
those answers. You have some primary losses due to arterial sclerosis. That's not unusual. I
wouldn't sweat it. But how much? Without a history, it's a tough call. And there are different
types of amnestic syndromes. Some amnesiacs have to be taught to eat all over again. They can't remember how to pick up a fork. In your case, you're lucky."

"Write down in your folder that I'll recover and file the damn thing away."

"Fine. In the meantime, I'm having you released from lock-down."

"What's that?"

"Protective custody. You're not homicidal are you? Or suicidal?"

"I can't kill anyone because I don't know anyone. And I can't take my life because I haven't given you anything important to leave in my file."

"That's a curious thing to say."

"Of course, I don't know at this point, but when someone dies, shouldn't they leave behind something more important than their last pressure reading or final weight?" The woman chuckled. "When I die, I'd like to leave behind what I learned while I lived, what made my life valuable. I sense that I've done that, somehow, but I don't remember. I believe, my dear, I've given a gift to someone."

"Well spoken," and a thought occurred to him. "Would you like Carly to show you the garden?"

"Carly and I have become great friends," the woman said.

***

"Is this it? She's missing, the end?" Dice walked the garden clutching Sebastian's hand. He stopped her, noticing her eyes. After ten months of searching, the pure whites were painted pink with large dark circles in the thin skin underneath. The corners of her mouth hollowed frighteningly anorexic. Sebastian, silent and anxious, became more worried about Dice's emotional state than about Flora. Flora and Sebastian had an understanding, and after all, he felt she was dead.

A year ago Sebastian noticed Flora slowing down. Weeds began overrunning the front of Rose Cottage and he became suspicious. One day he asked how she was feeling.
"Mr. Moon," she said, "it's kind of you to ask, but there's never any change. When I'm ill, the risks are that I may live or I may die. When I am well, the risks are that I may live or I may die. How do I feel? I feel as though I owe it to myself to live until I die. Life is only now. Perpetually now. It's a short life no matter how long we live. What more is there to say, my dear? Except that I love you for asking. Don't worry about me, Sebastian. I certainly do not worry about myself."

"I don't know what to tell you," he said to Dice. "I don't know what to do next. Or if I should do anything at all." He thought back to Flora's remarks of a year ago.

Each evening as the sun sank in the west, Dice forced a mouthful of food—her first and last of the day—with water, vitamin capsules and tranquilizers. The garden now grew wild and Rose Cottage became cluttered with strewn used tissues, newspaper pages, partially opened mail and clothing hung over chairs and doorknobs. She lived in darkness, drapes drawn until each afternoon Sebastian Moon dragged her screaming into the garden, bullying her into walking. "You place one foot in front of the other because that's what people do, or are you gutless?" he'd say, yanking her by the arm across the lawn.

Today she threw away his hand and stood still listening to the birds. There remained a still photograph in her mind of a police detective standing at the door holding Flora's handbag. He said they'd found it three houses away tossed behind some bushes. One hundred and fifty-three dollars lay loose on the bottom of the bag along with spare change, and as far as Dice could tell, all of her mother's identification. "You would've thought things would be different," Dice said, giving Sebastian's leg a squeeze. "I'm not stupid. I know the world doesn't revolve around my mother. Still, I feel as though I've lost a piece of my life. She was my history. Before her I tried looking back, but the past never happened." Dice smiled slightly. This was the first smile in a long time. "My mother gave me a point of departure, and her being who she was gave me a place. Did I tell you I found an unmailed letter?"

"No."
"I read it, and then I understood who she was." Dice looked down at her feet. "She couldn't have been real until then because I denied her in my mind, like she denied me. God, she irritated me."

"Why?" Sebastian knew why, but intuitively he felt this was the moment to keep the conversation going.

"She demanded I throw away my values, my boundaries, my loneliness. That crazy old lady conned me into accepting love. What do I do with that?"

"Pass it along. For all of your tears," he said, "you've changed since the day we first met. I see it behind your eyes, as though they're windows exposing your humanity. I sense compassion, the search, a purpose, and a vision of light where I used to see only a dark foreboding power. And, of course, there's sadness." He put a hand on her knee and at that moment Shep wandered over curling himself below the bench. "Dice, did I ever tell you that when you first spoke to me I shivered in your presence?"

"I lived that way. But then I met Mother, and she really gives one no alternative. She sees life through her own eyes, and if you're anywhere around, you find yourself giving in and just wondering, how does she do it? When I read her letter, I felt my life had been insignificant. Suddenly, all of my great accomplishments were just events to leave behind."

"That's what travelers have always done, leave life behind," Sebastian said. "Your mother is a great wisdom woman of courage. She could have held on to her life events, the good and the not so good. There is a secondary gain there. If you hold on to what you have, to what you know, every moment you will know what and who you are. You will avoid all manner of insecurities. There is simultaneously a great loss. No matter how long you live, you will never learn all that you might learn or be all that you might become. If you do not risk, the events you leave behind will not be so valuable as they might have become, because no matter how far you feel you have traveled, in the end you will not have traversed a single step."

"God!" Dice stood stomping her feet on the lawn. She sobbed. "Listen to us eulogizing her!"
"You are correct. We shouldn't be eulogizing her, because her nonsense stories, and lectures, and quips, and curt answers, and talking furniture, and her magic cottage and garden will leave you wondering about yourself and your world for the rest of your life. In a way, this is a woman who can't die. In her irritating and aggravating way she now lives under your skin. In her way she has beaten the odds in the game of life and death. She dares you even now, in this moment to love yourself enough to say goodbye to the event that was Flora Stravinsky. Face the loss, Dice, and then dare to move ahead on your journey, because you deserve it."

After months the words were out of his mouth. Dice stared at him. A November evening fell and she turned back, walking towards the house, leaving Sebastian in the garden. He reached down running his fingers firmly through Shep's gray streaked hair. "You too, soon," he said, "but don't worry. I'll understand."

Inside she walked to the teak desk and sat in front of it. Dice ran her hands over its smooth surface hoping to feel something of her mother's presence, wondering when Flora found the opportunity to sit and write. She opened a musty drawer, bare aside from a slim volume. Inside the volume she discovered a brief inscription: "For Flora, the student surpasses the teacher. With nothing more to give you, go now and live." Dice allowed the book to fall open and she read arbitrarily:

"...The ten-thousand things cannot be helped but to live according to their virtue. ..."

"Sebastian," she spoke to him through the window, "I feel like I did when I was a child. She's out there somewhere. And I'm in here, on my own." Dice became aware of Flora's handbag hanging over a doorknob. "At first I didn't understand, but lately I've been hearing a voice."

"You're hearing voices?" Sebastian watched the window through his furrowed brow.

"Like intuition," she said.

"Oh." He relaxed.

"It tells me she doesn't want to be found, and that now I'm free. Whenever I hear the voice, I experience a moment of peace—" she stepped closer to the window feeling the chilled winter air on her arms. Moonlight reflected itself in Shep's luminous eyes. "—as if the seasons are changing. It's sad. It's good. But it's very sad. I've lost my mother."
"I know," Sebastian said.

"Come in and I'll make dinner," she said. "It's time to eat." As if he understood, Shep lifted his head his eyes brightening. He crawled out from under the bench, sat on his haunches and barked once directly at the window. Tears streamed rivulets down Dice's cheeks. "Okay, you too," she answered.
THE WAY OF VERSE THIRTY-EIGHT by Thalia S. Moon

Excerpted from The Way, by Thalia Stravinsky Moon, a series of interpretation and commentary on the Tao Te Ching, by Lao-Tzu. This series was first published in Beginner's Mind; A Journal of Eastern Thought.

"...The greatest virtue is not morality; therefore it truly corresponds. Morality is unyielding; therefore it cannot correspond. The greatest virtue declares no direction, though it is constantly moving; False loyalty to this or that forces direction, though it loses touch with The Way; Wrong values are declared, though they cannot correspond. Then codes are made strict, yet people do not obey, so laws must be enforced. When we lose touch with The Way, we have morality; When we lose touch with virtue, we act on false loyalties; When we act on false loyalties, we are unyielding; And when we are unyielding, we enforce wrong values. Unyielding values lead to improper loyalties, and wrong sincerity, and eventually disorder.

To live by a preconceived morality is to see only the surface. To originate a genuine existence one lives with virtue, not with morality: Living with virtue one becomes the core of life; Therefore, one rejects moral codes and is accepting of The Way. ..."

Commentary:
I live and write in a cottage handed down from my grandmother, Flora Stravinsky, to my mother, Dice Moon, to myself. It's a simple life, and I find days in my English style garden conducive to contemplation. Often, I compose whole chapters in my head while pruning roses or watching the goings on of a ladybug crawling along my finger. Jays land on the garden walls, and squirrels chase each other in circles while I tend the mint or work at separating iris. Occasionally, I stop in the middle of whatever I'm doing and without moving a muscle, I listen. Mother used to say I share a common vision with my grandmother. I hear the usual melodic symphony of birds imitating each other out of primitive instinct. Also, I hear leaves falling on the wind, grass growing in soft soil, and I swear the stones are speaking to me. I've never been one to sense much difference between the animate and the inanimate. Sometimes the cottage itself speaks to me; it wishes a cleaning, or it wishes to be left alone.

That which includes all of these goings on, but which is greater, also pervades the garden. It is not a force. Rather, it is an allowance in the universal mind for time and space, a process of allowance making possible animal, vegetable, and mineral: the ten-thousand things. On days when the sun is high, and my mind and spirit are especially clear, I feel the garden teeming with a ceaseless yielding quality; tao or The Way. Often Lao Tzu referred to tao as the mother, female, or valley, and the material universe as the ten-thousand things. Tao flows through the ten-thousand things allowing thingness, virtue, or te.

While gently watering new transplanted cuttings, which rest in the shady over-growth of older flowering plants, I am aware that these youngsters have the te to become an immense forest. Virtue, flowing as te, is a free virtue; the quality of a dynamic situation or thing to naturally become what it is. People, like plants, have their virtue.

Te is not always obvious within a thing; yet, in its way it is constantly striving. Humanity often perverts natural te by forcing decisions and actions born of an educated doctrine of moral and political virtue. A doctrine of unnatural virtue is self-perpetuating, leading us away from te down the dark labyrinths of wrong action and confusion.
When through confusion we become loyal to moral or political virtue, or for that matter, blindly loyal to any doctrine, including Taoistic doctrine, it hampers the freedom necessary for tao and te to work in the universe. To witness the tao but not demand of it, this is philosophical Taoism. Loyalty to religion, politics, education, etc., is an unnatural virtue and the beginning of disorder. When we bring disorder to our lives, we bring disorder to the universe. I've witnessed one rose with mildew spread the disease altering the eco-system throughout the garden.

My garden lives as a cooperative whole. Leaf, flower, and vine produce empty of selfness. Though their myriad of forms and aspects appear differentiated, the virtue of each to become what it will works through an indivisible relativity to the whole.

As I work the garden and it fulfills my spirit, I've come to realize that people are virtual flowers planted in the universal garden. The garden feeds us through our deep roots, and we become what the garden is, and in turn we create what the garden will become. We are not only plants in the garden, we are the garden. We are not only people, we are the universe. It's light shines through us and is reflected by us, as it shines through everything and is reflected. My mother used to say that she could feel my grandmother's light in the garden. We are a reflection, a cause and an effect, and from the moment of our birth we are returning to all that we are, to that which does not cease, to the allowance for existence. We naturally return to the tao.

Life holds a precious meaning for us only because life itself holds the prospect of death. Every hour The Way carries us a step further along our journey. To live consciously with both life and death is to achieve harmony. To cling desperately, one-sidedly to life, surviving at any cost, is disharmonious. Living with disharmony is detrimental to the life experience. Accept death, and life is glorious. Realize death as return, and we are immortal. "

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A FINAL TOAST by Flora Stravinsky
[Excerpted from an unpublished portion of Flora Stravinsky's notebooks. Research indicates at this time that Flora wrote for the L.A. Today Journal. It is my opinion this was targeted for that publication, though the journal has ceased operations and no library copies are available. This certainly would have been Flora's final column, and it is the last entry in her For Publication series of notebooks.]

"...the scent of a rose? ...The woman who inhales it closes her eyes: Leave me, I feel as if I had at last come home.' ..."

~ Colette, Journey for Myself

"...Shop talk is pathetic. Especially when it consists of worn old maxims like: a gardener's work is never done; live by the hoe—die by the hoe; and how many times have I heard this ancient rag: the last hole I dig will be the one they bury me in. I too am guilty of using worn maxims. My favorite is: when it is time to stop and smell the roses, stop, and smell the damned roses!

Begin with love. All of us desire to love and be loved. Our common soil may then be nourished with the mulch of giving and receiving respect. Finally, we wish to lead fearless lives of fulfillment, to flower, to feel secure with ourselves.

While a fecund variety of people dapple the earth, we arise of the same source, part of that source, spreading our leaves in search. It is on this basis of commonality—the source and search—that I have dedicated my life to self study, and finally arriving at an understanding that the entire garden is all that I am; how Eden flourishes is how I grow, and is who I am.

In my old age I've moved closer to Her, and I have it on excellent authority that upon completing the great north forty, even She rested. All flowers in the garden will grow stronger if we, as well meaning caretakers, allow our intuition to speak, alerting us when to stop hovering over our pansies and zinnias, our carnations and peonies, and allow them their birthright; not our shadows, but the warm sunlight. Without this light the garden cannot flourish.
I'm motivated to write this column because I no longer feel a call to arms. I believe it is time for me to retire my pruning shears, hang up my hoe, pour myself a tall one—I'm thinking white and dry with a beer chaser—and enjoy my work knowing that it was good, and most importantly, to then move on.

Another old maxim is one I look to now. Spoken by biblical prophets, folk singers, drunken poets, and college students, it rings true to my soul:

"...To everything turn, turn, turn
There is a season, turn, turn, turn
And a time to every purpose under heaven..."
~*Turn, Turn, Turn* by Pete Seeger

Dear readers, this is my final column. I thank you for your time, and I am grateful for the years we've spent together. I'm retiring to contemplate the universe, and then hopefully to return without leaving a footprint in a garden that does not need a better idea."

Sincerely,
Flora Stravinsky
Los Angeles, California
CHAPTER 9—WATCHING THALIA

"What are you anxious about? Look at how you're fidgeting." Doctor Dieter sat behind his desk watching her. "I understand you've been out there digging in our garden again. I told you we hire a man to do that."

"I would like to leave," the woman said. "I'm ready."

"Ready for what? For where?"

"I'm ready to begin my new life."

"Now?"

"I only have now, don't I?"

"What day of the week is it?"

"Today." The woman grinned at the doctor who grumbled. "Well, it's not yesterday," she said. "It's not tomorrow. My dear, it only follows that it must be today!"

"This is exactly what we've been talking about. It's Tuesday."

"So what? I'd like to be out of here by Thursday morning."

"And where will you go?"

The woman considered Doctor Dieter's question. She paced the office finally looking at him. "I'm going someplace exciting and new." The doctor swiveled in his chair. The woman smiled. "Oh, don't you see? I might as well never have been anyplace at all. So, anyplace I go will be an adventure. I have this overwhelming desire to—"

"What's wrong?"

The woman covered her face with her hands and cried. "That man smoking the pipe. And a woman sits in the kitchen peeling potatoes. It's so sad."

The doctor spoke softly. "You have a life here. You can't just walk away from it."
"No."
"Give this a little more time. Please?" the doctor said.
"Yes," she agreed.
"Do you know what you're doing?"
"What do you mean?" the woman asked.
"In the garden," the doctor said. "Do you know what you're doing in the garden?"
"It knows what it's doing. I'm just helping it along. Sometimes I have this feeling that I should leave the garden. 'Leave it alone, ' this voice keeps telling me. 'Leave it alone and the garden will come into its own. What's left, what grows on its own grows strong.' I know part of me is speaking, but I don't know where it's coming from. I don't think it has anything to do with the garden. Sometimes I think that if I sit quietly, very quietly, it will become clear. That something out there will come to me, that it's moving all around me. A light. There are times when I feel a presence so strongly that I believe I can actually touch it. And then it's gone, and I'm left here."
"You know, you came in here without identification, without a purse."
"I was mugged."
"No, I think not. Call it an experienced hunch."
"It just seems I've been here long enough. Carly? What happened to Carly? I had that dream again, the one about the bus. Around and around. I'd better tend to my flowers."

Doctor Dieter studied the woman's file that had grown thick. "I'm trying to find your admission date. No good. I'm afraid I've lost it."
"Two weeks ago," the woman spoke abruptly.

The doctor slowly closed the file. He placed his hands on it and eyed her over the tops of his glasses.
"Six months ago?" she asked.
"It's been almost three years," the doctor said.
"Yes," the woman said. "The garden has its seasons and they'll change without any interference from me. You know, Doctor, I'm really a very good gardener, and a good gardener knows when to put down the hoe and the rake. I'm tired now, my dear."

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The statement required privacy, a confidence between the two of them, a deeply felt promise not to be taken for a show. No parents were alive to be insulted by being left out.

Retired Judge Estes presided. They felt the nature of this promise lay beyond religion. It bespoke of spirituality. For witnesses they counted on Shep, old and blind and too tired to stand, and, of course, they had Her.

"I almost didn't show up today," Judge Estes said squinting into the morning sun. "The obits, the math, you know, was very bad. But then I remembered, they're opening a new driving range this afternoon up the coast, up north towards Santa Barbara. They had about forty acres that they didn't know what to do with, so they put in a coffee shop and the range. Maybe they'll plant some flowers. Anyway, that's enough. Let's get married!"

Sebastian and Dice stood together in Her garden holding hands in the midst of all that is good and flourishes, and they spoke their vows; private vows.

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I can't fathom why I remember these things, or tell the story, or ask questions, except to say, long ago Mother told me of her awakening—a time she finally admitted her fears, learned to understand them, and realized the majority of her life up to that point played itself out as a series of reactions to fear. Afraid of living, afraid of dying.

"I began to look into the faces, the lives of those around me and know that I was not alone. That we all suffer in fear. That to understand my own fear was the key to understanding the human condition, my key to compassion for others. That to understand is to conquer. I
examined my life and came to see myself in others. Through knowledge I at last originated a life of interconnectedness, relative fearlessness, of wonder opening into wonder."

Now, perhaps by asking those questions, which make a woman's life her own, I can teach my child when she arrives. Mother, before she died, used to tell me the unexamined life is not worth living; that a flower is not only a flower but also the garden. The sun rises in an hour and I'll tend the garden my grandmother left my mother and that my mother left me. There is one other incident I recall.

After Shep died, Sebastian Moon, my father, moved into the small room with the teak desk where he sat days writing poetry. As it does now, the garden flourished beautifully then, and each morning, Dice, my mother, would wake us early and make tea for herself and hot chocolate for me, and we listened to my grandmother's old radio play Mendelssohn until one day it simply would not play anymore, "...because," Mother said, "it doesn't want to." Sometimes at the table Mother reached out stroking my hair and telling me I was her miracle because I arrived late in life. Afterwards we fed birds and squirrels and worked the garden side by side, though I was small and couldn't do much in the way of hard labor. One day when I was four, an old woman stood watching me with my pail and shovel, smiling down at me. "She's here," I told Mother.

"Who, Thalia?"

"She's just here. That's all." I never saw the old woman again.

That day I learned my first poem. We dropped our tools in the dirt and Mother held me close and taught me:

The earth is my body
The rain my tears
Wind my breath
Flowers my spirit
And you...
You are my mother.

THE END
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CHAPTER ONE--BEAR VERSUS COYOTE: THE PRESENT TENSE

"The greatest sacred thing is knowing the order and structure of things."
~Black Horse Mitchell, Native American

"...No matter what you look at, if you look at it closely enough, you are involved in the entire universe." ~Michael Faraday, Chemical History of a Candle

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The wind tunnel sucks in fresh meat bleeding, sliced by mad machetes, shot by the insane trigger finger of urban war, or leather lungs gasping through a hole in the ozone, and this because we live out of balance. When a drill press operator loses his index finger in the factory of night, when a baby snaps her tiny spinal cord because General Motors forgot, then they come to us arriving through the ambulance entrance, the wind tunnel, screaming in agony—if it's not too late—because nature, the process, the structure of things is at best unknown, at worst ignored.

"Oh, shit! Oh, gawd! A knife, he had. The sonuvabitch!" Glass emergency doors fly open and a moist summer afternoon delivers a manned gurney screaming through the tunnel; a gray body strapped down, sheets flying, a Christmas tree dangling a swinging bag of plasma, tubes, and old Ben Chandler, screaming, shivering and small.

His wife, Sylvia, rushes in after him, blown through the tunnel down the corridor, "Oh, my God! My God... My God..." smack into the arms and breasts of the triage nurse. Sylvia beats her fists on the younger woman, an Armenian nurse with deep brown almond eyes darting
practiced in all directions. She grabs Sylvia's fists, compassionately squeezing both of the old lady's wrists together using one manicured hand, and speaks above the commotion raising her other arm pointing the clutched end of a stethoscope, "Gentlemen, O.R. two is open," and back to Sylvia, "Sweetie, you can't go in there." The doors automatically shut, the tunnel quietly waits.

In the lobby, Sylvia softly cries blotting her eyes with a balled tissue. From the public television screen four friends sit joking back and forth on a sofa. Sylvia doesn't see them.

A hand swats the large round disk on the wall and two more doors swing open. Ben sails through on his gurney, answering questions from police and a medical team as if conducting a power meeting concerning the circumstances of the robbery, "...and he was how tall? I see, right or left-handed would you say?" The doors shut. Ben feels a whisper of air behind his head, becomes aware of his bloody red sheet, and realizes he is sailing down death's corridor.

"Ben?" Doctor Robert Johnson, a tall athletic gentleman in his early forties runs alongside the gurney. He sprints in white sneakers, holding Ben's chart, flipping pages, his brain inputting data: bouncing, reading, running and speaking, "Ben, can you hear me!" Doctor Johnson instructs his team using only his brown eyes set back behind high tan cheeks, never missing a beat.

"Yeah, but it hurts like—"

"You're going to live, Ben. I'm going to clean you up and sew you up and save your life. And while I'm doing that I want you to consider your wife who's in the lobby terrified because she thinks you're dying. I want you to think about all the money this is going to cost you because I'm so damned expensive there isn't an insurance company in the Western hemisphere that'll cover my fees, Ben. Ben? Living is very pricey these days, Ben."

"I'm in pain here! I'm the victim! The sonuvabitch, he had a fuckin' meat cleaver! Oh!"

"Uh huh, a meat cleaver?" Doctor Johnson leans in close. His forehead shines under thick coal black hair and he grins wide through a square jaw whispering to Ben, "You're lucky he didn't have a fucking shotgun! Next time make with the money."
Another few steps towards death and Doctor Johnson glances at his nurse. She's holding a small vial up to the light in one hand, squinting an eye because she mustn't stop moving while precisely filling a syringe.

"Bartender?" He gives her the look.

"Yes, Doctor Johnson?"

"It's Happy Hour." Having thoroughly assessed the patient, taken Ben's vitals, prepared his pre-op shot, and never stopped moving, the group now passes between two stainless steel doors marked SURGERY. Ben feels himself being lifted and turned. A sharp needle jabs his fleshy old posterior. He lies face up again with lights shining down. He entered the hospital less than two minutes ago. His skin feels dry, ashen, the color of concrete, and he smells. Someone asks him his social security number. Doctor Johnson and his team scrub at the station behind a thick glass partition—his telephone number—he's out…

A large firm male hand is squeezing the fingers of Ben Chandler's wrinkled right hand. He opens his eyes into a different room, softer lights. Doctor Robert Johnson loosens his grip on Ben's hand and speaks in easy tones, warm and intimate. "What I was trying to say, my friend," he sits momentarily on the edge of the bed placing a reassuring grip on his patient's shoulder, "is that we have a responsibility to value our lives and the lives of those around us. We pick up stragglers as we go along—dogs, maybe a wife," both men laugh, "and we don't live in a vacuum. The money is, well, you know?" He rises off the bed, folds his stethoscope loose into his pocket and Ben smiles weakly.

Sylvia stands in the doorway self-consciously picking at strands of hair and pushing them quickly into place, because when next he turns she wants to be his angel.

***

Buena Vista Saint John's Hospital rises proving glorified determination on the back of its own sixteen story skeleton, the result of heavy steel beams, miles of conduit and optical wire, slabs of mortar and architectural masonry carved in a skyward fashion: caulked, stacked, and
spray gunned towards heaven, where, with the right key one may ride any of a dozen staff elevators from an underground parking structure up a straight line to the first cloud break—our Creator.

The corporation does not overtly reveal human ingenuity with a structure such as Saint John's. It stands a marvel of mighty industrial servitude to religious power. It stands on an American quarter in mint condition claiming its existence as the result of higher morality, a divine ethic in which we trust.

Behind its monolithic glass doors, walls pretend humbleness recalling their roots in small statues of Jesus: rabbi, yogi, rebel, healer, the blue-collar carpenter, a homeless wise man aesthetically ribbed and dying, walls that feel your pain, and though you are an absolute stranger, you lie on a gurney under thin white sheets knowing this place; and that man and these walls know you. Watercolors hang in pastel shades, fields and flowers, the unseen administration reducing your disease to a pastoral blip. One day you find yourself linked with a familiarity and faith in the unknown you had no previous notions about. This is the phenomenal institutional power of the industrial medical church; by the time you sleep here, you want desperately to believe.

No one remembers when Saint John's did not exist. At ground level the parking lot spreads out tree-lined under the afternoon sun. Sidewalks sparkle. A subtle buffer zone unfolds. Only well beyond the zone do we find the city.

Working long hours in this environment power rubs off on Robert's shirtsleeves. A doctor believes he is humble; in touch with his patients, he believes that he remembers his roots, but he knows he is powerful and whatever academic financial struggle came before life at Saint John's he works to forget. Inside the technologically miraculous belly of an epidemic he must believe in free will. Any biochemist will attest that on a cellular level free will is not empirical, not scientific, and impossible. Yet, for the sake of his sanity the doctor desperately believes he can construct a personal safety zone. Robert holds faith in this because he accepts as fact that a part of him is not subject to hard-wired physical responses; that something exists beyond the
physical, a quality with its own will. Although, asking for a scientific admission of such beliefs only garners one a denial.

Stepping out of the great stainless elevator on the fifteenth floor, walking down a quiet hallway, the only carpeted hallway in the building, each wooden door hides an office cubical. Behind the door marked INVASIVE CARDIOLOGY sits a dark space save for a single ray of light aimed at a pile of manila files with color coded tabs laying on a desk top. A brown veined hand working long artistically strong fingers flips open a file and from the muted daylight above, behind the desk lamp, a deep male voice, removed, reads into a telephone transcription service today's surgical reports.

"Transcription." Snatching a ready tissue out of its box, with his free hand Robert wipes down his face waiting for the proper cue from the computer menu. "Doctor Robert Johnson, cardiology. Patient: William Ventura. Location: Buena Vista Saint John's Hospital, Burbank, California. Begin notes: Preoperative diagnoses are multi-vessel coronary artery disease with angina. Postoperative diagnosis is a crapshoot. Operative procedure is a coronary artery bypass graft."

He wads the tissue, throws one sneakered foot high on his desk, lifts his arm above its shoulder, and tipping back the chair Robert tosses the tissue dead center into the corner trash receptacle.

"Detail: left internal mammary to the diagonal and left anterior descending. Sequential vein graft from the aorta to the second and third marginal. Saphenous vein to the acute marginal branch of the right coronary." Doctor Robert Johnson closes his eyes. He hears drums. Of course it's impossible, yet he hears them.

He pushes off with his foot and the chair spins around until he tugs suddenly at the drape pull. Light floods the room. The tree-lined parking lot spreads below; however, Robert tilts back his chair angling his body, fixing his gaze above on the hazy distant mountains surrounding Glendale. The drums fade.

"The patient was supine with standard padding and positioning. Anesthesia was obtained and monitoring lines were established. Cardiac sterile prep and drape were performed. The
sternum was opened through a vertical midline incision. The left ankle was opened with a small incision, and the saphenous vein harvested through a series of small incisions—"

He studies lines of traffic flowing like blood corpuscles along the on and off freeway ramps.

"—using laryngoscope and laparoscopic equipment. The sternum was divided with a reciprocating saw." Drums again.

***

He travels in a black hand-detailed BMW west from the hospital towards affluent Toluca Lake where manicured streets gently curve lined by well-lit two and three story homes. Chopin plays through his stereo while a breeze brushes the doctor's cheeks tickling his ears. Robert mildly appreciates the Romantic classics and is passionate about abstract jazz, but at the end of a long hard day he drives absent-mindedly, thinking, *Appreciation is all I can muster.* Taking this next turn slow, he passes familiar shadows falling long over the local golf course, past the golf club's guardhouse, and swings a gentle left into his driveway; this and Chopin's piano send him crackling over dried leaves to an attached garage with an open carport overlooking the lake.

He cuts his engine, switches off the lights, and for a moment Robert Johnson sits gazing at stars hanging particularly low. Astronomically he understands them, their gases and chemical structure, their ancient photon emissions, although it's not enough. The answer of a physical universe is true but misses the point. A chunk of important information remains inaccessible; a deep mysterious image felt, not seen, and buried. *Einstein, I remember it,* and Robert's eyes travel a trail of bright pinpricks in infinite space, "...following in the footprints of God," he said. Thin wet mist rolls off the water. He's attempted previously to grasp this mystery; however, inevitably the doctor falls short and walks away feeling ignorant, primitive, and stupid.

Minutes later he enters a kitchen directly off the garage, staring, growling under his breath in the direction of their main room. He hears party noise; laughter, exclamations, glass clinking glass. Lumbering across their floor like a bear, Robert removes his sport coat throwing
it over a chair. He folds up long sleeves revealing hard dense forearms and large rounded shoulders, and gently slips off his watch. The doctor scrubs his huge hands with surgeon's fingers twenty-five times a day, but this time is different. He consciously lets go of his focus leaning over the sink watching the water run, stopping for the first time since five a.m., listening, and then he splashes the clear liquid cold against his face and forehead up into the front of his scalp, and again over closed eyes.

Robert sees a waterfall, a high cliff, wet boulders trapping some constant wild splash in foamy pools, and a tree growing at the fall's base where it empties into a lake. Drums. A coyote cautiously crosses behind the fall. The mountain's landscape broadens and water runs shallow. A hungry animal turns eyeing him. This coyote is healthy, intelligent, and frighteningly sharp-witted.

***

In the main room he stands tall wearing a warm tired smile for friends.

"May I have everyone's attention, please?" Maddie, his wife, twinkles, blue-eyed and blond, in her middle thirties and pregnant in a black cocktail dress; round, a bomb about to explode, and jumping up and down, an excited bomb. This prospect the room finds worrisome as she speaks. The doctor holds her hand stabilizing, he hopes, the impending situation.

Doctor Robert Johnson, still smiling, chuckles holding down the bomb in the cocktail dress and doing his best making eye contact with the room.

"Surprise!" the room shouts.

"Maddie," Robert gently guides her by the shoulders, gazing down at perfect lips and ivory features, her nose straight and turned up, "what's this?"

"Oh, well, it's your 'First Year In Private Practice' anniversary! She stretches, her dress rising, and standing on tiptoes Maddie encircles his wide nut-brown neck straining her thin pale arms. Their eyes meet while he leans over and they kiss. For Maddie, kissing him is feeling his oak tree roughness against her cheek.
Kissing her is sensing the universe in a single blade of grass, an eternal moment, the mystery again, and when at last they part lips he whispers in her ear, "If I didn't have you, I would have nothing. Be nothing. I love you because I long to love you." With every word she feels his hot breath.

The room silently watches. A balding ruddy-faced gentleman in the crowd finally raises his wine glass shattering eternity. "It's nice knowing the man who slices flesh and saws through bone to hold a heart in his hands possesses one of his own."

Maddie winks at her husband. "Uh, do I make your heart beat, Bob?" She strokes his thigh through his trouser. "Do I make it skip a beat, Bobby? Two beats? Wanna try for a coronary, Doctor?"

She plays "hands on" displaying a sinful grin and he plays "hands off" knowing what is expected of him. This is their vocabulary. They've invested years polishing it, carrying it around, each of them in a hip pocket, their language an expression of their bond.

Eight year old, Kyle Johnson, darts nimbly between oversized feet, glasses set on the floor, and furniture, landing with a grab onto his father's legs. The doctor reaches down covering the top of his son's blond head with one hand stopping him like a wall. "Congratulations, Daddy!"

The doctor allows his wife's hand to fall and he bends deep at the knees facing his son. "Doctor Kyle, did we scrub up?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Is the O.R. ship-shape?"

"Yeah, I guess so. But—"

"I love you, Kyle. And I appreciate your staying up way past your bedtime just to congratulate me." In one move he hoists the boy from ground-zero to a point barely below the ceiling while peering up at his son. "And now, Doctor," Robert spins the boy around pumping him up and down, "it's time to operate. Say good-night to our guests," and he lowers Kyle to his feet.

"I'm growing, yuh know."
"Yes, I'm acutely aware of that, Son."
"Someday I'm gonna be as big as you."
"No. You will never be as big as me."
"Will so."
"Remember great grandpa?" Robert smiles holding a far away thought.
"Yeah."
"Well, he was my mother's father."
"That's 'cause Glowing Hands died."

Robert smiles at Maddie and turns his attention back to the boy. "Glowing Hands was my father's father. But my mother's father was also my grandfather, your great-grandfather."

"Anyway, he accepted me at a difficult time in my life. And I grew in the light of his acceptance, and he shrunk. Kyle, one day he was very old and small. He suffered from diabetes, The People's curse, and I looked down at him in his wheel chair," Robert pounded a fist over his heart, "but it was like looking at a giant in my life. I knew then that he would always be bigger than me. Understand?"

"Yeah! Naw, not really."

"That's alright!" In his way, Robert gives Maddie a well-intended look, and she, grabbing the boy's hand knows what is expected of her.

The doctor edges behind his long gray marble bar, scooting past a steel sink towards the wall. He turns a round switch softening the lights. He's considering a scotch and soda on the rocks, and Robert grabs the glass in one hand, holding ice in the other; bringing the two together, hearing the music of cubes falling, is a homing signal for Ellen, a nearby friend.

She leans across the bar on one bare elbow, bending her wrist and pointing at the glass. Robert's drink mysteriously becomes Ellen's. "Easy on the soda, Bob. No point in wasting my reach."

He smiles and mixes her drink. "You know, it's funny. Before I became aware of women, I owned things."

"Did you?"
"Things I guess I took for granted. I had a small place. The kitchen was mine. I came home at night and I remember it like a dream, hanging my clothes in my closet. Throwing my stuff in my chair. I had a bathroom sink. It was mine!"

Robert glanced around and then met Ellen's eyes. "Sometimes I'm standing at the sink. I reach up to get a can of shaving cream and before I can bring my arm back down she's there, and I'm not standing in front of my sink about to shave. No, I'm standing behind Maddie who's spitting toothpaste into her sink and will continue working in front of her sink for the next half-hour. And here's the kicker," he carefully pours scotch watching amber liquid flow between ice cubes, "ten minutes into the process she'll turn around and look at me like I'm an invader and if I know what's good for me I'd better leave." He slides her drink across the bar.

"Thank you, Bob."
"I don't have a closet either, or a dresser. I do have a file cabinet."
"Oh, then you must have the key." Ellen barely smiles studying her drink.
"Yes, Sweetheart, I have the key."
"But do you have another glass?"
"Uh huh, and an inexhaustible supply of the good juice."
"There it is," Ellen lifts her eyes towards Robert. "Things aren't that bad. You see, you're just a typical male. You took her half of the bed while she was still in it, but you expected to roll away owning the same amount of real estate you had before she extended her invitation." Ellen stretches one long free arm draping it across his shoulder, pulling him towards her. "It doesn't work that way with nations and it don't work that way with women."

She twists her head around momentarily glancing with familiarity at an older man, grayish, sixty, sitting in the far shadows, Councilman Jack Macy, and then she looks back at Robert who, without removing her arm, manages to finally fix himself a drink. Ellen blows alcohol breath into his face. "Now, you take Jack and me; he doesn't have a key. I took it away from him because he's pathetic. He allowed me to."

"Did you?"
"Well, Doctor, what do you think about the popular vote versus the electoral?" She swishes a finger around in her glass and flicks her tongue over the end of it.

Robert rattles his cubes. Jack and Robert enjoy a thick bond and Robert doesn't care for Ellen's remark. At this juncture she is difficult to take. "I think I need something stronger." He reaches under the bar.

"All right, fine," Ellen said. "If you won't say it, I will. The constitution clearly separates powers, but I think the presidential ticket has a different agenda."

*Here it is,* he thinks, surfacing with two bottles. *She is hard to take.*

"Not that he'll have any power," she says, "but he does represent the spirit of the team."

Robert avoids Ellen's eyes. He examines the bottles without pouring the drink. Suddenly his being sober becomes critical just because she is not sober. He lifts his head and stares at her, speechless.

"Well, don't just gawk at me."

"I'm not gawking, you bitch. I'm analyzing. I'm trying to decide whether you're a concerned constitutionalist or a racist." Robert picks up the bottles removing them to their previous hiding place.

"One wonders about your concerns. I'm going to let the bitch remark pass. I'm sure you've had a hard day and here I was thoughtlessly insulting your boyfriend."

Robert's dark eyes search nervously for Maddie. "I do all right for myself. I'm not that concerned. I'm even generous. Drown yourself with another drink, Ellen. It's on me."

"I take it then, you voted Democratic, since you're giving it away. That makes you a minority in my neighborhood."

Robert winces struck by a short stabbing pain in his brow. "It was nice of you to stumble by, Ellen. Would you excuse me, please? I haven't checked my messages or mail." *Coyote the Trickster, you think I don't recognize you?*
CHAPTER TWO--BEAR REMEMBERS; NATURAL RESOURCES

In the dark privacy of his den, sequestered from the universe behind a heavy Mediterranean door, Robert Johnson's stocking feet escaped their shoes, and he crept across bare wooden floorboards feeling his way along walls, running fingertips over heavy bindings, thick shelves supporting volumes of medical books, until he hit a rectangular metal box, pressing by rote a short series of switches. The front panel of his stereo system glowed soft green, and he adjusted its volume for background music, late night music; Kind Of Blue by Miles Davis.

Robert seated himself in his overstuffed leather chair behind an antique mahogany double desk the size of a billiard table, and pulled the chain on a green glass banker's lamp. The chair sprouted wings enveloping his head, and he enjoyed stealing time, turning his face, cheek flush to the leather, smelling its warm scent as if an animal's blood ran fresh beneath the surface.

Sports knick-knacks collected dust scattered in cubbyholes between sets of books: a football ashtray, a gold sailboat business card caddy, a bronze golf tee and ball, and the walls held several framed diplomas, and numerous humanitarian certificates, as well as a photograph of a grinning then president Ronald Reagan shaking hands with a young Doctor Robert Johnson.

Opposite the doctor's desk sat an oversized, serious, matching leather sofa, and above the sofa hung a long two-hundred-year-old, handmade throwing spear. The spear, a two-piece affair, exhibited its eagle-feathered ethnicity at odds with everything else in the den. Robert rarely honored it by way of a second look, but after his bout with Ellen he settled into his chair, sniffed the leather, listened to Miles Davis torturing sweet honey from his horn, and spent the period grumbling, emotionally connecting with the artifact.
He rolled open his bottom desk drawer, and from deep within pulled out a five by seven photograph nestled in a well-worn frame. A beaded loop attached to a small Native American dream catcher wrapped itself around the frame. The doctor carefully unraveled the dream catcher, setting it aside, and he gazed at the old photograph; a tiny stucco house with a tin roof and an Indian blanket hanging in the doorway. A Native American family stood uncomfortably posed in front of the house; a painfully thin, careworn, codeine infested mother; a sunken-chested, beer-bellied father wearing threadbare jeans and pointed western boots; and two sons sitting on the hood of an old pickup; no smiles. He tried wiping off the dusty glass and scratching his nail at a speck of dried dirt, but the land in the little black and white picture extended itself bleak and dusty, barren on either side of the tiny house, and behind the house. When Robert was young, he thought the reason their chickens ran so fast was because the land radiated intense heat. It was, after all, a picture of dried dirt, not the ocean shore they hailed from, but the valley floor inland where the Chumash fled when escaping death at the hands of European missionaries and the Spanish church. Most who ended up here died, as well as all those souls who stayed at the mission, and cleaning the picture didn't improve its oppressive ghost-like quality.

"Course, I don't know much 'bout those dream catchers," Councilman Jack Macy blustered.

Snapping his neck, shocked, Robert swore the ceiling beams vibrated.

"But, aren't they supposed to be hung in the window, not kept hidden in the dark?" Jack respectfully lowered his tone. "Say, is your brother in that one?"

Robert fumbled the photograph, and Jack lit a green cigar, the fire light flaring in his face, flickering shadows over thick flesh, red broken blood vessels, breathing through large whiskey soaked pores.

Robert had no notion how long ago Jack sunk his large bones into the leather sofa. "Wherever you sit, you manage to look like you've lived there forever. Please, don't feel compelled to take that as a compliment." A long silence ensued. "Yes, Carl is in this photograph. I didn't hear you come in, Jack."
Jack blew a slow smoke ring. "Ellen's a whore. I keep her around just for the challenge."

He picked at a nostril hair.

Shaking his head, the doctor grinned. "Now, what am I supposed to do with that? If I agree, you'll kick me in the teeth."

"Aw, hell!"

"How's life in the colony, Jack?"

"You really ought to move out to Malibu, Bob. The ocean air is, well, it's better than choking on this horse shit." Jack inched his huge frame to the edge of the sofa. "Maybe you ought to visit his grave."

"Carl's? I'm not much on visiting those I can't heal. Death is an answer I have no argument for."

"Just a thought." Jack pushed his massive legs shoving himself back into the sofa. His expression developed distance listening to the slow easy thump of a bass speaker, and then he returned to the living. "The war's over, you know?"

"I know. Today was my shift for ER, that's all. It leaves my nerves…" and Robert smacked his hands together, lifting his arms, running his fingers through his scalp. He worked his jaw from side to side. "The harder I slave to heal humanity the less tolerance I seem to feel for them. There are days, my friend, when I actually hate having patients. Does that make me a poor excuse for a doctor? Jesus, man! I'm scared, one day I'm going to make an incision and just keep on cutting."

Jack raised himself out of the sofa and sat on the edge of the desk. He manipulated the photograph an inch this way and that, and peered at it through a blanket of cigar smoke smelling like dung. He chewed the cigar with talent, shifting it from cheek to cheek, savoring its acrid juice. "You said, 'them'" , and he looked up from the photograph casting a familiar sharp eye on Robert. "You have less tolerance for 'them' you said, as if the human race is something you're not a part of? Hell, you're so far from the Chumash… Bob, you're like a Black man. 'They're' not your people? Well, who are your people? 'Cause, buddy, we all got people."
You'll never die. You smoke like a burning craphouse in the field at midnight and then you throw alcohol on the fire, and you don't slow down. The older you get the faster you think. You don't miss anything. I respect you. I envy you, Jack. I hate your pickled guts. "For Christ's sake, Jack, that cock cigar you're smoking stinks like a burning yeast infection and you talk to me about changing my air? And what do you mean, 'a Black man'? I'm like a Black man?"

Not too offended, Jack extended the distance between them walking over to a far wall, feigning interest in the pictures and diplomas. He reached up straightening one, stepped back and lifted an arm, one thick hand, and waved it in small circular motions conducting sax; Julian Cannonball Adderley. "Hell, they call themselves African Americans. But they could no more go back to being African natives; I mean, they couldn't live the life." He spun around bending forward at the waist, not moving any closer. "Would they ever be accepted?" He ripped the wet cigar out of his mouth shaking it at Robert. "No! They're Americans, by God! Forced, I'll grant you that. Oppressed, poverty stricken, imprisoned, and with a serious two centuries old PR problem that runs so deep, now they generate self-stigma from father to son, but Americans nevertheless. Poor, luckless bastards. As long you live, you'll never hear a Jew call another Jew a kike, or the Irish call each other micks, but Blacks, they call each other nigger all day long."

"Hell, people don't choose to become disenfranchised at first, but I think, to an extent, they perpetuate it as a lifestyle. My group, your group, a kind of pride fueled by rage. It's a disease. But some diseases get so huge, so insidious, society can't eradicate them. So, they hire politicians, like me, to manage the disease, to legislate it." Jack stared at the moist end of of his cigar.

He discovered Robert's football ashtray and stashed the stogy, wrinkling his nose, viewing the crumpled butt as if he never really enjoyed the thing."Could you go back to life on the reservation?" and Jack allowed himself a giant fall back into the sofa.

Holding his head still as stone, Robert trailed him with his eyes.

Jack leaned over, elbows dug into his knees. "We've got eight one-hundred-percentor Native American physicians in California. Eight! You made it. But your success didn't come
knocking with impunity. By God, look at that room out there, buddy. Look at me. Do you see one god-damned Indian out there?"

Habitually, Jack went digging into his inside coat pocket for another cigar, and he grabbed it half way out of its hiding place, but sniffing at the air like a giant Irish beaver he tucked the plastic wrapped tube back into his pocket. "You're right. These things smell like shit. I smell like shit. Ellen says so. How do women do that? She smokes and drinks as much as I do, and she smells like a fuckin' rose garden in July. Let me ask you something, Doc."

Robert shifted towards his old friend and his eyes widened. He parted thin lips without words. Uh, huh... It's coming.

"Do you remember anything? When you look at that picture. Anything?"

Barely audible, like an organic heart beat, Miles gently strained, twisting, reaching tones out of his trumpet, repeating a three chord structure hypnotically, improvising with each pass, bending notes, drawing in experience, blowing out his past. And then the drums faded in and up like a precision machine. The stereo panel glowed in front of Robert, floating across his vision.

"I remember sitting on a cane chair in front of the small grocery store on our reservation," Robert closed his eyes. He smiled, but Jack knew Robert too well to take it as anything other than a bitter smirk. "It was as hot as burning your cheek with a flat iron, and I was nine years old and dirty, sticking my tongue so far out it hurt. Man, I wanted to get the big lick eating my ice cream. The big lick with the sun in my eyes meant it was late, almost time to be getting home. Ed Sullivan time, ...from New York City! That's what Frank, my pops, would say." He opened his eyes slapping his hands on the desk edge.

"But Pops, Frank White Bird, was busy talking to an elder, some crazy guy slapping a sweaty wet hat against his jeans. I remember watching dirt clouds flying off his pants. If I dared say a word, Pops would pick me up and throw me. One time I landed in the rear bed of his pick-up. I bounced off his stash of beer cans and two of them exploded. Pops beat me for it, but I knew it was his fault, and when we got back to our little house, Moms tossed the blanket up out of the doorway and stood there yelling. Pops dumped me out of the truck and took off for a month. I remember that."
"What else, Bob?"

"Well, it was rumored that this elder, the old guy Pops was talking to, knew all of the stories, and that he still drank Datura. I remember him waving his arms in the air, drawing circles with these crooked old fingers. He tried not whistling through the gap in his teeth when he spoke. I remember he said, 'It was a time when Glowing Hands stalked the earth as a bear and practiced his healing in secret.' "

"Why,' Pops wanted to know, 'did the great shaman practice in secret?’ "

"Because the bear doctor's vision of healing was misunderstood and The People feared it as evil. Glowing Hands understood that to heal the patient meant to heal the family, the village, the nation.' The elder stopped and stared at me, and Pops stared at him."

"Then I remember thinking, Here it comes. 'Fuck you, old man!' Pops was a mean sonuvabitch. He beat me more than once. I remember that. And then he asks, 'How can a great shaman heal in secret?' But Frank didn't really want to know. You know, he wore these sharp-toed western boots with silver metal toe caps and he was always kicking up a little dust cloud digging his walking heels into the dirt. That was Pops; Frank White Bird. And he was talking to Gray Cat Elder, an important elder, but he didn't especially want to know that either."

Robert searched his memory for an eternal moment. "And I remember like it was yesterday that Gray Cat Elder said, 'Because, the bear lived in the world of no time and no space. Knowing this, Glowing Hands stalked the earth through all time and all space.' The elder whistled and he sighed breathing Pop's dust. 'Now the family, the village, and the nation are not well in their time,' he said. 'They are sick at heart, sad of eye. Their minds are agitated, sometimes raging like mad dogs down at the auto-wrecking yard. It seems as if the soul itself is confounded beyond repair. Truly, it is a time when men stalk the earth.' Shit. Can you imagine this guy? Man, he talked like a drugstore Indian; I swear to God."

"Pops smiled. Pushing his sunglasses up with one finger along his nose, pressing them against a ridge between his eyes. I could tell he liked the elder; lucky for the elder. 'So,' Pops says, 'what happened? Where is he now, this great bear shaman, this Glowing Hands?' Not that Frank gave a crap."
"The elder looked at me and smiled. I was lucky. That evening, Pops looked at me and smiled. 'Come on, Bobby. Time to be getting home,' he says. 'Time for Ed Sullivan from New York City. That elder, he doesn't know me, doesn't know who I am.' "

"I asked him, 'What do you mean, Pops?" "

" 'Glowing Hands was my father, your grandfather. The old fool.' Pop's laughed, but not laughing; not really."

"We took off in his truck leaving Gray Cat Elder in a dust cloud. I remember it, but I'd rather not. I was so young, but I felt strange. As if Frank was disrespecting something important. I felt it as some great wrong. I felt responsible. But look, Jack, shit happens. And, it doesn't matter whether we're kids or adults. We're always living in the future. These kind of intuitive feelings about things don't last." Robert gently tossed the photograph across his desk. "I respect The People. I really do. But they're not my people. Not anymore."

Tossing one leg over the other, Jack pulled on the creases of his beige slacks.

Robert played enough poker against Jack to know all of his tells, and this straightening of his creases heightened Robert's senses. The short hairs on his neck stood at attention. It seemed to him that the jazz had grown complex and frenzied. He reached for the remote switching the music off.

"Look, Bob, I'm not gonna pretend I don't have an agenda here. I do. My district is steeped in my group-your group politics—Native American history—and the tribal chief is twisting my arm, and I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, spit it out!"

"They want to build a casino. They want me to pressure the council. You own strategic parcels of land between Malibu and Santa Barbara, and the Injuns want gambling overlooking the ocean."

"The who? I ought a break your damned neck!"

"Now, wait just a minute here, Bob. The historic titles to several parcels of your land are in question."

"Bull crap!"
"That Malibu beach front property across from Topanga State Park?"

"Where the lagoon is. The museum and tourist house. But nobody knows I own that. How the hell—"

Jack cleared his throat. "I sit atop the Bandini Mountain, buddy. I'm a councilman. I do my homework. That land was Humaliwu. It was a village. One of the largest." Jack scratched his chin, What did that mean? Very romantic, that. Oh, yeah, 'The surf sounds loudly'. Sounds kind of Hawaiian. Say, have you ever tried passing for Hawaiian?"

Rising out of his seat, Robert hovered over Jack like a bear in the shadows. Even his white teeth shone in his square jaw like an angry bear. "And the government stole it from The People, and I stole it back!"

Jack shouted, "And it's got a Chumash burial site on it!"

"What?" The bear retreated. Robert sat down, staring at Jack with a question mark scrawled across his face.

"Bones, buddy. Lots of bones. Piles of bones. Shit, Bobby, this is getting complicated, and I've been doing my homework. Now, as a full-blooded Chumash, you have a legal right in your own nation to own that land, on the other hand, you don't."

"What do you mean, I don't?"

"Doc, the secretary of the interior's office tells me whoever sold you that land was acting without the permission of the United States government. It's part of the parks system, and their office will contest the sale."

"The chief has informed me that there are tribal laws concerning who can own what acreage within the tribal landscape. You see, it's parceled out according to its resources versus your contribution to the tribe."

The pit of Robert's stomach ached. "I know that, but nobody takes it seriously."

"No? Your chief does." Jack leaned in close. "All right. If you were a medicine doctor, you know, one of those what a you call 'em shamans, and the land was rich in some medicinal herbs, well, you'd have a claim to it under tribal law." Turning away abruptly, Jack slapped his knee. Then he faced his friend eye to eye. "But you turned your back on the Chumash. You left
the reservation, the community that needs your skills. The Chumash nation is not happy with you, buddy-boy. You might as well be a pale fa—, a Caucasian, for all the good you're doing them."

***

Later that night the large house by the lake sat quiet, surrounded in light summer mist floating just above the water. In the upstairs master bedroom, Maddie and Robert stretched out under white cotton sheets catching up on their reading and only vaguely aware of the television flickering against a far wall. Robert found his concentration scattered, shifting from the medical text in front of him to his earlier disturbing conversation with Jack Macy. He rested bare-chested and Maddie kept glancing over, studying the defined lines of his pectorals, her eyes journeying down to her husband's etched upper abdominals. He pretended not to notice—his mood catching him on edge. Besides, he thought, I love her, but the woman's about to explode. What is she thinking?

She twitched her nose closing her eyes for a split second, long enough to plan the assault. In another second she dropped her novel over the side of the bed, and grabbed his medical journal flinging it across the room.

"Hey, you're eyeing me like an insane woman. Your bedside manners suck. So do your library manners. Didn't your mama teach you anything?"

"Oh? Am I not beautiful?"

"Oh, but you're very beautiful."

"And with beauty like mine, Doctor, I don't need manners. I fed you, made you a party. Now, you come across."

Robert smiled leaning on one elbow, and Maddie ran her fingers along the curve of his bicep, trailing, cupping her hand over his large, dense shoulder. "Have I mentioned to you that you're pregnant?"
"You’re a doctor. You know what to do. How to do." She lifted the sheets tossing them away.

Robert, in spite of everything swimming in his head, grew hard, and he reached for her because she belonged to him. "You don't have any whips do you?" He ran both of his strong hands over her smooth round belly and leaned over her. He kissed her navel driving his tongue inside.

She shook her head negatively, slowly, and a cascade of blond hair fell caressing her face, and he stared up at her, rubbing one rough cheek against her warmth, "Oh, that's too bad…"

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Their hearts were slowing down when the telephone rang and Maddie picked up the receiver. She laughed. "No. We're— It's fine, Ellen. I thought you'd be asleep by now." She placed her hand over the mouthpiece whispering to Robert, "It's Ellen."

Robert didn't give his wife more than a moment to view the dyspeptic expression crawling over his face before he jumped out of bed, turned, and made tracks down the hall. In the shadows outside Kyle's bedroom door, he paused standing on bare feet, wearing loose pajama bottoms. Robert crept into the room where his son slept. He closed the only window, locking it, and standing over his son watching him sleep, he bent down the great distance kissing the boy gently on his forehead.

Coyote, he thought, you will never touch this boy.

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The doctor stood in his custom-built shower with its spray-head raised eight feet off the ground. Even through the spray and steam, and with his bathroom door closed, he still heard Maddie on the phone with Ellen. He didn't care. The soap and hot water obliterated the night;
Jack, Ellen, the party, everything other than the moments spent with Maddie. He clung to those, not allowing them to wash away.

Turning off the shower, Robert reached around the glass partition for an oversized towel. He stepped out of the stall, and instead of drying himself in a civil manner, he shook his entire body like an animal throwing off the water. He waved away the steam in front of his mirror and an unexpected image stood reflected in the glass.

Robert Johnson spun around in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of an old Chumash medicine doctor, Glowing Hands of Humaliwu, in full eagle feather regalia. Glowing Hands, expressionless, stared and vanished.

Robert froze.
CHAPTER THREE--BEAR VERSUS COYOTE; HIBERNATION ENDS

"...The earth hears you, the sky and wood mountain see you. If you will believe this, you will grow old. And, you will see your sons and daughters, and you will counsel them in this manner..." ~Luiseno ritual teaching lecture.

"...The ancients devoted their lives to maintaining the balance of the universe: to great things, immense, [mysterious] things." ~Najgneq, an Eskimo man of knowledge.

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"Arturo, you're moving slowly this morning." Wearing the obligatory suit and tie, and loaded down with a bulky briefcase and matching leather agenda, Robert paused on his way to the car. Last night's events still shone on his furrowed brow; a lack of sleep and vagueness about the eyes. This morning he stalked across his lawn like a man weighted down by an invisible philosophical anvil and a great many moral loose ends.

"Si, Doctor. I have pain. Some thing, some pain." The Johnson's gardener pointed to his right pectoral muscle, "It's here, you know?"

Although early, the summer sun beat down on both men, and the doctor dropped his load by his feet simultaneously squirming out of his jacket.

Robert placed one hand on Arturo's slumped, overworked shoulder and with the other hand he manipulated the gardener's arm in circles. "Do you ever see things, Arturo?"

"Si. I see many things. What do you see?"
"No. Not that kind of seeing. I mean, do you see things? Have visions?" He motioned for Arturo to hold the arm out at his side.

"Doctor Johnson, I do not drink. Eh, well, perhaps a little cerveza on a hot day." Arturo twisted his head looking at the doctor expectantly. "You have been drinking, yes?"


"Ah, si! Your hands? You saw your hands. Doctor, what were they doing?"

"No. I mean I saw my dead grandfather."

The gardener's eyes widened and he backed away still holding out a stiff arm. "Espíritu?"

"Si, Arturo. Espíritu."

Arturo's other arm shot up at its side, an airplane with stinking wet pits hitting the runway."This thing is bad!"

"No. This one was good. Of course, I didn't really know him. I was young when he died. He blessed my birth, gave me my name, and then he died."

Arturo dropped both his arms with great relief. "Si! Of course, this thing is good because the doctor is a good man! I would never say 'bad', no. Eh, Doctor Johnson, did espiritu talk? What did grandfather say?"

"Nothing."

The gardener pulled a soiled bandana out of his rear pocket and wiped down his face. He thoughtfully folded the bandana returning it to his pocket, and taking on an air of authority, Arturo pronounced his educated diagnosis of the espiritu vision. "It is the living spirit. Grandfather is a living spirit. He comes to you with love. Not such as we love, but, si, love. He wants to tell you something."

"But…" Robert waited.

"The curandero, the wise man in my village, used to tell us these living spirits say something. But always man, you and me, Doctor, we cannot hear. We use this," Arturo said, tugging on his ear, "when we must use this," and he reached out jabbing a finger at Robert's heart, "si?"
Robert glanced away studying distant trees lining the adjacent golf course. He noticed their still branches and green bushy tops against the blue morning sky. After this moment of emotional retreat he returned his attention to the gardener. "You've pulled a muscle there, my friend. Ice, heat, and rest." So saying, the doctor scooped up his briefcase and agenda. He assumed Arturo's thank you was in the air.

The gardener's cheeks expanded like a blowfish and his eyes turned red. "Oh, sure, rest!" In a huff, Arturo danced in one spot grabbing up and throwing down tools. He spun on his heel searching for the mower, yanked on its power cord, and ripping off a single furious pull he screamed in Spanish and the engine roared. Arturo appeared to run away with the machine.

Robert, nonplused, stood his ground watching the gardener holding on to his hat with one hand and running with the mower until the doctor decided to head out to his car.

Behind him, Arturo paused. He felt his pectoral muscle. It appeared to have improved dramatically in the last few minutes. Arturo examined the ground beneath his feet and the sky overhead. He felt around his muscle again. This miracle he found inexplicable and his anger melted, replacing itself with wonder. He stared into the near distance towards the carport, silently watching the doctor play with his key ring hitting the alarm on his BMW. The trunk flew open of its own accord—more magic, Arturo thought—and Robert threw his load into it, slammed it shut, and took off.

***

"I don't get it, Carl. I bust my ass to pay America for land that already belongs to me, well, to us. They sell it to me, and now they want to steal it back again. And the chief, he wants me to sell the land, which I'm not sure I own, back to the tribe. You're a soldier. You tell me, how many times can a man get shot in the back? How many presidents can a man serve?"

Robert raised himself off the ground of his brother's grave whisking away bits of grass stuck to his knees. "I don't know why Pops treated you the way he did, not that he singled you out for punishment. I think he was just plain pissed that you had a career, that you were rising in
the ranks of a white man's army. Oh, but he loved you, Carl. He'll never say it. You know the day he received the letter, he picked up the bottle and he hasn't put it down since. He never spoke your name after that; never. I haven't seen him myself in years. Truth is, I'm not sure how I feel about him. I suppose I feel something."

Wind whipped through the plains across the flat Los Angeles National Cemetery, and a siren raced down Sepulveda Boulevard crossing Constitution Avenue. Grave markers appeared identical, a simple white square chunk of concrete standing at attention rain or shine. Robert lifted his head looking around—miles of markers, eighty-thousand dead—and this, only one in a string of veteran cemeteries criss-crossing America. Robert's feelings lie deep and uncertain about the war, and death, though he supposed he ought to feel something. "I should have taken a stand, Carl. That's what I should've done. I never did and that's why I have trouble facing your grave. If I had, well, whose to say? You might have come home sooner, or not."

"It was Jack Macy said I owed you a visit. He and Ellen are still going at it." Robert spoke directly to the grave. "I guess you're wondering why I give the old curmudgeon so much latitude. I love him, Carl. That's all. He put me through school, he cared. Well, we don't see eye to eye on a lot of things. He's political. And me? I don't know what I am."

"You know what it is, Carl? You know what Jack and I've got? We're not looking to change one another. We just accept who we are."

Robert stood beside the grave resting one hand on Carl's headstone. "Us? Me and you? It was a matter of timing. I was just too young and angry to accept you, to believe you would fight in an army that slaughtered The People, and fight for a war that America didn't belong in and couldn't win. Shit, I was too young and angry to accept my own people… and then you died. And I realized for the first time, that in a sense, time does run out. Time has no end, but it does end."

Robert removed his hand from the stone allowing its limp fall to his side. This is so useless. We can never know each other now. We can never know each other as men, and I'm angry about that! "Well, I have to go. Hey, Carl, you ought to see this jazzy little BMW I'm driving. What a gas!"
He peered at the tree line separating the cemetery grounds from Sepulveda pass, beginning the lengthy, onerous trek back to his car. *I don't believe in you, God, but I'll give you one; the car doesn't mean anything.*

***

"So, Doctor Johnson, what do you think? I think it's getting worse. Morning and night." Mrs. Collins suffered from painful angina. Even now, sitting on the exam table watching the doctor in front of her and his nurse standing by the door, she felt a stabbing electric pain, progressively narrowing arteries squeezing the flow of blood to a trickle around her heart muscle.

Bright light poured into the room from behind the doctor, making it impossible to see his features. She only heard his voice while he stood, arms crossed, his back to the window.

"Have you quit all caffeine, Mrs. Collins? Remember we discussed that?"

She raised an arm testifying, "I swear I have."

"Good. What about exercise?"

"A needy husband is exercise enough." She examined the doctor's dissatisfied expression as he turned half facing the window. Looking up at him, the grunting strength of his chin, the thin line of his mouth turned decidedly downwards. She felt ashamed. Mrs. Collins, raised in the old school, revered her doctor. Exhaling, she brushed a lock of dyed brown hair from her eyes.

"No. I really haven't pursued the exercise program. I'm sorry. I know I need to workout."

Robert shook his head. Using a strong set of white teeth, he yanked off the cap to his pen and jotted notes in Mrs. Collins file.

"I don't blame you for being upset," she said. "Oh, my, you're giving up on me, aren't you?"

"I'm not familiar with that terminology, 'giving up'." He shot her a piercing look. "That's not what I do here. But I have to say, I felt perhaps you were throwing in the towel?"

"No, please."
Robert stepped over to the exam table closing the distance between them, smiling at Mrs. Collins. "If you meet me halfway, pursue an exercise program, sponsored by the hospital, I have an idea. It's a new technology that I've had great success with. Actually, it's not new. But we haven't utilized it in such a wide range of applications until recently."

"What's it called, this technology? I have to tell people. I have to tell my husband, the helpless wonder-boy."

"Stints. They're small tubes made of latticed metal. We place them inside the narrowed arteries and they hold the arteries open. This allows more blood to flow through your veins and into the heart muscle." He jotted another note in her file and carefully replaced the top on his pen. "You're starved for blood in there. Frankly, I feel we're playing Russian roulette, waiting for an attack. Those pains are a warning."

Robert picked up a small sample stint off of a side counter handing it to Mrs. Collins with a playful toss, downplaying any serious fear factor.

She turned the little tube end over end in her palm and then held it between her thumb and forefinger up to the light. She stared with one eye through its tiny, latticed surface. "It's an operation? I'll be scarred. I'm afraid. Here," she said, pointing to her breastbone, running her finger down the bone lightly, fearful to touch it. "Listen, I said the man was helpless, not crippled. So far, everything works and I want to keep it that way." She turned her head away. "I…want to be beautiful."

The doctor walked slowly around the exam table feeling her sense of vulnerability, meeting her eyes. "No scar there."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Robert pulled up a rolling stool, grasped her hands in his, and Mrs. Collins fell under his spell. Doctor Robert Johnson cast his true healing magic, the power of words; these coming from a doctor are symbols of what must be if, as Mrs. Collins does, one believes in them. For her, a tiny drop of hope arrives riding the back of each syllable her doctor utters. He is one step away from God. Robert seems to be speaking lightly, but beneath the surface, he is acutely aware of a grave responsibility and the power that his words own. Every day, each word he hears coming
from within feels like a lead weight upon his back and shoulders. He examines Mrs. Collin's expression for a moment, considering the invisible contract, an unspoken promise exacted under pressure. *It's what you believe me to be, that's the toughest part of my job, knowing what you believe. The burden upon my soul of having to watch every word is incalculable. Each patient is so different, how can I know if I'm telling the truth? I can't. I'm hoping, my dear, sweet woman, right along with you.*

"We all want to be beautiful for the ones we love. We want to be beautiful for ourselves. This whole procedure is done with microscopic wire, a tiny camera, and a monitor. No scars on the chest. You might have a very unobtrusive blemish on your leg because that's where we insert. And, you'll be awake the whole time, and I'll be talking to you."

Mrs. Collins eyebrows lifted in amazement, then knit tightly exhibiting concern. She studied the stint, her amazement returning.

"Doctor," checking her watch, Robert's nurse reminded him, "you're thirty minutes away from a surgery."

Robert stood, kicking the rolling stool into a corner. "Okay, then? Mrs. Collins? Okay?"

"Okay then."

"Nurse, please help Mrs. Collins back into her things and escort her to the appointment desk."

So saying, the doctor removed his stethoscope and pocketed it. He slipped off his white jacket throwing it over one shoulder.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse me, I have a meeting."

"An affair of the heart?" Mrs. Collins asked.

In his consultation office, Robert exchanges his white jacket with his sport jacket onto a single hanger. He consults his watch, computing the amount of time it will take him to race across the street to the hospital complex, catch an elevator, and appear suited and scrubbed in surgery.

"The knife is not our way, Ahkimay Khus. The hands. The heart. A vision given by the spirit guides from deep within. These are your healing tools, your magic."
Robert spun in a flurry of coat tails, but no one appeared. "Ahkimay Khus—Black Bear!" This time Robert raised his voice. "You gave me that name. Glowing Hands, I know you're here. What do you want?"

The office rested in silence.

"Fine!" Robert slammed the door behind himself. He stormed down a short hallway passing Mrs. Collins and his nurse and through reception.

He remembered traffic and sunlight, standing on the noisy street corner, punching repeatedly at a crossing-light button, the futility of the rush; and here he stood, suited, scrubbed, his mask in place, over a patient in surgery surrounded by his team. Robert allowed himself a count of three seconds attaining complete focus. "Good," he checked two stacked overhead monitors. "Our vitals are looking good."

***

Highway 101 dips, rolls, pitches, and shoots forth like a terrified, side winding, five lane snake cutting the length of California, struggling up steep grades beside the Pacific Ocean, warning of sudden drops into inland valleys, the San Fernando, and the Ojai. Jamming white noise down one's ear canals, it is the second most congested freeway in the world. The roar of its billion-plus pistons exploding in darkness under hoods racing over hot asphalt deafen two passengers riding a BMW with the top down doing eighty. Late afternoon sun cooked Robert and Kyle burning up the leather upholstery, and the wind tore at their eyes.

Robert, born on a windy day, attempted to extract the dashboard cigarette lighter and replace it with his cell phone's quick charge unit. "So that I can call your moth- Youch!" The doctor burnt his thumb. "Your mother."

"Daddy, are you all right?"

"What? I can't hear you! Yes. Just a burn."

"Dad!"

"What?"
"Our ramp is coming up on the right! You're gonna miss our turn!"

Robert saw the Topanga Canyon sign. In a daring move he jerked the wheel to the right immediately crossing three lanes of traffic. "Man, now that's driving!"

"Yeah!"

"Don't tell your mother."

"I know."

A few minutes later, they pulled into the lot at Topanga State Park and unloaded Kyle's mountain bike. "Don't ride too far ahead."

The boy peddled off twisting his handlebars this way and that and disappeared around the first curve, leaving Robert hiking in his dust.

"Kyle, slow down, son! Take pity on your father! Promise me, son," he screamed ahead, "when they find me dead on the trail, you'll have one kind word to say about your ol' man." The doctor's burnt thumb throbbed. If he allowed it to drop to his side it pulsated worse, so he hiked throwing his knees up in a modified goose-step, holding his thumb in the air.

Battling an uphill trail and a small but unmerciful injury left Robert breathless when at last he caught up with Kyle. "Son, let's stop here."

"But why? We haven't reached the top."

"I'll give you three good reasons. One, I'm old, and two, I think we should do something of lasting value for you."

"Like what?" Kyle backpedaled looking at the ground.

"It's time for a nature lesson." Robert continued holding his thumb to the breeze.

"And what's three?"

"Three is, my thumb hurts like a sonuvabitch!"

Kyle turned his handlebars about to ride for it when Robert lunged at the boy, knocking him off his bike and wrestling him to the ground. The two wrestled until they embraced, and Robert cherished the moment. *Son, in a year or so, Coyote the Trickster will be on your trail, and you won't want to hug your ol' man. What will I do then? I can't help feeling our days are numbered.*
Robert pointed his son towards a flowering plant. "So, what have we here?"

"Not a tree," Kyle shook his head adamantly.

"How do you know?"

"Too small."

"Maybe it's young, like you."

"Daddy, I know a tree. That's not a tree. Nope."

"Sometimes you have to watch a thing, witness its becoming, become one with it for awhile before you can say that you know it. That's all I'm saying."

"But it has a soft stem. It has a flower."

"True. The stem is soft and it has a flower. This is a wild tulip."

Kyle's eyes lit up. "I wanna bring it to Mom."

Robert reached over stroking the boy's hair. Quick as a gnat he pinched a single strand ripping it out of Kyle's head.

"Youch!"

"Where have I heard that before?"

"In the car. That hurt, Dad!"

"I know, my thumb is going to blister."

"No, I mean when you pulled my hair out." The boy rubbed his scalp with a pained expression.

"Oh, that." Robert lifted his index finger holding it in front of Kyle's eyes. His son understood, the sign being familiar, the sign meaning "awaken"—Kyle being trained like everyone in Robert's life to understand what was required of him via a single look or sign, any slight movement. "The tulip is a part of this mountain," Robert Johnson spoke with simple assurance, an ancient wisdom, which even he could not recall the origins of. "The mountain and the tulip are a whole. They complete each other. Yank it up and you hurt the mountain. It will become highly disturbed."

"Mountains don't feel stuff. Only people feel stuff."
"That's not true, son. When it rains, the mountain grows cold and wet and sheds its soil, and if you've tried to conquer that mountain, to clear it of its growth and build a house on it, it'll bring that house down. When it gets too hot in the summer, the mountain wrinkles and cracks just like an old man. It dries out. Sometimes it burns."

"And the animals lose their homes. We learned in school."

"We need to respect the mountain. It has its needs, its requirements. The universe knows this, Kyle. It gives the mountain what it needs and what the animals that live here require. Each thing on this mountain is a part of the whole as the universe designed it. So, my question to you is," and Robert slowly lowered his finger dropping his hand, "what should we do with this plant?"

"Let it grow…"

"Look at me, son. Make a statement. Decide you believe in something, and make it your firm statement." Robert knocked gently on the boy's head with his knuckles driving home the words, "Make-a-statement!"

"Let it grow, Doctor," Kyle shouted with laughter, turning his back, peddling for the summit.

"I agree, Doctor!" Once the boy was out of sight, Robert's joyful face turned to grimacing pain. He held his thumb, rocking it, alone on the trail.

"Not the head. The heart. The hands. Use your vision, Ahkimay Khus," the voice said.

Robert didn't bother opening his eyes now shut tight in agony. He felt the pumping action of his heart in the tip of his thumb. Slowly he released the thumb. It was hopeless.

"No! You know what to do. You have the bear spirit."
CHAPTER FOUR--BEAR VERSUS COYOTE: THE ELDERS RETURN

Robert found himself in pain and at a complete loss with only a disembodied voice calling to him from the wilderness. "Even Moses got a burning bush!" he called back to the mountain.

"Do I sound like God?" the mountain replied. "You always get what you already have. I am not here to give you anything. I am here to remind you. Moses? His spirit was on fire. Do it! Do it!"

Robert, alone on the trail, eased his eyes closed gently grasping his burnt thumb. A bear growled. The path lay open, empty, and waiting. No one witnessed the magic of a universe speaking, using violet light, slowly expanding, and turning white.

After ten silent minutes, he separated his hands, peering down at them. He wiggled his thumb. No blister, no pain, just a small red mark, a reminder for Doctor Robert 'Black Bear' Johnson; he stalked the earth as a healer, a full-blooded Chumash Indian, the haunting visions intended as gifts to remember by. Live by the drum, Robert thought as he continued sending his thumb ice and light.

He spoke to the empty sky, sensing Glowing Hands, a living spirit. "Eighty percent. Not bad. Not bad at all." He did not delight in the miracle—he computed it. The doctor understood immediately, and a memory, some vague familiar quality reached out nagging him. There was nothing to say. I know, he thought. I know.

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At ten, Kyle's features grew angular. He watched his two-year-old baby sister, Magnolia, playing on the floor, on a pink marble surface fronting the large fireplace.

"Kyle, don't let her play that close to the fireplace. We have to teach Maggie her boundaries early, son. I don't want to see any accidents. Savvy?" Robert poked his head out of the kitchen keeping track of his family in this new empty house. "Remember, she's your sister. You're responsible."

"Okay, Dad." Kyle carefully lifted Maggie, setting her down in the middle of the huge main room, an immense space showing a single vast Spanish window lighting thirties style wood plank floors and heavy lath and plaster walls. Kyle, tall for his age, appeared dwarfed by the house's setting and heavy accoutrements. He watched the baby toddling and falling and crawling towards the wide curved staircase where an additional small window, fifteen feet above the young man's head, cast its narrow light beam. He understood, the staircase built solid enough for an elephant herd would not be considered a safe place for the baby, so he chased her down dragging her back to the center of the room.

The Johnson's estate agent hunkered over a temporary folding table in the kitchen, scribbling notes and speaking a Southern drawl into his cell phone. "Uh, yes. The Doctor Johnsons would like to have their house inspector down on Friday." The agent paused. Maddie studied his red suspenders and a straw hat. You can take the boy out of Tennessee, but you can't take Tennessee out of the boy, she thought. He smiled back, his eyes crinkling over the tops of his Ben Franklin glasses and continuing into the phone, "Of course, we assume our offer is acceptable. It's certainly over market. Excellent." Maddie and the agent exhaled.

Robert, who now wore his jet black hair medium long in a pony-tail with flecks of gray, quietly moved off to the breakfast room, standing in front of a sliding glass door, studying the lush green grounds, clasping his hands behind his back. He tucked the pony-tail conservatively under his white shirt collar. The doctor still carried his stethoscope visibly folded in his sports coat pocket.

Seasonal rains recently abated leaving the grounds blooming with wild flowers and moss, the smell of jasmine, a stream trickling and a frog croaking, and as he partook of his new
environment, a feeling of material security and accomplishment filled him. However, this pastoral scene soured when Robert's shabby childhood reservation house became visible. The familiar coyote crossed the scene, head bowed down, sniffing at the ground. Scratching with his paws, but finding nothing to eat, he lifted his head staring directly at the doctor.

Coyote the Trickster. I'm not impressed. Robert inhaled long and deep. Nor, my old friend, am I afraid, he thought loudly.

Maddie stepped up quietly behind her husband, who she suspected might be talking to himself, or to one of his spirit guides, whom she could not see and could not compete with. She grasped his hands, twisted them apart and held one. "Bob, it's beautiful. I can't believe it's ours."

"We have to be careful." He fixed his watch out the window, as if something were staring back.

"What do you mean?" she asked, hoping he might not answer. Through the tall glass panes she studied the willows, two large trees whose trunks crossed one another. Communication over the last two years had grown thick, often cryptic from his side, and she felt highly disturbed at understanding him less as time plowed a wide ditch between them that she could not traverse. The odd comment, the mysterious reference became a lifestyle. Exotic qualities she once and still found attractive in Robert, she now saw as a mysterious, impenetrable wall.

"Just what I said, that's all." Maddie moved swiftly, with purpose, between Robert and the window, facing him. "You and me, and the children, we're going to have a fine life here. I feel blessed. Lucky!" She closed her eyes taking subtle etheric pleasure in the moment, striving for a simple vision of her own, but he turned on her.

"No, Maddie! No! Don't belittle my achievements with your religious, synchronistic bullcrap!"

Her eyelids flew open. "I only meant—"

"I'm a scientist, a doctor, a surgeon." He whipped his glasses out of an inside pocket and flipped them open. "I researched," he said, shaking the glasses defiantly in her face, "until I was seeing triple! I've worked every second of my life. I work in my fucking sleep! And luck hasn't got a damned thing to do with it! And blessings? The jury's out on that one."
"Robert, you're screaming."

"Luck turns on a dime, Maddie!" He ran a hand along the window casing and punched at the solidity of a wall. "This is my home. Mine. It belongs to me! I'll kill anyone who tries to take it from me."

Maddie placed one hand on his chest, backing him off to arm's length. "Okay…" She looked at her husband but a stranger stood in front of her.

"I'll kill anyone who tries!"

"Please, Bob, the children. I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"Us." Maddie dropped her hand stepping to his side. They both gazed through the window. "We never used to argue like this. You make me feel like I'm walking in a mine field."

Self-conscious, he hung his head.

"I know you're changing. I can see it in the books you read, the art you collect, your need for more solitary time, your whole philosophical temperament, and your outlook. I live with you, mister. I'm aware of everything. It's in the things you say, or the way you say them." Maddie twisted her head covering her face. "Oh! I don't know what I'm saying." Slowly, she allowed herself to fall back against this man, and he encircled her in his arms. "I want to be a part of the change," she cried softly, "but I don't know how."

He held her in his arms and kissed the back of her neck, and placed his cheek next to hers. "You are, Maddie. You've always been the very finest part of my life."

She sniffed and wiped at her tears, and took solace where she realized there was no longer space for her, nestling the back of her head in his chest. "I feel like you're pushing me away, Bobby. And don't tell me about the visions again, because I don't think I can handle that. I just don't think I can."

Robert held her, speaking softly into her ear. "You're right. What else can I say? I am changing. My life is one shadow chasing another. But it feels correct. This is the time."

"Time for what?"
"The People say it is the medicine wheel turning. They say a man can be born on a particular area of the wheel, never investigate any of the other areas and never advance. Or, a man can turn the wheel, investigate, learn, accept the gifts given by The Four Directions of The Great Mystery, and advance along the path. I don't know why, after leaving it all behind, but I believe now that I have always lived in the shadow of the wheel, The Four Directions of The Great Mystery."

Robert sighed. "There's all of that, but I swear, you and the children mean everything to me. Alienating you is the last thing I want to do. Maddie, please, don't leave me. I need you like oxygen. I fall in love with you everyday."

She turned back wrapping herself around him, feeling that he could easily hold all of her in one hand. They kissed, and his coat sleeve rode up slightly, revealing a Native American beaded wristband custom made to hold his gold watch.

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Huffing and puffing, Charles Rampart stuck his head through Robert's car window just as his hand hit the stick. Robert, shaken, automatically jammed the brake. The whites of Charles' eyes stood out in the dark parking structure and he still wore his white lab coat, meaning he was on shift.

"Charley, what's wrong?" Robert switched off the engine, and in the distance he heard elevator chimes. If not for the narrow horizontal opening running along the walls between levels, they would be in complete darkness.

"Probably nothing. But I thought you ought to know, a Mr. Frank White Bird checked in today. He's indigent and terminal. Look, I didn't think about it at first…"

Charles' voice trailed off. Robert slipped into deep thought. He remembered a younger Charley and himself, both med students at U.C.L.A., heading to Santa Barbara for the weekend. Before leaving, Robert drove them through the back streets of Hollywood's east side, and he recalled pulling his gas guzzling monster Chevy Impala into a tiny parking space behind a small
bungalow. Charley and he walked around to the side of the ramshackle structure where Robert knocked on a door facing an alley. Slowly, it creaked open and Frank White Bird stood, his painfully thin body with it's swollen belly weaving, shifting weight from one foot to the other until he stumbled backwards into the shadows falling on an unkempt bed. The room stunk of body odor, urine, and sweet red wine. Robert saw himself peeling two one-hundred dollar bills out of his money clip. He tossed the crisp bills on top of Frank's bare, sunken chest.

Today, Robert felt the disgust of that moment.

"...They checked him in on my ward," Charley was saying, "and there was something familiar about the old man's face, then it struck me. He was the drunk you gave money to in that bungalow years ago. I thought, well, he might be a relative, you know, or something."

"Thanks, Charley." Robert cranked the engine and parked his BMW. He ambled slowly towards the chiming elevators, like a man walking down death row. Already at the elevator, Charles Rampart held the door open for his old friend.

They moved to the rear of the stainless steel compartment, insulated, watching digital numbers on the screen change silently. *Old friendships*, Robert thought, *handle silent moments.*

"Charley, Maddie's waiting dinner for me. Can I impose on you—"

"I'm on all night."

"Would you stop by ADMITTING, change White Bird to Johnson, tell them I'm the financially responsible party, and have him assigned to me?"

"No sweat. How's 'bout a private room, Doctor?"

The elevator halted and the heavy steel doors rolled open. Robert stepped out. When he glanced back, Charles stood in the middle of the compartment pointing at his stomach.

"Charley, you're not going down to the cafeteria? That food will kill you, my friend." The doors rolled shut.

Doctor Robert Johnson faced a long hallway through the noisy indigent ward. He listened for a time to patients screaming demands for service, and some just screaming. They moaned and groaned bursting with concrete injuries, exposure, dandruff falling out of rosy red scalps like snowflakes, broken fingernails and teeth, and unwashed urban insanity. Nurses balancing
bedpans and phlebotomy carts with marked tubes of blood scurried back and forth between rooms.

At the nurse's station, Robert flipped through a wall of hanging patient charts. The indigent ward was also known as the war zone, and there were no computer monitors in the war zone. He found Doctor Charles Rampart's patients and finally selected the chart for Frank White Bird. At first, he pushed the pages around quickly, angrily, and then he slowed down and began reading statistics. These numbers and letters coalesced, soon representing more than check-marks on paper, they represented a terminally ill patient, and without asking permission humanity reared its head; the reports showed the enlarged liver and spastic stomach, and internal hemorrhoids earned from a life of alcohol abuse. This, Robert read as a gutless man who spent the better part of his time on earth trying to die without courage enough to pick up a gun and pull the trigger. Noted were numerous stays in mental hospitals and short periods of drying out. The chart took on living weight; a reality clean hospital paper or information on digital screens rarely assumes. Before he could stop them, tears formed welling up from his eyes, clouding his vision. These reports of no hope were all that was left of his father. Robert knew he'd begun the mourning process for a man he loved—he knew not why—but whom he never liked, and though their visits arrived infrequently over the years, Robert cried. He would miss Frank White Bird of Humaliwu, son of the great Glowing Hands of Humaliwu. In a flash, Robert thought he saw himself as an infant being held by Frank, thought he felt it. Then the vision blew out like a candle flame.

Robert closed the chart and clipped it on a rack next to the air grate. Continuing down the hallway, eyes now clear, Robert focused straight ahead. In front of room 134, he abruptly halted inhaling deeply. He exhaled and entered.

He faced a four-bed room with a large, dirt streaked, multi-paned window at one end. Beyond the window, an iron bar cage jutted out from the wall, and beyond those a view of the gray roof with multiple air conditioning units. The room smelled like dirty diapers and ammonia, and Robert took a moment adjusting his senses. Nurses pulled drapes closed around certain beds and then yanked them open again, constantly running back and forth with measured urine
samples and bedpans to the only bathroom. A patient appeared at the bathroom door. He vomited and stood wiping his toothless mouth across his arm. Without thinking, Doctor Robert Johnson supported the man, helping him back to his bed. "Bless you, Doctor." The patient managed a smile.

Robert, about to speak, felt someone staring at him. He excused himself turning to view the room's length once again. In the last bed, partially visible behind a sheer drawn curtain, laid a man who appeared as skin and bone except for his distended stomach. He was in his late sixties but looked much older in the unforgiving window light. His long, thin white hair trailed over the side of the bed like angel dust floating on air currents created by each passing body. Robert drew closer, slowly, and suddenly Frank's limp hanging arm electrified, snapping into an upright position, gripping forcefully on Robert's forearm. The old man squeezed his fingers hard into Robert's flesh. "Bobby, will it be slow or quick?"

Both men paused. Robert's pulse beat in his ears and chest, and the old man's grasp tightened. "I'm sorry, Pops."

Frank released his grip patting his son's arm, shaking his hand, as if the two men just met. Robert, out of habit, took stock of the patient's cloudy eyes, wrinkled flesh showing liver spots, and broken blood vessels running over his nose. "You're taller than I remember. Shit, son, don't look at me like that. Did you think this was news?" Frank drew himself up, and still holding Robert's hand, he drew his son closer. He studied the boy grown into a man, saddened at their mutual loss of twenty years. "This is your time. Anyone with eyes can see. You have the bear spirit." Frank spoke dryly through yellowed teeth.

*Glowing Hands*… Robert thought.

"Don't make my mistake, Bobby. Don't run from it. Never run. If you fear the bear, he'll eat you alive. Make a slow meal of you. You must be the master."

Robert reached into a bowl of ice chips next to Frank's bed. The old man barely opened his mouth and his son slipped one past his dried lips. Robert tried again to speak his thought, "Glowing Hands."
"My father, Glowing Hands, has been with you always, waiting." He sucked on the chip. "The morning you were born, he stood over you, naming you Ahkimay Khus, 'Black Bear'. I watched him. He picked you up, held you in his arms, and I knew."

Robert sat on the edge of the bed listening to a missing piece of his life, a small part of the great mystery clarified at last. The way of The People is a belief that if you ask many questions out loud you can't be listening, you can't be learning. Robert 'Black Bear' Johnson held back numerous unanswered questions, but this one he'd waited for. He asked, "What did you know, Pops?"

"I know my father saw something in you, courage, something he never saw in me."
Frank's bloodshot eyes grew watery. "It hurt." Though, in the instant he spoke, demonstrating renewed strength, and raising his voice, Frank White Bird's face transformed, his eyes and cheeks, his mouth animated with the spark of life, the strength of certainty."I should have risen above the pain, but that was my problem, no strength. Look, in the end he was no fool. No. My father saw deeply. He knew this earth in the way of The People. And, he was what you would call a student of humanity."

Frank White Bird stared straight ahead. "I realized that some day he would be with you. Teach you the true healing. Teach you to help your father." Frank peered up at his son searching for a sign of understanding, because the healing he spoke of crossed accepted boundaries. Frank called for the healing of the great mystery of birth and death.

Robert averted his eyes. He flipped open the old man's bed chart. "All I can do for you now is order a Morphine drip. We'll try dialysis."
Frank's head shot off the pillow. "Morphine gives an old Indian nightmares. Crap! You know what you need to do, Bobby."

Shocked realization struck swiftly and Robert felt himself tremble. "I can't. I won't."
Glowing Hands of Humaliwu, father of Frank White Bird of Humaliwu, grandfather of Robert 'Black Bear' Johnson, stood at the foot of his son's bed. Frank smiled at the vision; however, Robert saw nothing. Frank spoke to his father, though Robert assumed Frank lectured to him. "It is time for my journey to Humqaq, to make my sacrifice. Then I must pass through
The Land of Widows, where the women are all young and beautiful." He chuckled and his pink eyes lit up. "Tough job, but I can handle it. Then, Similaqsa. I'm Chumash. In our way, I welcome death. Shit. In my own way, I can't fucking wait."

Robert threw his father's chart on the bed. "You were always angry at the wrong things, the wrong times. Fighting for the wrong reasons. Now, Pops, now is the time to fight! To fight with everything you've got!"

He gathered up the chart's pages one by one, clipping it back together. "But no. Why become a man this late in the game, huh?"

Frank slid down in the bed, growing tired, and he gazed at his son, speaking to him. "A man is born forgetting what he knows. He lives chasing shadows of what he needs to remember. Then the time comes when a man remembers everything he knew the day he was born. Then it is time for the journey to continue. Help me, Bobby, with my journey to Similaqsa, to Chumash Heaven."

"Why? When have you ever helped me with my journey?"

"You must have courage for us both. If you can't do this, promise you won't hold me back with your life support, your drugs."

"Well, Jesus H. Christ! Then tell me why you came here. You checked yourself into a hospital. What did you expect to find here?"

"My son, Ahkimay Khus. I came to find you. I knew you'd have the bear by now. Look, I've been a damned poor father. But don't let your actions rest on mine. I came here for you."

Frank paused, his mouth dry, looking at the bowl of ice chips like a wounded cat. Robert slipped another chip between his father's lips.

"He's here," Frank said.

"Glowing Hands?"

"He's here for us both," Frank said. "It's time."

"Pops, even if I entertained the thought, I wouldn't know what to do. Not in our way, not in the Chumash way." He circled the bed, stopped sharply, and stared his father down. "Hell! Do I owe you anything?"
Frank smiled shaking his head. "Hell, it's not a matter of payback. It's about owning up to who you are, to what you are. You owe your people. We all do. Did you think you were different?" Frank looked down at his son's moccasin covered feet. The doctor no longer worked in sneakers. "Go home, Bobby. He'll be there for you." And Frank stared straight ahead, but Glowing Hands no longer presented himself. Soon, Frank's eyelids grew heavy, and his face softened. "Mocs are okay, but The People wore sandels." He fell asleep slipping into an innocent, childish expression.

"Hell, Pops, you're already half-way there," Robert whispered. "You know you're a sonnuvabitch. I—I love you, Pops. Good-night."
"…Native American sacred ways were aboriginally, and still are, practical systems of knowledge. The scientists of the sacred were holy people…. [The sacred was not separate from science, scientists, and their universe.]"

~The Sacred, by Beck, Walters, & Francisco

***

Maddie leaned a paper-thin, angular body against the bathroom sink in front of an extravagant mirror. She performed an odd ballet wearing one of Robert's old shirts and stretching on her toes, bending her wrist back straining two fingers stuck through steel loops in a scissors. Furrowing her usually smooth delicate brow, she held the sharp instrument horizontal and parallel to blond bangs, which hung loosely in front of her eyes. She steadied for the cut while baby Maggie played, throwing toys on the hall floor just outside the bathroom.

Downstairs, Robert's den smelled lightly of burning white sage; a musty, peaceful scent drawing together books, furnishings, and Robert's state of mind into a harmonic whole, and over the past two years most of his medical books, sports memorabilia, and community certificates found themselves relegated to high places; shelves out of reach, boxes out of sight, clutter above one's head being symbolic of growth.
The doctor's personal journey deepened, and at this juncture his awareness paused taking note of a new vibration, a wave pushing him to understand not only his current circumstances, but to seek the ancient. He marveled, revitalized by the search.

His massive double desk sat in this house as it had in the previous one, now groaning under the weight of literature stacks on Native American culture, history, and current politics. Whitewashed shelves held volumes on American Indian traditions, herb cures, Chumash life, historical texts on Santa Barbara, California, and the Mission period.

He sat buried behind his desk, sore eyes close upon the pages of an encyclopedic volume while scratching out notes on scraps of paper, bits and pieces of important information flittering around the table top, pinned on walls, and held down in meaningful piles by paper weights of turquoise and jasper and granite stone. The day's final light softened and dimmed, and the doctor removed his reading glasses, rubbing his eyes, closing and opening them, focusing for distance past an oversized dream catcher hanging in a large heavy open window. A breeze blew past. The sky turned red and Robert switched on his desk lamp.

He rose from the desk to rifle through mountains of documents blanketing his leather sofa. He searched among news clippings on gambling casinos, tax battles, and the ever-growing land battles being fought by virtually all Native American tribes in existence.

His glasses hung off the corner of his mouth where he worked the plastic earpiece across his jaw like a smoking pipe.

This catalog of current events he perceived as a testament to The People: decimated, scattered, abandoned in poverty and disease, and …generally fucked up the ass, or so he thought, every time a child is taught about Columbus the adventuring hero, or those God-fearing settlers risking lives to settle "their" country in the name of freedom and the American right to homestead land and raise a family.

Robert snatched the glasses from his lips, stretched and yawned throwing his arms above his head. The tails of his flannel shirt pulled loose from his threadbare jeans. A small gourd drum decorated with a bear's paw symbol on goatskin dangled from a beaded strand around his neck.
while his long thick hair flowed freely about his shoulders. Along one side of the gourd a craftsman had burned in the name Ahkimay Khus.

When the telephone rang, a screech cutting a razor's edge reverberated above his head. Immediately, baby Maggie filled her lungs to bursting and cried.

Robert dropped everything, all thoughts vanished. Exercising a clear mind, he flew swiftly up the wide staircase and down the hall.

He passed Kyle's room, where the boy stuck his head out of a partially opened door, and Robert, without stopping, gently shoved him back into his room shutting the door. Robert's moccasins barely touched the wooden floor.

Racing towards Maddie's bathroom, he scooped up baby Maggie placing her in the master bedroom and closing that door.

Entering Maddie's bathroom, blood dripped down the mirror into the white china sink, and Maddie, pale as candle wax, clung to the sink, scissors stuck on her quivering fingers, battling not to pass out.

"I'm calling an ambulance!"

"Don't, Robert, God, I'm gonna vomit. Don't leave me."

The phone rang on, and behind the master bedroom door baby Maggie screamed. Yet, for Robert, all grew silent.

Drums. What do you want? Yes, I know what to do. He placed one hand loose over Maddie's wet blood soaked eye, and the other he placed behind her head. His mind worked on multiple levels filling the room with violet light, filling Maddie with violet light. Simultaneously he envisioned her eye drying up, an ocean floor becoming a parched desert. He passed the light through her head from one of his hands toward the other. The ocean dried to the last drop, all vegetation turning ashen, and the desert burned with a bone-clean white light, a purifying light. He envisioned the eye itself, and he seared shut the wound with more golden-white light passing from one hand to the other. This last light was to burn out infection and disease. The drumming faded. Baby Maggie no longer cried, and the telephone ceased ringing. Only now did he dare uncover Maddie's eye.
The blood, dry and crusted brown, flaked off her skin. Gently he washed and disinfected her cut. "Better?"
"Yes," she said, trembling.
"Now, will you let me take you to the hospital? You still need stitches."
"Okay."
Robert and Maddie reached for each other, both in a state of disbelief.

***

Robert leaned over a telescope on a warm summer evening. He rarely spent time on his observation deck; so little opportunity for nature these days, he felt honored, enveloped by the heavens. Blowing dust off lenses, fiddling with dials, speaking at length, teaching Kyle the Chumash view of their universe. Stars hung low, dropping out of a clear, dark sky, constellations easy to make out: Orion, Cancer, Andromeda, Ursa Major, Phoenix, Scorpius. Viewing the Milky Way, Robert experienced himself as part of a larger plan, a single aspect of the violet light, a plan of natural forces, though he believed not divine, as such. However, Kyle having other ideas slowly snuck away while Robert turned his back fooling with astronomical adjustments.

His long spine arched over the telescope, straining at its eyepiece as he spoke. "You know, the Chumash believe the universe is divided into three worlds, Kyle. Now, the world below is coyinasup, where the nunasis, the demons, live. The world above is agape, held up on the wings of Slow Eagle, and this world, where we live is called itiasup. Itiasup is held up by two giant serpents, and… Kyle?" He sensed the boy's desertion.

Robert coaxed the instrument by tenths of an inch marking a planet and sighting adjustments to his camera. *Well, you can't photograph Slow Eagle anyway, so why bother talking about him.*

Under the quiet canopy, a familiar sense overtook Robert. "Uh huh, Glowing Hands, I know you’re here, I can feel you staring at me. How much longer are we going to play hide and
seek, Grandfather?" He turned away from his telescope, a faint wind having passed through his body, and Robert examined the fine hair on his arms standing at attention, tentacles reaching beyond known boundaries to touch the unseen universe, the world, itiasup.

Glowing Hands stood in front of him, the greatest bear medicine doctor in Chumash history. His living spirit dressed in a wild grass and eagle feather skirt, wearing a bear's head pulled over his own, and bear paws strung around his neck. Glowing Hands scowled.

Robert laughed. "After all this time you think you can intimidate me?"

"You are not Chumash." He eyed Robert's tall frame. "We do not dress like this!" he said, pointing first at his grandson's moccasins, then up his body to the drum gourd necklace. "What tribe are you? What is your village?"

"I am a member of The People, the Great Tribe. My village is The Great Mystery of The Four Directions."

Glowing Hands shrugged his shoulders smiling. The smile melted into a serious expression. His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. "When I was Kyle's age, I liked to hear the elders tell stories of Slow Eagle, and Coyote the Trickster …and I believed them!" He craned his neck under the weight of his headdress gazing at the heavens.

For the first time this living spirit moved. He stepped forward in sandals, placing one arm high, firmly on his grandson's shoulder and lifting his chin, he met him eye to eye. "You have been studying The People. Do not think that I have not been studying you!"

Robert, nonplused, backed away from the short Indian. He stood speechless while Glowing Hands continued. The old medicine doctor, frizzy hair escaping from beneath his bear headdress, pointed a wrinkled finger at Robert's telescope.

"Your science is powerful medicine. I see this. It weighs the human heart," and Glowing Hands tapped his finger on his chest, "measures its strength, tracks the pressure of blood through a man's veins," he ran his finger down along his opposing arm. "Your science sees the world above and answers many mysteries. I know a mystery."

He settled on the floor of the observation deck motioning Robert to join him, and grandfather and grandson sat together under the stars speaking, and Glowing Hands looked to the
sky as if the stars spoke to him, gifting him, having Glowing Hands pull the story from the universe itself.

"Silinaxuwit was a bear doctor. Although he was harmless, he put on a good act. One day, a young woman's house caught on fire, and she stood outside crying." Glowing Hands constantly waved his arms, illustrating the story as the heavens presented it to him.

"Silinaxuwit said, 'I will save your things!' He covered his face with his hair and disappeared into the flames. The fire opened for him, and he brought all of the young woman's things out of the house. He studied this woman. He touched her with his hand, his fingers. He stroked her face. But suddenly he became very sad. He turned away, climbed into the mountains, and the young woman tried to follow but his tracks turned into those of a bear. He never returned to her." Upon this ending, Glowing Hands bowed his head.

"Tell me, Doctor Johnson, use your science and measure for me, what was in his heart?"

"Science can measure a man's respiration, pulse, even his perspiration, and we use what we can see to help us visualize what we can't see." Robert studied Glowing Hands while the old spirit raised himself off the ground and paced the deck.

Glowing Hands spoke slowly. "You can feel what you can't see? You can know in the way of The People what you can't see? Does the unseen reveal its name to you?"

"I didn't say that," Robert said.

Glowing Hands jumped down into a squat and threw his finger in Robert's face. "Show me what was in this bear doctor's heart! Now!"

Robert avoided the finger and studied the sky overhead. "I can't. But I know it was love."

"Bah! How can you know that?"

"Being a man," and he moved the spirit's finger aside, "I can know another man's actions. I can understand what they mean, their motivations."

Glowing Hands sat full upon the deck. "Ah, you are Coyote the Trickster. You call yourself a scientist."
"I'm a scientist, a doctor, a surgeon. I studied until I was seeing triple. I've worked every second of my life. I work in my fucking sleep. I'm both. I'm a scientist and a man. You spy on my private moments?"

"Those years you spent studying to become a doctor, you were also studying to become a man. You think your father, my son, is a failure? Yes, White Bird is a miserable human being, a man who only now finds his courage. I hurt for him, feel his pain. He is my son! But always he has been something you are not."

Robert chewed his lip and his stomach tightened. "I don't like my father, but I love him. So, tell me what he is, because in my eyes he isn't much."

"White Bird is awake. He walks with fear, but he is awake. You walk tall …in your sleep. You deny your manhood."

"But I just said—"

Glowing Hands quickly reached out and snapped a single hair from the doctor's head. Robert's eyes flew open. His cheeks flushed and he rubbed his scalp.

"Just as being a scientist means being a man, so, being a man means being whole, and you are Chumash! You are bear!" Glowing Hands looked deeply into the sky, reading the stars. "You have great courage. Now it is time to battle the bear, to become whole. A whole scientist, a healer, a whole man."

"And if I lose?" Robert struggled to get up from the deck. He shook his legs, first one and then the other and he walked over to his telescope. He positioned himself over the instrument, turning his back on the old spirit.

"Do I look like the Shell Answer Man? This is not to win or lose. You must make the bear your ally. You have been chasing shadows, my grandson. It is time to awaken. You are the shadows, and you are something more. We will meet at Humaliwu," and Glowing Hands spread his arms wide, "where the land is sacred, and I will teach you. But, Grandson, I can not teach you to be more than bear; and at the moment, something more is your issue. The story I told you, well..."
Robert left his telescope and sat down in a chair. He exhaled loud and long. "You will teach me what?"

"The quest."

"Grandfather, I'm too old for a vision quest. The gray hair is already creeping in."

"The bear lives in the world of no time and no space."

Glowing Hands quietly rose. The old spirit suddenly transformed into a huge growling bear standing on its hind legs, weaving back and forth, sniffing at the breeze, and it disappeared. Robert sat frozen in his seat, awe struck, respectful.

***

"I mean, you just don't see Chumash like this. I grew up on the reservation, and even there, well, you just didn't see them."

Robert screamed from their bed while Maddie stood against the far wall doing a finger-crawl across a shelf of books. She examined their titles over the tops of her reading glasses, which she never read through. She raised avoidance to an art, feeling sad and helpless, and that Robert's visions had become a losing battle.

"The feathers! The paint! We heard about it, the big commercial pow-wows, but we never attended. I never saw it. A bear's head. Christ!" He heard himself repeating it. "A bear's head…"

Maddie pulled down on the binding of a thin, yellow book. It was the wrong one and she shoved it back into place. "Have you seen the book of animal poems?"

"What?"

"That book we used to have of animal poems. I think I should begin reading to our daughter."

She turned and they stared at each other.

"I remember," Robert said.

"Well," she smiled, "where did—"
"I remember that painted face, but not the rest of him. He must have been holding me in his arms. Naming me. I must have been looking up, you know, at his face."

Maddie's smile evaporated.

"What do you think? Should I do the quest?"

She wanted to turn away again, and before tonight she would have. Instead, Maddie lightly touched the stitches two millimeters above her eye. Her hand fell and she walked over sitting on the edge of their bed. "I don't know. Don't you understand? Bobby, I can't do this. It just can't be true. I just don't think it can be true."

Robert stroked her cheek, her skin soft to the touch. "I'm not losing it, Maddie."

"No."

"What about your eye?" he reminded her.

"I know. I know!" She jumped into bed cuddling with Robert under the covers, and looked up at him. "I'm— My family— We're Methodists. I'm not sure I believe in anything. But I guess, if I did have faith, Jesus is about as exotic as I could manage. You know, the odds of Jesus appearing to me are about a million zillion to one. You see, it's not something I ever have to consider. As long as I have Jesus, my faith can ride up and down like a yo-yo, the way faith does in a person's life, and I don't have to care. I've got distance. I'm never going to stand up there on the roof going toe to toe with Jesus. Bringing the morality of Christ into the life of my family is a challenge, but the question of Jesus: if he is, who he is, who I am in his light, the question of Jesus never actually has to be answered. If I ever told another good Christian that I sit on my deck and talk directly to Jesus and he answers telling me he's not The Shell Answer Man, well, they'd put me away and take my children from me. We don't want a real healing Christ to contend with, we never want to have that. We want to live in the shadows. But you, your morality is more than doctrine, more than shadow. It's real. Glowing Hands stands there, you claim, and you speak with him."

Maddie gazed at Robert for a long time. He peered into space, lost in thought. She must save it all up, just so she can shock the shit out of me with her analysis all at once. "I respect your grasp of the situation, but it doesn't help me. It doesn't help us."
"Robert, I don't believe you're losing it, not after tonight. I know you're having an amazing experience. But you can't look to me to help you understand it or deal with it. I'm White. When I married you, you were White. Oh, you had a year-round tan. So what? This is California."

"Maddie, you knew my heritage. We talked about it."

"Not much. You weren't big on personal history. You were passing and I accepted it. And like I said, we gentiles don't go toe-to-toe with our history, we don't talk to it. Look at all of this," she swept her arm through the air. "Look at everything you've gone after since the day we met. Since before we met. Golfing, yachting, flying, the best homes in the best neighborhoods. You've got a walk-in closet crammed with business suits: Armani, Hugo Boss; White man business suits; Dockers, Levis, Nikes; White man clothes! Don't you think I know that for two years you've had your lawyers keeping the Chumash away from your land? It's their land! If I didn't marry a White guy, I married a young man who wanted to be White with more zeal than any pasty-faced Methodist I ever dated. Do you know, you're the first man I ever dated who wore knit shirts with those cute little alligators on them?"

"I used to like them, so, crucify me. I still like them!"

"I just don't think so. No. I didn't marry into this. I didn't bargain for this. At first, I felt like you were pushing me away. But I was wrong. It's me. I love you, Bobby. But at the same time, I'm not sure who you are."

Robert slapped his hands against the cover and stretched out his legs in frustration. "I…"

"I know," Maddie said, and they held each other. "What about Frank?"

"Shit, what about him?"

"That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

"No." Robert thought better of it. The answer would not pass muster with Maddie. "Well, yes, but it's so much more than my father."

"I didn't make you a doctor, Bobby. He's shadowed you all your life. Frank's your motivation. Not me. Anger was your motivation, not love." Maddie silently pondered the point. Robert had become a healer not out of a wish to save humanity, but out of a vitriolic hatred for
the condition of his people, a condition he was afraid he'd inherit like Frank White Bird. "I never saw that until now. Bobby?"

"He wants me to guide him along his journey to Similaqsa."

"Where?"

"Chumash heaven."

Maddie rolled away to her side of the bed staring at the ceiling. "Everybody's moving. Everybody. Kyle overheard you. He wanted to know who Daddy was talking to on the roof. Jesus!"
CHAPTER SIX--STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

"They were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counselors; they were totally good for nothing."

~Undocumented tribe response to an offer of western education.

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"Why did you tell them 'Johnson'?" Frank White Bird looked up at his son through watery eyes, his body limp on a clean white bed, in a small room enclosed by bright yellow walls, and sunlight streaming in behind a window leading to a private balcony. Robert leaned over the bed holding his father's chart in his hand. A group of students maintained their respectful distance. Frank's eyes froze on Robert. "You know I hate that name. My name is White Bird. Your name is Black Bear. Ha!"

"What, Pops?"

"Figures is all. The same man named us both."

"Pops, you'll get better treatment on this ward."

"Why? Because you're footing the bill? I don't deserve it."

Robert sat on the edge of the bed taking notes. "I think we're way past that."
"Do you think so?" Frank grinned, "I'd like that."

Robert knew Frank lay eighty percent blind and half deaf, and unless one of his group dropped a clipboard, Frank had no way of realizing they were clumped at the other end of the room waiting, listening, pencils poised for important information. "Why do you hate the name Johnson?" he drew close.

Frank licked his lips. All pencils stood at attention. "When I was a youngster, my parents sent me to school. A good for nothing place. They told them, my parents, they were educating me for a better life." He grabbed Robert's arm shaking it. "They were assimilating me!"

"One day, an agent came to our house. He said it would help if my name blended in with the other children. Of course, they were Chumash and Gabrialano too. But their names had been changed. A lot of marriage outside the tribe. Some of them were only one-percentors and couldn't make it into the tribe. There was a lot of in-fighting and arguing between the parents and the children."

Frank paused, thinking, tugging at remnants of the story from a deep recess, an innocent place alcohol hadn't drowned. "My father didn't want trouble. He wanted to practice his medicine in peace. He didn't ask me what I wanted. He was a selfish fool."

Robert looked up from his chart, his eyes grown large. "But he was Glowing Hands."

"Listen, you don't know. He was a man with a vision. He reached a point where his medicine shined superior in every way. He had numerous spirit guides. I remember their names: Chief Gray Fox, Bear Medicine Doctor, Black Raven Dancer, Gray Cat Elder, Ahbe, Jesus the Healer, Wakan Tanka."

"Those are not all Chumash names."

"Naw. Glowing Hands traveled. He left us alone. And when he came back from a trip he'd talk to us about a new tribe he'd met, and about their spirit guides and rituals and herbs. He even went to the Christian church, the Jewish temple. Catholic?" he raised an eyebrow, "I think he wanted to try them too. Don't know if he did. He was nuts!"

"You think?"
"Naw. If anyone asked, he would say he was a healer, but we knew he was a shaman. Nothing escaped my father. The world fascinated him."

"He must have earned The People's respect."

"Sure. Maybe. But the winds blew. There was a time when men like Glowing Hands were the core of our life as a people. We had no religion. The medicine doctor, the canoe maker, the weaver, if you were at the top of your craft, you were holy. The People were a living religion. But the missionaries before me, and the government after I was born, systematically rooted out men like my father, the lifeblood of The People. They educated the young, like me, against our ways. At the most powerful time in my father's life, this country and his nation, the Chumash, viewed him as a fool. I mean the young ones coming up, like I was, the ones that could have kept his medicine alive. He wanted to pass his knowledge on to me, but… I was nobody's fool."

Frank shook his head, eyes closed, his jaw tightening like a steel trap.

"You're angry, Pops."

"Even after all these years I remember his face slowly changing, dropping, privately, as he lost a little more pride everyday. He ended this life looking at the earth instead of the sky. So, what if he was Glowing Hands? So, what if he was holy? He was also a man. I should have understood then. I should have been a courageous son and stood up for my father. But I didn't. You know, I lost face with myself because of it, because of the whole fucking thing." Frank laid perfectly still, air rasping from deep within his chest.

"Glowing Hands knew how others viewed him, and he didn't want to hang out any shingle. He just wanted to be left alone. To practice alone." Inexplicably, Frank chuckled. Out of nowhere a glint of pure light appeared in his eyes.

"So, he, my father, asked the agent what his name was. Huh, I'll never forget it. The agent says, 'Well, Mister Bird, or Mister Hands…' Ha! Mister Bird, Mister Hands! Ha! Oh," and Frank lapsed into a short coughing fit, which the group took copious notes on. "He says, the agent says, 'My name is Hiram Johnson.'

My father said, 'Then name him Johnson.'

'Why, I'd be honored to give your son my name, Mister Bird, Mister Hands.'
My father glared at him, you know, up and down like, and he says, 'Honored? Do not be honored, Mister Hiram, Mister Johnson.' And then the old fool stood there smiling and slammed the door shut on Mister Hiram, Mister Johnson. Hell, I hate that fuckin' name!

Robert turned, saw the group dutifully writing all of this information down, pencils flying across clipboards trying to keep up. With all of that note taking, Robert knew the truth had eluded these young ivory faces, and he and Frank White Bird laughed together at the absurdity, the desperate, pathetic implication of the name "Johnson". Being Chumash at that moment meant understanding laughter as a deep tonic in the face of overwhelming historical tragedy. They shook, grabbing at their sides until tears rolled down their cheeks. The pencils stopped moving; nothing here to write, nothing worth remembering.

"I wish it could have been different between us, Pops."

"It is different now. Bobby, I'm proud of you."

"Pops," Robert chewed the end of his pen in contemplation, "I need to go on a vision quest."

Frank rested just above sleep's twilight. "Tell my father, the old fool, I have often thought of him."

"Really? And just what should I tell him you thought of him?"

Frank White Bird slept, floating, rasping a hollow death rattle, and Robert motioned everyone out of the room. In the hall, Doctor Robert Johnson wrote a few quick notes to be lengthened later. He shut his father's chart with the death rattle fresh in his ears and crossed his arms facing a group of young exhausted faces. "That, ladies and gentlemen, in case it was lost on you, is my father, Frank Joh—White Bird of Humaliwu."

A student with curly red hair and freckles shuffled his feet. "That would make you Robert White Bird?"

"No," Robert patiently answered. "The People didn't answer to surnames. We were identified by our given name and the village we hailed from."

A young lady interrupted. "I don't get it. Was your given name Robert? I mean, if you don't mind my asking, sir." She picked up her pencil.
Robert smiled, reaching over and pushing the pencil flat against her clipboard. "Well, yes and no. My mother named me Robert. My grandfather, Glowing Hands, named me properly, Ahkimay Khus—Black Bear. But everyone always called me Bobby, and of course, I took my father's surname, Johnson." Robert paused. He absentmindedly rifled through his father's chart. "But that's not my conundrum."

A tall, lanky student in dirty white sneakers and a wrinkled lab coat leaned against the water cooler. He drained the last drop of water out of a paper cup and crunched it between his palms. "Doctor, I don't see any conundrum. He is dying, sir, isn't he?"

_This punk's barely begun his internship and he's already disassociated_, Robert thought. "Yes. A protracted death. His kidneys and liver are functioning just enough to keep him alive and in pain, not enough to allow him any quality of life."

"Christ, if we're going to go there..." the kid rolled his eyes.

"He has diabetes, the curse of my people, and high blood pressure. He couldn't really see you guys." _How did the punk get this far?_ Robert felt himself pleading to a bunch of school kids. "He has glaucoma. Can't see three feet away. His edema is so bad he can't move under his own power," Robert lifted a foot empathetically, "he's lost all bladder control, and I suspect congestive pulmonary problems are around the corner." He stopped. Again, it hit him, My father is dying. "Anyone?"

The student with red hair and freckles glanced around nervously. The rest of the group maintained silence and finally, sweating like a can of steaming tomato soup, he spoke. "Morphine and Ativan for comfort, and dialysis." He wiped damp hands across his jeans. "A respirator when the time comes."

"Why dialysis?" Robert asked.

The group eyed one another, still silent, and the red haired kid slowly skulked back to the rear.

The young lady didn't understand why the question. "To keep him alive, sir."
"Yes, of course. But I've just described to you a human being with no quality of life, and whose only expectation is pain and an agonizing death. Actually, if I were a humanitarian, I'd withhold dialysis. Allow his kidneys to give out first."

"He, your father, would fall asleep, sir, and not wake up. You'd want to keep up the pain meds and hydration," though she frowned staring down as she answered, and this little tell gave Robert hope that the future of medicine might not be bereft of spiritual conscience after all.

The tall student by the water cooler threw his crushed paper cup into a nearby receptacle. He had no problem meeting Robert eye to eye. "If you were a humanitarian, sir? You are a humanitarian. You're a doctor. You save lives. Therefore, you are a humanitarian."

The doctor pursed his lips. "Sometimes," he told Maddie long ago, "teaching is like hitting a brick wall at sixty-five miles per hour." He took a step back crossing his arms behind himself. Doctor Robert Johnson, spreading his shoulders, lifted his jaw. "That is a syllogism that doesn't always apply. The actions we take as doctors are not above the dictates of culture. We're able to do what we do, science is able to do what it does, because our culture has developed a path, a process of progression that all but demands those actions. We call the path humanitarian."

He slowly circled the group coming face to face with the kid at the water cooler. "Frank White Bird, for better or worse, is a Native American Chumash Indian. And believe me when I tell you, his people travel a different path. Their lives proceed alongside the rest of American culture, but always outside of it. And they feel their path with an emphasis on the spiritual-medicinal balance, that it is perhaps more humanitarian than our pure scientific path." He strolled back around to the front of the group. "Whose culture do I respect here? Is one more valid than the other? Let's break for the day."

The group broke up into two's and three's wandering towards the elevator. Robert looked at his watch and took off in a walk-run towards the stairwell.

"Doctor Johnson, sir?" The water cooler student ran after him. Robert stopped just before reaching the stairs. "Yes?"

"The conundrum, sir?"
Robert smiled. He'd hooked a fish. Maybe he'd judged the young man too quickly. Perhaps a deeper ground lie beneath the surface than he'd given him credit for.

"I've been asked to guide a man through his death experience."

"As a physician, sir, that's not your place. We're not here to end lives."

"But he didn't ask me to end his life exactly—just to guide him to his waiting destination. And, remember, in his culture that destination is not the end of life. It's very much alive. It is the next leg of his journey."

"It's not right, sir. As health practitioners it's not our place."

Robert turned away taking the first stair down. Then, he turned back. The water cooler kid still stood there. The two stared at each other.

"And as sons?" Robert asked, no time to wait for an answer.

***

With the final sutures in place, operating lights are turned down casting faint shadows, and Doctor Johnson's team relaxes. Three and a half hours of tension slowly seeps into the ether. The instrument nurse mumbles behind her mask, counting inventory while the anesthesiologist reaches for an overhead switch rolling his equipment stand away from the gurney.

A wiring configuration is arranged so the patient continues being monitored when traveling across the hall to RECOVERY. Lines are disconnected and others secured to the patient's body.

Robert rotates his shoulders in slow circles loosening the muscles. Only after the operation does anyone feel the temperature in the room, or hear the whoosh of the air unit, or become aware of their own bodies. His trap muscles stretch stiff and fiery, like burnt bacon on both sides of his neck reaching down deep into the rotator cups. The cups were wrecked thirty years ago playing football and rowing. For no particular reason he thinks about Kyle coming to grips with his adolescence, and Robert wonders what his place as a father will be relegated to.
He slowly rolls one latex glove down the back of his hand, considering how much of his value system he'll pass on to the boy before his parenting is shut out.

"Doctor! Blood pressure is failing. Eighty over…" Bodies snap and spring, hands and fingers flying, the monitor nurse continues counting, "Pulse fifty-two, forty-eight…" Crash carts appear stacked one behind the other. The anesthesia equipment rack is in place, paddles are charging, charging, discharged and the patient's spine arches up like a fish out of water. Charged, charged, charged, discharged and his spine jumps again, this time like the Bay Bridge in the middle of an electric storm. A team player breathes the breath of life deep into the man's lungs and pushes up and under his rib cage, over the diaphragm, breathing and pushing, and charging. The paddles are discharged, but the body merely shakes like dead jelly.

Monitor lines go flat. A light comes on. Everyone's eyes are glued to the screen, still flat. Erratic beeping goes constant and long. The team lives with the flat-lined monitor, their ears consumed by a long, high pitch of finality. The air is thick; it is always difficult to breathe a human loss. At last the monitor nurse speaks calmly from behind her mask to Doctor Johnson, "Call it, Doctor?"

Robert hears drums, and chanting of the ancient ones. It grows from within the long, high pitch—chanting—and he doesn't answer the nurse.

The doctor steps to the foot of the gurney. Beginning at the patient's toes and heels, he holds his palms down over the feet until both his palms and the patient's feet are glowing, exhibiting flames of energy, leaping and crackling like golden-white spots within the aura of a violet sun.

Robert slowly moves his hands feeling a fine energy mesh, and he stops at the lower abdomen slightly above the pubic area opposite the sacral bone. He holds his hands over the area until a ball of light develops. He pauses, focusing his intention to move this energy ball slowly up both sides of the spine.

Several team members yank down their masks to breathe. Others move away and stare. No one utters a sound.
The monitor beeps faintly while Robert moves his hands and violet energy lights up the solar plexus—another stop and he is on his way to the heart. He passes energy through the body by extending both arms with a hand on either side of the body, and he pushes the energy from one hand to the hand on the other side and back again. He works on both length and width. When he feels a clear energy circuit without blockage he moves ahead in the process. Finally, Robert places both hands palms down above the body. He visualizes and feels the whole subtle energy body lifting out of the physical body. He holds it in place for a moment while filling the entire subtle body with golden-white light. Dark spots float in the patient's aura and Robert spreads his fingers; light rays extending from their tips, raking through the aura, picking out dark spots, throwing them towards the ceiling of the room where they disintegrate into the light, and he then slowly lowers his palms until the physical body has once again received the subtle body. He visualizes a clear aura enveloping the entire body, and beginning at the feet he zips it shut. The body now glows as a single whole unit.

The monitor beeps strong and pronounced, and in a moment, as the light around doctor and patient expands, the flat line inches into familiar peaks and valleys. The light now forms a huge egg shaped field enveloping both doctor and patient.

Doctor Robert Johnson's eyes are closed, his face smooth. I am Ahkimay Khus. Accept me as a student and teacher along The Path. Make of me a beacon for the light of the true teaching, right vision, true perception, true healing. I invite the spirit guides from The Four Directions of The Great Mystery. Help me to turn the medicine wheel and accept its gifts with grace and courage. Keep the doors of communication open between us that I may learn to heal the universe, others, and myself. I recognize the healer and creator as myself and all others. One healer. One creator. I am Ahkimay Khus, and this good man is my patient. Finally, the doctor's hands rest over the patient's throat, and then his forehead. Violet energy fills the operating room.

The team stands speechless and stone still while Robert draws a line of pure white light over the patient's body from head to foot.

Doctor Robert Johnson opens his eyes, gently. "He's ready for RECOVERY."
Dripping perspiration, Robert peeled off his faded green mask. He and Andrea, the monitor nurse, stand plastered against a cool wall in the outside hall. She slowly removes her mask, and Robert finds it surprising that she does not shed a drop of sweat, though she is plainly overheated and keeps jutting out her lower lip blowing wisps of brown hair off her forehead. Andrea looks away, avoiding his gaze, and Robert allows his eyes to travel the length of her body, to her feet.

"New shoes, Andrea? Very spiffy."

She turned staring into Robert’s eyes for thirty seconds. He didn't try breaking away.

"What was that? In the operating room, Doctor, just what was that?"

"A bypass. That’s what I was doing. What were you doing? Polishing your nails?"

"He died. The patient expired. The man died! Not near-death. Death!"

They both watched as several nurses and an orderly rolled the gurney across the hall through a set of swinging doors marked RECOVERY.

Robert turned his attention back to Andrea. "Better tell them. They just wheeled him into RECOVERY."

"But he—"

"Hey, do I look like the Shell Answer Man? We save lives. That’s what we do. It’s what we just did, Andrea. Feel good about it."

She watched his tall figure walk away at a slow even gait, his ponytail barely escaping beneath his scrub shirt. He shoved one hand into his pocket allowing the other arm an independent swing. Andrea drew a blank until Robert was halfway down the hall and she shouted after him, "I mean, don't you think we should report this?"

The doctor paused using a slight twist of chin. "Whatever's right." He took another step forward, but then changing his mind Robert performed an about face standing his ground. "Do you think his wife and kids will bring a wrongful life suit?"
"Look, all I'm saying is, I saw something in there. We all saw something in there. I'm not the only one. Doctor."

"Yes?"

"I would just like to say that I witnessed an unorthodox procedure being used in that operating room, by you, without legal consent."

"Really. Very astute. Having literally only a few seconds to make and carry out a decision, who was I going to ask for permission? His family? They're a distance away in a waiting room on another floor. The patient? As you mentioned, he was in no condition to be informed or asked for consent. And what if the unorthodox procedure had failed?" Robert lunged covering half the measure between them in three long steps and peered into Andrea's huge, hazel eyes. "The patient was already dead." He waved his large hand through the air. "Go ahead, nurse, report it, report me, do whatever you think is right. I really could care less. I am here to save lives, and I did."

Robert snapped himself away, and in an instant, back down at the end of the hall, he rounded the corner whipping his ponytail out from under his collar, yanking off its band and shaking his hair free around his shoulders. He felt positively angry, alive, and particularly good.

***

Once again, Doctor Robert Johnson sat behind his desk in a small upstairs office phoning in his daily transcription reports.

"...The vein tunnel was irrigated with antibiotic solution, the entrance incisions closed with two layers of Vicryl, and the leg was wrapped with an elastic wrap. The sternum was approximated with number six wire, the midline fascia with interrupted Polydek, and a multilayer Dexon closure on the remaining subcutaneous tissue and skin and then the sonuvabitch died and I brought him back to life. Whoa..." he lowered the handset from his ear and tapped it repeatedly on his desktop.
After a few seconds of intense thought he spoke back into the handset. "Wait, wait. I can't say that. What can I say? Umm, say this—stop after the Dexon closure."

"Continue; the monitors appeared to be exhibiting some temporary difficulty, perhaps an electrical outage. I stayed with the patient after closure, and until the monitors came back online. A final sponge and instrument count was conducted, and the patient, who appeared to take the procedure well, was sent to RECOVERY."
CHAPTER SEVEN--COYOTE COMES TO DINNER

Jack Macy, struggling with his turkey, caught her moving in on the bottle, as if a vase of flowers to be held close, to be inhaled. "People are gonna think you're a sailor, Ellen." Leveraged with his big round thumb, Jack gripped a long-handle, two-prong serving fork backwards, prison style, sticking it to a leg, managing well enough until the leg slipped off the fork into his plate and turkey juice splattered up onto his silk necktie. Nose down, Jack rolled his eyes sideways like a convict, stealing a look at Ellen. She'd bought him the tie for his birthday, and Jack, not a religious man, prayed that she missed the incident and would not do what women seemed fond of doing, dipping napkins in water glasses and dabbing at spots. If the situation became a desperate emergency, a spot that required operating, she'd stick the napkin in her mouth and lick it, first twisting it and then wrapping it around her index finger. Soon the finger jabbed at Jack, rubbing his shirt, blotting his necktie, or worse, shoving and pushing hard at the flesh on his face and leaving a trail of red marks. Jack didn't understand any of this and found the female process of needing to groom one's date revolting. He would be happy if shaggy dogs ran beneath the table, doing away with napkins altogether.

Her eyes caught his and traveled down the front of his shirt. Jack felt invaded. Being somewhat redeemable, he grew ashamed of himself for ruining her gift, knowing that in her way she loved him.

"Really? A swabbie!" Ellen picked up the bottle and poured. True to form, she tossed her opera length pearl necklace in a wide circle where it landed running down her back and hanging high on the front of her throat. With the precious strand out of the way, she snatched up her wine
glass emptying it in three gulps. In one more move Ellen had the wine bottle sitting squarely in front of her. She owned it.

Jack looked up from his plate smiling at Robert and Maddie, directing his commentary to Ellen. "Come to think of it, you resemble a sailor I once knew," and holding his empty fork upside down with his thumb, he shook it conducting his words. "It was off the Gulf of Tonkin. An ugly cuss. The sailor, I mean."

"How well did you know him, Jack?" Ellen spilled out another drink. "It must get lonely and hot in those little submarine thingies or boats, whatever. Tubs." She threw the fuel clear to the back of her throat oiling up the evening vitriol. "Did you guys remove your shirts when you swabbed the deck? Would someone pass the bread please?"

Maddie handed her friend the bread dish.

Chewing a mouthful, Jack stood and removed his sport coat, hanging it on the rear of his chair while lifting his Irish chin motioning his appreciation of food, not necessarily well or artfully prepared, just a mouthful of it.

Ellen slathered her bread with soft butter.

Robert and Maddie eyed one another when Jack's coat came off, understanding this was Jack Macy's way of moving in, making himself at home, taking over. Jack swallowed his mouthful still standing, working his tie loose with one thick hand, opening his arms, embracing the table. "Did you folks know about Ellen and me?"

Ellen's butter knife froze. She stared up at Jack.

"Oh, no," Robert said.

"Well, I have to say, I damn near married her."

"Must you!" Ellen tightened her grip on the knife.

"But my father, he was a wise man. He told me one day, he said, 'Son, if you wanna know your future with a woman, just get a gander at her mother.' She was an ugly cuss. Ellen's mother, I mean."
Maddie glanced back and forth between Robert and Jack. "Jack, maybe you shouldn't." She felt she ought to say something civilizing. Maddie grabbed his arm trying to stop his momentum. But Councilman Macy stood an imposing figure holding sway over the room.

"Ol' Thunder Thighs, I called her. Hell, I couldn't look that woman straight in the face without wondering how many testicles the bitch had crushed." Jack scooped up his wineglass holding it high and standing at attention. "Now, Ellen, dearest, if you're underwater in a submarine thingy, and you're ordered to go outside and swab the decks, well, shirt or no shirt, it's a, well, it's not good."

Robert, reaching over to Maddie for the salad bowl, howled. Maddie glared furiously at him shoving the bowl into his shaking hands.

Jack deadpanned it, slowly sitting down, stuffing a roll in his mouth, and Ellen, finally dropping her knife, ran crying into the dark living room. She took her bottle.

Maddie threw down her napkin following Ellen into the darkness. "Ellen, wait. You know Jack," shooting him a glance as she left. "He never did have any brains!"

Jack continued feeding himself, thumbs up, without missing a beat until Robert managed to compose himself. "You know," Jack said, "I would've married her, but it was the sex, Doctor. I'm into oral." This moment of composure Jack took as a sign to begin again.

Robert attempted to cut him off. "Oh, Christ, do I want to hear this?"

"I'll be damned if she wasn't just like her mother. She kept eating and growing and eating and growing. I don't mind saying, one night in bed it just got plain scary. I felt physically threatened. I knew I was about to get into some prime oral coitus and I had to dump her ass before she loved me to death."

"Bob, what about the land? You know, that night I had a dream that I was stuck in a boxcar rumbling down these old train tracks and all of a sudden this giant vagina lunged at me from out of the dark and I heard myself yelling, 'Help me! Somebody help! It's the vagina! The vagina's out to get me!'" Jack looked away, lighting his green cigar and smiling at the evening as if he'd earned his place in some perverse heaven.
"The land? Well, I'm going to have my lawyers draw up papers," Robert said, pushing his plate away, "and the chief is going to sign them. They can have their casino, but the Chumash burial ground goes untouched, and a percentage of the gate goes toward building a two thousand square foot Chumash educational center next to the casino. And, a further percentage of the gate comes to me over and above the cost of the sale." Robert paused.

"Talk about giving 'em what they want while you kick 'em in the balls." Jack enjoyed this, gleaming from ear to ear.

"And," Robert continued, "I have been assured by my legal team that those government contracts are sealed," he said, banging his finger on the table, "and there's nothing they can do about it. So," he crumpled up his napkin dropping it into his plate, "tough shit."

"That's a tough sale, Bobby!"

"Oh, and if they can't meet the requirements, if the casino goes bust, or they can't fund the educational center, all of the land rights revert to me. You tell the chief he can take it or leave it. Tell him he's dealing with a bear."

Jack, staring into space, rubbed out his wet cigar in the middle of his plate. He tugged on his bottom lip, tightened his necktie, rose from the chair and wrestled himself back into his coat.

"You look fine," Robert said.

"I guess I better go apologize to Ellen."

"I know."

"She wouldn't marry me, Bob."

"I know."

"I'll take her home, and we'll do the deed."

"Uh, huh."

"I love her."

"All of this is true, my friend."

"She hurt me. Of course, I know you know, Doctor."

"I know."

"Say, Bob, how are you folks doing?"
"Love's hell. It's strained at the moment."

"Yeah. I'll take that offer to the chief. He'll accept. You can go ahead and draw up the papers."

"I'll do that."

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White sage spread itself in loose bundles across Robert's desk. He focused, deftly tying the bundles into tight units called smudge sticks. When he had a dozen units tied, he wiped off the desk and stored the smudge sticks in a tightly woven natural grass basket. The basket, decorated with intricate designs from natural dyes and pitched inside with asphaltum, sat on one far corner of the desk. Purchased at auction, the basket evidenced itself as clearly Chumash. The smudge sticks, however, Robert tied and used according to Glowing Hands' instruction, a tool the great traveling shaman might have picked up amongst other tribes.

The ritual involved specific method and goals. Robert stepped methodically to the center of the room where he slowly lit and then blew the smoky end of a bundle. Once the bundle's smoke curled ash into the air, he directed the ash to The Four Directions enlisting the help of his spirit guides to clear the room of negative energy. He smudged his body's personal space or aura, as he called it, to purge his field of negative energy.

A period of healing meditation followed the ritual. Visualizing a healing, cleansing golden white light, Robert slowly filled his body with the light from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, from the inside outwards; first at the molecular and cellular levels, and then encouraging the light to fill whole organs, muscle fibers and connective tissue, bone marrow and soft bone, the epithelial level, then his flesh.

Soon he witnessed the light with every breath glowing, leaving his body and expanding through his local space outwards to the community, the world, his universal self. He chanted and visualized the syllables as symbols in his minds eye. The chanting filled his mental screen and he searched under the symbols, over them, and through them feeling the mind energy that gave
them birth. The symbols grew smaller, slowly, until they vanished and he lived in the pure space of his infinite mind. At this time Robert allowed himself to open up, to become a channel, and to communicate with his team of spirit guides.

This evening, Maddie quietly entered the room, and it became apparent that Robert either did not realize she was standing there, or that he simply decided to ignore her. The more of his time he gave to studying The People and their ways, the more she felt alienated. Awareness grew within her that she was White.

She stood watching him draw symbols into his palms, and sitting in a modified lotus position on the floor, he slowly spread his arms out in a circle, palms up until he held them outstretched as if presenting a gift to the universe. Slowly he closed the circle, like a sponge soaking up a quality in space only he was aware of. Being a Methodist, yet coming to believe in Robert's ritual, confused her, pulling the Christian rug out from under her feet. Maddie felt her chest constrict. "Bob, what should I say? It was an interesting evening?" She walked behind his desk placing her hands on the tall wingback of his swivel chair. She waited.

Time passed and her husband traveled ever inwards. He worked with colored light, violet energy, and symbols, smudge sticks and often incense. Robert's method grew as a hybrid learned from the travels of Glowing Hands, and his spirit guides, and his own research. Unbeknownst to fellow professionals, and friends, healing in this way became a tool as natural as knowing when to order and perform surgery. In the hospital he operated on living tissue, muscle, bone, flesh, organs; at home he performed psychic surgery on those same patients, operating on unseen forces, speeding the healing process, manipulating a patient's own energy to strengthen and increase in its healing abilities; in this sense, the doctor lived beyond time and space. Doctor Robert Johnson studied the ways of The People as a complementary modality to partner with conventional science. Yet, on such matters, he dared not speak.

"Robert!"

His eyes fluttered open. "Hm?"

"I'm taking the kids to visit their grandparents."
Maddie's words wounded him while he soared beyond space and time. She aimed, shooting the healer, sending its arrow deep. She stepped out from behind the desk. "I love you, Bobby. But I need time away from all of this." Maddie looked around at the strange artifacts: spears, Native American blankets, pelts she found distasteful, baskets, shells, and breathing deep the scent of the room her eyes rested on Robert sitting cross-legged in the middle of it all. "I'm confused, husband."

"And the children? They're mine too, Maddie."

"Yes, they are. And they love and respect you. But I'm taking them now. I need them. I need my family. Don't fight me on this. Don't make it worse."

Robert maintained a stoic, square-jawed silence, twisting his head to one side. He couldn't look at her.

"I need time to think, Bobby. That's all."

He faced forward, she thought to speak with her. Instead he closed his eyes journeying inwards, where Einstein once traveled, where Glowing Hands traveled, where Black Bear healed beyond space and time. Maddie turned and left, softly closing his door.

For a second, he opened his eyes, and then he shut them.
CHAPTER EIGHT--VISION QUEST

"I have searched the darkness, being silent in the great lonely stillness of the dark. So I became a shaman, through visions and dreams and encounters with flying spirits."
~Najagneq, an Eskimo man of knowledge.

"...In my dream, one of these small round stones appeared to me and told me that the maker of all was Wakan Tanka, and that in order to honor him I must honor his works in nature. The stone said that by my search I had shown myself worthy of supernatural help."
~Brave Buffalo, medicine man, Standing Rock Reservation.

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The psyche, stilled in deepest meditation, roars. The meditator is awake, truly aware. A practitioner of The Way does not seek escape, rather transcendence. A questor studies closely each of his experiences, learning to understand existence as experience, and how experience carves one into a creation of the gestalt, ever-fresh, in each moment being a little different, more than the sum of all experience passing. This is the dynamic moment in which The Great Mystery opens, it is the quantum wave telling us a particle exists; this is transcendence; the particle-wave.

Followers of Buddha say, it is here one knows the sound of stone growing in a cliff. Revealed through the words of Jesus, it is in this place one comes to know The Father. Taoists
challenge the successful man to uncover his true face in the midst of life's torrent. The Chumash claim it is here one knows one's primordial nature, the crashing of an ocean wave.

Doctor Robert Johnson walked barefoot, kicking up tufts of sand, collecting beach tar on the soles of his feet. To his right, waves crashed and rolled, foaming, the tide creeping in. A gathering of pelicans flew silently in formation against the clear sky. High above and to his left sat Adamson House, the Malibu Lagoon Museum, and 23200 Pacific Coast Highway. Beyond the highway, carved out of stone cliffs Topanga Canyon opened a wide, rocky slice running through the mountains, curling up and then down into the San Fernando Valley on the other side. This shore was Malibu, California, "The Colony" as wealthy inhabitants referred to it.

Still on this beach, unseen they worked; the Chumash building canoes, traveling north over the Pacific, trading with other Chumash on islands off the coast of Santa Barbara. They worked sustaining an advanced culture built on ethics, justice, art, and exchange; creating craft guilds, political and social positions within a defined structure of law, communication, trade, and a distinct perception of world order preserved through traditional oral narratives passed down to the generations, spoken across a multitude of fires. The Chumash lived as a people possessed of aesthetic opinion, culture, government, and the intricacies of personal and civil politics. Malibu was also bustling Humaliwu, the largest Chumash village along California's coast, and the birthplace of Glowing Hands. Robert trudged beside the water feeling his ancestors' presence.

He sensed their dissatisfaction at the Adamson House and Museum, and he felt their pull upon his spirit, because during these past months the doctor scratched the surface of existence beyond time and space. He searched their faces, listened to their drums and rattles. I'm so close, he thought, to touching you. But I can't, and I'm wondering if you can see me. During meditation he contacted spirit guides, some Chumash, others not; guides who helped him in his healing work, yet, on this site he hoped for a summit with guides thus far beyond his reach. Today he arrived at his promised vision quest holding silently the knowledge that no heaven exists above, and no earth below, but all thrives in a single dynamic grain of sand, and that we are, everyone, universal sojourners; some aware of this fact, others not. He felt set apart, dropped upon the earth
even within his own nation, the Chumash nation who believed in three worlds, one stacked above the other:

   The First World, below—Coyinasup—the home of dangerous creatures, also home to Sun, Giant Eagle, Slow, Snilemun, and Coyote of the sky. Spirits inhabited The First World, nunasis, Chumash for devils or demons; Hap Hap, a sucking monster who swallowed trees, rocks, and people; Lewelew, who tossed children into a carrying sack dragging them home to eat; and Alueleqec, the traveler, an old woman bent under the weight of a hot tar basket on her back.

   Two colossal serpents whose movements caused earthquakes supported The Middle World, a cosmology of mundane human events in the vast abyss. The Middle World laid flat and circular, mainly ocean sprouting a number of islands. The Chumash and their neighbors occupied the largest island located at the center of The Middle World. Spirit people of The Middle World were elyewun, dreadful swordfish leaping from the sea, powerful old men with long beards and white eyebrows, and plumes on sword bones projecting from their heads. Eight of them lived in a crystal house underwater where they hunted whales, tearing them apart and eating them raw. Seeming malevolent, actually they benefited the Chumash by driving whales ashore for The People to eat.

   Slow Eagle bore The Upper World upon his great wings. Contact between middle and upper worlds occurred rarely, but was possible if one searched for the sky trail north of Santa Monica at Huasna.

   Far to the west rested The Land of the Dead, where souls awaited rebirth. The Land of the Dead was composed of three different spheres: Wit, being Chumash purgatory; Ayaya, being Chumash hell; and Chumash heaven, Similaqsa. The path to Similaqsa shown itself long and arduous, and Frank White Bird hoped his son would lead him through this ordeal.

   No longer the strict empirical scientist his peers once respected, and holding a dissimilar worldview than the Chumash nation offered, Robert Johnson stood enigmatically sniffing salt air awaiting his vision.
In the distance a small male figure beckoned, hiking towards him. The windy space between them closed itself, and the figure wore a grass skirt decorated with eagle feathers blowing in the breeze. White ring markings flexed painted on his arms and legs, and he adorned himself by hanging beads of clam shells, olivella, and steatite around his neck, both wrists, and ankles. His hair, cropped short, grew hidden beneath a bear's head. Robert spied a carrying net tied to the figure's waist. Two bear paws hung loosely across his shoulders. Short and stocky, he measured his calm even stride.

The doctor calculated the time and distance between their meeting, figuring ample opportunity to stop here and there, picking up rocks and shells, examining them and throwing them back to the sea. The sun slowly traveled west, lessening in severity, melting into the distance. Robert stooped beside the rushing tide, allowing salt water to run over his hands. This water he splashed onto his face and neck repeatedly. Salt air filled his lungs, freshened his blood, purifying his brain, clarifying his mind. Experiencing thoughts like a reflecting mirror, he gained perspective on his life, and consciously, surprisingly, discovered an image of himself; I am Chumash. Glancing above and over his shoulder, the Adamson House and Museum no longer occupied their space. He turned, and out of a late morning fog behind him sprang the low rounded forms of a group of thatched huts. Women clambered down the side of a cliff holding long strands of wild grasses harvested from the canyon above, tied in bundles for basket weaving. Men dragged plank canoes pitched with asphaltum from the ocean, and they carried glistening fish. Remembering the small figure in the distance, Robert performed an about-face. He stood toe to toe with Glowing Hands.

"You must come to know the land and the sea in the way of The People. Feel the sand with your feet." Glowing Hands paused every two or three sentences, this habit forcing Robert's extended consideration of any remark. He took in each simple syllable, allowing it to become part of him, aware that only now was he being trained by Glowing Hands to listen in this fashion. "Allow the ocean to wash over your flesh. Never pick up a stone and give it back to the sea before you know its name."

A strong breeze enveloped them.
"What does that mean, to know a stone's name?"

Glowing Hands shook his head lifting a finger in the air. "You can not ask questions and learn. This is not our way. Pick up a stone in silence. Hold it until it reveals itself to you, until it speaks its name. Be of quiet mind." The old spirit paused and a lone gull flew overhead. Glowing Hands squinted into the sky watching the bird. He looked back at Robert then lowered his chin. Glowing Hands returned his attention to Robert, desiring to commune with his grandson eye to eye. "I once sat on this spot, looking across at the canyon, at those mountains." He strained his vision, seeing into his own past. Again, the old spirit lapsed into silence.

This pausing between comments, between the two of them, became unbearable over the past months, like counting grains of salt. How often Robert felt himself losing his mind waiting for the next word to drop.

"And?" Robert tried speeding the process. Glowing Hands, knowing full well he held all the salt, stood his ground for another extended minute.

"One night I heard it revealed to me."

"Heard what?" Robert asked.

"Heard what?" Robert asked.

Glowing Hands stepped closer bringing his face up to Robert's, craning his neck, staring into Robert's eyes. "I heard the sound of stone growing in a mountain. I heard the sound of the ocean in the stone. I met the creator through the sound of the ocean. In the creator I came to know myself. Then, I could say, 'Glowing Hands, you know this stone. It has revealed its name.'"

"The sand's full of tar," Robert shouted over crashing waves, the tide rolling in, threatening them. "I suppose there's revelation in beach tar?"

"Do I look like Mister Clean? You ask too many questions." Bending down, running his fingers through the sand, the old spirit picked up a small piece of soft tar. He motioned the doctor to join him and they both sat cross-legged on the damp sand. The tidewater crept between them, underneath them. Glowing Hands played with the tar between his fingers. "To The Brotherhood of The Tomol, this was gold or diamonds. The tomol, the canoe, sustained our way of life, and this tar they used to make the tomol rise and carry itself over the sea. I was not of The Brotherhood. They had their work, I had mine. They were the best at their work."
Glowing Hands paused again while the tide crawled back out. Robert examined the shoreline and the horizon; the sun shifted further on its westward course. "And," the old spirit finally picked up the thread, "I was the best at my work! Ha!"

Glowing hands rose to his feet while holding Robert down by his shoulders, and leaving him sitting in the sand, he moved behind his grandson.

Glowing Hands removed his carrying net from the sash cord around his waist. He carefully extracted a measured pinch of dried herb, handing this to the doctor. "Did you bring the white sage?"

Salt wind whipped into Robert's eyes, drying them out. "Yes," he said, knowing the vision quest had begun.
"Light it, as you have practiced."

Robert lit the smudge stick evenly, blowing gently on it until smoking tips glowed red and ashen. He jammed it into the sand where it continued burning, cleansing the air of negative energy.

Glowing Hands stood behind Robert drawing a symbol into his crown and blowing on it. "Repeat after me," the old spirit said, "I, Ahkimay Khus, know the time is now to meet my true spirit guide." So saying, he handed another pinch of herb to Robert and scattered a third pinch to the wind.

Robert repeated, "I, Ahkimay Khus, know that the time is now to meet my true spirit guides."

Still standing behind Robert, Glowing Hands leaned down hanging his face next to his grandson's ear. "More than one guide? Chew the herb."

Robert chewed the bitter herb. "I've been researching. Isn't it true that the more guides a medicine doctor has, the more power he possesses?"

Glowing Hands performed a little dance from side to side, laughing, smacking his hands together. "Huh, power? Bah!"

Ocean swells grew and bursting waves rolling out thick white heads drowned all sound. Glowing Hands placed spread fingers on Robert's shoulders and continued standing behind him.
He shouted into the wind, "I, Ahkimay Khus of Humaliwu, understand the time is now to accept
the gifts of the medicine wheel. May the spirit guides of The Four Directions of The Great
Mystery help me to accept these gifts with grace and courage."

Robert repeated the incantation word for word.

The old spirit continued, "I invite all positive teaching and healing entities to accept me
as a student and a teacher, as one on The Path, and to keep The Way open between us, that I may
learn to heal the universe, others, and myself. I am Ahkimay Khus. Make of me a light for the
true healing, for inner-peace and glowing health."

Robert finished the incantation and brushed herb residue off his palms. He stood facing
Glowing Hands, who, reaching up, drew a symbol onto his grandson's forehead and then into
each of his own palms, and he spoke gazing into Robert's eyes. "You, Old Woman Datura, guide
my grandson, Ahkimay Khus, Black Bear, along his journey."

Glowing Hands touched Robert's shoulder using one hand and placed his other hand over
his grandson's heart, and both men sat back down on the wet sand. "You didn't tell me that was
Datura."

"You didn't ask. You have met your first spirit guide. Old Woman is powerful. I've seen
her pour a cup of tea and kill bigger men than you. Old Woman likes to kill men in their sleep.
Do not fall asleep, Ahkimay Khus."

A long silence ensued. Waves crashed and salt water sprayed both man and spirit, each
with eyes for the other. The sun floated red and yellow at the far end of a wide scooping
shoreline where it met the horizon. A bird squawked, and only a bird, and the primordial ocean
tossed and turned its visions, smoothing them, throwing them as wet stones on the sand in the
wake of its return.

Glowing Hands lifted sandy arms. "Arms forward. Palms down on mine. The Chumash
way is a good way, but not the only way. There is more than one path to the healing power.
Learn all you can. Call the best your own."

Robert felt the old spirit's heat, the universal energy he directed. It warmed his palms
while the ocean air turned cool.
"To be a shaman is not the Indian way, not the way of any one people. You are for now, for this time, for all time."

"I am Chumash," Robert said.

"You have the Chumash way, the way of Buddha, the way of Christ, the way of science, the way of faith. I walked the earth, a man of my time; the best I could hope for was to become a bear doctor. But you are a man of your time. You must become the bear shaman. It is for you, and you must take it."

Robert became aware of energy traveling up his arms and spreading like a comforting wool blanket over his body. "What gives here?"

"I do not give my energy. That is poor healing. I only use my energy to light your energy on fire. I use my energy to talk to the spirit guides. I tell them about our work today. They help. They share their energy, lighting your energy."

"Glowing Hands, Grandfather, I've studied the ways of The People as well as those ways of science. It always comes down to the bottom line, there's only one energy."

"True! The Great Mystery is one energy, one light. But The Great Mother is many mountains, rivers, and seas. Before my journey to Similaqsa, I thought this village, Humaliwu, was the center of The Great Mother. But now I see that The Great Mother, while one, is also many villages, and The Great Mystery is like a river passing everywhere. It nourishes The Great Mother, flows inside of her, inside of you, inside of the Chumash. I say I have this energy, the spirit guides say they have this energy, and all of us have our work to do, and a way to use the energy. But, still, it is one."

Glowing Hands passed his right palm over Robert's face examining his glassy stare. "Soon, Slow Eagle will come for you."
"What is this? Who are you? Whoa!" Robert struggled keeping his balance on the back of Slow Eagle, a bird so all encompassing that his eyes, one of which might have mistaken Robert for a gnat, rested in his skull like two planets.

"Do not fall asleep," Robert heard the familiar voice of the old spirit, but Glowing Hands remained invisible to him.

The universe turned dark save a sheet of stars like spilled milk, an infinite mobius strip of sparkling lights along which path Slow Eagle gracefully flew. "We've been expecting you, Ahkimay Khus. I am called Slow. On your journey in The Upper World, I will fly you around the moon," and around the moon they flew, Robert clutching Slow's feathers, his flesh icy and feet numb, their journey continuing, "past the morning star. Can you see it?"

"Yes, my friend!"

"And to the crystal palace…"

***

The doctor stood once again on solid ground in the middle of a path. Peering into the sky, he caught a glimpse of Slow Eagle circling. He appeared to be standing on a narrow land bridge reaching across water to an island in the distance. He felt overheated, sweating profusely. Robert burned with a fever, and he clearly heard Glowing Hands, "Follow your true voice, Ahkimay Khus. It speaks to you. It leads you; a voice from on high. You must walk The Path as you have chosen it."

Robert hiked on bare feet laden with beach tar along the land bridge of rich red soil towards the island. Drawing closer he made out the form of a rock crystal palace. The crystal grew cloudy with mica and flaws, and Robert couldn't see into the strange architectural structure protruding at odd angles. Studying the palace, he felt like Alice on the other side of the looking glass. Slow Eagle completed another pass overhead, his white-orange beak and dark eye covering the sky as he swooped in for a closer look at his charge and then flew away.
Robert looked down again in front of him, and stumbled back in surprise. "I didn't see you before. Were you hiding?"

A young girl silently circled Robert.

"I won't hurt you, you know. I'm on a vision quest. I, well, that is, I hope to become a bear shaman."

The girl possessed soft, long, ebony hair. *Your hair is not dried by the ocean air*, Robert thought. "I'm Ahkimay Khus, Black Bear."

"You do not look like any bear I have ever seen." The girl stopped moving and chuckled, covering her small mouth with a soft, genteel hand. "I am She Who Spreads Light, daughter of the sun. I show the Chumash where to fish at dawn, where to camp at dusk. I am the light in a newborn's eyes. You will call upon me for warmth, Ahkimay Khus. It is I who light your path; The Path. We know each other well. You may have forgotten me, but I have never forgotten you."

Robert found himself charmed by her immediate innocence and lingering wisdom. He reached for her hand, testing the waters, wondering if she would be real or the figment of his fever.

"Not one finger closer to my daughter, you puss spot!" Robert faced the broiling heat of a disembodied scowling head. Its nostrils flared and its mouth opened against a blood red face like a black cavern leading into the jaws of hell. The head blocked his view of all creation.

"Father! No! He is our friend, Ahkimay Khus of Humaliwu."

"I know who he is. You are the useless one! Why have you deserted The People? Did you think you could carry our light, puss spot? Hmm? Do I frighten you? You frighten me! Look at her." Sun's voice grew low and heavy with sadness. "It is up to you, Black Bear. Does she live or die?"

Robert felt faint, his eyes dropping their lids, and fever worsening in the sun's oven. When he opened his eyes, an ancient Chumash Indian, Father Sun, sat inside his palace at a glass table. Sitting across from him, Robert gazed weakly into a strange myriad of lines deeply etched in his brown face. His hands, old with blue veins, shook, pressing themselves against the glass.
Silently, an old woman crossed the room taking short steps and balancing two cups of tea. She set them on the table and disappeared.


For the first time since their meeting, Father Sun exercised his cheeks choosing a wistful smile. "Light is an odd quality. It must move to live." Trembling, he picked up the cup of tea in both hands and blew on it. He sipped the steaming liquid. "If it stops moving along, it dies. My daughter and I, we reside with The People, and there are not many left. Will we live, Ahkimay Khus? How beautiful She Who Spreads Light is. Will you kill her?"

"I took a physician's oath to save lives not take them."

"Allow me, Black Bear, to shed light on the subject. To stand in defense of one path is to stand in denial of another. To save one, is to leave one expendable. Is this where you stand? I'm not asking you to swear an oath," Father Sun said. "I'm asking you to come to know us in the way of The People, the Chumash. To know our names. The bear's path is wide. To stand firm, yet bend like tall grass in the wind, this is bear path standing." Father Sun slowly, and with pain, extended his arms palms up on the table. "Your palms to my palms," he said.

Robert rested his palms over Father Sun's and felt the life force. A vision of gold and violet lines filled the crystal room. Each crystal acted as a prism bending the colored rays.

"Can you see it?" Father Sun asked. "It is the helix of light that bonds the universe."

"Yes, my friend, but how have you guided me?"

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"Stand firm, yet bend..." Robert remembered while clutching at Slow Eagle's feathers, flying in a downward spiral back around the moon, below the morning star, leaving the carpet of light rolling through dark space behind them. "Ah!" Robert panicked. Earth appeared and Slow Eagle made no turn to avoid the inevitable collision. Rapidly, land melted into water, the ocean, and Slow Eagle took them under. Robert squeezed his eyes shut gripping at Slow Eagle's feathers, but the feathers disappeared from his fists and he felt no water.
As they sat before, palms extended, Robert opened his eyes finding himself searching his grandfather's face.

"When The Great Mother was created, it was the time of The First People," Glowing Hands said.

Robert witnessed the tide. He sat like a sea lion on the beach; both man and spirit presented themselves to the universe as rocks along the shoreline. Robert envisioned himself as solid and heavy, at peace and unwilling to move.

"Now," Glowing Hands continued, "a great flood washed over The First People," and ocean swells covered Robert. Under water, his arms and legs developed into thick sea vines with curling leaves. He sat planted in the sand. Human forms swimming desperately crossed his vision until they transformed into a host of plants and fish. Those who struggled and screamed slowly formed coral, shells, and rocks.

When the sea washed away and the tide receded, Robert struggled to his feet once again on dry land in the mountains of Topanga overlooking the ocean and Humaliwu. He wandered a short distance under a dark, thundering sky. Within that flash of light seconds before thunder strikes appeared the spirit guide he sought, his birthright, Black Bear. It reared upon dense hind legs, shook its massive head, growled through yellowed teeth, and then lowering itself down on all fours, Black Bear paced several slow methodical circles in front of Robert. Overhead, the sky opened, God washing the earth, and rain fell. Man and beast stood their ground, neither one moving until the storm passed and the sun shone above the mountains.

Robert Johnson froze. The bear swung around showing its back, shaking off water and peering over its wooly shoulder at the man, it growled again, softer this time, and swaying this way and that it meandered behind a boulder. Robert felt his entire existence must culminate in this meeting. I have my fears, Black Bear, but I've come too far for them to have me.

He cautiously felt his way around the giant boulder. On the other side of the rock he stood in the open, vulnerable and waiting.

"Ahkimay Khus, why do you follow the great bear? Are you ready to make him your own? No. No!" Robert spun around in time to view a hungry coyote. The coyote howled, its
nose to the wind, and dropping its head it kept a steady eye peeled on the man. Man and coyote danced dangerously with one another.

"I know you. You're Coyote the Trickster. If I weren't so close, so ready, you wouldn't be here. I won't listen to you! Black Bear is my guide."

"You people of the Middle World, you have my sympathy," Coyote growled under his breath.

"We don't need your dammed sympathy, you mangy mutt!"

"Oh? Am I the one who tries to rule a dynamic universe through fixed moral and ethical principles? You have more than my sympathy; you have my pity."

The coyote leapt onto a high rock, his pulpit. "You may call me The Trickster. You may call me when black and white turns to gray, and this and that become one, and they will! You may call me when you are lost in the maze of your uncertain, miserable journey. Many become lost along The Path. Some lose faith, lack courage. Helping one of your kind find those qualities, now that's healing. The doctor may require a placebo, a lie for a life. Not a bad trade, eh?"

"Tsk, tsk. Remember the day Moms taught you it isn't moral to lie?" Coyote the Trickster squinted his eyes and softly howled."I am Snilemun, your guide, at your service, as I have always been at the service of The People. I will be here for you, but saving the sick and infirm, that's your work, not mine."

"You must decide, Ahkimay Khus, if one finds the courage to go on with the journey, who are we to stand in their way? You believe the journey is false? Do you think Old Woman gives you what you don't already have? All fixed morality is false in the ever-changing face of the Middle World. And false morality is tricky. If you haven't the wherewithal to call upon me when I'm needed, you'll never call the bear your own."

Robert sat with his back against a large boulder, flat against one side and throwing his upper torso into cool shade. He became nauseous vomiting between his legs. Everything grew bright. Wherever he looked, he was staring into the sun. He passed out.
The sun dropped below Robert's left shoulder while man and spirit sat upon the wet sand. Glowing Hands faced Topanga. "When I was young and asked too many questions, I said to my father, 'The ways of The People, these things we believe, our stories and legends that the elders tell us, I do not believe them for myself. I do not think they are good to know, to hear.' "

Glowing Hands studied Robert's face, the line of his nose leading to his straight upper lip. "My father," Glowing Hands said, "remained quiet for a long time, until the sun set and our sacred mountain was only a shadow," he said pointing high to Topanga, "and then he smiled at me. 'You who ask too many questions, who think too much, let me ask you, do you think our stories elevate the soul? Do they ground the body? Do our beliefs and legends show The Great Mystery and The Four Winds as the body and breath of our creator?' "

"My father was a wise one. I knew this and gave weight to his words. After a time I answered, 'Yes. All of that is true. The souls of our people are elevated. Our bodies are grounded to the Earth Mother. And, we know The Great Mystery and The Four Winds as our creator.' " Glowing Hands sighed with his memory, respectful.

"My father looked at me. 'Then The People's beliefs are honest and good,' he said. 'Truth is found in purpose and result. You seek truth in stone. I know truth as water. We put our hands around a stone. We touch it and know it is real. We know that something other made that stone, brought it to us. We know other is as real as the stone. But like water, we cannot grab this other with our fists. So, like weaving a carrying basket, we weave a story. Now, like touching the stone, we can touch the other. The story does not make the other less real. These stories, oh!, so many of them, complete the big story of The People, and we know we are stone and water. Enough said!' "

"After that, we smoked and I did not ask anymore questions, that night."

"I know Slow Eagle," Robert said. "I know Father Sun and She Who Spreads Light. I know Coyote the Trickster, and I may finally understand him. But the bear eludes me."

"Where did you find the others? How did you come to know them? Ahkimay Khus, how did they speak their names to you?"
"Datura, The Old Woman, said she couldn't give me what I didn't already possess. Or was that Coyote the Trickster? This fever has me confused. The images… I can't remember."

Doctor Robert Johnson, eyes glazed, with the sun sinking into the sea behind him, barely traced the features of Glowing Hands sitting three feet away. Suddenly awe-struck, Robert's eyes opened wide. "They've always been with me. They're my shadows. They're water. They're how I arrived here." The doctor perspired with chills. His fever broke.

Under a rising moon, Glowing Hands stood and grasped the bear paws hanging around his neck. He lowered his head and the bear's head he wore now glared down upon his grandson.

Glowing Hands no longer stood in the spot where a giant black bear swayed on its hind legs, growling, swatting at the air with its razor sharp claws. Calm overtook the animal's countenance, it settled down on all fours, stalked a circle around the doctor and came to rest, docile, by his side. The bear yawned, nestled a heavy head between its two front paws, and dozed beside its master who slept like welcoming sweet death.
CHAPTER NINE--WHITE BIRD'S JOURNEY

The doctor's long body stretched out sandy and burned in the morning sun, and he awoke with the ocean thundering in his ears. Lifting himself, first onto his elbows, he twisted his stiff neck right and left, searching, but the beach lay deserted. He stood, shaking off the grit, running fingers through thick dirty hair. Above the shore, high in the east sat Adamson House and the museum.

Had he achieved enlightenment? What is a vision quest worth? He didn't know, however, he understood these answers secreted themselves in the telling details of how he chose to live his life from this moment forward.

Robert yelled, "Good morning!" to a flock of gray pelicans flying like old wise men over the water. He stared into the distance where the village of Humaliwu once thrived. The doctor heard no drums, saw no huts. *I'm a man of my time. Don't worry; we'll stand the bear path together.* Robert estimated the quest at approximately twenty-four hours. Life appeared as he'd left it, though for the first time he grasped the fleeting miracle of The Great Mystery. Robert Black Bear Johnson took in the sand, water, sky, rocks, and the traffic on the highway above. He included himself in the elements along with the known and the possible, and with a sense of perfect peace he arrived at a single element. All that he understood and all that he had yet to discover became aspects of a single dynamic creative force; the space and time to become. *So, you're what's been missing from my starry nights,* he thought. *The allowance to become, this is the quality Einstein called God's footprint!* *Life doesn't happen to us. We create it. Shit happens,*
but that doesn't make me a victim, does it? Not when I am an aspect of God, a telling piece of The Great Mystery.

"Sometimes a man sees the connection within The Great Mystery of his life, sometimes not. Always, he is accountable." Glowing Hand's voice exhibited itself out of nowhere and everywhere. "You have made the bear your own. Along with this knowledge comes responsibility. This thing, life, it grows. You and I grow. You call it a universe; I call it 'we grow'. We who know, we do not search for enlightenment. No such thing exists. It is only that we grow, the universe grows; it is The Great Mystery."

Robert hiked towards a strip of rocks lining Pacific Coast Highway.

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The Johnson's home rested empty and silent, and the doctor impatiently ransacked his cupboards and refrigerator. He systematically opened plastic containers, sniffing at leftovers, scrunching his nose at the stench. He tossed rotten food into one side of the sink. The other side sat piled high with dishes; a precariously talented balancing act. Robert added one more bowl, slowly, without breathing, like building a house of cards. He backed away five feet before allowing his oxygen to escape, and then smiled.

Photographs of Maddie and the children, the maid's schedule, and scattered recipes covered the refrigerator door. Robert took a moment. He reached out touching one of the photographs. Being a man of his time meant being a man in love, and he entered the large main room settling into an overstuffed chair, a hungry man profoundly pained; an argument I have no answer for, he thought, drifting into sleep. That evening Robert steamed in a hot shower and passed out on the bed he once shared with Maddie.

***
Exiting a stainless steel elevator, Doctor Robert Johnson's hair, streaked with silver and black, flowed long over his shoulders. No sound escaped his moccasin's soles padding peacefully down the hallway past the nurse's station. Several nurses gasped at the visible weight of Native American jewelry hanging around the doctor's neck and wrists.

Focused, he passed them continuing down the long hall and making a right turn into Frank White Bird's room. Frank trembled in his bed and his flesh ran cold. His lips quivered. Blind, his head remained still.

"Pops?" Robert spoke in low tones. "Hello, Pops. Can you hear me?"

"Bobby, is it time?"

"Yes. Your father, you know, he feels your pain. He has always felt your pain. I was angry with you, Pops. But, your father defended you." Robert leaned over Frank. He cranked up the bed knowing Frank couldn't see. "What you saw in your father's eyes was never disappointment, only your own pain. He loves his son," Robert said, squeezing his father's shoulder. "He told me so."

Frank's voice sounded like broken glass, his lungs whistling between words. "Glowing Hands, he's no fool. No fool. Ahkimay Khus, thank you."

"White Bird, close your eyes. A surprise awaits you at your journey's end."

Frank White Bird managed a weak smile. Robert felt a presence and looked up to see Glowing Hands at the foot of the bed. Robert reached into his pocket withdrawing a white sage smudge stick, which he lit and set by his father's bedside.

He cranked the bed back down and stood over Frank White Bird placing one hand over Frank's feet. He allowed his hand to rest there while slowly passing his other hand from foot to head several times and eventually coming to lightly rest that hand on his father's brow. The doctor closed his eyes and through an act of will enveloped Frank in a cloud of white, blue, and finally violet light with a touch of gold.

Robert lifted his hands slowly above the body, encouraging release. "Spirit guides from The Four Directions of The Great Mystery; Father Sun, She Who Spreads Light, Slow Eagle,
Coyote the Trickster, Bear, please guide my father, Frank White Bird, along his journey to Similaqsa."

Robert sat on the bed beside his father, holding fast his trembling hand, and Frank's eyelids jumped in short, swift movements.

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Frank White Bird rode the back of Slow Eagle over the San Fernando Valley, high above Topanga Canyon with the wind in his face, eyes open, his vision clear and unafraid. "Stay with me White Bird while we fly north of the Santa Monica mountains searching for—"

"The sky trail to Huasna?"

"Yes, brave one. Huasna."

"Then it's true? Dammit all, I knew it was true! I must go to Humqaq, Point Conception across the sea, to make my sacrifice."

"I know, White Bird. Many years ago I flew Glowing Hands, your father, on this journey. Look below."

"I don't see anything. I must go to Point Conception. I must…"

"Soon, brave one."

***

On a wild, stormy piece of land, White Bird looked upon himself. He appeared whole, tanned, and glowing. He opened and closed his fists repeatedly feeling the stretch of his flesh. Raindrops the size of creation's tears pelted him and his hair stuck to the sides of his face, and water ran rivers down his body. Quickly searching, spinning around in circles, he found a cliff with Chumash spirals and stars, and symbols, and a shrine carved out of stone below the cliff.

White Bird discovered rocks and branches and grass, which he piled at the foot of the shrine. Hopping like a wild man, uncertain, confused, he picked up a sharp rock and cut his wrist allowing blood to flow over the objects piled at the shrine. He waited, breathless with
anticipation, but nothing happened. The sky didn't open. The spirit guides did not appear. Even Slow Eagle had flown away and White Bird found himself alone.

Time passed and the moon rose. White Bird cried in his despair; cold, wet, and afraid. *There is no Similaqsa*, he thought. *This is the reward I've earned. What a fucking ass I've been!* He crawled under a tree, and shivering he tried to sleep.

"White Bird," he heard his son's voice, "this is your journey. Your path. Your choosing. Be still. Listen to your voice within. Know your path in the way of The People."

"My voice?" White Bird spoke to the trees, the rocks, and the sky. "My voice is bitter and undeserving. The Great Mystery, the spirit guides can never forgive me." Frank White Bird pounded the earth with his fist. "I am filled with rage! Your brother was my son, Bobby. I loved you but I also loved Carl and he deserted me, deserted us, to fight in the White man's army, a White man's war! He died, Bobby, in a land that was never ours. And here, in this place, where do I go? Where do I go, Ahkimay Khus? How do I forget? I loved you both, but Carl I never forgave. I guess I was too scared. Time passed. We didn't write, didn't speak. I guess I was scared. And then I was ashamed."

"Remember," White Bird heard his own voice quiver, "the time I was on a six-month bender and I said to you, 'I don't give a fuck if I die!' Remember? I remember, we were both talking about Carl and we couldn't say his name, and you said, 'Death is an argument I have no answer for.' I have an answer! I know! The answer, Bobby, is forgiveness, but time runs out."

White Bird buried his head in his hands, sobbing. Much later, when he felt dry, he lifted his eyes and beheld a golden light shining from the west. In his journey, Frank moved towards the light, but stopped at the edge of a high cliff with a long drop. He stood against the wind certain to look up, never looking down. "Ahkimay Khus, I don't know if I can do this."

"It's your journey, White Bird. Pops, take it."

***
Inside Frank White Bird's hospital room, his son sat holding his father's trembling hand. Robert read Frank's energy signature outside of time and space, speaking to him, witnessing White Bird's journey; both men feeling the other.

***

In Humqaq, Frank shook, plastered against a cliff's side, hanging above a steep drop below he fought to locate finger and toe holds. Slowly, hour after hour the wind whipped Frank's face and hands raw as he descended. Terrified to glance down he strained his eyes searching upwards, too far to return, and he yelled into the wind, "My eyes are old. I can't see. It's no use. I can't."

Like an angel, She Who Spreads Light appeared at the top of the cliff, dancing along its edge, and she glowed, casting her light upon Frank White Bird's path. He tried extending his arm and one foot. Frank slipped falling away from the cliff’s side, flying through space.

***

In his hospital room, Frank’s trembling increased. Robert grasped his father's hand tightly and steadied him placing a firm palm on Frank's shoulder. Streams of perspiration rolled down Frank's cheeks and neck, over his chest, soaking his shirt.

***

A placid lake of clear water rested at the base of Humqaq's cliffs, and amid the slippery wet stone played footprints of children leading into the lake. Frank White Bird's head broke the surface of the water where he splashed and washed himself with excitement. "Bobby! Bobby,
look at me! Can you see me? I feel twenty years old again! Can you see?" He waited expectantly and glanced around, though no answer was forthcoming.

Frank, naked, jumped out of the water, sure-footed on the wet stones, born to the task, and quickly he scrambled into a cave. Once inside he wasted no time crushing stones and weeds, mixing the powder with water into a paint. He stood on his bare haunches dipping his fingers into the paint, applying the black and brown Chumash colors to his face and arms.

Without warning, Slow Eagle's giant eye covered the cave's opening, throwing it into darkness. "White Bird," Slow said, "we must go."

"Wait, Slow. Look at me! I'm young again. If I could see my Bobby one more time, just to say good-bye."

A young boy licking his ice cream cone ran through the cave. He looked at Frank and hid. Frank ran after the boy, trailing his laughter, sharing a game of Hide and Go Seek. Just as they discovered one another in the rocky shadows the boy waved good-bye and turned.

"Wait! Where are you going? Bobby, my son, please. Stay."

"I have to go, Pops. It's getting late. It's almost time for Ed Sullivan, Pops!"

Frank White Bird's heart exploded with love lost long ago. "From New York City. Right, Bobby?" He barely spoke, his eyes watering.

"It was different this time, Pops." Bobby appeared as a faint after-glow against the stone walls.

"Yes, my son, Ahkimay Khus. It was different." Frank's brow furrowed. His lips moved, at first no words escaping and then, "I wish Carl could have been here."

***

Slow peered down and ahead, deeply into the universe, searching for The Land of Widows. Frank rode on Slow's neck, hanging onto his feathers, feeling his flesh warm and dry when they passed around the sun. He thought about Carl. "Slow, will I see Carl again?"

"Below lies The Land of Widows, White Bird."
Frank lounged in the cool grass by a lake, being fed and fawned over by young Indian maidens. In their bare feet, they brought him baskets of berries and nuts. After three days Frank stood, nourished, refreshed, and he hiked west again across the meadow to a far ravine.

"You can not return from the ravine," one of the maidens called after him, "but you can stay here with us forever."

"My journey lies there."
A deeper voice called Frank. "Are you as brave as you are wise, White Bird?"
White Bird turned to see the skulking form of Coyote the Trickster. "Coyote, Snilemun, you'll do my bidding, if I need you."

Turning back, Frank White Bird found himself confronting the ravine, a road steep and dangerous. Two large boulders repeatedly opened and closed, threatening to crush anybody who dared cross between them. Beyond the rocks, two black ravens further guarded the sacred way.

Frank stood still, focusing his mind on the task. He saw only the stones and passed between them. In an immediate flash of pain, the ravens swooped down pecking out Frank White Bird's eyes. Frank stumbled in agony, unable to breathe. He fell into the ravine head over heels dropping through the air, screaming out, "Help me, Bobby! Please! Help me!"

White Bird fell a great distance through the deep chasm. He flew through a storm of poppies. Feeling them in his hands, knowing the legend, he placed a poppy over each eye, and regaining his sight he landed.

"You're almost there, White Bird." In the hospital room, Frank's trembling ceased, though he still tightly held Robert's hand. Robert felt as though grasping a palmful of bones; almost dust, soon to be nothing.
Three nurses silently watched at the room entrance. One quickly turned, stomping away, throwing her stiff chin in the air. The other two whispered while an orderly passed behind them whistling, pushing the lunch cart.

"I think he's amazing. I heard his wife left him."

"I heard they're out to get him."

Robert heard nothing. He watched a row of fat sparrows landing, twittering, attacking, and alighting off the windowsill. He remembered the beatings and verbal abuse, yet attaching anger to those episodes felt trite. Not certain how he'd arrived at this emotional point, but positive about feeling a spiritual satisfaction, he returned his gaze to White Bird's gray face. You are my father, not a perfect man, scared and finding your way. "I didn't expect it to be this way, Pops. I never thought I would miss you. I accept you, Pops. I love you." Robert Johnson leaned over kissing his father on the cheek. At that moment, he recalled a time when he was small, and Frank and he sat together on a sagging sofa in their stocking feet, their boots beside them. They were watching The Ed Sullivan Show on an old black and white Zenith television. Another time they rode down the lonely highway in Frank's pickup and Frank grabbed Robert's small hand, his skinny ten-year-old arm, and placing his son's fingers around the steering wheel he spoke to the boy in a low, patient voice, "You got it, Bobby. Just like that. Hold 'err straight now. That's my boy. Hey, don't run over that buffalo!"

"Aw, that ain't no buffalo, Pops. It's just a leaf on the windshield."

"That so? Well, I'll be a sonuvabitch!"

They looked at each other smiling and then back at the highway, and in a way only fathers and sons can know, they shouted in unison, "Better let go of our cocks and start paying attention!"

Robert felt Frank's pulse growing weaker. He didn't need to look up at the monitor, to take his eyes away from his father, and he didn't dwell on past moments. He thought about them, allowing them to fly away like fat sparrows on a sunny afternoon.

***
Walking the mythic path led Frank White Bird to a bridge extending over a body of water. In the distance he saw Similaqsa, Chumash heaven. It appeared to be a strip of green land with a beige sand shoreline beyond and another ocean. "Can you see it, Bobby? There, on the other side. Similaqsa."

Suddenly, Frank leapt wanting to leave his skin. He looked down and realized the stone ground he'd been standing on was alive, embedded with human eyes. They moved and rotated. They looked at him.

"Who are you?" Frank found his voice. "How did you get here? Don't speak! I don't want to know!"

"We are the evil ones, White Bird. We alone are not allowed to cross the bridge into Similaqsa. Go! Go! Go, White Bird, or rest here forever."

Frank sucked wind running until he hit the middle of the bridge. There, two giant hydra monsters broke water and played with Frank, rocking the bridge, threatening to knock him off with their tails. Here he trembled, weak kneed, holding onto the bridge's sides and shouting, "No! I will not falter! I will not lose my balance! I am White Bird, son of Glowing Hands of Humaliwu. I am the father of Ahkimay Khus, Black Bear… and I am Chumash. I am not afraid. Snilemun!"

Coyote the Trickster appeared sitting on his haunches.

"Slow Eagle!" Frank shouted.

Slow Eagle, now the size of a wild eagle, landed on Frank's shoulder.

"Glowing Hands!" Frank White Bird called to his father, the great medicine doctor. No one appeared.

"Glowing Hands!" Still no one.

"You old fool! Are you going to hang my ass out here to dry?"

Glowing Hands stood his ground on the bridge without faltering. "It would serve you well, you sniveling coward!"

White Bird grinned from ear to ear. "Fool!"
Glowing Hands played his game close to the ground without giving it away too soon. "Bah!" After another moment, he smiled upon his beloved son, and Glowing Hands raised his arms in the air. The hydra monsters obeying their true master submerged into the deep. The water lay below the bridge like a sheet of glass while Frank White Bird, Coyote the Trickster, Slow Eagle, and Glowing Hands crossed into Similaqsa.

***

Frank White Bird's body lies motionless, bloated, as white as his sheets. His hands drag along the floor as his arms dangle over the sides of the bed. Robert listened for a heartbeat, wrapped up his stethoscope, and picking up his father's arms, he laid them on the bed along side the body. The nurses no longer lingered at the doorway and Robert crossed to the hall sticking one white sleeve out into space. Crooked at the elbow, he beckoned his team.
CHAPTER TEN--BLACK BEAR RETURNS HOME

"I cured with the power that came through me. Of course, it was not I who cured, it was the power from the Outer World, the visions and the ceremonies had only made me like a hole through which the power could come to the two-leggeds."

~Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

***

"Hello, Johnson residence." Robert chewed an egg roll mumbling into the telephone and he slipped a soft drink straw over his teeth through the side of his mouth. "The ethics committee!" He shot forward in his chair turning down the television and sprang back pasting himself into the seat bolt upright. "Well, no one told me. Why? Don't I have the right to defend myself?"

He dropped the egg roll into its plate and jamming the phone between his chin and shoulder swiftly wiped the grease off his fingers twisting and wadding a paper towel. Again, he clutched the phone in hand. "I understand that they can conduct closed sessions. I just feel…

Then I do get the chance to defend myself. A hearing. Okay. When? Tomorrow morning doesn't give me a chance to prepare any kind of defense. I'm going to walk in there with my balls hanging out. But then that's academic because you don't really want me to put on a defense, do you?"
Robert licked the last bit of sauce off his fingertip and picked up the old phone rising from his chair. He paced the room lashing the electric cord around like a whip. "Let me ask you this, will the members of the ethics committee be present at the hearing, or am I just facing corporate?"

"Well, they should be. They're my accusers. Fine. Goodnight." He slammed the mouthpiece into its receiver and slammed the entire unit down on a side table. Approaching what was left of his egg roll he took aim with one eye, raised his right leg, and showing a bare foot he kicked the plate from the bottom hoping to make the ceiling.

He had plans of staying with the death of White Bird through the night and into the next day. He wished his time to grieve, but time just dropped off the map of his life, that space for the spirit to breathe shut down. And why do I care that I've lost you? Can there really be something that is just present in the blood? I've examined thousands of hemoglobin slides and never seen it. I have never seen love. God, why can't they give me a week to cry?

***

Doctor Robert Johnson smelled the wet mortar and concrete of the hospital complex while evening dew dried on its gray exterior walls, and the morning sun burned away the last cloud cover. He passed along a line of young sapling oaks freshly planted next to the building. For a moment, the only one to spare, Robert stood over the narrow dark soil line, staring at the dirt, attempting to feel reality. He snapped out of it, swung a large tan leather briefcase and stepped long and quickly sporting his loose fitting, earth colored Hugo Boss suit and size twelve oxblood loafers. This morning he allowed his thick mane of hair full freedom. The hair, hanging down to his waist and not quite as black as it once was, blew in the breeze between tall buildings, jingling enough Native American jewelry to qualify as a sunken treasure ship. The good doctor ushered in the wind alongside his stride when entering Corporate 'C' Building's lobby. Thick glass doors and marble floors and walls sealed out the traffic. Robert grew warm under his collar.
He waited in front of an elevator, sleepy eyed; a late night of last minute campaign phone calls shown on his face. His crow's feet deepened over the years, burned forever into the flesh around his upper cheeks and temples. Robert shared a ride up to corporate with a young secretary trying unsuccessfully not to notice him. He smiled firmly, always with the idea of putting those around him at ease.

"Young lady," he admired her green eyes and noticed the fine bird-like bones of her nose and shoulders and further down, her wrists, "would you say," bowing slightly from the waist, "my tie is on straight?"

"Why, yes I would …doctor?"

"Yes. Thank You. Robert Johnson. You must be in accounting?"

"My, you're good."

"Talent. Actually, your nails are trimmed down low. That's a dead giveaway for data entry and pencil pushing." The lift halted abruptly. The doors slid smoothly open. "Have a good day, accounting!" and he stretched one long leg out of the elevator as though he owned the landing, the building, the entire complex and the city. Not all of this confidence grew from Robert's high self-esteem. Anger, like an electric current, ran through his veins. They never intended to allow him his privacy; he would have to work out the personal loss of his father in front of strangers. Silently, he swallowed a lump in his throat; hurt and insult traveled the path slowly to his stomach.

***

"I'd just like to say to our esteemed board members, and to you folks on the ethics committee, that like it or not, we are a publicly held corporation, and the business of creating an image is a large part of what we do."

Mr. Evan Drake, Vice President of appropriations, spoke from one of many seats lined up along one wall and placed high behind a mass podium. He tapped at his microphone testing it.
Above the corporate board seating area, along the far wall, ran an open row of narrow transom windows casting sunlight across a crowded room. The ethics committee sat below corporate at floor level along the opposite wall around a table. Mr. Drake played for a moment with his American flag lapel pin push up on the perfect windsor knot of his red silk tie. He smiled under a mop of white hair contrasting dramatically against his navy suit.

"We invest billions of dollars on the latest equipment, which we may rarely, if ever use, just so we can say, 'Yes! We have that machine. We can perform that procedure.' We're required to answer every question in the affirmative to a world community. We must inspire trust beyond doubt, beyond any public review or scrutiny." His white teeth beamed down at the ethics table. "Naturally, that's why we have an ethics committee!"

Two empty tables and four empty chairs sat square on the floor in a cold, impersonal squeeze between ethics and corporate.

At the ethics table a slight built man, obviously high-strung, pumped his knees and continually cracked his knuckles. His backside left its seat, but under the guiding hand on his shoulder of the priest seated next to him, he floated back down into his chair spitting out his comment. "Thank you Mr. Drake. Your humanitarianism is overwhelming." The stranger scratched his thinning scalp, then placed his hands in his lap, then cracked his knuckles once again.

Evan Drake grinned. He calmly entwined his fingers, looked thoughtfully over the room, and returned to his friend at the ethics table. "Now, listen, it's your committee that brought this foolishness to the board's attention. I'm just saying it doesn't cut ice for an institution, which operates on the public's trust, to have an Indian in war paint and jewelry running around our hallways whooping it up—"

A gavel cracked through the large room resounding off the walls. Madame Chair, sitting in the middle of the line shot a long angry stare at Evan Drake. She cracked her gavel again. "Uh, thank you."

"—sending other Indians—"

"Thank you very much!" Madame Chair's voice grew.
"—to the happy hunting grounds. Thank you, Madame Chair."

Madame Chair raised her gavel in the air and held it there staring incredulously at Evan Drake. Her eyes strained and lips thin as razor blades, she brought down the gavel loudly once more. "If you are finished, Mr. Drake, and believe me, you are finished, we can bring in Doctor Johnson, please."

***

In a tiny waiting room outside of corporate, Doctor Robert Johnson sat alone sipping a cup of coffee. He leaned forward into his Styrofoam cup, blowing on it, grasping it with both palms and rolling it between them for warmth. He sat in a black vinyl chair with a chrome frame that bounced a bit when he rocked it. Above his head hung a large poster flat against the ivory wall in a thin black steel frame. It was a motivational poster proclaiming in bold blue letters, "WE HEAL THE PATIENT, THE COMMUNITY, THE WORLD!"

The doctor crushed his cup and tossed it at a trashcan. The door to the meeting room opened and an innocuous appearing little man, struggling with a facial twitch, called out, "Doctor Johnson?"

Robert slapped his hands together and glanced up.

"Doctor Johnson, they're ready for you now."

Robert extracted a small healing gourd with a goatskin top from his pocket. It dangled on the end of a necklace laced with eagle feathers and he arranged it around his neck. He rose out of his seat standing at his full height. The smaller man's eyelevel brought him only as far as the doctor's feathered chest. He craned back his neck and managed to look into the doctors smiling face.

Robert laid one heavy hand on the other man's neck, obviously taken off-balance by Robert's gesture invading his space. After a moment, the doctor released his hand. "You know," Robert said, "in the broadest sense, what goes on in this room today is insignificant, yet, we consider what we do, you and me, to be important, and it is."
It was hot, like a warm iron… the small man thought, still feeling the aftereffects of Robert's hand. He realized suddenly that his face no longer twitched, and he stood very still as the doctor crossed in front of him through the doorway and into the large meeting room.

***

The small man ran excitedly back to his chair at the end of the corporate line, and turning to his right he jabbered in a whisper pointing to his face.

Doctor Robert Black Bear Johnson, Ahkimay Khus to The People, glanced at the empty table and chairs in the "squeeze area." Instead of being seated, he walked calmly to the center of the room, serene. He strode up and down the line of corporate board members and spun once, quickly taking in the ethics table. Turning back, he placed himself in front of Madame Chair and swung his arms behind himself. His shoulders shone themselves as brawny as a wild animal.

"Doctor," Madame Chair inquired, "would you care to have a seat?"

"I am Black Bear of Humaliwu, son of White Bird of Humaliwu, grandson of Glowing Hands of Humaliwu. I am a bear medicine doctor, and what you might call a shaman. Shaman is a Hungarian word, but in America we take things expecting that they will become American. I am a Native American. It is we Native American medicine doctors who are responsible for the discovery and use of two-hundred-twenty botanical drugs listed in the Pharmacopoeia of the United States, and the National Formulary, and prescribed daily by this hospital. It is by our knowledge and grace that the drug industry exists and that you profit from it, and that a hospital board exists for you to sit on. I do not require your permission to sit."

"Doctor," Madame Chair’s eyes dropped to half-mast and she exhaled harshly, "If I may interrupt—"

"You may not. You have no real charges against me or you'd be trying me in a court of law. With all due respect, you nice folks are about to railroad me out of this hospital, and most likely out of this community where I have spent the better part of twenty years building my
practice. It's only through the hospital's bylaws that I'm entitled to a hearing. You just referred to me as 'Doctor'. Correct?"

"I..." Madame Chair lightly, thoughtfully tapped her gavel in her palm.

Robert paced the length of the corporate board, pausing before one or the other of its members as he orated. "I know, we all know, that there is something different about me. And, you're correct. Being Native American, and working everyday of my life in an arena where The People have made great historical contributions, however, is not different. From my point of view, it's not worth looking twice at. But you called me 'Doctor'. True!"

"I'm a graduate with honors from our very own UCLA School of Medicine. I'm recognized and published by the New England Journal of Medicine, and the Journal of the American Medical Association. I'm a cardiovascular specialist. I'm a doctor. That's different."

Robert turned facing the ethics table, making eye contact with every member, except the nervous knuckle cracker who only stared into his lap listening. "I didn't look askance at your culture and its value system. I didn't steal from your people, enslave them in the name of your popular religious myth, Christianity, and then attempt genocide on your civilization because I wasn't acculturated to understand it when it challenged me."

Slowly, Doctor Robert Johnson lifted his eyes to the sky beyond the open transoms. He brought his arms out from behind his back and lifted them as if delivering a gift. "Instead, I expanded my Native American horizon, and broadened my own humanity by inviting your culture into my life!" He pointed a finger at the board, withdrew it and pounded his chest with a fist. "I pursued my studies with excitement and added your medicine to mine. In addition to becoming a bear doctor and a shaman in my nation, I became a degreed, board certified surgeon; a doctor in your nation. I adopted the mythic religion of Western science. Why? Because I know that in order to touch life fully, to engage the universe in the discovery of what we do not yet understand, but hope to reveal, one must use many tools."

"You who call yourselves scientists, and I am certainly one, cannot deny the value of those Native American myths, which you are not acculturated to comprehend. Those very mythic methods The People used of knowing about the universe brought you your medicines and your
positions, our positions, Madame Chair." The Doctor paused to smile, and Madame Chair politely smiled in return.

"Today's science is composed of yesterday's myth. Always has been! Always will be. Science is vision! I am as much a realist as any of you. But we cannot always touch what is real with what we already know, with our science. To be the best scientist, the most complete healer I know how to be, requires that I be a man of vision."

"I stand before you today as a member of one of the most powerful professions on earth, with one foot in the Chumash nation and one foot in America."

"Now that I've established who you will be speaking to, you may speak."

The room roared with an ocean of deafening silence. Doctor Johnson walked effortlessly over to the table in the squeeze area, and crossing his legs he leaned casually against it. He patted it's top with one hand. "Nice table."

The pregnant pause extended for a long time, creeping to the edges of eternity when Madame Chair finally spoke. "Doctor, we can't argue your accomplishments. Nor will this board invalidate the sincerity and seriousness with which you approach your profession. Further, I personally agree with much of what you've just said, and we are not here to railroad you, as you put it, because of your ethnic background. We are here today because this hospital doesn't practice Native American healing methods other than those adopted over time by science, such as the dispensation of certain drugs."

Evan Drake broke in abruptly and loud, "Uh, we're here because you sat idly by watching, perhaps even assisting a patient to die!"

***

An expensive bronze sedan crept through the parking lot. It turned into a space cutting its engine. Maddie, baby Magnolia, now a toddler, and Kyle Johnson emerged from the vehicle.

Maddie moved tensely, straightening everyone's clothing, spitting on loose hairs to flatten them down. "Kyle, I want you to hold your sister's hand. You're—"
"I know, I know, responsible."

"On second thought," she walked to the trunk end of the vehicle and popped it open. Maddie wrestled with a baby carriage, set it up and strapped in Magnolia, who appeared perfectly pleased nestled in her yellow dress and small white shoes. Instinctively her fat little fingers clutched at the shiny chrome safety bar.

Kyle felt free of the weight and brushed his long, recently darkening bangs out of his eyes.

Maddie gave her troops one final inspection and led the parade with Kyle pushing the carriage. She shouted to her son who kept falling to the rear, "Kyle, no matter what you hear in there, no matter what we hear in there, we will act with decorum and make your father proud of us."

"Decorum?"

"I mean we'll be quiet."

"Yes, Ma'am. Does Dad know that we know, that we're here?"

"At this point," Maddie spoke under her breath, "I'm not certain what he's capable of knowing or how."

They stood in the lobby in front of the elevator. "You see that directory box on the wall?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Go and read it. Look for 'Corporate Auditorium' and the room number and floor number. Then take us there."

"Okay!"

***

Robert froze every muscle leaning against the squeeze table. His eyes stared at Evan Drake without shifting a pupil or batting a lash. His lip remained firm, chiseled out of stone, his jaw immobile. Invisibly and in silence his mind raced down a long, wide path reaching back to The First People, She Who Spreads Light, The Crystal House, Slow Eagle, Coyote the Trickster,
his own birth, the reservation, Pops, Moms, Carl, his marriage, separation, and now, in this body, at this moment. He spoke finally, easy and with conviction.

"Those are serious charges. If I sat idly by while a patient died, that would constitute a breach of my oath. Of course, I deny that charge," he moved closing the distance between himself and Evan Drake in two steps, "because the second charge of assistance with death is true."

The corporate board buzzed from one member to another down the line, and the ethics table bickered in whispers. However, Madame Chair remained silent, and Robert realized studying her stoic presence that he had his audience. He spoke to her as if they were the only two in the room.

"I hope that the board in front of me, and the ethics committee, who I've turned my back on, will allow me latitude in my defense. I believe some brief patient history is germane and that it bears heavily on my actions."

Madame Chair leaned over, desiring whatever intimacy might be possible between two people under the circumstances. "Please, continue, Doctor."

"Frank White Bird's family lived on government aid, and at a young age he attended government school. One of the first things he learned was that he was an Indian, that his name was Indian, and," Robert turned facing the ethics table, "that it had to be changed because that name bore proof to the world that White Bird did not belong, that he wasn't a correct fit."

"He became Frank Johnson, a young man growing up in poverty on a reservation where he was kept because, well, he wasn't good enough. Now, we all know that there exists scads of socio-economic statistics and arguments for why any one particular race faces the challenges that they do."

Robert turned back to the corporate board and continued pacing the length of the room. "I'm going to take pity on all of us and simplify the matter; it takes courage and encouragement to get back up when you've been told repeatedly, in hundreds of subtle, and often not so subtle ways, that you're not expected to amount to much."
"Frank White Bird Johnson, son of medicine doctor, Glowing Hands, saw his father's medicine status reduced to that of common quackery. He learned in school that the unified, spiritual perception that Native Americans hold to be their cosmology was naïve and foolish, and he was made to feel that his people, the Chumash, were ignorant."

As he grew, he became disenfranchised, a lost soul. After all," Robert faced Madame Chair, "if he exhibited courage, if he took pride in being Chumash, was he not labeling himself a misfit and a naïve fool? But how could he consider himself an American in the same respects that White Europeans considered themselves Americans?"

"Frank White Bird was a Native American, and the White Europeans and South Americans had systematically destroyed the life of the tribe, enslaved them, abused them, inculcated their young against their elder's traditions. To live in this way, under this distress, to call one's self a man in any such nation takes courage."

Robert stopped in the middle of the room. He slipped his hands into his pockets and gazed up high at the transom windows. Here it is, Pops, he thought. I'm working it out the only way they've left open to me. "Frank White Bird Johnson might have found that courage, perhaps, but the process of self-discovery was stopped the day Frank took his first drink. Because when you're polluted, you don't have to ask those deep and important questions that lead one to self-discovery."

"The years that followed saw my father drink away his marriage to my mother, drink away my brother's death in Vietnam, and finally drink away my leaving him to fend for himself, because I felt I owed it to myself to make a life—a life as different from his as possible!"

Hearing the heavy meeting room door open, Robert turned to see his wife and two children standing, suddenly back in his life. They smiled at him, and Maddie softly cried. Cautiously she led her brood to the empty table in the middle of the room and they settled in. The doctor wanted to cry. He wanted to encircle the entire family in his long, strong arms. Yet, when he studied Maddie she made it clear in the way she looked back that she understood he was fighting for his life. He watched Magnolia for a moment, and signaled Kyle with a twitch of his
eye. He turned again towards the corporate board and strode around his family, feeling anchored by them, no longer adrift, and Robert continued.

"I would like to say that I'm courageous. That leaving the reservation and the guarantee of a government income to meld with what I considered to be a foreign culture was an act of bravery. It was not. I ran."

"I ran from my home, my family, my people, the very people that could have used my skills the most. The shadows of that guilt, and so many other shadows, the shadows of my true nation, my true culture, my true understanding of the world, all of those shadows chased me down. I grew from an angry youngster into a hunted man. I was not a humanitarian."

Robert spun quickly around facing the ethics table. "I won't pretend to be something I'm not. I'm just like them!" he shouted pointing a finger behind himself at the corporate board. "I present myself exactly as I am. I'm a wealthy Native American bear doctor, and a cardio-vascular surgeon. I'm a capitalist. I became a doctor to escape my economic class, and to hide."

The doctor crossed his arms behind his back and paced staring at the floor. He paused, struck by a thought, and turned directly towards Madame Chair. "A humanitarian? Now, yes, I most certainly am. But that's a later development. Compassion takes time, if it's to be worth anything. It comes from wrestling the bear, those deep questions my father never asked. After over thirty years of being hunted by my shadows, I discovered the other side of compassion; courage. The courage to be all of who I am, so that I could be the best of who I am, so that I could offer the best to the patient, the community, and the world… of which, Native Americans are a part."

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert caught Evan Drake's gastric expression.

"My father entered this hospital, Mr. Drake, because there were no bear doctors left, and he didn't understand or trust modern medicine. A lifetime of drinking had rotted his viscera. He couldn't walk due to his diabetes. He couldn't see. His kidneys were weeks away from failure. He had no teeth. He'd finally drunk so much that he couldn't drink any more. He could only lay and suffer. And during his days here, without alcohol, in between bouts of extreme pain from any
one of a half-dozen different organs, he began to consider his life, to ask questions. Wouldn't you know it, the son of a bitch found courage!"

Robert looked over at the table where his family sat. Maddie cried, and he walked over handing her his handkerchief. He leaned in low and whispered, "I love you."

Evan Drake spoke. "You had your back turned, Doctor. I had trouble hearing you."

"No," Robert said, "you have trouble listening. My father came to me and said, 'I've found the courage it takes to die as a Chumash, as what I am. It took me a lifetime to find it but I'm here.'"

"I was angry. I scolded him. I asked him why he bothered checking into a hospital if he didn't want our expensive machines. He told me he came here to find me. He asked me not just as a doctor, but as his son, and a Chumash bear doctor, to simply guide him along his journey to Chumash heaven."

"In our culture," Robert worked his way along the board pausing again in front of Madame Chair, "this is not death in the final sense. It is the next leg of a journey. I did not see myself assisting a man to die. The patient did not see himself being assisted to die. We viewed it as a journey, White Bird's journey, and my chance to stand my ground on the bear path of healing and compassion, and courage. As a father and son, and as a bear doctor and patient, we decided to share our discovery of courage and of our connection to our nation, the Chumash nation, and our connection to each other."

Robert turned to the ethics table. He walked around his family and stopped in front of the priest sitting on the ethics committee. "I pulled no plugs because the patient had refused them anyway. I stopped no medications. I sat by a man's bed as his requested guide." Robert focused on the priest. "I wished him a good journey, and as a member of the Native American church, I offered him the same last rites and sacrament of help on his final journey. As his guide, his son, and the man he chose to help him on his journey, I spoke to my guides and his, or his god, if you wish. I requested what priests and rabbis have been requesting for centuries, that this man be offered a place in heaven. The People call their heaven Similaqsa. I am on trial because after all efforts have been exhausted, there is no such thing as an anti-death drug, and if there were, it
would never come up in discussion or be offered to a homeless man without insurance; and because at the final moment when our mythic science and our mythic religion finally shakes hands, allowing a patient and family to practice their religious beliefs, Frank White Bird's religious and spiritual beliefs were not respected. I am here because in our land, our culture was outlawed long ago. Our soul was murdered."

Sitting at the ethics table was the same monitor nurse who witnessed Doctor Robert Johnson's first act of healing during an operation, and who had threatened to report him. Shaking and sheepish, she stood, and Robert knew she had lit the fuse. She cleared her throat and barely squeaked out, "Madame Chair, may I speak briefly?"

"Yes, briefly, you may."

"I can't claim to understand this doctor's methods. But I assisted on one of Doctor Johnson's teams last month. We had concluded what we thought was a successful surgery when suddenly the patient's vitals showed every sign of failure."

"I think I can speak for the team that day when I say I believe we witnessed what I can only call a miracle. As a scientist, of course, I believe there's an explanation for it we just haven't discovered yet."

"But the bottom line was that we were ready to call it, when Doctor Johnson did some kind of laying on of the hands. He refused to give in. Knowing that a room full of potential witnesses could play hell with his career, he put the patient first, period. Today, that man is alive."

Facing his accuser, their eyes met. "I guess that's all I have to say, except that I'd like to apologize for my attitude outside the operating room that day, and since. I don't think I understood what I was witnessing. I'm sorry, Doctor, I was simply unprepared."

Madame Chair acknowledged the nurse's speech with a wave of her gavel and looked at the empty chair. The nurse quickly sat down and Madame Chair returned to the doctor. "Doctor, would you care to introduce us to these people sitting at your table?"

Before the doctor could speak, Maddie stood in her place wiping the last tear away from her cheek. "If it pleases the court—"
"We're not a court," Madame chair said politely.

Robert took his place by his wife's side. "They're not a court, honey, no, no. Not a court. An informal tribunal."

Maddie spoke again. "I'd like to make some introductions." She turned to her children; Magnolia who hadn't a notion of what was going on around her, and Kyle who understood enough. "Children, Kyle, I'd like you to meet someone." Robert squeezed Maddie with one arm. Clearly, the couple were drained. "This is your father, Ahkimay Khus, Black Bear: the last, proud, full blooded, Chumash bear doctor." The group shared a hug, and Robert and Maddie kissed, sealing their commitment to one another, and showing the room that when they get close, the world disappears.

Madame Chair smacked her gavel twice. "The board will now retire to consider this case. The room may take five, but please, don't go far."
CHAPTER ELEVEN--JOURNEY'S END: COYOTE CONGRATULATES BEAR

"We as a people are still fighting. We're fighting for our heritage. We're fighting to keep ourselves strong and we have so many battles ahead of us. And our children need to be proud of who they are and what they stand for."

~Julia Davis, Nez Perce

***

The board, not yet risen when the meeting room door burst open, dropped their notes and papers. Two large men, one of them Jack Macy, shot through first. Following closely behind, an unassuming, light-haired young man wearing an economic gray suit, and a plain bespectacled woman, black and in her early forties wearing a two-piece business suit, completed the final wave. Robert coughed into his hand whispering to Maddie, "My loyal troops have landed."

Will it be okay?" Maddie asked. "I mean, you know Jack."

"Could it be any worse?"

"Who's the big one?"

"That's Chief Sam fucking Riverside. My wot, and my friend, but only for a price. While I've been studying the way of the bear, Riverside has mastered the way of the Coyote. Hell, that's why he's chief."
Jack Macy wasted no time approaching Madame Chair. "Just a minute! One moment of your valuable time, please. I'm an old friend of Doctor Johnson's, and I'm a city councilman from Malibu." Jack grinned as if he were God's gift.

Madame Chair's eyes dropped again and her lips went thin and cold. "You're out of your district."

Chief Riverside immediately picked up the war call. "I don't believe I am out of my district." The chief, wearing a turquoise bolo tie and a large silver belt buckle with silver tipped boots, leaned his loose jowls and double chin close into the doctor whispering, "Consider this the beginning of our contract negotiation. You might be a bear, but I am still your chief."

The chief stepped up another foot and addressed the board. "I'd like to introduce myself. I am Sam Riverside; Chief Sam Riverside. I'm called Wot by The People. The People I speak of are the Chumash nation. We're small. We number only five thousand at the last census. The majority of our people live here in California. Most of them live within two hours drive of your facility.

I've taken a special interest in Doctor Johnson's situation. The simple fact is, we feel more comfortable being treated by one of our own. Doctor Johnson is the only full-blooded Native American cardiac specialist in California, ...and you have him. Or, do you? Perhaps not."

The chief approached a position dead center and below the board podium. He looked up at Madame Chair as if he'd just knocked on her door about to sell her a hairbrush, a bottle of cheap perfume, and a miracle coat hanger. "Say, did you know that we have a Native American press? And, we also own a Native American radio station! Perhaps you've listened to us. Or not."

Chief Riverside stepped back a bit, clearing his throat and lowering his voice a notch. Flourishing a wide sweep of respect, he removed his Stetson hat. "I speak to The People through our news media, and they listen because I am their Wot. If I send them to your hospital for Doctor Johnson's services, they will come. On the other hand, if Doctor Johnson should decide to move his practice to another hospital, The People will follow him.

The health of the Chumash is failing. We have a few Native American clinics, but we are in desperate need of a fully equipped hospital here in Southern California. I came today to ask
for your consideration of our situation. I am asking the board, may I send my nation to your hospital?"

Jack Macy, still grinning, rabbit punched the chief in the arm. "Oh, I almost forgot," Chief Riverside quickly added, "These nice folks," motioning to his left and right, "Miss Shelly Robertson, and Mr. Daniel Forth are good friends of mine." The chief chuckled fingering his Stetson. "They represent the Anti-Defamation League, and the American Civil Liberties Union. I brought them along merely for moral support. I suppose that's acceptable?"

Miss Robertson and Mr. Forth stood by in silence. Their perfectly calm, hushed presence set Evan Drake's teeth grinding.

The chief moved backwards to Robert's table and whispered into his ear, "Understand? I don't sign contracts. I negotiate them." He returned his attention to the board, and with a slight bow of his head signaled that he was finished.

Madame Chair's eyes met Chief Riverside's. "I'm certain I speak for the board when I welcome you and say what a pleasure it is to have you visit our facility. We were about to consider our decision. If you'll pardon us now." The board filed out through a small white door into chambers.

***

Robert picked up Magnolia, and rocking her in his arms tears streamed down his cheeks. He kissed her cheek and forehead and carefully laid her back down in the stroller, releasing his grip as if she were made of glass.

He wiped the tears from his eyes and looked at Kyle. "And what about you? Too old to hug your old man?"

Kyle extended his hand for a shake.

"Oh," Robert accepted, and then like reeling in a fish he grabbed his son's arm and yanked him over only to give him a bear hug. "An old Indian trick!"

"Yeah, we're a tricky bunch. Will we be together now, Pop?"
"You bet!"

"You know," Kyle blew the hair out of his eyes, "Mom missed you, but she was angry."

"I know." Robert, releasing Kyle, turned his attention to his wife. He held up the back of one large hand and stroked her cheek.

"Bobby, I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's Okay."

"No. It's not. And I want the children to understand their heritage, all of it."

"There's time for that later. For now, we may have to move. I don't believe I impressed the board. They..."

The small white door opened and everyone found their way back to their seats, except for Jack Macy, Chief Riverside, and Robert. The three stood in front of the board as they filed in returning to their seats, a stern looking group. Evan Drake still ground his teeth, Madame Chair appeared untouched by the morning's events, and the man who was cured of his twitch only seemed bewildered.

A new hand placed itself reassuringly on Doctor Johnson's shoulder; it belonged to the priest from the ethics committee. "For the record, ladies and gentlemen of the board," the priest turned for a moment, "and the ethics committee which I proudly serve, I should mention that I too have administered last rites to patients and bid them well on their passing, and I have never had my standing as a professional questioned." The priest faced Doctor Robert Johnson and shook his hand. "I wish you well, Doctor, whatever the outcome, whatever your choices. I've heard enough here today to know you'll make wise ones."

"Thank you." Robert said.

Madame Chair shuffled her notes in silence and without any hint of expression. She read one page to herself and then closed her folder.

Robert, unknowingly to those watching, was saying good-bye to Frank White Bird. While standing in his spot, awaiting the board's decision, he felt the presence of Glowing Hands, but he didn't dare look around. He considered his vision quest and realized that this morning's
events were all a part of that quest. *There is no enlightenment, and no death, only the dynamic process of becoming. It never ends.*

"This board," Madame Chair's voice broke into Robert's thoughts, "finds no lack of responsible healthcare dispensed by Doctor Robert," her eyes opened wide and she looked directly at him, "'Black Bear' Johnson. Further, as it was pointed out to us earlier by one of our own, we are here under any and all scrutiny to provide care to a world community. There are times," she said looking at the ethics table, "when it's just good business to reach out culturally."

"May I mention," and Madame Chair's face lit up with a warm smile, "before adjournment, that it would perhaps serve the community if Doctor Johnson were included on the ethics committee. And who in the hell called the press?"

"I did," Evan Drake mumbled.

Madame Chair shook her head. "Why?"

"I, uh, wanted to show… I just did, that's all."

Madame Chair, exasperated, cracked her gavel. "Adjourned! Doctor, go meet your public, and make us look good."

***

The pressroom doors opened and the Johnsons entered, baby carriage and all, passing the state and city flags, and flinching in an attack of flashing lights and high-pitched squealing feedback from the microphone. Robert heard questions being shouted at him while he calmly loosened the ring around the mike stand raising it to his height. He stood upon the stage with the light blindly reflecting off of his chest jewelry and waited until the barrage of questions stopped coming, until the press realized he would make a statement.

"I am the Chumash son of White Bird of Humaliwu, grandson of Glowing Hands of Humaliwu. And, yes, I am a physician." Robert smiled, because standing at the rear of the room was a great man, short in physical stature, wide and unfathomable in spirit. He wore a grass skirt
of eagle feathers and was the greatest Chumash medicine doctor in The People's history. "My ancestors were Native Americans. I am Chumash Indian, and it is my people who are indigenous to this land. That is to say, the culture, the way of life here, the way of death here, belongs to us. You are not familiar with our measure. You have no wherewithal to judge anyone but yourselves. Yet, we welcome you, because, after all, what can one do when a heard of wild beasts decides to settle in your barn?"

The press lowered their cameras, others their microphones. Some laughed uncomfortably, feeling that they didn't quite fit. The man on the stage had only to look at them. They understood.

"Doctor? Jack Weddington, ABC."
"I'll take one question, Jack. Make it count."

"After having your unorthodox methods called into account, how do you feel about continuing to heal the White establishment?"

"Jack, the people in this city, in this building, from the twentieth floor down to the parking garage are Vietnamese, Korean, Russian, Mexican, Spanish, Philippine, Indonesian, Arabic, and every other race, and they are American Indian-Native Americans. It seems to me that the 'White establishment' is quickly becoming a myth. And my methods, from where I stand, are not at all unorthodox. You may call me Doctor Johnson. Or, you may call me by my true Native American name, Ahkimay Khus, Black Bear. My people have been here scattered between Malibu and Santa Barbara for a long time. I am Doctor Robert 'Black Bear' Johnson. That is what the sign will read on my office door. I'm not going anywhere."

***

In Similaqsa, a giant dancing celebration filled the space. Drums played on the wind and Frank White Bird turned to his father, Glowing Hands. "Glowing Hands, you old fool; so, this is Similaqsa! You know, Bobby and me, we played some Hide and Seek back there in the cave. Maybe you and I, we can make it right between us too?"

"Who do I look like, Mister Rodgers?"
One of the dancers covered in feathers from head to foot and heavily painted approached the two men. "You two look like you could use a workout. Who wants to learn to dance?"

"I'm a bear doctor," Glowing Hands said proudly. "He's a drunk," he pointed his thumb at Frank White Bird. "Take him."

Frank's face lost all of its color. "I'm sorry," he said gazing at the ground, "that you feel that way, Father."

"Stop feeling sorry and go become worth something."

"I can teach you to dance," the young dancer said.

"Glowing Hands is right. I'm just a drunk."

"What's your name?" the dancer asked. "Everyone has a name, and I know it isn't 'drunk.'"

"Frank. What's yours, kid?"

"Carl."

Frank stared into the young man's face, into his eyes, past the paint. He felt his knees buckle and thought he could no longer stand. The two stood for the longest time studying each other while the drumming continued.

"Getting here is a tough journey. It takes a man of courage. What do you say, we kick some ass, Pops?" Carl smiled.

Frank White Bird rested a hand on each of his son's, Carl's, broad shoulders. "Yes."
AFTERWARDS--BEAR’S LONG WINTER

"Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all, and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.

And I say the sacred hoop of my people was one of the many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy... But anywhere is the center of the world.

A long time ago my father told me what his father had told him, that there was once a Lakota holy man, called "Drinks Water", who dreamed what was to be... He dreamed that the four-leggeds were going back to the Earth, and that a strange race would weave a web all around the Lakota. He said, "You shall live in square gray houses, in a barren land..." Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking."

~Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

***

Before the Mission period, the bustling Chumash village of Humaliwu grew as the largest of many Chumash villages thriving along the California coast between Malibu and Santa Barbara.
The People developed a highly cultured civilization expressing itself through a religious and political structure, a legal code, and trade guilds and brotherhoods. The Chumash always enjoyed an egalitarian society with men and women in positions of power and influence. The People possessed sophisticated language, communication, and artistic skills, and held an evolved worldview of The Great Mystery as a cosmological whole.

The Chumash living in and around Santa Barbara have disappeared. Inside the Santa Barbara mission, for two centuries, a flickering candle burns before the altar where an expansive wrought-iron chandelier throws its shadows against a dark cavernous interior. Four-thousand graves surround the mission as a reminder of the great price paid for this place and its building by Native Americans who called this land home for thousands of years.

Friars and soldiers together captured coastal Chumash enslaving them into a life of mission servitude. The People were forced to consent to baptism, forced to clear and farm land, build the missions, wear clothes, and worship a Christian god.

Friars whipped the Chumash men, locking them in stocks, shackles, and chains. Unmarried women were imprisoned in large rooms and raped by Spanish soldiers. Prostitutes were paid with food. Venereal infection ran rampant. European diseases killed children and infants in the thousands.

The only escape meant a dangerous flight to California's interior, where many also died. Today's descendents are from interior escapees. All of those Chumash remaining at the mission perished. The Friars forced the Chumash to dig their own mass graves.

The Mission period began with seventy-thousand Chumash and ended with fifteen-thousand. Today, the Chumash are estimated at a mere five-thousand people.

***

I have visited Humaliwu, walked its grounds, listened to the surf, and felt the presence of gracious, beautiful spirits. I have toured the tourist house and museum on Pacific Coast Highway, and also felt the spirits' displeasure at the spoiling of their land.
When it was given that I should write Bear Path Standing, I had no previous interest in anything Native American and scant knowledge of their history. I did not understand why I, historically a Semitic Jew with contemporary Buddhist leanings, would be offered such an undertaking. I went into deep meditation feeling conflicted, searching for answers.

Several hours later, I found myself running my daily errands—this time food shopping. I parked my car in the market lot and left it for the twenty minutes that I shopped inside the building. When I arrived back at my car a curious item lay at the entrance to the driver's compartment; it was a Native American dream catcher.

Later that week, still with no particular knowledge or interest in things "Indian," I retired into my usual meditation and was contacted by my first Native American spirit guide, Bear Doctor. In following sessions I was honored to be befriended by spirit guides, Gray Cat Elder, Black Raven Dancer, and Chief Gray Fox. At the project's completion I was honored with the knowledge of my spiritual name, Youngbear, which brought my life's sojourn and the writing of this book into focus.

I have written Bear Path Standing to honor my spirit guides, many Native American, and also my spiritual mentor who has passed over, eden ahbez, and my teacher and wife, She Who Spreads Light, and Brahman, Ishvara, Wakan Tanka, Divine Mother, Jesus the Christ, Arleta Soares, and Gautama Buddha who is probably watching a ball game with my friend long passed, T.M. Roshi.

Dear reader, may you journey along The Path with grace and courage.

Youngbear Roth
Los Angeles, California, 2022

END
MERCY IN LOVE; VOLUME FOUR:

MESSIAH, MESSIAH: The River of All Time
EPIGRAPH

"…Humanity invented a new game, and that game is called culture. This is not the creations that hang on walls in art galleries or fill the pages of literary books. It is the stuff of human existence, the quality that allows us to impose our will on the world around us rather than having to respond to its every quirk and tremor."

~ People of the Lake by Richard E. Leakey & Roger Lewin
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Epilogue    THE NEUTRAL ZONE
Averting his gaze from an unshaven beef-fat mestizo pilot suffering bloodshot eyes, the two men fought holding down four corners of a map rustling in the wind on Sao Tiago Island at the sidewalk café. Abel straddled his worn bamboo chair across the table and the mestizo pilot drew his brown finger over the map poking at it, grumbling through his foggy throat. "This one, my friend. Right here. We fly south of the equator, west of Galapagos. No one knows about this island. I don't even know it. Well, I've never been, but I've heard about it."

"How?"

"My great-grandfather was an English missionary at the turn of the century. When he was old, he would tell us how he met my grandmother on Isla Del Santo." The mestizo pilot swallowed grogo wiping his chin along his arm. Abel watched the man's adam's apple travel up and down his thick shiny neck. "The fool died with mud in his pockets."

Abel turned his head away speculating on the distant island squalor, hypothecating an answer to Sao Tiago's poverty. His scientific nature assumed a fix-it frame of mind.

"What're you looking at?" the mestizo asked.

"Nothing." Abel didn't want to risk offending him. He needed this stranger to fly him where water flowed and the promise waited of uninhabited land.

"Say, that's a nice watch you have. Can I see it?"

"No." Abel trembled.
"I want to see your watch." Several badio men and women at the bar turned leering at Abel through blue-black flesh. They oozed alcohol leaking out of their pores, puddled around white eyes, fumes escaping open shirts and dresses clinging to dark thighs.

_I'm a moral man, Abel prayed. I know you're in this place, watching me. Damn you! Devil, leave me alone._

Abel's leg vibrated below the table, him growing conscious of a strained silence on the patio. The beef-fat mestizo pilot chuckled, gold spaces between his teeth shining. "You wouldn't treat me like a thief in front of my friends?"

"I wouldn't do that." Abel handed over his large gold chronometer watch and the pilot slipped it on.

He rolled and twisted it catching the light. "I have seen many watches, my friend, but this is a special one." The mestizo pilot thrust his victorious wrist in the air, the crowd mumbling and groaning their admiration. He grinned at Abel. "Well, my friend, I see by my watch it's getting late."

Abel squeezed back his tears during a far-reaching quiet moment.

Removing the watch from his wrist, the mestizo pilot contrived a grand gesture handing it back. He spoke loudly to the bar. "Did I say 'my' watch? What was I thinking, eh?" He spun around pealing laughter, the crowd laughing with him. Swiveling back, he grumbled in a whisper to Abel, "Remember our deal. And the plane is mine."

"I'll be there."

"I know." He tossed back a slug of grogo wiping dribble off his chin.

Three hundred miles west of Africa, on Sao Tiago Island in Cape Verde, winds gusted through queasy bars, cobblestone streets and loose verandahs hanging off weather beaten Portuguese hotels. The town stank of dry dusty chicken excrement and peeling paint. Abel, sticking to his rumpled clothes, unrecognizable under shaggy hair and an iron jaw, weaved through crowds of desperate mestizos and budios, the beggared brown and black citizens of a depressed voodoo island. In a blur he passed one bar after another licking the breezy taste of salt drunkenness off his lips.
He arrived at the shop he'd been searching for, a rodent infested crack between two crumbling buildings with a circle of young toughs wasting away on the stones, drinking grogo and waiting.

A Portuguese man paced, mumbling, behind the wooden counter. He appeared ancient, embalmed, his skin stretched tight over his bones. He smiled crazy and toothless incanting a spell. The man wobbled jabbing pins into a rag doll, glancing up at Abel who pointed behind him to a shelf. "A half dozen of those cigars, please."

The embalmed one displayed brown gums and shrugged.

"Six. Understand? Six cigars?" Just speaking, drawing attention to himself became a courageous act.

The old man laid six green cigars across the counter. Abel reached. Quick as a gnat the old man slapped his veined hand over them, hoarding them until Abel tossed down a fistful of coins. Abel turned to leave and the toughs kicked their worn shoes against the stones. One of them snickered at Abel. The old man, the embalmed one, shrugged and mumbled. Abel bit down on his cigar. Clutching himself, slipping by them and feeling their hot breath he picked up the pace looking straight ahead. He bit through his smoking cigar and disappeared down a dimly lit street.

In the dark hallway of his hotel Abel fumbled for a room key. The stench of mildew from blackened rugs, rotted floorboards and flaking white wash burned his sinuses. Three rooms away the door swung ajar as a couple argued, their coffee bean skin glistening inside yellowed underwear. The man snarled rising off the bed. She spit in his face and he smacked her. Abel turned back to his door and the business of his key. I don't care if he kills her, he thought.

Creeping into the room, Abel paused in a green beam of neon streetlight adjusting his vision, listening to the squeal of an overhead fan. He dropped his keys on the table next to a bottle of wine and without switching on a light sat on the edge of the bed removing his shoes. Slinging long praying mantas legs onto the mattress, he sighed. Extracting a cigar from his shirt pocket he let the plastic wrapper unfurl and fall. The clamor of playing children floated through the window. Sao Tiago struggled sinking under the weight of its pregnant women. Like a
drowning man Abel wrestled for a deep clear breath. He drew a wooden match across the wall…
two ugly faces appeared in the flickering shadows.

Bolting for the door, Abel fell short. One of the men seized him by the throat, another
hammering blows against his solar plexus. Sharp pains flashed between his shoulder blades and
then his groin, the darkness growing bright and nauseating and he couldn't breathe.

Two cackling *mestizos* ran down the hall and nobody cared. Abel lie crumpled, his life
force dripping slowly onto the floor like a bleeding beer can. This is how he survived since
escaping to the island of Sao Tiago.

***

Previously, in California Abel hunkered above a stack of blueprints in his cubicle. Three
thick sopping cigar butts keeled over a mountain of ash in a Denny's coffee mug, a final wisp of
smoke curling around his erudite forehead. Clean-cut in his pin stripe suit wearing stylish retro
forties suspenders, he vigorously punched figures into his calculator looking up through wire
framed Bolshevik spectacles when the elevator chimed. Patsy, stepping into the elevator holding
a pair of heels, waved good-bye to Abel, putting the lift on hold for Jack Murphy. Abel noticed
that she appeared distant. He buried himself in computations hoping Murphy would leave. Under
the drafting table one foot habitually vibrated.

"How late?" Murphy hung his head into Abel's cubicle like a man feeling his necktie
knotted around his balls. An eyebrow flinched and bobbed.

"Not long, really. Muriel's waiting supper. Say, Jack, did Bi-Medical Procedures get back
to us on that sensor thing I developed?"

"Naw. But they will, don't sweat it. Save lives, that's the name of the game." He slapped
his hands together. "I'll clear an hour with security. One hour, Abe." Jack crawled to the elevator.

Patsy, in deep consideration, worked out her plan. After all, such things were delicate.
And too, she knew Abel called it right, pegged it right all along. The corporation's position
soured. Jack's position soured. They'd joined the other side. Without warning she yelled directly
into Jack Murphy's encroaching face, "Mister Abel Stein, Misses Muriel Stein phoned. She said if you're not home by a quarter to six she'll—"

"Gotcha," Abel yelled. Muriel might show up with Chinese take-out, he thought, but she'd never phone ahead.

Patsy smiled at Murphy and the anvil of her blind complicity lifted. Staring at her incredulously he stuck a finger in his ringing ear. "My gawd, if you're not the strangest damned girl."

Abel watched the doors glide shut waiting for a series of floor lights to hit one. He walked calmly to the back wall. Passing his hand over a flat-lit dot, the drapes slid apart and Abel faced his own reflection in the night window on the tenth floor, the window lights of monolithic skyscrapers illuminating his skull. A tenuous suspension bridge with moving streams of yellow blips lay over a greasy river lapping at the rusty shores of a junkyard terminating in his colon. When he looked up, a heavy sky too filthy for stars filled the upper third of the window, and a plane flew low blinking blue and white flashers searching for a safe body part to land on.

He peered down at the street. A black limousine pulled easily out of the drive. It paused. The silver top of Jack Murphy's head popped out of the passenger's door. He smiled, tossing a wave to Patsy on the sidewalk, and the limo floated into the street. Abel stood still in the shadows ruminating over the day's events.

Earlier, he'd watched Murphy stretch his arthritic back, then casually drift to the file wall where he removed a folder labeled BAGHDAD. Just as casually he'd allowed the shredder to suck up its pages and spew out long white paper snakes unwinding like dead pasta from the machine into a wastebasket.

Now Patsy flagged a taxi. Before stepping in she glanced up with concern. Abel watched while the yellow cab inched its way into traffic.

Quickly he made for Patsy's cubicle. Spinning around once in her chair he checked the elevator floor lights, spun back, and anxiously booted the computer. Both feet vibrated below the desk. He punched in 5:45 on the monitor. It beeped NO ENTRY.

545 - Beep
Popping a knuckle, Abel thought about it. His stomach fluttered; so many years, his entire youth passed since the last fluttering. It reaffirmed his need to roam uncharted space. He considered his reflection in the monitor and typed ENTER over his left eye:

FILE?
REQUEST PATENTS, 2014, REVERSE SEQUENCE.
COLOR?
GREEN.
LOADING:
>->
>->
>->
>->
>->
>->
UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES CONTRACT #G22589-41-07624
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.

TO: U.S. CIRCUIT DYNAMICS CORPORATION
ORDINANCE SYSTEMS DIVISION
SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

PART: HEATER/TEMPERATURE SENSOR

GENERAL: THIS ITEM SHALL CONSIST OF AN INTEGRAL RESISTIVE TEMPERATURE SENSOR AND AN ELECTRICAL HEATER ELEMENT. THE ITEM SHALL BE CAPABLE OF MAINTAINING THE TEMPERATURE CONSTANT WITHIN 1ºF.
Abel scrolled through schematics representing two years of work. His mouth tasted dry. Stomach and spleen spasmed.

APPLICATION: S.A.M.

INSTRUCTIONS: TO BE PREPARED IN ACCORDANCE WITH MILITARY STANDARD 300A.

PURPOSE: TO FURTHER ENHANCE MOLECULAR SOLIDS SEEKING CAPABILITIES THROUGH ADVERSE ATMOSPHERIC CONDITIONS.

He stared at the words lighting up across his eyebrows.

CODE NAME: SAM - "SMART ASS MISSILE."

Sitting alone in the dark office Abel did not pop his knuckles. His feet remained still below the desk, amber words from the monitor filling his reflection's erudite forehead. Quietly he removed his wire-framed Bolshevik spectacles, switched off the tower and stared at his empty ghost.

***

Today Mallards swam, turning, dipping orange beaks, shaking green feathers, pecking at furry ducklings bringing up the rear. Resting, taking refuge on a bench beside her husband of twenty years, Muriel Stein listened.

They tossed splotches of bread in the water. Afternoon winds tickled tiny waves across the surface of Upper Franklin Canyon Lake. "It's this way," she said, allowing the current to
pacify her mind. "The older ones set the pattern. If they choose west, then the little guys follow. They need guidance. Besides, how can an adult desert its young? Look how cute they are, Abe."

The breeze murmured blowing Muriel's long auburn hair and she ran her fingers through thick strands. She picked a fine twist out of the way off her bedroom eyes, away from her Semitic nose and full lips. She let go, let the wind carry it back listening to Abel.

"Do you realize we're sitting here on a bench watching the water? …and it's exciting! I'm getting old, wife."

"No, you're not. You're digging nature. You've always enjoyed the outdoors."

He gaped apathetically at a flock of wild geese taking off from the far end of the lake. Abel still wondered at their precise organization, their cooperation in ascending the heavens and he pondered, as always and forever, how he might bring this cooperative quality to bear upon civilization, though his enthusiastic spark for the process waned as if vaguely remembering what he used to find fascinating. "I enjoyed being a vital part of my environment. Look what it's come down to. I've spent the best years of my youth training to analyze it. Dissect it. Murder it and then resurrect it. Think about that. It's my job to refine humankind's relationship with the universe. As if it needs my reparation!"

He leaned back adjusting his glasses and giving Muriel a perfunctory once-over. "Whose to say a scientific perception is the only valid one? I mean, if we can measure it," he looked into his palms, "it's valid. Well, we can't measure God, can we? Or is that just exactly what we are doing? Because if that's what we're doing, then faith must be part of our perception. Hot shit! That's what Einstein meant. He said he had no need to resolve his religious views with science—that his science was to discover how God works—not if God works. Faith, a spiritual perception of the metaphysical, must be valid alongside our scientific perception of the phenomenal. We use science to prove that the phenomenal is the result and the how of God manifesting itself. It's one. Singular. The whole variably manifest. It's called balancing the books, Muriel. And, babe, we're way out of balance, and it's because of guys like me. Einstein saw it coming. He knew."

Abel threw a hand in the air, waving away the whole mess.
"No, don't think about it. How do you resurrect something murdered? It's no good. Next comes the duck. The duck comes and I feed it a piece of Wonder Bread, because that's what brilliant old criminals do." He nodded to his chest and thoughtlessly popped a knuckle. "I didn't want to grow old gazing at a piece of wilderness humanity has been kind enough not to destroy."

***

At home, Daniel sprawled on his bed balancing a drawing board across his crooked knees, sketching lazy curving strokes using a photograph as his model. He grew lanky and fair inheriting Abel's broken broomstick bones and Muriel's soft features. He'd avoided dinner because of Cain's visit. Being eighteen, he felt certain social decisions belonged to him.

He copied Miss February, attempting to maintain a relationship between breasts and buttocks, envisioning her as a Matisse showing a fat post impressionistic derriere and exaggerated knees. His arm swayed in huge sweeping strokes.

"What's wrong, Danny?" The deep voice caught him from just outside his doorway.

"Nothin'."

Abel, standing in the shadows, studied his son. The boy's face glowed transparent under the intense light of a throw lamp. Moving closer, Abel settled on the bed's edge under the light. His eyes traveled Daniel's walls: Democratic campaign posters, a giant photo of Pablo Picasso staring through droopy Spanish eyes, and an expensive surgically antiseptic Nikon digital camera; a serious piece of business. He picked names off bookshelves in the evening light: Victor Hugo, Philip Roth, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and a sense of urgency enveloped Abel's body. The passage of time unchecked. Days and nights at Sun King defining energy. Abel privately queried a desperate speculation reaching back through years to ascertain if he'd done everything a father should. For all they attempted together, lived together, episodes that make a man's life his own remained unspoken between father and son. "Then why aren't you downstairs?" he asked, uncomfortable that he could only ask. "Your uncle shows once a year. Don't you think you should be eating with us, with the family?"
They studied each other until Daniel spoke. "Always bragging about how many gooks he killed."

Abel sighed. "There's nothing I can do."

"Last year he talked about the good ol' days hanging ears on his belt to keep score. I can't handle his Nam crap. I mean, alright, he was there. I read about it. It was a tough war. We all know it was tough. But it's like six wars over, man—the six that we know about. It's been over, you know? And, what I'm living with now is proof that what you and Cain lived with didn't teach anyone anything."

"I don't much like it myself," Abel turned his head staring into space.

"Can't you talk to him, Dad?"

"And say what? I'm tired of fighting, Danny. There's a lot of mixed emotions between Cain and me, but he's my brother and I love him, and I'm so drained from fighting to save America from itself, drained from fighting the world, and drained from fighting those I love the most."

"But—" Daniel, shaking his head, set the drawing board aside.

"No. It reaches a point where you realize, certain people, they can't be changed. That's all. My brother's a military dinosaur. His past can't be altered. We can't raise the dead and the issue..."

"He's not dead, and the issue, it's not dead, not with him," Daniel said.

"True enough, son. Certain issues are better left deceased. I won't argue that."

Abel often thought about Cain who had no wife, no son, not a yardstick against which to measure the trespass of his time. Cain gripped tightly to over forty barren years of mourning her face. They were in their twenties when she died. An empty pain. Abel's attention drifted.

"Dad? Are you okay? Dad?"

"Huh?"

"You okay?"
"Dynamite! The Stones are coming to town. They're performing from wheelchairs. Keith will be laid out in a coffin holding his guitar in the air. Are we into it?" He snapped back trapped by Picasso's Spanish eyes and listening to Daniel.

"Zack Hoffmeyer is moving out. He says two can live cheaper than one and I was wondering…"

"You were wondering? I was wondering, how long are you going to leach off me and your mother?" Before leaving, Abel paused at the bedroom door. "I didn't catch your answer about the Stones. Do we still rock together or will they be a deceased issue by the time they get here?" He swallowed self-consciously. "I might be."

All was lost. He wanted to tell his son that he loved him, that he exuded vicarious pride over Daniel's academic and artistic accomplishments. Those words wouldn't come. He felt his throat bottle up and all of it remained undeclared. "Don't ever let them step on your convictions."

"Another of Dad's jazzy maxims?"

"No more maxims, Danny... Dan. Just file it away for later. That's all."

***

Cain, sporting short white hair, smirked wiping his mouth, soiling one of Muriel's best cloth napkins. His uniform jacket hung at attention behind his chair, his collar unbuttoned beneath the knot of his necktie. Pounding the table brusquely with a square clenched palm he continued, "Sure 'nuff! While we stand around jerking off into a sand dune the oil sheiks are building more luxury hotels. I say, off with their ears!" Dark eyes shined deep in his skull.

Muriel, reaching recklessly for greasy dishes quickly loaded both arms.

"Can I help?" Cain asked.

"No. Not at all." She paused for a tumultuous moment and smiled. "I'm fine, really. Thanks."

The two brothers sat by themselves. Abel's leg bounced up and down below the table. He wanted to move an arm, stop his knee, but his hands experienced temporary paralysis. The
evening newspaper lay in the center of the table though he couldn't reach for it. Bold headlines announced: U.S. DRAWS TIMELINE FOR WITHDRAWL—AGAIN! After an interminable silence Cain slapped his other square palm on the table laughing.

"Cain, you've got this way of alienating people." What's the point? I'm not going to get through to him.

"We gotta blow up their gas tanks, you know? Shoot their fuckin' camels out from underneath 'em." Cain cocked the hammer on his imaginary revolver and clicked his tongue. He eyed the headlines. "Withdraw from where? Where are we not fighting? Sorry, folks..." He stood taking command of the dining table, leaning over and spreading his arms, supporting himself on his knuckles and lowering his voice he grinned, "...well, now, that shit's classified. Where are we fighting next?" Cain stared at the ceiling, beyond the ceiling. "That shits classified too! Yuh gotta just love it. At least we know why the satellites are up there. So we can read our stinking maps and drive simultaneously. Right?"

The hairs behind Abel's ears tingled siphoning fresh blood from his brain.

Cain held his position staring at his brother. "Free country ain't it? I don't mind. Why don't yuh wave your goddamned banners? I don't give a shit. What's the matter? No grass roots initiatives to push on unsuspecting old buggers in parking lots?"

"I don't want to do this," Abel said, "and I resent being put in the position."

"What?" Cain's jaw hung open.

"Fighting," Abel answered.

Again Cain laughed, this time until he choked.

Abel burned. "You chased my wife out of the room and my son's barricaded upstairs. What's so god damned funny?"

"It's an irony, that's all. A big stinking irony. Yuh know why I risked the better part of my life?"

"I-Pods, smart phones, GPS, I don't know. You tell me. Chrysler? The growth of the American Empire?" Abel's body parts broke ground through thin skin. He stretched his arms and
shook his legs, furious. He knew his brother's manipulative mind. *Here comes the righteous martyr.* Abel braced himself.

"Tribal pride, Abe. That's the answer. So the natives have the right to disagree. Problem is it's turned us against each other. Pitted brother against brother. Torn us apart. Democracy; the great experiment backfired. Democracy; a divisive son of a bitch. It's not fair." Cain pouted pounding his fist on the table. "Our positions are not that far apart, Abe. I'm not stupid, just a violent motherfucker, and it's not fair to blame me!"

Muriel leaned sadly against the kitchen doorway drying her hands in a dishcloth.

Tilting back his chair, Abel tossed his arms behind his head. "Liberty doesn't insure justice," he said. "Besides, I'm not blaming you."

"You're not? I dunno. I don't just shoot people willy-nilly, well, not anymore. All that talk, yuh know, that's army bullshit, force of habit." Cain leaned in, drawing on the tablecloth with one finger. He sniffed and then took a deep breath. "But with all that we agree on, Abe, when I have to do it, kill someone, order it done, I think about my tribe, about defending my tribe. I feel sadly honored. I love you guys or I couldn't pull the trigger. Well, sign the papers. They haven't deployed me in a decade. I got no worries."

"Talk about your tough love..." It was Abel's turn to smirk.

Cain grabbed the evening paper indignantly beating it on the table, strangling it, shaking it under Abel's nose. "What if I sat here with a finger up my ass while the Arabs got all the oil? What's left for my people? The Japs have our industry without firing a shot. Now they're coming for the land. Don't yuh see? It's the law of the jungle and there's only so much jungle, and there ain't no more!"

"Hell, you and Muriel, and that dopey kid of yours, you're all I've got. I don't mean to alienate you. I guess what I'm saying is ...I'm sorry."

Muriel tiptoed behind Cain, her hands gently falling at rest on his broad shoulders secure in the knowledge that he wouldn't shoot anyone in the house. She kissed him on top of his aging head. "We love you too." She spoke softly like fog, at the same time glaring at Abel. Having his own wife turn against him, even for an instant, stoked the fire. He felt less than human.
Emasculated by his brother in front of his wife, and soon to be sonless, losing control over his life.

Swooping across the table, Abel snatched the paper from Cain's grip. "We're a sophisticated tribe. Don't you think it's time we put down our spears? The Japanese took our industry without a shot. We can take it back the same way. It's all one industry anyway. It's all America! We've sold spears to the entire world and then we're outraged when they toss them back at us?"

"Screw the Japs!" Cain's cheeks turned purple.

Abel tried keeping up, but it didn't make sense. Every time they broke bread Cain managed to turn everything they owned against 'the Japs': the food, the plates, the silverware, glasses, the table, the whole house. He'd upend whatever wasn't nailed down.

"Shit! This ashtray was made in fucking Yugoslavia! They made that car didn't they? That urinal on wheels. Thank God that failed! The Yugo. That's what it was; the god damned Yugo, a Hungarian shithouse with a spark plug. Fuck. What about our oil, Abe? What about—"

"What about Russia! China! Venezuela! Mexico! What about Alaska! For Christ's sake, Dakota is starving to drill and the rest of the country is just starving!" Abel stalked, tearing the floor apart. "We don't have the money to drill in our own back yards, but we've got billions to wage war!" He sent the paper whizzing. It collided with a scotch decanter.

Cain gasped at his brother. "Well, now, you better thank your stars and stripes we've got a defense budget."

Abel leapt three feet off the ground. "Of course we've got a defense budget, you jerk! We've sold out our pensions and our children to get it." Abel sat down and composed himself. "You know, Cain, I've got a dream, no, a nightmare." Abel spoke softly, afraid he might be overheard. "I'm laying in bed and I open my eyes and there's this bomb falling see, it's two miles high and falling; one mile; a quarter mile from my face and whistling the death whistle; closer; and then I see the god damned nose of the thing, clear as can be in glow-in-the-dark letters, 'General Electric',' and he added as an ironic afterthought, "brought to you by Iraq, Iran,
Afghanistan, Korea and China! And then everything goes black …and crisp. Yeah, and that's the short list."

Muriel melted into a chair wringing her dishcloth, watching her husband gyrate out of control. She lowered her head inhaling the syrupy stench of spilled Johnnie Walker. "This isn't about oil or the endless wars, is it Abe?" She fired on him, "Another year! Another dinner destroyed!"

Abel, looking at her desperately, rattled off the oil states. "Louisiana! Oklahoma! Wyoming!" he shouted.

Rising, trembling, fists clenched, fighting off tears, Muriel stormed into the kitchen. The room held its silence except for Abel's heels digging into the floor, chipping away at the wood. He stalked by the kitchen when a telephone directory flew past his head soaring straight at Cain who threw up his arms for cover. Tearful sobs exploded from the kitchen, "I can throw stuff too!"

"It's about instinct!" Cain shouted.

"Why the hell didn't I think of that?" Abel yelled into the kitchen, "Muriel, would you excuse me? I have the sudden urge to fuck my secretary!"

No one said anything after that. Exhausted silence smothered the room. Cain stood gawking. He looked past Abel to the kitchen doorway. Muriel leaned in the threshold, her eyes swollen, pale brown liner running down her cheeks in tiny rivulets. Cain hung his head shamefully and Abel turned away from them both. Spent, Abel dragged himself towards the den off the dining room pausing at the dark entrance. He wanted to turn but didn't and he heard her dry speech behind him, "You're a disgusting animal."
CHAPTER 2--JUICE AND COOKIES

Abel yearned for a vacuous womb where the disparate pieces of his addled brain might fall together. He prayed for a world free of people constantly disrupting his sense of well-ordered destiny.

Muriel and Cain commiserated in the dining area. The battle over, leaving the dinner table a wasteland, Abel disappeared into the family room.

"He's having a tough time. We're having a tough time," she said.

"He told me about it." Cain, composed and appealing to memory, furrowed his brow. "I guess the problem's that we're both arrogant bastards. Abe and me, we always believed we could make a difference."

"He used to believe it," she said.

Television noise trickled from the family room, and Muriel and Cain half listened. The president blandly spoke. "Just two hours ago, allied air forces began an attack on enemy strongholds. These attacks continue as I speak…"

Abel sunk into a dark leather easy chair and television light flickered off the walls. His arms collapsed on side-rests, a remote control dangling in his hand. He moaned at the screen. The president snarled mass media-speak, stale syllables rolling around like marbles pouring into one side of Abel's head and dripping out the other.

"…As I report to you, air attacks are under way against military targets. We are determined to knock out enemy nuclear bomb potential. We will search for and destroy chemical weapons facilities. Much of the enemy's striking ability will be destroyed…"
"…Prior to ordering our forces into battle, I instructed our military commanders to take every necessary step to prevail as quickly as possible, and with the greatest degree of protection possible for American and allied service men and women."

Murphy sold me down the fucking river, and nobody gives a damn. The CIA was warned months ago, and they didn't give a damn. Abel began drifting off with television in the background.

"I've told the American people before, and I would like to FURTHER ASSURE ABEL STEIN, that this will not be another Vietnam…"

Abel's heart pumped in his ears. He sat stone still. He didn't believe it.

***

In the wee hours, he awoke suffocating in cold sweat. Abel's arms slid with a film of perspiration against his sides and wet sheets wrapped themselves around him, trapping him. Checking his nightstand, the clock read 2:17 A.M. He looked at Muriel, wondering if she hurt while she slept. Guilt overwhelmed him, clogging his arteries, making it impossible to breathe lying down. He kissed her and gently stroked her hair. She smiled far away and angelic, but never awakened. He slipped out of bed pausing by the open window, watching suburbia slumber.

Pacing the landing, a ghost in his white terry-cloth robe, he found his son's throw lamp on. Daniel slept, his drawing board lying across his legs. Abel removed the board and a *Penthouse* magazine fell out. He wanted to kiss his son. Instead, he set Daniel's things aside turning out the light. Abel lingered in the dark. A lifetime passed between them.

There's an all encompassing, important truth I want to mention. At the moment, I can't think of what it is, but I wanted to be the one to tell you. I should've told you long before this, and now you're leaving. The thing is, I wanted you to know how I felt being your father. But now you're leaving—it's over—and all I can say is "Watch your back. Don't fall in love; build love. And, have a great life." It's not enough to say, I know. But at the moment, my mind is a crumbling wall, a dark well.
In the kitchen, he ransacked the refrigerator and cupboards, and standing over the sink scratching his dry scalp he guzzled carrot juice and chewed whole-wheat fig bars. He carefully arranged the bars on a plate, poured the juice into a glass, rearranged the bars into a circle, then a square. Thinking there might be enough bars to construct a triangle—he was short three, the ones he'd eaten—he shuffled with slumped shoulders to the cupboard scouting extras.

*These are the five minutes of peace and quiet.* Abel Stein revelled in the first seconds of serenity until naked fright mounted an attack from the rear riding in on red and white cells up the ganglia into the cerebral cortex. Fear gripped his optic nerves insinuating itself into his sinuses, a double dose of nausea.

I'm insane. I wonder if the rest of them can see it, that I'm afraid. I've always been scared, since the day I was born. Whatever normalcy I've achieved, I've fought for in spite of my fear. And I'm tired. I've lived this way for so many years.

In the study, he hit the light switch with an elbow while balancing his snack. An inkling of comfort traveled his body as he set the snack on his desk. Abel's library held massive oak bookcases, a studious warmth, lots of soft polished surfaces. Fifteen hundred bound volumes of history, philosophy, politics and classics reaffirmed an intelligence he feared might be deteriorating. Abel found himself requiring reassurance in ever-greater quantities from the environment. His collection of aviation memorabilia hung above the books: pictures of Muriel, baby Daniel and himself in front of their first private plane.

He ran a hand swiftly across one of the shelves feeling books bump beneath his fingers, and the next shelf and the next, landing on a wide heavy binding, an aviation atlas.

Gulping juice and eating fig bars at his desk, he walked long fingers cautiously through the atlas. When he finished snacking, Abel selected a cigar from his humidor. First chopping off the end in a miniature guillotine, then licking it, he gently rolled the thing back and forth in his mouth, tasting acrid tobacco on his tongue and soaking his cheeks with bitterness. He pulled a pad and pen from the drawer and skipped to the back of the atlas where he stored a series of planning charts. The cigar smoked in the cockpit of a steel World War II fighter ashtray while Abel wrote methodically down the left edge of the pad:
Dutch Indies
Japanese Islands
East Africa
South Seas

He felt a presence in the shadows and glanced up. Daniel lurked in the doorway. Abel popped the last fig bar in his mouth. "What are you doing?"

"Can't sleep," Daniel said.

"Provocative literature," he grinned, "will do that to a man."

Daniel skulked into his father's study. Abel closed the atlas and turned over the pad. Stepping casually to his shelves, he carefully selected three first editions: Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer, Delta of Venus* by Anais Nin and Lawrence Durrelle's *Justine*. Handing these to his son, he believed the books to be gold. "They're yours, if you want."

"Why?" Daniel examined them, turning each one over in his smooth young palms, uncertain.

"Why not?" He wanted to tell his son about the pleasures of sex, the pain of love, the transcendence of an erotic life. "I read those when I was your age, and they were pivotal to my understanding. *Damn it! That's not right.*" Abel's painful awareness cut a nerve, as if he'd stabbed himself. He looked at his son, waiting. No further words materialized.

"That's it?" Daniel asked.

"That's the best I have to leave; it's the best I can do for you."

"I saw the maps. Why, Dad?"

"It's been a long day. Why don't you go to sleep and let me finish here."

He stood watching his son reach the top stair. Daniel gazed down at his father, "You're not coming back, are you?" He disappeared into his bedroom.

Abel popped a knuckle and then another, flipped over the pad, reached down tightening the sash around his robe, and studied the list.

***
"Mister Abel Stein, sir, Mister Jack Murphy requests that you double check these specs before I disk them." She handed him a stack of pink spec sheets but Abel waved them away.
"No can do."
"Why ever not?"
"Because, we almost had an affair, and you're still calling me Mister Abel Stein. Why don't you ask me again? You can even call me Abe."

Patsy gingerly placed the sheets on the corner of his drawing table. "A girl has to have her own style, don'tcha think? Besides," she lowered her whiskey colored eyes and moistened her lips, "almost don't mean bo-diddley."

Abel placed the call that afternoon while Jack slaved at his desk across the aisle and Patsy typed at her keyboard. Taking a crumpled note from his vest pocket, he punched in the numbers and waited. Oh yeah, this is wrong. Definitely bad stuff. He held the disturbing notion of giving up too much, and an equally disturbing compulsion to press further. "Ordinance Systems, please. Purchasing division. Thanks, I'll wait. I'm a bastard. Muriel, the kid... Yes, no, not long at all. This is Abe Stein from Sun King Energy. I'm afraid there's a slight glitch with the work we sent regarding our advanced heat sensor. I'm embarrassed to say that I screwed up the specifications and—Oh, it hasn't? Great. Don't send it through yet. No. Why don't you shred your copy and I'll expedite a brand-new set of prints and paper for you. As, yes, as soon as you hang up, and I'll see to my end. Really, I'm sorry for the mix up. You too. Good-bye. Gotcha.

Later, he meandered to Murphy's cubicle and hung a smiling face inside the doorway.
"Abe!"
"Jack, how are you doing?"

Jack Murphy, bare fisted, County Kilblarney contender looked Abel straight in the eye.
"Everyone I can and the easy ones twice. What can I do you for?"

"I've just about got this project for the energy commission wrapped up. Can you clear an hour over for me?"
Murphy grabbed the phone. "Security? Jack Murphy," one eyebrow jerked and froze. "One of my best, Abe Stein, will be working over tonight. Right. Two hours. Fine."

"Thanks, Jack. Nice suit."

"Cost a penny." He hung up the phone never taking his eyes off Abel.

"You like running this show, don't you?"

"This is no show. No, sir. I'm damned serious about our work," Jack said.

"I mean that—"

"I can't conceive of a more decent honorable way to skin the pig." Jack leaned full back in his executive chair, clasping historically rugged hands behind his head, inhaling deep and expanding his chest. "Helping the environment, helping humanity. Yes, sir. I'm committed." The other eyebrow jerked and Murphy grinned. He considered things momentarily. Abel returned down the hall. Then Murphy bellowed, "And we're damn proud of you, Abe! Damn proud!"

Jack Murphy's grin melted. If nothing else, he'd been cautious. He smiled to himself; Abel Stein was expendable.

That night, Abel pressed his nose against the glass watching the street. Jack Murphy's limo pulled into a heavy line of traffic and Abel picked up the telephone. He turned from the window, switched on a small lamp directly over his Rolodex file and flipped through the cards.

"Rick? Abe. I wish there was time old man. …Not a big deal. No. When you go into the office tomorrow, I'd like you to lose the patent file on Sun King's heat sensor. Also, check to see if there's anything under the military. That's right. If there is, lose it. No! For Christ's sake, don't steal anything. Just misplace what's needed. Will you do that for me, please?"

Abel turned out the light moving quickly through darkness. He booted Patsy's computer furiously entering codes. His knees vibrated a lean body strained to the breaking point when BAGHDAD flashed on the screen. He tried calculating the repercussions, the logistics of his actions, but he lost rationality, not in the fix it frame of mind.

Until now, only buttons clicking and the soft whir of a disk drive punctuated the dark. Strange, the insignificant waste he thought about during the commission of his crime. He knew
this world would never mourn him, that only a fool overestimates the value of a single human being. He felt a presence, not his own, and steps close by.

"Murphy?" Abel's rhythmic breathing ceased.

His carotid artery burned, inflamed from the base of his neck to his ear. He swallowed, turned, and threw up his arms blinded by light. A security guard checked his clipboard. "Abe Stein?"

His body released its tension bone by bone. "I'm Abe Stein. Is anything wrong?"

"No, sir. You're cleared. Just making rounds. Sorry to disturb you."

"That's alright."

The guard, an older gentleman, gave the office suite a once over swinging his long handled flashlight, shining it in several nooks and crannies, demonstrating on the job proficiency, and then continued his rounds.

Abel maneuvered feverishly at the keyboard. Sliding a disk into the drive, he pushed more buttons until:

COPY SAVE TEXT. PLEASE WAIT.

He looked at the clock.—7:01 P.M. Able Stein sat calmly, a wanted man. He worked a cigar out of his vest pocket fidgeting with the wrapper.

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"One atrocity after another," Abel lie in bed perusing Durant's *Story of Civilization*. Next to him, Muriel wore reading glasses cocked three quarters down her nose. She used them habitually, never reading through them, only over the tops. She propped the latest issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* on her blanketed lap. If he'd give her time to finish—she rushed three sentences away from the end of an article on restoring the Sistine Chapel. She crammed in words before the expected outburst. Staring at the ceiling, Abel turned *Civilization* over on his chest as though the work represented a mortal anvil, breathing under its numerous accomplishments at
the cost of several billion nameless victims. Muriel read, twenty words to go. He tapped his fingers against the back of the weighty anvil.

Fifteen words…

"Civilization! It's not built on man's creative vision, you know. That's not the story."

She calmly set aside her magazine and shifted position studying him over the tops of her glasses. "What's the story, husband?"

Abel's eyes glared intensely. "Greed and avarice. The political dynamic of humankind, nature's only suicidal creature trying to stop his own annihilation by further destroying himself. We take something, do something, invent something, to improve the quality of our existence, and whatever that thing is, it knocks us a little further off balance and closer to ultimate destruction. We keep fucking the cosmos and when it bangs back with its ugly rear-end we're dumbfounded."

Once, a young Abel Stein enthralled her, running his hands over her body until dawn, speaking through his revolutionary beard.

She ran her fingers over his clean rough chin, his middle-age cynicism disappointing her. He slapped his hand over his book and ran roughshod over her last warm strokes. "Evolution's a son of a bitch. In a sense, it's not our fault. Nature gives us no choice. We must play the game of improvement. That's our dynamic, to transcend. But every time we transcend where we are to create something new, we solve the old problems only to birth new ones. Problem solving in a technological civilization is complex. Humanity successfully answers a complex challenge and the new problems we open in the process are ever more dangerous to our survival, more demanding of our resources. Solutions must become more precise and independently specific. Science says if we can measure the answer in a laboratory, in a study of some sort, then we can call it done, finished, valid. And there you have it!" Abel tossed his hands in the air and they landed on the covers at his sides.

Muriel studied him. "There you have what, Abe?"

"The evolution of faith and spirit, that which cannot be measured by the scientific method, losing out to the evolution of empirical tables: the table of elements, the table of weights, the table of measures. We experience what we perceive to be valid as the entire ball of
shit—but!—in reality we never see more than a small portion of the true universe. We use only a piece of our mind and live only a portion of our lives. It's sad." Abel's eyes bore directly through Muriel.

"Do you realize," he said, "every invention to improve our quality of life has been born of war?"

She pulled back. "You think science should have kept quiet?"

"Damned right!"

She removed her glasses chewing on the end of an earpiece. "Very disillusioning. What about you?"

"What about me? I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"I don't like that. When you say that, I mean. The way you say it."

"We screw up when we dismiss faith and spirit as invalid because they can't be measured by scientific rules. Wait. The shocker is arriving. Wait until they find out that the true God Particle can't be measured because it's will, free will, the will to live, the will to create. Will is the fundamental essential quality of the universe. Scientific rules are valid for measuring in a scientific arena. But the spirit that Einstein and Jung admitted drove science, drove them, and operates in a different arena. In as much as everything is connected, they are two arenas that are connected. They are simultaneously one and two. And, spirit must be measured by its own rules, validated by methods dictated in its own arena. The two, in order to balance and function as one, must respect each other's validity, and that validity does not rest on the rules of a foreign arena."

"What about me? I need a change. I need to experience living by a different set of rules. I long to see my universe through different eyes."

"Are you giving up your work? That's what it's all about, isn't it? Why not cut off your balls? What about the nuclear march on Saturday?" Muriel removed her glasses.

"What about it? Look, what's the point? I mean, what are we accomplishing? No. I'm through fighting. What am I doing? What if I died? Would it make any difference? Because if it doesn't, my being here doesn't mean anything either. And I'm not talking about giving up my work. I'm not breaking my slide rule over my knee. I'm considering broadening my perceptual
foundation. But every time I approach the idea, I don't know where to begin. I feel trapped in my own skin; a lifetime of acculturation I can't shed. I only know for a fact that I've got this life, and I'm desperate, Muriel. I feel like I want to jump out a window!"

"Your searching for definitive answers to 'what if' questions and I don't have them. I only know I have a responsibility to do what's in my heart. I call that spiritual. And when it tests me, I call it having faith. Isn't that where our creative vision comes from, the heart? There has to be a reason for the journey, Abe."

Abel closed the anvil of war and human suffering and laid it on his nightstand. He jabbed himself in the chest with his thumb. "What's in my heart?"

Muriel refused her tears. She sat propped up on two pillows, angry, and he wasn't worth crying over. "I don't know anymore," she said.

"I want to be left alone. Utterly and completely alone. I'm fatigued. I'm not a young man, and my dreams are shot to shit. I'm tired of trying to do the right thing, make the ethical buck. I'm tired of being overtaxed, underpaid, and kicked in the ass for my trouble!"

"You used to say we have a responsibility to help each other. The people need you, Abe. I need you." She looked at him wondering how he felt about her. "If you have any love in your heart for your family, you've got to admit your responsibility. Do you? Feel any love I mean?"

"Humanity doesn't want to save itself. Who are we kidding? They crave a cesspool. Fine, they can have it. I'm sick of it." There was no passion in his voice, only resolve, withdrawal from a doomed civilization. "I love you, Muriel. I love you because you believe in people. My love for you is the one spiritual piece of me that isn't dead. But I can't do this anymore. You're marching by yourself."

"Do you love me? I'm not sure you realize the meaning of the word. You have a son entering the world. How can you not care?"

"Care?" He searched the easy planes of her face: her cheeks, nose, her smooth forehead, her lips and at this moment he grew acutely aware that he loved her. "I live in fear. I'm afraid for all of the sons and daughters who are inheriting the cesspool. I haven't lost my compassion, wife.
But I realize that my caring isn't going to make the difference, and I wish all of you dedicated do-gooders would leave me alone."

"It's a bitter tree you're climbing. I hope you're happy up there. One more thing," she looked away, "how long have you wanted to screw your secretary?"

He didn't answer, instead flipping off the lights. Muriel rolled over and her head sank into the pillow, her wet eyes staring into darkness. "Wrong answer, husband." She mumbled softly, "Why can't you be a stranger?" Overnight so much changed, yet the little things never change, telltale habits twisted within the roots of a long relationship that make change painful. She lie curled in a ball drifting into sorrowful sleep when she felt it. "Abe."

"Hm?"

"Stop vibrating your leg."

"Sorry."

At three A.M., Abel sat in his study composing a letter. He finished, folded it, and stuck it in an envelope. He scrawled an address on the front, examined his handiwork and laid it aside. Curiously, he repeated the process writing another letter, and pocketed both of them. Fumbling in his trousers for keys, he unlocked the bottom desk drawer, removed a computer disk from its hiding place and sealed it in a third envelope.

Abel threw on a leather flight jacket and hurriedly grabbed a handful of cigars from his humidor. From a guest closet he grabbed a packed flight bag and his chart case. At the study doorway he turned, looking back for the last time, and then switched off the light. Abel paused in the darkness afraid he'd forgotten something.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, he removed one of the envelopes from his pockets and tossed it onto the bottom step. He noticed bare feet. Abel and Daniel contemplated each other, both struggling for words. Abel dropped his flight bag by the front door. "More provocative literature?"

"Are you leaving now?"

Weakness gnawed at Abel's viscera. A great shame enshrouded him. "Yes." He handed Daniel the second letter and the envelope containing the disk. "Wait two days and mail this
letter. This other one's a disk. Keep it." He backed away from his son. "Take care of your mother."

Daniel turned away, slowly ascending the stairs, leaving Abel alone. He knew, with indignation befitting of his eighteen years, he cut more of a man than his father. To overcome his anger, to say good-bye to the man he loved, would be his first act as an adult. At the top of the stairs he forced himself around speaking into the shadows below. He spoke softly, so as not to wake his mother. "I love you, Dad. I'll miss you." Daniel heard no sounds from the early morning darkness, and the flight bag had vanished.

***

"I'm a casualty of war, Colonel Stein. Do you realize that?" Jack Murphy curled his nostril hairs while Cain, decked out in a formal uniform, sat across the desk at Sun King. Murphy threw the letter on the desk between them. "I'm wounded. Shot!" pounding his fist over his heart, "right through here."

"Sir?" Cain had Murphy pegged; he'd steal potatoes from his own grandmother. Cain crossed a leg, tugged on his trousers razor sharp crease and waited. Twenty years of enlistment taught him better than to volunteer body parts or information.

Murphy leaped out of the chair, his hemorrhoids on fire. Then, as if he'd sat in a cool bucket of brew, he paced slowly around the desk and sat on its edge. He lunged, leaning in towards Cain, his left eyebrow jumping. "I trusted your brother like a son. Muriel and Daniel? Why, they're family."

"I appreciate your feelings, sir. I'm glad you decided on this course of action."

"I haven't called the Feds …yet. I'm only thinking of his wife and kid. There's no sense in dragging them through the dung."

"No, sir."

Murphy invaded Cain's space, leaning over so he almost fell off the desk, going nose to red nose against him. "You find that son of a bitch brother of yours and get my sensor back!"
"The United States Army's sensor, sir."

"Whatever," he pulled back, sniffed and swallowed. "Just keep your investigation discrete. For…"

"Muriel and Daniel, sir?" Cain smiled wondering how dumb Murphy thought he must be. Standing, pumping Cain's hand, Murphy signaled the meeting's end. "Let's keep this in the family, shall we?" So saying, he picked a microscopic piece of lint off his custom lapel. "Fine then."
A fossilized taxi bumped along the grim road, the busted frame and rusted doors of a once majestic Cadillac. Abel rode in a dent bouncing up hard on his tailbone, hammered by every rock and brick and empty bottle. Ashtrays strung with baling wire clattered. The transmission ground against nocturnal silence. The driver, a hard working young man wearing a visor cap, whistled into the rearview mirror.

Abel, in a trance, nursed his black n' blue cheek and swollen ribs, watching phantom shadows of road construction and trees blur past. The taxi jumped the road rattling across a field, hitting potholes and grinding gears, its driver whistling extra forcefully.

Violent chills shook Abel's body. In his worst nightmare, he never felt this alone. Always operating under the assumption that people are basically equivalent, that a fundamental bond exists, he discovered since landing in Sao Tiago that he dreaded this unknown third world, that he reflected as a westerner, perceived the universe through an American mind. He found no bond, only the unknown, unexpected, and a great foreign eye cast upon him, the village stranger.

Approaching a clearing, he recognized his small plane, the one he flew into Sao Tiago. He hadn't meant for life's currents to carry him this far out to sea on the back of a crazy dream, an hallucination of escape. A perspiring man poured into his wrinkled beige suit and Panama hat waited in front of the plane.

Abel shut his eyes, squeezing them until his bruised cheek hurt, taking pitiful comfort in his pain. When he opened them, the taxi whined clopping to a stop in moonlit mud, and the beef-fat mestizo, in his dirty suit and hat, strode along side, hanging his head through the rear window.

"Huh." The mestizo shook his head. "It's good I took my fee. Not to worry, my friend. You don't need money anyway."

"What about the taxi?"

The young driver twisted around gleaming a toothy grin through his soft face and bright eyes, and he proudly offered Abel a Life Saver candy struggling to open the roll.

The mestizo removed his hat scratching his head. "You load your stuff in the plane. I'll pay the driver."

Abel grabbed his bags and plodded across the field. His street shoes sucked mud as he sank ankle deep. He looked back once, long enough for the mestizo to ask, "Did they take your watch?"

"Yeah!" he shouted, wishing he'd changed into hiking boots. The icy mud squished between his frozen toes.

"It's a crime, my friend!"

The mestizo pilot slid into the passenger seat, next to the driver, and they bargained in Crioulo. The mestizo, good on his promise, produced a shaky fistful of coins paying the driver. Afterwards, he slipped a flask out from under his beige sport coat. He offered the driver a pull. The driver understood a little English and inquired about the robbery. He swallowed off the mestizo's flask, the liquor raising water in his eyes.

"He got robbed because he's a fool. But he paid me, so what do I care?" the mestizo said, taking back his flask. He pulled long and deep. A plane flew low overhead. Its jet engines deafened both men, who watched the landing gear disappear into a huge silver underbelly.

They sat outside the fence off the airport runway. "It's good he paid you," the young driver said. "But what work were you lucky enough to get from an American?"

The mestizo seriously studied this driver's face. The driver fidgeted under his stare. For no apparent reason the mestizo burst into belly rolling laughter, and the driver, unsure of himself,
decided he should laugh. Another jet flew directly above, drowning out their sidesplitting
convulsions.

The *mestizo* again offered the driver his flask. The driver played a game allowing liquor
to run over the Life Saver in his mouth. The *mestizo*’s drunken belly calmed and he smiled
approvingly at the driver. The plane hovered motionless in the sky. The *mestizo* drew a relic
Browning ’45 semi-automatic. He fired. The driver’s ear, a section of gum, his entire nose, one
eye, and several teeth landed in the mud.

Abel, a quarter mile away in the cockpit, heard nothing. Soon, the *mestizo* climbed into
the pilot’s seat beside Abel. He pushed buttons and flipped switches. The engine turned over
warming up. The plane ran three circles and straightened for the field’s length. It lifted into a
starry night leaving a body slumped over an ancient Cadillac steering wheel in the field below.

Abel sat, unable to move his hands and legs while the plane droned through a lonely
stretch of night sky. He didn’t look to the left or right. He did not look at the beef-fat *mestizo*
pilot.

I’m going to die up here. Silently he castigated himself. I should’ve marched into
Murphy’s office… told that son of a bitch I knew everything: Baghdad, the military contracts,
everything! I should’ve threatened him with the United Nations. If I’d offered to expose his sales
to that madman, I could’ve forced him to pull the contracts on my sensor. I would’ve been out of
it.

An eternal moment passed before Abel turned his head and spoke. "You’re going to kill
me tonight, aren't you?"

The *mestizo* guffawed so hard his eyes bulged and he released the wheel careening the
tiny plane into a nosedive.

"Jesus Christ!" Abel screeched.

The *mestizo* pilot laughed until he wheezed and then grasped the wheel with both hands
pulling back, leveling the plane. "My friend, I have your money." He took out his flask wiping it
on his sleeve. Offering it to Abel, he said, "I also have your plane. Do I need you for anything?"
Abel turned down the flask. The buttons and lights in the tiny cockpit floated in front of him.

"And, I might kill you, throw you from the plane and who would know? You Americans, sphat!" and he spit through a gold space between his teeth. "You have easy lives. You put your money down for a bottle of Coca-Cola like it's nothing, while the rest of the earth struggles to survive! My people have no food to eat, and your people want to know how to lose fat, how to throw away the food that rots in your fields! You think I'm an ignorant pig? I know what you think, and for your thoughts alone I should cut your throat."

The mestizo pilot looked away from Abel, ran his hand under his coat over his Browning, and gazed down through his window. He lowered the landing gear circling wide. "With this plane I could go anywhere in the world, but I know what I am. It's all I have. I'm a bandit, my friend. Where is there to go? What should I run from? Will I change? No, I tell you, I won't. Huh, I could do it. No one would know. But why?" He pulled his Browning and aimed it at Abel's head. "Look at me, American! Look at me when I talk to you!"

Abel's neck worked around. His eardrums grew painfully fuzzy as the tiny plane descended, and his jaw ached.

"I could blow the back of your head off. I've done it before."

***

On the cliffs of Isla Del Santo, Neptune, the old god thundered pulverizing petrified rock, each tumbling wave etching a natural fortress, chipping away at its grains of history, sustaining his hidden creatures: whale and dolphin, shark and giant sea turtle, sand scum and sea anemone; extending his great sinewy arm nourishing the grassy savanna beyond the cliffs, setting free white gulls soaring and swooping in and out of dark caves. Isla Del Santo owed its life's blood to the salty blood of the old god.

Dense groupings of fruit trees seamed the horizon between earth and sky feeding palm fruit, kiwi, coconuts, avocados, bananas, grapes, apples and papayas to Neptune's estranged
ravenous children. Long ago the old god's worms swam from the sea's tide pools, growing hair and vertebrae stalking the land.

Hundreds of chimpanzees scampered in circles lashing branches against the earth, vying for leadership positions.

In the bushy treetops, a group of chimps yawned and smacked their lips shaking loose fruit-showers for those waiting below. On the ground, mothers shielding clinging babies ducked protecting their young. Concentrating downcast eyes they meticulously probed each fruit, fingerling a grape's skin, savoring the bouquet of an apple, and as they chomped and spit satisfied grunts escaped.

A short distance away male hunters shredded a dead bush pig. Their pant-hoots grew excitedly to pant-screams while jumping and beating the earth with closed fists. The chimps curled back lips exposing hideous grins. Body hair bristled erect and they tore off the pig's limbs, running, dragging them through the dirt.

High in a swaying tree one of the chimpanzees paused and sniffed the air. She glanced towards the cliffs whimpering, appearing agitated. Her whimper grew to a series of squeaks. Jumping up and down on her branch the squeaks escalated into a repetition of short shrill screams. Answers in kind issued from another tree. Chimps in the branches abruptly sent darting glances all around, noses to the wind. Chimps on the ground allowed wild pig meat to dangle loosely from arms and teeth. They froze in the middle of chews looking up sharply. The sun sank, a huge full drop of blood falling into the sea and all became still. Winds swept the savannah carrying a stranger's scent among its inhabitants.

Abel, watching from the cliffs, witnessed the tiny plane rising further into the sky, swinging a wide angle disappearing over the ocean. Having finally arrived on Isla Del Santo—Island of The Saint—Abel discovered no saint, only a dislocated soul listening to breaking waves below. He knelt changing into his hiking boots. The plane diminished to a speck and floated into the drop of blood, and Abel wiping dirt from his knees turned his back on the water. He stood still for a moment: beaten, sore, in self-exile from his kind. A sudden emotional avalanche poured upon him of all he'd left behind and he cried until the drop of blood barely peeked above
the sea. Still, he would not turn a cheek to look back. Through watery eyes he saw only the savanna ahead and an isolated horizon of trees coming into shadow against the deepening cobalt sky.

He hoisted a weighty pack containing his tent and sleeping roll high on the shoulder and hiked inland. The pack settled, tugging, bruising his broomstick bones as he tramped through tall grass, sometimes marching, sometimes stumbling, sometimes twisting his ankle and sometimes throwing his knee out of kilter. He'd feel the spot, intuit its magic. I'm an animal. I know these things, and he pressed on no longer considering his insanity or his accumulating injuries. It's foolish to think about. A man can't go insane where no sanity exists! He'd know the spot. Not just the approximate where of it, but its particular coordinates. Trees and grass flourished. Cliffs, rocks, and boulders erupted from the earth.

He twisted his ankle again. This isn't the worst of what I've been through. Keep moving. Civilization, he recalled breathing hard, treated him worse. All of his days bereft of meaning, dragging a vehicle through which he aspired to an empty career, an existence filled with things. He huffed and puffed. Things Wall Street taught him to desire. Things growing obsolete against a runaway culture, leaving him feeling dissatisfied and forever struggling to catch up. Sweat stung his eyes. One day all things in his life shrunk to a bleep behind the technological pulse and his ethics faced him devoid of meaning. What did he really own? The beef-fat mestizo did him a favor. He'd left Abel grasping that which he'd searched for since birth. He smiled aware of his long swinging biceps, the balance of his legs carrying him. Darkness covered Isla Del Santo. Abel slapped himself on the chest. I'm alive, and that's the only truth I've got. Abel's shoulders bled from the straps. He dropped his pack for the night.

Cricket hordes inflicted their grating din without mercy, making it impossible to sleep. Abel didn't know what time he awoke in pitch black. Naked, he threw himself out of his sleeping bag and grabbed a short handled camp shovel.

He tapped the ground cautiously, his bare feet gingerly creeping through damp soil to high grass twenty yards behind the tent. There he worked his shovel digging a deep hole. He stooped and waited.
He'd thought before of enlarging his bathroom to include an atrium. He wanted plants to commune with while relieving himself. *Now I have lots of plants.* His eyes adjusted to moonlight.

A twig broke in the dark. The crickets’ constant din ceased. Abel's stomach tightened. Hunched over in the grass, he panicked. A series of shrieks riddled the cool air. He could reach out and touch them, feeling their eyes upon him, their breathing. He heard whispered grunts. Something beating the earth. Teeth.

One chimpanzee sprang to its full height, waving its arms in the air, screeching, while another ran circles around Abel shaking a tree branch at him. More chimps quickly surrounded him, tested him, poking, jabbing strong fingers, screaming and finally grabbing him and dragging him violently through the grass. Fingers like steel hooks ripped at the flesh on his arms and legs while rocks and twigs sliced his naked body.

They tortured him, prying apart his legs tearing into his abdomen. He screamed. One chimp leaped on him tearing a tremendous bite of flesh and muscle out of his calf. They rolled him back and forth through the dirt like cats rolling a bird, as if it were a game until he no longer screamed.

He lie in silence. Abel felt his consciousness slipping away, smelling blood and urine. They'd played with him long enough. One of the chimps pulled his lips back over his gums, opening his jaws wide, and rocked towards Abel screeching, lunging at his skull.

***

Abel's eyes swelled oozing puss when the visions began. Dreaming in detail. Imagining a human hand darker than his, sprouting blackened cracked nails on the ends of wide fingers growing bulbous knuckles. The hand reached in grabbing a chimp by its neck, hurling the attacker shrieking through the night.
Images passed in front of him; chimpanzees scattering under the moon, shifting their weight from side to hairy side, rocking, looking back, turning on their knuckles, bent forms stumbling for cover in the high grass.

Celestial peace blanketed him, a floating out of the battered body as if Abel Stein comprised more than a bloody shell. Until now, Abel realized himself as an aggregation of only physical aspects, each part assigned its proper place in time and space respective to his frame.

In tranquility he envisioned a man whose trunk stood naked and dark, limbs dense and stocky, his knees and elbows bent; the muscles, thick and fibrous, suspended in isometric tension fighting against one another, ready to strike, recoil, and strike again.

Bending down examining his features, he placed a dark finger on Abel's jaw and Abel stared into his face for the first time. His head shone under the moon broad and hairless, spouting wide nostrils and wider cheeks stretching tightly without an ounce of fat over blocky molars. His jaw gaped open exposing broken teeth covered by slick yellow enamel and dark purple gums. A nauseating stench escaped his boiling stomach and his nose discharged. His finger softly touched Abel's face.

Abel, the scientific engineer, distanced himself, questioning. What happened to the Judeo-Christian symbol? If this were death, where was the icon? Yet, he recognized the bloodshot eyes resting in their cavernous sockets as his own. The aberration became familiar. The man loomed frighteningly equipped to deal with his own primitive truth. Abel Stein no longer cared if he survived or whether his Neanderthal savior proved a delirious vision.

The man, encrusted with mud and grass, rose like a black lava mountain holding a huge boulder over Abel's head. Abel, stretching out his bloody arms, his windpipe partially severed, gasped, "Help me or kill me."

Pushing the boulder, the man strained gaining another inch of overhead power. He heaved it into the high grass at chimps that spun around fleeing, exposing bare rumps under the luminous moon.

Once more the man bent over Abel and cocked his head studying him quizzically. Abel floated above the earth.
Warm orange light glowed showing through a small opening at the rocky base of the mountain. Emanating in waves off hot stones deep within, its heat dispersed into starry darkness. Outside of the light's sphere a foreboding landscape cast unknown shadows. A man, if wise in the way of shadows, would not leave the orange light until the sun grew weary of shadows and ascended in the east.

Abel awoke shivering, lying curled on the ground. He stretched unaware of how long he slept: hours, days, weeks perhaps. Inching one hand through the dirt floor, it fell on a sticky cup shaped leaf. Bits and pieces materialized and dissolved into memory. The chimpanzees. The pain. The man. Panic squeezed his belly. Death? Distant laughter reached out to him. What hell permits children?

Youngsters' tittering echoed in his ears. His eyes cleared. The swelling subsided. Puss dried and flaked away from his tear ducts and he found himself staring into a natural cavernous ceiling, a stone cathedral where light and shadow danced. Do I exist inside the beast, this tumor? Are you my icon? Abel awoke inside the Devil.

A prolonged intense effort and he managed craning his head. He watched naked children running around one of many fires, small pudgy bodies leaping about exposing fat cheeks and soft bellies, and long dirty hair trailing down their backs. They ran in one direction stopping and giggling and then ran around in the other direction.

Returning his attention to the ceiling, Abel studied its structure. Millions of twisted gnarled roots knotted the ceiling together housing thousands of hanging bats, wide eyed without a flap of the wing. Feeling a flow of warm liquid between his legs, Abel moved in disgust. He stood trying his legs, reeling and then walked until he reached a wall and sat again. His eyes traveled around the tremendous cavern feeling its stone boundaries, its walls colored in obsidian black veins, terra cotta red and speckled granite gray. Every few feet natural shelves jutted out. On several shelves piles of raw animal skins lay emitting a putrid perfume. Other shelves
contained stashes of wood branches and bark chips. He trailed his fingers along the wall behind him drawing back a sooty hand. He lifted his fingers to his nose and sniffed.

The laughter carried again and Abel felt warm. Toasty, not tormented. It felt increasingly comfortable sitting, his back propped against the wall. He trailed a hand across his face, his fingers sinking into a short beard. Painfully he picked and untangled tiny curls of fine hair. He examined his nails grown long and dirty. He looked back at the spot where he'd urinated in the dirt.

He tried speaking to children dancing in rhythmic motions around the fire. Moving his jaw, waggling his tongue, only a deep rasp from the base of his neck escaped. His head dropped to his chest and Abel saw the long fresh scar, pink and purple, slashed across his abdomen and he remembered. His eyelids weighed on him as if two kind fingers were nudging them shut.

Several hours later, he awoke to the sounds of crackling flames. Watching. Smelling. Tasting the air. With all fires lit he judged the cavern a third of a mile in circumference. Forty fires burned, and around each one congregated a small group of adults and children. Some grew thick hairy flesh, dark with wide Neanderthal heads. Others appeared sickly light-boned and frail. They'll never survive, Abel thought.

Fires roasted and popped. Aside from a satisfied food grunt here and there they didn't speak, though hands narrated, bodies undulated, moving, telling tales with toes and ears, hair and elbows back and forth across the fire.

Abel owned no fire. He chose a group near him who appeared much like him, and he approached.

He swayed weakly two feet away when the male stood pushing Abel, causing him to stumble back. The male, full of glory, turned to his family for approval, which they didn't give to him. Snorting, he gave it to himself. Abel, regaining his balance found himself being butted again by the male and again he stumbled. The aggressive male stood shorter yet capable of great bursts of strength and the pushing continued driving Abel back. With an effortless muscular blow, he slammed both hands down on Abel's shoulders. Sickly Abel collapsed on the ground in
front of a vacant unlit fire pit. The male grunted a job well done and returned to his fire where he sat continually staring at the stranger in their midst.

Abel tried speaking again. Again he only rasped. The hours passed. Cold hungry anger welled inside him gnawing against his abdominal wound.

A day and night passed without food or water. His tongue grew swollen. They didn't care for me, my wounds, put water to my lips. Perhaps, it was the work of one kind soul, and when the rest found out, they strung him up by his balls and tortured the poor, misguided son of a bitch. He opened his mouth with furious determination and the word erupted, "F-ff-fire!" full and clear. A few heads turned, looked up and then returned to their business.

Abel scrounged around his pit picking out a lengthy dry branch. This time he approached the female of the family while the male was away. He recognized a spark of humanity within her eyes. He hoped she might give in. Abel extended his stick and she, carefully poking in the fire, selected a burning log. *Are you the one who filled the cup shaped leaf with water and put it to my lips? Are you my angel?*

She held out the burning log. Abel reached over with his stick. She screamed shaking the log in his face, jousting with him, forcing him away.

Why, he wondered, didn't he leave? No one was holding him here. In his previous life Abel designed himself to appear like the wild thing; though, he married within his religion, secured the right job, became a contributing member of society, voted the liberal platform, and turned forty believing in the constitution. Abel spent years mulling by way of grave concern over the quality of his life, believing qualitative thinking insured survival.

Cold and hungry, sitting in dirt, he shared a primordial motivation with the maggots of the earth, the pupa and larva of the universe. *I must survive.* Gazing down he studied his bruised shins and ripped stomach, the blisters on his arms and scabbed lips and cut feet, and Abel saw that he was naked.

The male returned approaching Abel who recoiled into the dirt. The man extended his hand lightly touching Abel on his shoulder, reassuring him. He held out two sticks. One he'd
fashioned into a dowel, the other he'd worked into a flat stick with a small round notch counter sunk in one end. Abel studied the man's movements.

The man set the tip of the dowel into the notch on the flat stick. He looked up at Abel and smiling continued his curious activity. He passed the dowel between his palms twirling it, bringing his palms down the dowel and quickly back up to the top. In this way the dowel never stopped spinning. He paused only long enough to grab Abel's hands placing them into a position above his own on the dowel. He motioned Abel to perform the same action while he rested his hands and watched. When Abel's hands tired, the man took over and drilling continued between the two of them. Their initial conflict had ended. Rhythm developed, Abel feeling his partner's hands tired, and placing his in the above position so drilling became incessant. Humankind's first victorious by-product of war blew into being, a wisp of smoke so delicate that if a man lacked experience he might mistake it for a single hair casting a shadow over the eye.

The man tossed a small amount of dried moss over the spot, leaned his head close pulling his hair aside and blew gently. In a breath, the prime directive of the race fulfilled an historical promise. Fire. Truth manifested itself as life burning, and this truth coursed through the man's veins, also through Abel's: one truth, the same truth; however, an ascent of mind, a millennium's war for survival carved its changes between brothers. I don't belong here.

The man, grinning with satisfaction, placed his hand on Abel's shoulder. Abel felt compelled to speak, knowing he wouldn't be understood. "One of you brought me here. One of you took care of me, allowed me to live. Now, I'm begging you, don't desert me." The man stood and from a nearby shelf selected the thickest log. He made a display out of pounding his chest, flexing his muscles and gesturing using a wide sweep of his arms to show the sky while stomping dirt to show the earth. Lifting his arm, sounding a mighty howl he smashed the log repeatedly into the ground until it flaked into slivers of kindling. These he picked up and allowed to float between his fingers into the fire. In time, Abel thought, they might learn each other's languages; however, fundamental differences ran better than skin deep.

That night a Neanderthal woman threw Abel a piece of meat for his fire. He'd cleared the most difficult hurdle. Lying in dirt, his stomach ached from the dense red meat after a long fast.
He stared at bats hanging from the cavern roof while people slept. A young woman silently crept away.

She left her world of orange lights, and deftly scurrying her way down the outside incline held fast to vines and bits of shrubs easing her slide down the mountain's base into the shadow world. Abel, who took to spying on his neighbors, stood shivering at the cave's entrance.

The woman, ugly with stringy black hair and loosely hanging breasts, searched for something. She kicked gently at the dirt. Bending, she examined a plant, and then stooped on her haunches scratching out a deep hole below the plant. Abel jumped up and down warming himself while the cold didn't bother the woman. She dug quickly and found a nearby leaf. She curved it into a cup, dipping it into the hole, scooping water to her lips. Abel noticed a moving shadow out of the corner of his eye, a dark figure stealthily slipping closer in the moonlight. Abel inched his way down the incline.

The young woman finished her midnight drink, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, when a great weight dealt her a crippling blow to the solar plexus. The earth catapulted up and he pounced on her, forcing her to the ground, pinning one of her arms behind her back. She tore at his chunky flesh. He held her jaw tightly shut with one powerful hand and pried apart her legs.

Flying down the incline, ripping his tender feet on the rocks, Abel long-jumped grabbing a fistful of the assailant's hair. Forcing up his head, he crooked one arm around his neck squeezing until the would-be rapist gasped. Before he passed out, Abel released his throat and dragged him to his feet.

A heavy log swinging through the night met the attacker's spine with a clean crack. The assailant, his mouth open like a fish, died standing, his body staggering three feet before it collapsed.

Abel turned facing a large snot-faced man brandishing his weapon high above his head.

The woman, throwing herself between them, desperately gesticulated with arms and elbows. She twisted and contorted her body this way and that, communicating her peril, jumping and pointing to Abel.
The snot-faced man lowered his weapon and she threw herself into his arms. He turned his back on Abel, grabbed his woman and they made their way to the cave.

Abel, expecting nothing, not even a kind sign, stood watching them. He no longer anticipated these people. He bent down in the dirt picking up the plant, studying it, memorizing every vein, committing to mind the turn and curl of each leaf. He picked one forming it into a cup, drinking from the hole in the ground. Life became a series of passing shadows; the lay of his land and nuances of raw humanity, his matter of life and death.

At their fire, the young woman argued with her mate, cutting the air with her hands and he proudly beat the earth. She turned refusing to look upon him. He pushed his fingers through dirt, eyes downcast, defeated. Consumed with speechless complex thought, he stared into the fire. It popped and hissed and he felt her hands on his shoulders stroking his neck. He grasped one of her fingers, squeezing it.

The snot-faced man snatched up a reeking animal hide along with a dowel and flat notched stick. He ambled slowly to Abel's fire and cautiously sat across from him. He bundled the fire kit in the hide and extended his arms. Abel accepted.

Quietly, leaving Abel, he stepped over sleeping bodies and around fires until reaching a cleared area in the center of the cavern. He stood in the middle of a circle of stones and howled awakening the community. One by one they wiped the sleep from their eyes and focused on him, firelight flickering in his face. Slowly, he slipped his hands through the air, creating patterns, telling his tale. His body swayed, the muscles tensed for danger, flowing one into the other, and he danced out the story of his mate wandering into the shadows, and of the stranger who saved her.

When he finished his dancing tale, the men, women, and children gathered crude stone tools, animal hides and kindling. They formed a long line leading to Abel's fire and offered him their gifts.

This done, they sat watching him, waiting. He spread out an animal skin on the dirt. Another one he draped around his body. He stood searching their faces, the toothless old men
and the smooth young children, the careworn women, and he lifted one arm and pounded his chest howling.
CHAPTER 4—CALIFORNIA, THE FIRST YEAR; MURIEL

Muriel ground her molars and clicked her jaw. Her hands trembled wiping a strand of long hair off her forehead. She stood in the kitchen shifting weight from one foot to the other, impatient with the doctor's receptionist on the other end of the line. Dropping the receiver from her ear, rocking back and forth, peering around the threshold corner, she searched the entry and stairs listening for hallway sounds. Silence filled an empty house. In frustration she repeatedly banged her white knuckles against the wall, returning the receiver to her ear, interrupting in desperate spurts. "I just—if you could squeeze me in… No. It really can't. I need to see the doctor today." Muriel's volume increased with her panic. "Please, I'm afraid. I can't do this alone anymore. What? No. It's been ten months. It's not getting better!"

She heard a key jiggie the lock. Daniel stood in the entry, irksome, his heart in his shoes. Praying his mother had disappeared for the day, he heard her in the kitchen peering around the doorjamb. He felt her.

"Yes, thank you," she said quietly into the phone and hung up. She kept her distance for the moment, angry eyes fixed on her son. "Give me the key, Danny."

"Oh, hey, sure. I just thought—"

She advanced one measured step at a time. "You deserted me. I don't want you here."

"But."

She circled closely, testing him. "You're just like your father. Why didn't you go with him?"
They stood still, she accusing him with arms crossed and he looking at the floor, then the walls. He couldn't face her. Daniel felt confused without a defense, uncertain renting an apartment required defending. Though his father left and his mother was hurt, Daniel sensed his lifecycle continuing. He waited six months before leaving, before striking his first mile as a man. "I don't get a shot at my life because of you and Dad, because your lives didn't gel?"

Muriel exploded lashing his body, swinging both arms wildly. Screaming and crying she punched her son, who wouldn't strike back and who never turned away. "Give me the fucking key and get out! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

In the midst of a severe pummeling she grabbed Daniel hugging him, pressing him to her breast. He encircled his mother protectively and they cried until the house returned to silence.

"When they find Dad, if they find him, I want to be with you."

"Listen, Danny, I miss your father more than anything and I feel very alone." She sniffed, laying to rest her final tears. "But, I'm not sure I'll ever take him back."

"Why? You must love him or you wouldn't care."

"I do love him." Muriel backed away looking hard into Daniel's eyes. "He's violated my trust," she said.

"He's broken his vows," Daniel ventured.

Muriel stroked her son's boyish face. "It's more than that. Much more." That Abel breathed depth into their lives, their relationship together helping Muriel define herself as an individual; it was understood they were not needy, even so, they desired to intertwine journeys, human beings yearning for contact of flesh and soul; their relationship evolving as the universe evolves, all together from the simple moment to the complex, and each moment being a whole. Muriel, independent, knew herself as part of a greater human whole, a vast mortal need from which she'd been torn. She felt alone, aching deeply, left untouched. She missed their lovemaking and hungered to be desired. She longed to feel a man inside her. To be wrapped in his arms, controlled, to be made secure. For ten months she'd been denied, empty, save for a profound sense of desertion.
"Why did he leave? What happened wasn't his fault. Dad would never design a weapon. He should've stayed. Should've fought."

"Danny, there are other things, other reasons." She averted her eyes. "I'm not young anymore."

"No! That's bullshit! Love is more than youth, more than sex."

"You have to accept that the length of our relationship, the comfort of it, is one of the reasons he left. I've accepted it. Where's it written that love is pure? He's not perfect in love. None of us are. And the rest of it, well, he worked for years, since before you were born."

Muriel motioned for them to sit together at the kitchen table. Daniel swiveled his chair around and straddled it, his forearms resting along its back, supporting a brooding chin.

"My husband had pride," she said. "He held tight to his values. Abe walked out of this house every morning knowing he'd found a way to work through the system to change it. Feeling it was possible to beat the system was part of what made his life worth living."

Muriel's hands dropped to her lap. She appeared to be focusing far away. "Your father used to say, 'We didn't stop war or human rights abuses, but we grew through lives filled with conviction. The American family paid dearly for its children to begin their pilgrimage towards wisdom. Ike's society laid there like a sleeping dragon, Muriel, and we woke it up. We can't just walk away now and say, 'Well, it didn't work.' We have a monster to deal with and he's breathing fire on our children. We can't give up now.' But as the years passed he became discouraged day by day, and older."

Muriel took one of Daniel's hands squeezing it. "He woke up one morning next to an aging woman," Daniel winced, "a grown son about to leave home and the reality that he'd changed nothing. I think it frightened him."

"But none of its true!" Daniel said.

"No? Maybe not. But you have to understand, it's his truth, and reality is a pragmatic quality for each of us. Your father took me out of my parents' house and taught me how to live, how he lived. He offered me a perspective on the world and then pulled the carpet right out from under me. Like an injured animal he crept away to die."
"No! It's not right! Any of it! And you have to take him back!"

"I do? No. He hurt me, Danny, and I'm furious, and the only thing I have to do is whatever's right for me."

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On the trip up, Muriel remembered a small girl riding the elevator at the Wilshire May Company. Lifts, then, were constructed using wood panels and brass fittings. The large derriere of a Black woman operator bulged over an uncomfortable stool that flipped out from the side of the compartment. Muriel wasn't in charge of the ride yet. It bumped along a set of steel cables, the operator smiling, calling out each floor, and little Muriel arriving at her destination.

Now, in the Encino Medical Tower, she thoughtlessly passed her fingers over numbered photoelectric cells in a plastic panel. The elevator shot up its hydraulic lift humming like an aerodynamic projectile bound for infinity while through her dark glasses Muriel watched the back-lit number display—1,5,7,10—every so often wondering what she would do if something went wrong.

She reproached herself for silent feelings; wanting someone to take care of her, to make everything all right.

In the hallway Muriel paused drinking from a water fountain so contemporary in design she had problems locating its knob. A large male hand came to her rescue and a deep resonant voice spoke, "Please, go right ahead." As she drank, his reassuring tones continued, "Don't feel bad. It took me two days to figure this one out. The installer calls it an ergonomically correct user friendly water station."

She lifted her head.

"Now, can you beat that load of shit? I was sure I'd need a credit card to get it going."

For the first time in a year of Monday mornings Muriel laughed.

"It's obviously Italian," the gentleman, tall with pleasing features, said. "Oh, you know why Italy boasts one of the highest rates of alcoholism in the world, don't you?"
"Oh, no. I don't know," she said.

"Because they can't find the god damned knobs on their water fountains! Meanwhile, this puppy's being sold to architects and installed out of catalogues all over the United States."

"Ah, I see." Their eyes locked and she smiled.

"The guy who designed this beauty won an award. Of course, he's an alcoholic, which explains why he put the mouthpiece down below your knees and the knob up above your head."

He offered an introduction.

She hesitantly extended her hand, which he shook while he began, "I'm—"

Muriel burst out sobbing, tears streaming from under dark glasses. "I'm so embarrassed. I don't cry in public. It's just that I've been crying all day."

"It's fine," he said, wrapping her hand in both of his.

"You must think I'm certifiable. What? It's fine?"

"Of course. Tears don't make you certifiable."

Muriel managed a soggy demure look of delight. "They don't?"

"Not at all. Besides, you do it very well." He looked down into his hands at hers curled tightly, resting. "I especially like the way you ball your hand into a fist." He gently manipulated her fingers, demanding she uncurl them one at a time, and then pressing her hand firmly between his. "It shows you're not—well—you know—that you're sincere. You mean business."

"Right. I suppose I do." The flood subsided and she searched his eyes, the lines at the corners of them, and his lips. Knowing he couldn't see her eyes, she lingered deliberately on the crest of his lower lip and drew a line down the edge of his chin. When he bent over for a long drink, she made no pretense about watching. He straightened up abruptly, she thought possibly catching her in the act, and she found the idea of his knowing, of their both knowing, dangerous.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to get back to work," he pointed to an unmarked door.

"Speaking of loonies, that's a madhouse."

She stood looking after him, and when he disappeared she entered the next-door marked DR. FRANK L. WEISS - PSYCHOTHERAPY.
She read her magazine until the receptionist called. "Mrs. Stein, Doctor will see you now. Through there."

"'Doctor' is not a name. She's having an affair with 'Doctor'," Muriel thought, "the sleazy bitch." She walked towards the door slowly tossing the magazine on a table. Entering 'Doctor's' office she paused surprised and smiled, and feeling daring removed her dark glasses.

Dr. Frank Weiss, the gentleman she met at the user-friendly water station, sat behind his desk. He trapped her again using his eyes. She became self-conscious. Sorry, she'd removed her glasses. "They must look pretty bad," she said.

"Who are they?"

"Not who, my eyes."

"They're very nice eyes, but just now they're sad."

Muriel stood in the center of the office not knowing what to do.

"Please, have a seat, relax. All we do here is talk."

Muriel sat and for a few moments said nothing. She thought the doctor should lead the discussion. "Aren't you going to say something?" she asked.

"Well," he picked up a pen tapping it on the desk, "what precisely would you like me to say?"

"The bastard left me."

Doctor Weiss dropped the pen and folded his hands, which Muriel imagined crumbling under. "This is where I usually shove a box of tissues at the patient. But, you know, I don't believe tissue is what you need."

She exposed his flesh with her gaze and he played her game walking around the front of the desk, leaning against it, placing himself within reach.

"You've used enough tissues. You've decided not to be a victim. You've decided to do something about it. What?"

She stood moving towards him, feeling his stare scorching her breasts, firmly lingering on her thighs.

"What would make you feel good, Muriel?"
Straining on her toes, she felt her heels slip and her thighs brush his. A warm wet flush spread through her body, between her legs. Feeling his muscles flex, feeling him grow hard, the insides of her legs ached and she allowed his lips to crush hers, running her hands under his coat and along his back.

They parted and his hot breath covered her face, flowing down her neck, and his tongue pressed her bare flesh where he tore away her blouse. She pulled him closer devouring his smell. "I want this," she breathed, and she became aware of his strong hands under her skirt lifting her.
Chimpanzees rocked forward stalking silently on feet and knuckles through dry brush. They tracked in a half moon sniffing out prey, maintaining visual contact and quietly surrounding a group of unsuspecting bush pigs. When a breeze shifted, the pigs scattered too late.

Chimps leaped grinning and screeching, closing in from all directions, whipping around in circles. They dismembered squealing victims. Chimps with bristling hair beat the earth, victory underfoot. Nonetheless, the struggle for survival never ceased.

Attacking in unison, three bush pigs stampeded a chimp who caught a pig moments before. They closed the distance between them, hunter becoming the hunted. The chimp released his meal scrambling up a tree. In a state of extreme agitation he hid himself, insinuating himself in the tree's densest branches, biting his fingernails.

On the ground a herd of fawn colored gazelle delicately grazed in the open. Looking up, one arched back its long ringed horns. A blade of grass broke in the near distance, and the herd, flying and leaping with the pointed precision of a ballet, floated swiftly across the savannah, their hooves barely touching earth. They left a man softly breathing their dust alone in the high grass several yards away.

The savannah sweltered. The man watched his food sprinting, melting in distorted waves over the field. Since sunrise he scouted herds for his tribe. He stooped resting under the heat, castigating himself for stepping on a clump of stiff dry grass. A proficient hunter knew better than that. Exposure cooked his skin nut brown and he scratched at numerous insect bites. His feet
ached dry and hard and caked with dirt, and his blond hair grew long and stringy, a home for
ticks and larva. His mustache and beard sprouted wildly. Pieces of grass and chunks of his last
meal hung in its fine coarse hairs. Stretching his jaw, exposing yellowed teeth, he picked a
matted string of hair off his forehead, and his eyes, roaming blankly, covered the distance with a
savage stare. He appeared an hoary specimen living the first moments of human consciousness.
His concerns were not considered by intellect but driven by the spleen.

Taking the weight off his haunches he stood tall and lean and muscular, without fear, the
most advanced being creation offered, a king amongst a grizzly primordial race of kings, all of
his power within the confines of flesh and bone, blood and guts. Abel Stein moved cautiously
heel to toe, knees bent; he'd have to find another herd.

He foraged through the grass tasting bugs, scratching and slapping at mosquitoes. The
rest of the tribe worked a dry riverbed digging for water, making stone tools. Women gathered
roots and nuts, filling hide pouches for storage.

Abel pressed further into the savannah. Finding tracks or discovering broken brush or
fresh dung meant signaling the others, and a hunting party's silent arrival. He kept his vision
concentrated on the telling ground, searching for broken blades of grass and twigs. Tracking, he
achieved hyper-awareness sensing the east and west of changing winds against the skin of his
upper arms, smelling the scents of plants and animals, feeling each pebble underfoot.

Unprepared when he found it, at first stunned, Abel picked up a two-inch piece of
perfectly woven hemp rope lying by his muddy toe.

Turning it over in his hands, a pleasant emotion flushed his body. A homey feeling
warmed his stomach and brought him, for all of his past conflicts with civilization, a sense of
peace. In his fingers he tooled with a piece of simple technology, plotted out and constructed.
Feeling woozy, a touch euphoric with his private memories, he looked up and discovered a
footbridge.

Should I call the others? Abel proceeded with wonder to cross the bridge alone.

A half-mile long tightrope of swaying bamboo and loose wooden planks stretched high
above a fissure in the earth. Abel, a speck in the sky, tread on the pads of his feet, sliding white
knuckles along the rope creaking from side to side, moving dangerously with each footfall. Winds howled in Abel's ears, gusting in his face, making him dizzy; clutching tightly to the rope, hugging the wood, breathing deeply. Narrow boards flaked under his feet. Standing alone against the sky, touching clouds, he watched large slivers sail down. The fissure's shadow split rock and mountain, savannah and jungle as far as the eye could see, and it sucked at him, threatening to yank his hollow body into its bowels.

God spoke to him. "You see? Really, you're nothing. I made you, breathed life into your lungs and caused blood to run hot through your veins. You think you're a miracle? Look into the black hole and realize how small you are, how tenuous your position is. You're as spectacular as any sunrise, yet common as a fly and as easy to crush. I am every event and process you see and know, and you, my son, are every event and process you see and know; and now, if you've been paying attention, you know me."

Stranded in the middle of the bridge, Abel slowly sank to his knees. Stretching on his stomach he embraced the wood beneath his cheek. Abel waited, closing his eyes, allowing a rush of wind to flow over his body. His flesh seeped into the narrow boards and slivers pricked his belly. Still, he lay there listening to God. "I've given you the gristle to fight the war, to survive. Some will realize, a fly, a mountain or a man, it's all the same, it is only that I am. However, some will get sucked into the hole before their time."

Abel took this "...only that I am," to mean there is no appeal to a god outside of himself, his own abilities. He believed the process of his life and how he conducted that life—the actions he took or failed to take—those existential elements were God manifest. If nothing else, this broad belief in creation and creator kept him as a man outside of time. The other tribe members appealed to this god and that god, while Abel could appeal only to his own activities.

Deafening air blowing into Abel's ears ripened to roaring thunder. A cloud covered him. He rose ready to forge ahead, to discover solid land. Inching through mist, the roaring grew in his ears crumbling bone and ligaments. The air changed from dry savannah heat to moist sticky syrup. When at last he broke through the other side of the cloud a waterfall staggered above crashing to earth, spraying Abel's chest and awakening him from his nightmare.
He ventured cautiously along the bridge behind the waterfall, passing so close to its thunder his eardrums grew wet and numbed with pain. Reaching into the fall using both hands, unafraid to let go of the support rope, he drew back water and splashed his face. When it hit his lips he spat. It stank, not fit for man or beast.

Passing under the falls, Abel entered a natural tunnel through the mountainside. In darkness, thunder diminished to musical trickles over rock walls echoing into a bubbling pool beneath the bridge. A few more steps and he no longer walked on wood but on solid ground. He gripped powdery dirt between his toes. Lying ahead, a soft hazy light filtered into the mountain. Standing at the threshold, his heartbeat quickened.

Abel stared as if dropped from the moon. A morpho butterfly, the width of a man's head, lifted in a blinding blue strobe along motionless currents of thick sweet air. Stepping gradually, he sank into a floor of decomposing leaves, twigs, and roots. He bent lifting a log, inhaling the damp mossy swill, a nest of giant iridescent harlequin beetles scattering quickly over his feet.

Moving another yard, he paused leaning against the thirty-foot high buttresses of a tree; smelling dank rotting wood underfoot, the honeyed perfume of ripened citrus petals gently fallen to the floor, and the aroma of hanging crawling chains of heliconia flowers, lianas and strangler figs.

Tree trunks—bald craggy bodies, hairless old men of the jungle—tirelessly supported a world of green upon green, shadow upon shadow, shooting two-hundred bare feet into a canopy spreading arms and knobby fingers so dense few shafts of sunlight penetrated.

Not Abel, the engineer, but Abel, the man, studied each leaf, smelled every petal, listened to each strange sound. Form, monumental as the Amazon or minute as a jelly ameba, carried out creation's prime directive; begin with the simple, all elements playing their parts, and move to the complex, the entire universe simultaneously considered during all steps in the process; this being the universal map. He saw only one bird, a multi-colored parrot screeching at mid-canopy. Another, unseen, joined in. Another squawked. Soon jungle birds trilled and whistled rakishly for attention. A spider monkey swinging by its tail flashed through the trees. An armadillo scurried along the ground. Then again the air rested still.
Existence scrutinized itself through its own eyes from between the shadows, behind trees, under rocks, inside logs, from the underside of a leaf, perched on a branch, ensconced in a high nest, behind Abel, in front of him, above him, between his toes, buzzing in his nostrils, crawling into his armpits, yet at this moment all grew silent. *Man, Abel thought, is another way the universe has of perceiving itself.*

He stood against the tree waiting. A twig broke. An ocelot streaked from a standstill straight up a trunk. Two human figures bolted into the bush.

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"Hey! Hello! Hello!" he yelled running and stumbling up the side of a slope catching sight of them. "I'm a friend!" He lost them again. Abel ran miles through thick humid air, over troops of biting army ants, through swarms of mosquitoes. The bushmen disappeared.

Laboring for breath he dropped to the ground. In the trees a howler monkey let loose his booming call answered by the harsh cries of a macaw. Abel's breathing came easier. He searched the canopy for the howler monkey; he didn't like monkeys, did not trust them.

He felt spied upon at every step. Had the two men been watching him since he crossed the bridge? That they might be a savage tribe of cannibals crossed his mind. He shook it off. Quickly turning, Abel stared. He saw the grasshopper on the vine, the tick on the grasshopper. Slimy Bullfrogs.

He stood still, like hunting gazelle, and then he smiled taking a slow look around.

An old man, short and slight, stood his ground studying Abel through almond eyes and lined cocoa brown skin. The almond eyes sat clear, guiltless, and ageless.

Shoulders and neck, arms and knock-knees, sunken chest and protruding belly, all of these abused by life were transient.

The long straight black hair hanging down to his cheeks couldn't be denied, yet Abel sensed the strands had fallen out long ago, that his teeth were rotten though they gleamed.
The old man remained inexplicable. His eyes focused as resolute constant pools. Abel searched the whites, the blue irises and his deep black pupils. The old man waited fearless.

His naked harmony with the jungle, for everything was exposed, was broken by an unreasonable top hat and worn tattered smoking jacket exhibiting one particularly shaggy shoulder. He stuck a long pipe in his mouth puffing it. He looked at Abel solemnly, quizzically unspoken.

Abel selected a twig drawing lines in the dirt. With care he scratched out a bridge and a group of simple stick figures. He looked up at the old man who puffed watching through a film of smoke. Abel pointed at the drawing and then at himself. He waited. The old man puffed. Hopeful, he drew a circle around the group of stick figures and then poked himself in the chest. "I came over the bridge. Bridge? My tribe," he said, pointing again to the group of figures in the circle, "The people I live with, they're on the other side. We live on the other side of the bridge." Hope disappeared from his eyes and he collapsed in the dirt. "You don't understand."

The old man removed the pipe from his mouth, and knocking it repeatedly against the palm of his hand he shook out the ash. He stuck it in a waistband of twisted vine. He gently took Abel's twig and scratched the earth drawing a crescent moon and a sun and a simple cloud form. Above those he drew a group of stick figures. He studied Abel and for the first time the old man smiled. Drawing a circle around his stick figures he poked himself in the chest and then pointed behind himself.


The old man shrugged. He searched Abel's face. "My name is Bill."

Abel scratched his beard circling the old man, never taking his eyes off him.

"Bill," the old man repeated.

"Why did we do that? Why the fuck did we go through that?"

"My name is Bill and I like to draw." He snatched his empty pipe from his waistband and stuck it in his mouth. Bill appeared satisfied.

Abel didn't know what to say. "You draw well." He waited for Bill's reaction.
Bill gripped the empty pipe thoughtfully between his teeth resting his hands on naked hips. He crept around Abel's drawing slowly absorbing its primitive elements. Kneeling in the dirt, he scooped a handful into his palm. It sifted and fell freely through his fingers back to earth. At last Bill stood. He removed his pipe tapping it against his thigh. "I can not say the same for yours. You do not draw well." A wild parrot swooped down from the canopy landing on Bill's shaggy jacket shoulder.

Abel watched in amazement while the bird cocked its head staring directly into Bill's face. It shrilled out a loud harsh squawk. Bill untied a pouch connected to his waistband and extracted a berry feeding this to the bird. The bird, in appreciation, defecated on his jacket. Bill didn't care.

"You don't need the pouch. You have pockets."
"Pockets?" Bill deadpanned.

Abel reached out grabbing one of Bill's jacket pockets. He tugged on it. "Pockets."
"Yes," Bill answered in perfect English, "I wondered about those." He turned his head speaking to the bird. "Say hello to Abel."

"What's your bird's name?"
"Name? I call him HeyYou." Bill glanced up at the canopy watching an anteater sniffing out a colony of termites through his long snout. "One day he was up in those trees and I called and called. The missionaries said to call him Polly, so I did." He lapsed into silence absorbed by the activities of the anteater, who now hung upside down by it's hooked claws and stuck its snout into the nest. Termites panicked, scurrying in droves out of the tree, covering the anteater's body. While waves of insects escaped, the anteater, unaffected, continued feasting.

Abel prodded Bill. "And? The bird?"

"He would not come and I became angry. He did not know I was boss. So, I called again, much louder, much stronger, 'Hey, you!' He came." Bill searched Abel's face. "I am one who knows of your coming." He turned without further explanation and walked.

Bill spun around on one foot bouncing like a young man. Abel, rooted to the spot, watched Bill leaving through the jungle. He hiked a short distance lifting his legs in a high goose
step. Before disappearing into the dense brush he paused and without words gestured back at Abel to follow. Abel struggled keeping pace with Bill. The air weighed heavy and his back muscles ached. He labored to push ahead. Ever since he'd passed through the mountain he felt the pores of his flesh smothered in sweat. No conversation passed between them and Bill refused to slow his goose step.

They journeyed with only the sounds of wet leaves mashing underfoot, a miscellaneous hoot, howl or squawk or the flapping of a wing and the hard rhythmic pulse of Abel's breathing. Bullets of sweat poured down his wide brow stinging his eyes. In quiet moments Abel flinched feeling distant guilt. After all this time a past life still called.

The men met an insurmountable wall of vegetation, tree trunks throwing out hanging vines wrapped and strangling each other, rising to heaven, battling one another for sunlight. Bill stopped. He sat cross-legged on the jungle floor. Abel buckled hitting the dirt.

"What now? This looks like the end of it."

"No," Bill said.

"No, what?" Abel's patience for Bill's cryptic games grew thin.

"No it is not the end," Bill said.

"I'm not going any further."

"To live a man must move. If you do not follow me, where will you go?"

"I'm going back across the bridge."

"I do not think so." Bill pointed behind Abel.

Abel spun around breathing hard, searching every tree trunk and vine, each leaf and fallen branch, every rock. Nothing seemed recognizable. Abel couldn't ascertain which direction they'd come from. A howler monkey swinging through the canopy above spooked him. In the distance a blanket of fine mist hid any telling detail. All landmarks lost themselves in the rainforest steam.

"We move through the jungle and the jungle moves. Our spirits do not move. They are," Bill opened his arms wide, "all of this. But Bill and Abel are small. We move through our spirit jungle and we stop, you know, here and there, and we look. Every time we have moved and
stopped we see something different. Bill and Abel become different when they move and see. And so the jungle moves, and again it does not. But Bill and Abel move and are different."

Bill studied the canopy and then smiled at Abel. "When I was your age I tried to find the village where I was born. I was the son of a great king. But they took me away. Gave me a new family, new people. So much traveling between the boy and the man. I could not find the village."

"I'm sorry, Bill."

"I am not. I look at the jungle and I cannot know where I was. I cannot know where I will be. But I know where I am going, as much as a man can know. I am going here. Always I am here."

Abel studied the wall of vegetation looming in their path. "What now?"

"We will wait until it is time." So saying, he gathered thick tree limbs, green and pliable, along with tough strands of strangler vines. Bill spoke contentedly gathering and tying, pulling vines taut using fingers and teeth and stepping on branches from his pile. "There was a time when The People had no resting place. Then we moved with the land. We followed the lizard and the lion in their search for water. We built our houses each day." He bent branches into large inverted U’s. These he tied with vines into a ribbed shell. Into the shell he wove large palm leaves, tightly constructing one skin. In a matter of minutes the old man built a house.

Abel, the engineer, marveled at its design. He ran his hands over the leafy skin absorbing its form. It reminded him of an igloo yet it took too many planes. Each square became subdivided into two triangles. Bill could lift the structure in one hand, while its curved surface lay close to the earth making it impossible for the strongest wind to blow it away. It reminded him of something else. "It's a geodesic dome."

"No. This is our house."

Abel stared at Bill in disbelief. "But it's a millennium ahead of its time. Well, your time anyway."

Bill stuck his pipe firmly in his mouth, crossing his arms, unimpressed with the news. "Do you hear the cry of the bird?"
"No." Abel felt perturbed. It became clear he wasn't going to get through to Bill.

"What do you hear?" Bill asked.

"Nothing." Once again the jungle became silent. "I don't hear anything."

"It comes now." Bill craned his neck searching the canopy.

At first the air grew cooler and Abel breathed with relief. However, streams of hazy light soon turned dark. Sinister black clouds gathered momentum, high winds driving them together. They formed a heavy blanket about to break wide open and flood the silence below.

"Dig this way." Bill began scooping out a ditch around their jungle house. "This way, this way!" Abel followed on hands and knees scooping soft dirt as fast as he could. The sky flashed. "It comes now. But we are ready."

In an instant, the jungle lit up with intense brightness, a primitive frightening white voltage. In that second Abel saw the innumerable eyes of creation, hairy and bristling, feathery and crouched, leathery and slimed, curled and panicking, still, huddled together under branches and leaves, disappearing into holes and a sense of despair issued forth from the species.

Another flash of lightning cracked the sky, and another and yet another. Distant roil churned the atmosphere, rolling closer until a detonation of thunder struck the jungle floor.

A sudden rush of cool wind blew against Abel's naked body and rains exploded in watery sheets. Abel stood, rain pelting and dripping down his flesh. Mud coursed along the crevices of his muscles. He gloried in water cleansing away an ooze of jungle sweat mixed with dry savannah dust. "Come on, Bill! It's a shower! A god damned shower!"

Bill climbed under their house. He peeked at Abel through a peephole in the leaves. "I do not think so." He shook his finger through the hole.

"You ancient fart! All we need is soap." Promptly, a massive bunch of liana vines tightened snapping one by one in quick succession followed by a long high creaking noise.

Slowly, an immense tree hinged over. Its giant buttresses ripped loose from the earth. More vines, holding the tree secure in its shallow planting, snapped free until its great canopy began traveling.
It picked up speed tumbling towards earth, crushing smaller trees in its path, sending animals and birds screaming into the torrent.

Abel watched, paralyzed while the tree toppled, smashing, falling, heading straight for him. He took a flying leap. A substantial vine pulled at his leg, wrapping around his ankle.

The traveling liana vine yanked him through deep mud whipping his long body like a dead iguana being flung by its tail.

When Abel's helpless body came to rest, he lie on his stomach in the soft muck of the floor, and with a thundering crash the tree landed directly behind him slinging mud fifty feet in the air. Rain poured.
Winds abated and rains ceased as abruptly as they began. Abel never got his chance for a second shower. The men popped out from under their house and examined a gaping hole in the canopy where the fallen tree once stood; an old wise man of the jungle spreading its arms, protecting what flies, what swings and what crawls. Light shafts spilled in warm buckets onto the rich dark floor where before the old man's giant buttresses stood entrenched. Bill laid a shady hand to his eyes studying the clear universe above his head. "It is not enough. It is never enough. The jungle will steal what it needs and there will be none left for The People." He lowered his head solemnly ambling over to the wall of vegetation. Examining the ground, feeling it with his eyes, he discovered his spot. There he sat cross-legged waiting.

Abel joined him at the wall. "How much further do we have to walk? I assume you're taking us to your home, your village."

"Yes. I am taking you to our home, our village, where you will meet with The People. We will not walk there."

"Do we fly?"

Bill examined the sky, considering the notion. He nodded his chin without looking at Abel. "The sun comes standing where the tree stood before. Tomorrow the earth will be covered with plants. There will be no place for us to sit. The jungle moves fast. We must move fast. Can you fly?"

"No, Bill, of course I can't fly. Can you?"
"Do not be a fool. I am an old man." He tried flapping his ancient arms. Once, twice. They moved slowly. "Too old."

"Look, are we going to sit here all day?"

"I hope not." Several moments passed before Bill spoke. "You were stupid to suggest it."

"What?" Abel asked.

"Flying."

"I—" Bill slapped a hand over Abel's mouth stifling his words and crossed his own lips with a quiet finger. He pointed ten yards along the edge of the wall. A lone white lipped peccary, the hog of the jungle, sniffed at the ground poking its piggish snout underneath and into the vegetation. It moved slowly enough; however, the bristling stiff hairs behind its head betrayed an erratic violent nature.

"We have waited for the pig," Bill whispered. "He is lost from the others. He is not afraid of us, not afraid of The People." Bill slowly removed his hand from Abel's mouth and shot him an apologetic glance.

Abel whispered, "What are we waiting for? Let's kill him and have a meal."

"No. Watch."

After sniffing at grubs and shoveling them up with its snout, the peccary pushed its head into the wall, first here, then there, snorting, and after several attempts it broke through the seemingly solid vegetation and disappeared.

"It is time," Bill said. He rose in one smooth motion shaking the stiffness from his joints and gestured to Abel who struggled clumsily to his feet. The two men approached the spot in the wall where the peccary slipped through. "I know the way." Bill stuck out his arms parting a gathering of leaves, revealing a passageway through the wall. Bill took the lead with his goose step crouching his shoulders through the low narrow escape. Abel experienced less trouble keeping pace. His lungs adjusted to the air and he imitated Bill's walk, lifting his knees, ducking numerous hanging vines. Above their heads these same vines tightly compacted fighting for sunlight, traveling ever higher, threw the passageway into darkness. Abel felt claustrophobic, a
potato bug tunneling under the earth below the root system. After ten feet he wanted to travel out front. Without another body in sight he hoped he might feel better.

Bill watched him pass. "I think I should be the leader." He stopped momentarily, wrinkling his nose and upper lip in a hurt curling. He fidgeted at his waist for his pipe.

Abel quickly moved ahead, becoming an expert at knocking vines out of his way. He called back to Bill, "I'll wait for you at the end. Don't worry, I'll wait."

"Yes. I think you will." Bill sat chewing on his pipe, nursing an internal wound. A bright green emerald tree boa curled its thick long body around a heavy vine directly in Bill's line of vision. Its muscular rings constricting and loosening in waves, it rotated its head slowly from side to side flicking its tongue, skillfully searching the environment. Bill sat unconcerned. A baby water rat slipped over his toes along the leafy ground, vanishing, reappearing and darting up a vine.

"It's wet here. I'm drowning in crap!"

He heard Abel yell from five feet beyond. "That is true," Bill mumbled between clenched teeth.

The snake sighted the water rat. It weaved a triangular head and continued flicking its tongue, lean and expressionless, winding back a full nine feet, eyes remaining fixed.

In a split second the boa held the furry creature in its mouth playing with lunch rather than swallowing. The snake stuffed the rat's defenseless body into undulating curves of long scales wrapping around the fur ball, squeezing the life out of the baby rat an inch at a time. Ten feet ahead Bill heard a short scream and a splash.

He got to his knees calmly sticking his pipe back in his waistband. He crawled and goose-stepped along the low passage for ten feet until he hit a thin wall of leaves. Resting his knees in wet silt he pushed only his head through. On the other side, below his head, he smiled at his reflection in the brown river. The wall ran its course flush against the river's edge. Abel spit and choked treading water.
"Thank you for waiting." Bill drew his head back into his hole leaving Abel struggling in the drink. Bill, rapidly tearing through the bush to his left, worked both arms ripping at vines grown in only a few days.

"For Christ's sake don't leave me! Bill! Bill!" Abel's arms gave out, and then his legs, and he allowed himself to sink for a moment, thinking he'd regain a small amount of strength. When at last he floated up through filthy water, Bill paddled towards him in a canoe.

Abel spit silt through his nostrils. He prayed silently thanking God he'd been saved. Bill paddled towards Abel, then passed him, leaving him. Tossing the paddle into the boat, crossing both arms over his proud chest, the boat drifted to a halt. Abel swam screaming between strokes, "Jesus! Christ! Christ!" and choking.

Bill picked up the paddle rowing the boat forward another few feet and then stopped it again. Again he crossed his arms demonstrating great consternation. "I lead. Me. I lead."

Abel swam for his life.

***

Bill sat in the rear of the canoe while Abel rowed a hot ten miles of mosquito-infested river. Whenever he complained, Bill took pains reminding Abel who captained this boat. Every five miles Bill broke his silence with praise, "You row well." Abel mimicked Bill's words from their first meeting, "I can not say the same for your rowing."

They floated along a vociferous river filled with a discordant, often harsh, cacophony of life: the click of the beetle paddling in water, the maddening whirl of swarming mosquitoes, the booming hooting howl of the monkey, the squealing cry of the baby orangutan, the screech of the hornbill, the flutter, squawk and clamor of fruit eating birds, the long rough wailing of the elephant, the piteous growl of unseen beasts, the tiger, leopard, and jaguar; not a moment's peace.

Three miles back, a tiger craning his head over the edge for a drink leered intensely at the men. A wet crocodile wriggled out of the water, dripping, lying on its belly in the warm dirt
The sun was setting. A tiger was sunning itself. It snapped long jaws at the tiger, which swiftly turned tail disappearing into the jungle.

The river broke into tributaries and Abel listened to a new sound, a constant low pulsing he thought buzzed from within his ears, the beating of drums. The canoe drifted on a light southeast current. Cries of the species faded into the distance. When they all but vanished, aside from the mosquito, the tributary splintered into narrow veins. The canoe floated calmly among the veins knowing its way, winding around silt and sand hills where dry white bones lie bleaching under the sun. The pounding of drums strengthened, a beat echoing so loud that Abel couldn't hear the swarming mosquitoes.

Letting loose the oar, the boat floated freely with natural direction. He looked up. The face of the jungle changed constantly. He studied shadows and the line of an immense vegetation wall spilling into the river throughout their journey.

Perhaps I didn't run. Maybe I have nothing to be ashamed of. I took steps, began a new life. How many men have done this? Seen this? This, all of this, this can't be crazy.

Bill spoke. "Soon, you will meet The People. They will ask me, 'Is he one who runs in fear or one who stalks, searching like the big cat?'"

"Tell them I'm a man," Abel said, "and as happens with men, I've run in fear. I've made mistakes. Tell them, however, that a man may turn his life around. Tell them I'm searching," he turned and smiled at Bill, "like the big cat."

"What is your prey?" Bill asked.

"I don't know yet."

"Hmm. I understand. The jungle changes. You think you know what to search for, and then, the jungle changes again and you must change your search. The People believe it is never too late. But they do not understand fancy words. The People build their houses. They do not talk about them. I will tell them, 'Abel is an honest man.' It will be enough. I must row."

Bill manned an oar, but rather than row he prodded the boat away from the sides of the earth where it tended to drift in stagnant swamp waters. He jabbed his oar into the earth and pushed, and they rounded a narrow bend. A group of pile houses came into view.
Structures ascended high above the murky water, unaltering in the wind, flamingos on long legs. The houses rose windowless with thatched roofs. From the center of each roof a stream of charcoal black smoke wafted into a pleasant high breeze where the streams mingled and dissipated. Canoes rocked on water currents below the houses, bound between long knotted posts and ladders which dropped from the bottoms of the houses to within three feet of the water's surface. Bill's canoe left a trail sliding through stagnant scum. The drumming ceased.

Abel turned his head owl-like, wide-eyed at every sound and peripheral movement. Drifting into the heart of the village, Abel heard splashing and found wet naked children playing in a shallow river. Their mothers, he assumed, working on a dry sandy mound nearby. Chocolate brown, their large flat breasts dangling pendulous, swaying rhythmically, the women gathered wood and spread large palm leaves to dry under the sun. Some wore skillfully woven grass skirts and others wore nothing. A few women decorated themselves using wild dogs teeth necklaces; others labored under the weight of innumerable strands of colored beads forming heavy collars around delicate bare shoulders. Some wore their hair naturally frizzy. Most took great pains stringing their hair into finely braided strands corn-cribbed loosely about high cheekbones pulled away from sleepy lidded eyes and trailing down bare backs. One of the women wore her hair like Bill's, straight and long and shiny.

"She is the daughter of my sister."
"She's beautiful. What's her name?"
"My sister's daughter." He smiled.

Never through their activities of bending and stooping, standing and stretching, picking and gathering, working side by side, talking and laughing wide grinned and watching over their children did they appear as intruders on the land. They carried out creation's prime directive blending into sandy mounds, swamps and pile houses, showing consonant harmony. They worked their movements along the rhythm of air currents, the ebb and flow of the waters their babies bathed in.

On the other side of Abel a canoe floated lazily down the central waterway. The expert boatman sat so low, Abel saw only his round face and closely cropped hair. He piloted the canoe
Mercy in Love / Roth

into its dock below one of the houses. The young boatman stood naked aside from his vine G-string, and cupping a hand to his mouth he tilted his head hollering. Tough strands of muscle rippled in his thighs as he strove to maintain his balance in the rocking canoe. He extended one short powerful brown arm decorated by an armlet wrapped around it, straining against it, and lifted a net crammed with silver fish from the canoe's bottom.

A young woman smoking a long pipe and bearing a child wrapped around her neck hurried sure-footed down the ladder. Without thinking she grabbed the heavy load of fish in one thin arm from her husband and scurried up the ladder. At the top she slung the load through a floorboard entrance and followed it in with her head, her shoulders, the baby, soon her knees and then her disappearing bare feet.

On the verandah of yet another house sat a toothless old man surrounded by hanging skulls. Abel stared at the hanging skulls. Bill looked at Abel. He shrugged his shoulders. "When one dies, his spirit is tended by the family. He lives in the house of his family." Abel breathed a sigh of relief. Bill laughed. "I will tell them you are no good to eat. You are drowning in crap."

The canoe rounded a narrow bend and Abel heard chanting. The men drifted past another grouping of numerous pile houses where men and women sat on their verandahs watching the stranger and Bill float by. Small gatherings of village fishermen stood on shore working on their nets and torches, and watching. The boat continued along its torturous stream negotiating several sharp turns. The chanting grew louder.

At the final turn Abel and Bill were flanked on both sides of a tributary by thousands of chanting dancing natives. The constant rhythmic song of The People sounded high pitched and strained with the staccato syllables of birds, then low with long growling leopard moans and then a return to the high bridge. Dancing was an unrestrained goose step, wild using pointed rotating of elbows and hips, and rippling thighs and quivering full lips smiling wide, gleaming like a new yellow moon moving and swelling with the tide of jungle life.

The entire village existed within a song of colorful blankets, beads, dogs' teeth, bodies painted by ashen pigments from the earth, bony head dresses, bouncing up and down shaking the
ground in welcome, rocking boats, all of them lining the green bamboo thin shore, all shining in aphetic euphony, naïve, devoid of false pride.

Bill buried an end of his oar deep in the earth and the canoe rested. He stood saying a few words in native tongue to two young native men who came forward out of the crowd. They stood on the largest coral mound, serving as a central meeting place for The People. A small strongly constructed shack stood in the middle of the mound. The two men, their faces painted in ash and red clay, moved abruptly, their hand signals short and choppy. They helped Abel from the boat.

"Hello. I'm Abel." He smiled, but there was no reply. "So, you're all like Bill here. Quiet." The natives gestured towards the shack. Abel hesitated for a moment glancing at Bill. Bill turned his head away. "Bill?" The men grabbed Abel roughly. "Bill!" dragged him violently through the crowd, "Bill! Bill!" and threw him into the shack bolting the door. Abel stood in the dark aware of his breathing, nothing more.
CHAPTER 7--CALIFORNIA; MURIEL'S BEDROOM

Rain drenched the Santa Monica Mountains, turning Sepulveda Pass pitch black aside from one lone street lamp. Water drained down both sides of the asphalt in narrow rushing streams. It rippled from higher up the mountain, from a curving black vein of side street. The hilltop house appeared deserted. The windows shone dark. However, a car waited in the driveway, a silver Porsche.

Inside, warm amber shadows danced along walls, bookcases, pictures and clay and porcelain objects d'art. Wooden logs spit and crackled heating floors and pipes. An abandoned fire burned in the big empty downstairs fireplace. A disheveled sofa stretched in front of the fire, as if someone cozied up by the flames, rolling themselves body and soul around the sofa's huge stuffed cushions. Another someone must have come along stripping them of their cushion, exposing their softness, stroking it.

Low moaning flowed from shadows atop the long stairway; stairs Abel used to sneak up and down on wearing his terry robe during midnight forays to the kitchen. Muriel's bedroom door was closed.

In that room they breathed unevenly, shallow with anticipation. Water dripped down large sky light windowpanes in crazy patterns, and Muriel and Frank fought on the bed, hot and salty, swallowing each other.

Their tongues probed each other's mouths and Frank found hers soft, moist, and fiery. Muriel, though, would not merely be kissed. She refused to be kissed. She sliced him to ribbons
with her feverish tongue, darting and flailing him, teaching Frank who owned control, digging her nails into the small of his back until it bled and he grew hard.

Frank stroked her hair, grabbing fistfuls of silky strands, letting it slide between his fingers as they faced one another kneeling and he pulled her to him. Muriel glared at him defiantly bending over, allowing her hair to brush the fronts of his muscular thighs. She looked up at him once more and smiled taking him into her mouth. Frank felt her moistness scorch him. He throbbed inside her throat and his knees buckled. She sucked him in long deep strokes and he reached down for her breasts lifting them, cradling them.

Muriel enjoyed doing this to him. He'd meant to take advantage, but she maneuvered the forces, it being her war. In this most subservient position, she rested control. If she were to encircle him with her lips, look up at him and shout, "Kill!" he'd stab a man to death. All pretenses at morality went to hell; no love, save love scorned before Frank, came to her bed.

When he could stand it no longer, she played her final card, withdrawing him, placing him between her white globes, pressing him there, where Frank closed his eyes rocking back and forth, losing control.

She lay on top of the sheets satisfied. Not sexually satisfied, but satisfied that she'd single-handedly emasculated two men, even if one of them wasn't aware of it. When all abruptly ended, he searched her eyes. "What do you call that?" he asked.

"Something I needed to do."

"And now what?"

"Now?" She lay next to him stroking his chest. "Is this what it's going to be like? Fellatio as rape?"

"No, Frank. I don't need it this way again. But I'm not sorry about it."

They came together in a tangle of arms and legs and kissed each other and they made love.

Afterwards, the couple lay in each other's arms stroking one another, feeling the curves and hollows of their bodies. Muriel blew softly over Frank's neck and chest cooling his flesh. They lie that way for a long time gazing at raindrops tapping and running along the skylight.
Muriel studied the planes of his body and thought about him carefully; understanding, sensitive to her needs, Frank proved strong enough, allowing her to take advantage of him just this once. She liked him. She wasn't in love with him.

They rolled together for another kiss when the phone rang, and for the first time in over a year she didn't dive for it, but let the machine answer the call.

"Thank you for calling Muriel Stein. I can't come to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name, number and message, I'll get back to you."

"How-do. It's Cain. Listen, I'm at the American Embassy in Japan and—"

Playfully she lifted the phone drawing the cord over Frank's body, pinning him to the bed. "I'm here, sweetie. Any news?" She asked knowing the answer.

"Another dead end. Another bogus flight plan." He stood in the embassy lobby leaning into the phone, his hat in his hand. His eyes drooped, exhausted and the corners of his mouth fell in disappointment. He'd spent three days in Tokyo in a sixteen foot square room, talking on the phone staring out the window, feeling his beard grow dark, watching hordes of sallow skinned civilians trampling each other in the streets, stepping over one another for an inch of unclaimed space: adolescent street hustlers, bar girls, business men in occidental single needle suits, their knees bent and tongues loose for Saki.

"I'm sorry," Muriel said. "Remember, if you find anything I want in."

"No. Besides, it's not that simple."

"You're a colonel. Fix it."

"I've spent the last two months checking every hotel, raw fish dive and Saki sewer joint on the island. I'm telling yuh, he's goat-fucked us. He's a smart son of a bitch." Cain glanced out the corner of his eye.

Two men, American boys, stood at the far end of the lobby. They're regulation height, Cain thought, stiff as two-bit whores with Coke bottles up their cunts.

Muriel sat in bed smiling at Frank, waiting. The other end of the line went mysteriously silent. "Cain, are you still there?"
"Yeah, I'm here." He turned into the phone lowering his voice. "Listen, have yuh noticed anyone following you?"

"No. Why?"

"Hell, probably nothing. We'll talk later." He hung up.

Muriel stared at the phone.

***

At the bottom of the hill a parked car sat with wheels angled into the curb. Two male figures kicked back low in the front seat. One of them lit a match touching it to the end of his cigarette while the other listened dryly through his earphone. His partner beat him to the good stuff again. He should've grabbed the earphone sooner while Muriel and Frank ahhhed and ummmed in the throes of passion. All he got now were leftovers. He searched his partner with hatred, as if the job wasn't low enough, as if he didn't feel like a desperate loathsome worm. He cranked up the volume, smiling lecherously to drive his partner berserk.

"I thought you were finished with him," he heard Frank say.

Then the woman spoke, "I don't know whether I want to see the bastard because I love him or because I want to kill him. But I want him."

***

Cain listened, trying his patience across the desk in one of the embassy's offices. He tapped his fingers on the hard visor of his cap while a young Oriental woman spoke to him. "It was not difficult. The only airports that can land small private planes are Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nagoya."

"Do we have anything?"

"Yes, I believe we do. Kyoto shows a private plane matching the license and description landed for refueling."
Cain nearly fell off his chair.

"Colonel, those records are over a year old. The pilot filed a plan for Africa."

Cain reached for the telephone in front of him. "May I?"

"Please."

Already punching in numbers, his fingers worked the button pad at lightning speed. "This is Colonel Stein. Wanna join me for a swim? Good. Africa."

On the heels of that call, he placed one more, against his better judgment, and didn't bother saying hello. "Follow orders. That's the first rule. I don't know who you got in my brother's bed, but kick the bastard out and get your ass down to San Pedro. I'm gonna show yuh how we track an enemy. What? The hell you say? No! Damn it! The boy may not come!" He slammed down the phone, the excitement of the chase burning in his cheeks.

The clerk smiled politely at him.

He pounded her desk once with his fist. "Off with his ears!"

Her smile melted.
CHAPTER 8--ISLA DEL SANTO; THE SECOND YEAR

He propped his chin on one knee, uncertain how many days and nights he rotted incarcerated in the shack on the coral mound. In summing up his life, the aching futility of it, Abel arrived at an outstanding conclusion—civilization still existed—still shouting its mad automobile horn at dusk, writing human-interest columns below the bad news.

He'd solved nothing by running, bequeathed no higher values to the progeny, and his peers fared better in gridlock traffic and windowless offices than he did naked, dirty, scabbed, and defeated. In fact, urban cave dwelling do-gooders still stood a better chance of making the world a more habitable jungle than Abel did. The only virtuous things he accomplished in the dark were that he no longer craved cigars and didn't feel the need to pop his knuckles or shake his feet. A long time passed since he felt like rattling bones or jumping out of his skin. When The People murdered and ate him, he would own the pleasure of knowing he'd achieved this much; he was a man without bad habits, a dead man.

Visions of past experimental utopia enshrouded him in the pit, Muriel and Abel and a small circle of university friends desiring to meld with the primitive life. They set up a nude farming commune in the mountains where they made love, not war. Abel chuckled to himself. *As if we knew the first thing about love or avocados. Acres of barren land, dicks, tits, and asses. No one mentioned responsibility, commitment. No one told us we had to work at love. Sure, the crop failed.*

The door opened and light blinded him. Two men entered and while Abel's pupils slowly shrunk he recognized Bill. The other waddled behind and plopped down, a soft fat native
wearing a vine G-string and grass ornaments around both calves. Continual chanting haunted Abel since before daybreak, and accompanied by his visitors' presence it unnerved him. Two more men entered quietly scooping out Abel's feces from a large hole in the middle of the shack. "When The People no longer traveled, we had to learn to feed the earth which feeds us." Bill laid a reassuring hand on Abel's shoulder and the men sat in a semi-circle. "The People have decided that you have rested long enough."

"Rested! Tell The People they've got shit for brains! And tell them I'm not afraid to die!" Abel hocked one on the ground in front of the fat native.

Bill turned to the native, speaking in twisting syllables punctuated with clucking noises he managed by snapping his tongue against the back of his throat. He used a few sparse hand signals bringing a quiet force to bear on his simple speech. Abel knew when Bill finished translating his tirade, he'd be roasted over a pit.

Bill turned. "I told him you were grateful for shelter from the day's sun and for the fine mat to sleep on."

Abel's eyes rotated in his head. The native spoke to Bill. He sat on the ground, one huge knee propped up, resting his flabby arm across it and using his free hand to point a thick finger in the air, waving it in proclamation. His two butterball stomachs hung loosely, one over the other, shaking at each word, with every swing of his arm. He remonstrated at length, growling here, erupting a guttural snipe there, drawing his finger across his throat and baring his teeth, clenching his fingers into a fat fist and opening one eye wider than the other in fury. The coup de gras occurred when he hocked one on the ground at Abel's feet. He crossed his arms like a fuming buddha.

Bill thought for a moment and turned to Abel. "He says, 'You are welcome'."

Abel threw his hands heavenwards shaking his head. "You're diabolical."

Bill shrugged. "Among ourselves we do not use names. One body is more or less the same as another. But to you his name is Tanuck. Ta-nuck."

"Uh huh." Abel leered at Tanuck without fear, only feeling disgust for his hangman.

"Tanuck, you're a shmuck. You know what a shmuck is?"

"Do you know why they chant?" Bill asked Abel.

"No."

"They celebrate a new woman in the village. You will be Tanuck's wife." In one swift move, Tanuck tossed a collar and vine leash around Abel's neck.

Bill emerged from the shack followed by Tanuck and Abel, his wife. Natives lined the narrow banks, stood on their verandahs, crowded into canoes. A hush of anticipation blanketed the crowd of ebony black and cocoa brown faces. Slowly teasing the crowd, Tanuck raised Abel's leash into the air. Cheers exploded like lava spewing into the village, giving way to more chanting, stronger chanting, and the natives danced, rocking canoes, loosening pile houses, all for the new woman of the village. Abel, frightened and weak, knew only that he lived.

***

Six months passed. Below a pile house on a narrow stretch of land, Abel crouched, his leash connected to his collar, the other end connected to a post. He wore The People's G-string - a loincloth and vine waistband. His hair falling below the middle of his back showed its gray, and his beard flourished bushy and long. He appeared a wise man, a guru, a sage, and towering over short spirited natives, Abel cut an imposing figure. He accumulated strange facilities.

Which civilized man among his peers could spar a fire without a match, smell a bush pig or gazelle from a quarter mile away, hunt with only his bare hands or build a house in ten minutes? Abel spoke any tribe's language using his eyes, and developing access to an innate inner wisdom he understood language articulated with or without words. Unlike those he'd left behind, Abel Stein, engineer or man, sniffed trouble in the changing winds, affording himself time to admit mistakes and change course, which is exactly what he'd done with The People. He determined, at the end of a leash, that this was his world, today his time. He awoke to the often-frightening moment; The People breathed here, and by God he befriended the enemy.
His spine bent under the afternoon sun, Abel grasped a stone scraper thinning split bamboo shoots into narrow strips of cloth. Time passed quietly. He drew the stone in long repetitive strokes down the shoot towards his body, always towards his body. While laboring above, a creaking canoe docked under the house. He listened carefully. Abel heard the canoe bumping against its post. He sniffed like a dog at the air and detected the aroma of cooking fish. Today smelled like a fine day. Dinner smoked on the fire. His stomach churned. It was early.

Tanuck's pile house, a mansion among The People, sat patiently, high atop its posts rising into the sun. Four fireplaces burning day and night depleted the large room of life sustaining oxygen, charring thatched rafters and smothering its inhabitants. Shelving stacked with earthenware vessels, bamboo cloth, dogs teeth, and various utensils ran along the upper portion of one wall. Against another wall hung several family skulls, fleshless, grinning in the firelight. Two remaining walls held fireplaces, a pair against each one connected by long shelves strung loosely over the flames.

This morning's catch abounded and these shelves bore the brunt of wood smoking turtles and kingfish. Crabs and tadpoles wrapped in leaves simmered among hot embers, enough to feed Tanuck's household: two wives, a sister, two daughters, and the family of his brother's house.

Tanuck's family lived fortunately blessed in that the head of their house became a fisherman. However, when Tanuck dragged in empty nets, when his bamboo spear missed the lightning quick silver schools, the shelves hung bare. Then, the family of Tanuck became forest gatherers of sago palm, betel nuts, lime and ginger, and farmers cultivating tropical yams. Tanuck's brother, a hunter, killed snakes and rodents, and on rare occasions a pig.

This afternoon, the shelves sagged laden with fish, and Tanuck's wife, sister, and two daughters slaved in the ash-filled heat. The two daughters worked experiencing little relief near an open trap door at the end of the room. One of them, a sixteen year old, shredded leaves for palm pudding. She moved quickly filling a clay pot. The other daughter, fourteen, nimbly beaded long strands for her wedding costume. Both occasionally glanced at a baby boy, Tanuck's nephew, who crawled along the floor examining cracks in slat boards, spying lapping water below the house. Tanuck's wife and sister tended fish and cooked batches of palm pudding, and
though these two fat women perspired copiously over the flames, they were accustomed to the heat. When the baby crawled over to his mother, Tanuck's sister, she offered the child a toe to slobber on while continuing her tasks. At first the baby punched his mother's toe swinging his tiny fist. Then he put it to his mouth, teething on it. Soon, he toddled off scrambling across the floor until he stopped at a wide gap in the rotting slats. He looked down below in wide-eyed interest chortling at the white man.

Abel felt eyes upon him. Not dangerous eyes, but small mischievous ones. Abel, one who gained an intuitiveness that saved his bony hide from the jaws of a river crock, smiled to himself not missing a stroke of his stone scraper and maintaining the rhythm of The People, the rhythm of life, speaking, raising his voice to be heard above by small ears and eyes. "Nephew of Tanuck, get away from that crack or you'll fall in the water. Go!" The baby laughed gleefully scampering across the floor.

On the other side of the swampy waterway, a young man lounged on the verandah of his humble abode. He studied the sky, breathing deeply, inhaling and exhaling with gusto several times as was his habit when the sun began its descent. His hard dusty body tensed on each inhalation. He concentrated on tightening the muscles of his feet, moving up the ankles, tightening his diamond calves, his long round thigh muscles, inhaling deeper, tensing his abdominal section, his pectorals, holding his breath, tensing long lines of muscles running across his back, shoulders and neck. When he could hold his breath no longer, he released it, slowly relaxing his shoulders, back and chest, relaxing his solar plexus and thighs, his calves, and feet down to his toes.

Beside him sat a polished decorated gourd and a wooden spatula carved into the terrifying image of a fanged serpent. From a small bag he extracted a handful of betel nuts popping one into his mouth. He added a pepper leaf and using the spatula scraped powdered lime from his gourd adding it to his chew. This, Abel noticed, became his regular afternoon snack. Each day Abel shouted across to the young man, "Hello, I'm Abel," determined that he receive an answer, a nod, a hand signal, even a grunt. He understood that he must prove himself.
Abel no longer wished to be left alone. After all, the world was a son of a bitch, even for a man of his talents, and he found himself longing for companionship to soften the blows of fortune. He scraped towards his body, always towards his body, and the thought struck him, *Who'll be there for Daniel? Put it aside, and stick to the business at hand.*

The business was scraping bamboo shoots into cloth, and while Abel labored under the afternoon sun he listened to a distant wild parrot screeching, reaching out to the jungle trees hoping for a reply, the discovery of a sentient being in kind. Abel felt its language must be imprecise, though he understood perfectly:

"I have a black beetle, I have a black beetle…"

And an answer from far off:

"It is cold on the mountain, it is cold on the mountain."

Not the beetle, not the mountain, not precisely.

But the intimate desire:

"I am not alone, not alone."

A canoe quietly floated along the waterway. Its pilot, a proud young mother, her breasts high and bare, bore her child lovingly wrapped around her neck. Abel looked up never losing the rhythm:

"I have a black beetle
    I have a black beetle…"

Across the waterway on the next mound women spread palm leaves in the sun for drying. They worked in silence while children scrambled from rock to rock, some spearing minnows, others throwing slimy seaweed. The canoe carrying mother and child came to rest near Abel.

"Hello." He smiled.

"Hello, hello, hello, hello." Each day the same thing. The mother floating down the waterway stopping to visit him, stopping to play the game of The People, mimicking: not only
words but expressions, actions, all mannerisms, content to play the game without understanding the meaning of words, the import of actions. They appeared content, Abel decided, in all the particulars of their lives.

He sought to break through, to enjoy more than mere empty verbal symbols between them. Man, the jungle taught Abel, is born like all animals; in bondage to the specie's limitations. The birds screech and squawk, but these are only limited displays of direct experience in the jungle. These displays can never be used to transcend their own bondage. Humanity alone misses the direct experience, instead speaking in specifics 'about' the jungle; simple word symbols constructing complex precise concepts, destined to miss the direct knowing of a dynamic life. Through struggling to understand detailed concepts 'about', the journey towards deeper communication 'about', humankind uses its bondage to transcend its bondage. Abel understood that one day a moment would come, a word would be spoken or left unspoken, and the human animal awaken within dynamism beyond language or perish. "Abel. A-bel."

"Abel, Abel, Abel, Abel."


He considered tying her up, so she'd know what it feels like. *I'll get the stew pot for sure.* Instead, he smiled warmly at her, trying not to fault her. He made faces at the baby who gurgled and drooled communication beyond words.

The mother smiled back briefly imitating a series of Abel's expressions. Always their sessions ended abruptly. Before he managed a grasp on the situation, she glided effortlessly away pushing the pole in slow even movements off the sides of the mucky swamp bank where flies buzzed above the water.

***
The sun dove behind an undulating green carpet of treetops leaving in its wake a yellow sky. Neptune's tide rolled in, crashing on rocks, wearing away at earth's jagged protrusions, the water's white foam lapping at the sand as if the aged god floated, combing out his great beard over the sea floor.

Inland, where much of the water lay stagnant, an old black man pushing a herd of pigs hobbled along the village bank. He walked painfully, yet paid no heed to his discomfort. With a bamboo cloth sash for warmth and a long rickety staff for his bare ashy feet, he patiently pressed towards home.

Abel, still tied to the post, watched the decrepit native prodding his herd, poking them with his staff and mumbling loudly. The man's words sounded in short syllables from the back of his throat. "Move you stinking swine, you stinking pigs! Don't you know we're going home? Move! Move!"

Abel closed his eyes after a long day. Sunset arrived as a time for reflection on things past and present. This evening his mind muddled slowly postulating in the breeze, evolving a simple theory. It took a few minutes to clear the ether in his brain. He spoke so little of his own language that he'd stopped thinking in words and found his consciousness devoid of symbolic detail. He seemed no longer to string together thoughts. Whole concepts appeared as self-illuminating modulations out of the darkness of his mind, a vibrational communication. He realized deep within he'd posed a query, yet he wasn't clear on its exact meaning. The answer, when it settled in, did not come from intellect. It issued from spirit; *It's eternally sad how far a man travels before he misses where he's been.*

He opened his eyes at nightfall. Abel studied silhouettes of pile houses against a full-mooned sky. Occasionally a shower of red and orange fireplace ashes spewed forth dimming in coolness, falling, joining the earth. In the distance, a line of one dozen fishermen hiking through mist became gradually visible hauling their nets and spears back to the village. Abel watched torches bobbing up and down in the dark.

Tanuck arrived hours ago. Abel listened to him shouting orders in the house and laughing. Abel smelled fish and palm pudding when they ate. Tanuck had not fed him. He bayed
up at the house where he imagined Tanuck's huge belly quivering every time he belched from a bit of smoked turtle. "Food!" Abel shouted, "I'm hungry!" He'd tried placating The People, supplicating to their desires attempting to win them over. His plan failed. During months of quiet servitude he'd not garnered an ounce of respect.

"Food!" The People, unaccustomed to hearing a wife shout, ran onto their verandahs witnessing the scene. Abel, aware of the crowd, shouted louder. What he shouted didn't matter. The louder he screamed the greater Tanuck's shame. His shouts proved Tanuck's lack of authority. He'd have to kill Abel or banish him from his family. Forcing Tanuck's hand remained his only alternative. Physically he'd survive the leash, even the servitude. Spiritually he would perish. Looking at the crowd spurred him on. "Tanuck! Tanuck! Eat turtle shell and bleed in the morning! Shmuck!"

Tanuck finally showed himself on the verandah of his pile house. He stood resolute peering down at Abel. Abel knelt straining at his leash, grabbing his balls in one hand. "Suck my dick, fucker!"

Without a word, fat Tanuck climbed down his ladder. He hopped nimbly, a rhino performing ballet, from one canoe to another until reaching the narrow strip of land. Abel looked up at him, standing over Abel, grasping tight a primitive machete. Tanuck raised the knife over his head brandishing the weapon using both hands. Abel met his gaze. Neither man wavered. "Kill me, shmuck! Do it!" Abel lowered his head exposing the back of his neck. He waited.

The knife cut. Abel didn't feel it. It took a moment for Abel to realize the leash lay severed. He looked up slowly rising to his feet. Tanuck stood resolute as before, his face telling no tales. He pointed towards the forest and pushed Abel away. Abel, wearing a crazed expression across his eyes, understood he'd been set free without a word. He glanced at Tanuck then at the forest. Abel ran.
CHAPTER 9—HUNTING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Fifth and Alice Streets swarmed bodies like mosquitoes on fruit jelly. Strong New York noses collided with pug Chicago chins; thin L.A. legs trampled fat London feet. Swarthy Roman shoulders bounced along the pavement hob-knobbing with upper crust pasty white office tower flesh and poor Blacks from Soweto dripped mine sweat under their wet shirts in Sandton City, a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa.

At the Sandton Hotel, Colonel Cain Stein stood at ease impatiently riding the elevator, hat in hand, repeatedly tapping at the sixth floor button. The elevator stopped, the doors slid open and Cain shot out in perfect stride. He marched a direct path through the shopping mall where noisy crowds milled eating and picking at clothing and jewelry behind large display windows. They dressed casually well, talking and laughing, chewing and counting their rands and traveler's checks. During his forward march, if Cain noticed the crowd at all, he glanced at them peripherally.

He halted, abruptly performing a right-face-forward into the South African Tourism Board office. A smiling middle-aged gentleman, a film of perspiration on his high forehead, would've greeted him, but the man never had a chance. Cain appeared in front of him, whipped out a photograph of Abel Stein and mounted his assault. "Seen this man?"

"Naow," the clerk drawled.
"Think. Are you sure?"
"I said, naow."
"Have you been at this job for long?"
"Tha's right. Ten years in February. I wonder… could this fellow have had a beard?"

"I doubt it," Cain said. "Maybe."

The gentleman stroked his chin thoughtfully studying his shoes, and then, as if a glimmering of light seeped into the slow space between his ears, "There was a fellow here who smoked cigars. Tha's right. Terrible! Tha's how I remember." He continued studying the photograph. "Looks rather handsome without the beard."

"Did he say anything? Where he was going?"

"Yeah, well, I really wouldn't remember, sir. It's been a long time."

A hollow breath of disappointment escaped Cain's chest. He shoved the photograph into his coat.

"I'm not even certain it was him, the fellow in the picture," the gentleman said.

"This man smokes cigars. It was him all right."

At another mention of the cigar, the aroma materialized, haunting, wafting through time and the clerk snapped his fingers. "Tha's right! He asked about tours to the Cape Verde islands. I told him—"

Cain performed a brusque about face. He'd heard enough. He stepped out of the office slapping his hat hard on his head, half covering his eyes, and searched the mall for Muriel and Daniel.

***

They stood off to one side in front of a shop window. Cain stared into the glass at a model wooden ship.

When he was twelve, Cain built a model ship, a Spanish galleon, yet halfway through he'd given up. The rigging, for which he used his mother's black sewing thread, required long delicate fingers. Cain's hands developed square and strong, not necessarily nimble. His long fine lines of rigging hung hopelessly tangled and twisted, encrusted by gobs of glue. He sat at his desk in a depressed bunch. His shoulders aching, he felt he possessed no effort left to give. When
he looked up, old man Stein leaned over him peering at the half-finished model, the mucked rigging. "And how goes the boat building business?" He laid a heavy hand on his son's shoulder.

"It's a ship not a boat. I tell yuh, Pop, I give up."

"What? You what?" his father snorted like a beast.

"I can't do it, Pop."

Old man Stein grabbed his son by the shoulders spinning him around. When he spoke, the timbre of his voice resonated throughout the house. The whole world heard him that day. Thirty years later Cain still remembered his words. "Can't! Never utter that word in this house. I tell you right now, boy, strike it from your vocabulary. No son of mine's a quitter! Now, here!" he slammed down the spool of thread in front of Cain. "This time get it right!" So saying, old man Stein stormed away. He secreted himself outside his son's room spying through a crack in the door.

In a few moments Cain reached for the thread. He carefully measured off a length breaking it over his tooth. "You can go now, Pop. I'll start over again."

His father stepped out from behind the door. "It's my house. I'll come and go as I damn well please!" Again, he stormed off, this time with a twinkle of pride in his eyes.

Cain attacked his life as a series of challenges, each solution giving birth to the next problem. The closest he came to happiness was momentary satisfaction. Never a greedy man, he didn't desire that which he couldn't see and he never noticed that which would not help to achieve his goal.

Pacing himself, he progressed like a pit bull into the third year of his manhunt for Abel. Time logged across three countries, hard military bunks, small hotel rooms, rotten food on the run, acid stomach, and another man might have burned out. However, exhaustion didn't figure in Cain's strategy. THEY also searched, and if they arrested Abel, they'd imprison him as a traitor. Cain Stein experienced one feeling in his life that never begged for resolution. He loved his brother without beginning and without end, more now than ever. Their relationship, always problematic, never felt wrong.
While young and inseparable, Cain fought the neighborhood bullies for Abel. Growing older, the brothers no longer viewing life in the same context, Cain found himself defending Abel's political activities to their father, defending his numerous protest rallies and arrests.

Brother loved brother the way their father loved his sons. When a problem plagued Abel, old man Stein suggested the answer might be found in a book, "The noble record of men's ideas," he said, or he proposed Abel try battling with paper and pencil outlining his solutions. However, Cain owned a thicker skin; the kind of boy one picked up by the scruff of the neck, even slapped on occasion to wake him up, because he learned best that way. With Cain, the old man took a direct, tough route.

Cain's respect for Abel cut a deep vein, knowing his brother's strength originated from a burdening sense of morality, a dogged conviction, a tenacity Cain realized bonded them to one another. Living through the strength of their convictions sculpted an overall quality, making the brothers more alike than they cared to admit. They never fought about anarchy or institutional destruction. They did argue over which road America should travel, over whose politics would get the job done. Never for a moment had Cain stopped loving his brother, though he'd often found himself thinking what an idealistic idiot he must be. If they imprison Abel, Cain thought, I'll go insane.

Hands behind his back, he examined the rigging on the wooden ship, finishing his conversation with Muriel. "...Cape Verde. Look, I have some business to tie up here. Daniel, why don't you take your mother back to the ship?"

Muriel, wearing hair shorn to a new assertive length, balled her tiny fists. "I don't want to go back to the ship."

Cain knew they watched him through the crowd. He didn't have to turn around to see the two men dressed in dark suits. Their heavy stature conspicuous: thick jowls under petroleum jelly hair, collars buttoned to the top, their suits constructed of heavy solid fabric. Hordes of shoppers quick on their feet, dressed in light cottons, their hair dry, threatened to trample the men as they stood their ground.

"We're being followed." Cain smiled. "We had a deal, didn't we?"
"I don't recall making any deals," Muriel said.
Daniel stood rocking on his heels, his hands in his pockets. He glanced past his uncle. "I see them." Then he looked away. "Mom, let's do what he says."
"Good man." Cain spoke to Daniel, but glared at Muriel. "Take your mother back to the ship. And you, you're gonna have to trust me. This is war."

***

He allowed the men to follow him down to the hotel lobby and outside into the afternoon heat, where he strolled along Alice Street until they slowed in the middle of the block fighting off sun in their eyes. Cain spun around on one army oxford placing himself in opposition to the enemy. They stopped dead, not knowing whether to turn or continue past Cain, who approached in long strides swift and certain. He bravely played his game in the open, in front of numerous passers-by, launching himself down the walkway like a scud missile, his intention to annihilate them with a show of nerves. At least he would take an eye out.

They strode forward, a moving offensive wall. When they met, the men smiled.
"You boys wouldn't be following me, would yuh?"
"No," one of the men said. He twitched nervously.
"What are you doing in Africa, Colonel?" the other one wanted to know.
"Vacation with the family. I'm going to run with the elephants," Cain said, deciding they must be CIA. "And what did you say you were here for?"
"We didn't. Golf."
"Good." Cain tipped his hat. "You boys ought to be able to handle that." He turned back to the hotel.
CHAPTER 10--ISLA DEL SANTO; SAINTED VISIONS

The leopard's silhouette stalked down wind, lean and low, padding silently on jungle leaves, rotating muscular shoulders, holding back such restrained power that ten-thousand tiny crickets chirped unaware of the great cat's presence. Abel Stein stood, stretching his body, his nose to the breeze, ignorant of the killer pursuing him.

Like a leopard, Abel mastered traversing the earth while leaving no trace; no footprint in the dirt or broken branch under his toes, no snapping twig beside his arms, not a sound or an image in time attesting to his existence.

A fat boa wound its way through the grass in front of Abel. He froze. The leopard stopped and slung its head down rolling its eyes upwards, never taking its sight off the human prey.

Abel studied the snake. It bulged swallowing the carcass of a river rat gulped whole. The snake slithered close. It stopped within killing range of Abel and lifted its head flicking its tongue, arching back, ready to strike at the battered white flesh of Abel's calf and shinbone. Abel did not invite death, nor was he afraid.

Several months before, a boa found its way into the village. Helpless, tied to his post, Abel watched horrified while the giant snake squeezed the life out of a pleading native boy. Abel shouted for help. Several men came running. They attacked the snake with crude machetes, but by the time the snake released its death grip the boy shook deep purple. His vital organs crushed, he didn't survive the night.
Abel calmly stood his ground. The boa, satiated with its meal, lowered its head sliding along the ground continuing on its journey.

Abel continued and so did the great cat.

Hiking towards a flickering light, for some time Abel thought it odd, a light where he expected darkness. Why he'd be drawn to the light felt equally mysterious. Living in the jungle meant existing in shadows under a high canopy of leaves and branches so dense that daylight rarely found a way through. His night vision grew strong over the years. He lived enveloped by night's pitch.

Through his suffering, moments struck, a spot of light where he witnessed in awe a magnificent journey. Under early morning illumination he viewed the electric blue Morpho butterfly, veins in a grasshopper's wings, the rising sun. Without light, would he know nightfall? Light rescued and fulfilled, and it seemed natural that Abel gravitate towards light in the darkness.

Drawing near, light emanated from a cave high upon a stone platform. Abel stopped for a moment. The leopard drew back on his powerful hind legs ready to lunge.

Biped, quadruped or a slithering reptile, all traveled The Path. However, only the biped man ever paused, considering his journey, because humanity reflects. One afternoon, in The People's village, Abel caught himself in the middle of reflective thought.

I used to search for a purpose in life. Yes. But not here. Not anymore. All I do now is live. Day in and day out; there's no point in fear. What? After all, I will die, so, in the end, any higher purpose in life is just mental masturbation. I don't love and I don't hate. I just survive. I survive waiting to die.

Bill happened along that day. Searching Abel's eyes as if overhearing his thoughts. "You are one who knows. You are awake in a big way."

"You're wrong, my friend. I'm asleep. Dead to the world, just waiting for God to catch up with the morning news."

Bill grinned looking into the distance. "Only those who are awake ask about it. The People call it doing battle with faith. We think about a thing. We say, we know this thing. But
then we do not. We think we have lived all of this time, here and there, thinking this and that and
now we know nothing! I tell you," Bill shook his finger at Abel's face, "this battle with faith
makes a man ask, 'Am I crazy?'"

"I'm depressed about my stupidity, Bill. About everything I've ever done. About everyone
I've lost." Abel grabbed his bamboo scraper working a long green reed. First he split it and then
scraped it thin. "I guess you would call that crazy." He looked up. "I'm angry and I dare the
universe to show me a reason for living."

"That is an important question. You thought of it? You did? Without me? When I was not
here you thought of the question? No."

"Yes, you idiot! I can think! And I'll tell you something," Abel cried, tears rolling down
his cheeks. He threw the scraper. "I've paid my dues! I want answers!"

"Ah…" Bill gazed into Abel's swollen eyes baked by the jungle. "Awake!"

***

Now, Bill sat quietly, his tenantless eyes unblinking. Hey You strutted at the other end of
their large cave, occasionally squawking at flames. Hey You did not like fire, he'd merely
adjusted to it.

Flames swelled and diminished in rhythm with all life on the island, in rhythm with Bill's
breathing, and when they swelled, Bill's face shone bright yellow. When they diminished, Bill's
face glowed pale red. He listened to the sound of his breathing; a slow inhalation, first the lower
abdomen then the belly, finally the diaphragm. He sucked up the flames and they illuminated the
walls of his cave. When he exhaled, Bill forced one sharp quick breath through his old nose, his
sinking cartilage. Every half-dozen breathes he sat, eyes vacuous, moist air seeping out for the
longest time, listening for things too far away to be heard, too distant for remembrance. He heard
The People chanting. They began soft. Intensified. Heightened in a blasting crescendo, until he
knew it was not The People, but the attacking roar of a leopard snarling and tearing flesh with his
fangs while a man screamed. He sat, unblinking. Abel Stein, bleeding, stood in the cave's entrance in the flickering light.

"Sit," Bill said.

Abel approached the fire slowly sensing its heat, aware of the moment. His eyes wandered stone walls timeworn with voice inflections, textured flesh, the hair and teeth and bone of an old man. Stone absorbed Bill's essence, his spirit.

Bill handed Abel an open gourd filled with earth colored mixture. Abel pinched a dab between fore and index fingers, lifting these to his nose. The odor reeked pungent and dusty. The two men studied each other. Bill picked up another gourd dipping his fingers into its mixture. Staring at Abel, Bill licked the ends of his fingers. Abel quickly adapted to the ceremony licking the mixture off his fingers. Choking violently, he gagged and wiped his mouth across the back of his hand.

Bill, unmoved, sucked at the flames while they rose and fell and he spoke. "You know, I am old. I have seen many places. Met many men, all with different ways. But in all of my years, never have I seen a man eat bat shit."

Abel spit-up into the fire. His face illuminated by flames turned pale green about the ears.

Bill continued patient as granite, "I have always found it good for open sores. The dried dung kills maggots and, of course, keeps the mosquitoes away." He picked up his own gourd offering it to Abel. "If you are hungry, try this. It is nut chew." He pinched some in his fingers shoving it at Abel, pushing it in his face. "Go on. Take it." Abel vomited.

"You've got to help me," he choked out, "to get back to my tribe."

Bill appeared stumped. "Tribe?"

"Damn you! My people. Across the bridge. Before Tanuck hangs my skull in his living room!"

"I know of no bridge. No people."

"What do you mean, no people?"

"None," Bill said.
"Then where did I come from? How did I get here? Don't be ridiculous. I have to get back."

Bill gazed into the fire. "Your coming was told long ago. I have waited, sitting here like these walls. You will teach us to drink from the sea. After this thing you have done, I should be angry with you. You are responsible."

"That's a big word for an ignorant little man."

"I know that word. You are responsible. The jungle is a mother. It remembers and teaches. A monkey at one end of the river learns to use a tree branch to dig for ants. I do not know why, but tomorrow monkeys that do not know each other, they know how to use a tree branch to dig for ants." Bill shrugged.

"You've got me, Bill. That's an amazing observation."

"I know this. I have seen it many times."

"That doesn't explain why you should suddenly be angry at me."

"After tonight, all men must eat shit." Bill threw his hands in the air, hopeless.

Abel's retching ceased. He wiped the flow of salty liquid from his tear ducts clearing his eyes. "You realize this is beyond comprehension?"

"Ah..." Bill's arms moved through the air high and low, his hands searching.

"By your reckoning, I should blame my eating shit on Adam. That doesn't sound like taking responsibility to me."

"Adam is a friend of yours?"

"Well, no. We've never met."

"I have watched the monkeys eating ants with a stick. They know what they are doing. They think about it first. It is a choice." Bill reached into his waist pouch extracting a fistful of nuts. He tossed them freely on the ground, contemplating their formation. He scooped them up, shook the nuts between both hands and tossed again. Again, he considered them, grumbling in the language of The People. He regarded Abel with a strange expression on his face—a look of metaphysical finality—as if, by studying the fall of the nuts, he'd learned something beyond
explanation, nevertheless definitive. "I do not think so," he mumbled half-heartedly. "Yet, it is told."

"What?" Abel leered at the nuts, mistrusting whatever nonsense they must be telling Bill. Still, he found himself caught in the hocus-pocus.

"It is time for you to become one who knows." Bill popped half the nuts into his mouth. Abel, following his example, scooped up the other half. *Maybe they'll poison me. I'll get lucky.* He held them to his mouth, but paused. *Maybe they'll taste like bat shit. I don't trust the old man. I don't want to die with the taste of crap in my mouth.* He sniffed them, turning them over on his palm.

"Do not be a fool," Bill said. "Swallow them."

Abel tossed the bunch in his mouth. He chewed tiring his jaw, finding them tough and fibrous, and as they mixed with his saliva, their tartness cut into his tongue. The two men sat across from one another over the fire, Abel gnawing at his bitter cheeks.

"I am not your enemy," Bill said. "A long time ago, you did not want to live. Today you must live! A man makes choices. All we have in life is what we hold in our right hand or our left. Which one?" He held out his leathery fists knuckles up. The jungle is like a mother. She remembers and she teaches. If you listen, if you see, you make good choices. If you do not listen, you make bad choices. We know what we know, remember what we remember, because we are like the jungle. Each thing you do is important. Because, as you do a thing, make a choice, all men will learn to do this thing. When you do a thing, it is like telling a story on the village mound. Telling stories is important because the jungle is listening and remembering. My friend, you do not live alone or act alone."

The fire flashed in Abel's eyes. "What do you know about my life?"

"I could ask you the same." He withdrew his fists.

"I don't care about your life! Do you know what I've done? What I am? What I have to live with!" Abel jumped to his feet seething with anger.

Bill, already far away, stared straight ahead. "Sit, wife of Tanuck. I see what you have done still belongs to you. You live with the ghost of pain."
Abel crossed his legs in the way of The People. Quietly, he watched Bill. A deep silence, The River of All Time running between them, connecting them, a universe alive with memory became his teacher. Abel warmed in his extremities. His joints loosened. The bones of his skull softened. No news here. I'm not telling the old man anything he doesn't already know. It'll be with me as long as I'm alive. This became Abel's admission, long time coming, of his shameful guilt-ridden state of affairs.

"Then you are one who runs from his own—" and Bill slapped his ass.

Abel couldn't help laughing. They both laughed. Bill's laugh resonated, and when it peaked, he caught his breath, his smile melted and he looked at Abel. Abel grew transfixed on Bill's mouth. He examined the straight line and thin lips. His eyes, an electron microscope penetrating each of a thousand hairlines escaping Bill's lips, running to his nose above and chin below. He studied the hollow in Bill's neck, groping, lost in the deep shadow between his mastoid muscles. He zoomed in below the flesh through the forest of thin red fibers riding on a blood corpuscle… The jungle is inside of him and so is the river. Am I mad? No. I'm positively brilliant! Suddenly, Abel became aware of himself, of what he was doing and thinking. "What kind of nuts did I eat?"

"Nuts? Hmm. Just something to eat. The People need you, wife of Tanuck. Be with us."

"As what? A slave? The People don't want me."

"The People have given you a gift."

Abel's eyes opened wide.

"We do not keep slaves. We know slavery."

Slavery, the word lodged like a shard of glass in Abel's heart.

*Behind him, a native screamed a pitiful sounding plea. Abel saw the wooden ship. He heard the dead clanking of heavy chains.

Abel shook his head, running his fingers through his beard and shaggy hair to rid himself of lice. He tried crawling out of his skin. Bill spoke stoically, as if he hadn't seen it. "Before the
missionaries, The People had their ways. We planted, we hunted, we had sons and daughters. At
night we told our stories to the children of The People."

*Abel saw Bill in the firelight, though it wasn't him. Young Bill didn't speak to Abel. He
danced above the fire, acting out a story to a group of children.
Abel's glassy eyes stared. He no longer shook his head while tributaries in The River of
All Time flitted across his consciousness. He looked to the old man.
"We buried our fathers and mothers in the sea and hung their skulls and prayed for their
spirits."
Bill shook his head slightly and softly smiled. "When the mother of my wife died, I had
to hang the skull in our house, just when I thought I was finished with her. I often thought when I
looked at it, there is something wrong with this way."
"When the sea and sun were kind to us, we danced. When they were not, we worked
harder at the planting, the fishing, the hunting. If we did not plant, we would not eat. If we did
not make the houses, our children would not sleep. This was our way."
"We did not know an enemy. We did not know we were savages until the missionaries
told us. Imagine our surprise! They told us we should throw our skulls into the sea. That day I
shouted, 'Yes, we are savages. We should throw our skulls into the sea. I will be the first.' I did
not believe this, that we were savages. I just wanted to throw the skull of the mother of my wife
into the sea. Ha!"
Abel's line now severed, he found himself adrift on the river, his laughter becoming
uncontrollable, the only honest response he could offer. In the midst of his doubled up
convulsions, he possessed a faint notion he might be vomiting again, painless, nothing of
consequence, and then it passed. His sides hurt and he caught his breath. It dawned on him.
"Missionaries? How old are you?" He felt his legs with his hands, thinking he might have
urinated. They ran cold.
Bill looked down at his body. He wiggled his fingers and played with his toes. "I do not
know. But, I know if it does not hurt, it is dead."
Abel's face grew wan, his bones malleable, his joints liquid. His veins ran warm, rising mercury flowing through his limbs. He sat helpless if death stood in front of him. Yet, he sat supported by life's primal strength, an undercurrent of truth supporting his vertebrae, securing the position of his shoulders while his arms hung loosely, palms landing upwards in his lap. His gaze met Bill's but he didn't see Bill.

*Torches burned in the night sky and chains thudded and scraped. White men laughed and shouted oaths driving young and old of The People into the stinking fleshpot holds of large wooden ships. They kicked a young boy and yanked a young girl out of line. They bludgeoned an old woman to death. The ship's masts, sewn from human skins, billowed in the winds.

Bill knew Abel's vision. "I learned to talk to the missionaries. I thought it was for play until they came. They followed the missionaries, the men with guns who would take us away. They did not hurt me. I could talk like them. Talk to The People. Lie to them."

Abel's vision faded on a scream, and the old man's words trespassed The River of All Time from the past to the present. It took Abel time to fathom them. Finally, incredulously he asked, "You betrayed your own people?"

"I thought if I did not do this thing, the men with guns would kill me. Would that help my people? Only if I could live and learn the ways of knowing, then, later I could help. But later did not come. They had no more use for me. They put me on a ship like the others. I have been to the land you call Portugal, to the land you call England." For the first time since they swallowed the nuts, Bill looked at Abel through a strong sense of recognition, a sense of bonding. "Always, what I did to The People traveled with me, because there is no time in the jungle and never this place or that place. You—is always here now, and then it changes. It was here, in my head, my chest, my stomach. It was in my arms and legs. Some days my arms were so heavy they could not lift, my legs would not carry me. I hoped death would come. I was a house servant in Portugal. A big house. I was treated well. I was fortunate. And then one day, when I became old, they did not want me."

"Why return to this hell-hole?"
Bill rose. He slapped dirt off his hands, hobbled to the other side of the cave, picked up a few medium sized logs and returned with them to the fire. He dropped them on a pile of burning embers. Sparks flew. A glimmer of a smile crossed his ancient lips. "I have always liked the way they look, bright, floating through the air like that."

Bill sat cross-legged holding his feet. "I returned because the slavers were done with us. I had a wife and son. I wished to know my son as a man. To live my final days with the comfort of a wife. What I did, well, I understood then how I could help The People. What do you see, wife of Tanuck?"

"Nothing."

Bill held out both of his fists knuckles up. Abel stared at them. Bill turned them over, opening them, exposing his palms.

*Gun blasts exploded around Abel. Mothers grabbed children running for their lives.

"When I returned, my wife and son were gone. Those of us who survived were killing each other. Always it was a longer spear, a sharper arrow. I was already one who knew. I knew the guns would come. I saw it one night in the fire. The guns came, the rains did not. The lake became shallow. Those who tried to drink the high water died. The People panicked. There would not be enough water for everyone. Those with guns would take the water. Then, in the fire I saw a man who would come. He would show us how to drink the sea. But The People had been lied to by the missionaries, the slavers, me. They would not listen."

"I can't help you. And what if I could? Why should I?"

"You should be grateful," Bill said.

"For what? A leash around my neck?"

"I see no leash. You are free to come and go, as you wish. The People have treated you well. In time, you will understand."

"I'm not going back to that village."

Bill inhaled deeply sucking flames into his cheeks under ancient eyes. "You are now one who knows. But that is only knowledge. Understanding takes more time. I have no herb or berry
for understanding. This thing comes with living, choosing. Knowledge and compassion; this is understanding. Learning that you are never alone on The River of All Time, that you are responsible for the jungle as it is responsible for you, this is wisdom. You will do well with The People. Perhaps, you will do well without them." Bill held out his fists. "Will you desert them like the others?" He nodded towards his fists, "Which one?" After a silent moment Bill withdrew his fists, instead placing his hands behind his neck. He removed a bamboo string necklace holding a single dog's tooth dangling from it and handed this to Abel. "Put this on."

Abel draped it around his neck awakening from a dream. In front of him burned a low fire. Across from him sat the old man. Abel's skin was drenched. He ran a hand through his sopping hair. Feeling chilled, he inched closer to the fire.

"Was the water cold tonight?" Bill asked.
"Water?"
"You have been playing like a child in The River of All Time."
"Right. You're not making any sense."
"What are you running from?" Bill asked.

Abel wrestled with a vague feeling in his bones. "Things I couldn't change. People I couldn't abide." He clung with one hand to the dog's tooth around his neck, as if it were a life preserver.

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Abel scraped bamboo strips towards his body, always towards the body. His hair, pulled in a ponytail, ran the length of his spine. His gray beard grew full, and he worked without a leash around his neck, washed clean and free from sores. Bone armlets of The People strained tightly against his long biceps, and the dog's tooth hung around his neck, swinging with the steady movements of his body.

Weeks passed since that night on The River of All Time. Without the leash, Abel still performed his tasks each day because he wanted to. He lived content, appreciating the sunrise and sunset and knowing one day he'd arrive at the end of his journey. He hung suspended over
The River of All Time, his teeth clenched around a tree branch, hands tied behind his back, comfortable with his mortality.

Returning of his own volition, he'd shown Tanuck a willingness to partake of village life. To his credit, Tanuck welcomed Abel into his home where he slept and ate with the others. For Abel, taking up his scraper symbolized a conscious act of welcoming the life of The People under his skin, an assertive act empty of ego, allowing himself assimilation into the universe. Abel Stein no longer felt himself a cast about bag of bones.

On the other side of a twisting arm of the swamp, a small pile house climbed high on its stilts, and occasionally between strokes Abel squinted into the sun at the house's empty verandah. At mid afternoon Abel's skin glistened in oils and his tongue swelled from thirst. When the sun shone directly above, a young woman stepped onto the verandah. Her skin appeared smooth and fresh and black as dark earth discovered under a fallen log. Afternoon heat left her countenance untouched, and smiling under hair shaved close to her head and numerous bead necklaces resting on narrow chocolate shoulders, she emerged undefiled by anything worldly.

Again, with hope in his eyes, Abel peered at the house squinting, trying to locate the verandah through harsh yellow light. She shouted to him, waving a bag in one hand. "Abel. Hello. Hello. Abel."

"Hello, Marwe."

According to The People's legend, in ages past there lived a young girl named Marwe. Kept from the man she loved by a tyrant father, Marwe decided she would rather die than pine away her life. One moonlit night she threw herself into The River of All Time. However, instead of perishing, the river transformed Marwe into a radiant ageless water goddess. She lived under the river for many years until her father grew old and died. The day of his death she appeared on land to search for her beloved. When she found him, he'd grown old. Marwe healed the agedness of her beloved with a touch of her gold bracelets, turning him into a god, and they married.
This afternoon Marwe shimmied down her ladder as fast as her sweet bare feet dared and jumped into her canoe. She cradled the bag between her knees, and using a long pole pushed off from the bank, floating down a razor thin waterway, the sun blazing at her back.

Abel set down his scraper. He stretched and leaned on his belly over the water's edge where he washed his face in tepid liquid, taking pains not to swallow any. At night, when the fisherman returned, they brought fresh drinking water from the lake and filled a large common vessel sitting on the coral mound. During the day The People squeezed tart juices from jungle fruits. Sitting on the edge of the bank, he dangled his legs in the brown water.

Marwe glided up in her canoe coming to rest by Abel. He smiled at her, his eyes expectantly searching her canoe, knowing she hid his lunch. Abel envisioned his favorite, sago palm pudding. Marwe giggled sheepishly. She'd hidden the bag under her thighs. "No food for your friend Abel?" He cocked his head like a sad puppy and she chuckled, not ready to give up her secret.

The best fun resulted from simply being aware. By day, children snuck behind Abel mimicking his step, while at night, adults hid his mattress and, of course, he was invited to do the same. He joined them under the story torches on the coral mound. Here, The People formed a large circle taking turns sharing the common thread of their existence: horrifying tales of storms and death and destruction, stories filled with awe and respect concerning the observance of a new life form; a fish of a different color, a sacred singing bird, sometimes a village elder would regale the youngsters with parables revealing The People's morals and ethics and their sense of political power and fairness.

Abel, invited to speak, stood in the center of the circle acting out his story of the leopard, terrifying the children and making the adults laugh. Slowly, The People recognized Abel's spirit.

Marwe abruptly stopped chuckling and cocked her head to one side using a definite pout. Then she smiled a broad half moon grin reaching under her thighs for the food bag. Abel helped her out of the canoe onto the bank where she fed him palm pudding. While they ate, children played on a grouping of nearby rocks displaying their prowess for danger, running and jumping
over a series of deadly jagged protrusions, splashing one another in the shallow water, cautious never to swallow.

After lunch Abel and Marwe swam in the deeper end of the lagoon, holding each other close in the water. The older boys and girls drifted over splashing each other. They pushed the water with their hands, making waves, trying to wave over Abel and Marwe. The water foamed, seaweed flew and Abel and Marwe found themselves drawn into a no-holds-barred water fight. Hands, arms, and naked bottoms slapped the mud. Eventually, Abel and Marwe lost the war, willingly giving up the lagoon to an army of troublemakers.

On the bank, they lie baking under the sun and when the water dried it left a fine film of ashen silt on their skin. Abel got to his knees brushing off the silt from his chest. He knelt over Marwe, who smiling up at him naturally spread her legs. Abel gasped, flustered, not without desire. For Marwe the act came as play. He wondered if she drew a correlation between sex and having babies. He grew embarrassed.

She sensed his discomfort and sat up perplexed. Abel struggled for words, hoping she might intuit his meaning. "There's the ritual. My god, where I come from a girl doesn't do that, ...yet. There's dinner, a glass or two of wine, dancing. Of course, I'm an incurable romantic," Abel tittered at his confession of being from the old school. He smiled at Marwe and she gazed at him, her eyes wide and deep brown filled with equal parts of reverence and naiveté. He studied her lips, her chin that moved ever so slightly, the tantalizing curve of her eyebrows."*I confess anything, everything.*" He reached out to her, brushing the back of his hand against Marwe's soft powdery cheek. Her lips moved barely discernible and he knew her struggle to understand what he said, what he was feeling. It touched him that what he felt should be this important to her. "Oh, and slow dancing, Marwe. That's the best." She didn't understand when Abel grasped her hand and they both stood facing one another. He proceeded to civilize her, to show Marwe a simple box step, which she found impossible and which they both howled over. And then the laughter stopped. Abel felt ashamed. He knew it was wrong to teach her his ritual. Marwe must be left beautiful. She must be left Marwe.
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While Abel and Marwe discovered each other below, the women of Tanuck's pile house above cooked, mended, and cleaned by the dark fire heat. The baby crawled, incessantly scrambling and mumbling in astonishment at each new crack in the rotting floorboards. Occasionally, one of the women moved quickly about the room, picking up the child and rushing him off to some corner not to be trod on.

Below, a comfortable afternoon breeze whistled through the village. Welcoming the relief, Abel and Marwe held hands stroking each other's bodies. At Abel's suggestion, they'd begun showing one another which areas were sensitive, ticklish, or erogenous. Abel, playing with her feet, tickling Marwe, moved to new ground inching slowly up her calve, running his callused hand up her thigh in long slow rubs until she shivered with pleasure biting her lower lip.

A piercing scream shattered their universe followed by a loud creaking. Abel spun around in time to see a floorboard from above fall into the lagoon. Another scream and the baby tumbled through the air, its small body turning helplessly head over heels until it hit the water with a thud and a tiny splash. Abel's world stopped. He felt himself rising, moving beyond conscious control.

The infant's lifeless body sank to the bottom of the lagoon. Another splash quickly followed and all that could be seen were Abel's feet disappearing into the muck.

The women, screeching in horror, raced down the ladder leaping over rocking canoes, and braced themselves on the bank. Abel had not surfaced. The women held each other waiting. Abel's head broke water choking and spiting and then disappeared. The women cried. Villagers watched from their verandahs.

The People shook their heads shouting at one another, swiftly debating. Who else would dive and search? It was well known, that particular marshy pool was off limits. A terrible thing happened in that pool. Ubuku, the old shepherd, went for a bath. No sooner had he stuck in his right toe, than his foot had been eaten to the ankle by the 'hungry fish'. 
"Tanuck was warned," one of the village women argued in the language of The People, to move his house upland. The others nodded agreement. "But no. He is too fat and lazy. Too arrogant!" the village woman said.

"What if I dive?" one of the village men spoke out, "and if the fish eat me, not that I am afraid, but would it help? No, I will not dive. But I am not afraid."

Natives hung their heads, stoop-shouldered in consensus; all was lost. Although the baby had been trained to swim from the womb, an infant body could never survive the fall.

Abel's purple head broke the surface. His eyes bulged, distended and wild. He dove again. The mother would not be comforted, falling to her knees wailing and pounding the earth with small fists.

When the women screamed again, the mother looked up. Abel shot out of the lagoon. In his arms, he held the baby. He laid the tiny body on the bank in front of the mother. He opened its mouth, and cradling the back of the infant's head, he breathed into his heart and lungs. The baby laid limp, eyes open. The People, devastated, turned away returning to their tasks. What words of consolation could be spilled into a bleeding wound?

The mother stood planted in the muddy soil staring at the tiny body. Abel breathed one last breath into his little mouth. The baby's eyes rolled in his head. He dribbled from the corner of his lip and choked.

Abel, having swallowed the water, suffered dysentery for two months. The first month he wished he could rip out his bowels. By the middle of the second month, he felt too weak and emaciated to wish for anything other than death. The baby recovered in five minutes and never became ill. He crawled around Abel's sick bed clucking, shortling and drooling, grabbing at Abel's finger and toes, and Abel wondered seriously, Did I do the right thing?
CHAPTER 11--THE RULES OF THE GAME

The People's torches burned, jumping up and down, swaying back and forth, hundreds, thousands; fireflies streaming the night sky, lining narrow shores, setting the coral mound aglow, floating like a planet in deep space. They lit their canoes, those who had no place else to stand, like white curled leaves bobbing on black waters. The People chanted stopping time, mesmerizing the cool dark air, unifying the cosmos, "Chaka chaka chaka, chak chak, chakaaa chakaaa, chakaaa chakaaa, oooombwi!" They weighted down sagging verandahs flashing fleshy grins, dancing for the new hero, the brave one amongst them.

On the floating planet, the coral mound, bamboo sheets were spread earlier in the day. These sheets bore a tonnage of multifarious fruits carefully gathered by the women: Abuk, whose name meant 'The First Woman'; Rangda, whose name meant 'The Sensual Witch'; and Ala, whose name meant 'Guardian of the Harvest'. The torches illuminated kiwis, bananas, melons, pineapples, and a collection of betel nuts liberally sprinkled throughout. In the center of the feast, laid to rest a juicy wild pig, a huge snorting monstrosity showing a spear gash in the side of its fat belly, hunted at great personal risk by Kwaku Ananse, whose name meant 'The Trickster'.

Honored to feast alongside the hero were the upper echelon of The People: Chulu, whose name meant 'Controller of the Rains'; Ibassi, whose name meant 'Leader of the Hunt'; Nantuck, whose name meant 'Speaker for the Spirits'. Sitting on the hero's right, Tanuck the fisherman, and on his left sat Lehook Nakumba—known as 'Bill'—whose name meant 'Gifted One', and who Nantuck assured The People their gods spoke highly of. In the hero's position at the center
of the feast sat Abel, no longer Tanuck's wife, no longer a woman of The People, but their new hero.

Abel the egotist, the center of his universe, gloried in his moment. Tanuck rose motioning for silence. When all grew quiet and the ten thousand crickets could be heard in the jungle, Tanuck spoke. He discoursed at length, sometimes speaking so softly he could barely be heard, other times shouting and flailing the air using arms and hands, pointing fingers and stomping his pudgy feet. Twice overtaken by deep emotion, he choked pausing to drink from the tart juices. When he finished, The People grinned and laughed nodding in agreement. Abel grinned too, though at somewhat of a loss. He'd intuited the spirit of the speech, not the words.

Bill patted him reassuringly on the shoulder and stood in his place translating. "When the stranger came to us, Tanuck saw that he was alone and afraid like a leopard cub without a mother. He took pity on the stranger and asked The People if he might give the stranger what gifts The People have to give. He taught him to make bamboo cloth for the cold. To sleep under the sky if the wind blows away his house. To search the jungle for food. To paddle a canoe. These, Tanuck says, are all the gifts The People have to give. It was a good trade. Now, the stranger has given to The People all he has to give. It is a good sign. Tanuck is sorry The People must lose a woman. But, he is proud to have a brave leopard for his friend."

Bill sat cross-legged in his place and the feasting continued, hands grabbing at fruits, fingers tearing at meat, and the sounds of satisfied tongues smacking in full mouths and chanting behind them, "Chaka chaka chakaaa..." Bill drew close to Abel. "You are a brave man. Tanuck speaks the truth. Myself, I did not think you had such strength inside of you. To jump into a lagoon with Piranha, the 'hungry fish' of The People."

"Piranha?"

"You did not know?" Bill grumbled cynically, "That explains it. I am never wrong when it comes to the living."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

At that moment, strong hands grasped Abel's armpits from behind, ripping into his body, yanking him from his place of honor. Other hands took the undersides of his knees, raising him
in the air, carrying him above a torrent of The People, passed from one set of hands to another quickly across the coral mound. "Chaka chakaaaa!" The end of the torrent brought him to the entrance of the dark hut, where he'd spent his first days with The People. Being pushed and prodded, once again he stumbled into darkness.

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His nostrils burned inhaling the citrus sweet stench of The People. A crowd shoved at each other, standing shoulder to shoulder around the fire in the middle of the hut. They struggled to get a better view of Abel, of the ceremony. Fathers bounced sons on their shoulders. Mothers nursed babies at their breasts. Great mumbling, thoughtful words, excited rumblings traveled among the crowd. There were those who doubted, but most remained certain. Outside, The People swarmed waiting and chanting throughout the night.

Inside Abel faced fire. He stared into the flames at glowing red and white rocks. Resting on the rocks, a knife fried to searing, an aura of blue and yellow leaping from its blade. Abel perspired. The brave one trembled, buzzing, scared shitless.

Grinning he turned. The People nodded to each other in satisfaction. Here, they thought, stood a brave man. Only one amongst them, Bill, knew better. Things progressed too far. Bill realized there was nothing to do except get on with it. He stepped out from the crowd, speaking to Abel. "Tonight, you must be initiated into manhood, in the way of The People."

"Some kind of ancient tribal ritual? A male rite of passage? Is that all this is about?" Abel breathed a relieved sigh.

"I must tell you, most of the boys are young."

"Better!" If a boy could do it, a grown man had nothing to fear. So, okay, they'll ask me to prick my finger. They're such primitive children. "Okay, I'm up for it."

"All the same," Bill whispered, "I wish you had known about the hungry fish."

A fat tribesman, an elder with one eye, Kubu Niko, whose name meant 'Keeper of the Medicine', stepped over to the fire and cautiously grabbed the knife by its long handle. He spat
on the blade. Saliva sizzled and disappeared instantly. Abel smiled. An old hag of a woman, another elder of The People whose name is unknown, appeared in front of Abel. In an instant, she reached out a bony hand tugging away his loincloth. Abel, not being naked since he came out of the jungle, froze in degraded shock. It became apparent what the knife was for. His blood ran cold. Flames and faces, darkness and gray shadows all mixed, floating in front of Abel. His knees softened to rubber. He struggled maintaining equilibrium. Tonight, a voice spoke to him, a fellow traveler on The River of All Time. "The closest we come to knowing life is to suspect it. No promises made, none broken."

The People mumbled amongst themselves as they looked upon Abel's nakedness. He felt their eyes crawling over his genitals, regressing to a small boy ashamed of what hung between his legs. The mumbling grew to heated argument. Abel, dizzy, didn't know how much longer he'd stand. His breathing shallowed. He kept looking at Kubu Niko, at the knife. *My lungs are collapsing. I'm fainting.* He thought Bill spoke to him from a great distance, although they stood next to one another. "The People believe you are a god. How else could you have known the ways of The People before you came here? No need to initiate a man twice."

That's right, breathe. Slowly. Just breathe.

Abel, relieved, cried silently, tears trailing down. The People filed out leaving him, his back to them. The old hag waited until they all left the hut. She slapped Abel playfully on the ass and shot an approving glance along the length of his body. He intuited her meaning; he stood a well-hung, brave man, a fine god.

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Abel emerged into the fresh night air a victorious god. The People crowded, extending their arms and hands to touch him, to squeeze his shoulders, slap his back, and to let him know, each one individually, that he or she could be counted his one true ally, a silent friend who'd been rooting for him all along. Each one desired his presence at their pile house to bless their fires and their family's skulls, seeing as how they were now personal friends. The chanting grew
frenzied and the dancing wild, until everything abruptly stopped. The crowded circle around The People's god opened revealing Marwe.

Marwe enshrouded her body from the night air in a long thick blanket dyed in three broad stripes: red for the hunt, blue for the sky, and yellow for the harvest. She wore a waistband with a hanging mantel of dogs' teeth and intricate beadwork of red and black and earth brown above a white border. Around her head, she wrapped a green bandanna, held in place with a beaded band. Finally - and Abel gaped at these - Marwe beaded and assembled seventy-five concentric loop necklaces which rested on the base of her shoulders and stacked, each loop minutely smaller than the previous one, up to the bottom of her chin.

Marwe, for seven years, devoted a portion of her days to foraging for raw materials. She cut each bead separately and gathered plants, roots, and herbs, boiling them, producing dyes. Marwe went half-blind with the stringing, working by custom in the privacy of her dark pile house lit by only a single fire. This morning, Noa Bikar, Marwe's father, whose name meant 'Keeper of Bees', decided she would wear the costume tonight. A bevy of elder women helped Marwe prepare herself. She then underwent the scrutiny of Noa Bikar, who in his way did not smile, yet showed approval. Now she stood still, a tribal icon awaiting her god, tense in anticipation hoping for his approval.

Bill pointed out a firm stocky man to Abel, a man who stood to the left of Marwe. Abel opened his arms in a sweeping gesture, showing Marwe his pleasure. The stocky man scowled at this. Obviously, he didn't approve of the god. Bill whispered to Abel. "He is Noa Bikar, the father of Marwe."

"What's his problem?"

"He has no problem. He is mean. It is said he does not hunt with the spear or knife, but with only his legs to carry him, and his hands to kill."

"Do you believe that?"

"I have felt the jungle shake when he walks. He is a mean one." Bill shook his head. The situation as he saw it just became desperate.
Noa Bikar handed Marwe another blanket and a pile of dogs' teeth. Marwe approached Abel, making him a gift of what she held in her arms. Abel accepted in silence, not knowing what to say. Marwe stepped back, without taking her large eyes from Abel, returning to her father's side. Moments of uncomfortable silence ensued. Abel, listening to the crackling torches and smelling smoke, asked Bill, "What now?"

"You better give her something quick or Noa Bikar, father of Marwe, will take off your head like this." Bill made a slow twisting motion with his hands. He barred his teeth producing a high-pitched moan from the back of his throat. Abel watched him. Bill shrugged.

Abel, in a panic, picked a moonlight blooming wild flower growing between two rocks not far from his feet. Bill looked at the flower, then at Abel, and grimaced smacking his lips in dissatisfaction. "You are a stupid god."

"Hey!"

"She is waiting. Worse, he is waiting! Give it to her and speak like a god. It will be your words that are important."

Abel advanced towards Marwe, who'd begun examining the dirt around her perfect feet hoping for the best. Like Buddha of old, he handed her the flower. "You look pretty tonight, …like this flower."

They waited. "Is that all?" Bill asked Abel.

"Look, what do you care?"

Bill turned to Noa Bikar and translated Abel's words. He articulated, running off at the mouth for several minutes, using sweeping hand gestures and bowing, and scraping at the earth in front of Noa Bikar's callused feet. Noa Bikar's lips formed an easy grin before Bill finished. He advanced on Abel trapping him inside a bone-crushing hug, his salty tears flowing like the sea. Abel, unable to suck in a breath, became dazed and confused.

"You are lucky," Bill said. "Noa Bikar likes you. And he is lucky."

Noa Bikar hugged him and cried.

"Why is he lucky?" Abel gasped, his kidneys being mashed to pulp.

"Because his daughter has married a god."
"Chakaaa, chakaaa. Oooombwi!"

***

In his own pile house, Abel lie on the floor watching Marwe next to him. He stroked her black skin, noticing the stark reality of his whiteness. She fawned at him with eyes he could tumble into. She spoke, "Dance?" Abel covered her with his body, feeling her breasts against his chest. He slid down rubbing against her dark thighs and she spread her legs for the slow dance with her god.

Marwe trembled as they lie together rubbing cheeks, grazing lips, kneading each other's muscles. He moved inside of her, growing, and lifted her legs caressing them, encircling them with his arms, while he moved and moved again, stroking, and she squeezed him moaning for the dance. He watched her eyes turning to warm glass.

Outside, a sliver of deep orange sun yawned over far hills through a blanket of mist rising like steam from the jungle. The fishermen's torches floated silently in procession towards the sea as the pig shepherd poked at his stock along the bank, they snorting, he grumbling, "Swine! Move! Don't you know we are going to feed? Move! Move along!"

Abel lolled under his blanket, red for the hunt, blue for the sky, and yellow for the harvest, with Marwe's legs tossed over him and her head on his chest. He shivered surrounded by the morning cold, thinking about water and wondering what would happen when The People grew up and realized no man is a god.

***

Bill, holding Hey You on his shoulder, paused at the cliff's edge standing so precariously close his toes extended over the perimeter. Wind blew steadily through his long hair, ruffling Hey You's feathers. The bird scrunched its head nestling itself against the breeze. Bill yelled
back a short distance to Abel, who considered the lay of the land at his feet. "This is where I saw it in my vision," Bill said.

Abel looked up. "Saw what?"

"I do not know what. But I saw it here." Bill searched the ocean, studying a gray-blue horizon as if he'd been there, wherever there was, once long ago. He turned joining Abel. "One more year. I think that is all we have."

Abel lifted a handful of soil and let it slip through his fingers, wind casting it away like so much temporal dust and he brushed off his hands smacking his palms against one another. He squinted, giving the immediate environment a final cursory glance; Abel the engineer. "There's not enough current in the tide to carry the water back to The People. However, there might be enough to carry it if we build a narrow pipeline from the bottom half of that fall increasing the pressure and running pipe at a slight incline over a distance to the top of this cliff."

"I do not know of this pipe. But why do we not build it at the edge of the fall? Up here, instead of down there?"

"Falling inertia."

Bill closed one eye leering at Abel through the other. "I do not know of this inertia." He rubbed his chin formulating a thought, fighting against it and then giving in. "Perhaps you are not a stupid god."

"Thank you. Perhaps your visions have validity."

Bill appeared confused.

"Maybe you're not crazy," Abel said.

Bill grew belligerent. "I am not, thank you."

"From here," Abel the engineer picked up the thread of his thought, "we can run the pipe down hill increasing the pressure to the village. Halfway between here and the village we'll build a simple desalinization plant. How many of The People are willing to help?"

Bill scratched Hey You and the bird closed its eyes, cocking its head down, exposing the back of its neck. Bill scratched it there too. "Let me think. None." Hey You squawked long and soft and raised its feathers. It lifted one leg and then the other side stepping closer to Bill's cheek.
Bill looked at Abel and shrugged. "I put it to a vote after my vision. The elders, they do not believe we will ever drink from the sea."

Disgusted, Abel turned and hiked away leaving Bill behind.

"I knew Tanuck was wrong," Bill yelled. "You are not a leopard!"

Abel spun around. "Déjà vu, Bill. You can't go against the tribe."

"They will help."

"What are you going to do? Bring them in chains? In the end, you'll lose. They'll sell you out for a handful of dogs' teeth. What the hell are you doing?"

Bill began scouting around, grasping wood pieces. "You know, I am very old."

Abel's shoulders met his ears expressing chagrin. He hiked back to where Bill calmly worked at building a large fire.

Without looking up Bill continued, "I could use some help." Abel joined in the wood piling and Bill smiled, pleased with himself.

***

At early sunset the sky burned yellow and the sea green. A slight mist, the body of Neptune slowly rolled up the sides of the cliffs. Abel remembered words from another life, a poem he'd learned in school, something about 'The fog came on little cat feet', Carl Sandburg long ago and far away. Again, emptiness swelled in the pit of his stomach. He squelched it drowning in a gulp. Abel and Bill sat cross-legged facing each other at the fire. A few yards away, an armadillo scratched aggressively digging a hole signaling a hollow den within a pile of boulders. Swiftly, a mole-like creature with large round eyes popped its head out of the hole. Just as swiftly, it disappeared again. The two men watched—the gifted one and the hero—and the winds abated leaving a stillness that touched them.

"I have watched the two play this game before," Bill said. He scratched at the earth with a stick.
"How is it that you always manage to rope me into stuff I don't want to do? I'm not going to help The People. They don't want to help themselves."

Bill contentedly drew in the dirt glancing at regular intervals to Hey you on his shoulder for approval. The bird sidestepped up and down the length of Bill's drawing. Bill answered for the bird, "So, you think there are too many mountains? Who asked you? Okay, I did." Bill leaned over stretching out a hand, wiping at dirt, clearing away a mountain. Immersed in his drawing, without missing a stroke of the stick or a wipe of his bare palm, Bill spoke to Abel. "The mole lives by the rules of the game or dies."

"You're doing it again, avoiding my question," Abel said.

"He must never see the sun. His eyes are only for night."

Abel, against his will, couldn't help smiling at the old man.

"He must stay buried from those who would harm him," Bill said, still drawing. "He will spend his life hiding from the dangers of the jungle. This is the way of his world. To hide or run in fear."

"Sounds like we're in the same boat."

At this commentary, he laid down his stick and looked up at Abel. The orange fire flickered across Bill's serious brow, his eyes a void. "No. Not the same boat. The mole does not have the power to change the rules."

Abel avoided Bill's gaze. He pretended to watch the armadillo still scratching hopefully at the rocks, sticking its nose into the dark spaces. The old man looks at me as if he knows something I don't, but there's nothing in his eyes, and that stare. "What if you want to change the rules, but no one's listening?" Abel asked and the emptiness returned. He closed his eyes.

"About boats," Bill said, "long ago I shared a canoe with the family of my wife. They were noisy. Always talking about this, making trouble, complaining about that. Who would lead The Festival of the Dogs? They talked and talked. One thought the brother of my wife spoke words that went easy with The People. Another thought her cousin walked and looked like a dog. How I wished they would lose their tongues."
"One day," Bill studied his palms, "the canoe started to fill with water and sink. I screamed at them, 'The canoe is sinking! The canoe is sinking!' But they were making too much noise to listen."

"Being one who knows, I understood that they will do what they will do, and I will pick up a wad of seaweed and plug the hole, or I will drown. Imagine my surprise if I had waited for them? I am happy not to be a mole." Bill shrugged, "They could have thanked me, and now that I have thought of it, her cousin did look like a dog."

Bill paused thoughtfully, smiling at Abel. "I know you see us as simple. 'The People are children,' you say. But, my friend, on The River of All time, how you choose to see a thing is important. How you see is the first step in what you will do, and you are responsible for what you do, and you are never alone. Do not ask if we are simple. This is the wrong question. You must ask if our ways work for us, simple or not! If they work for us, if they allow us to survive in the jungle, then we are not simple, we are right. In my travels, I have heard of men who did not judge your tribe, but tried to give your tribe the thing that would work for them in the jungle. Your tribe did not see, and now they are in trouble. Oh, your people are not simple, this is true. But, my friend, they are in trouble!"

"How do you know that, Bill?"

Bill stared deeply into Abel's eyes. "Because their best men are running away. When I look at you, that is what I see."

"Yes, The People are simple. But if you help them to survive in the jungle, I will help them to see. They will not nail you to a cross. They will not shoot you with a gun. The missionaries, they told me the stories of your people."

"Bricks," Abel said.

"Bricks?"

"The desalinization plant requires fire. We'll need to start baking bricks for a wind break."

The mole-like creature, finally realizing the armadillo would not go away on its own, let loose a hideous screech and shot out of the hole snarling at the enemy, chomping its teeth
making a clean show of its incisors. The armadillo leaped back as if thrown by an unseen force and scurried away.

"Bill?"

"Yes, my friend?"

"I hope we're doing the right thing."

"You have cared about The People enough to struggle in the river and to ask, "Can anything I do for them be right?" To do a thing with hope but without knowing, because you feel you must; to do a thing for survival in the jungle, this is compassion. Even if it does not work, you are right."
"He'll probably be here in the morning," Muriel said to Daniel.

Shadows of bushes and overgrown weeds threw themselves against a sidewall: crowns, spikes, tentacles reaching for stars on a black mountain night. Newspapers lay strewn across the walkway and yard. Aside from a yellow porch light, where moths fluttered and clung flat and gray to the stucco, the house sat moldy and deserted, an old vagrant exhaling his final wrinkled breath. It used to feel good, warm, and cozy arriving home with Abel from vacation. It wasn't a structure then, but symbolic growth; a child they produced, a family member welcoming them, opening its hearth, cooking them hot cocoa, offering steamy baths, warm robes and slippers. The walls resonated, "Read my books. Run the palms of your hands over my pottery collection. Why not watch black and white television and eat popcorn in the belly of my being? I'll take care of you always."

Muriel stood on the porch in front of Daniel. She fumbled in her large handbag searching for keys in the dim light, a foreboding emptiness in her bosom. She didn't want to stick the key into the cold metal lock, twist the icy brass knob, or open the heavy oak door. A shiver fingered Muriel's spine from her tailbone to the base of her neck. "Here," she said softly, handing Daniel the key. "You open it. I—I don't want to, and I don't appreciate playing decoy, and for God's sake, what's that dirt on your chin? Look at all of this luggage. I hate it."

"Cain's right, Mom," Daniel said, rattling the key in the lock.

"Whatever. We can use the sleep." She studied his chin again. Short light hairs covered the curved surface of it, like down. "Here, Danny, look at me." It began as a thin vertical line
under his full lip and then the smudge spread. They'd managed to keep him off drugs. He wasn't one of those retro-punks who idolized the sixties. *So, why mud?* She wanted to laugh, not at him, with him. Exhausted, she gave it up. Instead she kissed him lightly, motioning him to unlock the dead bolt. The heavy door opened gently, silently.

Muriel stepped into the entry, standing at the foot of the stairs. She remained still in the dark. Daniel, behind her, reached for a light switch, but she put her hand over his. "No. Don't," she said quietly. "I like it this way. It's better."

"Okay. Sure, Mom. I'll get the luggage."

She stood imagining the way it used to be. Any moment now, little Danny, in his pajamas with the feet sewn in, would come romping down the stairs, the baby sitter trailing behind, helpless to slow the boy's decent. When he reached the bottom step, he'd throw himself into Abel's arms, and then run to her, and excitedly search amongst their luggage for his special treat: a junior printing press, an erector set, his first microscope, a learn-to-draw box.

Abel, two years out of his masters program, knelt down, castigating the spoiled boy. All at once she saw it, little Danny pulling on his father's revolutionary beard, until the old man came across with his surprise.

Quickly enough, Abe's beard floated down the bathroom sink. Abel went to work each morning protecting blue prints tucked under his arm, and the family grew up together: Abel, Muriel, Daniel, and the house.

What if they don't find him, or what if the CIA … She didn't want to think about that. How will Danny remember his father? What legacy has Abel left him?

"I'll just throw the suitcases in the family room. Do you want the small one to go upstairs with you?"

"What?" She turned slowly, not wanting to leave her dream, feeling cheated, being called like that. "The small one? Yes." Daniel came in handling a load and dropped them on the floor in the dark family room.

"Danny?"

"Huh?"
"That's a handsome beard you're growing. A serious beard. I like it."

The young man beamed. "Really? Thanks. It feels, you know, creative."

"Different?" She knew her son. She understood Daniel's envisioning himself a dissident artist, proud to have a father on the run from the government, transferring his anger from desertion fury to safeguarding Abel's fire. "Your father had a beard once. That was years ago. Remember it?"

"Sure. Look, I just felt like growing it. Okay? I'm not emulating anyone. I'm just being who I am."

"Be who you are, Danny. Let's get some sleep."

A light switched on in the family room. Daniel and Muriel jumped. A gentleman wearing a military uniform sat deep in an easy chair, his legs crossed holding a cap resting in his lap. He'd turned on the reading lamp. "I hope I didn't frighten you, folks. Ma'am? Sir? Colonel Stein said you'd be expecting me."

"I thought you'd be arriving in the morning." Muriel sounded tired and upset.

"My mother needs rest," Daniel motioned to the door. "Come back tomorrow."

"Please, don't be angry at me, folks. Believe me, I can appreciate your stress."

Muriel advanced on the officer. "Can you? Is that so?"

"Try to see it my way."

Muriel, about to take another step forwards, found her way barred by Daniel's arm. She'd never seen him take control before. "Mom, sit." She sat. Muriel slept.

Over at the front window, the officer pointed up to the street's dead end, showing Daniel a group of colored lights and activity. "…and while they followed you folks half-way around the world, your uncle, I mean, the colonel, he's been taking care of business."

"I understand." Daniel watched a half-dozen uniformed M.P's. holding four cars of government suits at rifle point.

"Of course, it's only a matter of time before they figure out we can't really arrest 'em."

The officer angled. "We have to make a move, sir. I sure wouldn't want Colonel Stein angry at me, no sir."
Muriel's eyes fluttered, reduced to open slits. She rocked her jaw back and forth. "Men, let's move out."

The officer stiffened while Daniel helped his mother out of the chair. "Ma'am, I have a car waiting."
CHAPTER 13--SAO TIAGO; CAIN'S GHOST

No marching today. He dragged himself through the crowd, tired of marching, frustrated by the intensity of his search, though no less dedicated. Arid winds lulled his mind, and the ambling directionless pace of the island, of the Praia Market Place, dulled his body. Piles of bright orange carrots, shining teeth, beds of green lettuce; coal black *badios*—not *mestizos* of tainted Portuguese blood, but *badios*; pure African—wearing cotton striped blouses and pink bandannas, hawked the prices of onions, kiwis, garlic cloves; their running children, untrustworthy antiquated scales, clear yellow bananas, again the children, bare-bottomed and laughing in the market place, and Cain out of uniform, his shirt tails fluttering in the breeze, flashing Abel's photograph to the big busted woman who sells potatoes. "No," she said, she hadn't seen this man, "but wouldn't you like to buy some potatoes?" She smiled like a milk cloud, and Cain spied the scale. He felt the bashed and beaten tin weighing bowl, its worn years still serving, and pondered why it seemed impossible for him to relax. A bus took off, bound out of the corner of his eye, and with a deep sigh his business continued. "Have yuh seen this man?"

In a worm eaten bar, Cain ordered *grogo* and passed the picture. No luck. On the street, on the stones he showed the picture to a sepia skinned *mestizo* man wearing a Mets baseball cap covering his shock of red hair. The *mestizo* waved him off and Cain studied the sky. Late afternoon approached. At this time of day, before nightfall, Cain felt the end loomed near.

He previously traveled to other islands of Cape Verde; Fogo, the volcanic island; Sao Vicente, the island of Mindelo Harbor where a group of *badios* sprawled by their boats and didn't know the man in the photograph. He traveled to Santo Antao in the north and Maio in the south.
All of the islands, African, Portuguese, Dutch, French, all of Cape Verde lie fallow, sour, grogo tipsy and falling into the Atlantic.

***

At sunset, before the end of the world, Cain wandered into a Voodoo cigar shop, Portuguese hole in the wall. He flashed his picture to a toothless bag of flesh behind the counter. "Have yuh seen this guy?"

The old man rubbed his wrinkled fingers together.

"Yuh know something?"

The old man didn't play anybody's chump - more rubbing of the fingers and a horrifying grin, a slit showing only a shadow. Cain, the soldier, felt certainty in the pit of his stomach. He crossed the old man's palm with cash. The old man stretched each bill in the fading light, and one by one slipped them into his pocket. For a moment, he stood still grinning, one hand in his pocket crinkling the bills, and then he turned slowly reaching the top shelf.

"Hey, what're yuh doing there? I gave yuh the money. Stop stalling and spill it." Cain was about to give it up for lost, when the old man turned around tossing two cigars on the counter. "That's more like it. Well?"

"Buy!" the old man demanded.

"What?"

The old man tapped the counter firmly with his finger, "Buy."

Cain belligerently pushed across another bill. "You make a fool of me, pops, and it's off with your ears! Yuh hear me?"

The old man, wanting to square everything, pushed the cigars across to Cain. "Good shit!" Cain smiled.

The old man pointed down the street to a sidewalk bar.

Later that night Cain hunched over a small unsteady table nursing his drink. From the crowded patio a woman appeared at his table. "You need help to finish the bottle?" She smiled, touching her wide tongue to her upper lip, running it over her teeth.
"I've got bigger fish to fry."

"Your loss, American. If you want to swim in my ocean let me know." She twisted, showing it off, and headed for the bar. Cain watched. She strutted it along the front of the bar and one of the men, a beef-fat mestizo, reached out his knotty forearm yanking her onto his lap. He laughed and so did she, and she stuck her tongue in his ear. He reached for a fistful of thigh, that's when Cain saw the watch.

The colonel waited. His blood pumped. Pouring himself another drink, he sat like stone watching ice cubes rise in the glass. The beef-fat mestizo kicked the woman off his lap and turned around on his stool. Now he drank with a buddy, every few moments unconsciously hooking a thick finger under the watch's flex band, playing with it. He didn't notice when the patio grew thick and silent. In a burst of pain, he hit the floor.

The beef-fat mestizo vomited his liquor, helpless while Cain beat him, breaking the bone in his nose and kicking him in the kidneys and liver. It took fifteen seconds. Nobody at the bar moved, spoke, or flicked their ashes or drank their drinks or dared breathe.

The beating was calculated to force a bad man to talk; not an extra kick, not one more punch than needed. Cain ripped his brother's watch from the beef-fat mestizo's wrist and briefly examined it. He knelt in close, speaking calmly, as if nothing happened. "Where is Abel Stein?"

The mestizo choked and drooled, "I don't know any Abel Stein."

"Two years ago, you flew my brother out of this piss hole. You robbed him first." Cain waved the watch in front of the mestizo's bruised and bloody face. "I'm going to ask you again, where is Abel Stein?"

The mestizo grew silent. Slowly he inched his coffee brown hand along the back of his belt where he kept a clip-knife. Càin raised his fist.

***
In the interrogation room, a black bâdio fist broke the mestizo's cheekbone. He drew a hard baton from his belt and smacked the table with it, stretching his fingers around it, testing his grip. He began on the ribs, cracking them one at a time.

***

Cain, in full uniform, sat in the office of the police of Praia, Sao Tiago. He waited, his hat in his lap. Another mestizo entered; a thin hard-edged man, bony, wearing a starched stiff police uniform. Cain stood and they shook hands. The officer in charge spoke tersely out of the right side of his mouth and only his right eye focused. A livid white scar jutted above the skin, running down the left side of his body from his temple along the side of his neck, disappearing under his collar. "He tells a story about an island. Eh, these petty criminals," he snickered, "they lie."

"All the same," Cain said, "I'd like to hear it."

The officer produced Abel's watch and handed it to Cain. "Won't yuh need this as evidence?" The door to the interrogation room banged open, and two officers walking backwards carried out a stretcher holding a cadaver in a body bag. The officer in charge turned sharply, glaring, and shut the office door.

"Evidence? No."

"Was it necessary to kill him?" Cain asked.

"Colonel, my territory is economically depressed. Its people are desperate. Many would kill for a bottle of grogo." The officer in charge clasped his hands behind his back strolling in front of the window. He peered through dirty glass into arid light. "Do not feel sorry for this animal. He confessed to murdering a taxi driver. A young man. Should we wait until he murders another one?"

"But a trial…"

"Please understand, I am responsible for enforcing the law. One must be vigilant." He turned, his bony frame silhouetted by the smeared window light. "I say, off with his head!"

Cain stared at the appaription in front of the window as if he'd seen a ghost.
CHAPTER 14--ISLA DEL SANTO; ABEL'S RECLAMATION

They stood in the running brook, one of the last brooks, up to their waists looking at their feet, toes curled in the gravelly bottom. Tanuck faced his friend Abel, whose name all decided meant 'Brave Leopard'. Abel's great gray beard dipped in the water and his blond hair lie in wet matted strands dripping down his head and back. Today, Tanuck, the fisherman, taught the brave leopard how to catch fish between his hands.

These last weeks bore witness to difficult impasses; all The People being won over by Bill's persuasive oratory for water reclamation, or as he explained it, their need to learn to drink the sea. He petitioned elders tirelessly at special meetings held on the coral mound, wearing away their resistance, pleading the increasing hardship of traveling further and still further for drinking water. "We are no longer a traveling people," he preached. "We have struggled to farm our potatoes, build our pile houses. We had hopes of providing our children with a place to live, an easier life. Must we now burn our village behind us and roam the jungle again? Must we leave our children nothing but hardship?"

"We have become those who are settled in spirit. The Village offers us more than a place to sleep. It has offered us safekeeping within its pile houses and daily work. Each of us has had time to know himself, to draw pictures, to talk to the gods, without having to look over our shoulders for the attacking bush pigs. A deep knowing has come to us through the village, a knowing of ourselves. Can we deny our children this knowing? How will they know what is buried in the breast if they have time only to move from place to place searching for water, gathering food, hunting, protecting themselves?"
"If the village is to survive, we must have water. The god Abel, Brave Leopard, has been sent to us with knowledge. He can teach us to drink the sea. I have seen this in my vision, in my fire."

After much negotiation men hauled buckets of mud clay, handing them off from one to the next in long lines across lagoons to the island mounds. Women formed the clay, with strands of bamboo gathered by children, into lengths of hollow pipe hardening in the sun. The People worked in shifts from sunrise to sundown, and at night they chanted, danced and told stories around the fire on the coral mound. The elders decided that to sacrifice the village would be to sacrifice the soul of The People.

When the men's palms grew blistered and bleeding, and the women's backs ached from stooping under the sun, when the children's feet became cut and bruised from jumping over jagged rocks, the elders decided The People must steal a day from the future and rest.

Abel paused. The silver fish darted, jumped, and Abel shoved his hand in the water. Again and again. Finally he withdrew his hand holding a fish gasping with open gills between his fingers. He lifted it over his head, displaying the fish to Marwe and Bill lying on the shore. He handed it to Tanuck, who tossed the fish in his pouch and grasped his friend, the brave leopard, by his white shoulders showing his approval. Abel climbed out of the brook to lie beside Marwe.

She stroked his face and neck trailing a drop of water with her finger down the middle of his pale chest. Without warning he became sullen and stared into the distance. Again he felt loneliness gnawing away at his solar plexus. "I have a wife, you know," not easy for him to say.

"Wife." Marwe smiled proudly.

"No." He fought to get the words out, not knowing why he bothered. "I mean, I have a wife back home in California."

Bill, a few yards away, drew in the ground using a stick.

"And a boy. Well, not a boy, really. He's a young man, an artist. You know what you've done? Huh?" She gazed at him in uncomprehending sweetness that made his throat bottle with
emotion and caused his heart to spasm. "You've made me a bigamist! Her name's Muriel. Can I
tell you something? You don't understand anyway, do you? She was a good woman."

Marwe's eyes flashed with recognition, "Good, good, good?"

"That's right." He cupped Marwe's cheeks in his hands and confessed. "God, help me, I
loved Muriel," and he let go of her face, turning, unable to look at Marwe. "I lost hope. I looked
at the world and I didn't want to care about it anymore." She sensed a deep seriousness in his
words and reached up stroking his hair, combing it with her fingers. "Do you know why men
make war? I don't either. I'll tell you what I do know. They found this island once. They'll find it
again, and when they do they'll rape it, and where will I run? Muriel was right. There has to be a
reason for the journey." He held out his right and left palms studying them.

Bill dropped his stick moving closer. "I am an unchristian savage. But I think love is the
reason."

"I ran from those I loved," Abel said, still gazing into his palms. "I deserted the village
when they needed me most."

"You told me you ran from what you could not change, from those you hated."

"Checks and balances, old man." He raised and lowered his palms alternately as though
weighing something of value. "You run from one, you desert the other."

"That so?"

Abel looked at Bill. He showed him his palms and asked, "Which one?"

"A man has his choices," Bill said.

"I wish it were that simple. A man can't go backwards, like trying to raise the dead."

"No. A man can not go backwards," Bill said. He felt his own body parts, checking for
ancient dusty decay. "But have you ever tried raising the dead?"

"I want to go home."

Bill reached out and grasped both of Abel's palms bringing them together, squeezing
them firmly in his own. "I know."

***
At sunrise from the cliffs a misty blanket hovered above the jungle. The People formed numerous lines hard at work. Abel watched the blanket rise exposing two huge clay vessels in the distance sitting like levitating fat ladies in a cloud above green swells of ground. The sun rose burning away the mist and the magic disappeared leaving behind a well-designed scaffolding of tree trunks supporting the vessels. A fire pit was dug below one of the vessels and a windbreak of clay bricks guarded the pit's perimeter.

Completing the pipeline meant salt water running into the first vessel, boiling, steaming and bubbling, depositing the salt behind to be collected. The steam forced into the second vessel would cool, once again, condensing water to be further piped to The People's village well.

Abel examined the tops of the vessels from his high vantage point. The technology was crude, handed down from the time of Caesar watering his conquering troops along the Mediterranean. Abel wondered, not without misgivings, about bringing any theory to bear upon the lives of The People. Perhaps without technology's help The People would perish and he would die. Is this legitimate motivation to attempt stasis, to exist forever as an opposing force in direct violation of the natural law?

They look correct sitting there, but can they be? Sitting where there were once trees, now on bare ground? Is it natural for me not to assert my creativity to enhance the lives of humankind? Does the prime directive not dictate survival? Does history repeat itself? If it does, I'm up shit's creek! There's only one answer. If I turn my back on The People, I'm staring into the face of death. If I help The People, I'm staring into the face of death. Trees die. People die. Does this mean I twiddle my thumbs?

Bill crept up behind him. "The People are ready to travel down the mountain." He looked at Abel quizzically. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking how nice it would be to pour myself a cup of hot chocolate, light a cigar, put on my favorite copy of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and die in my sleep."
"I do not know these things. But I know The People would like to die in their sleep. Some have, the old ones. But most died screaming from wounds or fever. We knew they would die. All we could do was be with them, touch them so they felt they were not alone."

At that moment the gnawing feeling in Abel's solar plexus dissipated. He imagined he heard the sounds of rock growing in the face of the cliff. "It's true," Abel said. "All any of us can do is touch The People in a way they understand, so they're not alone."

"You are one who knows," Bill said. "But you are no god, no brave leopard, only a man whose knowing looks back over his shoulder. You must turn it around. Wisdom is only what you know until you can use it to see where you are going. Then wisdom is wisdom. You told me yourself, you can not go backwards."

The first groups descended a cliff with Bill and Hey You leading them. The second shift stood at the ready for Abel's inspection. He walked the length of pipe sections checking bamboo-carrying slings for strength.

Below, water crashed on the rocks and the waterfall back-splashed high into the air, showering The People with salt water, their black skin glistening under the rising sun. It took the strength of twenty-five natives—men, women and children—scaling down the face of the cliff carrying once section of pipe. Bill, his pipe in his mouth to steady his nerves, gestured at them this way and that, shouting loudly to be heard over the deafening cascade of water. The People struggled holding fast to a narrow ridge along the rocky monolith that would bring them in line with a position Abel predetermined as the fall's most forceful.

At first, no one above heard the screams. The second shift saw them from where they waited at the top of the cliff. One of the bamboo slings had given way and the pipe tumbled end over end, The People plummeting like howling worms into the sea. Bill, watching in horror, dug his fingers and toes into the side of the rock. The People shouted for Abel, for their god who ran to the edge, who could not be with them, help them, or touch them at their moment of death.
Clouds illuminated in pale orange unfurled like rolls of cotton to the east, spreading over a seaweed calm ocean, and The People's boats creaked and rose then sadly dipped, hundreds of them, the water lapping at their sides. One by one, The People stood solemn against the wind while they cast flowers to the sea. "When the sea is still and the boats creak, this is the death rattle of the The People," Bill whispered to Abel.

Ibassi, whose name meant 'Leader of the Hunt', gave Neptune two hares. Ala, whose name meant 'Guardian of the Harvest', offered the ancient god lime and papaya and betel nuts. Kwaku Ananse, whose name meant 'The Trickster', offered a clever palm leaf sail boat. Nantuck, whose name meant 'Speaker For the Spirits', lifted his large bamboo flute to his curled lips sounding a mournful infinite note transcending the material world. He followed this blowing a series of short notes, low for the fish, high for the birds, a grievous lament. They journeyed, touching their dead in the way of The People.

Abel, whose name meant 'Brave Leopard', stood rocking in his canoe. Once the tiny boat rose and he stumbled teetering on the brink, but Bill reached out an ancient arm and steadied him. Abel threw Marwe's blanket—red for the hunt, blue for the sky, yellow for the harvest—into the sea. He watched it float until the sea took it, and he hoped that he touched her during her life, and that the blanket would keep her warm. Abel, the engineer, believed this, that The People could touch their dead, that he could touch Marwe; and rightfully so, because however primitive the belief, it sustained The People who lived on the river of all time.

***

The ten thousand crickets kept silent guard over Bill's cave that night while Abel slept within. At dawn, enormous trees spread branches before the sun like fingers from God's hand spreading across a warm windowpane. Water, odoriferous as rotten eggs, dripped off a branch onto a hollow log, knocking, and Abel turned on his side attempting to block the sound. However, the jungle awakening is unforgiving, when one bird twitters, six more answer,
screeching, and this disturbs the monkeys who howl and hoot and before long a symphonic
cacophony rises with the dawn, symbolic of the process miraculous.

Abel lay in the cave, his eyes open wide, staring at the rocky dirt encrusted ceiling. He
awoke in pain. Nothing in the arms or legs or lumbar. A deeper throbbing ebbed and flowed
numbing his sense of reality, increasing his paranoia while assuring him that he was correct in
thinking himself alienated from the sentient universe. He sat up gazing into his lap. He twiddled
his thumbs and laughed, and then tears streamed down his cheeks in hot rivers of pain until he sobbed. Abel, the engineer, never admitted a belief in God; it would have been illogical. Why then, he wondered, did he feel beyond the shadow of a doubt that God did not love him?

The pain grew easier to bear and he squinted past the entrance into the sunlight. Abel's rivers abated and he felt his insides scrubbed clean. He stood walking into the morning, slowly, holding fast to his spiritual anvil. Outside on the stone platform Bill sat waiting patiently. Abel struggled, allowing a shaft of light falling directly over the cave to enter his eyes. At first he thought his eyes played tricks on him. He saw faces below the platform covering the ground like a field. The dead come back to haunt me.

His head undeniably cleared with fresh air, their faces now attached to bodies increasing in number. The People turned out in droves carpeting the jungle floor, standing on rocks, children peering at Abel from trees, mothers nursing their babies, old men, the healthy and the infirm waited. Wherever he looked, Abel witnessed the face of The People. They lined distant slopes, and when he turned they stood behind him, thousands, silently anticipating.

"My god, what are they doing here?"

"They hope for their work orders," Bill said. He filled his pipe calmly, tamping down the smoking mixture. Unlit, he stuck it between his teeth, satisfied. The jungle became silent, The People still.

"Are they crazy?"

"I do not think so." Bill sat cross-legged.

"Hell," Abel said, "tell 'em to get lost."

Bill, disturbed, looked at Abel. "They are too smart to get lost on such a small island."
Abel paced the platform, running his hands over his face, trying to wipe away the pain, searching for words.

"I could tell them," Bill said, "to go climb a tree. They would like that. But I think it is better if you talk to them."

"I can't. I can't!"

"You will not."

"I don't know what to say," Abel begged.

"You are too weak to say what you know. It is as good as not knowing. They will take it as a sign."

Abel searched the masses, the innocent eyes and soft faces. Out of it all, a baby cried. "A sign of what? No. I don't care."

"The People believe everything happens for a reason. They believe each thing on the river of all time is only a part of something else, something yet to come. The People believe everything in life holds a sign. All time is now."

"What sign do I hold, Bill? A deserter? A killer?"

"If you have no words, if you will not teach us to drink the sea, your sign must be 'death without purpose'. What good is death if it is not a thorn in the side of the living forcing them to action?"

Bill studied his toes. "Death is good. It leaves the living with work. The work of the living is to find a reason to live. The dead live on in this work. This way death is good; life is good. But it is only a sign. You and I have seen the world, and we do not believe in these signs, do we?"

Expectant faces began showing grave disappointment. Abel, speechless, powerless, stood facing The People, hoping they would no longer conceive of him as a god or even a brave leopard. He lifted his arms in the sign of The People and spoke. "I'm sorry. I'm just so…" He turned to Bill, "They don't know my words."

"They know a man's heart. Speak."
"I've made a mistake. I've led you on a journey to a place I had no business showing you. My place. My time. My knowledge is not right for you."

Tanuck stepped forward, his eyes swollen from crying. He spoke softly, and strangely enough, a smile came to his lips as he gestured the falling death of his son. Abel got the impression after Tanuck's son fell into the sea that he rose again as Tanuck raised his arm waving his hand back and forth in an upward rocking motion.

Bill translated. "The son of Tanuck has fallen far into the sea. Tanuck is sad, but he must work to satisfy the spirit of his son. The son of Tanuck died so that The People might drink from the sea. If Tanuck works, his son will be happy."

Abel answered, speaking to all of The People. "I can't teach you to drink from the sea and I can't satisfy the spirits of your dead." It seemed to Abel he couldn't take another breath but he continued, "I'm not your messiah. Can't you people see? I'm not your god damned messiah!"

Tanuck appeared deep in thought. Something of what Abel said lodged in his brain. He tried forming the word which stuck behind his thick tongue. He wanted to imitate the word, play the game of The People. It crept out barely audible at first, "Messiah." The next time he pronounced it firmly, "Messiah." A few of those around him mumbled the word, "Messiah, Messiah." The question dissolved, becoming a declaration, spoken louder and by more of The People, "Messiah, Messiah." In a matter of moments the word spread, and the word on the lips of The People became truth as they shouted from distant slopes to the stone platform at Abel's feet, "Messiah! Messiah! Messiah! Messiah!" The chant in unison grew to a single roaring voice, "MESSIAH!"

Abel, breathing heavily, felt as if a leaf on a branch blowing in the wind. And then again, like a tunnel, the wind of The People blowing through him, not his to hold, but to allow the right of passage. Look at them! I didn't bring them to this point. I didn't foul the water. They arrived here on their own.

"All things hold a sign of all things to come. All things must pass through you going up river or down river. The river of all time will find you," Bill reiterated, as if he knew what Abel must be thinking. Abel understood that in a sense something greater had brought The People to
this point, and that same something would build or not build the pipeline using him or not using him. This is the way of The People or it is simply 'the way'.

Abel turned to Bill, "We'll finish it."

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Because the universe does not begin nor end with Abel Stein."

A slight smile played across Bill's cheeks. "I am never wrong about the living. You are a wise man."
CHAPTER 15--ISLA DEL SANTO; OVER THE FIRE

Cain, ringing wet in olive green and brown combat fatigues scaled the cliff landing breathlessly on solid ground. Throwing off his full pack, raising a puff of dry dirt, he grabbed his radio and pushed the button. Static between himself and the ship crackled in his ear. He lie on his disciplined gut, elbows stuck in the earth supporting his chest and shoulders. His eyes roamed slowly, constantly scanning the horizon, searching for any sign of life. Grabbing binoculars, Cain continued working the radio off one hand.

"Lieutenant?"

"I read you Colonel." The answer crackled back in broken pieces.

"It's deserted," Cain said, scanning through his binocs. He searched for green trees signaling a source of water, and for creatures, anything that moved, that had to eat. "If my brother's here, he's dead. He's gotta be. Everything else is."

"Sorry, sir. Should I send out a launch?"

"No. Not yet. Don't forget to write. Out."

Isla Del Santo, deserted since missionaries left it at the turn of the last century, offered only signs of death. It wasn't clear which country the island belonged to, if it belonged to any. History presented scant evidence. Brief notes and scribbled margins between the pages of ancient bibles told the story. "They are savages beyond redemption who will surely burn in hell," one of the missionaries wrote. "...cannibals who eat their young and display their bones as trophies," wrote the wife of another missionary, "and I shall be cautious not to give birth while on this god-forsaken island, lest my babies be eaten by those heathens."
As Cain learned, eventually the church refrained from attempting redemption of their spirits and sold their souls instead; the savages, imported by European trade markets, were beaten, colonized, beaten and civilized, beaten and forgotten. In the name of the savior, the church moved on to other islands, saving other savages.

Cain adjusted his pack on his shoulders and buckled its belly strap. Allowing the binocs to dangle loosely around his neck, he headed east, inland, tramping over short burnt yellow grass. Not a single living tree appeared, only the leafless curled black specters of disease. They died stumped under a blazing sun, their dignity scorched, a warning to any unfortunate who came their way. His throat parched, Cain paused, stretching his neck and guzzling warm tinny water from a canteen. The hike continued for several hours until he arrived at a wide abyss, the edge of the earth where a decayed system of hemp and bamboo showed what ancient creation left of a sad bridge.

A rock formation above the bridge, to the right, appeared to have been a waterfall, now dry, the boulders reluctantly splitting under the sun's merciless rays. Cain edged out along the remains of the bridge. He listened nervously to its creaking and watched as a flake of once green, now gray bamboo splintered from beneath his feet sailing down into the abyss.

***

Cain entered a cave during late afternoon. He'd spend the night there, returning to the ship at dawn's first light. Abel, I've done my levelheaded best. Leaning, his hand outstretched against one wall, he supported himself in the dark waiting for his eyes to adjust. Gradually shapes appeared floating in the shadowy blanket, a boulder, natural shelves against rock walls holding gourds of different sizes sitting neatly in a row. The flesh on the backs of his arms crawled and his neck tingled. He spun around without warning and drew his gun. ...No enemy there... Establishing his bearings, he inched cautiously around the side of a rocky protrusion. His eyes burned, filled with dust, playing tricks on him. Not more than a yard away a man sat cross-legged on a bamboo mat.
Cain, stunned, understood the intent of the man's posture, that he was meditating, his eyes open, vacant. The man's hair fell long over his back and he sat on the ends of its strands. His gray beard, full and bushy, hung down to his lower abdomen. He wore only a loincloth.

It struck the colonel as so shocking a proposition to discover a human being out there alone that Cain, not moving from his spot, decided he must be staring at some ceremonial statue carved from granite. He laughed at himself for being afraid and holstered his gun. Another step and he'd stumbled into an unlit fire pit in front of the seated statue. Embers still glowed.

"Forgive me. That's all I ask." The statue's words reverberated off rock walls shattering a dark silence. Cain's gun flew out, his finger pulsing on the trigger.

"Who the hell are you?"
"I wouldn't blame you if you shot me." The statue grinned.
Cain dropped his hand to his side, the gun hanging pointed at the ground.

"Bring any cigars?" Abel stood in one fluid motion and the two men faced each other.

Three years passed. Cain, always sure of himself, had gone over this moment. He rehearsed in bed late at night, how he would immediately take the upper hand. Now, he didn't know what to do. He stood speechless, helpless to control the tears wetting his cheeks. He opened his mouth several times, but not a sound escaped. Abel laid a reassuring hand on Cain's fatigue clad shoulder. Cain felt like a child with his father's hand across his back. A heavy hand. A secure hand. As long as it rested there everything would be all right. The hand pulled at Cain, begging a hug and the two men clung tightly to one another. Abel, brimming with compassion for his brother, didn't cry but silently comforted him.

***

"...so we had our orders," Cain said, the fire flickering in his face. In reality, they owned simply a common agreement concerning words between them. Cain carried his like a load of hot rocks in the intestines. But Abel sat here, and he could tell Abel. "They said Charlie was everywhere. 'Boys, shoot anything that wiggles!' they said. Man, yuh don't forget a scene like
that. I was nineteen. We had boys in our platoon with more pimples than pubic hair. Didn't matter though. We just knew we were mighty big men."

"Then the orders came down. We were scared shitless. Mighty big men. Terrified! We went in blasting everything even if it didn't wiggle. The entire village fell, demolished." Cain settled quietly staring into the fire and continued, "We killed—I killed children. When we were counting the bodies for Westmoreland and his buddies we didn't find a single gun. Just laundry. Jesus, Abe. Children. Fucking children."

"In Life Magazine, we were cutthroats. Yuh know, we couldn't tell the difference between the North and the South Vietnamese. Life forgot to print that. The hardest to swallow? Couldn't tell the difference between an innocent child with a laundry bag or a kid smuggling grenades for Charlie. I swear to God, Abe, we just wanted to live through it."

"We were children, damn it! We were scared! And Dad was gone. And you, hell, you were getting a degree in campus un-American activities, and when I came home you hated me."

Colonel Cain Stein had a bombshell to crawl out from under. He took the night doing it. In the end he asked his brother's forgiveness, as Abel asked for his.

"I wasn't there when Daniel was born," Abel said.

"I didn't know that, Abe."

"They were finger printing me. They made me strip. They, you know, examined up my asshole. The jail infirmary stitched up my head to keep my brains from falling on the floor. They wrapped my rib cage. I couldn't breathe. The doctor said they'd beaten me so severely with nightsticks I should've been D.O.A. He wanted to know how on earth I managed to walk into the precinct under my own power. I told him they cuffed me and kept jabbing a pump-action riot shotgun into my kidney. The motherfuckers motivated me to put one foot in front of the other. I told him the power was theirs not mine. He wanted to know if I'd learned my lesson. I told him Chicago's a tough town, and I wasn't coming back."
"Then they threw me in a cell and charged me with inciting a riot. Me? Incite a riot? Because I wanted you home. Sure, I incited that riot. America incited the riot. The whole thing was a perverse—"

"No. Don't say it, Abe. Defending those yuh love is no joke. You did what yuh thought was right. I can see that. Hey, I have to see that. You have your weapon, I have mine." Cain laughed.

"What?" Abel asked.
"Yuh know what we are?"
"No."
"A couple of old war-horses," Cain said.
Abel looked deeply into his brother's eyes, and for the longest time the fire spit and popped and neither of them said anything until Abel spoke. "I'm proud of you. I love you, Cain."
"Well, right. I feel the same way. We'd better get started."
"I wonder where Bill is. I better say good-by to The People."
"Who's Bill, your pet lizard?"
"He's a friend. One of The People."
Cain inhaled and sighed. He had a feeling all night about his brother. He seemed different. He knew Abel was a sick man. "Abe, I want you to trust me."
"I do."
"I've been over every inch of this island and there ain't no one here but us sad sacks. So let's—"
"Oh, now look—"
"Shhh," Cain crossed his lips with his finger. "Trust me." He swept the dirt in front of him scraping up a berry. "Yuh eat these? Wonder what's in them." He held one up in the morning light and turned it over between his fingers. He dropped it into his pocket. A thought struck Cain, not altogether unpleasant, that if Abe was non compos mentis, they might decide to cure him in a hospital and release him to pick trash on the highway. He'd get him into an army or navy
They'd have themselves a time. *We're brothers, and the craziness, well, it doesn't matter, that's all.*

"Don't do this to me. I'm not insane."

"I didn't say you were, did I? I just said it's time to go. Look, Abe, don't give me any trouble." He thought back to the week before Abel left. Muriel called him on the sly one night telling him about signs, depression and fits of anger. However, he never thought of his brother as unstable, never imagined Abel coming unhinged. This time Cain held back his tears.

"I'm going to the village," Abel said.

"There isn't one."

"To say good-by to The People."

Cain stood brushing dust off his pants and slapping his hands together. "Okay, let's go."

"No," Abel said.

"I mean to the village. Let's go together."

"Okay."

"After that, we leave the island," Cain said.

"You're patronizing me." Abel looked away.

"After that, we leave the island!"

"Okay."

***

They found no village. Abel grabbed hold of Cain's binoculars. "What're yuh searching for?" Cain asked. Abel didn't answer. He kept turning in circles finally spotting two tremendous vessels, ancient, crumbling into useless dusty pieces. He studied them quietly for a moment and handed back the binoculars.
EPILOGUE;--THE NEUTRAL ZONE

Muriel gazed at Abel a long time. The sea pitched and she felt an overwhelming wind of confusion rush through her like an open portal.

He stood on deck in a pair of borrowed jeans and a blue work shirt, barefoot with his flowing blond hair billowing in the sea breeze and his yogic gray beard, waiting for over an hour when she and Daniel arrived by helicopter. Sadness swept over him to see her bowed head obviously lonely and the set of her shoulders bitterly independent.

Cain briefed her by radio on the way in. He told her they had little time, that the CIA was closing in. Muriel looked up at Abel, tears welling in her tired red eyes, because she had no time, because he'd done this to her, because she, losing him again, had forgotten how it felt to know his mind and feel his body and she was scared. She slapped him hard.

Abel stood, compassionate stone. "I did a horrible thing. Nothing I can do—"

She slapped him again …and then she hugged him and he held her without breathing. He would never breathe, he vowed silently, until he could make them one.

"You look like Robinson Crusoe," she said. They kissed passionately, and afterwards she laid her head on him and closed her eyes. Losing him again, she longed to feel his chest against her cheek now.

"Did Cain tell you?"

"What?" She spoke softly into the folds of his shirt.

"I'm crazy."
Then she craned up her head and studied his eyes. They appeared to take up so much more space than she recalled. They'd grown etched and weathered. They vibrated far away with the rhythm of all humanity. "I don't know what happened to you. I can see you're not the same man. But, God, I don't think you're crazy."

"Will you give me another chance? Muriel, I've learned so much."

"How can you ask me that now! They're coming for you. Don't you understand, Abe? They're taking you away!"

"What if they don't take me away?"

"I'm different, Abe. This thing's changed me. I don't know. But I have you now." The distant sounds of engines across the ocean reached her ears. Muriel's breathing grew still.

Her hair looked different than he remembered it, shorter, and he knew what that meant. His hair was certainly different than she remembered it and she grew uncertain of their fate.

Abel realized that his son waited on the other side of the deck. Daniel stood next to Cain watching their reunion. Abel faced him smiling and threw out his arms, however, Daniel turned and walked to the railing. "Dan, try to understand." He shouted over the breeze, recalling that old sensation that words didn't serve, and Abel wondered which words would salve a wound. He ran to the railing and grabbed his son roughly by the shoulders spinning him around. "What's that mud on your face?"

"It's not mud, damn it, it's my beard!"

He gripped his son's hands shoving them into his own great shaggy beard. "That's a beard. If you're going to grow something, grow something! Daniel squirmed. Abel held fast to his wrists, drawing upon a strength that shocked his son. "I'm your father! And regardless of what I've done, or what you think I've done, I love you! And you love me too!" Daniel stood dead still. His father had never spoken like that to him. "We have to know that, Dan, or we have nothing." Abel let go of Daniel's wrists and they hugged, two bears pawing each other, looking at each other eye to eye. "You think because you're a man you can turn your back on me?" Abel said grinning. "Never desert the ones you love. You ever walk away from me again and I'll kick your ass."
Cain reluctantly approached. "Abe, Sun King and your government wants back what belongs to them."

"Do you mind? I'm having a moment with my son. Besides, they're not getting it."

Engines drew close to the ship and then cut. Abel whispered to Daniel, "You still have the other envelope?"

"I've got it."

***

Abel, his back against the wall, seated on a bunk in a small compartment, relaxed his handcuffed arms. He watched perfectly calm, and this 'bad attitude' rankled the already rankled agents who encircled him bearing down on him with pit stains, white knuckles and red ears.

"I'm gonna bottom line this for you, Stein. Your country was at war with Iraq at the time you stole the plans for the heat sensor."

Another agent scratching his head thoughtfully piped up, "You could be shot. I mean, it's not out of the question."

Abel accepted the news gracefully. He looked from one agent to another. The four of them circled like lions.

One of them leaned into his face. He'd eaten a hamburger with onions for lunch. "I don't like you, Stein. You're an unpatriotic son of a bitch. Much as it grieves me, I'm instructed to inform you that if you return the sensor, well, maybe we'll cut a deal for life." He pulled a semi-automatic pistol from under his coat and shoved it against Abel's head. "Of course, if I were president (playing squeeze the hammer) bang!"

"Let's bring him in on this," Abel said.

"Who?" one of the agents asked.

"The president, I mean. I think he'd be very unhappy about the way I'm being treated."

"He's full of crap! Haul his ass outta here!" another agent groused.
"Gentleman, I have a disk in my possession." Abel leaned back on the bunk and swung one leg across the other, as if negotiating the lunch tab. "It seems that your president and Sun King Energy are old friends. When he headed the CIA, the president approved the purchase and sale of chemical weapons technology and advanced land to air weaponry from a select group of American companies. Sun King was one of them. He then arranged the sale of that technology through a broker to the Islamic world of countries in general, to any and all governments we were supporting at that time, and specifically to Baghdad."

One of the agents sighed and one belched.

"I only single out Baghdad amongst a host of locations because they seem to have been the sore spot at the time of my disappearance. I have no doubt that other locations and governments will turn out to be sore spots in the future for following administrations, and I have enough hard evidence to convict our president of numerous classes of war crimes involving the transfer of chemicals, weapons, monetary funds, and narcotics going all the way back to the beginning of his career and his friendship with Sun King Energy. I have names, dates, places, international account numbers. I hold all of the cards. Gentlemen, I'm the most dangerous man in this room. Actually, as soon as we float our little boat back into U.S. waters, I become the most dangerous man in the country."

"You know, I hazard a guess that because of our president, the majority of wars and terrorist actions we fight for the next fifty years will be the United States at war with its own resources disguised as one country or another."

"Why don't you come right out with it, Stein," said an agent chewing gum.

"Out with what?"

"You're calling our president a traitor to his people and a terrorist."

"I didn't say that."

"Yes, you did, you son of a bitch."

Abel leaned forward. "The money you took your last vacation with is blood money, possibly the blood of your own team. As head of the CIA, your president was the most powerful drug dealer and arms smuggler in world. To a greater or lesser degree, we're all culpable here."
We're all criminal, willing or unwilling, knowing or ignorant. It's an ugly circle, and no one in this room gets out clean and the higher up the ladder we go the dirtier the air gets. Gentlemen, I've stood on the highest mountain and it's filthy up there."

The agents sat on stools. Perspiration poured down their necks. They stared at each other. Abel sat forward on the bunk leaning into his handcuffs.

"Now, then, I've instructed my contact to mail the first copy of that disked information to the United Nations and a second copy to the Hague… should anything unpleasant happen to me. Of course, I have copies for the media and so on and so forth," and he wiggled his fingers.

Two of the agents left the room and Abel heard their footsteps clatter in an orderly but hurried fashion up the metal stairs. He shouted out, "Tell the old man I said, 'How do!' "

The two agents left in the room glanced at one another. "He's a crackpot," one of them said. The other stared at his shoes.

***

Abel and Muriel stood on deck against the railing. A sunset dripped in orange and purple stripes across the horizon, and Muriel toyed with a strange necklace around Abel's neck. "What is it?" she asked.

"It's a dog's tooth."

"From where?" She drew her hand away not anxious to touch a dog's tooth.

He pointed to a barely visible black sliver along the horizon. "It was given to me on Isla Del Santo by a saint. When I touch it, it's like a beam of light in the darkness." Muriel inched away, just a little, wondering if he wasn't crazy after all. Abel gazed out to sea.

On an island south of the equator and west of Galapagos, an old man stood high atop the cliffs watching the sunset over the ocean. He wore a turn of the century coat and a top hat and smoked a long bamboo pipe. On his shoulder sat a parrot scrunched up, its head nestled against the wind. Slowly at first, the old man danced. "Chaka Chaka, Chakaa Chakaaa," he chanted. He paused looking out to sea, "Gotcha, Abel Stein."

END
MERCY IN LOVE; VOLUME FIVE:

Promises From the Garden
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DEDICATION

In memory of eden ahbez: April 15, 1908—March 4, 1995
My friend in life, and now my spirit guide, I believe that somewhere you are holding a flute to your ear, allowing the wind to play the music.

***

In America’s yesteryear, a gentle hobo whose fate it was to ride the rails, and live off the fields and fruit of the land, befriended rich and poor, and anyone who would witness the manner in which he conducted his life, thereby understanding his example for a golden age. "The earth is my altar," he said, and writing of his life, travels, and lessons in his song, Nature Boy; "The greatest thing you ever learn is just to love and be loved in return." This soft-spoken man called himself eden ahbez, but we called him ahbe and loved him from the first, knowing he was one of us, yet suspecting he was of The Path, a sadhu, an avatar for our age.

Ahbe, I have felt you around me often during the writing of this book.
"...It is because it [absolute truth] is vast and deep that it contains all existence. It is because it is transcendental and intelligent that it embraces all existence. It is because it is infinite and eternal that it fulfills or perfects all existence. In vastness and depth it is like the earth. In transcendental intelligence it is like Heaven. Infinite and eternal, it is the infinite itself. ...": ~Confucius

"...for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for who we exist...

~1 Corinthians: 8.4-6
Theirs served as a marriage whose every detail burst upon the scene laid bare to public probing and argument before the dawn of satellites and digital television, the tabloids and paparazzi; Adam and Eve became the first couple caught naked running through the forest. The longevity, breadth, and import of Adam and Eve live unparalleled in literary history.

Painstakingly chiseled, legislated, evangelized, even brutally defended and implemented at the cost of human lives, a social conscience evolving from the storied lessons of The Fall is carved in flesh and stone as a benchmark for all revealed truth resolved to be moral, sometimes hallowed, occasionally divine. Genesis and The Fall began, and remains, the nexus of Western humankind's misunderstanding of our universal position and meaning.

Today, Adam and Eve are as instigating a force within Western society as are Confucius' hoary analects in Eastern culture. From the book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve, known as The Fall, imparted birth to the Herculean warning of Judeo-Christian sin and justice by which modern law, ethics, and social powers roar out their judgment.

Contemporary America largely views itself as religiously Christian though constitutionally nonsectarian, while a strong undercurrent of Judeo-Christian values flexes its religious biceps, politically sculpting our daily lives through an expanding media, and lobbying over such central issues as recognizing gender and sexual propriety. These, and other biochemical elements and aspects of free will, become human rights inquiries and statements attempting to make a show of walking an objective middle path. The Fall, by virtue of its
historical and contemporary influence in our world, is a story demanding scrutiny. For westerners, understanding *The Fall* is knowing the house we live in.

Many biblical scholars perceive Eve as the first Mary, and it is the actions of Eve and her husband in the garden of Eden that introduce a tyrannical god who visits the sin and punishment of the elders upon their generations, and which story begs for a messiah to save us from the mortal anvil of the first couple's original sin; the serpent compelled Eve, and Eve dared Adam, and the consequence of their actions brings forth the insecurity and righteous indignation through which the world of religion and faith judges that of science and reason. Without Adam and Eve from the *Old Testament*, there would be no Jesus or *New Testament*.

When the *Tanakh* (*Old Testament*) actually sprung into existence is up for theoretical grabs, though current archaeological evidence suggests its development along a timeline from the tenth century B.C.E. (Jahvist authorship), through the eighth century (Elohist authorship), and completing its present form during the fifth century B.C.E. when Jahvist and Elohist writings, along with *Deuteronomy* and the priestly writings, became codified as one set of five books attributed as *The Five Books of Moses*.

*The Fall* appears in numerous cultures throughout the pages of cosmological memory, and while names and faces of characters change from one nation to another, the similarities in story, plot, and character motivation and development remain striking. The universal and apparently timeless questions inspired by so divinely simple an episode as *The Fall*—humankind enters into a contract with God; humankind attempts to deceive God; humankind falls from God's grace—have personally concerned me since adolescence—a time we normally begin feeling-out a philosophical code to live by:

What is the nature of God, and what is God's function in the universe? Is God a tyrant? Is God loving?

What is the true meaning of evil? Is universal existence dependent upon the homeostatic balancing of good and evil? In seeking to rid the world of wrong and hold fast to right, do we risk existence itself?
What is the value and meaning of knowledge? Is humankind's search for knowledge to control the universe, making it a truly comfortable home for humanity, the worst evil of all?

What is humankind's motivation for deceit? For honesty?

What is grace, and is grace something we acquire or a creative quality already possessed merely awaiting our discovery, or should we care?

As if pondering these questions is not enough, they lead to the inexorably critical queries, which either catapult one to the summit of living or dangle one by a thin rope over the frightening chasm of profound introspective madness:

Who the hell are we, really? What is our place in the universe, our raison d'être?

Is there a divine plan or are we a chance assemblage of basic elements? If there is a plan, what is the direction of the universe and what is our direction?

Human life is a transcendent process, and I firmly believe it is our responsibility, whether or not we are put here by God, to aggressively ask those questions that aid in furthering our evolution as a self-conscious race and as aware individuals. While we may not find the answers, the inquiry must be vigorously pursued. In my heart, I feel the world will be a better place and our lives more fulfilling for having taken up the chase. Life is dynamic, and certainly investigating God, interrogating the Devil, and unraveling the mystery of our own original nature must provide our organism a wealth of nutrition upon which to thrive and evolve.

Finally, and personally most important, I do not for a moment believe we can successfully live as thoroughly rational beings. We must, in the Jungian sense, be grounded in spirit as well as intellect. When it comes to introspection—a writer's favorite pastime—I am naturally predisposed to a logical, almost mathematical analysis of my self and my life. However, there have been times when both the empirical and scientific approaches of experience, proofs, and hypotheses is not enough to explain, justify, or pacify my incessant longing for a definitive answer to the inquiry of why the universe and I are here, and what together, as two sides of the same coin, is our original nature.

I have numerous explanations of how and why reality functions without spiritual parameters, without religion, and without God. They are scientifically reasonable and I believe
them, trusting in their functionality to a point. The point arrives at twelve o'clock each night when I close my bedside book, turn out my light, and relax in the dark; when I know that aside from my wife and myself, God is present. For years I fought this irrational, illogical, mysteriously motivated belief in God. I proclaimed a godless reality of war, disease, pestilence, man's inhumanity towards man, and a spiritually bereft wasteland of chaos into which only weak minds read synchronicity. Yet, at the stroke of midnight, every night, God returned.

The conundrum of my life has passed as a treacherous journey causing me to denounce God in no uncertain terms, though, in the end, for me God still glories on as an unmistakable intuitive fact.

One night I at last asked the universe a pivotal question; is scientific understanding in conflict with our spiritual realization of God? Since that night, the purpose of my writing is to meld the sciences and spiritual philosophy: quantum and nuclear physics, astrophysics, cosmology and God. This is not, as Professor Timothy Ferris warned against in his preface to *The Whole Shebang*, an attempt to reduce God to a set of equations. As that wise Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, wrote in the *Tao Te Ching*, "Nature can rain for only half a day and not insist." Science, with all of its methodology and formulas, is still hard pressed to predict the weather. In a universe whose only material insistence is dynamic flux, the best equations in the face of time are fleeting, momentary explanations. However, if our evolving universe is God, or is work created after God's likeness, or if God is within the universe and scientific equations are explanatory models for the known universe, then they are also explanatory models for that part of God's nature that has become apparent to us.

Einstein's equation, $E=mc^2$, 'energy equals mass times the speed of light squared,' is "how" it works. Any matter from an atom to the entire universe is composed of multiple subatomic relationships called particles. The nature of these relationships is dynamic, let's say energetic. Energetic resistance within matter is referred to as mass. Einstein's equation proposes that the measurement of energy within matter equals its mass times the speed of light, squared. I sense absolutely no science versus God conflict here, nor am I reducing the dynamic universe, God's nature, to an equation. I am using the equation as an explanatory model to understand
what's happening here and now, in much the same way a psychologist uses test results to understand what's happening in the psyche of a client, while realizing that the client is more than the sum of their test results.

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"Years later, asked by Ben-Gurion whether he [Einstein] believed in God, '…even he, with his great formula about energy and mass, agreed that there must be something behind the energy.'

…in [Martin] Buber's words, Einstein burst forth revealingly. 'What we (and by this 'we' he meant we physicists) strive for,' he cried, 'is just to draw His lines after Him.'

…walking with a young woman physicist to his Berlin University office, Einstein spelled out the same task in more detail. '…I want to know how God created this world. …I want to know His thoughts, the rest are details.' …" ~EINSTEIN, The Life and Times by Ronald W. Clark, World Publishing

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Aristotle proposed that the essential nature of matter is potential (virtual energy), and form gives this potential reality. If God is the original potential, the Creator, then God and matter are inextricably linked, and inquiries into the nature of God and spiritual philosophy, and the subatomic nature of matter and quantum physics are together required.

Born of potential, the particle wave—an elemental relationship of space and time, the quantum unit of reality—exists because God created it.

However, there are those who are religious about science alone, turning scientific method into God and religion, and religious methods throughout history have always been in competition and conflict with one another. But that is a religious matter: not a scientific, spiritual, or philosophical one. Religion, while it may contain spiritual and philosophical ideas, and even
room for scientific speculation, for the most part functions as rigid doctrine against a universal wave of fluctuation. Science, is evolutionary conceptual development. *Promises From the Garden* explores science and Eastern spiritual philosophy; the book of Genesis, especially the story of Adam and Eve, a religious document, is pregnant with spiritual possibilities and room for scientific speculation.

Regardless of when or where any particular version of *The Fall* was written, the majority of those historical authors reasoned and addressed the challenges of their day in a popular rhetoric designed to communicate the attitudes of men who were gender bound and geographically trapped on a flat planet without a digital, fiber optic, genetically engineered clue. *Promises From the Garden* is also written in popular rhetoric rather than dry scientific notation; it is a layperson's novel. And so, for a new generation, for a human race that has persevered and transcended, and because I am able to sit suffering and still in a traffic jam on the San Diego Freeway blaming both scientific technology and God, I feel I owe it to myself and my friends to tell the story of *The Fall* one more time, but with a twist.

I must acknowledge the exquisite seventeenth century epic poetry of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as my inspiration, my conception of God as my solace, and my background in Philosophical Taoism, Zen, Raja and Jnani Yoga, and subtle energy therapy as my light. I would also like to thank my dharma partner and wife, She Who Spreads Light, for her unwavering faith in my abilities.

Youngbear Roth,
Los Angeles, CA
2022
Faith is a large piece—that's my story—and while religious faith works for some, and I won't knock it, that's not the faith I'm talking about. This is faith in reality; in the way things are, the way they move from place to place, moment to moment. Reality is a relationship between space and time; infinite intention, a virtual path along which at any point the relationship blossoms, waving transcendent will as a particle-wave, traveling, dynamic, evolving. That's my story, and it doesn't preclude religion if you're disposed to it, it simply adds another aspect to the board. It deepens the game. Broadens it. Understanding the way the board operates rewards one power, determination of an individual's own design over predestination. If Master Elohim created any destination in mind, it is for us to exercise the free will we possess.

"The Master bids us rest here!" Michael shouted, throwing up a strong copper arm high above thousands behind to witness. All following. Believing. Marching. Practicing faith and chewing on death's dust. I felt jealous of his arms, a collection of long steel sword blades and
masses of short daggers digging under the flesh, tensed, ready to explode. They shone a thin film, sweating dirty gray ash, and then the one relaxed dropping back to his side. Michael, the stocky dark-haired angel, a quiet soul of few words, our strength in battle. He impressed me, planting his heavy roots where he stood. "There's no victory in reality," he'd say, "only doing what must be done." One gazed into his large sad eyes and knew Michael served as a warring angel who reflected often on his deeds, who harbored misgivings.

He turned, piercing Gabriel under his stare and Gabriel blew the horn, a signal to halt, a long sour note. Gabriel served well that way. He forged into battle intuitively aware of which notes begged playing, how to bend them, coaxing them to speak. Gabriel wiped the sting from his watery eyes. He turned facing the troops, and expanding his chest, holding all of Heaven's air - the chosen messenger for Elohim - and his soft blond body transformed into an instrument of absolute control. The winds of the Master's kingdom escaped, blasting precision from his lungs, heard by the last man on the far side of the valley. "Elohim has taken his hand from the board!" Gabriel, in a single thrust, sunk his shield below.

I listened to an ocean of armor shake the valley floor. "Beelzebub's troops are closing in, Michael," I said, sitting on my shield, wondering what my position would be in the new order. I contemplated my body; each of us is good for something. Struggling, I removed my helmet, breathing labored through this flat nose and holding open these heavy eyelids. Resting arms on bare knees, I examined my fingers, like skinny chocolate sticks running under black skin to thin wrists. I am here, I thought, to narrate the story. To point with these fingers. I'll underline, drawing attention. I must explain how the war, this chaos, a moment of crisis, gave birth to the universe.

In the meantime, Elohim and Satan sat high on the hill playing Chess while we suffered smoke inhalation down in the valley. Our choice. Just yesterday, I gazed down here from up there and it floated clean and cool and white, and I enjoyed the expanse of it all, the endless being of it, and I flew down into the valley's misty embrace and played in it; yesterday, when faith seemed easy, when I believed.
I'm writing for the record, trudging behind Michael and Gabriel, all of us weighted down in our armor clanking along, and the valley is dying black and hacking dry. The once golden ether glows furnace room red and ashy faced. Our wings are trapped in these metal vests and Heaven is closing in on itself, a black hole where I can't breathe.

Yet, this too shall pass. Reality is transcendent. It's the lone thought in time of war that saves a soul's sanity. When I say reality is transcendent, I impart direction, strictly non-linear, and will to the relationship between space and time. You and I are real, and so faith in reality becomes faith in one's self, in the direction one chooses. Often, no one else perceives reality my way. Then it's a tough climb. The choices are friendless, and I feel like faith is a lead weight sleeping in the pit of my stomach. I am another part of it; Raphael, the faithful.

Gabriel once said to me, concerning the playing of his horn, "Music, Raphael, is not only what is written in space and time, but how one hears it. The listener. What the listener brings to the experience completes music."

"Then the music itself is not your only focus. Music is not the thing. You have audience, and they're another thing. You believe you're creating one thing, but the reality encompasses far more. I understand."

"Oh, but reality, my angelic brother, is not made up of things. Reality is composed of relationship; the quantum dynamism of existence," Gabriel said. "Reality is an evolving musical composition," he blew a staccato run of notes, effortlessly, "and the listener, the faithful one, can't be separated from reality's melodious becoming. I create music and listener together, each bringing an original spark to the same moment in a wave of space and time."

That the relationship between space and time is on the move makes faith an infinite composition of innumerable dimensions. Slippery stuff, faith. If you ask me, Raphael, I call faith a practice. Vigilance. Personal spiritual tenacity. These are the qualities one calls upon to keep faith with a reality whose only wholeness is its infinity. Faith is a bear.

Belief is easier. I'm troubled about faith, but I've always warmed to belief. It's for times and places which correlate with how we perceive times and places to be. However, when it all goes awry—that is, when we believe it's gone awry—without faith, belief takes a hike. At times...
I've thought, you know, I deserve this! But I struggled until my gut ached, still failing to achieve it. I felt powerless taking part in my own reality. Each move I make changing the relationship between my self and my reality, altering who I am until I realized that I have no self. There is only this context of the moment without knowing enough to understand what future moments this context creates. Desperately, I forced control of the relationship. Instead of acting from a position of true strength and wisdom, riding the wave in accordance with the transcendent direction of reality, I reacted against the current, weakening my position, stacking the odds against myself in a furious bid for power. That's war.

I taste ash in my mouth and it burns my eyes; the ash of my brethren. It tastes like betrayal. Although I'm loyal to Elohim, even though they were not, we're all real. The ash is betrayal, and faith during war is a damned bear.

Faith vexes me, and I'm one of the loyal chosen. Even so, sincerely feeling loyalty, I still question Master Elohim's methods, if only to myself. At best, after all of this time waiting on the Master I deserved, no, I worked for the position of second in command of Heaven. At the very least, Elohim should've seen fit to bestow the position on one of us, the Master's archangels, Elohim's troops. Creating a son to rule through, as far as I'm concerned, begs an insurrection, daring those who felt powerless to keep faith or commit a heinous act of aggression.

I love Elohim and I'll defend the Master's decisions, however, Elohim's not perfect. Elohim's an occasional bastard, a blow-hard, and a now and again fool, and the Master asked for this war; but I'll practice keeping faith. That's my choice.

So, if you ask me, Raphael, war is a loss of faith in an imperfect God; the relationship suffering—love, the acceptance of imperfection, the welcoming of it. I welcome the occasional warrior, with hopes that together we will transcend present conflicts. This is reveling in the relationship, the lay of the land.

These are the rules of the road, the way this game board operates, and any move we make on the board is a functioning leap of faith. Check and mate skulk around the bend. Better to keep moving. Staying fluid is working within the scheme of things, the Master's plan. I always try to keep moving. That's my story. Just keep moving.
"Raphael!" Gabriel shouted.
"What?"
"Stop daydreaming."
"I wasn't," I said. "Satan's making his move. I feel it. They'll be here soon. The Devil isn't one for patience." Feeling it is a double-edged sword. I've always felt it. If your heart is beating, I know you're there.

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Satan's struggle forever joined with envy and pride, and none of us were surprised when he raised a vociferous diseased ruckus, rallying those who listened to his spewing venom. "Master Elohim is not one of us!" he cried, and beneath his ruddy flesh, a shock of thin silver hair standing at attention, and his midnight blue suit, lurked a subtle palsy; a trembling anxiety nervously chewing a mouthful of loose fingernails, on the edge of some trite success, a thing he didn't wish to reveal, yet.

Satan grinned through his still boyish good looks, holding tight a secret time bomb squeezed high between his rear cheeks. "Elohim's been out of touch with our strata far too long. The Master can't possibly relate to our everyday problems." His lower lip shined, quivering while he raised his arms admonishing the crowd. "We serve the Master, but my friends, we are no longer served by the Master. We are archangels. Archangels!"

I waited for the spitting of one nail at a time to begin. Satan's eyes darted swiftly from side to side, on the run, forcing me to turn away when he shook his fists in the air. "The kingdom of Heaven is our birthright! The kingdom is only for those eternal ones. Those who are begotten have no place here!" I saw one nail fly off the tip of his tongue.

He smirked, a crooked bitter smile strutting across the wide plateau where a sizable group gathered milling around. At first, they mumbled uncertainties, however, he fed them, cutting an intense figure in that blue suit, his eyes bulging, working his jaw, jamming disease down their
throats, the ballyhoo and hoohaw of divisive blame, and Satan flailed his arms whipping the air into a frenzy.

"Yass! Oh, yass! We need to take what's ours!" Beelzebub hollered from the crowd. "Although, let's face facts. We were created to serve, and that's what we are; servants."

Beelzebub's wire-rimmed spectacles slid down his nose while he nodded in self-satisfied agreement.

"Speak for yourself!" shouted one of the infected creatures. I knew then they owned the crowd, and I saw Satan and Beelzebub exchange quick glances. "I'm not afraid, and I'm damned-well not going to serve the begotten!"

"Whoa," said Satan, "I don't know…"

He pursed his lips, and I snuck quietly off to the side. I felt it brewing, the disease gripping its victims about the throat. The heartbeat throbbed constricted, valves tightening with rancor. Camps grew delineated, for the crowd, not by them.

Satan wiggled his fingers, twitching one sharp eye barely controlling his palsy. "You seem to be saying, and correct me if I'm wrong, that there are those who have power and those who do not."

"I guess I am," replied the poor infected creature—surprised to learn what he'd said—and a group of friends approvingly nudged, shoved, and slapped him on the back before he'd had a chance to think about it. Politically ignorant, he smiled, pleased by the attention.

I watched Beelzebub, jaundiced and decrepit, twisting and dodging his way through the rear of the crowd, nodding at Satan. "Yass!" He stood, his yellow bald head suffering a profusion of liver spots, crossing his arms behind himself, opening his front quarters, an angel with nothing to hide—in hiding; an extraordinary campaign manager. The two of them, Beelzebub and Satan, held the crowd in a pickle.

"And you seem to be calling for a revolt!" Satan shrugged his shoulders throwing his hands out to his sides, lifting them just a bit, as if lifting a brief doubt.

"Well, I—" but the infected creature spun around too busy being vigorously congratulated.
"Sir, you put me to shame. Cut me to the quick!" Satan, loudly exhaling, waved away the doubt. "And, since I don't want to lose face entirely, I hope you'll at least allow me the honor of seconding your brilliantly conceived motion for a revolution." Satan grinned at the angelic folks.

"Are there nay-sayers among us?" Beelzebub asked a crowd in shock. They turned, and faster than one can mutter "betrayal" he loudly answered his own question. "No? Motion carried! So, I don't know much about this kind of thing, you see, but I think we ought to give Satan a crack at leading the troops."

The infected herd cast their attention back on Satan, whose internal combustion hissed and steamed, contained by a most serious, deeply contemplative turn of the cheek, and who I felt convinced would break out into a quick tap dance, his famous shuck n' jive. One long leg shook inside his slacks.

"I'm honored," Satan said. "Stunned at the idea of it all. It's very sudden, sure. But, I accept. Beelzebub will take my command in the field while I sit at the board toughing it out. Facing Master Elohim across the table will be difficult, but!" he rubbed his hands together lowering his voice, "I won't let you down."

The great diseased herd mumbled incoherently. They'd given power to one who struggled with envy and pride, and they didn't dare cross him. They cowered, afraid, if not for their eternal souls, for their bodies, subtle Heavenly vehicles that could be destroyed.

Presently, Satan and the Master opposed one another eye to eye, knee to knee, hunkered over a chessboard on Master Elohim's mountain; a qualitative area of allowance, a permission zone for time and space to mingle one thought removed from space-time itself, and as each made their play so progressed our battle below. Elohim, occasionally stern, sat stone still, expressionless, an old chin supported by knobby bridged hands entwined over the board: Never Begotten, Yahweh, Brahman, Tao, Pure Thought, Unmoved Mover, Only Begotten, Allah, En-Sof, Elohim, Adonai, Master, God, and most truthfully, Unnamed; swinging short legs freely below the seat, with eyes crinkled holding two small points of golden light, and a slightly
distended paunch creeping over the Master's lap. Infinite patience and wisdom-eternal bore the Master's strategy.

Elohim's disciplined gaze met Satan about to make his move.

The Master, concerned, jabbed at a double chin taping one pudgy finger. "You don't want to do that." Elohim spoke that all Heaven could hear if they were disposed to listen, though the Master never insisted. Honoring Satan with a lively paternal smile, the kind a grandparent might share with their child, Master Elohim leaned in close. "Slow the pace, son. Ease off the gas and check your options. You know, scope out the board. Say, are you hungry?"

Elohim peeled a grape examining it closely, squinting out of one ancient eye. Popping it into a small round mouth and rejoicing in its taste, as if it were the first grape, the Master reached down tightening the sash cord around a loose robe.

"Excuse me," Satan said. "I don't see any reason to drag this thing out." He raked his fingers through thin hair, pushing it down, but the silver strands leapt back up buzzing with electricity.

"You're not being very charitable towards one who's older. Has anyone ever told you that you look queer? Strange, I mean." The Master's smile melted into a sympathetic pout. "I know how you feel, you know. I'm only trying to help."

"This is war, and I don't feel charitable. When's the last time you were charitable, Master?"

"Charitable? Let Me see…" Shifting position, the Master crossed one leg over the other, sitting back in deep thought. "Charitable…" Abruptly, Elohim's smile returned, this time as a full toothy grin breaking into high round cheeks. "An angel came to see Me recently," The Master's fingers snapped at the air. "The poor bastard claimed he hadn't had a bite in three days, so, I bit him! Wha! Ha! No? You're not laughing. Now, that's sad." The smile dissolved and the Master's cheeks sunk, losing their light like the sun setting at dusk.

"You just don't get it. There's nothing funny here." Satan leaned back sighing, wrung out by frustration, the ball and chain of servitude gnawing at his viscera.
"That's where you're wrong, son. It's all connected. There's a balance. Rules. Regulations. Laws. There's machinery at work. Oh, it's very involved. Each move is the result of the previous move, and the reason for the next move. I'm telling you, you can't divide and conquer. The game doesn't work that way!" One eyebrow lifted and then the other, both saying adieu to a serious moment.

The Master chewed another grape. "Why, levity during crisis is mandatory! You can't have a successful crisis without laughing at it." Master Elohim spat a seed off to the side and leaned in. The chess players looked into each other's eyes and Elohim whispered enthusiastically, "Each moment, a part of the before and the after. The whole of infinite time in a single tick-tock. All existence in one action." Elohim tilted back the chair and tossed a grape into space, catching it jaws open. "Wa-wow! That was a juicy one! Come on. Join Me. These little guys are really gonna take off, and you can get in on the ground floor. Make a killing! What do you say? I call it," and Elohim painted the air with a sweeping gesture of strong palms and kind open fingers, "vision."

"Grapes?" Satan slapped his hand on the table.

"Why, sure!"

"Look, man, it's all the same to me." Lifting his hand, shaking with palsy, Satan dropped it on a pawn, holding it there.

"Right. That's what I'm saying. From up here, from where we sit, from where you'd like to sit, it's all-one-move," Elohim knocked each syllable with knuckles into the table, knitting together both eyebrows. "You're not ready for a position of absolute truth. Just because you live by My rules doesn't mean you're aware of them. Doesn't mean you know the moves. Doesn't mean you pay attention. Here you've got Heaven," a closed upturned fist presented itself to Satan staring down at it, "though, you don't realize it because the only way to Heaven is through Me." Elohim yanked back the fist, pounding a divine heart, and then the fist threw out an index finger, shaking it at Satan, transforming itself into a gun. "Listen, tell you what let's do; I'm gonna smite your troops, kick your incredibly grim, envious ass, and send you all to Hell." Elohim smiled a fulfilled ear to ear grin.
Satan trembled—not with palsy—and again removed his hand placing it in his lap. "Your angels are weak-kneed and most of them follow me, and if they follow me to Hell, what then? I'll have the greater kingdom. Above. Below. Hey, man, geography is irrelevant."

"Say! I'll beget more souls." The Master's smile appeared glued on.

"You can't do that. They won't be eternal. Your rules, remember?" Satan shook his hands above the game board, "Oh, very involved. Lots of machinery."

Elohim picked another grape. "You know, son, I'm sorry you're not happy with My little solution, but it occurs to Me that nothing I do will make Satan a happy fella, so, what the hey! I say we give it a shot in the dark." Elohim, shutting one eye, pulled the invisible trigger. "Run it up the flag pole. Play the ball where it lies!" swinging His imaginary five iron. "Oh, shit." The Master sat.

Satan's eyes crossed with fury and his narrow lips dried up puckering out like a bird's beak. At a loss for words, he made cheeping sounds twisting the beak.

Elohim watched in amazement. "You know, My friend, I'm disappointed in your complete lack of zeal. Obviously, you're not keen on the idea. Do you mind... how do you make those noises? They're nauseating, but you must know that," and the Master chewed several more grapes, thoughtfully, in silence, spitting seeds. "Seedless grapes! Now, there's an idea. A cleaner Heaven."

The color drained from Satan's face until his flesh turned the same electric albino gray as his silver hair.

Elohim watched Satan's change of pallor exercising brief interest. "I'm sorry, but this is the way it works; you make a move and place My kingdom in crisis. I make a move. I take what I've already got and use it to create something unique. Motivated transcendence, I call it. You motivate—I transcend; we're a team. I'll create a training ground where space meets time. Where souls will earn their immortality. That's transcendence, the result of crisis, including what's here and building something out of it that's greater than the sum of its parts. It don't mean a thing if it don't have that swing! My rule." Elohim, itching for Satan to make his move, waved a finger at the board. "The board is a board, however, it's also something more. Cosmological
organization is exponential. Things are what they are, and more. Reality is only one thing; more!

"Quiet, I can't hear myself think," Satan stared dejectedly at his position on the field of battle. He propped up his head with a single hand, and the head puddled into his palm like warm sweaty wax.

"Listen," the Master asked, "have you heard this one? If I say bears shit standing on their heads, does it make it true?"

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Below, we waited for battle, straining our eyes in the valley's thick dark chill. I heard Beelzebub advancing in the distance, though I couldn't see a damned thing. "Is this what it feels like to be trapped in the bowels of a volcano?" I asked Michael.

He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Raphael, fear, like a compass, keeps a soldier in line."

"I guess," I said, "for some it takes sitting at the bottom of the Valley of Death without a shred of faith to make one finally ask, 'What is my line? My direction?' Faith is a bear."

Michael turned maintaining silence. Gabriel, on the point, crawled and shimmied through darkness up to the next ridge. Behind us, thousands slept or quietly talked or contemplated their kingdom. We wore fear like a silent shroud; and I felt angry—angry about being a pawn in their game. I sensed a heart beating, and knew the Master, omnipresent and omnificent, already at work.

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On a plane where space meets time, an enormous relationship exhibited itself as a wave in the fabric of space-time, imperceptible by finite vision; a quantum particle of possibility, an
energetic quality of virtual form within curved dense matter, a hydrogen plasma sphere so enormous that even I, Raphael, could not stand outside of it to view it.

This virtual quality of possibility and form existed before the beginning as the nature of Elohim. Immediate space-time all here, infinity now—its density trapping itself, compressing itself, heating a subatomic architecture constructed out of the space-time wave, breaking through the molten plasma matter, expanding at imprecise times and imprecise places. Hydrogen, like hot air trapped inside a balloon, released particles of virtual relationship from one another, stretching them, the sphere expanding within itself, creativity using itself to transcend itself and seemingly infinite from my finite point of view. Finding myself on the universal plane, try as I might, I couldn't discover an edge to this space which thinned itself, clearing itself of plasma willy-nilly.

Increasing spatial area, Master Elohim created areas of thin space clear to the finite mind, perceptible relative to other areas of dense cooling matter. A curved universe apparently boundless, the proving ground for humankind, born out of the beginningless mind of Master Elohim; the finite from the infinite.

The mother, a particle nucleus of relative truth, gave birth to other relationships between subatomic particles, relationship birthing relationship: quarks, photons, protons, electrons, neutrons, subatomic architecture within a universal family, at last manifesting those relationships through atoms, molecules, cells, the form and pattern of substance, a burgeoning complexity of varying densities: atmospheric gases, stars, planets, galaxies, the earth. The universe expanded driven by quantum possibility, the wave flowing away from its original relationship particle, yet carrying the quality of possibility within. All matter containing the energy of subatomic relationship as the Master said, "...swings with My velocity."

Elohim's contextual touch lived at the root of all possibility as the center and beginning of the universe, and the Master first required that the universe become aware, that all things in the universe exist in the light of awareness, each particular in its own way cognizant of all other particulars. Hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, sulfur, and phosphorus, all aware of one another, possessing their qualities out of contextual awareness. The Master's mind and awareness, a vast
common ground where all existed as one open-ended relationship out of which all particulars individuate. One energy, multiple manifestations—multiple manifestations, one energy. The light of awareness gave birth to a new day.

Elohim envisioned no essential difference between eternity and a moment, each moment being a result of the previous one and giving birth to the next moment. Yet, if this were a training ground for proving, the Master would invite a circumscribed creature to bear witness, more than that, to be a part of the reality symphony, to recognize the challenges of a dualistic life, choices between this and that, now or later, good and evil. Humankind would perceive the relative born of the absolute, the Master’s absolute mind and awareness. Truths must be one. There is eternity in a moment, but also, there is only a moment. That soul, Elohim thought, who can live in both the relative and absolute will realize immortality.

In this way, Elohim created the universe in the Master’s image, that reality hummed with Elohim’s nature. One will at first see only a mountain, and then one will sense My selfless nature as the mountain, and finally one will grasp the mountain also as only a mountain. And the universe, multitudinous in its relationships, in the image of Elohim, gave birth to itself transcendentally; utilizing itself to create and recognize itself, ever connected to itself, yet, ever fresh. Thus, the Master becomes realized as an inexhaustible dynamic source, an eternal moment.

Elohim’s nature being co-emergent and coexistent, an infinitesimal meeting of time and space gave birth to a particle of reality that begot atoms, which formed molecules birthing a single cell, that divided into multiple cells, each retaining its autonomy though together they emerged as a greater whole; an organism that evolved using what previously transpired, becoming ever more complex and unique, ever evolving wholeness into the first seedling; Elohim’s way of planting a garden.

This seedling begot a plant, the plant a tree, the tree giving moist shade to the rocks. In this way, through a repetitive transcendent system Elohim created plants, bacteria, fungi, and small insects on the face of the earth, all of these differing aspects of Elohim’s nature the one in the many, the many in the one. This was the direction of the universe, of reality, of the Master.
Creation evolved as an increasingly complex context always composed now of previous relationships procreated by numerous less complex contexts. The universal substance followed its pattern of expansion along virtual lines of transcendental complexity. A brilliant light shone on the earth; awareness between the many of the greater one—death and birth, evolutionary tension sustained through natural crises—a divine fingerprint throughout time.

***

An enemy lunged out of the darkness, and I heard the screams of those fighting behind. I couldn't help them. I could barely help myself, thrashing my sword wildly, choking on dust while flesh fell turning to ash. At times only an arm dropped or a leg. Warring angels sliced the genitals off their brothers, using them to keep score.

This is my story, that tired troops swooped upon us, and that I, Raphael, not a warrior, but an intellectual by trade, an interpreter of Elohim's way, couldn't feel my own extremities and could not see through my abject terror. Once, I stopped, viewing the butt end of a sword's handle squeezed in my fist, witnessing it there, as if the fist belonged to another, and then in shock I fought off an assailant. I butchered, though I don't for the life of me know how, to save my own carcass. No bravery, no higher purpose. I harbored no interest in protecting the kingdom, only certain knowledge that mine were about to be used to keep score.

Michael cut his way through bodies, straining, grasping his sword in both hands, swinging it with no more courage than the rest of us, although killing assuredly, as one who lived in acceptance of his fear. When at last he found Beelzebub, whose yellow jaundiced pallor now suffocated, hidden behind a coat of charcoal dust. The valley grew silent and the killing ceased. Slowly, the ash settled. Both soldiers raised their swords, the only clean thing being the whites of their eyes, and Michael bellowed.

On the mountain, Satan perched over the board, his toes curling inside his shoes. He rubbed his hands briskly at last reaching for a pawn and glanced up expectantly at the Master.
"Hm? Oh! No, I've got nothing more to say, fella." Elohim sat contemplating a new grape, a green one without seeds. Making a declarative statement, Satan slid his pawn forward. Below, Michael hacked off Beelzebub's right hand and leapt forward to dust him. "No! Wait!" Beelzebub, kneeling, holding his arm, which terminated at the wrist, pleaded drowning in pain and misery. "It's over."

I stood beside Michael, yet, as my trembling calmed, I felt oddly unresolved. "Order your troops to advance, a single column at a time laying down their weapons," Michael commanded.

On the mountain, Elohim grinned at Satan. "Say, are you aware I've moved out both My bishop and My queen?"

"What brand of fool do You take me for? Perhaps not… No matter. Just show me the throne. The kingdom of Heaven is mine! Do You hear?"

"Patience," Elohim said, pushing a rubbery nose around with a finger, touching the tip of it, tapping on it and then sniffling. "There will always be another bus. You know, that's My secret. I'm a creative son of a bitch because I'm wise enough to know that not a thing is Mine. I claim nothing in particular because I know a particle of dynamic relationship will appear on the wave of space-time and change everything. I can afford to be patient because I've got nothing to lose, and no thing to defend. I expend a minimum of energy for a maximum of return. Pay attention, My friend. This is valuable stuff."

"Then what do You do that's so valuable that no one else can do it? You're expendable,…and so is everything You don't claim."

"When I say 'nothing', I mean, no-thing. Reality is no-thingness. Each thing subject to change, as a part of everything; a fluctuating everything is the same as nothing, emptiness. Can you deal with that?"

"That, Master, is what we're here to find out." Satan steadied himself forcing an unmitigated act of will. Concentrating. Staring into the Master's eyes, he tugged on pointed blue lapels.
Elohim's gaze bore into the dark pit of Satan's soul. The Master, growing, spread like a mountain, breathing as a calm wind through drifting clouds, hands clasped on the table. Demonstrating genuine control, Elohim's presence deified a fierce tranquility, a direct and full awakening of reality. The mountain spoke shattering a long silence. "Can you be still while the kingdom's at war? While your enemies are marching like termites up your ass? When Heaven opens its bowels swallowing those you hold dear?"

Satan frowned wrinkling his brow, and his shock of silver hair curled forward and back, always at attention. He looked like a cockatoo eating its tail feathers. "Not a pretty picture. It sounds as though You're losing."

"There will always be another bus. Watch My queen, son."

***

Above The Garden of Eden, a place called Paradise, Elohim continued creation so that the garden did not conclude on the surface of the earth but extended as sky and space, a location for lights, nourishing itself through the sun's warmth, and resting by the light of the moon and stars. The time of all which thrives in the garden is limited, subject to decay and accountable by the passage of the sun and moon, the Master thought; a transcendent notion, an ever changing landscape, and the time of growth became day, and rest rode in on the night, and an evolutionary cycle of birth and decay buzzed incessantly.

By day, Elohim living as plants and trees in relationship with chlorophyll captured the garden's sunlight, and the relationship of chlorophyll, plant processing and decay, and sunlight gave birth to oxygen, the sustainer of energy.

Creatures of the garden inhabited the entire spectrum, and while the Master concentrated on the game board and saving Heaven's throne, birds floated gently, lifted on air currents through the sky, landing below, using tree tops for rest, insects from the ground for feeding, and then again taking wing.
Decay and birth in the garden produced gases, hydrogen and oxygen drawn by the sun into the sky, raining down upon the earth as water, and Elohim swimming as water brought forth abundant life from the oceans and seas; the Caspian, and Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf. Watery torrents rushed along river beds slicing channels through rock, overflowing their boundaries; the Tigris and Euphrates, the Diyala and Khyber rivers, and their tributaries flowing like veins through The Garden of Eden, delivering minerals and removing toxins like blood feeding soil rich with the rewards of death and decay; because the universe is transcendental in its cycle, and nothing is lost and everything is used. The garden, according to its plan, flourished in a direction of constant return to itself, to the Master.

This became the work of the Master while facing Satan, to deal with the crises of Heaven by showing Master Elohim as the inexhaustible source of a place along the wave of space-time where humanity would prove itself and gain an immortal seat in the kingdom. The Master commanded that Eden increase through plants and soil, and creatures and sky, and that the garden forever remain empty of self while filled with relationship, and Master Elohim called Eden paradise because birth created itself as it should be, and also death.

The Garden of Eden did not flourish by particulars first, so much as it grew by a series of dynamic activities between particulars; creative energy. Here, if one used eyes to see, absolute truth decreed that the garden exist as a single unending whole while appearing differentiated. Again, the relative born of the absolute, the many in the one. The particulars of paradise existed not only for one another, but also by virtue of their creative energy, in the light of awareness giving birth to one another. This transcending process expressed Elohim in action through the quality of context.

Even I, Raphael, cannot fathom the expansive mind of Elohim. I'm sometimes lost, frustrated, and confounded by its depths because I fail to understand or predict the purpose of nature. Yet, my faith that nature operates with purpose is unwavering.

Faith and purpose in the way things are, the way they move, this is my story and I'm sticking to it.

The sun and moon passed over the garden five times.
Elohim slid the queen slowly across until she stopped, resting a single square from Satan's unprotected king. An empty square next to Satan's king remained under the watchful eye of the Master's bishop. Two of Elohim's archangels appeared, one standing on each side of Satan's chair, and he knew check loomed near. "There," Master Elohim released the queen, "now, what'll you do, son?"

Satan bit his lower lip. "At Your advise, I've examined my options, and I find that I still have an ace up my sleeve."

"Say, this isn't poker, you know."

"Patience," Satan said, glancing up at the Master. "Another bus is about to come along."
CHAPTER TWO--WHAT A PIECE OF WORK IS MAN

"Man? A self-balancing, 28-jointed adapter-base biped; an electro chemical reduction-plant, integral with segregated stowages of special energy extracts in storage batteries, for subsequent actuation of thousands of hydraulic and pneumatic pumps, with motors attached … and a universally distributed telephone system needing no service for seventy years if well managed…." ~R. Buckminster Fuller, *Nine Chains to the Moon*

Rank and file, the enemy stripped themselves of weapons laying them at our feet. They advanced slowly, continuously along the horizon, and as each horizontal column marched towards us, they bowed their heads. They wouldn't look us in the eyes; not afraid, only exhausted, too tried by battle to summon the energy. Armor and cloth singed around the edges, ragged with dirty cheeks, those few whose faces I did see threw down their swords relieved. We took no prisoners, created no living victims; this was not Elohim's way. "Reality," the Master often said, "is a learning process, and the only way to learn is by throwing yourself into the thick of it! If you're alive, then live! If not, then be as dust and blow away. If you're a victim, that's your doing, not Mine."

"They've had enough," Michael said. "Allow them to rejoin us, to cleanse themselves in the Master's light."

"Join Elohim's troops!" Gabriel sang. "Move back, back now and make room. Welcome home!" he shook one's hand. "Good to see you," he said, embracing another.

"What's wrong, Raphael?" Michael asked.
I couldn't shake this unresolved feeling. As I stared into the horizon, enemy troops lapped up like ocean waves breaking on the shore, a sea of bodies so easily misled. Are souls ready to believe the worst, or are they simply ready to believe? Elohim says the state of the union can be tested with a fast game of Three Card Monty.

"Something. I don't know," I said. Darkness rolled in, rolled across the valley, that's all I knew. Even angels are not always as we appear. We're subject to mistaken judgments and loyalties, and to false intuitions. We grow through crises. The angelic life is a practice.

"Maintain your formation!" Gabriel demanded. However, the column directly in front of us scattered like thousands of lice. Enemy war cries deafened our ears, and I realized the moment confronted us.

"Yass! Fire the damned thing and blow them all to Hell!" Beelzebub shouted, waving his dirty yellow stump of an arm. He'd formulated his desperate strategy several moves ago. Occasionally, angels are played for fools. Out of the darkness rolled a cannon. Michael, Gabriel, and I found ourselves staring down the gaping mouth of it.

Michael froze, momentarily listening beyond the war calls. Long ago, he discovered a quiet place, a small area of placid consciousness. Here, Michael listened to Elohim's voice. His sword arose in his mighty arm and the valley hushed like a feather floating in the breeze. I felt a warm draft whistling through my armor. Only the whistling. All else became silent. Beelzebub hesitated, nonplused.

"Divide and make way!" Michael shouted to our troops. "Make way!"

At last, I understood the distant rumbling of wheels crossing the valley floor. They advanced swiftly and without warning like a quake, and behind our troops, flashes of lightning electrified the darkness. At once, as though no middle distance existed, the Master's son rode his chariot parting our center, summoning thunder and tossing lightning bolts into the midst of the enemy's troops.

I watched in awe the waves of Beelzebub's angels retreating; glaring, horrid faces in the shadows running, writhing in agony under his wheels, and the begotten son, his long mane of
fine hair flying in the wind, heaving a lightening bolt like a mighty explosive charge cutting a cavernous gash in the valley floor.

His limbs, as mine, shown long and thin, yet unlike myself, the son appeared aesthetically pale. One might have mistaken him for a harpist, never a soldier. Watching one so gentle destroy without hesitation—and without conscience—frightened me, and I couldn't turn from terrifying screams as he forced a sea of bodies over the gash's brink, falling to an eternal place; I'm certain not Heaven, I'm certain not to rest. Elohim destroyed without compunction if pressed, and this one, the beautiful white one, rode into battle as Elohim's son.

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The last of the son's lightening illuminated the Master's mountain, a distant flickering summit. "Check," Elohim nodded at the queen, "and mate," nodding at Satan's king.

Battle no longer raging in his ears, Satan slumped in his chair allowing a long deep breath to escape. He stared into his lap examining sweaty palms, gradually becoming aware of a steady hum. "I hear it. The transcendent life. You didn't waste any time, did You? The ash hasn't even settled yet! I hear it. Like motion rings in a pool of water pushing outwards into time and space," he shook his head, smiling sadly.

"Why not? Now is as fine a time as any."

"And, what about me?" Satan crossed his arms.

"You know the score. One's destiny stream begins in the present moment. You're the one who threw stones in the pool stirring the waters." Elohim stood, shaking out one leg and then the other. "I was content to just be. Put on a side of Coltrane," the Master conducted imaginary jazz swirling one arm and a quick wrist, "partake of the good juice... but you had to go throwing rocks. Why? I had My ducks strutting in line until you came along. Quack, quack." Elohim's fingers tapped out a line of imaginary ducks along the game table's edge. "Did you honestly think you could wage a rebellion without feeding opposing forces?"
"I'm missing something here. Are You saying You're going to feed me to the bogeyman?"

"You know, you're negative in a queer sort of way. What's it gonna take before you figure it out? My friend, I don't punish, not even a recalcitrant feather-brain like yourself."

"What about Hell?" Satan countered. "Or is that an empty threat?" Depressed, he lifted one corner of his mouth looking away, wondering why he bothered with verbal sparring, surprised he had any presence of mind left. After all, I lost. What's the point?

"Son, I see great promise in you, but you're subject to the same laws of reality as everyone else. Say, ever heard of the law of homeostasis?"

"No. Is this where I get the lecture?"

"Just asking." Elohim settled back down in the chair. "However, if you want the soup..." The Master shook one shotgun finger between Satan's cloudy eyes. Elohim blew on the smoking finger drawing it back. Then the Master's grin turned concentrated, eyebrows in relaxed perfect alignment, hands once again supporting a soft double chin. "The law is clear; 'reality is dynamic, variable and fluctuating, however, only within certain limits of tolerance'. This is one of the ways I achieve omnipresence; homeostasis," Elohim smiled gently. "You've tested My limits, bird-brain. Stretched My tolerance."

"Sorry?"

"Oh, apology accepted, though it doesn't change anything. Listen, you know what you are. I don't have to tell you what you are. Now, Me, I'm more than just the Master. I'm an entire organization! I like to perceive Myself as a complex system requiring a certain balance. I'm finely tuned. The sensitive type." Elohim's fingers played with one another.

Satan perked up, feigning interest, thinking he might stave off the inevitable if he could keep the Master talking.

"And then some dip-shit comes along and drowns all My rubber duckies. That's a crisis, a breakdown in balance. I feel like I skipped My prunes, you know? My response is to
reorganize. Toss out the dead wood, so to speak. Are you listening?" The Master drew one
finger lightly across the chessboard. "When limits are exceeded, homeostasis demands a new
game strategy."

"Revolution causes evolution. Man, why didn't I think of it?" Satan stared into the
distance, his right leg pumping under the table.

"Well, to be plain about it, because I'm the Master of the mountain and you're a nervous
bird-brain. My friend, you're bereft of any moral or ethical constant, and homeostasis
demonstrates a consistent ethical imperative at work in the universe."

"I'm going to Hell, aren't I?"

"Well... I don't know..." Elohim bit into a banana and thoughtfully chewed a piece
while examining the rind, scratching at it. "Incredible stuff! Would you care for a banana?"

"No, thank you."

"Yes. You're going straight to Hell."

***

On behalf of the Master, Azrael, chief angel in charge of birth and death, hovered near
the edge of a gaseous spiral, arguing humankind's case with earth. Space lay dark, save a star
here and there, though below within a cluster of stars shined more light bonding to itself like
illuminated spilled milk, and off to the far side of one hundred billion stars Elohim created earth
that humanity might contemplate the Milky Way galaxy. "This is the sixth day," Azrael said.

"And when these creatures rebel? What then? They'll bring a curse upon me," warned
earth, "and I'm not seeking my maker's wrath. No, siree!"

"My understanding is that humankind will be modeled after our likeness, as the universe
is shadowed after Elohim's likeness. Not a separate and rebellious race is humanity, but all of a
piece with the mind of the Master, Elohim's universal spirit manifest as a seminal political point
of power in the destiny stream of the planet. Creating humankind is the Master's way of creating
a universe that is able to look upon itself. It is a transcendent universe in that it uses itself, its
own crises to overcome and further create itself, and this the Master calls "evolution," and given humanity, the universe will be able to perceive itself, judge itself, and act upon itself with relative free will." Azrael's delicate wings fluttered so swiftly they vanished in space. He stretched his legs, pointed his toes, and took a quick spin around the earth.

"I see these creatures as dangerous. Manipulative," earth said.

"Political," Azrael said.

"Same difference, and I don't like it! Look, these humans," earth spun on its axis, "they'll be the culmination of all that's arrived before them, yet, in their transcendent way, they'll be more; self-aware with the ability to decentralize their egos and reflect. It's this something more that concerns me."

"Why?"

"Because allowing a creature to walk the walk and talk the talk of others, and consider the conditions of its existence, is opening the door to desire. Reflection upon conditions quickly turns to scheming for control of those conditions. Look at the dog. It's a species I've recently acquired. A wonderful creature! A dog isn't aware of time, so it won't invent anything to try and save any.

However, not to bestow free will at this juncture is clipping a bird's wings. In other words, these creatures, these humans, have to be free to exercise their questioning inventive spirits. In large part, this would be the universe's method for perceiving itself. Would Elohim visit spiritual death upon these creatures?"

"No, Elohim would not. The universe is imbued with the Master Creator's spirit," Azrael fluttered.

"On that point, winged one, we're agreed," and earth spun in curved space, within its atmosphere, bending space like a soft pillow with a lead ball dropped upon its center. Azrael hovered cautiously, lest he become caught in the whirlpool of gravity. "But who's to know which road these humans will choose? No, siree, it's too risky."
Azrael carefully weighed earth's argument and then, "If we agree that the human race will be imbued with the Master's spirit, with the will for, and awareness of transcendence, it seems to me that for you, earth, to stand in the way of progress is a lack of faith in Elohim."

"Faith? That's easy for you. I've got fire, flood, and quake hanging over my head! I'm telling you, humankind will be a fleshy eruption on my ass, an infectious pimple, a toxic waste dump vying for control in a place I can't scratch, a natural disaster to end all disasters. They won't be happy until they knock me off my axis suffering their endless, redundant investigations. I foresee a race of idiots trying to save themselves by destroying their own house! Besides, they're, you know, … real estate developers."

"Threatened?"
"Perhaps."
"Let me take seven handfuls of soil from different parts of the planet," Azrael said. He flew around in circles trying to keep pace alongside earth.

The planet spun furiously, threatening to pull Azrael in. "No!" earth cried.
"I'll secrete the soil in Eden and man will be born of the garden, never to venture forth from paradise."
"What are my options?" earth asked.
"If there are no politically savvy creatures? Complexity doesn't come to a head, nor does crisis and catastrophe. No complex bid for power? No evolution. The planet dies."

Earth slowed for only a moment. "Why do I feel between a rock and a hard place?"

***

In the kingdom of Heaven, Elohim sat on the throne surrounded by angels bickering noisily amongst themselves.
"We don't need more angels!" one said.
"I won't miss the others," a lesser angel offered.
But I, Raphael, still heard their tortured screams as they disappeared. I understood the Master's capabilities, Elohim's proclivity towards extremes and excesses of position, and my internal compulsion to question Master Elohim grew implosive. I felt ancient after the battle, as though I'd touched Heaven's hoary history. I became part of it now, and I had the right to question the status quo or the changing status quo. "On what grounds do You justify creating humanity, these future begotten angels? And how do You plan to do it?"

"My justification?" Finally, my disloyalty lay bare. And, I felt certain Elohim would banish me from the kingdom. Rather, exercising a light of beatific kindness, the Master examined my face, staring into my eyes. "You know, the organization," Elohim said at last, "is designed to grow or die. It grows in complexity and through catastrophe. Complexity and catastrophe..." One of the Master's fingers crossed a thoughtful mouth dragging down a fat lower lip. "Raphael, people are a perfect expression of My nature, the nature of the organization! Besides, and pay attention to this, that little rebellion Satan cooked up, it isn't over by a long shot." Elohim looked from face to face, grinning like a Cheshire that just swallowed the cockatoo. "Boys, we're gonna up the ante. Wha!"

For the first time I noticed master Elohim's sharp teeth.

***

In the garden, Azrael secreted seven handfuls of soil, which Elohim combined with water into formless clay, a shapeless puddle of matter. Yet, hidden within this matter lived its virtue to evolve by form. Form and matter, in the way of the universe, co-emerged as a result of their relationship with each other. Using the quantum element of dynamic relationship, the Master birthed humanity of the elements of the garden, that they would coexist in symbiogenesis; the universe evolving genetically from the simple to the complex according to the demands of homeostasis; from the simple non-nucleated cell to the complex nucleated cell, which in its turn and by its existence provided a home environment sympathetic to other living cells, to
mitochondria bacteria. By this symbiogenesis, a complex oxygen breathing organism evolved out of Elohim's transcendent universe.

"Now, Raphael," the Master said, "this is valuable stuff. I'm breathing life into humankind the way Coltrane blows: a loving science crafted one note at a time, each note growing from previous notes, with the complex whole as a melodious song more than the sum of its notes. Through symbiogenesis, those organisms which are independent will remain independent, but also, they'll be of a piece, housing one another, enabling each other's survival." Elohim, displaying arms outstretched, spoke to me, yet, at once the message, a mere thought, was delivered into the fabric of space-time. "Have faith, My friend, and have faith in man, because humanity's place in the universe holds purpose; the evolution of the architectural design, My house, and direction; to move the universe, and to move with the universe from the simple to the complex," the Master glowed, "to swing with My spirit, through My awareness. Humanity will be My shadow, proof of My existence. And, if humankind uses free will to live according to their true nature, then they'll journey through paradise as individuals, but of a piece, housing one another, enabling each other's survival. To journey along this road is marvelous! Exciting! It's to become angelic." Master Elohim beamed, both eyes crinkling with joy, the case for genes eloquently stated.

On earth, a relationship between space and time gave birth to the particle wave, the possibility—impacting birth to the elements, matter which included form—which gifted Adam, the first man, with the structure of a circulatory system, a respiratory system, a supportive framework of bones, and the power of vital organs; all of this matter, form, structure, and possibility sustained by the pattern of homeostasis and symbiogenesis.

Master Elohim breathed the warm song of life into man, giving him fire and locomotion, and Adam awoke curled like a wet bird in a wild field of einkorn wheat and flowers, the morning sun's heat baking his naked flesh and drying his body matted with fine hair. He opened his eyes, discovering himself as more than the sum of his parts or the qualities of those parts. He opened his eyes wondering, born out of and into the desire to know.
In it's way, time passed. A fat black lizard scurried by stopping short, seeing Adam, who spied it out of the corner of his eye. It stretched its tiny reptilian neck and head, bobbing up and down, bending its front legs, bowing, as if greeting the new king. Adam, feeling powerless to move, lie staring at the lizard. He watched while the lizard held its distance and continued bending and bobbing, playing at the game of using itself, if only because it found that it could. I am that, Adam thought.

It felt to Adam as though suddenly his arm decided to move and straighten from the elbow. His hand extended its fingers, opening and closing them, playing with one finger and then another. At this activity, the lizard turned tail fleeing deep into the einkorn. Adam turned his head moving his jaw, and felt the side of his new cheek irritated where it pressed against the field's gritty soil. I am that?

In these first hours, a small part of Adam, that bound by flesh, asserted itself. No sooner would he see a crawling thing or a slender flying thing than his arms or legs extended to touch it. Those parts of my big self that crawl and fly, he thought, they draw my smaller self to them.

Once, his eyes closed and his body continued moving, and for the first time he felt his small self as the mover. Adam's small self continued asserting until the separation completed. This is good. I want to do a thing, move a thing, and it happens! Wow! All right. Jaw, move. Adam enjoyed five minutes of opening and closing his jaw. All right, …arm!

A mouse ran close to Adam, sniffing and twitching its nose. Adam twitched his nose and the mouse dashed away squealing. This must be reality; a black lizard, harsh ground, wheat, and a mouse. Then there's me.

At midday, Adam stood, and testing his mettle as a man for the first time, he trailed one thick sienna skinned hand over his chest, down his stomach, feeling abdominal muscles, and at last stroking his nut brown thigh. Bending one leg, he gazed at the horizon far beyond the wheat field, where a hazy strip of green landscape buckling under the sunlight gave way to another strip beyond the green. This one glinted and shimmered catching light, turning it white and then sandy blue. In the land of Armenia, thus ran the Euphrates river, whose flowing tributaries nourished the Garden of Eden, though when he reached for it, Adam discovered a cloudy
distance existed and certain imagery lingered softly, beyond his immediate grasp. He played his first curious game, catching a speck of glinting white with his eyes, trying to hold it in one spot. The speck swiftly escaped him jumping along the sliver of blue water. Reality is also green and blue, and shiny wet, and it's warm and round and yellow, and hurts my eyes. It goes where it wants to. I can't keep it from going where it wants to. The first man hiked with improved agility towards this distant river, using the flat of his hand, instinctively shading his eyes from the sun. I am the mover. I go where I want.

Again, Adam met the black lizard. The reptile lay stiff across man's path, and when he examined it, the lizard didn't look back or bob up and down. Adam paused. In the field, I saw the mouse who ran in circles, the lizard that bobbed up and down, and I felt the wind along my wet flesh and saw the einkorn leaning first to one side and then the other, and I thought this must be reality, all things moving. Using his toe, he rolled the lizard onto its back, exposing its grayish-white belly to the sun. The first man bent over brushing a curly lock of brown hair away from his eyes. He studied the lizard. Now, there is stillness. Adam stood for a moment, still, honoring the notion, and then he broke dried twigs underfoot, onward through Eden.

The green landscape drew closer, and Adam discerned individual green forms. He saw trees but didn't know his maker. He knew his consciousness, however, he did not realize Master Elohim. The first man carefully formed a picture in his mind of the lizard, and he felt a vague sense of limitations and mortality, without awareness of his immortal unlimited spiritual inheritance; man's beginnings, his original nature now lost.

By inchmeal, crisp golden browns and dry wheat field beiges yielded to deep greens and rich reds, the oranges and yellows, the fruit bearing trees of paradise where earth underfoot turned dark, moist, and a canopy of the tallest trees shielded Adam from the sun's heat while allowing few scattered rays, long wide beams of light, to filter through. Who am I? Adam wondered. A white moth fluttering, passed through a sunbeam. Why am I here? Adam felt a presence, yet, saw no one, and Adam knew he stood alone in the universe.

A bird flew overhead, swooping in and out of the canopy, landing and squawking down at the first man. "Hello! Who are you?" the man asked, and he lifted his arms, critical of their
form and mass. They grew no feathers. No matter, he flapped them up and down, and in circles small and great seeing what he could see, feeling what a man feels, because it's possible.

"Who am I?" Adam asked the creature. It craned its head up and completely around, bending its neck, pecking and preening at blue and red feathers, but it didn't answer the question. The bird took flight for parts unknown, and Adam, dropping his arms, hiked deeper into Eden towards the river. Time passed in silence. In its way, the first man's mind undertook its wondering ascent.

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"You're man!" like water running over gravel, a rugged enthusiastic voice proclaimed the fact.

Adam spun around on one foot. "All right!" and he fell, landing on his hands in a soft pile of golden green leaves. "But who's there? Are you a man?" He rose quickly to his knees and tried bobbing up and down like the lizard. This offered no answers, no tangible results other than making him queasy.

"Me? I just flew down here from way up there, and damn are My arms tired. Ha! Wha!"

Adam smiled, and again he looked at his arms and tried a tentative flapping motion. No success.

"Say, you like that?" the gravely voice asked. "You thought it was funny?"

"Yes," Adam stood brushing himself off, separating himself from the rest of the earth.

"Huh, that old rag? I just dragged that out of the closet and dusted it off. Okay, here we go, son. Look at Me, and pay close attention; you're man."

"Where are you?" Adam cautiously turned, slowly, his wide eyes observing the high cathedral ceiling of leafy branches. He ran one hand along the rough buttressed root of a nearby tree trunk. The root crawled above ground and stood taller than man. The trunk grew so wide Adam couldn't see past it. He pressed his bare back against the colossus, forcing himself to look up, becoming dizzy, tracing its height with his furrowed brow. A wee mite under the universe's
big toe, he felt anxious and insecure. Adam became aware of an emptiness in his solar plexus. "I'm sorry, I don't see you."

"You're not paying attention. Take a gander at the treetops where they meet the sky. It's okay, Adam, go ahead."

Adam lay down sinking into a pile of leaves and gazed upwards. He felt the damp mossy ground against his back.

"Can you imagine it any differently?" Elohim asked.

"No," the first man shut one eye squinting through the other, and then shook his head violently causing the world to pitch back and forth vibrating. "It doesn't change." Adam sat up.

"Can you imagine a sky without sun? Or trees without sky?"

"No." A ray of light splashed over his face striking him in the eyes.

"Then is the tree rooted in the ground or above?"

"It's here," Adam said. "A part of all things it touches. Ground, sky, ... all things."

"Know Me. Listen to Me. You are man, and you're not alone. A man, yes, but also more. I'm your god, Master Elohim. Walking the earth, you touch Me. Seeing, you acknowledge Me. Envisioning, you swing with My spirit. We walk where we are. We see what there is. We envision more than were we've been, and more than we have seen. Together We become, We proceed. And please, don't do that thing with your head again. It's nauseating."

"But what," Adam asked, picking up a leaf, "is man? What am I?" He traced the leaf's dusty surface using his finger, following one of numerous veins down to its dry stem. He traced a vein from his wrist along his forearm.

"More or less, the same as a tree," the Master said. "You see, on its highest level, reality performs as a single exponential unit or the tree ceases to exist. The tree touches the earth and sky, you know, and points in-between from where it is, and senses what there is for it to sense, making its creative offering in return. The tree lives. The tree dies. It's a process. But man—"


"Oh, really?"
"Yes." The first man grew belligerent. "I know this tree." Adam leapt to his feet grabbing a branch like an arm and ripping it off the venerable giant. He didn't hear the tree cry out, and he waved the branch through the air while shouting, "Take my arm! Take my arm, you tree!" Adam ran around the huge trunk hideously dancing, hopping, and shaking his leg. "Take my leg!" He leapt into the sun, quickly snapped his head around, hurdled over a rock, and sprang back under the shade of the tree. "I can use you, you tree, but you can't use me! Man is more than a tree." Adam walked the circumference of the venerable giant. He stopped and slapped one hand on its trunk, no longer insecure concerning his position under the big toe of the universe. A tree is a tree, he thought, and a man is a man.

"Adam," the Master asked, "what is man?"

"Better than a tree," Adam grinned.

Master Elohim's head shook in frustration. "Humanity, the infant conqueror."
CHAPTER THREE--LAW AND VIRTUE

"From the bosom of the sacred Word he brought forth the world. On high, below, he abides in his own laws." ~Atharva Veda, 4.1.3

"Master, why call me 'Adam'?

"Because, you're the first man. You know, the first creature of your kind."

Adam stepped out of Eden's dense forest into a clearing surrounded by fragrant tangerine trees laden with thin-skinned orange fruit ripe for eating. He felt Uriel, the sun angel's heat enveloping his body, and his eyes closed soaking up paradisal warmth. A brilliant forest green blanket of tall grass unfurled itself like a silk coverlet being set down in the breeze, and mounds of purple berries and currants trembled on low bushes along the ground. Beside the clearing, a stream ran clear bubbling water over rocks, foaming, gurgling along its passage. Adam knelt by the stream watching sleek bodied trout diving below the foam, darting between crags and floating weeds rooted in the stream's bed. He shoved an arm into the chilled water catching a fish; however, no sooner had Adam clutched his hand around one of these sly creatures then it escaped his grasp swimming away, sometimes folding its body and looking back, laughing at me, Adam thought.

He glanced up a short distance from the clearing, witnessing the Euphrates, wider than he'd first judged it; its blue water now tinged with mud, and at the river's far edge a small herd of dark woolly water buffalo drank. Some dipped their odd triangular heads over the bank's edge, wetting large square snouts, while others waded in the shallows, whipping their tails in circles,
splashing one another's black stringy coats. Unfortunately for them, flies buzzed profusely, enjoying a symbiotic relationship not wholly welcome.

"What do you call these other creatures, those in the water and on land," a grayish-brown bird of prey flew overhead, "and above?" Adam followed the bird's arc, spreading its large wings against a clear empyrean sky, hovering motionless, and then soaring in circles growing ever smaller until it touched the far horizon and disappeared. This time he didn't try his arms.

Elohim sat on a rock cradling two tangerines in one hand and a fist full of berries in the other. "Look at that color, the texture!" Elohim studied the fruit, holding it up to the sunlight, turning it piece by piece, examining its reflective properties and depth of hue, its living form. "Listen, I do damned good work." The Master's front teeth rested tentatively on a single berry. "Tart, but tasty. Valuable stuff, I'd say." When the berry disappeared, Master Elohim attended to the first man. "Adam, I'm charging you with the care of Eden. You name the creatures. After all, they're as much the garden as this fruit or those trees or the soil underfoot, or," the Master mumbled, "human kind."

Elohim stood, turning from Adam, pacing the garden. "Uh huh!" the Master spun around, advising with finality, as if this decision exacted copious time and effort. "All things being equal, I entrust Eden to your care. However," Elohim paused, eyeing Adam, smiling at him, "and pay special attention to this; your freedom in the garden, any point of freedom from any here to any there, from any now to any then, is not absolute. Freedom is relative to the limitations of reality as I've created it. I call this body of laws 'homeostasis,' the garden's method of maintaining a golden balance. It's My way of keeping a hand in the paint pot, you understand."

"Laws?" Adam asked. "What are those?"

"Be who you are, My friend. The first law of power, 'Come from a position of strength', your strength. The strengths I've given you."

"Like being strong enough to tear branches off a tree?" Adam danced through a bed of leaves. "Or being fast enough to kill small crawling things!" and he grinned smacking his palms together.
"No. That's not it. I've honored you with contemplation and vision. Study the birds. The creatures up above."

"They fly. I don't," and the first man hung his head with disappointment.

"Oh, they're very graceful and all that. Sharp eyesight," Elohim poked a finger against one temple. "Acute perception, yet, they can't envision the future. They construct nests out of instinct, but birds don't assemble clues, the subtle pieces of their lives, and formulate plans based on those clues to deal with contingent events. Only man can envision a future and actively navigate his transcendence." Elohim smirked.

"What's funny?" Adam asked.

"Oh, it's a little inside joke. You wouldn't understand. Something I'll do whenever any human tries to formulate a plan. Ha!"

"Listen, dismembering trees and killing small crawling things, that's not for you, you know? If I want a creature of destruction, I'll create the termite. The termite will be needed in its way, but you're not a bug, you're man."

"All right! Meaning?"

Elohims shook a finger in Adam's face, "Meaning, if you're gonna rip branches off a tree, use them to build a shelter against the storm."

"What storm?"

"Heads up!"

Charcoal clouds crept across the sun's face hanging motionless, and devoid of Uriel's light, the earth became cold and damp. Falling softly at first, raindrops discovered paths through the thick garden canopy, trickling along branch and bark, feathers and flesh. Adam, overjoyed, sighted his first rainbow, Master Elohim's paint pot spilling down from Heaven, and man opened his mouth tasting a fine mist, until the sky burst forth like a celestial dam and a long deep peal of thunder frightened him. A lightning flash sent the first man running, hiding under a tree. Raindrops swelled pelting him relentlessly. The rain froze to hale, and Adam, naked and shivering, cast down his head. Different from feeling Uriel's warmth upon his flesh, Adam
experienced the cold and damp clear through to the bone. His ribs grew sore and his lungs lost
elasticity. Even his toes refused to bend. "I see."

"I'm sorry, but you see I'm a furious Master, an imperfect god. Adam, even I require
practice. Like man, I'm in process. We're in process," and Elohim stopped the storm as abruptly
as it began. "Such that humanity proceeds and changes course, so will I. As I've created you in
My image, you, eventually, will create Me in yours." Elohim paused for a moment. "It's true,
son. Why, this morning you couldn't put two words together or realize your own thoughts. Just
look at you now!"

Adam, disgruntled, shook his mane of soggy hair. "Just because you can do a thing
doesn't mean you should, Master."

"No?"

"You say I have this vision. Then you too have this vision. We have this vision in
common."

"Meaning?" Elohim, wide-eyed, bit a cheek.

"Meaning, what is man? What is Master? We are vision. We know what we are. We
must know what we do. Make that the first law." Adam trembled while Uriel melted the clouds.

"Get outta town! Wha- Oh? Ha! 'Awareness' is the first law?" Master Elohim's
protruding belly convulsed with divine love's laughter. "Adam, you're gonna swing with the
organization yet. Humanity, the infant conqueror takes its first step."

"Pay attention!" Adam shouted.

"What?"

"Only a bird can fly," the first man said, smiling, flapping his bare arms.

"You know, that's true," the Master snapped two fingers.

"Only man is aware when he does a thing. The bird is special and so is man …and
Master!"

"I do good work," Elohim said.

Adam hiked over the wet slick grass until coming to rest by the shore of the Euphrates.
For the first time he witnessed his reflection in the water while Master Elohim's words, the first
law of homeostasis, planted themselves as seed in his swiftly evolving mind. By the river's solitude the seed gave birth to a nagging question; If man proceeds, how can I be who I am? Who am I? What am I, if I am ever changing? The first man pulled and tugged at his flesh. Using his fingers, he explored the waxy crusty orifices of ears and nostrils. He smacked himself hard in the face, being angry for a moment. Listening for whatever sounds he could hear and breathing long and low, smelling and tasting the air, Adam felt pleasure in being alive, and he felt confusion. "Master, I asked, what is man? You tell me that man is proceeding. This is no answer. I wander the earth knowing less than when I opened my eyes. Am I the creature of Your vision?"

Beside Adam, the great river flowed along its wide bed carrying bits of reeds and twigs and dried grass. The wooly water buffalo drank quietly on the far shore. From behind the clouds a flock of geese gracefully appeared, gently landing, riding the river's murky surface. Adam listened, but Master Elohim refrained from speaking—so the first man thought. Adam surveyed his surroundings, as honest and forthright to the eye as his own nakedness, however, Elohim hid. Still, the first man hadn't a clue as to the dimensions of his creator.

One by one, beasts of the field, creatures flying the firmament, and those navigating the waters, made themselves known to Adam, and by the banks of the great Euphrates river, man the conqueror named Master Elohim's creatures from the largest pachyderm to the infinitesimal tick, and each and every one, the Boa, wild cat, the field mouse and river rat, the gnat and mourning dove, Adam queried, "Now, we know who you are, but who am I?" No answer offered itself, and Adam silently castigated the Creator for burdening his mortal shoulders under this perplexing anvil; What is the self? Who am I?

Adam lingered beside the river, leaning on one elbow fingering blades of grass and watching the afternoon sun sink in the distance. On the other side of the river, land appeared parched and desolate. Soil packed itself in cracked hardened squares, and with the late sun meeting earth's horizon the land floated, illusory, in red waves above the blue riverbank's far edge. The woolly water buffalo now lay on the land; or galloping in circles, the animals kicked up small tornadoes of dust against a pale sky. Parched wilderness served as their kingdom.
"The second law of homeostasis is that all of My works, including humanity, possess virtue."

"I don't care," Adam said. "Get out of town. You leave me more questions, no answers, and my head hurts."

Elohim ignored Adam, and this was not unusual. I, Raphael, often heard the Master pontificate endlessly.

"And I don't mean moral virtue. That we'll touch on later. I'm talking about the virtue to become, to swing! Adam, when I plant a seed, it contains the virtue to become a rainforest. When I plant an egg, it's informed with the virtue to become a sentient being.

"You see, in order to maintain the balance it's imperative," and the Master's eyes crinkled, "that you act according to your virtue, and further, that you allow your virtue the freedom to become. False morality and steadfast loyalties will inhibit your natural virtue, My friend, and that's valuable stuff. You're here to struggle, not to suffer."

"So, it's Your law. That's that." Adam shrugged.

"Let's us try it this way; in the broadest sense of the word, don't become overly religious about anything. In other words, that may be that, but only for now. The process constantly proceeds. That's the direction of the universe. Your direction. Anything humanity will create to last must be doomed. Any final word the human congregation might hold dear must prove false. The important thing is to swing with the organization. Get with the program.

The first man only half payed attention.

"What's the problem, Adam?"

He ran his hands over the backs of his arms where goose flesh tingled. The sky turned blue-gray, and Adam, seeing his first early moon, grew acutely aware of a warning. "Uriel is sleeping. I think I'm cold."

Adam hiked back to the clearing and began collecting large branches. "Not to worry, Master," he glanced around himself. "I know what to do! Are you there?"

At sunset, with the Euphrates to his back, Adam inserted one last branch in the hut and stood clapping dirt off his palms, admiring his handy work. I hope the Master can see this thing
which I've built. He stepped back not wishing to block Elohim's view. The hut collapsed in front of him and an armadillo scurried out from under the mess. Adam considered the coming of night, the warning of a dim sky, and tried again; the project before him, yet another thing to tackle, and darkness an amorphous sponge to wrestle with.

The first man built his hut a distance from the river in the clearing, and when he completed it, in his heart Adam claimed the land. He gathered fruit to eat: tangerines, oranges, berries, avocados, and bitter olives. Each one he tasted and claimed as his crop. However, when Adam stopped to examine the tree in the center of the garden, he reached out and Elohim at last spoke. "Stop! This is the Tree of Knowing."

Adam pulled back his hand. "Why can't I eat from the Tree of Knowing?"

"Because, you're an infant crying out in the wilderness of your own consciousness, seeking your true self. Because, My friend, 'knowing' means attunement with the selfless dynamic process. You see, where I come from we say absolute reality is empty. Isn't that beautiful?"

"I don't know."

"Why, sure it is! We mean empty of selfness. No thing exists in and of itself. Evil doesn't emerge and exist in a vacuum without good, nor does any abstract quality of any element possess an independent self. There is no independent reality, only relationship, and relationship is a dynamic process. You keep asking Me about you, about your self."

"Finally, my Master hears me."

"But I can't give it to you, son."

"The answer or my self? My headache is back."

"Either one, because the universe, of which you're a part, is essentially empty. You see, in your swaddling state you'd mistake the empty process of knowing for having a grip on the relative elements of knowledge. The former is an absolute verb. The latter a relative noun. Yet, they're born of one another; co-emergent. They're two, but ever one. No. You'd make the mistake of separation and the pursuit of knowledge at the expense of knowing because you're hell-bent on searching for your elemental self, and, My friend, in searching single-sided for that
which doesn't exist, you'll destroy the natural balance. You'll violate My code of homeostasis. Eat from this tree, and on that day humanity becomes an endangered specie living outside of paradise.

Adam taunted Elohim, reaching for a piece of fruit from the Tree of Knowing and coming up short. He grinned mischievously, "Can't stop me!"

"Won't stop you, you mean. I'm not telling you what you must or mustn't do, Adam." Elohim lifted one skeptical eyebrow. "I'm merely explaining a little bit about how the game board operates and about life in the garden. I'm requesting that you refrain from eating from the Tree of Knowing, and I'm offering, in return for your cooperation, to guide you down the Middle-Path of My code. Not an easy path, but I'll bring you along slowly. I'm not always making rules and passing judgments, you know. Sometimes, I just try to help."

"Well, all right! Because you haven't helped me since I got here."

"I gave you life and asked for nothing in return. But you, you're full of self, and if you don't watch yourself, you'll end up spending hot afternoons on the other shore swatting at flies with your tail."

"Is this life? I've given it much thought, Master. I'm a man with many questions, no answers, and I live in a hut. I don't feel related to the garden. I feel trapped inside here, in my body, looking out at that which is not me. Sometimes I feel like the center of the garden. Other times I feel like I'm standing on my toes, on the edge of the garden, but I do not feel like the garden and I are one. Things happen to me, and I cause things to happen, but I do not happen. I am not proceeding, Master. You spoke to me of virtue, the virtue to become. But what is my virtue? What am I to become?"

"It's your virtue to become more than you are. To proceed. To transcend your life experiences. It's the nature of your virtue to be motivated by crises big and small." Elohim smiled upon man, and for a second in space and time, envied humankind its mystery. "At present, you have a crisis. Big? Small? I don't know. You don't know who you are. If I pity you your blind density and hand you the answer, I rob you of your motivation to proceed. I steal your fire. Adam, you don't want My pity. You want to swing! You don't want to know it all at
the flight of the first fall leaf. You want mystery, son. Mystery blooming into mystery. That's
the garden. Understanding the joy of mystery, the process of discovery, My friend, that's
paradise. Adam, can I tell you something?"

"Hello, can I stop you?"

"And, I say this with all the divine love I can muster for your specie. You don't know a
damn thing, and as long as you walk the face of the earth, you never will. Each thing is the result
and the cause of each thing. You either know everything—"

"Impossible," Adam smiled.

"—or you know nothing, because definitively there is no one thing to know. The
universe in its broadest scope is empty. Infinity encompasses everything, but not a thing. The
whole of time in a single tick-tock."

Adam smiled standing naked to the universe. For a fleeting instant, he felt as though he
and the world melded as one. Then something happened, which made him long for a quality
unnamed.

"Say, you got a piece of the action, just now I mean. I could see it in your face."

"Yes. But then… It's gone."

"That's how it happens, son. It's the light of awareness. What do you say we walk the
Middle-Path together?"

"All right, Adam said."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I won't eat from the Tree of Knowing."

"That's My boy! I'll make you a promise, Adam. Observe the garden. Work the garden.
Be a part of the majesty of garden life, and, son, I promise you'll never feel alone in body or
spirit, and when you're ready, My friend, I'll show you the eternal nature of wind, the eternity of
your own breath."

"But I do feel alone. I've observed that I am the only one of my kind. It's so dark now I
can barely see, Master, and if all I have is an eternity of dark nights alone, I'd rather get out of
town."
"Two can be a crowd, you know. Take My wife …please!" Elohim chuckled.

"I don't understand, Master."

"It's been a long day, hasn't it?"

Adam, surrounded by darkness, crawled into his hut. He listened to the sounds of his first night; the tree frogs' low throaty rumble, the high-pitched calls of crickets, a macaw's distant final screech, and the sleepy deep rhythm of his own breathing. "Master?" Adam called looking around at the tree bark walls of his cold hut.

"Yes."

"Just checking, that's all."

"Good-night, Adam."

***

Roosted high on Master Elohim's mountain, Satan slouched hanging low over the table, rubbing his eyes in deep despair and staring at the final game board. "You screwed me! Screwed! Triple screwed, three ways from Sunday!"

"I heard you the first time, bird-brain." The Master's eyes settled at half-mast and a pained expression passed over Elohim's face. "Too much fruit. Not good. These little skirmishes take their toll."

"It was mine," Satan half-heartedly struck the table with his narrow palm. "The throne was mine! Reality, I held it in my fist, and then suddenly it leaked out like squeezing a handful ofshit."

"I wish you wouldn't say that. Listen, fella, you lost this game because you failed to realize that nothing is yours. What you do depends on what's been done, and what happens to you depends on what you do. No one can screw you. No-how, no-way, …no, sir. Ultimately you're responsible for your journey; however, at the same time, you own nothing other than that which you can't see coming around the corner, though you can bet you earned it."
Satan gazed ahead exhibiting a stoned expression, his eyes jelled, electricity failing, and the crest of his silver hair flopping to one side.

"Okay. You wanted a throne, a kingdom. Fine! They're yours in Hell."

"Why don't you just annihilate me?"

"Because I feel for you, bird-brain. And, you serve a higher purpose."

"Fuck you," Satan mumbled, whispering under stale breath, "and fuck everyone who looks like you, and the way you operate, that should cover it." Satan smiled sheepishly raising his voice, "Ashes, ashes, all fall down, as they say."

"YOU BROOMSTICK WITH TEETH! I AM GOD THY LORD! RULER OF THE INFINITE! And, I have superb hearing." Master Elohim smiled last.
"...The peel is off the grape
and there's not much left
and what is left is soured
if clean:
if I go off my beam, some
small vengeance would be sweet,
something definite and neat, say
total destruction. …"
~Paul Blackburn, Sirventes

"Who advised you to mutter expletives under your breath?" Beelzebub demanded of Satan.

The albino roasted, twisting his beaked lips, contorting himself on a burning lake, trying to blow out his flaming hairy crest.

The two larcenous souls found themselves chained together, nothing between them save time and heat. "Because, as your campaign manager, I don't recall brainstorming that faultless strategy." Beelzebub, shackled to his nefarious meal ticket, waited for an answer.

Satan turned away blowing charred bits off the end of his nose, sizzling in his own spit.
"I wouldn't do that," Beelzebub finally said.
"What?"
"That's what I would've said, if you'd asked. Or perhaps, I would've said, 'Excuse me. Please, don't do that, asshole!' if you'd asked. Which, by the way, you didn't. Ouch!"
"What now?"
"It's hot."
Satan glared Heavenwards at the Master, "Tyrannical bastard!"
Beelzebub closed his eyes, moaning, envisioning Heaven before the war, its cool mountains and misty valleys. "You're not a quick study, are you?"

The most depressing feature of this new kingdom lay in its dim light, not the violet and golden-white aura of awareness, but an impregnable gloom of figured shadows thrown by random updrafts against walls of narrow chasms, ceaseless fires issuing from an unseen boiler in the belly of Hell.

Satan slowly twisted, facing his partner in crime. "Hey, man, fuck you!"
"I've always liked that about you."
"What now!" They went nose to nose.
"Your diplomacy! You're a politician's politician in the grand style," Beelzebub said.
"Shit."

Both fallen angels listened. They heard agonizing screams in the distance, their troops.

This, which they earned, their kingdom.
Those, whom they failed, their subjects.
Judgment rendered, nine days on the lake.
Eternity their kingdom. Hell, but for a grape.

A grape dropped from above into Satan's lap. He heard,"You could've gotten in on the ground floor. Say, instead of rotting in Hell, you could be fanning yourself on a verandah in Tuscany, bird-brain."
"Hey, man, piss on Tuscany!"
"Excuse me," Beelzebub said, "but I think it prudent to mention that the bird-brain, that is, Satan and I, are not always of one mind. Now, I personally would be willing to try this thing or place You call Tuscany. Yass!" Beelzebub smiled Heavenwards batting his eyes, succeeding only in burning their delicate lids. "Ouch!"

Nine days grew into one long night of evil, scheming consolation, begetting the worst in them; the kingdom of Hell forming a state of mind, and through hardened hearts, the two devils waited for freedom to take a meeting.

***

Under earth's luminous moon, a sweet scent of night blooming jasmine permeated the garden, while in the first man's hut Master Elohim cast a deep sleep over Adam.

"Watch this," Elohim said. I, Raphael, rejoiced in jasmine perfume and witnessing my Master at work. "I'm gonna steal a few living cells from our sleeping friend. Watch how the cells work in concert with one another, an energetic relationship transcending individual wholeness to create a new greater complex whole. The nucleus of each cell is originally empty of self; capable of anything and everything until I give My instructions. I advise it of its special purpose - inform it of its local environment, and in turn, this nucleus advises the rest of its cell through a system of instruction I call the DNA molecule. Oh," the Master shook both hands, loosening them, "very involved stuff, I'd say. The machinery of life. A double helix of awareness.

And, here occurs the working relationship, another of My laws of homeostasis, and this one I call the law of thermodynamics. It's a butte! Really exciting stuff!

A living body," the Master said, "is hot because as long as it lives, through structure and pattern, it processes and proceeds and transcends on the cellular level; in other words, it labors! Raphael, everything in reality is assigned its work. Everything thrives in dynamic relationship. And, transcendent work, no matter the level, is motivated by crises, imperfection, metabolic
inefficiency. As reality is dynamic, the human body is dynamic. It's real, and it gives off heated energy, works up a sweat overcompensating for its own crises."

"But heat dissipates," I pointed out. "The energy is wasted, useless."

"You think? I think not. Losing energy is a crisis that demands more work to fulfill homeostasis. The body seeks to constantly maintain a steady temperature, to discover its limitations and balance itself. When you swing with the organization, energy may be in crisis, but a crisis is never a waste. It's all part of this process; I am this process. I am not wasted."

We witnessed an organism growing ever more complex, each cell, every molecule containing the divine fingerprint, the Master's awareness growing by Adam's left side. As man is born of the garden, so woman is born. Master Elohim gazed down upon the woman, calling her Eve. "Adam's the stronger runner," Master said, "but, Eve will think faster on her feet. She'll be creative, passionate, talkative. As man, only different. Kind of like light and dark. They're one, born of each other, from the same ground of being, the garden, yet, they're two."

"How will You explain the woman to Adam?"

"Can't."

"Should we wake her up?"

"No. We're leaving."

The Master jumped as if late for an appointment.

"So, You're saying there's no appeal to a higher power because You can't explain the woman?"

"A complete mystery to Me." The Master settled back twiddling thumbs and wrinkling a red nose.

"...and that a man awakens with a woman he can't explain, doesn't have a prayer of understanding, and who talks faster than he can think? We leave him here, unsuspecting and deserted, clueless at daybreak? Helpless without appeal?"

"That's the plan, Stan. You know, I say we run it up the flag pole."

"Why?"

"Why? Because like everything else, love requires mystery and crises."
"This is God damned fucking stupendous! All this stone and fire… Astaroth! Dagon! Osiris!" Satan rose from his seat walking the long side of a table and he crept up behind Moloch, resting his hand on one of his council brother's shoulders. "Moloch!" He laid his other hand on Moloch's other shoulder, and from a vantage point behind his fellow member, Satan addressed the room. "Gentlemen, it's a matter of survival. As a governing body, we have a responsibility to survive, to lead those we care about. How can we expect to lead those we feel indebted to if they sense that we're weak, that we lack the ability to lead ourselves? The council must demonstrate a united resolve." Creeping silently back to his place, he leaned over, knuckled fists jammed tight to the table supporting his burnt jacketed arms.

Beelzebub, Mammon, Moloch and Astaroth, Orus, Dagon and Osiris, and Belial smothered each other with silent loathing.

"Council members—" Satan, free at last, ordered the building of his brimstone palace, Pandemonium, where the high council took its meeting. Today he stood at the table's head in his windowless throne room. "—my friends, can you smell it? Power! It's here. I can taste it! It surrounds us."

Feeling threatened by his failed revolution, and a possible coup hanging over his head, Satan searched for a common cause to rally the troops. He drew a huge whistling breath through his long nose. "This is our kingdom?" he asked, glaring at the council, rage proudly flashing across his face.

The group exchanged incredulous looks all around. They hadn't considered taking Hell seriously as a kingdom. Amongst them, escape took the power of assumption. Beelzebub, back on his game, furrowed a yellow brow dripping skepticism; though, if one observed, he saw the campaign manager wink at Satan, who strode across the room shouting, "Then let's truly make it our kingdom!"
Osiris, highly critical of Satan, summoned his courage speaking, "And how do you suggest we make this boiling chamber pot into a kingdom?"

The council shook their heads, folding their arms, and Dagon, following on the heels of Osiris asked, "I've always wondered, what precisely is a kingdom?"

Beelzebub broke in, "Well, to my way of thinking, a kingdom is a geographical title. And, gentlemen, Master Elohim's given us that." All members mumbled to the affirmative.

"And subjects," Astaroth said, "through whose labor and taxes we, the wise council, gain a power base—"

"—And fill our coffers!" Mammon pronounced, slamming his fist to the table, shooting out of his chair.

"Yass!" Beelzebub shouted, while motioning Mammon to remain seated. "But our subjects, your troops, brother Satan, have lost faith in this council, in you!"

Satan, crossing his legs and wringing his hands, sat slowly. He laid his hands on the table, fingers spread, moaning one time, softly, in deep thought.

Beelzebub rocked his chair onto its rear legs, balancing there, scratching his pimpled chin. "You've set the challenge before this council to make Hell a true kingdom, our kingdom. However, with an angry mob of little faith to rule, well, I don't see it."

Satan turned his hands palms up, staring into them, his tremors barely noticeable. One by one, he searched the council's faces. Before the revolution, each one served as an archangel to the Master, and therein hid the key to Satan's campaign. Noses and chins nodded tentatively, still uncertain where Satan was heading.

"Each and every one of you, from before the beginning, have had the virtue of leadership. Now, you might repent and spend eternity shining the Master's shoes…" Satan eyed his bedfellows.

The council members, squirming in their seats, shook their heads.

Orus, an eternal youth, dared speak. "Elohim says that we are all works in progress; to view ourselves as having potential limits is to shortchange ourselves."
"Let's consider Orus' statement," Satan said, smiling at the young devil, and he gave the council conference time among themselves.

"He makes his point," the group vigorously agreed after due reflection.

Satan lifted one eyebrow towards Orus. "I say, that by convincing you that you have no potential to reach, the Master is telling you that you'll never realize your true power and that you're bound to spend eternity as less instead of more. And just how, pray tell, were you supposed to progress?"

Orus looked down at his feet below the table. "By serving the Master..."

"Uh huh."

"But," the council again agreed with great enthusiasm, "the point young Orus makes is, of course, a youthful mistake."

"Naturally," Astaroth swiftly added.

"Even I," Belial said, "might easily have made the same mistake, if I hadn't the wisdom of age."

Mammon cautioned young Orus, "Don't take it to heart, boy. Like the rest of us, you'll learn."

Satan, excited he'd found direction, quickly continued. "Why feed off the bottom of the Master's progressive food chain when you can live at the top of your own? I'll tell you this, you're not archangels down here! Who are you going to serve? Not me! The public? That mob? Gentlemen, we'll tell them what they want, and that's exactly what they'll want! It pains me to say it, but I believe you've been bamboozled."

The council's mood struck a sudden haughty shift. Beelzebub shot Satan a warning glance.

"However, each and every one of you are natural rulers. Rule by my side and you'll spend eternity at the top of your game. Respect your virtue! I respect it. I won't speak for the rest of you. No. I respect you too much for that," Satan released a breath from high in his chest as Beelzebub nodded, "but, I would rather own Hell, own every soul in my kingdom, than bottom feed serving any master for eternity. They," Satan pointed beyond the walls holding out
a shaking arm, "know my strength! You might think they're a mob. They might think it. Yet, I know, they're my subjects, body and soul!"

"Yass!" Beelzebub grinned turning to the others, "Yass!!!! Oh, yass!" The council members nodded forcefully.

"Gentleman," Satan seized the moment, "let's swear an oath to the destruction of Heaven! Hell, from this day forth is the only true kingdom!"

"An oath? An oath!" Beelzebub stood, motioning Belial and Moloch, and one by one a unanimous council rose to their feet while the fires outside Pandemonium raged, and in secrecy, behind stone walls Dagon swore, and Orus and Osiris, and Astaroth swore, and they all swore an oath, each one cursing and swearing louder than the last until Beelzebub again motioned them to be seated.

"However," Beelzebub said, "what about Heaven? They far outnumber us. It's a vexing situation."

Moloch leered straight ahead, "War is the only solution." He pounded his fist on the table.

"No!" the council members definitely agreed, and with his long nose, Satan got a strong whiff of the odor.

"Moloch, my wise brother," Satan said, "I, acting in good faith on the public's clear desire," and he glanced at Beelzebub who nodded agreement, "tried that plan of attack, and here we are."

"Gentlemen," Mammon, already filling his coffer, spoke, "busy hands are happy hands. May I suggest working our subjects at the job of improving Hell, building and paving and creating a kingdom that will rival Heaven in its splendor, and perhaps someday we might attract those from on high to join us?"

Beelzebub stood eyeing the group and circling the room. "Gentlemen of the council, I don't mean to throw a damper on this, but before I was banished to Hell, a piece of information came my way, the way information does. It seems that the Master has created earth and planted
the seeds of a populace of creatures after Elohim's own image, a shadow of the Master's qualities."

The council squirmed all abuzz, and Satan appeared shocked at the news. His eyes opened wide and his hair stood straight up.

"I don't have to tell you," Beelzebub said, "there's no chance that Hell can ever rival the splendor of Heaven and earth combined, so long as the scales of power—in this case, a massive movement of loyal supporters—tilt in Master Elohim's direction." Beelzebub smiled briefly at Satan and continued, "However, being privy to this information, and being so vexed, I've had ample opportunity," and here Beelzebub frowned at Satan in remembrance of their nine days on the lake, "to consider this situation. Now, just suppose a representative from Hell seduced the populace of an as yet undeveloped third kingdom into joining the forces of evil against Elohim's authority? Would that not tilt the scales of power?"

"You mean," Dagon said, "some bit of covert chicanery?"

"I mean, sir, why should we dirty our hands with war and revolution when we can get others to do it for us? Call it chicanery or covert action or puppet politics; I call it damned good government!" Beelzebub addressed the rest of the council. "Brother members, the direction a shadow leans in is dependent on the direction of its light, and light is such a changing, fleeting intangible. Wouldn't you agree, brother Belial?"

"Fleeting? Intangible? Yes, of course."

Beelzebub zeroed in on Belial, "I'm glad you agree, and who do you think should represent Hell in this matter? Who among us is fit to steal Master Elohim's light?"

"Not me, surely. Why, I'm a demon of wisdom. The council, the kingdom would not be best served by my going. I suggest, in my wisdom—"

"—Yass, of course…"

"—a devil of action and physical daring. A fit devil. A young devil!" Belial, and the council turned on Orus.

"I…"
"Gentlemen! Orus, don't worry. You're not going anywhere," Satan said, once again standing in his place. "I feel responsible for all that's happened. Of course, it wasn't my call, but I feel badly about it anyway. Allow me to make it up to you. I'll volunteer to escape Hell, my beloved kingdom, to risk Master Elohim's wrath without consideration of consequence, and to turn the first of humankind, this race of earthlings, against the Master."

Satan showed a slight tremor in his fingers and his eyes twitched. "I care not for myself, you understand, but for my brothers on the council and my loyal subjects."

"Yass! Well spoken!" Beelzebub shouted. "Are there any nay-sayers?" and he paused …though not for long. "Motion carried!"
"...One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with a panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be misinterpreted as pessimism. It is not. ..."

~Woody Allen, Side Effects

Evil may be unhappy, but it is never lonely. It is in the way all things move, tangled in the dynamo of reality. Like good, evil is the result of relationship, of activity, and it is an activity giving birth to further relationships. Evil, as an abstract quality, is beginningless, eternal, yet, only when manifest in the puissant activity of relationship can we point to it and say, "Shame! The Devil walks here. I feel it in my bones." We shame ourselves because we're real, a part of the universe, and evil and good coexist as part of the relationship we call self. Evil—try me on this—being dynamic and possessing purpose is not ungodly, nor can it be left on the other side of any gate.

I, Raphael, will not venture Satan or humankind as evil, nor Elohim as good or that nature is good. The relationship of reality co-emerges. So, humanity finds their way in darkness because with practice they see the light always present. Therefore, the Master takes humanity to task and humanity bellows, "It's bloody unfair!" though in the way things move, it may be to humankind's own good.
The universe is homogenous good and evil, and these abstract qualities are combinations of each other, born of one another. In this way, reality is balanced. The Master calls this homeostasis. Some call it justice.

Where there is Sin and Death, some say justice does not walk the garden. Justice may be sad and homeostasis appear as unforgiving retribution, yet, justice is never lonely, and evil and good spread a single set of wings taking flight.

I, Raphael, watched Satan spread his fiery wings rising in slow arcs ever higher through searing heat to the uppermost reaches of his kingdom, beyond the bonfires of Hell, above Pandemonium where his brimstone palace shrunk to the size of a pea-spark and disappeared leaving the electric air thin and pitch black. Satan began his landing at the Gates of Freedom, though from the other side one might suppose them to be the gates of Hell.

Sounds of cheering and raucous farewell from his troops and the wise council, his bedfellows, played like a distant memory enveloped in silence until approaching the gates. Circling cautiously like any bird of prey, Satan navigated, stunned in his path by the howling of hounds and pathetic moans riding on the wind.

"How absolutely nicsssse!" Sin called out an ominous hiss. "A family reunion."
"Daughter, what are you doing here?" Satan hovered in the air.
"We serve the Master," and she motioned to the gates. "And you, dear Father, shall never escape." Sin bit down exposing her sharp canine teeth. "'None who enter here shall leave,' is our command."

Satan's eyes bulged wide and bloodshot. He blew his nose into his hands and rubbed his chin, his intellect currently stymied. "You're a member of the guard?" A strong tremor between the shoulder blades spread outward and down overtaking his body.
"We all have our work. Shocking, isn't it?" Sin laughed.
"Preposterous, babe," he mumbled bitterly under his breath. "Ironic, absolutely." Satan quickly gained his bearing. "Of course, you're as inviting as ever."
"I didn't invite you. I've never invited you," and she tossed her flaming red hair to the hot wind exposing full bare breasts above, yet writhing like a serpent below.

Satan, at a loss, studied the creature standing next to his daughter, a young male, bloodless and thin, sprouting a hairy crest. Bewildered, Satan scratched his own crest, and not knowing why, he found the boy admirable.

Sin smiled, shoving the creature forward and smacking him on the back of his albino head.

"Who is this?" Satan asked.

"Say Hello to your father! Your son," she spoke deep and throaty through an iron jaw. "I named him Deathhhhhh." Just then Sin winced, painfully moaning while two smaller creatures, Hell-hounds, wicked, scaled cherubim, escaped her incestuous womb only to catch sight of Satan and force their way through more agonizing moans back from where they came. Sin closed her eyes near a faint. Without help from Death—a smirking, cold-blooded son—she composed herself. "They could be your grandchildren."

Satan, staring at Death, suspecting Death and he had both been to the same well, asked Sin, "Who's the daddy, Mommy?"

She hissed fire like a flamethrower, skilled in her way like the begotten son with his lightning bolts, and Satan leapt exercising a fearful flapping of wings, lungs bursting, unable to expel his air.

Death snickered.

"Like father, like son!" Sin shouted. "We're all in this together, you prick, you snot, up to our genitalia."

"I'll bet you'd like to toast me," Satan, whispering, flew around to his daughter's other shoulder. "Slice me to ribbons?"

Ire crept into the taught glass-like angles of Sin's bleached face and neck.

"But you can leave here anytime. Apply for another position. Yes, that's it! Reapply, dear girl. Why don't you?"
"What a god damned fool you are. 'None who enter here shall leave', means wherever you are, you are always 'here', forever 'now'. Forever an incestuous prick. You carry your kingdom with you. For all these gates are worth, there might as well not be any. They serve no purpose, keep nothing out, and you can't leave anything behind." Sin, listening to herself, and depressed by the futility of escape from one's own good and evil, hissed fire indiscriminately.

"Why not burn them? I see you're capable." Satan checked his shoes for soot.

"Because, Father, we're fallen angels. From before the beginning, for us, these gates have stood. Wherever we exist, the gates are always clanking shut behind us. Oh, I can smelt them all right. But when there are no gates, I'll still have a gate. You'll still have one. Understand? Pick a side, any side."

"You're mad! I want out! I pick the other side."

"Which other side?" Sin's secret lingered on full lips.

"Any fucking side! Get me out of this asylum!"

"Tsk, tsk, snot. Such a dilemma. There is no other side. But that's easy for me to say…"

She stroked him under the chin, gently, suddenly nicking him with one long fingernail.

"Sssssss, poor Dada."

"Right," he fluttered his wings swiftly rising twenty feet and dropping again. "Then it won't matter if you open the gates."

Her gaseous solar plexus expanded like hot yeast. "Open them?" All rationale flew out the gates while Sin swept a long strand of hair off her forehead. "All right, but we're tagging along, Death and I. This should be rich," and she licked her canine teeth, squeezing out a bit of internal pressure.

"Fine. Just don't crowd me and you might learn a few things. That hiss, that's a nasty habit you've picked up, babe. I like it."

"Oh, Daaaaaddy! I'm full of 'em."

***
Master Elohim leaned to one side, then forward, and laid back again slouching on the throne, carelessly popping seedless grapes while studying the game board. On Heaven's mountain, the only begotten son sat hunched over, chin in hand on Elohim's right, learning at the Master's elbow, both of them witnessing creation. One of the begotten son's eyelids dropped shut, as if viewing through a telescope an earthly situation demanding intense singular focus.

"Master, what is the nature of events occurring at Adam's left side?" The begotten son lifted his head looking at Master Elohim through both eyes, winking the closed one, opening and clearing its watery vision.

"You like that? That's woman. Eve, I call her."

The son shifted his attention back to the board. "What is the nature of a woman?"

Elohim slapped a heavy hand on the begotten son's shoulder, speaking with authority, "Enigmatic, son."

The begotten son stared down at his feet, concentrating, trying to make sense of an answer that made no sense.

At first, the Master's face clouded over expressing concern, and Elohim's brow furrowed deeply. Suddenly, the Master smiled, brimming with love and compassion for the begotten son, who, like an unknowing sponge soaked up that love, making the quality of compassion his own.

I really can't do this to the lad. But in Heaven's name, how do I explain a woman? The Master slumped over on one elbow settling in for the long haul and began slowly, "Son, within the organization, the nature of a woman is the same as a man's," Elohim stared into the distance, creating woman on a wing and a prayer, and searching for words and phrases of explanation with due caution, "yet... she's different. Listen, both are born of two truths; the truth of earthly work determined by their gender, and the truth of spiritual experience, one's religious appeal to a higher awareness. Say, that's Me!"

With these words, the Master's thought grew manifest as human relationship born of common ground, although, with each gender playing a variation in the symphonic theme of creation.
Elohim popped another grape. The Master bore down in a single bite, a tart juicy explosion. "Wow! Where was I?"

"You were explaining woman. Eve." The begotten son waited while the Master chewed.

"Really?" Elohim worked a fingernail around a piece of grape skin lodged between two teeth. "How presumptuous of Me." The Master examined a speck of grape stuck to the finger in question, quizzically staring it down. "Woman," Elohim laughed softly. "A beautiful creature. My shadow. I suppose man will turn out to be the flawed one."

"Isn't man Your shadow?" the begotten son asked.

"Are you trying to tell Me something?" Elohim arched an eyebrow.

"No. I, no."

"I suppose, that is, if we're listening," the Master's voice rose for a moment, "that the difference will be, while men relate to the universe only aware in a vague sense of their need for spirituality, they'll be governed daily by their gender's demands. They'll be weak and lorded over by their own anxiety, their need for daily bread." Elohim paused periodically, each thought becoming manifest in the garden, imbuing the leaf and vine and blossoming of apparently mundane activity with a struggle for depth and meaning. Motivated by this struggle in all creation, in the pattern of life, humankind would seek God's grace.

"You see, Adam's strong enough to do the heaviest work the garden requires, so, around him will grow the demand to do it. Actually, he'll feel the need to do it. The garden's a full-time project. He'll have to get moving if he intends to get on with the work of the garden. There's a kind of pressure in being a man. It's not an obvious thing, just something, a quality I've invested man with. Gender and work will be so integrated that he'll often judge his own worth according to his work."

The Master rocked back and forth on the throne's rear legs.

"Now then, Eve possesses spiritual strength and mental agility, and enough physical strength to handle the less taxing work of the garden. She'll relate to the universe aware of her need as a helpmate in the garden, but, and here's the rub, due to her creative spiritual capacity, she's bound to be dissatisfied with that position. Her gender will demand she be a helpmate,
while that same gender's creative spirituality begs her as an individual to be more than one who lives through mundane activity. She also will judge herself by her worldly accomplishment."

Elohim's eyes narrowed and then shined with light. "Very involved. Lots of rules, frustration and argumentation, and in the end, man, a stoop laborer in the fields, will claim woman as the enigmatic bamboo shoot under his fingernail, the single biggest cause of illusion in the universe, a drain on his time and budget, and the ruination of all vacation plans."

Silently, the Master's eyes came to rest upon the game board. "Still," Elohim said, "he'll struggle to give her the best the garden has to offer while her sights are set on something much higher."

"Why bother? I'd say." The begotten son found himself mysteriously drawn to the human condition, though confused by human relationship.

"You'd say? Well, he'll struggle for woman because though man's a pathetic, anxiety ridden creature without a prayer of understanding a woman, and it's true that he less frequently seeks spiritual nourishment and solace, at times when he does seek such solace, during quiet moments, a woman's wisdom will be man's bounty. To live through his woman, to swing with higher awareness through his God given other, will be the closest man gets to love. The rest of the time, the best a man can hope for will be satisfaction in his accomplishments… and a little nookie." Elohim popped another grape, and the fruit sugar brought a smile to the Master's lips. "Remember, My awareness is an integral part of all relationship."

The begotten son raked one hand with long lean fingers through his shoulder length hair. "Then like all relationships that make up reality, Adam and Eve, as a team, a whole relationship unit, are infused with Your awareness. And then again as individual wholes, within each, You've created a cell which plays host to a bacteria, the two joined in relationship, and joined again in relationship to other cells. Smaller, simpler wholes becoming greater wholes that are more complex. Humans are composed of relationship within themselves, as well as between themselves."

The begotten son and the Master both leaned back, two of a kind pleased in the moment, a melding of minds.
"Bananas!" the son shouted.  
"I've already done those," the Master looked at the begotten son in wonder.  
"Persimmons?"
"Say, I like that idea."

The two lapsed into a satisfied silence, both considering the notion, realizing where love and mutual respect abide, words can only fall short of their mark.

"That means," the son finally said, "humanity is in crisis from the beginning. Gender is fighting against spirit within each individual. Earthly truth against the truth of higher awareness; this is the prime relationship in crisis that puts the human in every human being."

"That's the deal, Neal!" Elohim grinned from ear to ear.

"Deal?" The son questioned Elohim's modus operandi. "Your creatures are a study in crisis."

"Humanity is a struggle," Elohim shrugged, "a struggle for balance." The Master turned an eye past the board, along Eden over the foothills leading out of the garden. "And teetering on the edge of balance, humanity might lose faith and torture itself, but not at My request. No, sir."

"There's gold in them thar' hills! There's nobility in that work. Yes! There's grace in homeostasis manifest as humankind because they're the shadow of God." The Master leaned into the begotten son and motioned a finger drawing the son close. "You see, people already have My blessing to be precisely as they are, because they are as I am. Well, sort of."

Elohim grasped both of the begotten son's hands holding them firmly, examining the son's long straight nose and dark, deep-set eyes. "One day, soon, I'll send a soul to earth as a human. And he'll spread the message that the way to God is through him, in as much as it is through any human being. He'll never claim to be anything other than a man. He'll offer God's grace, because as God's shadow, humanity already dwells from before the beginning within that grace."

"What if," the son asked, "humanity loses their struggle for balance? What if an individual loses that struggle? What then?"
"I can only say this much with certainty; survival depends on the dynamic transcendent process," Elohim threw up one finger. "Dynamism is fueled by crises," the Master threw up a second finger. I create humans as individuals, however, I create them to live together, to form unions. Will an individual be able to transcend, bringing his offering to another, and form a team, a new whole? The rest of it's a crap shoot." Master Elohim shook two grapes loosely in a cupped fist and let fly at the board knocking over a pawn. "Seven come eleven! My people need shoes!" and Elohim drew one pudgy finger straight across the board while staring at the begotten son. "You don't have to play it so close to the vest with Me, son. Lay your thoughts on the line."

The begotten son rose pensively and walked, and peered down into the valley of death where ash still cleared. Some time ago, a war raged. Many did not survive. The extinction of a specie, thought the son, even at its own hands seems possible. As it is in Heaven, so it is on earth. "If the human prime relationship is between the two, group gender and individual spirituality, you have to infuse humanity with more than one instinct for survival." Feeling a superior edge, he turned towards Elohim. Ha! The student surpasses the Master.

"Get out of town!" The Master clasped hands, "You think?"

"And," the son added, "the instincts have to be qualities that are given to creating crises."

Elohim's lip cocked up a corner. Bending over the board, the Master slid the king into a face-off position across from his queen. "There it is. There we have it."

The begotten son took his seat beside the throne concentrating on the board. "There we have what?"

"The instincts in both man and woman for sex and power."

Dangling his arms loosely between his legs, the son offered a blank stare.

Elohim tapped him hard on the shoulder pointing down at Adam and Eve. "Watching is a good thing."

***
Satan felt his head spinning, losing chunks of mind to the cosmos. Rising through the vacuum of a swift updraft, he discovered himself hurled beyond control through time and space. Without pattern, and his only direction being escape, Satan soared, tossed, and pitched with wings glued to his sides, an insignificant moth blown out of the gates, a homeless angel in a filthy blue suit, drifting, as vulnerable as man in the garden. His point of departure long disappeared and his goals floated in future soup. Freedom, Satan understood all at once, meant practice, the unending pursuit of surviving the moment, a working within rule and principle lest one take the beating of a lifetime. "Man, do I have the bends. Sin, are you out there?" Sin didn't answer.

"Kind of chaotic, isn't it? For an angel at the top of his game, your form's looking none too keen."

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Really, you've got to learn to go with the flow, roll with the proverbial punches." From out of nowhere, Satan took a lollapalooza on the jaw. He lost altitude shaking off the invisible punch while his lower lip swelled and pulsed.

"Uh-oh, see what I mean? That's got to hurt." A cold hollow voice issued from the belly of free reality, from the destiny stream of all time. "Could be the profanity. You know, I think you may have offended me."

"Show yourself!" Satan hovered unable to gain propulsion. He rubbed his sore chin.

"Doesn't freedom have a face? Some constant I can get a handle on?"

"I'm Chaos, more or less, here and there."

"Chaos? Show yourself! Let me see what I'm up against, if you've got the balls." Satan's lower lip grew fat and tight.

"I'm not hiding. And coming up against me won't advance your case one minute or one mile. You see, I'm part of the Master's organization, although you won't find me on any flow chart."

"It figures."

"I'm what you might refer to as an independent contractor."
To Satan's ear, Chaos' voice ran deep, melodic, yet without independent substance. It resonated from everywhere at once, but with no single point of origin, no fixed defined entity. It's empty of selfness, Satan thought. How strange... Far below, a star exploded blinding him with its illuminating nova. There! That must be Chaos! But where does it come from? And where does it go after the fact? The splash of light died down and Satan stared into blackness. "I thought Elohim handled everything personally," he managed flying in a small circle.

"'You Know Who' would like to think so," Chaos said, rolling its eyes. "I'll bet you didn't know the Master depended heavily on me in designing the universe."

"So," Satan affected a casual posture in space, "you know where it is? You know where earth is?"

"Know!" Chaos spit and sputtered, and Satan felt himself yanked out of time. "I was first in! I was there before the Master. In the universal architecture, wherever you find the Master's awareness you'll find Chaos. I'm responsible."

"Responsible for what?"

"Simply everything! Nature without and spirit within; the unpredictable storms of the Brazilian rainforests; the turbulent seas off the Siberian coast; a plague of locusts, if you like; the revolution leading to evolution within a single cell and the rings around Saturn; the explosion of a star and the elements it showers upon the universe; the atomic difference between a gas and a solid; the synaptic functioning of a finite brain, the inspiration of infinite creative mind and the aura of living energy; internal combustion; an apple; an elephant; 'You Know Whose' grapes, and still to come: the apocalypse; male pattern baldness; and air conditioning. I consulted on the structuring of humankind," Chaos shuddered. "They're a time-bomb, you know."

"You're familiar with Adam and Eve?"

"Like ugly on a monkey. Speaking of which, has anyone ever told you, you look queer? Strange, I mean."

Satan navigated another small circle, his flight-sense gradually calibrating itself. Chaos, in its bearing and sense of self-importance, reminded him of the Master; the egoless ego of it all,
stating a fact simply as a fact. He didn't trust Chaos as far as he could see it, and he couldn't see it at the end of his nose.

"Let me tell you about Adam and Eve," Chaos continued. "Adam may appear dull, but he ponders the universe below the surface without making a show of it. Eve, too wonders, but through her self as the center. I motivate them through crises. Shhh!" Chaos, paranoid, peered over its shoulder. " 'You Know Who' would like to take credit for my ideas.

Of course, we could argue ownership, argue the point, but the point is I motivate progress in the inner-universe as well—the world of ideas—through confusion, insecurity, and fear. And my crowning achievement?

"Man, do I look like someone who cares?"

"Thermodynamics! Surprised?"

Satan's subtle vehicle was making the adjustment, breathing freedom's fresh air, and gradually he extended his nature searching for a handle on the universe. Not unlike good, evil lives by its own principle and form, a dynamic energy in search of a channel through which to manifest itself. Satan understood evil as activity whose relationship worked as a force acting upon the structure of good, dancing on its ceiling, hoofing manipulative steps.

"You see," Chaos said, "thermodynamics is a crazy little thing I do using entropy or atomic disorder in varying degrees that creates the need for working, living force.

Here's my relationship to Elohim; the harder the universe works, the more energy it expends, the more energy I, Chaos, siphon off. Through my atomic disorder, or heat, I render the siphoned energy useless for that particular job so that the universe continues working and investing more energy to complete the job. It's this idea of mine that's the heartbeat of the thermodynamic loop or work in the universe! The Master is work, and the Master created the universe, Elohim's shadow, so that everything works dynamically or dies. That makes me, Chaos, an integral part of every whole, large and small, in the universe, including humanity."

"So, I've heard. But what about evil energy versus good?"

Chaos cast a furtive look around. "I don't want to brag—"

"Because you're afraid of the Master?"
"—but I know what I'm doing," Chaos quickly added.

"Good and evil energy?"

"Nonexistent. Only working energy is real. There's no place for your evil force here. Only Chaos truly exists. No good, no evil, except as the judgment-call of some deluded creature. Do I stop what I'm doing to hold up the universe and ask whether the energy I'm siphoning off is good or evil?"

Satan lowered his wings, brushed the road kill off his blue suit and grinned. "Then," he asked, testing the water, "this shadow race of God has no need for ethics or morality?"

"In their relative world of crises, of course they do. They need good and evil, a certain relative opposition of forces to sustain balance within the eye of the torrent. But only long enough to satisfy survival judgments, to transcend that relative state of moral and ethical dualities called homeostasis. The Master creates an angel by teaching a soul to live in both the absolute and the relative. That's the plan. Each plane utilizes its own homeostatic plan, and there exists a third relationship, homeostasis between the two planes. This is called immortality."

The fallen angel composed a stratagem, an allusion to his relative purpose as a quick 'in' past Chaos. "And then what? Humankind transcends, but to where?"

"Then they'll join me, Chaos. Humankind is destined to realize their pure dynamism, that they are eternity. By that, I mean to say eternal work, in the moment of their tears or laughter, that they are the manifestation of the Master. Elohim is, as Chaos is, as humanity is, work in progress. This is angelic spirit."

"Then you deny the Master's position for good in the plan, and you deny mine for evil."

"No. I only deny you two your absolute claim on good and evil. I deny your across the board opposition."

Satan realized at once that this core of universal architecture was pivotal to his work on earth. Just how much does humankind know of good and evil? He pursed his lips—one thin, one fat—glancing here and there and feigning indifference. "Good then. Glad we understand one another."

"What," Chaos asked, "do we understand?"
"My relative purpose. The reason Elohim sent me."

"The Master sent you?"

"Don't worry, man. I won't mention the sock on the jaw, or your unprovoked assault on my dignity. I have to say, I'm impressed by your intelligent grasp of the dynamics of Elohim's transcendental universe, that you have a handle on my relative purpose, …and which way did you say earth was?"

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Master Elohim pursued the developing situation. "Say, look at that. Sin and Death are trailing behind, building a bridge."

"An escape route?" the begotten son asked.

"No. The bird-brain's too full of self to believe he'd ever need an escape route. You know what I think?" Elohim crawled on hands and knees around the board, hanging over it, now surveying the activity exhibiting severe interest. "I think it's all part of Satan's revenge. As a matter of fact," Elohim whispered, "I'm counting on it. I'm counting on him for the long haul. I see Satan as a kind of personal trainer. This fella's there to workout humanity."

"Counting on it?"

"Listen, and this is important stuff," the Master looked up at the begotten son. "If you ask Me about the nature of spirit, the spirit does not learn easily. However, I won't throw spirits away because they make mistakes. No! Instead, I'll give human spirits time to work on their moral muscle." The Master brought all attention back to the game board, crawling this way and that without missing a detail. "They're beginners, and they need time and just enough of the Devil to grow past their own limited understanding of morality as a relative issue. They need motivation: something to help evolve an awareness of a dynamic reality devoid of judgment and existing in the same time and space as their limited reality. They'll be born into the human condition of relative judgments, plural!, and it's only through that condition that they'll rise to an awareness of the absolute condition, one! The one in the many, the many in the one."
The begotten son folded his hands in his lap placing his feet together, and he contemplated the possibilities of evil and misfortune, of stumbling blocks such as greed and bitterness, those relative qualities that lead to destruction in Paradise. For all of his disinterest in the organization itself, the son understood clearly a human condition as Master Elohim created it, and he empathized with the challenge facing humankind; to persevere, and more than that, to transcend. "For humanity to be realized they must be aware of the co-origination of their own existence," he said. "No weak angels this time. No followers. If You pull this off—"

"If?"

"—each angel will know their self in its broadest sense."

"That's the skinny, I'd say. However, human beings will be creatures of fear when living through their limited reality. Creatures afraid of change. Staid. Some will even be too lazy to change. They won't grow without motivation. So, we make trouble for them. Shake the suckers up a little. That's why we let the bird-brain into Paradise. I'll give humanity all the time in the world, and each other, and a place where they can learn together from one another." The Master tread carefully around the board, as if Elohim voiced while afraid of being heard on earth.

Master Elohim sat upon Heaven's throne, arms extended, examining ten pudgy fingers. Closely, Elohim scrutinized his nails, their ancient cracked cuticles.

"You know, son, I'm enthusiastic about the organization, and I hope you are too. One day this will all be yours. I have to tell you, I love My work."

The begotten son turned his head away.

Elohim frowned. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No," the son spoke into the distance.

Master Elohim's arms dropped back to their sides.

"But I think it's irrational to expose the work You love, especially Your latest work, humanity, to Sin and Death, and Satan. You create and then threaten destruction all in the same breath while You sit back on Your throne in silence. Master, what must humanity take You for?"

"I've threatened destruction? Moi? Wha!"
The son, who'd seen enough, turned on the Master arguing the point against Elohim eye to eye. "Didn't You tell Adam that to eat from the Tree of Knowing would be fatal for his kind?" He shook his finger hard in the Master's face.

"Oh, I don't know..."

"You left the tree right in the middle of the garden! Washed your hands of the whole thing, and haven't spoken to humankind since. You're a son of a bitch."

"Pardon me, if I'm speechless!"

"Somehow I doubt that." The son bowed his head examining his bare feet. He'd lost faith, even a little respect. He'd begun viewing the Master as imperfect, a work in progress. If the teacher is not completely transcended, the son thought, what chance is there for the student?

"Son, greatness is a result of fortitude and resolution. It requires coaxing. I have a plan, and the plan often is not to push, not to harvest the spirit before its time."

Elohim read the begotten son's face and knew, though the Master kept talking, hoping truth would be made plain. "I motivate spirit. I exercise it, building divine strength. In humankind's case, Satan, Sin, Death, and free will are My tools. If I said to Adam and Eve, 'Go forth and swing with divine greatness,' why, they'd crumble! But the plan demands faith. I heard Raphael say, 'Faith is a bear.'" Elohim grinned. "I hear everything, you know? I agree with him. Say, what about artichokes?"

"Artichokes?"

"Why sure! They're larger and they have points. It would take a lot of effort and patience to eat one, and there's not much of a return. A meal for the humble man. To envision the artichoke as a meal is an exercise in faith. Humanity could use the artichoke, I'd say." Elohim considered the notion.

The begotten son eyed Master Elohim in befuddlement. How, he wondered, does an old god without a clue to the thoughts and feelings of Elohim's youthful creations become Master of the Universe? "I really don't know." Don't hand me Your organization, Old One. I appreciate the work You've put into it, but somehow when I look at me and I look at it, it just doesn't fit.
Elohim waved off the matter of artichokes with a brush of his hand. "Listen, I've imbued humanity with free will, and now I'll challenge that will to learn discipline by pitting it against relative Sin. I'll impart a sense of subtle drama that grows with time; that's Death's part."

"Don't forget, son, My whole project is to create an angel, that spirit which transcends the human. This means they have to use what's very human to become something a little greater."

"Son, everything I do is critically rational, however, I must admit, well, something I've never told any of the others." Elohim looked down studying two fat feet wiggling old toes that resembled pearl onions.

The begotten son laid his hand upon the Master's knee. "Your appetite is beyond control?" It was not what he wanted to say. He wanted to say that he loved the Old One during these moments of confession. Yet, those words never materialized.

"What? No. Ha! Yes, but that's not it." Elohim gazed upon the only begotten son and affectionately stroked his long hair. "As carefully as I've planned, as organized as the organization is, I feel a small nagging doubt. And humankind, being My shadow, must also have this doubt."

"What doubt?"

"I doubt that I am. Don't you find that odd?"

The begotten son shrugged. He felt a barrier between himself and the Master. He supposed he loved Elohim, but this confessional moment was not what it used to be. It didn't strike with force. The old god looked at the young angel. It's all right. His time will soon be at hand, and the son too must entertain his doubt.

"I doubt that I am," the Master continued. "I can envision the organization, pull together all of its disparate pieces into a cohesive functional whole and witness its working energy, yet, if any of the others were ever to ask Me, I'd have to say that I feel My existence flies in the face of reason. For Me to believe that I am is a totally irrational act."

"Does having doubt make one imperfect?" The son realized sudden sympathy for one who'd meant so much early on.
"Is imperfection a quality to be frowned upon?" the Master queried by way of an answer. These questions raised by Master Elohim were never rhetorical and the son understood this. He studied the Master's eyes and then looked away.

The lad must be prepared for Chaos and crises, Elohim thought.

"Then, if humanity harbors the shadow of this doubt," the begotten son stood walking easily around the perimeter of the board, "and they wish to accept you, they'll have to know rationally all of your works manifest on earth, but understand that regardless of what they know, there will always be a bit of mystery, the unknown element in their individual experience that answers only to faith when all else flies in the face of reason." In this moment, the son experienced a glimmer of thought and vision, a cloudy feeling of a time which had not yet come to pass. Having grave concern, though he knew not why, the begotten son beseeched his Master Creator. "Master, is it possible to be merely human yet exhibit this kind of faith?"

"Precisely what do you mean when you say, '…this kind of faith?'"

"Faith in one's imperfect self as the shadow of God, as the product and way of all that is as it should be."
BOOK II; KNOWLEDGE/CHAPTER SIX -- WE EXIST  THEREFORE  WE ARE

"...If man is 'a creature of distances, why should he transcend himself just so far and no farther? How are the boundaries to be defined?...

...man, and man alone, is responsible for the direction of his life, and can direct it adequately. Yet I was never to lose sight of that dizzy void, that dense blackness where all his impulses lurk;..."  ~Simone De Beauvoir, The Prime of Life

Chill might have frozen Satan to the marrow, yet it traveled through him, and the darkness on Mount Niphates, overlooking The Garden of Eden, fell as a welcome reprieve from the fire's light or the pain of Chaos; Satan did not have to view himself this evening. He preferred to remain completely unaware of himself, but bitterness, an overbearing seed, does not require light to grow. Neither does it require self-examination, however, it inevitably begs and perverts the same.

I, Raphael, now abide on earth. Not to interfere, though, to witness and advise. Master Elohim, after creating the universe, rested.

Satan strained, peering down into the valley of the great Euphrates River, but under darkness saw only vague shadows. He found himself dependent on Uriel's rays, waiting until
morning. Following a nesting bird into a cave, there Satan bided his time considering his eternal life.

"You've left me out in the cold, man, which is all right for You. You've got Your shadows; Adam and Eve, and earth and Heaven, and even me, Master. I'm Your shadow. Did You forget? Imperfect as You are, imperfect as I am, we exist, therefore we are. But what do I have?" Satan spoke pressing his conviction that Master Elohim sat on high listening, and equally convinced that all speech fell upon deaf ears.

"I'm a product of Heaven, like it or not. Hell isn't my home. It doesn't express me. I didn't manifest it. Up to the instant of checkmate, I would've sat upon the throne using a certain morality. Egocentric? Okay. Not your morality? Sure. But at least I had a code. Forget me not, Master; I am a soul!" He stood pacing, hanging at the cave's narrow opening, surveying night and listening to the crickets trill. Their incessant, high-pitched mating call tortured him, and above the crickets, softly echoing from the cave's rear, cooing of a thousand mourning doves drove him to cover his ears cupping bony palms. I wasn't always like this, Satan thought. When did I change? I recall once falling in love. He paid matters of love and his deeper self homage for several hours. At last alone, Satan journeyed inwards, a terrain rarely traveled.

"Let me tell You something about the game board," he finally said, adjusting to earth's music. "All that a soul is, is what it chooses to be. And, those choices are motivated by challenges, the successes, the pitfalls of a soul's world. I'm talking about existence, man! Did You think I lived in a vacuum of evil? Because it ain't so! And, where one exists demands a particular set of choices. The where and when of existence creates the how, and makes the soul what it is, how it chooses to perceive its being, its reality."

"I exist in Hell now," although he wasn't planning to return any time soon. "It's a dark hole, Master, and I've become a very dark fellow. Can You blame me? You put me there! You believe I enjoy my fury? All I can think about is exacting revenge, and it's a devilish existence, but that's where I sleep. Your Hell's welding my intestines shut. Where I live demands escape. I must get back to Heaven and I will! … or I can't live with myself, not floating in this waste, not for an eternity."
The crickets' call grew piercing, unbearable, and Satan slid down a rocky wall until he hit the floor burying his head in trembling hands. "This game, this war, it's not over." He looked up. "I'll build my numbers, my strength. I have eternal patience. I'll win my population to conscript. I'll have my followers. You think I'm a cold, callused bugger, but I'm not. I'll recruit sympathizers."

"What's that? The difference between us? Well, You didn't really ask, but I'll tell You. You envision a thing, become aware of it, talk about it, and it becomes reality, part of the whole ball of shit. Your choices are those You generate. They're absolute. Dependent on nothing but Your whims."

"I, being one of the things You thought of, possessing free will and an instinct to survive, have to deal with Your shit. My choices are dictated by existence. I evolved out of Your organization. It thrives within me. We evolve together. Wanna watch me deal?"

An artichoke fell at Satan's feet.

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Gabriel balanced on a large boulder at sunrise blowing his horn, greeting a new dawn by the gates of Eden. He kept watch in solitude, yet never alone. For company he took to heart the kingfisher and harlequin beetle, the gnarled root of the tree and cool whispering grass, the beasts of the field, and the sun god, Uriel, who this morning slid down a bright yellow beam landing at Gabriel's feet. "Join me, Uriel. I was just playing, celebrating the glory of your light," and the blond angel inhaled deeply through rosy nostrils filling his barrel chest with air. Gabriel affirmed his stance lifting the instrument.

"The news isn't good, my brother."

"Does there have to be any news?" Gabriel held aside his horn, cracking his armature wide open, smiling, until a serious expression crossed his eyes.

Uriel dropped his chin to his chest staring at the ground.

"Very well," Gabriel said, "let's have it."
"I'm sorry, but an innocent cherub flew by last night inquiring about earth, its whereabouts. The planet being so social, I didn't see any harm in saying. But this morning, by the light of day, I realized my mistake."

"No harm done. The more the merrier!"

"You don't understand. I believe that Satan deceived me in my sleep."

"Satan? That coward." Gabriel sat on his haunches like a cat atop the boulder. "The Master won't like this, but, hey, forget about it," and he sprang into the air landing on the ground, bouncing on his feet, a thick dancer showing muscular arms outstretched. "No soul gets through this gate without my permission," and Gabriel beat his chest swinging a free hand. Quickly, as though nothing transpired, he noodled the trumpet's valves; his fingers pushing in quick succession while his other hand held the instrument's bell, as if the horn bore an extension of flesh, bone, and nerve endings, and Gabriel sent his mind, a gale of creativity, through its narrow neck, along its musical passageways.

"I have to say it, and I hope you won't take offense, but, Gabriel, if he was clever enough to get past me, don't you think the bird-brain could sneak into Eden?"

"You mean, get by me? Never!" Gabriel broke a sweat over the tops of his eyes, backing further away from Uriel's light.

"If that was Satan, it means he connived his way out of Hell."

Standing in the shade of a tree, Gabriel steadied himself about to blow a note and forget the whole incident. Still, a ghost of insecurity tugged on the short hairs along the back of his square neck. He dropped his horn once again. "Very well, I'll send Ithuriel and Zephon out on patrol. Now, leave me alone. I'm trying to compose music for the wind to sing through the trees. I'm considering something well-crafted that'll stand the test of time, however, I don't want to take myself too seriously." He lifted the trumpet, readied his armature, and loosened his fingers.

"May I suggest something that bends, something fluid?"

"Uriel, I didn't know you were a music lover."
"You know, water and sunlight are the two most fluid substances in nature. Together we enter where other elements fail to go, and we can cut pathways and even carve and destroy the hardest granite. Although, we can not be broken."

Gabriel let the trumpet hang down once again and picked up a stone tossing it into a puddle. "The water, being fluid, embraces the stone."

"Always. And my rays bend and infuse the earth. You can't cut me with your sword. I shorten and lengthen my waves so that I'm where you see me and where you don't."

"Then," Gabriel said, "to bend, to change and be fluid is to master eternity." Gabriel took fluidity to heart, raising his trumpet, blowing, souring a single note in the middle of its stride and bending it like light through a liquid prism, allowing it to journey the distance, lower and softer until it dropped out of range. "I can't see it," he said to Uriel, "and I can't hear it. But I know it's forever out there. If I expect my music to stand the test of time, it mustn't react against worldly factors with a staid attitude. I'll compose a song that accepts the torrent as well as the calm. No matter the weather, the song itself will always exist in harmony." Having said as much, and not being one for words, Gabriel ignored Uriel, picked up his trumpet, and allowed the wind to play through it, to write its own embracing theme.

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Satan, by daylight, disguised himself as a kingfisher, the very same who pretended to befriend Gabriel on his watch. He flew the skies over Eden testing its tree branches, sampling its insects, and fishing its lakes, streams, and rivers, and Satan beheld for himself the simple joys of Paradise. He drank the garden's water and tasted its fruits, and in time he chanced to find a clearing across from the great Euphrates River where Adam and Eve, for a number of earth's years, worked, learned, and settled their home.

It happened on this day that I, Raphael, discovered Eve away from her work as Adam's helpmate, and away from his side. She hiked to the edge of the great river and lingered along its bank wetting her ankles and gazing at her reflection. She sat staring, enthralled by her long
auburn hair and deep brown eyes and her complexion tanned and tinted yellow, the color of wild olives. Watching as the river's brown water rushed over and between her toes, she giggled softly. Why, she wondered, does the river move? It's never still. I hear you, river, late at night after Adam has touched me and he sleeps.

"Hello, Eve," I said.

"Raphael, come here. Put your black feet into the water."

"Why?"

"I want to see if they change color. Mine turn pale blue. Look!"

"These feet don't change color."

"Don't you get cold?"

"Just as cold as you. My feet get just as cold as yours," I said.

"Oh. Sometimes, Uriel becomes angry with us and turns our flesh red."

"My skin becomes dry and ashen. It burns, sometimes."

"Ouch."

"Why are you here? Adam told you to harvest from the fruit orchard. The avocado trees are heavy and waiting. Eve?" I studied her overall, my eyes eventually traveling along her smooth arms, taking respite on Eve's fragile shoulders. Her neck appeared as graceful as any swan the Master might conjure, and I can't say for certain why, at this moment, the weight of a war past came once again to bear upon my heart. Standing the weight of it, I longed to eternally lighten my soul upon the lips of the first woman, to know the cascade of her hair brushing against my face and chest. Still, I dared not.

Eve dipped her soil stained fingers in the rushing water. "When I see my reflection I feel alone. Raphael, I'm the only woman in the universe."

No! You're not alone! What is this feeling I have? So all-consuming. Is it wrong, Eve, that I long to bury my head between your breasts? To linger until time runs its course. "True enough. The only woman. However, you have Adam as your mate so that you won't be alone." Never did I feel so hollow as when I spoke those words.
Eve's full lips grew straight and narrow. "Adam has his blessed garden, his Paradise, and he spends more time planting and harvesting and caring for the animals than he spends with me."

"Do you love Adam?" That you can love at all makes you at once angelic and unattainable.

"Yes. But I also require attention. There are wildflowers in the garden, but he's never brought any to my table."

"Doesn't he respect you as being a part of himself, as having come from his side, to serve at his side?"

"Yes. But I'm more than Adam's rib. Coming from man, I feel myself to be as he is, but also something more." Eve drew her feet from the water allowing the breeze to whisper through wet toes. She encircled her knees with her arms and studied my features, my white teeth. Soon, her gaze met my own, but she quickly averted her head. Even a good angel can feel the dickens about himself, and it felt soothing to be studied by Adam's wife.

"Don't you see?" she said. "I know Adam's thoughts before they arise. I know his likes and dislikes, his beauty and his ugliness. I feel what he feels, his joy and pain. But I'm not him. I'm me. There's more to me than being a part of him." Eve raised her eyes to mine. "There's being me."

"It's strange," I said, "in a sense I understand your meaning, intuit your feelings. But the Master has joined the two of you long ago, speaking into Adam's ear that he would speak into yours, 'Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. I belong to my love, and my love to me.' And the Master said, 'You shall be as one flesh, one body, and one divine spirit.' And you are as one in the way of things, in the way of Master Elohim's absolute awareness. Still, with this said, Eve, I must confess—"

"Yes, Raphael. But we are as two living on earth. Adam desires, and I desire, but not always the same desires. We know each other as one, and that's why we love, also, we live as two knowing ourselves, and what Adam knows about himself, and what he wants for himself seems to be the more important," and Eve's shoulders moved towards me ever so slightly, "only it's not."
"Eve!"

We reached for each other, and for the first time I touched the unknowable flesh, and she, with her soft lips under mine, and warm thighs entangling my body, touched the unfathomable within me. Yet, something more than this played hard and fast between us and my heart raced to unite with it, to never let it escape me again. Something we must share forever, I felt in the moment. I grazed her breasts with my cheek and sunk my lips into the valley between them, immersing my soul, my entire existence there in the darkness between them with a crushing kiss, and I could feel her hands pressing me to stay. "Eve, God almighty you must be an angel," and I entered her pushing slowly. "An angel, angel, an angel, …you are for me."

"Yes," she writhed, "I am for you, Raphael."

When it was over, sadness rained upon me unexpectedly. This parting I understood must be forever. Realizing the beauty and pain of the human condition, even in Paradise, now though angelic, I also became of the flesh. I felt to have dishonored my own contract with Elohim, but knew myself to be among the shadows of the Master, imperfect and in crisis so that I might grow. Let me say, this knowing is of little solace in times of passion. What good does it do for a creature to yearn when that yearning can come to nothing? Oh, my soul!

Eve and I lay silently in each other's arms, not angry, only aware that we were not of each other's worlds, and only for one another in a particular place where space meets time, and nowhere else. It can never be, my Eve.

She placed her fingers gently across my lips as a seal that we would never tell Adam, and the first woman spoke of him, this other one, as if to properly set the bone for healing meant breaking it once more. "Even though I love him, I find myself fighting to get away from his grip on my life. Raphael?"

Yes?"

"Is there such a thing as life with Adam and without him?"

"The many in the one, the one in the many." I, Raphael, suddenly became clear on the matter.

"What does that mean?"
"You are two, yet as you've said, you are one. It means, yes. The answer to your question is yes. If I were to advise you, and I guess that's what I'm doing, I'd have to say that man and woman are, like the rest of the universe, subject to the laws of symbiogenesis and homeostasis; the natural balance. They are whole individuals, one another's hosts within a whole relationship."

Eve's contemplative sadness melted, replaced by a strong bearing, and her body suddenly possessed firmness, holding itself high against the wind with its inner strength. I smiled at this, and her cheeks flushed as if the bare energy of an infinite plan would burst from them. "When you came along, I didn't know what I was thinking with my feet in the river, but now I understand." She arched her back and straightened one leg. "I was thinking, 'How do I become an individual? What does it mean, and how do I do it?'"

"In the way things move from place to place, I believe it will take a crisis." Such as we've just had. Have you forgotten already? Woman, my heart is broken.

"But I love Adam. I feel connected to him, and I know he feels this for me."

"That feeling is at once the joy and the boundary of your relationship. It will dictate how far you're willing to transcend your own agency, how much you wish to invest in your individuality, and how much individuality you wish to sacrifice to the relationship, …and bring to the relationship. Human relationship plays by the rules of dynamism. It's a complex matter. If you ask me, Raphael, and even if you don't, I would say the love relationship is an entire series of crises waiting to be played out on the game board." Just as well to be an angel.

"Oh, Raphael, my dearest friend, my beautiful black angel, all is not well in Paradise."

Eve stroked my face and I tried a reassuring smile.

"Perhaps," I said. "However, I'm certain all goes exactly as it should."

"Sometimes I'm desperate to know."

"Know what?" And while she stroked me, I wanted to tell Eve all that I knew. I dared not.

"The future. Everything. To know who I am. To understand why I'm here. To gain a stronger sense of my path." Eve smiled wistfully. "And, I wonder, Raphael, why do I assume
that I have purpose, that I have a path? But when I'm quiet, and it's late, and I'm listening to the river speed along its course, I do assume."

I thought to look up then, Heavenwards, to seek wise council from the Master for Eve, but all I saw was the kingfisher on a high branch. Cocking his head, shaking as if chilled, and he flew away.

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I suppose Eve had forgotten as the sun arose and set, and the moon appeared to travel across the sky.

On an early evening, Adam and Eve strolled hand in hand by a stream. Paradise, having exacted its toll over the years, the first man and woman entwined their callused fingers while above them the kingfisher followed nervously from tree to tree, hopping, spying through dark beady eyes; night after night the bird kept its vigilant watch. This evening the sky painted itself a pallet of violet and indigo, and Uriel prepared for sleep, while Adam—still strong, though now a bit gray around the edges—laid Eve down in the tall grass. He moved over her, enjoying the woman she'd become, and Eve stretched her long arms behind her head and with risen breasts gave herself, as she should, without a thought for me, Raphael.

Afterwards, they held one another, not a little in awe of how this spontaneous physical act created a space in time where the two were of one mind, a single strain of dynamic energy. Sometimes, this time, Eve returned to herself with a question.

She studied Adam, whose eyes fell closed without question, satisfied that all was as it should be in the garden. "We need to talk," she said softly.

Adam tortured himself returning from wherever he'd journeyed and answered. He felt it was the least he could do. "What? Now?"

"Yes, husband. This is our time, together."

"You didn't say a word all night, through the entire thing. You were so quiet. It felt nice, really. Now, you're gonna talk and destroy the whole mood? Let's sleep."
"Tell me again, Adam, why we can't eat from the Tree of Knowing." She traced circles through his coarse body hair.

There is no sleep, he thought. This thing, this talking, it takes so much effort. "Because the Master said that it would mean our destruction."

"Sometimes I wonder if this is not death, or a slow death."

"How can you say that! Eve, Master Elohim has given us everything to live. The fruits and vegetation. The animals. The water. Everything."

"Husband, are the objects of Paradise all there is to living?"

Oh, not this. Let's not take this path, Eve. "What do you mean?" Adam stared at the sky. The stars hung low. The first man thought he could reach them. He wondered what held them up and what it might be like to touch one, to smell one. Would they be cold on his tongue?

"The garden is beautiful, but it's on the outside. Is what's on the outside all that dictates what you'll do with your life? Do we exist to work, or do we work to live? Adam, have you ever wanted to explore what's on the inside?" and she poked him in the chest over his heart.

This last question raised doubt and Adam accorded it a moment of consideration. To answer his wife thoughtlessly would be the same as a lie, a dishonest moment. As taxing on the spirit as these talks became, Adam loved Eve and he refused to trivialize the all-consuming importance their relationship held in his life by being dishonest. You're my woman, and I love you with every fiber of my being, now and forever, but you wear me out. "I know what's in there. I want to give you Paradise, Eve." He grabbed her hand in his and held it at bay with his muscular warmth, a grip born from breaking bones over the land ever since he could remember. "To secure it for you, forever. And the Master has instructed me on how to do that. To work hard." Adam's eyes closed, reflecting. He opened them, sadly, as if he missed something or someone. "However, it's been a long time since the Master's spoken to me. There was a time, years ago, when I first arrived that I thought I caught fleeting glimpses of Elohim in the trees, the sky, sometimes in the way a beast stared me down. There were so many questions then to ask, but I was an infant. I didn't have the words."

"I feel close to the Master," Eve said.
"I don't see how. Elohim's never spoken to you."

"It's difficult to say. But I know that the Master made me all that I am." Eve propped herself up on her arms. "I believe I'm a promise, Adam. That to fulfill myself is to keep the Master's promise. Within me, Elohim is close at hand. Within me, the Master is at work."

"Wife, the only promise is that you're given to me to be my helpmate. Mine. The rest of this is foolishness. We live in Paradise, and Paradise is one tough nut to crack. It is given to you that you'll help me with the planting and harvesting and care of the creatures."

"Are we not creatures, Husband?"

"The Master gave me dominion over all the creatures. They're mine."

"No," Eve said calmly.

"No?"

"They're yours to care for."

"You understand the Master better than I do? Get out of town!" Adam glared at Eve through a heavy brow and crossed his arms. "I don't like the way this conversation is headed. I'm the man. I received the instruction, …which you are to follow! Are you strong enough to plow a field?"

"I don't believe that's in the plan."

"To do battle with an ox?"

"No," Eve sighed.

"When you become strong enough to take equal part in the work of the garden, then you can offer your opinions."

"I'm saying there's more to the work of the garden than you think. Dominion is responsibility. To care for the creatures is to care for all of the creatures, including us. I can offer us that much."

"Just what do you mean, Eve?"

"I mean, I think that's my equal part. While you're suited to plowing the field without, I'm suited to plowing the field within. By allowing me to discover my individuality—"

"Raphael again!"
"I can help us both to keep Elohim's promise to become more than we are. To use what we are to transcend the moment. To care for the creatures means to give them what they need to flourish. I need to find out who I am. Me! I need you to give me that understanding and respect as an individual. You would be caring for me as a creature of the garden, a creature with the Master's awareness. You would be keeping the Master's promise, your promise to Elohim."

Adam reclined on one elbow picking at blades of grass. "I don't see it."

Eve examined Adam thoughtfully and with deep affection. "I know," she said tenderly. "Give me some time everyday for myself. Not to work the garden. Not to serve at your side."

"For what then?"

Eve picked a handful of grass from the ground and tossed it playfully in her husband's face. He smiled sheepishly. The worst part, the argument, the debate passed. But how do I apologize? For what? Just keep your mouth shut, Adam.

"For me," she said, "so that I can walk the garden without you. To judge Paradise through my own eyes."

Adam looked up at his wife whom the Master had given him. "Don't you want to have me around anymore?"

"Of course, I do. As a mater of fact, next time we're together, bring me some flowers for our table. I'm not sure, but I think a part of me would like that."

"You can't eat them. They won't offer any shade. Why on earth…"

"I know this is all new for you, but can't you just do what I ask because you feel like it, without thinking about it? Flowers?"

Adam curled his lower lip and stuck one finger in the wet soil. "I suppose. I want you to be happy."

"I know that, but you don't really understand, do you?"

Adam jumped up from the ground, brushed the earth from his naked flesh and looked at a sliver of moon. "I need my sleep. Tomorrow's an early day." He offered an arm. "Well?"

"What?" she asked.

"Well, come along. I said we need our sleep, didn't I?"
CHAPTER SEVEN--A SWEET TALKING, UNDERHANDED, HOSTILE TAKEOVER

"As we go marching, marching
we battle too for men,
For they are women's children,
and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated
from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies;
give us bread, but give us roses!"
~Mimi Fariña and James Oppenheim, *Bread And Roses*

The kingfisher heard tell from his high branch about the Tree of Knowing and of Eve's desire to know her self, and decided his campaign to pit Master and creation against one another must lie within the natural triangle of crisis; a man's emotional handicap, a woman's desire, and the object of that desire.

That evening, with Uriel safely sleeping, Satan cast off his kingfisher's disguise nervously pacing his cave above the garden. "You almost had me, Master. I have to admit, that Eve, she's a sweethearth. I don't think her requests of Adam are so unfair."

"Oops! What am I saying? She'll have to be sacrificed. Nothing personal. It's just that I've got a major takeover to engineer— all of humanity from this moment forth— and somebody's gonna have to take the fall, man."
Satan struggled formulating a plan, his crest wiggling back and forth in anticipation while he reached one end of the cave, turning and strutting to the other end. This pacing continued relentlessly. Speaking to Master Elohim, Satan never ceased testing the limits of his dwelling. He ran hardened fingers over cold, damp walls coming to grips with their earthly reality, finalizing his understanding of the elements he had to work with - the elements of the universe, as humanity would perceive them. His hands shook.

"Don't believe I'm equal to the task? Sorry, Master, but You gave me an out: free will, dynamic morality, and an instinct for transcendence. In as much as these are my qualities, they also speak for humankind. So, You see, I know my enemy on an intimate level."

"Man, You may not believe this, but even I have battled over whether to be true to my angelic creed or to the individual lurking within my breast. I too possess the drives to transcend, to learn, to become more. But You failed to recognize the very desires You imbued me with, and here we are! You instigated the war as much as I did."

"You see, my situation and Eve's situation, they're not so different. I grew tired of service. Eve's tired of service. But I'll show her how to learn, how she can become more, and she'll make a choice of her own volition motivated by the distressing prospect of a lifetime existence of service."

Satan shuffled tired feet over to his cave's entrance where, for a moment, he stood on one leg and then the other studying the starry heavens. When the time arrived, he flew as the kingfisher silhouetted against a cobalt sky straining one bright eye on the garden canopy below. At the encampment of Adam and Eve, Satan transformed into the subtle guise of thought.

He trespassed upon the sleeping woman, causing her to dream, tossing and turning all night. Dreaming, Eve became vulnerable and Satan whispered into her ear until sunrise.

Petals lifting their delicate cheeks Heavenwards greeted morning in the garden. Beneath Uriel's first light, green lacewings feasted on ants sipping nectar, and night's dew warmed dripping from leaf to leaf on its spiraling downward journey to the grass under Adam's bare feet. Plants lifted their faces towards the sun, grasshoppers hopped, flies flew, and the snapdragons snapped. Adam wisped away a friendly gnat and entered the hut after performing his morning
rituals by an icy stream. Eve, sleeping when he'd left, now sat in their bed of leaves and vines. She appeared as though chased through the garden by a fierce beast. Auburn blond hair stuck to her forehead matted by perspiration, her brown eyes searching the hut, darting wildly about until Adam entered and her frightened eyes settled upon him.

"Eve, what's wrong? You look like you've been running for your life. Did you go out last night without telling me?"

"While I slept, I beheld strange visions."

Adam sunk down on one knee examining his wife, holding her, rocking her at his breast. At times like this, Eve felt small in his arms, in need of protection, and Adam grew acutely aware of his deep love for her. However, the first man never apologized to Eve, never admitted fault or guilt, or shame. Feeling these unspoken qualities seemed apology enough for Adam to forgive himself, deem his position right with the world, and advance from there. "I've had those visions. But they don't bother me. They come and they go, and I never give them a second thought. They can't be very important. I mean, they don't actually do anything, do they?"

"Not before. But I felt this one. I feel it. It lingers."

"What?"

Eve drew away from Adam, holding fast to his hand. "Yes, a meaning. The vision somehow holds a meaning, Adam, for me, for us. I remember a voice that sounded like yours, and it was calling me to come into the garden. Then I went out in the garden, walking for hours, searching for you, but instead I found the Tree of Knowing. I stopped underneath its shade and it felt good, and I suddenly realized which tree it was; the tree that provides our covenant with the Master. I felt unsure of myself, unsteady on my legs."

"But," Adam said, "you've seen this tree before, in the garden."

"Yes, of course, but it looked so beautiful this time. An angel appeared and he spoke to the tree."

"You can't talk to trees. It was a dream though, wasn't it?"

Eve's lips drooped disapprovingly. She cast her eyes down at their hands, his large thick ones engulfing her small ones, and she patted the back of his with a sentiment of hopeless
affection for his dogged ignorance. Perhaps, she thought, there isn't any covenant, just Adam's literal nature misunderstanding a conversation spoken long ago and far away. Maybe it was all his dream. "And, the angel asked the tree why no one's eaten its fruit of knowing. It seems I wasn't really there. But I was! Adam, I was there. And then… Oh! The angel plucked a piece of fruit off the tree and ate it. Just like that!"

"I don't think this is such a good idea. You spend too much time considering the tree. It's not so important. It's just there, but we don't eat from it, and that's that. Why not pick some avocados? Those we eat! We have something new these days." Adam squinted summoning an image, and he raised his arms forming an object between uncertain hands. "It's an odd shaped plant holding up huge heavy bulbs ending in thick pointed leaves. I decided, I don't know why, to call it an artichoke. You should pick those today."

Eve barely listened to Adam. She loosened her grip on him, allowing her arms to fall, draping her hands palms up in her lap. "The angel offered me a bite and I took it."

"What?"

At once, the feeling returned while Eve briefly paused expecting to taste fruit. "I took a bite and flew above the garden. It felt wonderful, the wind caressing my body in waves and Paradise passing beneath me. It was also terrible. I am ashamed." She turned towards Adam, covering her face, yet she felt only honesty to her husband could possibly cleanse her, returning Eve to herself, putting the dream to its final rest. "I sinned. I broke the covenant with our Master."

"Flying? No, you didn't sin. It was only a vision, and visions aren't real. You didn't do anything."

"Then why do I feel like I did?"

Adam thought to fill Eve with the fear of Master Elohim. "You're feeling guilty because whenever I order you to pick, you sneak down to the water and waste time filling your head with foolishness, and now Master Elohim has spoken to you in a vision, and you're ashamed." He shook his finger at his wife, "You should be." Adam tried appearing stern, though he couldn't help chuckling.
Eve pushed him playfully. "Get out of town!"

"Let's go to work." Adam rose and turned to Eve before leaving. He felt threatened by her dream, wondering why she desired fruit from the Tree of Knowing, why she desired anything. She has me, after all. Certainly, I'm enough. But these days, I don't seem to be enough. For the first time during their years together, he thought the canopy high over Paradise might not be as solid as it appeared, afraid of its swaying and crashing upon their heads. He casually lifted his knees, and like squashing grapes for wine, Adam tested the soft earth below. Everything is well in Heaven and on earth, he thought, chanting the notion several times, hoping it would take hold. "I'll pick you some flowers. However, as Elohim is my witness, I don't for the life of me understand why."

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Moving through their lives in the way of things, each owning the natural virtue to become, Adam and Eve spent their days working the garden. Despite the best of intentions, the dream was forgotten, and so the flowers, because souls do not learn easily.

At night, Adam lay awake designing more energy effective methods for tending the garden, and eventually he adopted the strategy of divide and conquer.

Most days husband and wife labored far from one another, and late one afternoon, Eve, alone, came across the Tree of Knowing and recalled her vision.

I, Raphael, played at washing my feet in the great river when Master Elohim spoke to me. "Raphael, how are you, My friend? It's been awhile."

"The garden flourishes, Master," I thought an appropriate reply.

"Well, that may be, but I've heard it said that 'Paradise is a tough nut to crack'. Say, what do you think about nuts?"

"Nuts?" I'd never heard of these things, and what should I think?

"Why, sure! As opposed to olives, I mean."
"I couldn't say. Master, I'm wondering…" I'd resolved that now was as good a time as any.

"Hmm?"

"I'd like to advance. You know, take a higher position for my work."

"That would be a reward for a job well done."

"Yes, it would," I slipped.

"Listen, Raphael, that reward's like paying you a wage, and you don't want to be a wage slave to the organization do you? I wouldn't insult you that way, My friend. You're a free soul. Aren't you?"

I stood there, waist deep in the water looking around, searching the garden. I wished to judge the face of Elohim, because like a fish I felt caught in the Master's humorous net. Slowly, I waded towards the bank feeling soft silt at the river's bottom push between my toes. "Master, you're not serious, I hope," I said, not believing Elohim could be serious.

Master Elohim allowed the matter to stew. "Time is upon the face of humankind, Raphael. Go and talk to Adam. Appeal to him for the good of the organization. Warn him, though I hold out little hope that man and woman are strong enough to rise above their existence."

"Then why don't you help them, Master?" I asked.

"In My way I am. You see, an important aspect of living in My grace is discovering one's own strength, and strength isn't needed when all is going well. The harder the fall, the more strength one develops lifting one's self up. Strength is developed through experiencing life deeply, through learning to transcend existence rather than reacting to it, learning to rise above existential circumstances through the process of existence itself. In the way of humanity, the race will seek solace and understanding, and power, through common doctrines. These doctrines will proliferate as the world's major religions. Each will have its own face, yet, all will teach the same bottom line; humankind, while living in the world, is not of the world, but is something more."
Suddenly, Elohim stood in front of me not twenty yards away on the bank of the Euphrates punching a fist into an open hand. "I promised Adam I would help him walk the middle path. The middle path is the easiest path to travel, but the most difficult to locate. To discover the middle path one must be willing to sacrifice life and limb. Go!"

I, Raphael, ran with wet feet through the garden until I came upon Adam removing a heavy stone from a field. "Adam! What's happened?"

Adam dropped the stone wiping sweat off his brow and the sting from his eyes. "Nothing's happened. I'm preparing this field to plant."

"That's all?" I couldn't believe my ears.

"That's that."

"Then it's not too late. I'm here to help."

"Great! Grab a stone."

"The time of judgment is upon your specie, Adam."

"Meaning?"

"You're tempted to fall from Master Elohim's grace."

"No, Raphael. I honor God and my wife. I care for the garden. I've kept my promises. I have nothing to be ashamed of, and I won't fall from the Master's grace. What are you talking about?"

"I couldn't say. But, consider yourself warned. I'm sorry, it's all I can do." I decided to amend this. "Though, in the way of things, it's probably for the best." I confess, I had my doubts.

At the Tree of Knowing, Eve paused taking comfort in the shade of a large leafy umbrella. At that moment, she spotted the serpent: a nervous creature wiggling this way and that, constantly moving, coiling itself and raising its head. It weaved its nose from side to side catching Eve's scent, and believing herself to be its prey, she froze. The serpent slithered past twisting a smooth sleek belly, curling itself around the trunk of the Tree of Knowing, and she grew hot under its glare along the nape of her neck. "Why do you suppose the Master doesn't want you to eat from the Tree of Knowing?"
"Serpents don't speak," Eve said. Slowing, facing her threat, she cautiously edged away, afraid of being bitten.

"Fine, babe, have it your way. But, isn't your Master the same as mine?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then are we not of one awareness?"

"Yet, we're different. I'm no serpent," Eve said.

"I'm no human being, but I'm better than you. The Master respects me. Elohim places me in a higher position."

At that, Eve planted herself throwing caution to the wind. The serpent snickered.

"That's right, little lady, I'm up here in the tree and you're down there. Notice our respective arrangement?"

"I can climb," Eve said.

"Be my guest."

Eve studied the Tree of Knowing and realized there was no lower branch to cling to. She couldn't begin her ascent, although she threatened by laying one purposeful hand on the trunk.

The serpent swung its head over Eve's face hissing loudly. She jumped back frightened and falling, and the serpent uncurled its body further, again waving its head across her line of sight, flicking its tongue between Eve's eyes, ready to strike. Eve sprang angrily to her feet hissing back. "I have dominion here, serpent!"

The serpent, grinning, retracted a few feet. "And I have the tree, babe."

Eve found herself speechless, however, she realized standing her ground, the serpent had backed off.

"What's the matter? Big bad water buffalo got your tongue? No? Maybe it's your husband. Or not! Perhaps, it's your Master. Our Master. I'm in the tree, and I'm allowed to be here. I'm not breaking any covenant. Master Elohim trusts me. Why do you suppose the Master doesn't trust you to eat from the Tree of Knowing?"

Eve had to confess, "At the moment, I wonder."
"But you could know, you would know, you should know. It's Elohim's awareness that nourishes you, sustains you. At the same time, it's that awareness you can't gain a clear understanding of. It hides behind a lifetime of mundane day-work and is clouded by your sleep at night. Curious thing... Some time ago you had a brief vision, an experience of awareness."

"No!"

"It's struggling to be free, Eve, to be known. There's no point in denying it. As long as it remains hidden, as long as Master Elohim remains mysterious, the Master maintains an upper hand. It's a power play! The organization is good at that.

Now, the Master has nothing to fear from me. I'm only a lowly serpent. But you! You're made in the image of the Master. You're one step away. The top of the ladder, as they say."

"Raphael says the organization is made in the Master's image. All of us, you as well as me, we all live in the awareness of Elohim. You're not lowly. And, I'm no more important than pond scum. That's what Raphael says."

"That's what Raphael says! Sssssssss! Don't believe it!" The serpent wound its way higher in the tree until it rested on a branch laden with fruit. Slowly, it worked a piece free which tumbled to Eve's feet. "If we're all made of the same stuff then explain this, babe." The serpent ventured a few more inches and snapped at a piece of fruit swallowing it whole. Eve, never before seeing a serpent eat, witnessed in amazement a whole fruit traveling the length of the serpent's narrow body. "So, we're created from the same source, eh? Do I look dead to you? Am I destroyed? No! But I know something you don't."

"What's that?"

"I know my true nature. I know who I am and why I'm here. I know that every lock has a key. In organization lingo, I know where I'm going. I'm so damned sure of myself that I'll let you in on a secret; I'm a predator. I have a nose for those who want to be caught, those who think they're too good for their position on the ladder."

Eve stared at her feet.

"Go ahead. Pick it up. It's fruit. It doesn't explode. There's no covenant against picking it up, is there?"
"No, of course not," Eve stooped down and held the fruit in her palm examining it.

"I know a loophole! A loophole! Ssss."

"What?"

"Your promise is not to eat. Being human means you have to chew your food in order to eat it. Bite a small enough piece and you can swallow it without chewing first, without eating it."

"That's awfully picky. Even infantile."

"All right. Fine. Have it your way. But the loophole is the life-blood of any organization. Ingestion versus mastication; two different things. They make contracts with loopholes just so they can break them at their convenience. They construct clauses that all but guarantee an imminent breach. 'You can't eat from the tree …yet, here it stands. We, the party of the first part, reserve the right to leave it here for you, the party of the second part to ponder, and to destroy you with in a weak moment.'"

"You're terribly smart for a lowly serpent."

The serpent swung down its head at the tip of Eve's nose, winked an eye and whispered, "I ate the fruit."

Eve held the fruit to her lips, and partaking of its citrus fragrance she touched it to the tip of her tongue. She dropped it. "No. What would Adam think of me? I can't let him down like this."

"Right. What was I thinking? We mustn't let Adam down. But I've gotta tell you, babe, he's a poor excuse for an organization man."

"That's not true!" and Eve turned on her naked heel stalking off.

"Wait! Wait. All I'm saying, is that if Adam was a real man he wouldn't be threatened by who you are as an individual."

"He's not." She turned. "He allows me to walk the garden on my own. To see the garden through my own eyes."

"If the man loved you, he'd want to know who you really are. To rejoice in who you are. To share your vision! If he loved you.
You know what I think? The Master set both of you up. The organization rewards risk takers who succeed, even if it's at breaking the house rules. 'So what if he broke the rules? He won! He's a winner! That's all that counts.' Elohim's testing your love for one another. Because if you truly loved Adam and wanted to share your true self with him, the best you have to give, you'd risk it."

Eve picked up the fruit brushing it off. "What if Raphael is right? What if the truth is just that I'm a manifest, transcended aspect of everything. Then I'd be chasing spit in the ocean."

"Then you won't find anything you didn't already know, but you'll no longer wonder. Elohim won't be a faceless mystery. You and the Master will be equals knowing what you each know. And, if Adam takes advantage of the loophole, the two of you will be equals. No more servitude at his left side, his right side, his hind side, or any side. Knowledge can only aid your dominion over the garden, your control. Knowledge can't hurt you. It can only set you free. But, hey, babe, it's your call. Obviously, you're not a woman who's easily influenced."

Eve studied the fruit. "No, of course not," and she swallowed a small bite. She was not destroyed and her world remained in force. At work, Eve's back hurt from gathering wood for the evening fire. Half-way up a hill she dropped the wood on the ground, arriving at the encampment empty handed at nightfall.

"Eve," Adam said, "you forgot the wood. What are we going to do about a fire?"

Eve spun around showing a quiet fury in her eyes that the first man had never seen. "I didn't forget. I'm just better than that. You want a fire? Then you build one. I love you, Adam. But if you want my respect, you'll have to earn it. From now on, you're building the fires."
"Ah, I can see it all now. You and me. You standing over a hot stove. But I can't see the stove." ~Groucho Marx to Margaret Dumont

"I've never seen this side of you before." Adam stood his ground, though at the moment, and after a verbal slap in the face, he felt naked, standing spread-eagled over a bottomless pit.

"All I said was, you're building the fires. Was it too abstruse a concept for you to grasp?"

Eve pouted, feigning sympathy.

"Eve, is that you?"

"Adam, sweetheart, there's a pile of wood back there along the path. If you want any kind of heat tonight, I suggest you go pick it up."

When he returned, Adam dropped the wood next to a dug out dirt fire pit and grabbed his kit, a small rough-hewn dowel and flat board with a hole recessed in its surface. He worked the dowel in the hole, twisting it back and forth swiftly, rubbing both palms to spin it until he sparked a handful of dry brush. Uriel slept, and Adam added one log at a time, slowly, to the fire. He watched, lost in dancing flames, not anxious for sleep, not at all anxious to see Eve. He held the final log while it caught, crackling, and the fire pit popped and spit, and Adam reluctantly dropped the log walking away from floating sparks.

He ducked low sneaking through their threshold. Adam straightened and a sharp pain attacking the small of his spine stabbed him above the hips. This body, he thought, is not as easy as it once was. He wanted to blame it on Eve or whoever that woman must be that made him
collect the wood. When he looked across the way, she lay naked stretching out long legs still
smooth and firm to wrap around Adam, to squeeze him with, and full lips showing small white
teeth to sink through the dense muscle between his shoulder and neck; and when she did, his
blood ran warm, pulsing upwards until it buzzed around his temples. Afterwards, after she cried
out, her ankles and toes growing fluid and knees trembling, he lay wet where Eve's mouth
latched onto him and she'd dab the area of flesh darting her tongue, blowing gently.

Now, studying her by firelight, throwing its shadows across her breasts, he wondered
how it happened Paradise saw him grow old while she appeared to bloom earthier in her season.
What, he wondered, does Master Elohim have in mind for Eve? Eve stared back at Adam,
knowing his thoughts. She spread her legs and Adam didn't turn away. Eve lightly touched
herself, lifting her hand, reaching into a space beside her body, into a pile of fresh picked leaves.
She pulled out a round orange fruit and rolled it across her breasts down the flat of her stomach
dropping it, cradling it between her upper thighs …and Adam ate of the fruit of the Tree of
Knowing, with full knowledge.

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"You don't pick! You don't plow! You don't plant! You don't work!" Adam screamed,
flailing his arms. "All you care about is yourself. Your egocentric existence disgusts me. Your
life has dwindled down to the gratuitous satisfaction of some fantasy bereft of space for me or
for God!"

"Your purpose on earth is to aid me in my work! How clear do I have to make it?"

Eve smiled a bone-chilling grin. "Purpose? My work? How clear do I have to make it?
Who the Hell are you to presume any knowledge about anything? You're a farmer! What do
you know of one's purpose? That's mighty deep inquiry for a seed pusher with terminally brown
fingertips. Oh, and I really like the way you've taken credit for the garden. You put it here, did
you? Perhaps there is one miniscule point you could clarify for me, husband. Am I your field
slave?"
Adam froze holding a single shooting finger extended. That she conceived accusing him of slavery dealt an immediate shock to the system, because as much as they fought, they loved. At least, Adam knew he still loved her. His mouth hung open, nostrils flaring while every vein in his body stretched to its limit.

"You and you alone keep record of the crops and how much each of us might eat," Eve said.

"That's only because I know best how much food a season will produce."

"You and you alone delegate all of the responsibilities."

"Because I'm your husband. I know best what you're suited for. I understand how to manage a labor force. Do you? Can you calculate how much food we're going to have next year? Next month? Next week! No! Do you even know how many man-hours it takes to produce a season's harvest? No! You spend all of your time down by the river staring at your own reflection and playing with Raphael! And, by the way, what about Raphael?"

Eve threw back her shoulders lifting her chin. "When any individual, meaning me, is not allowed to freely participate in the process of the distribution of wealth, in either its production or possession, that circumstance is grounds for oppression," she smiled.

"You oppressed bitch!" Adam stomped a bare foot into the earth.

"You know, Adam, you're the only man on the face of the earth, but somehow I still feel I could have done better. Raphael? Oh, yes… Raphael."
BOOK III; STRUGGLE/CHAPTER NINE--THE JUDGMENT

"The ages of the world will not turn back.
The iron rusts and will not shine again
like silver, will not be silver, and the gold…
Who believes that? Still there are golden dawns,
spings with their promises." ~Virgil, The Fourth Eclogue: Pollio
~Translation, David R. Slavitt

Master Elohim's choir wept on high while Elohim's ancient eyes shone clear. Unclouded by attachment to the universe, the Master saw to the core of the ten-thousand things of Paradise, of humanity, leaving a rugged journey on the surface for others. "It's sad," the Master said, "but I expected no less." Elohim's hoary double chin rose above Heaven and a divine sigh escaped. "And, who's to say that it's wrong? You know, a chicken crosses the road to get to the other side, or a chicken screeches out, 'The sky is falling!' and we wonder why the chicken does what it does. We always judge the chicken and miss the point entirely. Somebody, with all faith, put the chicken by that road or gifted that bird with prophecy. In the end a chicken will be what it is, and faith in the prophetic way of things, that they will move as they move, is all we have to call our own."
"Prophecy is not a mystery. A chicken will always be a chicken, act like a chicken, do whatever the Hell it is that chickens do, and the same for humankind."

"Dammit, I am the Lord thy God!" Master Elohim shouted at a most somber time. "But, if I dropped My robe—" The Master, threatening, leapt off the throne spinning around to face the weeping holy choir, "Quickly! What will you see?"

The choir covered their eyes in horror because even angels dare not look directly at their creator, and in a huddle they argued, chattered, and otherwise conferred. Finally, they chose a child among them to tell the truth of the matter. "We don't know, Master, what we'll see. However, You're very old, and we'd rather not see You buck naked."

"Ha! All you'd see is faith in prophecy. Naked, I have nothing more to call My own than do My creations. I'm no better than a mouse that squeals, a lion that roars, or a human being that, well, does what humans do! Creation and Myself are of a piece."

"Yes," the son said, sitting at the Master's side, "but what does creative prophecy have in mind for humanity now that they've taken that first step across the road?"

The Master's ears flattened and Elohim's ruddy nose wrinkled in deep concentration. Again, Master Elohim spun around, this time facing the son. "A speeding something or other and splat! …No? Wha!"

The son studied Elohim's face, round cheeks, smooth in contrast to the aged terrain they supported. He thought he saw an aura of light, not a sad thing at all, most healthy and pleasing, inspiring feelings of love and compassion in the son. It came as a shock when Master Elohim so casually judged humankind.

"They're not fit for angelic service," and the Master sat down straightening robe and slippers and crossing one short flabby leg over the other. "I just don't think, after assessing the situation, that they'll ever learn to swing with the organization." The Master waved off humanity as a passing thought, a fleeting note in the symphony.

"But You Yourself stated that crisis is not an end. I always believed You felt it was part of the balanced process of becoming, part of homeostasis."
Elohim's fingers twitched hanging over the sides of the throne. "True… All of it true as far as it goes. However, they're now drowning in relative knowing, Adam and Eve, I mean. Listen, son, this is important stuff. They're no longer satisfied with Paradise. They no longer accept the ways of the garden. Each one's attempting to change the other, to wrest control."

"Adam knows his position as material caretaker in terms of power and the battle to retain that power."

"Eve feels her position as spiritual caretaker is not accorded enough power to begin with."

"Relative knowing has imbued the rudimentary outlook of humanity with dissatisfaction; and dissatisfaction with the relative position of things, of themselves, can only lead to struggle, dis-ease, dis-harmony, and war, I'd say."

"And wars," Elohim opened one eye wide, pushing two pudgy fingers intrusively into the son's face, "are fought with two weapons, politics and knowledge. The dynamics of politics and knowledge, at this stage of humankind's development, can only splinter and polarize Eden. It's no mysterious prophecy that the ultimate cycle of this crisis of relative knowing is not balance, but slow, painful destruction."

The angelic choir maintained silence, reeling in shock, and the only begotten son trembled for the universe, for humanity, to which he'd become attached as more than simply a point of interest. "I don't know why," he said, "but I care about Adam and Eve. I feel their connection within myself."

"What connection?" the Master asked.

"The connection to a reality much greater than the sum of their parts and actions. A cosmic connection. A transcendent connection."

"Get out of town," the Master quietly bit a cheek.

"But you would destroy them now?" The only begotten son cast down his head.

"They don't mean a thing if they ain't got that swing. Quick and clean. Now. At the beginning. It's the compassionate thing to do."
"What if prophecy were more variable than You planned it? What if humanity survived wars in the homeostatic loop? Learned from them? The private wars and the public ones. Would war not then be transcendent? So, it's now in the nature of humankind to use knowledge as a weapon for power. This creates disharmony. If transcendence is in the larger scheme of things, then aren't You giving up humanity's fate too soon? You're writing a prophecy before its time, Master. If the crisis is transcendent, even if only in its future sense, can we claim humanity to be disharmonious and destructive? War is horrific, gruesome, destructive today, but is it destructive ultimately?"

Master Elohim's lips grew thin and pale, and a knot of electricity caused small explosions in Elohim's solar plexus. "You know, I think you're using humankind. I don't believe you're as compassionate and just as you pretend. They're not an emotional investment for you, only a hobby. Listen, they're not even a point of interest! I think you're using My creations as a point of connection between us, because you're young and feel you have to disagree with whatever I decide."

Being caught up in the game, Elohim felt genuinely angry. Concerning the insight of the only begotten son, Elohim's pride overflowed. The Master leaned across the game board in front of them slowly moving a knight. "You used to be a good student," the Master said.

"Used to be?"

"How would you like to handle this one?"

"I couldn't do that, Master."

"Good then, it's settled. You handle it."

Hearing this, the choir broke silence bickering noisily amongst themselves. The son lacked experience, some said. Others made the case that he demonstrated decidedly less ego than Master Elohim, who'd grown infinite in age and perhaps a bit crusty around the edges—certainly expansive around the middle—and who, at the moment of humanity's extinction, decided to work on a song with Gabriel. Finally, in unison they faced their Master. "Master, we concur."
"What?" Elohim held up a swollen palm and Gabriel ceased blowing mid note. "You what? I don't recall asking for your consent!" Elohim bellowed that all Heaven might hear. The Master, showing a mischievous grin, gave his attention back to Gabriel, who blew a Coltrane litany in progress on his saxophone while Elohim softly sang off key, "A love supreme… a love supreme…"

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Adam sunk his callused toes into the rich humus of the garden floor. This morning, more than other mornings recently past, he smelled the trees heavy fragrance, a clean leafy perfume and the mossy odor of damp soft bark. Directly in front of him, a sudden move, and a large black cat, a quick shadow, shot from a pile of leaves straight up the winged buttresses of a large trunk. It stood its ground on the steep incline above Adam, its head yawning towards earth, while it growled low under a thick coat of fur around its chest and neck. At that moment, a sleepy water buffalo slapped its tail in a circle making its way to the edge of the great river at sunrise.

I, Raphael, waited at the water's edge for the Master to call me home, and indeed, Master Elohim resided in Eden this morning, everywhere heard in the way things move from place to place, in natural law. Everywhere, Elohim's glory manifest in natural form, the ever evolving result of law; understood in one's own connection to law and form, one's own being through law and form. However, when Master Elohim called to Adam, the first man failed to reply. He saw, yet stood blind. He heard, though lived deaf. Adam no longer understood, having forgotten, no longer feeling any connection. A wall of relative knowing imposed itself between humanity and its creator.

The garden is alone, different from myself, and I will care for it, subjugate it, force it to reward me for my efforts.

The Master called out to Adam from every blade of grass and early rolling dew drop, and riverside salamander, and transparent frog's eye membrane, and beetle's Hell and wing, and
elephant flesh, and humanity's own thigh, yet Adam could not realize his god; this, because the first man no longer dwelt in the whole truth, yet with a lie upon his heart that the garden lived only dualistically, all parts being independent and possessing self. Separated from his higher awareness, Adam knew only vaguely that things were not as they used to be, and bitter at this disposition he thought, It changed sometime near to my being tricked by Eve into eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowing. This he used as his excuse the morning that Master Elohim shouted out, "Adam!" and received no answer.

Although, Adam felt a presence above, below, and behind him, and when he turned to look, Eve came walking through the clearing holding hands with the only begotten son. The three of them, the first man and woman, and the son, existed for a time as one in heart and mind. "What's happened here, Adam?" the son asked.

"Eve offered me the fruit of knowing, and I ate."

The son turned to Eve.

"The serpent offered me the fruit of knowing," Eve said, "and I ate."

In the presence of the son, for the first time, they gave the power of words to their transgression, solidifying it not as a dream or thought, but as a concrete deed bearing description and consequence. The tension of guilt between husband and wife dissolved, and they embraced sharing their love and the fear of their crime, and when at last the son reached out to separate the first man and woman, they bore themselves as one clothed in a relief of shame.

"What have we done, Adam?" Eve asked.

Adam turned to the son. "Not for myself, but for my wife, would you speak to Master Elohim on our behalf?"

"Elohim and I rarely see eye to eye these days," the son said. "Besides, I get the feeling you know what you want to say."

"Yes, of course. That we're sorry beyond measure. That we can no longer stand naked in front of the Master. That we're clothed in our shame. But the Master no longer hears me."

"I've been sent to the garden to judge humankind." The son sat upon a large rock deeply contemplating. Within himself, unbeknownst to Adam and Eve, the Master spoke to the son.
"Elohim and I may not always see eye to eye, but we're of one heart," the son said. "I will cloth you, so that in the future humankind will not stand in shame before their creator. However, know this," and the son felt the spirit of the creator upon him, "the iron has rusted. It is not shining silver, and the world cannot turn back. The organization's laws demand that the order of thermodynamics become spread across the universe with time, never to return to the original order. Paradise can never again be on earth. You, Adam, have set yourself in relative conflict with the garden and will toil against an unforgiving field to bring forth food. As you struggle to control, rather than care for the garden, the seasons will progress haphazardly and worsen."

"Eve, because you now realize the great magnitude of spirit, it will be in knowing equal pain that your finite body will bear a spirit into the garden."

"Because humankind has broken their covenant with their creator, they must find the Middle-Path through Eden encountering difficulty. To achieve this, humanity will live the wheel of birth and death until they gain angelic knowledge. Only through struggle will your angelic self receive strength. Only through using that very struggle to transcend the same, can the cycle be completed. Humanity is a dynamic life form capable of learning and change and transcendence. You are the shadow of Elohim. You and your god are of a piece."

"That you are, is that you already live within God's grace, and God's grace lives within you. That you are on the wheel of birth and death is a slap in the face of evil. Satan will never keep your spirit because the only way you can walk is within Master Elohim. Thus is the judgment."

***

"It's done," Death said upon Mount Niphates. "The bridge leading to Hell is complete."

"Man, let's test it, shall we?" Satan kicked Death a lollapalooza on the rear and they joined Sin for the trip home, because prophecy is not a mystery. "Humankind," Satan said, "is what it is. I only have to wait, and that's all she wrote."

"She who?" Sin shouted from far ahead.
"She! is fate, babe." Satan cackled. "Human fate is in the hands of humankind. They can blame me, but all I did was put the chicken by the side of the road. Did I do that? Splat! Tsk, tsk." Satan stopped in his tracks. He stood in the middle of the bridge to Hell and breathed deeply, witnessing for a moment the universe's immensity and the infinity of reality. Perhaps, he thought, he felt the Master at work. "…Then again, no," he said.

"No, what?" Death asked.

"No!" Satan shouted ahead. "I just wonder where I came up with the plan. That's all"

I'm not this brilliant.

"Yesssss," hissed Sin, "I've always thought to myself, you're not that smart."

"Fuck you!"

***

If you ask me, Raphael, it was not such a sad day, the Day of Judgment. Knowing Elohim as I do, it could have been worse. I stood then on the edge of a one-time Paradise, The Garden of Eden, and with Adam and Eve at my side we marveled at a sunset over the far bank of the great Euphrates River. A herd of gazelle danced, flying swiftly past Uriel, now a rich round drop of blood sinking into the horizon. The fall of humanity, I thought. Paradise lost. Yet, here before us the universe in its glory remains in its purple skies and golden fields, its luscious green forest canopies, frothy waters and fish and algae; in the eye of a raging tempest or a single ray of life sustaining sun; in a quark, a particle wave of possibility, a cell, the mighty atom; in all of nature, the shadow of the Master, still there rests the transcendent promise of a new dawn.

"Man," Adam said.

"Yes, Adam. What is man?" I asked.

'Knowing', being in itself not all bad or all good, Adam looked out at the expanse of land before Eve and himself. "Man is empty of selfness, as the garden in its multitudinous forms is one and many, a shadow of Elohim, and empty. Man is man, and more."

At that moment, only I heard the Master speak, "What a sunset! Wha-wow!"
"Will I ever hear the Master's voice again?" Adam asked me.

This is my story, and I'm sticking to it, that I, being the faithful one, prayed for humanity and the answer arrived on Gabriel's evening song through the trees. "Yes," I said, "because the master will speak to you until you hear. From the nature of the universe to be as it is, to move as it moves from place to place, moment to moment, the Master will speak. As the Master will not quit you, you will not quit yourselves. You will struggle and fear, yet never must you fear. Have faith. Because you are, you will be called home."

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"The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide;
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way."

~John Milton, *Paradise Lost*