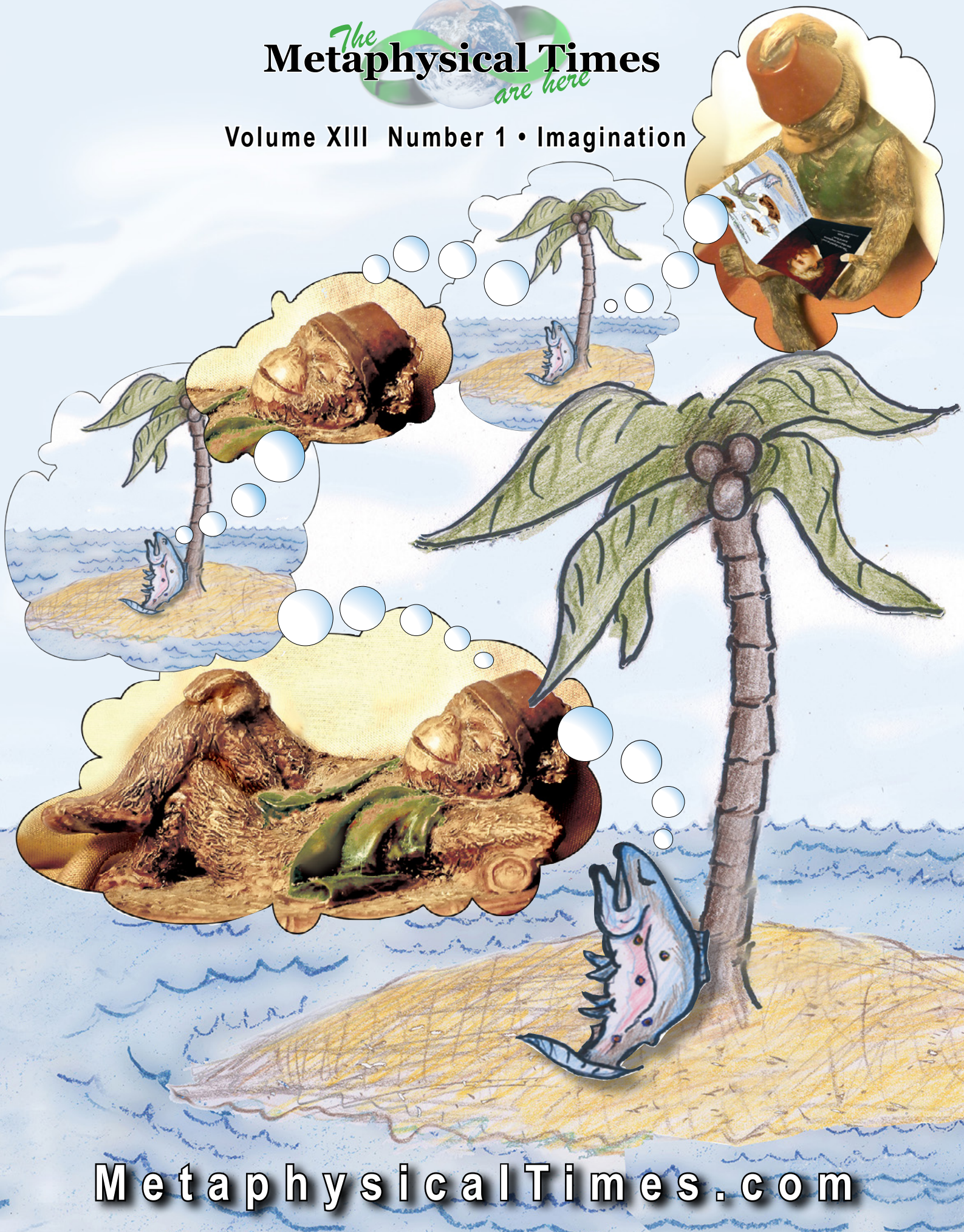


*The*  
**Metaphysical Times**  
*are here*

Volume XIII Number 1 • Imagination



**MetaphysicalTimes.com**



# IMAGINATION

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Mark Finn – Imagination

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## Editor's Note

by David S. Warren

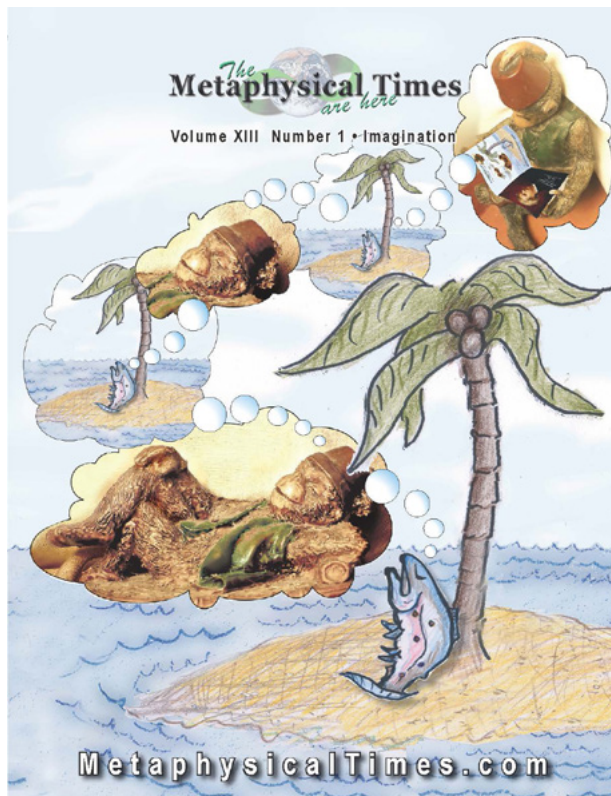
Some writers depend on a muse to open the gates of imagination, some on drugs, some on research, and some on discipline - like the aspiring novelist Charles Pekar-Stein who keeps his pens lined up beside his note pad and computer on a desk that does not look out a window. He also turns down the lights and closes his eyes to bring on the words, with the result that he can hardly read his hand-writing and if he uses the key-

board and his hands happen to be misplaced in the darkness, he turns out a sort of code which he does not bother to break because, really, the best ideas come to Pekar-Stein when he is AWAY from his station, with plenty of life around him: most generally at the State Diner where he jots story ideas on napkins and paper scraps.

If he brings along so much as a blank sheet of note paper folded to the size of a match book, the gates of imagination feel they are being forced, and will usually not open for him. A sales receipt, a paper napkin,

or a grocery list with some space on the back are not too threatening. The result of his underhanded efforts is a pocket file of opening notes for stories he might or might not ever get to working hard on.

Unfortunately Charles has managed to complete nothing for this issue of the Metaphysical Times, but in order that these inspirations not go to waste, he has given us the ones he plans never to use, so you can write your own middle and end to these beginnings; doing the hard work of imagination yourself.



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# Writer's Notes:

Thre were two of him and only one of her. That was the problem.

Once there was a story which, as told, ended when the lady fell off the street car and landed in a fruitt stall, but that was not really the end. Of course.

Once there was, or maybe a few times, has there been a person with cheek bones quite as prominent as his, and it was more than he could do, to locate his identiy in anything else, including his outstanding sucess in the farmed Truffel market.

The moment I walked into the place, seeing thjat it had a dirt floor and only three walls, I expected less elegance than I actual encountered



The Parrot, named Polly because it was the only one ever known in the county, was found beside the rail road track when she was a little girl in Ohio and there is no telling how old it was at the time, being probasbly a performing circus parot,

but Bernice had the parrot with her until it died eighty years later, where upon Polly was taxadermined and kept on in her cage until when Bernice died while well into her nineties. They had an open casket funeral with Polly, and the two were burried together.

Her third ear was not always obvious, beause of thje swath of hair she pinned over her left temple, where the ear resided, but of you ever noticed it, you felt deeply obsrved.

and Pom,pe Tympanum, would change his name for a year and try out another life, as much as possible avoiding legal fraud, and so on. The so on was the problem.



Four months after she moved in with her cats,  
he moved into a trailer in the yard and  
that was working out pretty well

When she first moved onto the property, there was no shed out back, and  
then one day there it was.

When I first met her, she had not yet unfurled her wings

*At first she didn't notice the large,  
ape-like creature in the tub.*

for a week when she had gone to collect eggs in the chicken house,  
she had found not real eggs, but plastic  
easter eggs: those two-part things you get  
with jelly beans in them, except that each  
of these chicken house eggs had a fortune  
cookie advisory on it, like, as in the first  
one, : nested pig up it ready wisdom/



ejrm jr eplr i om yjr ptmoh . jr trvlpmrf jr  
epi,fkidy hp nsvl yp c,rr ./

zoy dsd s fsu ,olr smu pyjrt fsu. rcvr y yjr dlu esd gs,,,omh.

When they sold the farm to the other side of the family, they were able  
to move into town and live a life where you didn't have to worry about  
being slammed against the side of the stall by a bossy cow, damn her  
hide

*She did not notice that she had stepped on a starfish,  
until it had been with her for a while.*

When she woke, she thought she smelled pancakes. but she lived alone  
in a doublewide trailer on four acres. Another morning it was bacon  
and, maybe potatoes.

My adopted brother William was handy on roofs where, because of his lower  
body dwarfism, he could work all day without kneeling or bending. He oc-  
casionally worked on some of our Natural Bone construction projects over the

years, most often sleeping nights on the work site, sleeping among the tools. No one ever complained, mostly no one noticed. . He did some garden work on his own and often then, lived in the garden, and sometimes with the encouragements of the ladies.

One lady in Cayuga Heights believed that gnomes are real physical beings, that William was one, and she was willing to pay him, whatever that might be worth, to be a resident gnome.

He was not so sure he liked the notion that he was a gnome, or just exactly what a gnome was, or what was to be expected of him, but he took the job.

He didn't have to be there all the time, and she paid him to build a funky little cottage for his garden stays. She wanted there to be a steep roof but with the appearance of snow on it all the time. The artificial snow was a huge pain in the ass for William. Mrs Truebody was thinking paper mache ... but William knew what the weather would do to that. He ended up using inflated empty plastic milk gallon and quart containers strung up by ropes through the handles and covered all over with agricultural row cloth. You got the idea, but it didn't look all that much like snow to William except when it snowed on it, and that was long after the garden tours came through. Mrs Truebody had him extend the fairy garden aspect of her property, making lanterns and fairy houses until William just got sick of it all and went out West for a while

He felt safe and secure sleeping with his tools. Like the sons of Cornell Professors at the time, he was a carpenter, house painter,, At the time of this story , he usually slept in his van or on the work site, in a bag, among his bags of tools.

They collided like ships in the night.

He was the kind of guy who, when he walked into a room, no one noticed unless he coughed or cleared his throat or laughed at nothing, as he often did at odd times any way. No one liked him and he didn't like anybody. He would be beneath your notice, except for his particular talent.

For many years, she felt she had never been to Boston.

He had been away so long that his dog didn't recognize him. bit him on the knee cap.

He had not been to an actual movie in an actual movie theatre for years now and when he sat down at all seemed familiar again except for one thing .. there were no other people in the theatre. And then the film started.



It was not long before Mason realized that the object he had picked up was a subject. something alive.

She attributed her long life and good health to a diet of worms, and because she was so old, many people thought she was serious, and some asked for recipes

She didn't even go back to work after Charlie the mechanic told her that her transmission had only about five more hundred miles on it, she could not pay for that, . could not pay for much more than the gas to go that distance. That was about the distance to the ocean. She had never seen the ocean, even though she had been to Boston and New York always on business and you just did not see the ocean from the city canyons. From where she was the closest ocean on the map, was the other side of New York, Atlantic City Maybe, or Maryland. Maybe she could manage to arrive at the Trump Casino with ten bucks, and luck into something. After all, she was already committed to big risk. When she stopped to gas up at the twelve pump mega station, She went into the convenience shop and bought three of those cream filled chocolate donuts they call headlights took them out of the bag and lined them up on her dashboard. She didn't eat the first ones she had just passed the diner in Roscoe New York.

He realized one evening after the second glass of wine after dinner, that the old fishing tackle box he was staring had been with him just about forever, was his grandfather's before him, but he had not opened it in so long that he had absolutely no idea what might be inside. He would have to look into it sometime.

He and Marsha always had a pot of coffee on the stove in case someone dropped by to sit for a spell, even though nobody ever did.

But the pot of coffee would always be kept fresh and hot through the day, then he would walk the coffee pot out to the compost pile, pouring the coffee and dumping the grounds there for the Raspberry bushes that would get most of it.

Some year, when there was finally got a decent crop of raspberries and the chickens didn't pick off most of them again, Marsha could make a pie. They already had a pie-safe bread-box thing used mostly to keep food away from the cats, but they could keep pies there handy, in case somebody came by for coffee and could be convinced to stay a while.



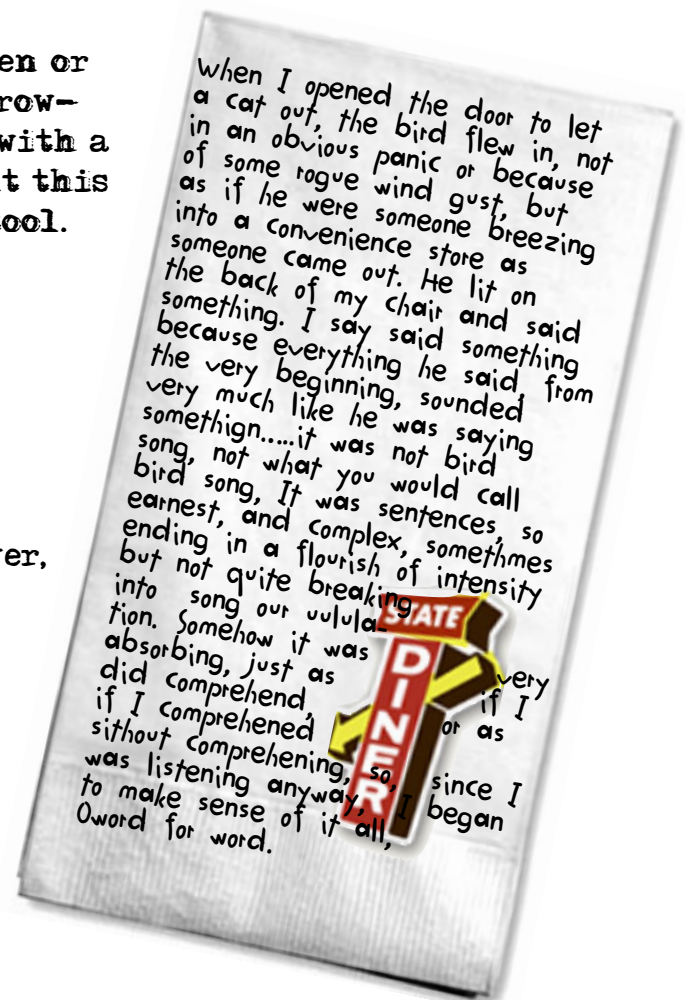
That was just a fantasy until the day they heard the crash on the highway. It did not turn out to be a terrible accident: a woman in a beat up Ford Focus had tried to pull over just a little and slow down so that the car bearing tail gating her could pass, but she had destroyed their mail box and disabled her car. She had been traveling the parrallel route for the very reason that at the speed she could travel, the traffic piled up behind her whatever lane she traveled in.

When he stepped into the examination down the hall he was startled to see that there was already someone there, his shirt off, sitting on the examination table, but he was startled again when he realized that the man on the examination was himself, and only half relieved that the man, that is he or him or his whatever, did not appear to notice HIM at all. He had once fallen off a bridge, not to his death, but not on purpose, and a good distance, but his life had not flashed before his eyes that time. Now it did, and he wondered, for the first time, just whose life it was, is, or had been. Who are you?



I am sure you have seen or heard of mushrooms growing up in bathrooms with a plumbing problem, but this one was big as a barstool.

She had always walked in the city, if she had nothing to carry, she liked to observe the street scene and the seperate little dramas she passed through on her way to wherever, but this morning, heading out for the local Starbucks equivalent, she did not notice until she was being swept along by the crowd that the sidewalks and then the street itself were becoming more and more crowded, and the people were all going in the same direction.





When he took his daily walk, he hated to go back the way he had come. What a waste. Loops and circles were the way to go. But even that could get boring, with a beaten path and tightening circles. One day, in order to insure that every day was a new walk, he pulled out the old board games and appropriated one of those spinners things with an arrow you snap with your finger, so that when it stops, you are supposed to make the move indicated in the wedge where the arrow head stops. Sometimes it said two or four steps backward, but he decided right away that, for real world purposes, he would take no steps backwards. After all, the whole thing was about keeping it fresh, and NOT going back the way one has come. Other commands, such as :You have been caught in a live animal trap. Miss two turns: " had to be translated. As a matter of fact, just about every command needed to be reinterpreted.

He was not what anyone would call gifted, partly because he did not display it, but also because it was a minor, though extraordinary, gift: he could see through paper envelopes to the writing on letters and even inside cards inside them, just as long as it was something written in blue ink. He did not know why this was, but he did take advantage of it when he became a rural delivery mail man, a very popular one who took longer than most when he stopped at mailboxes to deliver and remaining long enough to "sort" the mail for the next stretch of road, so that he was often there when the homeowner came out to get the mail. Mrs Garder came out almost every time, often in her bathrobe, carrying a basket for the mail, with a cup of coffee for Murray. He knew very well that she had more magazine subscriptions than friends who wrote to her, but he knew from his reading, that she sent blank letters to herself. Then, Murray took it into his head to open one of those letters and write some kind of message there.



**It's about me: I came here from a better place to save this planet, and I don't think I can; but I will leave as few notes when I go.**

*The sun never made it much beyond the window sill on his side of the building, so for hours around midday when she had the flu she spent on the sunny sill like a cat or a foetus and all that time noone seemed to notice that here was a person, not a cat sleeping there, and when she woke, or maybe when she started dreaming, it is hard to tell, she was a cat.*

***This in a dream not is a dubious transformation so she wanted to determine whether it WAS a dream or not. She had learned that she could determine wheter it was dream or reality (granted that it is all a dream....sort of...) all she had to do was pick up any odd book, providig it was not one she had read before.***

***She had never read anything by Franz Kafka, though she had read a lot of references to his story about Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one morning, transformed into a beetle, maybe it was a Cockroach.***

***The library was not far away, and she was really feeling quite well, and refreshed frm her window ledge sun cat nap experience, so went down to the street, and up the street to the library, to ask for the book, but two male lions that lurked there by the doors attacked, critically injured, and drove her away***



That sawed-off little shit, my imaginary brother William, is living in our chicken house again. Not that he wasn't invited. I found him lying there in the straw bedding, covered with hens when I opened up the chicken house this morning. He didn't wake, or he pretended not to.

Months ago I put out a call for him on Facebook where he has a poorly attended account, asking him to maybe come and hang out here like he did before, because we were having problems with weasels and coons, but he has only responded a few months on, as weather got harsh. Chickens have a body temperature of a hundredsix degrees.

William gets by most of the time, most seasons pretty much outside, then sometimes the ladies take him in, or he finds some other fairerly comfortable situatiuon. He is welcome enough, and it isn't that I feel fesponsible for him .... he is independent enough, but as long as he is around, i can expect to get up in the morning to maybe find that the refrigerator door had not been closed all the way by the person who last used it, and who, by the way, must have eaten the last of the Mosserella cheese out of hand, because there was enough there for four pizzas the last I knew.

He was living here in the arc, then the trailer until shortly before Georgia and I got married, He was trying to sell farmstays at the chicken house, on Line,

Link<http://dogs-plot.blogspot.com/2009/03/you-want-to-be-agrotourist.html>



I don't know if he ever got it up on Craig's list  
 Anyway, nobody evercame around for a Farm Stay,  
 except William ....and G. NOW I suppose i can  
 expect to se G around here soon.  
 She will not settle for living in the Chicken house.  
 She is pretty much a nomad herself, but still, she  
 is a civilizing influence on William and only with  
 the two of then here , neither beig suffi3cint in  
 her or himself, can Georgia and I ever feel free  
 to leave the place and, maybe someday, go off  
 to see the ocean, as Gerogia has never done.  
 On the other hand ... Georgia says she doesn't  
 REALLY care if she ever does see the ocean.  
 The problem may be getting rid of G and  
 William after a while ... which is not usually a  
 problem. So, no problem. I guess.



This pair of wool gloves was knitted  
 at least sixty or seventy years ago by Ernie Thomas, famous  
 in my family, but dead before i was born: a lumber jack, camp carpenter, and  
 trapper, who (with his son Harlan, a Har-  
 risville area school teacher whom I actu-  
 ally did meet at my father s funeral had,  
 along with my Grandfather) built a camp  
 in the late nineteen twenties on the  
 island people used to call Failing s Is-  
 land but we call Loon Island, close to the  
 North Shore of Lake Bonaparte. The camp  
 has a big central fireplace to which  
 they connected a big box stove for heat-  
 ing during the hunting and trapping  
 seasons.



One winter in the thirties or forties,  
 Ernie Thomas fell through the ice as he  
 was returning from running a trap line  
 in the Bonaparte outlet to Mud Lake. His  
 body was never recovered.

But we have the gloves and, for some reason, the moths have spared them com-  
 pletely. Georgia says it is because we have not put them away. I never use  
 them. Don t want to wear them out. If we ever find Ernie Thomas, he will need  
 them.





# We are Nuts

by David S. Warren

Our steel-roofed house is under a Horse Chestnut tree that never seems to stop dropping nuts: one just this morning, sounding when it hit and rolled down the roof like Gnomes were bowling up there. We do not complain about the Gnomes and we love the Chestnut tree as it shades our house in summer, putting on a great show of pink and white flower-candelabras, so bee-loud that we can't hear our little deck-fountain when we are sitting right by it.

Planted along side the original house nearly two hundred years ago and having survived the fire that burnt the house down, the Horse Chestnut shelters our tiny, replacement house and shades a good part of the yard where I set up a workbench. The tree trunk has some hollow parts which have often housed a Starling colony. For a few years on and off we have had a splinter flock of chickens that - because of Weasel invasions of the chicken house - insisted on roosting nights year round in that tree.

Horse Chestnuts are Home Trees: planted around new houses because of their beauty and shade, and maybe because if your house burns down, you can move into the tree. But they are not treasured because the nuts are good eating. No amount of boiling or leaching is going to make them edible. Occasionally something nibbles at one and then abandons it in distaste, or maybe crawls off somewhere to die. However, fresh out of their spiny husks, the nuts are as beauti-



ful as the tree from which they fall: rather like varnished chestnut wood, or wet chestnut-colored hair, except the bald back face where the nut has been connected to the tree. Children collect and hoard them instinctively, even if they don't use them in slingshots or for nut-on-a-string battles to determine the hardest one.

I was sitting on our deck one afternoon this summer contemplating a grocery list, with a pencil behind my ear, when I picked up a nut just to shine it on my pant leg and roll it around in my hand. They get so glossy that you can almost see your face in one; but this time I saw that on what we would usually call the back of the nut - this one had its own very real face, the face; had eyes, and the eyes were looking at me.

When I examined it more closely, I got over the shock of illusion, and realized that though the nut had two undeniable eyes and an indentation that could be a mouth, it needed a nose, or at least to have its nostrils cleared. It DID have a nose bridge between the eyes. Of course the nut had no ears but mostly they would be hidden by that cap of glossy, chestnut hair.

So I used my pencil to clear the nose and complete the face. It didn't require much, and the nut seemed almost grateful - even like it wanted to say something. Clearly it was THINKING something.

Since then I have not stopped

completing faces on chestnuts, and often enough still I will pick one up and be shocked by the face already looking back at me. Sometimes they speak to me.

Whatever I may see in them, each nut is a living individual, not that each is a perfect and symmetrical like a plastic-surgery victim, but precisely because they have the same complexity and asymmetry as do our own conflicted, suffering,

and smoldering faces; expressing or hiding something.

Just as every human is right or left handed, every person has a dominant side to their face. Look at that kid's lop-sided grin. One side of your face is the mask you put on, the other the unconscious expression. Somewhere there is the person.



*When nuts die do they go back to the tree?*



*Rambling Along the  
Metaphysical Path*

by Georgia E. Warren

*Publisher, Metaphysical Times*

# The Test

*This is not a piece of fiction. It is an account of an experience I had in which I met knowledgeable, interesting people as well as seeing most wondrous buildings and pieces of art.*

When I was in college I often over-extended myself. One semester I maxed out the number of classes I was allowed to take, plus I was rehearsing the play: "The American Dream." I played Mrs. Barker, a volunteer from the Bye-Bye Adoption Service. I was so wrapped up in the rehearsal I forgot I had an early morning class the next day in Renaissance Art History, *with a test.*

As soon as I got back to my dorm room I remembered. There was no textbook, we were supposed to research the famous artwork of Milan. The test was to identify and discuss the Italian Renaissance art was located in Milan. It was late. The library was closed. I decided I should go to bed and try to get to the library before class.

But I was exhausted: I sat on my bed ready to take my shoes off and fell asleep in my clothes.

Within a minute a very nice Catholic Nun shook my shoulder and told me I should not sleep in the pews of the sanctuary. I told her the problem about my class. I did not tell her it was thousands of miles away. She was much more sympathetic than she needed to be. She made me put on a transparent plastic jacket with a hood

on it. They gave them to people who weren't dressed properly at her convent. Then she gave me a cup of the strongest coffee I had ever tasted and handed me a map of the art highlights of Milan. She wrote out a note explaining that I only had a few hours in the city and would they please allow me access to the places on the map without paying a fee for each one. I kept the pencil she had.

I walked, I looked, I saw more wonderful drawings and paintings than I could have imagined.

I was so overwhelmed with all the artwork the city had to offer that I spent well over the three hours that the map indicated as the approximated time of the walking tour. There were original drawings in one of the buildings by Leonardo da Vinci. I could have spent all my time right there. But I had to keep going in order see everything I needed for my test back in Oswego, NY.

It was difficult to believe that one city could contain so many pieces from so many artists.

All of the buildings let me in for free because of the note the Nun had given me. I was impressed that they all knew who she was.

My walking tour took me in a ranging circle that brought me back to the spot where I started. *My Nun* was still there and happy I had such a wonderful time.

The Nun had one more picture to show me that happened to be in her convent. She took me to a room now crowded with tourists. We went right up to the front so I could sit with her to look at her special painting. I was sitting in front of the original Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci. It sure looked awful, nothing like the prints

you see in stores. The Nun was very sad about its condition, the Vatican had plans for the Last Supper restoration, but right then it was on hold because of some work in the Vatican on the Sistene Chapel ceiling.

She told me to look at it like she often did stare at the picture and then imagine what it originally looked like. Then close my eyes and see it as da Vinci had finished it. I did just what she said and the colors and the missing pieces were right there before my closed eyes.

Just then my professor shook my shoulder and asked me if I was going to take the test or just sleep through class. I apologized for my behavior. Then I took out my map with all the scribbles on it (we were allowed to bring our research notes to the test) and went to work on the test.

When I went back to the dorm I changed my clothes, threw what I had been wearing in my laundry bag and took a very long nap.

Yes, I aced the test.

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# I Never Imagined This

*Thirty-sixth in a series by Sue-Ryn*

always close to nature, but I never imagined then just how much closer nature would eventually get to me. We moved around a lot to different suburban neighborhoods and towns. There was always a vegetable garden in our back yard, long before it was common or cool. There was also a bird feeder somewhere in the yard, usually where we could see it while eating our meals.

Both of my parents had grown up on a Long Island that was more rural than it was in my youth. I heard stories about horse-drawn delivery carts in the city and roads paved with crushed clam shells further out.

In the towns where I grew up, there were still a few shops and buildings that looked like they were built in the early part of the twentieth century and several homes that had barns. I spent many hours with

and even a specimen arboretum that had not yet been developed or paved over. My father took many a carload of assorted kids to nature centers, some of which still exist, further out towards the shore giving us the gift of time to explore and enjoy deeper woods. He also taught us who the trees were and some of the plants that still flourished in the wilds. The scent of fresh Sassafras leaves still sends me back to that time.

Eventually my family moved to northern New York and I got to spend a lot more time in nature exploring the fields, swamps, ridges, and the river's edge on a former dairy farm. I know that was the beginning of an awakening to nature. My family continued to move around and I was blessed to inhabit many different types of northern environments. Always there were gardens, bird feeders, and domestic animal companions. At some point

my understanding expanded to the plants and trees outside of the yard. Friends with organic farms helped expand my animal experiences. I started discovering the world of herbs and their applications. A sense of the interconnectedness of all life was growing within my heart and mind.

People started turning to me for help healing their domestic animals. I'd been using herbs as first aide and to enhance the well being of the Airedale terriers my family hand reared. The chickens, goats, and pigs that we kept also got herbal treatments. Even a few dairy farm neighbors called on me for help. It was good to be able to help friends and neighbors help their animals.

Many years later, when I was married and settled here on Welsley Island with a growing herb-craft business, the gardens and pets persisted. Bird feeding and watching

became a quiet passion shared with my husband Steve. During our first few winters we enjoyed watching the wild Turkeys traveling in a uniform line from way out back over hummock and hill to scratch up the frozen soil under our feeders almost every afternoon. We also started making regular trips around the state parks watching Eagles and others along the rivers edge.

Steve was born and raised here. His roots go way back. He's also a caretaker, as many of the men in his family have been, so calls come in regularly for help with any number of situations. Calls also come in for help in complex situations....and we've joked that people call Steve when they don't know what else to do. I think that may be how we started getting calls about wildlife in trouble.

We were brought a Humming Bird who'd flown into the open door on an RV and gotten stuck in the screen. The resulting stress of being rescued and handled by a child for way too long and ending up at our house took it's toll. I remember frantically calling state parks and vets (who were of course closed for the weekend) and eventually talking to the child of a naturalist who wasn't home. She told me to keep the bird in a small box with some screening over the top, then get some drops of water on it's tongue and hope for the best. She warned that they frequently stress themselves to death. We followed her instructions and went back to our evening chores. Just before dusk I came inside to check the box and sure enough the bird was hovering around trying to escape. I gave the bird a few more drops of water, then took him outside and placed

him high up on a branch away from harm. He was gone in the morning and nothing in the area suggested he'd come to any harm. That was our first successful "soft release".

Another time, we came home from somewhere to find a pigeon sitting in front of our doorway. He seemed to be uninjured, but weak and unable to fly. We found some food we thought would be acceptable and put him somewhere safe. He ate and drank but showed no signs of being ready to fly away or leave, so Steve put together a makeshift cage to keep the bird safe overnight. This pretty much continued all week, with the pigeon being free during the day and safely caged at night, with no changes. Then we had to leave for a weekend at the Renaissance Faire. We freed the bird, left some food and water in the usual place and headed to the Faire. Steve mentioned the bird several times over the weekend and we discussed what we might do for and with him when we got home, if he was still there. "Pidge" ended up with a bigger cage and stayed around for a few weeks, eventually gaining enough strength to fly. We

deduced that he was an older bird and we were committed to providing for him. Unfortunately he flew into traffic and perished. This may have been a rehab boot camp lesson **#1, "even when they survive, they don't always survive"**.

About fourteen years ago, after a talk by a rehabilitator at our library, I was inspired to get a state license to rehabilitate injured and orphaned wildlife. It soon became apparent that I needed to get a federal license so I could work with migratory birds, because so many kept arriving for care. The first season I think we took care of a couple of dozen animals, and transported several raptors to a friend in central New York who rehabs mostly birds of prey. It's grown into pretty much a year round way of life, though currently I only have two pigeons one little red squirrel who earned the name Houdini. I now care for somewhere between one hundred fifty and two hundred creatures each year.

*I never imagined  
I'd be doing this.  
I also can't imagine  
not doing this.*







# Furuncle

by Rhian Ellis

The composer Scriabin took excellent care of his mustaches. These mustaches were reddish gold with silver threads and they tapered to elegant points. Sometimes they curled mischievously upward, sometimes they sagged earthward, and at other times they pointed heroically out to the sides. Like the furry and delicate antennae of a luna moth, they twitched and thrilled, receiving messages from the universe. Deep in thought, Scriabin would run his finger along them, first one, then the other. When he went out walking, his mustaches were the first part of him to greet the world. He wouldn't feel like himself without them.

But one morning in London something was not quite right: a bump had appeared beneath the right-hand branch. He leaned close to the mirror and saw, rising up between the golden hairs, something like a small, purple volcano. It throbbed and pulsed

and the touch of his thumb sent bolts of pain shooting across his face.

Squeezing or popping was out of the question. The pimple, if that's what it was, hurt violently. He took a shivery, calming breath and finished dressing. He put on his pants—as narrow as pencils, which was the fashion, at least home in Moscow—and the new frock coat he'd had made the day before, as he was caught off-guard by the news that today's concert would be held in the afternoon and evening dress would not be acceptable. The coat was too large but not excessively so in the sleeves, so it would do. He attended to his hair with a small ivory comb.

Coated, combed, and shod, Scriabin—Alexander Nikolaevich, also called Sasha—left his chilly British hotel room and crossed the hall, his boot heels sinking a bit nauseously into the carpet. After a great deal of two-knuckled rapping the door finally opened, and grumpy Bryanchaninov

stepped aside to let Scriabin in. Sasha's friend had the look of a brown bear wakened too early from his long nap, his hair and beard all of a mashed and tufted piece, small brown eyes peering suspiciously out. Bryanchaninov was an Alexander Nikolaevich as well, though for our purposes he will be B.

While B stumped around the room, grumbling about the godforsaken earliness of the hour, Sasha threw himself into an overstuffed chair and began to tell B about his dreams.

"I've been persecuted by them lately, absolutely persecuted. I can't begin to tell you what they're about. They aren't about anything. There are devils and gigantic whales trying to swallow me up, and talking dogs which are somehow more horrifying than anything. It's as if my brain is caught between grindstones in a windmill—that's what it feels like. A heavy, slow inevitableness that I

can't do anything about." His voice pitched upward. "There's a sense that I can't wake up and escape this—grinding. It lasts even after I'm awake, this sense of horrible, torturous, doom."

B. made a sound that was more growl than speech. Then he coughed long and tediously, and then he said, "Too much concertizing." The man had on trousers but no shirt; he was splashing water onto his woolly chest. When he turned away from the basin, the water drops in his beard glittered and flashed like diamonds. "Do you have a fever?"

"I'm not sure." Scriabin touched his forehead with damp fingers. He didn't detect much heat but he imagined, for a moment, that he could feel his thoughts buzzing like wasps just beneath the skin. "Perhaps a very slight one."

"Then we must see a doctor."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary. It's probably that I'm upset about this—this thing. Look." He sat up straight and pointed to his right-hand mustache. His finger trembled. B. approached him and scowled at the pimple as if had insulted him. The man's terrible morning breath gusted into the composer's face. S. shuddered.

B. said, "That does not look good at all. It could be an infection. A concert today is out of the question."

"What? But tickets have been sold! The piano has been delivered! I had a coat made."

"We'll see what the doctor says," said B.

"Very well."

"But first, my friend, breakfast."

B. rubbed his small, square hands together as if over a campfire. "Breakfast is when the English are at their most beautifully English. Afterwards it is all downhill."

But S. could not eat much at breakfast. He was worried now that he might be very ill. It did not help that the stuff B. ordered for them was unappetizing, less like food than a procession of modernist art works. The meal began with a discolored fish opened up like a butterfly, its eyes still on. B. attacked it with his usual gusto, knife and fork flying. Then followed a perfect, warm, bald egg balanced on a stand. It gave no clue as to how it was supposed to be eaten. B. showed him. "You take off the top of its skull. Then, with these pieces of toast, you scoop out the brains." He grinned wickedly, slurping at the yolk so it coated his lips. S. was appalled.

"It's almost raw! What if the hen were consumptive?"

Then more slices of toast, cold and placed in a rack like phonograph records, served with a bowl of bitter yellow jam and strings of rind.

"You'll be hungry later, Sasha."

"I shall never be hungry again," said the composer. He drank a little tea and forced down a corner of toast, ripples of pain issuing from his lip.

"It is a catastrophe," he said quietly.

Catastrophes. In his maudlin moods he sometimes felt as if his life had been one catastrophe after another, the world collapsing and remaking itself over and over and over again. Even his birth—on Christmas Day!--occasioned the illness and death of his mother before he even learned to walk. Her name was Lyubov—Love--and she was a musical genius. Certainly the composer got nothing from his father, a mid-level civil servant with the artistic sensibility of a horse. Lyubov held concerts throughout

her pregnancy, exhausting herself, her swollen belly pressed against the wooden edge of the keyboard, vibrations making their way through filmy layers and cloudy water to the embryonic Scriabin inside. Was the frantic performing a way of asserting her existence as an individual, her hard-won independence, before the baby came? Or did something about being with child enrich her, fill her with a creative energy that could not be expressed in any other way? Who could know? His family never knew what to make of the young woman. "She was very pretty, very talented," his aunts would say. "We never understood why she married him. She didn't talk very much. An odd pairing, indeed. Don't repeat that, darling."

So, his mother: a cipher. He had a photograph of her, a woman caught between emotions, her eyes lit up, her mouth half-open. Her dark hair fell in waves down her back. She was a stranger. But nevertheless it wasn't difficult to imagine that they were connected. Maybe the heavy, purplish umbilical cord had not been cut but had instead turned to something finer, an invisible thread that connected them between the spheres. He felt something like it often. It tugged at him, pulled hard sometimes.

But yes, he was her final catastrophe, and her death was his first. One ended, the other began. He was born into disaster. And disaster made him.

Before they left that chilly, bourgeois dining room on the ground floor of the Welbeck Palace Hotel, with its colonial-looking palm trees and awful stink of fish and dishwater, B. had summoned the concierge and arranged for a doctor to pay Sasha a visit. The

doctor would, it was promised, be there within the hour. This made S. glad he hadn't eaten much. His stomach turned over at the thought of an English doctor burrowing through his mustaches. What kind of cures might the English offer? A slap, he supposed, some dry pills perhaps, a bitter unction. Not the vicious and primitive Tatar treatments he had been subjected to as a child, the kind that, well, either cured or killed you.

In his room again, S. lay on his back on the broad bed, looking up at the plastered ceiling. The cracks seemed to shift and waver like living things. He had taken off his frock coat and pulled it over himself, blanket-wise, up to his chin. His bare feet, as narrow and white as a woman's, were chilled by the cold London air that came through the window where B., cigar in his stubby fingers, leaned.

"When you're done with that thing, please shut the window. That draft will be the death of me."

"Fresh air is good for a person."

"You are the first person who has ever called London air fresh."

B. tossed the brown stump out the window and slammed it shut.

"In my *Mysterium*," said S., "there must be perfumed breezes. I'm not sure how we'll manage that. I suppose a bellows? An enormous bellows, worked by an entire team of men. And a harem of women to spray perfume into it. Different scents, of course, as the narrative progresses. We'll have to find the best perfumer in the world—I don't want ordinary fragrances! Someone to concoct the smell of the woods in spring, the smell of sunlight warming cold soil..."

"Indeed!" said B., not entirely without enthusiasm. "However, of course, we have to consider..."

"None of your negativity!" cried S. "Not now! I am creating..."

There was a shuffling sound at the door and a gruff voice asking something in English.

"What is it?" S. asked B.

"Our doctor!" B. answered, and shouted some English words right back. The door opened. S. didn't know what he expected, possibly someone like the bug-eyed English King George who was best known for his love for shooting animals. Hadn't he shot a thousand pheasants in a single day? That seemed very English, for some reason. But instead of a regal fellow in hunting garb, a fat man with a curly ruff of hair came into the room, with a bag and a top-hat, which he immediately took off and placed on a chair.

With B. translating, S. learned that the doctor's name was something along the lines of Moonbasket. Dr. Moonbasket pulled a magnifying glass out of his capacious black bag and, detective-like, went about examining the composer's lip. His eye loomed large and blue behind the lens and he muttered something in his indecipherable language.

"He says it must be very painful for you."

"Well, yes!" said S., validated. "Yes it is!"

"He says he will have to operate."

"What? No! No no no no!"

The doctor seemed to understand the string of nyets. The next English words that came out of his mouth sounded amused, almost jolly.

"He says he has to let out the bad juices. Once the bad juices are out, the swelling will go down. You will feel much better."

"Ask him if I can play the

concert this afternoon."

The doctor laughed and B. laughed.

"What is it?" asked S. irritably.

"He says most certainly. In an hour or two you will feel as correct as the rain. You will be as healthy as a violin."

Both comparisons sounded a little ambivalent.

"All right. Tell him he can go ahead and get the 'bad juices' out. Just mind the mustaches, they are very important."

B relayed the information and this time the doctor hooted with laughter. He put his hand beneath his nose and wiggled his fingers, an absurd pantomime of a mustache.

"He says I need to fetch some hot water and clean towels and a bottle of the strongest whiskey. I will be right back, my good friend." And with that B. was out the door, and S. was alone with Dr. Moonbasket.

As the curly-haired doctor nattered on, busying himself around the room—straightening curtains, washing his hands—S. marveled at the grace with which the big man carried himself. His enormous belly, barely contained within a titanic white shirt, seemed to move with him like a dance partner, shifting slightly with every step. His behind, on the other hand, jiggled in a different rhythm, faster, perhaps a 2/2. It was as if the man himself were a mazurka.

B. returned with a steaming basin, towels tucked under one arm. Once he'd put the basin down and placed the towels next to it, he pulled a bottle of dark brown liquid from his pocket. Then, from the other pocket, three shot glasses.

"Cheez," said the doctor, who took a glass, poured himself a shot, and downed it in a single gulp.



"He says it steadies the hands. You must drink some as well. Alcohol is a disinfectant."

"Very well," said the composer. He drank. It was quite foul. B. took two shots in quick succession.

"He says you need to lie back so that we can put the show onto the street."

S. obeyed. The huge doctor loomed over him.

Every pain is different; each one has its own color and shape. When he was a child, S. came down with measles. He was a frail child and the infection was too much for him: his body began to swell with fluid—what Moonbasket would probably have called "bad juices." He didn't remember that stage of the illness very well, the fevers blocking out everything else, but he did remember the cure. It was a last ditch effort. He was going to die, otherwise.

Essentially, the doctors cut a hole in the back of his neck and stuffed it with cloth. The idea was that the pain created by this strange and awful procedure would cause all the fluid in his body to rush to the site, soak into the cloth, and pour out. And the pain was extraordinary. Later he was told he screamed so loudly a passing policeman heard it and came to investigate. But he didn't remember that. The pain had become a wheel, a spinning black wheel edged with blades, and the wheel spun him into unconsciousness.

The pain that flashed through him when Moonbasket lanced the sore on his lip was not a wheel. It was a bright green flame that engulfed everything for a moment, then died down into a kind of tender mushroom of pain. It was true that it felt better once the fluid was out. But only a little.

Moonbasket gently dabbed at the sore with a towel. It came back a watery red. The doctor's hands, when they rested on the composer's brow, were warm and soft. S. almost wanted to spend the rest of the day right here, in bed with the doctor touching his face, instead of playing his composition to a London audience in a too-big frock coat. Almost.

"He says these sores are caused by nerves," said B.

"What do I have to be nervous about?" said S. "I have played a thousand concerts. The only thing I'm nervous about is this sore!"

"Then it is a vicious circle sort of situation."

The doctor was washing his hands and talking. B. had stopped translating and was staring moodily out the window, perhaps regretting his lost cigar. Moonbasket packed up his bag, bowed deeply, and replaced his top hat. As he exited the room, the hat knocked against the top of the door frame but stayed miraculously put.

"The English are a very spiritual people," said the composer. He and B. were in the taxi on the way to the concert hall. His lip still throbbed.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," said B.

"They welcomed Madame Blavatsky. They are not as hide-bound as we Russians. Perhaps they will be transported by the music and not notice that the pianist's lip is maimed."

"Of course they won't notice."

"Perhaps the piano can be turned so that it is less obvious."

"Perhaps."

Outside, a dismal English rain fell. Daffodils lay flattened on the ground and in window boxes. It was spring but only in a technical fashion.

"I wonder if there is a way to make a piano float. In my *Mysterium*, I would like the music to emanate from all sides equally."

B. didn't respond. He was busily picking something out of his teeth.

"Of course, the pianist should have to float as well, and that poses a separate problem."

"The Hindis are well-known for their levitational skills." B. examined a bit of matter on the end of his finger.

"Yes, yes," said the composer softly, wincing a little as he touched his lip.

\* \* \*

If the English audience noticed that the composer was under the weather they were too polite to say. ("The English are very polite," thought S., greeting people behind the stage before the concert.) It was his Prometheus.

Prometheus was meant to be played with colored lights shifting and changing throughout the concert hall, but alas, none of the halls were equipped for it. Of course, the colors were there, anyway. As he played through the red bit, the fire bit, redness saturated everything.

He was playing very well. The orchestra was surprisingly good and had paid close attention to his directions—only the piccolo seemed a bit shrill. He didn't feel any pain while he played—what a strange thing! Only perhaps not so strange. The physical body had nothing to do with music. Well, of course, physical bodies were playing the piano and all the other instruments, but somehow music caused the body to transcend the body.

He moved into the violet part. Here was Prometheus chained to a rock, here was his liver being

pecked out, here was his liver growing back so it could be pecked out again tomorrow.

The fire was art, Prometheus the artist. The artist was Scriabin. This music was fire, red and purple and streaks of hot yellow. Who needed a color organ?

Time stretched and snapped back. It bent forward on itself.

And then he was done, bowing in his ludicrous frock coat, and the audience roared.

They cheered and howled and stamped their feet. S. was taken aback. He had never had such a reception in Russia, or Germany, or France, or even America.

And in the front row a familiar face: Moonbasket. He was on his feet, clapping his big soft hands, his hair a gray halo illuminated in the stage lights. The pain came screeching back.

\*\*\*

The next day S. did not get out of bed. He thought: What if I die here? The room had developed a sickroom's murky funk and his sleep was shallow and filled with confused dreams. I could die in England and never see Tatyana again. A tear of self-pity slipped down his temple and into his ear.

B. hovered over him anxiously most of the day, only leaving once to fetch the doctor again. Moonbasket came right from the pub, bringing with him a miasma of cigarettes and booze.

"He says it has turned into a furuncle," said B.

Another lancing, and this time the doctor left an ointment that needed to be applied every two hours, along with clean bandages. To perform these procedures he sent a series of sisters from the local nunnery. Each wore the black habit and white neckerchief

of the Sisters of Mercy, and in his mild delirium he imagined they were cormorants, like the ones in the Crimea, which in his dreams became muddled with birds who ate up Prometheus's liver.

"Don't worry, I shall have a new liver in time," he told one pretty young Sister. She was Irish, though, and didn't understand a word.

But he could not linger in bed. There were to be two more concerts in London, solo recitals, and he needed to practice. Hotels in other cities had been eager to accommodate him and allowed a piano to be delivered to his room. But the Welbeck Palace refused, in spite of the tirade B. enthusiastically unleashed on the management.

"They just don't respect musicians very much here," he said, shrugging. "They think your kind are all dissolute."

"Well, so we are," said S. "What of it?"

"Also there was some nonsense about disturbing other guests."

S. shook his head wearily. "You'd think I wanted to slaughter pigs up here, not play a few etudes."

Fortunately, Bechstein Hall, which offered piano studios by the hour or the day, was right around the corner on Wigmore Street. So, after a day and a half in bed, the composer painfully roused himself and proceeded with his toilette. He checked himself in the mirror and decided that he looked absolutely ridiculous with the bandage on his lip, but there was nothing to be done about it. He shuffled on his old overcoat, clamped his hat on his head and ventured out.

B. stayed in the hotel room to read the paper. He had telephoned Bechstein's to tell them the composer was on his way, so he

was not needed to translate. S. was alone.

It was a strange, foggy day. The air smelled sulfurous, like bad eggs, as if Satan had recently strolled down the street. People appeared out of the mist and disappeared again, ghost-like.

Near the corner of Welbeck and Wigmore Streets, a shape emerged from the fog, heading right for him. It was a spookily familiar shape: a woman, short but sturdy, with black hair pulled straight back and large shadowed eyes.

Vera!

She was staring at his face, her eyes sad and accusatory. The composer gasped. Why was his wife—his former wife—very well, his still-legal wife—in London? Was she concertizing? For some years she toured around Europe, calling herself Madame Scriabina (a terrible insult to Tatyana, his new love), and playing his compositions (an insult to him!). Or perhaps she had followed him here, hoping to get her hands on his concert money. Or maybe she wanted to kill him. What better place for a murder than this gloomy, dark city where no one knew either of them?

While all these thoughts went through his head, the woman's dark eyes remained fixed on him. But then her eyes flicked away and she walked right past him. S. turned and watched her progress as she strode purposefully onward.

Safe in a small studio, leaning, exhausted, over the grand piano, the composer willed his heart to stop its flailing. It may have been Vera and it may not have been. His concert had been well-publicized; a few inquiries would place him at the Welbeck Palace. It was not so strange, really, that a vengeful ex-wife might follow him here.

Or maybe the woman was nothing but a rude stranger, staring at his bandaged face. And maybe he was still sick and guiltily hallucinating.

In any event, it ruined his practice. He battled through for two hours, hitting wrong notes, his damp hands clumsily attacking chords and his feet unable to get the pedaling perfect. ("Damn this piano!" he shouted at the piano.)

It didn't matter if Vera killed him or not, he realized. She got her revenge by simply existing.

When S. returned to the hotel, cranky and exhausted, B. greeted him with a sheaf of newspapers and envelopes.

"Look at the reviews! So many of them! You have made England fall in love with Scriabin! There are only one or two bad ones and they not very intelligent."

S. touched the piles of papers with a gloved hand. "What are all these letters?"

"Requests for your signature!"

"What? Why?"

"They are your musical admirers! Your autograph is what you owe your admirers in exchange for their loyalty."

"The music is not enough?"

B. shook his head. "Believe me, I know how these Londoners are. If they love you, they are passionate. But you don't want to be on their bad side."

"I suppose I should get started, then. That will take hours." He began to shrug off his coat, but B. put his hand on his shoulder to stop him.

"No, no! We are going out this evening. We must celebrate! And then tomorrow we're meeting with some professors who want to talk to you about the symphony. Perhaps they will find a way to perform it with the colored lights!"

So, with B's arm around the composer's shoulder, the burly man chattering excitedly about the reviews, the two Russians went out the door and into the London twilight.

In the morning, waking rather late, S. checked his skull for a headache. He did not drink so much any more, but B. insisted and they'd had quite a bit of champagne—enough so that B. took to singing right there in the restaurant and they'd been asked to leave.

But the composer was not hung over. In fact, he felt quite well. Quite well indeed.

His hand reached for the bandage on his lip. He tentatively pressed it. There was no pain.

He got out of bed and stood in front of the mirror. Carefully, excruciatingly slowly, he pulled the bandage away from the sore. To his shock he saw that a sizable portion of his right mustache was gone. Either the doctor had shaved it away without his noticing or the sore had somehow eaten it up. But the sore itself was gone.

Well, not entirely gone. In its place was a crusty, red and yellow scabby thing the size of an orange seed. But it was no longer weeping or swollen, and it didn't hurt at all.

"I've been cured!" he whispered to himself, marveling.

His lip was not the only thing

that had been transformed. Out the window, all the clouds and rain and gritty fog had disappeared. It looked like a different city entirely, one filled with lemony light and domed with blue, the trees already wearing a pale green haze on their upper branches.

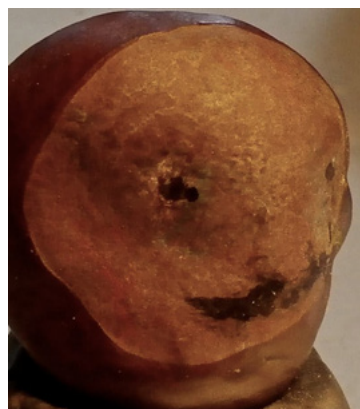
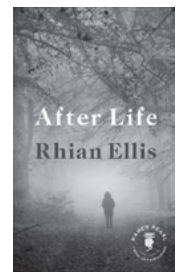
The composer dressed hurriedly and put on his shoes. He slipped out the door and made his way out to the street, where the city had already begun its headlong rush into the day. Cars rumbled by, horses stood silently by carts, people shouted indecipherable things to each other. Daffodils in window boxes, the ones that had been battered flat a few days before, were now struggling upward. The sun was almost warm. The composer turned his face to it, shutting his eyes, and felt the yellow rays entering through his skin, filling him with strength. Soon the world would end. He could feel it.



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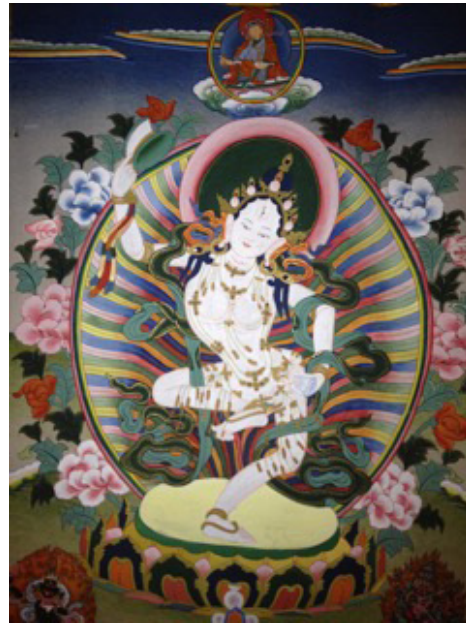


*Thanks for the compliment. I find the mustache gets me a little respect and balances my face, which ... you may not have noticed ... has a considerable cerebral overburden. Also, the stash hides an old abscess scar ... AND, some people say it makes me look like the composer Scriabin.*



# Sky Dancer

by Mary Gilliland



As early as I remember I was reading books, and re-reading—most frequently Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes, or Greek Fairy Tales*. It was a Victorian retelling of three stories about Perseus, Jason, Theseus. Later, reading Mark Twain, I would exult in adventures of Tom and Huck, not Becky. Kingsley's Andromeda, Medea, Ariadne barely registered as accessories to the drama—yes, even Medea. A vicarious hero, I rescued them, felt a little thrilled, and then moved on as a hero does to the next adventure.

In my world once the book was closed were all sorts of bondage and conventions to be rescued from, though at that time I did not admit their pictures.

'Down from the height of the air fell Perseus' captioned my favourite of the coloured plates in Kingsley's book. With a great sword he will slice the chains from Andromeda's wrists and ankles before the approaching sea monster gets a chance to swallow her. I was 9 or 10 years old and the life that I was in could not be rescued. Households in the hopeful white U.S. suburbs circa 1960 held their own stories tightly. Dad being helped up the stairs to bed, and we were not to speak of this. Or Mom driving to pick him up, passed out in a seat on the train, because he had missed his stop coming home from work, and she got a call again from

the end of the line. Or learning forty years later that my friend Kate's father, who made stacks of pancakes for us after Mass every Sunday, had been abusing her after he got home.

Myth is longing. I lose myself in myth. When I would re-read the texts, or re-imagine them, myth led me out of family problems I could do nothing about. It contextualized the martyred strivings of Roman Catholic indoctrination. In adolescence it was a springboard as I discovered the Beat poets' world of orgiastic Zen, their lives larger than mine. When one of those heroes gave me a booklet by H. D., myth let me absorb her transformative poetics through my inner as well as outer ear. I don't know whether Gary Snyder realized that the contents of that booklet were penned by the perfect choice of writer for me. Hilda Doolittle published under her initials, and was critiqued as 'wearing a Greek mask' because as an Imagist poet she wrote of and as figures from classical mythology instead of everyday people walking past on their way to the subway.

Myth also sent me to a rocking chair with whisky many nights, until Dionysus showed me his bright face. It

helped me through heroic daily efforts until I remembered a true hero does not depend on effort. For I am granted the winged sandals, I win the Golden Fleece, I slay the Minotaur. Though I am not the god.

Time has whiled its way from backbends and handsprings in the grass on humid evenings in one of the first New Jersey suburbs, from my right foot propelling a red scooter along a newly installed macadam road. Myth has been fleshed out. In Colchis, Medea outmaneuvered the machinations of her father. On Crete, Ariadne solved the maze; in the 1990's as a brother of mine was dying I made labyrinths so that people could walk in a container for their grief. Before Perseus came flying by there was Andromeda, naked and adorned. Like the figure on the Tibetan thangka in a room where I meditate. Her right leg raised, wearing only a few jewels, the white dakini's left leg extends in the dancing posture. The sky in the background symbolizes absolute rather than relative mind. And she dances across it.

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# Evening Out

by Gabriel Orgrease





# Evening Out

by Gabriel Orgrease

The running joke had become that I was being passed off as Billy Gibbons from Zee Zee Top. I wandered the streets of the French Quarter with family and friends of family. Whenever anyone of the group shouted, "Billy Gibbons, everyone, Billy Gibbons!" I was to go "Har har har."

It was pleasant warm weather. I had to make up some sounds. I'm not one for realistic impersonations and it does not help that I had no clue what my alter-ego Billy Gibbons should sound like going, "Har har har." I had to make do on a limited amount of information. Based on the reaction that I got from members of our group I must have sounded like a wheezing donkey getting a suppository. I smiled a lot.

Often what is going on inside of my head, when anything is going on, I try to figure out from signals that emanate from the outside of my head what the anticipation is of my next reaction. Sometimes we must go with the flow. Sometimes it is best to not flow, just go.

In this case it is night and we are in a dank bar with a famous name that I forget, and everyone is drinking, some more or less than another. My new friend, I'll call him Walter for convenience, well, Walter is sloshed big time, big pink bunny talks to the dark-air of the 7th dimension kind of wasted. We must keep figuring out where is Walter as kinda like an extraterrestrial lizard he does not stay put so well.

I see lights flash across the ceiling and there is a smell of burnt umber. Music is jiggy in the background behind a tumult of mixed voices. Ice melts toward the center of my glass of raw bourbon. I can't hear so well. Sirens evoke a sense of pending curiosity. I can't separate the noise from the noise. Keep on an even keel. I shut down and watch people. Faces, arms, movement, eyes that twitch, laughter, tongues stuck out, boob, the guy Mike sat

next to me asks me if I like boobs, rather conspiratorial, out the window is the street. Ambient glow of the night. Some readers may think that I make this scene all up. I could if I would.

Next thing I know Walter grabs me by the arm. Pulls me off my chair. He wants me to meet his new friends who stand at the other end of the bar. I am pulled along. He brings me up to two younger dudes and their classy dame and introduces me as Billy Gibbons. I stagger forward, my best imitation of a drunken super-star stagger. I give them each a hug. They don't seem convinced. I step back and yell at Walter, "What did he say? What did he say?"

Then I fall on the floor to pretend that I am passed out and that my real name is Walt Whitman. I figure this will confuse everyone as they have never seen a video of Walt Whitman braying at Har har har. Easier to mock and imitate poets long dead before television reality shows. But on the way down I hit my head on a bar stool and I really do pass out before coming completely aware in the ER and dream that I am Santa Claus doing a cameo on Duck Dynasty. They clean the sawdust out of my eye sockets. I spit out peanut shells. My shirt smells like it got used. The morning sparrows peck at my beard in search of moldy seeds. I rustle with a wet newspaper. I'm not sure how I got on this park bench. It never hurts to have friends. Oh, my, if only.

*I fell off  
the wagon  
and they  
didn't notice,  
so I walked.  
Until I found  
the puppy and  
carried it.  
Only it wasn't  
a puppy.*







# One for Miriam

by Dan Lovell

## One for Miriam

We take our martinis with Hendrick's gin, Miriam and me, every Tuesday in the same bar. We like them dry, stirred -- never shaken. A martini is never shaken. And it is never served on the rocks.

Miriam is running late, as always, but I order anyway. Her smile is brightest when her martini is on the table when she arrives, the glass sweating a little puddle around its perch on the coaster. She will smile tonight.

"Two olives in each, please," I tell the young waitress -- Heather, according to her name tag. She is young, but I've heard her talk to the others here. She has two children and no steady man.

Heather asks if I'm sure I want two martinis.

"Yes," I say. "One for me. One for Miriam."

She raises a carefully plucked eyebrow.

"She'll be along," I say, smiling a smile I hope doesn't belie my pity. I will tip her well, if it means her children will have new shoes.

There is a special art to the martini -- a perfection of proportions that must be respected. A real martini must be garnished with one olive. I always ask for two. They always give me three.

Legend has it that even numbers are unlucky, so good bartenders are

trained to serve odd numbers of olives. If this bar had the old, studied bartenders I've been searching for, I would credit superstition for the number of olives Miriam and I are treated to each visit. Judging by the size of the hamburgers they serve here during the day, however, I tend to believe the generosity is mere American excess and ignorance.

Every little city in America has a bar like Murphy's: the kind that promises a vaguely Irish pub from the outside, but inside offers standard-issue neon domestic beer signs, hamburgers, chicken wings and quesadillas. Lunch is served every weekday. After six, the lights

are dimmed, mercifully hiding the makeup and wrinkles on the over-40 divorcees who crowd around the oak bar. This is a beer crowd. It does not appreciate art.

In truth, gin should be kept in a freezer -- not on the almost rustic shelves they have behind the bar. The martini is served with gin so cold it cracks your teeth. And a Hendrick's martini is never served dirty. At home, I shake the brine from my olives, so it doesn't sully the cleanliness of the gin.

Such care can't be expected here, though. I've learned to grin through that. Miriam will be along. I sort through my wallet, waiting for her and our drinks.

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"And here's Henry, like clock-work," Heather said, speaking just above a whisper. "He breaks my heart."

"Oh, stop." Jeff was jocular. "He's okay. And he always leaves a good tip."

"It's just that...I don't know," Heather said.

She watched Henry move to his booth. It was Henry's booth on Tuesday nights. The rest of the patrons knew that's where Henry sat every week. Henry and Miriam.

He took off his hat, set it on the table, then stripped off his overcoat, hanging it ceremoniously on the hook outside the booth. He hung his hat atop his coat. He sat down in the booth, eyes scanning the bar, searching. He was unshaved, as always, his hair short and thinning. He was an old soul, but not an old man. And while he wore the pits and wrinkles easy lives don't earn, he wore them like honor badges.

Heather pulled pen and pad from her pocket and wrote down the order. She read it aloud to Jeff: "Two Hendrick's martinis, up, dry, two olives."

"You haven't asked him what he

wants yet!" Jeff laughed.

"No need," Heather giggled back. It was a sad and nervous giggle. There was little joy in memorizing the order. "Just once I wish he'd order something different. And just once I wish you'd give him what he asks for. Every time, three olives."

"Hey, he's a good customer," Jeff said, shrugging. "I like to do a little extra."

"He's picky," Heather said.

"I don't hear him complain," Jeff answered. He snapped Heather's bottom with the bar towel. "He only drinks one of them anyway."

At Henry's booth, Heather smiled sweetly. She hoped her smile didn't look the way it felt: filled with pity, as if they both knew his secret. Or maybe that she knew the secret he didn't know.

"Welcome back, Henry," she said. "Nice to see you tonight."

She thought about asking if he wanted the usual, but hope stopped her short. Just once, she prayed, let him order a beer. But Heather wasn't fooling any God. She didn't believe any supernatural force would change Henry. Not for her sake. Not for her sanity.

"Good evening, Heather," Henry said. His eyes were crystal blue and lucid. "Quiet in here tonight."

"It's early still," she said, still smiling. "It will pick up in an hour or so. We're sponsoring an indoor volleyball team now, and they're in on Tuesdays to celebrate."

"Ah," Henry nodded. "We won't be here that long. Just here for a cocktail. Just one."

"What can I get for you tonight?" Heather asked, pulling pad and paper from her apron. She was cute. Henry couldn't help notice that even after two children, she was trim and curvaceous. Her eyes were bright, though sad, and she

had a smile made more endearing by a few slightly misaligned teeth. Sometimes on these nights, after his martini was empty, he wished he could put his arms around her and let her cry. Her deep brown curls would smell of hamburgers and fryer grease and she would tremble.

"Two Hendrick's martinis, straight up, stirred," Henry said. "Two olives in each, please."

"Sounds good," Heather said, pretending to write the order down. She turned from the table just before the tear escaped the corner of her eye.

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A good martini is hard to find. That's why Miriam and I chose this place -- we've tried everywhere else. And while they don't do it right, they do it less wrong than anywhere within 10 miles.

To make the best martini, start with a glass of ice. Add a quarter shot of good dry vermouth, then two shots of Hendrick's gin. Stir about 30 times, quickly; you must keep the ice from melting too much. Immediately strain into a cocktail glass and serve. If done right, you can develop a small sheet of ice on top of the drink, which melts fairly immediately. The cocktail glass should fog quickly. Add an olive. It's simple, really.

To be accurate, a martini with two olives is called a Roosevelt, named after FDR, who repealed Prohibition and was a legendary cocktail drinker. But I can't ask Jeff to make a Roosevelt. Not Jeff, who snaps Heather's bottom with his bar towel and uses well gin when he thinks he won't be caught. Jeff, with his strong chin and full head of hair. Jeff, who at 25 can make all the money he needs by wearing a tight shirt and flexing his pectorals at the divorcees, all 15 years his senior, all grasping to the last

vestiges of youth, all desperately trying to convince each other they don't look their age, that they have a lot of life ahead of them, that they're happy now. I am grateful for Miriam.

Miriam. Always late. But always right on time.

She has a way of swooping in just when I start to think she won't. She always comes in with the same smile, the same spark in her eye. There's a glow about Miriam I've seen in precious few people.

She's not in love with me.

Miriam and I talk about everything in the world. Everything about the world. The world and all that is the world. We're bad Catholics. Miriam once told me I was born with a broken heart.

I wonder if the drinks will arrive before she does. I don't see cocktail glasses on the bar. Jeff is taking his time, chatting with Heather.

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"I don't know what you get so worked up over," Jeff said, scooping ice from the well under the bar. "He probably doesn't even know. He seems perfectly happy."

"Well, who is she?" Heather said. "He's too young to have dementia. He's too old for imaginary friends."

"So what?" Jeff snapped back. "It's not your business. He comes in every week. He's not a danger to himself. He's not a drunk. He orders two martinis and drinks one. Doesn't matter to me, as long as he pays for both. And I think he's taken a liking to you, anyway."

Jeff had two cosmos, two Labatt Blues and a Guinness to pour before he could think about Henry's drinks. And he needed to take his time on the martinis. Henry was a friendly enough guy, but he was particular about his martinis. He ordered nothing else.

"Why does it upset you so much?" Jeff asked, pouring cran-

berry juice over ice. "Do you like him or something?"

"Jeff, please," Heather sounded weary. "He's nice. I just think he needs help."

"He a nutcase," Jeff said. "But he's got money. Take it."

Jeff handed the cosmopolitans to Heather and shooed her off. He quickly poured the Labatts and set them up on the counter for Sarah. The Guinness was a slow pour. He scooped ice for Henry's martinis and picked two cocktail glasses, polishing them with his bar towel and examining them for spots.

He set about the work of making a martini.

When making Henry's martinis, Jeff was meticulous. He saw Henry as a connoisseur of martinis – one who would appreciate his technique. He pulled the bottle of Hendrick's from the shelf and poured two shots over the ice. Then he added an extra splash, for good measure. He was generous with the vermouth. He stirred both vigorously, counting 30 revolutions, exactly as Henry had instructed in one of his first visits, several months ago. The ice clanged against the side of the mixing glass.

Jeff strained the drinks into the cocktail glasses, which fogged. He inspected the drinks for stray ice cubes. There were none. He smiled to himself. Henry would love this one.

And then he added his special touch: A plastic sword, with three olives, carefully skewered through direct center. He set each in their place and stepped back to admire his handiwork. They were beautiful.

"Heather?" he called. "Get these to Henry. Quick."

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Ah, the cocktail glasses. The cocktail glasses here are fine. They aren't too heavy to lift comfortably

and aren't so thin that the cocktail loses its chill too quickly. The stems are colorless and straight – not like the curved stems in the pretentious martini bars. Perhaps the cocktail glasses are the most honest thing at Murphy's.

Watching Jeff place the glasses on the bar and begin his martini making is like watching a Charlie Chaplin film. He takes pride in his work, clearly. Unfortunately, he fumbles and trips his way through, ultimately falling, face first, into a mud puddle. His saving grace is he wants to do it right.

He's clumsy with the ice, so it breaks into tiny pieces as he scoops it up. And he always pours the gin over the ice first. He's too generous with the liquor, and stirs too frantically. I can always tell when Jeff's making my martini; I can hear the rattle of ice cubes from across the bar.

Stirring a martini takes patience and practice. It's about moving the ice through the spirit, with as few collisions as possible. It should be done almost silently, without violence.

I try to watch him while still looking away. I should know better. I should enjoy the drink when it comes, not fault this heathen for his spiritual abuse. But, then, there they are: his stupid plastic swords with his damned three olives.

I try to be surprised and put on a polite grin as Heather daintily sets the drinks on the table, one on each Budweiser coaster.

"Here we are," she says. "Jeff wants a full report. He said he's been studying up on martinis and wants to know how he's doing. He also says he's got an incredible chocolatini recipe he thinks you'll love."

I hope my cringing is only in my head – that Heather can't see it in my face.



"It is poor manners to start without Miriam," I say, politely. "But you can tell Jeff I did order two olives. He always gives me three. I don't place my order by accident."

"I'll tell him," she says. As she turns to leave, I notice she's lost a button on her shirt. I catch a tiny glimpse of her undergarments – black lace. Sheer. I feel myself blush. Thankfully she's walking away.

I feel a rush of cold air as the door opens and February rushes inside the bar. But, not finding what he is looking for he quickly rushes out again. But there, in the doorway, is the culprit who let him in.

Miriam is here.

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"And here we go," Heather said, directing Jeff's attention to Henry's table. Every week for six months it had been the same. Heather dropped off the drinks, and moments later Henry came to life. It was Miriam's presence, Heather supposed, that did it.

Heather allowed herself to imagine that Jeff was right about Henry. What if he had taken a liking to her? He was not unattractive, and based on his tastes he was not suffering financially. Though he was a dozen years older, Heather imagined finding comfort with him. Jeff wasn't right, though: Henry didn't light up for her – not the way he did for Miriam. Heather was surprised to find herself jealous.

Henry looked toward the door, his eyes bright, his grin wide. Moments later he was standing, doing a curious dance next to the table that caused more than a couple of patrons to snicker. He quickly brushed at his sweater, smiled again, broadly, and sat down.

Henry lifted his martini and gazed wistfully across the booth, seemingly enveloped in Miriam's words. He smiled, nodded. He sipped his drink.

Heather could see Henry's lips purse just slightly as he swallowed his first sip. That wasn't a good sign. Henry never really complained. But his disappointment scrawled across him, like an apology on a middle school blackboard.

"I don't think he's impressed with his drink," Heather said to Jeff over her shoulder.

"Miriam hasn't touched hers," Jeff said.

"No, she hasn't." Heather watched the life in Henry's face. The martini might not be to his standard, but he was enjoying himself. He wasn't the sad, expectant man who walked in every Tuesday. He was the satisfied, fulfilled man she'd seen leave the bar every week. He was transformed.

Somehow, seeing Henry this way turned her heart into a dishrag. She turned away again, feeling tears slowly run down her cheeks.

"Ah, Heather....every week," Jeff said. "Every week it's the same...you lose it. He's fine."

"He's not fine."

Henry sipped his martini again, this time without wincing. His smile spread. He was animated, talking with passion.

Probably talking about his damned martinis, Heather thought. She was going to have to check on him.

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Miriam hugs me, even covered in snowflakes as she is. I dust off quickly, hoping the snow doesn't wet my sweater, and help her out of her coat. Her hat, curious, colorful, knit, is tossed unceremoniously on the seat. She begins to talk immediately, her words a flurry of notes, spinning wildly about me. It's all apologies for her tardiness – and a fanciful excuse that just floats past. I expect her to be late, but I don't tell her that.

I take the first sip of my martini. Jeff has outdone himself. He's

been too generous with the vermouth again. I would guess he's used a half shot or more. These "wet" martinis are good for those who can't appreciate the spirit.

In the 1970s, I tell Miriam, the martini gained popularity. But 1970s men were too soft for gin. They used equal parts gin and vermouth. Sometimes they used sweet vermouth, even. Blasphemers.

Of course, those weren't the darkest days. Those days are upon us now. Most martini bars can't serve a true martini, but they're happy to serve a vodka-based confection that tastes of apples or cranberries or chocolate – drinks for the juice box generation. Drinks for those who don't appreciate the spirit.

In the beginning, cocktails were made of spirits, sugar, water and bitters. Back then, bartenders distilled their own whisky and gin. And it was a point of pride for them to share what they'd made with their patrons. In those days, medicine men and snake oil salesmen developed bitters as a cure-all, but they used spirits to help the bitters go down. During Prohibition, bathtub gin was so unpalatable that fruit juices and soda water were often added to mask the taste. They were spirits without spirit.

FDR ended Prohibition and let America have its booze back. And that meant the return of the grand cocktail. FDR himself mixed martinis at the White House for his guests.

I realize I'm on a tangent again, and Miriam smiles. She lets me get away with these things – my little obsessions. When I'm with her, I can't help but pour myself out to her. In her eyes I see the limpid pools of time. I am lost there, transfixed, mesmerized. As always.

I've barely noticed Heather has returned to our table.

"So?" she asks.

I pause. I'm weighing whether to use this as an opportunity to impart some wisdom on the hapless Jeff. Then I remember Miriam has listened to me talk about martinis enough tonight. I choose to wait.

"Tell Jeff he gets a solid B plus," I say. "And an E for effort."

She asks if I'd like to give Jeff a few pointers.

"Not tonight," I say. "I'm enjoying Miriam's company."

Miriam smiles. She may be blushing, just a little. Or maybe her cheeks are still flushed from the cold. In the dim light I cannot tell.

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Heather swallowed hard and leaned over Henry's table. She'd stood there at least 15 seconds, but he talked on, not noticing.

He looked up with surprise, but smiled politely.

She returned the smile, but hers included a question – a knowing little query they both knew she had to ask. And they both knew his martini wasn't perfect.

Heather hated interrupting Henry in mid-monologue. But she hated interrupting Miriam even more. She could tell from afar when Miriam was talking: Henry would be silent, grinning, listening. He listened for long stretches.

If Heather interrupted Henry, he would answer her politely. If she interrupted Miriam, Henry was visibly hurt. It was as if he was awoken from a dream that he couldn't get back. It made her feel guilty.

"So?"

Henry was reserved, almost complimentary, Heather thought. She kept the exchange short, and walked away with purpose. She exhaled deeply as she returned to the bar.

"He says you get a B plus," she told Jeff. "And an E for effort."

"Bah," Jeff answered. "What was wrong with it? I was dead on. I don't know what he wants from

me."

"Maybe it's the three olives," Heather offered. "He did ask for two. He told me that's no accident."

"Fine. So how's Miriam tonight?"

"Jeff, stop."

The volleyball team entered. They were loud. They ordered beer and nachos.

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Where has the time gone already? I had so much more to say, and yet the volleyball team is here already. I've got a sip of martini left. And, of course, those damned olives.

Miriam is aglow tonight. She always glows. I remember the first time I met her, 16 years ago, outside an all-night diner in the middle of this filthy burgh. I'd been ambling about the city in the dead of night, smoking a pipe and enjoying the night air. She asked if she could give my pipe a try.

She managed it deftly, this bold, glowing creature she was then. And in those small hours, on that grubby street, we discovered a kinship for the night, a shared love of desolation. We laughed at the futility of traffic lights that continued to direct cars that weren't passing beneath them. And we hid, inexplicably, behind the bushes when we heard approaching footsteps. She told me she had an old lady's name.

We'd often found each other over the years, wandering those streets, enveloped in the greasy yellow glow of the street lamps. We'd sip coffee at the diner, or sit in the darkness of a nearby park. Sometimes we'd talk for hours, filling the air with notes and words. Sometimes we sat in silence, just breathing. I'd often close my eyes and feel her next to me. I could feel her glow.

Life in a small city is different from anything else in the world. Dillon is home to about 30,000

souls – too big to be quaint, too small for the excitement of a city. It's safe, yet uncomfortably dull. It's a city that's constantly tried to reinvent itself, to make itself more attractive to businesses and visitors alike. To that end, it tore down entire neighborhoods during the 1970s, so city leaders could install a road, bypassing downtown. Of course, that bypass cut off the life's blood to downtown businesses.

The factory jobs that built this city are gone. Most people work at the prison, the hospital or the school district. The city has tried to market itself using several dubious claims – notably the taste of its water, the accomplishments of its minor league baseball team, and its connection to an inventor who was cheated out of his rightful spot in the history books.

The main business district is now filled with chain restaurants and big-box stores. But you can still see the true city, the proud Dillon that prospered in the 19th century, in little pockets downtown. Most don't bother to look. But Miriam and I know where the authentic spots are. And we can sigh over what was lost before either of us was born.

And here we are, in this middle class bar, sipping Hendrick's martinis. The volleyball team is loud. They're drinking beer and spilling nachos on the tables. It is time to go.

Miriam excuses herself to the restroom. I don my coat.

In her curious knit winter hat, she wanders off down the street.

It's early, but it feels as if she's bidding the world good night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Heather was exhausted when she returned home. The volleyball team kept her running for nearly three hours and left the required 15 percent tip on the team captain's credit card. The kids were purring

away in their sleep, and Heather kissed her mother goodnight. As she undressed, she noticed she'd lost a button on her shirt.

"Damn."

She was in tears again.

She slipped a hand into her pocket and found a crisp \$20 bill there – Henry's tip. The same he'd left her every week. It was generous, considering the \$16 tab he paid every Tuesday. She slipped it into the mayonnaise jar above the refrigerator, where she kept every other tip he'd left her.

She wondered how a man so alone could be so generous, could smile so sincerely. She wondered how he could seem so content with his imagination.

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Jeff is coming to the booth to talk to me. I suppose he'd like some martini pointers. It's quiet here tonight, and Miriam is late. Hopefully I can answer Jeff's questions before she arrives.

Jeff is smirking as he approaches the table. He's questioning my taste.

I politely tell him the proper ratios for a martini.

"You have to swirl the ice through the spirit. It's a dance," I tell him. "Don't smash the ice, or you get too much water in the drink. I want ice-cold gin. If I wanted watered-down gin, I certainly wouldn't pay for Hendrick's, Jeff."

Jeff is troubled. He's not his normal, affable self. Heather has been crying again. The left side of Jeff's face has an angry pink welt on it.

He offers the argument I've heard too many times now – the one bartenders use to excuse a bad martini.

"James Bond doesn't drink them that way," he says. "Are you telling me you know better than James Bond?"

As I begin to explain why 007's Vesper martini is not a martini at

all (it's made with vodka and Lillet, and is shaken – a vodka Bradford, maybe, but not a martini), Jeff has had enough. He storms off. I wait for Heather to take my order.

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"Okay, what am I doing wrong?" Jeff asked. He had made the unprecedented move of sitting down at Henry's table. Sure, they'd talked martinis before, but that was months ago. And after six months of making Hendrick's martinis, Jeff figured he should be an expert by now. "Every week it's the same thing. I'm doing my best here, and it just isn't good enough for you. What's the deal?"

"Jeff, Miriam will be here soon; I don't have time right now," Henry said. "But I will say you need to respect the art. Two shots Hendrick's. Quarter shot vermouth. Stir. Strain. Your martinis are better than any in the city, but you use too much vermouth and they're watered down."

"Watered down? I don't add water."

"It's the stirring, Jeff," Henry said. "You have to swirl the ice through the spirit. It's a dance."

Jeff felt the anger well up in him. He tried, dammit. He tried every damned week, and this self-appointed expert had never been a bartender. What the hell did Henry know about booze?

"You don't know shit, Henry," Jeff said. "James Bond doesn't drink them that way."

"That was Ian Fleming's stroke of genius," Henry said, ignoring the insult. "In the movies, Bond is slick and sophisticated. But that's not what Fleming intended. He intentionally created the Vesper martini to show how uncouth his character was. Unfortunately, Fleming didn't count on the ignorance of his audience."

"Bullshit." Jeff rose to his feet. His cheeks were red. He could feel his eyes burning. Across the room,

he could see Heather, watching him, horrified.

"Listen to me," Jeff said, pointing. "I'm done trying to make you happy. I'm done stressing myself out, worried that the great Henry won't be happy with my martinis. Maybe I'm not the problem. Did you ever think of that? Maybe you're the problem. Maybe nothing will make you happy."

"I'm happy, Jeff," Henry looked puzzled.

"You're not happy," Jeff's voice rose. "You aren't happy at all. You only think you're happy when you're sitting here with your imaginary girlfriend. Haven't you noticed she never talks to anyone else? That she never drinks her martini?"

Jeff knew he'd crossed a line, but it was too late.

"Get it through your head, man. She's not fucking coming. She's never been here, and she never will be."

Henry smirked. Jeff stormed away, hurling his bar towel onto the bar. Heather pushed through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

Flippy, the dishwasher, caught her arm as she walked by.

"I'm fine," Heather said. "It's just Tuesday, and Henry's here."

She got herself together quickly, checking her makeup in the mirror by the door, and made her way to Henry's table. She did her best to smile.

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Miriam is later than usual, and I wonder if she was scared off. Maybe she saw Jeff at the table and didn't want to interrupt. Thank God I haven't ordered the drinks yet; nothing is worse than a warm martini.

I'd better keep my eye on Jeff tonight to make sure he doesn't slip me well gin as revenge. And maybe I'll pay him a better compliment tonight. Maybe if he lets me



behind the bar I can give him some pointers.

Six months ago, Jeff was eager to learn. "A good martini separates the mixologists from the bartenders," I told him. "If you can make an amazing martini, you can make anything."

And there are the cocktail glasses. He's beginning. Though I expect him to slam the mixing glass into the ice in anger, he steps back and takes a deep breath. He uses a set of tongs and carefully pulls several ice cubes from the well. He measures a quarter shot of vermouth and pours it over the ice. He measures exactly two shots of Hendrick's. And then he stirs.

Listen as I may, I can't hear the ice cubes clang.

He polishes the glasses, as always, inspecting for spots, and strains the drinks. In each, he places two olives, impaled on wooden skewers. He sets them on the bar.

It seems an eternity before Heather has picked up the drinks, but I know it's only seconds. She sets them lightly on the coasters (these advertise Yingling beer), and I can see her smile is sad and nervous. I don't think she is nervous about my drinks.

It is 7:15. Miriam is here. Just in time.

I rise to meet her. She pulls her colorful hat from her head and her hair is disheveled and full of static.

"Miriam."

"Hi, Henry. Sorry I'm late."

"Please, let me take your coat."

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"Who is that?" Heather's nervousness had boiled over. In six months, Henry had talked to nobody, save for Heather and Jeff. He played his curious pantomime every Tuesday night. He'd become a fixture – an oddity you'd see at the county fair. Pay \$2 to a grubby, tattooed guy and you can peek in

on the grown man with the invisible friend.

But who was this woman? And what of her curious, colorful knit winter cap?

Henry hugged her and helped her from her coat. The woman sat down.

Heather looked across the room, toward the bar. She sought out Jeff's eyes. Jeff shrugged. Heather checked her tables and made her way toward him. She looked back at Henry, but her eyes settled on his partner. To Heather, she appeared to glow.

She had a smile that lit the little booth, and brought Henry to life. There was a warmth in the woman's eyes that encouraged and invited conversation. Her gold hair caught the dim light like a prism. Heather felt her eyes fill with tears again. This time, she didn't understand why.

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In truth, the martini is perfect. Not much could make it better, and I intend to tell Jeff. But not now.

The martinis are nearly gone, and the volleyball team has stumbled in. I can smell the sweat from here, and the play-by-play recollections of the game are getting louder. It's time to go.

Miriam excuses herself to the restroom. While she's gone, I finish my martini and don my overcoat and hat. She returns, and I wrap her

coat around her shoulders. Tonight, I pull her curious hat down over her ears. We both laugh.

Miriam leans into me and lightly kisses my cheek. She takes my arm and we stride out into the chilled night.

I will walk these cold streets tonight, long after the bars have closed and the houses are dark. I'll walk and watch the traffic lights, flashing from red to green and back, directing cars that will wake with the sun.



**Daniel Lovell** is a former investigative reporter and editor, a musician, a songwriter, and a dad. He has won several awards for his work in newspapers and community leadership, and has released several albums. He has studied martinis extensively, and takes his with two olives and Beefeater gin.

*If you think; therefore you are. If you think you are a NUT though, you probably are NOT a nut, because If you are a nut or just nut crazy, you never know it.*



# Margarida, José, and the Queen

by Nancy Vieira Couto

Margarida saw the Queen in that summer of 1901 when all the days were damp and filled with the smell of salt. She couldn't see the future through the fog, but she imagined machines, money, and motion, a city crammed with tenement houses and streetcars. She was fourteen years old. She and her mother, Maria Julia, had just arrived in Ponta Delgada, having said good-bye forever to aunts, uncles, cousins and friends, the living and the dead. They had their freshly-issued passports, and their trunks were still in the cart that had carried them the short distance from Rosário, Lagoa. Soon they would board the Dona Maria. But what was that commotion?

They had forgotten all about it. Yes, Queen Amelia and King Carlos were visiting Ponta Delgada, and there was the Queen right on the other side of a large group of cheering people. Margarida, who was slim and quick, darted under elbows and between skirts to get a good look. The Queen was tall and seemed kind. She smiled and waved at the crowd. I like to think that Margarida caught her eye, that she and the Queen were poised for a moment on a pivot in time, and that they would remember the moment always, even as they traveled in opposite directions, one to the New World and one back to the old maelstrom of political intrigues. I know Margarida remembered.



Before she married Carlos, Amelia had been a French princess, the great-granddaughter of Louis Philippe, the "Citizen King." Louis Philippe had a long history of rolling with punches, starting with his years of exile when he earned a modest income teaching in a boys' school and later traveled the world incognito. Amelia must have inherited her great-grandfather's talent for coping with sudden change, as she would demonstrate in 1908. As the Royal Family crossed the Terreiro do Paço in an open carriage, a couple of assassins shot and killed the King and his older son, Crown Prince Luís Filipe. But when a third shot hit the younger son, Prince Manuel, in the arm, Queen Amelia turned and whacked the gunman with a huge bouquet she had just been given, catching him off guard and saving Manuel's life. Those were big punches. Amelia ordered some black dresses from her dressmakers.

Margarida went to the school for immigrants. She learned to say "I see

the cat I see the dog" but wondered where that was going to get her. Not very far, she decided, and she didn't go back. She met José at a dance. He was good-looking, and she was slim and quick. Where else but in New Bedford could a girl from Rosário, Lagoa, meet a boy from Ribeirinha, Ribeira Grande. They married on April 1, 1905, and in no time at all they became Margaret and Joseph, although at home they still used the old names. Joseph was a fireman. He worked in the cotton mills, not putting out fires but keeping them going. He also kept a dream going, a dream of becoming a citizen of the United States. He practiced writing his name, Joseph Vieira, over and over again on scraps of paper. His handwriting was shaky. "Joseph" and "Vieira" were the only words he knew how to write.

The courtroom was so full of hope that Joseph could hardly breathe. Soon he would raise his hand and take the oath of citizenship. At least, that's what he thought, but he had some punches to roll with, too. There in the courtroom Joseph had a stroke, his first, and wasn't able to take the oath. Afterwards he had to walk with a cane. He never became a citizen. Years later, on a summer morning in 1941, Joseph went into the bathroom to shave and get ready for the day. His second stroke was as sudden as an assassin's bullet. He died on the Fourth of July. If Margaret had had a bouquet of flowers, she would have wanted to whack someone with it. But there really wasn't anyone to whack. So she bought some black dresses and a black coat and a black hat. What else could she do?

This year I signed up for the 52 Ancestors challenge. The theme for the first week is "Start." Because most of us begin the genealogical journey with grandparents, I am sharing a story about two of mine, the maternal grandmother that I knew and the maternal grandfather who died before I was born.  
#52ancestors ~ Nancy Vieira Couto

Nancy Vieira Couto lives in Ithaca, New York, where she is poetry editor of Epoch, Cornell University's Literary Magazine..

Visit Nancy Vieira Couto's website at: <http://foothillspublishing.com/2011/id24.htm>

# Poem for Archie

“You have your identity when you find out,  
not what you can keep your mind on,  
but what you can't keep your mind off.”  
(A. R. Ammons)

by David S. Warren

In nineteen sixty four, after a year in Europe during which I had decided to be a writer, I returned to Cornell and signed up for the first of many “Creative Writing” classes. Because the section taught by the dynamic and popular Steve Katz was all filled up, I was assigned to the new guy that year: A.R. Ammons, whose class met over in the Industrial and Labor Relations building, because the regular English faculty class-rooms were in use by the old regulars at that hour, and probably not just because until the year before, he had been an executive in an industrial glass manufacturing business, nor was it because he had started out a dirt-poor farm boy from the South, and surely not because he was a Navy Vet.

Archie (and I can't remember the last time I heard any one call him anything but Archie) was without a bit of pretention, posing, or elevated bullshit about him. He looked at us all around the table with the wide open curiosity of the Bachelor of Biology that he was: What sort of beings are these?

One day about fifteen minutes into our off-quad class meeting over in the ILR building, Steve Katz (the popular young novelist mentioned above) showed up with his own class, carrying a bunch of landscaping flowers he had picked on the way, having decided because of the Indian Summer weather, that his class should group-write a poem and take it to Archie's class.

So they did: Steve read the poem (which I wish I could remember) but I do recall that Archie glowed with what seemed to be more delight than embarrassment.

Delighted, open, and accessible was Archie. During his general office hours, he kept the door open and sat there looking out for you.

My first scheduled office meeting with Archie came after I had presented a story about an ex G.I. I had met on the Greek island Hydra, where he made poems writing with syrup and other food products on paper that he then baked in the oven, proposing to make edible poetry, although as it came out the oven, it was not even readable. At the end of the story, morbidly obsessed, the poet-artist is staring at some murky flotsam in the Hydra harbor, and he fails to notice a Butterfly as it passes over him and rises above it all.

“What kind of butterfly would that be?”  
Archie asked me.

It was only a damn Symbolic butterfly, and he knew it. I could do better now but Archie seemed only kind and interested. As David Rollow reports him saying, the only kind of criticism he cared for was praise.

Encouraged, I told him I had been thinking that I might write my next story in the third person: like “you went down to the river, and



there you saw a .....whatever....and you “ and so on, you this and you that..

Archie looked at me in that slightly anxious or worried way you see in this photo Dede Hatch took of him, and he said “Oh, I hope not.”


Enough said. I never pulled that cheap trick.

I have tried many a silly device since, I’m sure, and even Archie could be radical with his literary devices - for instance, writing a single extended poem on a narrow strip of adding machine tape, making good tight sense though, and later producing thousands of poems long and short, all good, gooder, or goodest, until he became what many critics considered to be the greatest living American poet, *and certainly the greatest poet you maybe never even heard of.*

He died when he was seventy something, about my age now, and not a lot changed since our office chats. The last few times I saw him, well after his retirement, he was standing in the central section of the Ithaca farmers-market as he often did on Saturday mornings, just in case anyone happened to stop by, and no doubt his ghost does stop by to stand on that spot for a while. It’s just a dirt floor, but there has to be one of those Ithaca Stars there for Archie.

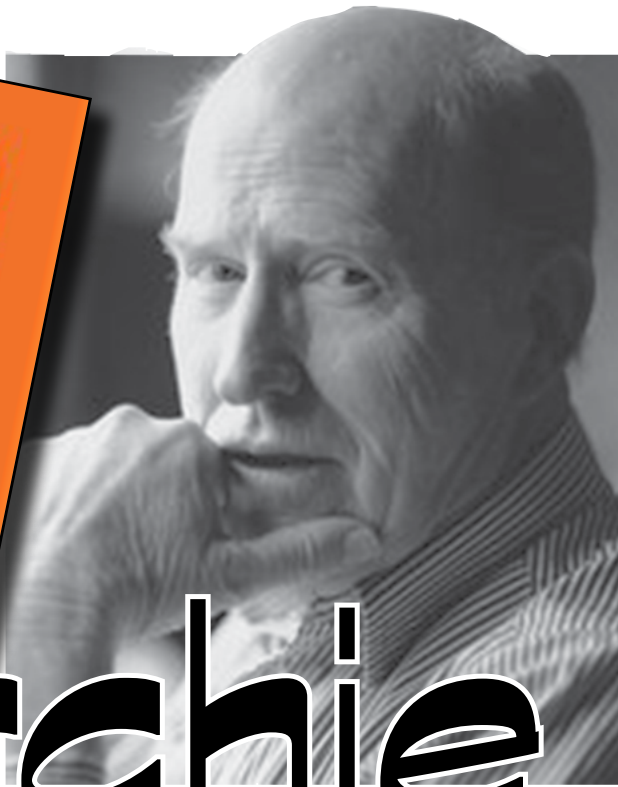
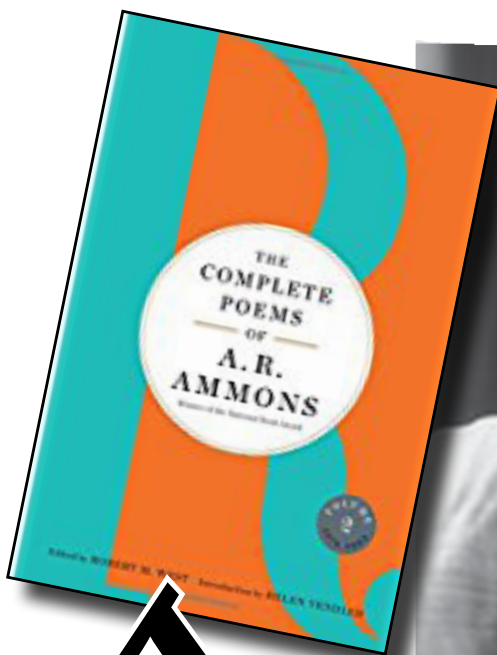
And now all his poems have been collected and published together in two thick volumes which you may never get all the way through, but they all deserve the deep attention that David Rollow offers in his review here. It comes with a few small, but whole, entire, unabridged Archie poems.

*Plain spoken, yet fully detailed  
and without phony butterflies.*

A symbolic butterfly with a human face on its thorax. The wings are black with yellow and red markings. The face is a realistic human face with a mustache and a slight smile.

**“What kind of butterfly  
would that be?”  
Archie  
asked me.**

**It was only a damn Symbolic butterfly, and he knew it.**



### *Room Conditioner*

After rain I  
walk and looking  
down glimpse  
the moon. I  
back up to see  
and the puddle splices  
onto two hundred  
thousand miles of  
height two  
hundred thousand  
miles of depth

(ii, 35) 1977 (1978)

# Archie

**David Rollow  
reviews**

## **The Complete Poems A.R. Ammons**

W. W. Norton, 2017,  
2 volumes

A. R. Ammons, called Archie by all who knew him, had routines. He met friends for conversation in the coffee shop in the basement of Goldwin Smith Hall at Cornell (where he taught from 1964 until his retirement). He wrote poetry in the mornings on his old-fashioned

office typewriter, letters after the mail came around noon, and he took a walk in the afternoon along Ithaca's creeks and waterfalls, "every day a new walk." The walk was more than a habit, more even than a habit of mind. On his walk he got somewhere, and his poems often take a similar form, starting out without a goal but arriving by getting somewhere unexpected as if words were steps and the movement or progress from setting out to arrival constituted the form of the poem:

"I can tell you right now I don't know how to write/verse, not even poetry: if I did I wouldn't be here," he wrote drily. (ii: 429) He pretends to be innocent of versification, but as one reads through his work it becomes evident that he writes consciously *against* meter; his line breaks are clever, conscious evasions of tetrameter and pentameter. Emerson wrote, "It is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new

Ian Hacking, in his book *WHY IS THERE PHILOSOPHY OF MATHEMATICS AT ALL*, classifies mathematical proofs as either "Cartesian" or "Leibnizian." Cartesian proofs are "surveyable," meaning they can be contained in the mind all at once and understood in their entirety. "Leibnizian" proofs are too long and complicated to be thus surveyable and must be understood only a step at a time. Ammons's long poems are too long to be held in the mind in their entirety and are written to be read at length, understood gradually, and sometimes not understood at all. They reward repeated reading and should be read slowly (all poetry should be read slowly). The principle of pre-established harmony is a concept taken from Leibniz, analogous to the principle of least effort or the criterion of elegant parsimony that is a

guide for scientific explanations, to which Ammons subscribed. The principle of least effort is best illustrated by the fact that light chooses the most direct path from source to target. Nature tends to take the easy way. Light goes to its target, a charge jumps across the gap, directly and instantaneously.

*Tape for the Turn of the Year* contains a typo (I can't keep myself from pointing it out, because it is exemplary): "soilage," a meaningless word or non-word in a context makes it clear that it ought to be "spoilage." This edition of the poems, like several other major editions of major poets in recent years, makes no effort to establish a better text than that provided by the published books or occasionally by hand-corrected mss. in libraries. I cannot understand why.

thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.” There could hardly be a better description of Ammons’s poetry, and Harold Bloom noted the link to Emerson long ago. Emerson continues: “The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.” Walt Whitman was the first to offer this “new confession,” and Ammons is the poet of our age, one of the most original since Whitman. His work as a whole reforms and refreshes American poetic language and as such is a great gift to the future.

He’s most famous for writing a long poem, *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, on a continuous roll of adding machine tape. Forbidding himself revision, writing daily, he used anxiety to create. It’s not that there’s only one right way, as if a poem were an example of a Leibnizian principal of least effort. His roll of adding machine tape provided him with the net Robert Frost had said free verse lacked, not meter or rhyme but merely the width of the paper he wrote on, a postmodern kind of constraint, at once physical and conceptual.

—Yet I no sooner deny the Leibnizian principal than I find it full blown in *Tape*.

Ammons declares a wish to do “short rich hard/lyrics” after finishing his long, skinny poem:

lines that can be  
gone over (and over)  
till they sing with  
pre-established rightness

(i, 285)

Here “rightness” is Leibniz’s

“pre-established harmony.” But Ammons is less a philosophical poet than the scientific observer, despite his quixotic long projects. He invokes the scientist’s “elegant parsimony” in the middle of—it is tempting to say—a long poem that resembles a Leibnizian proof, too long to be held in the mind all at once, a procedure or series of steps or leaps that the reader must attend to one by one and only in this way capture the world the way Ammons needed (his need) to capture it. In his long poems he sought “rightness” from another direction, aiming to get it right the first time.

This part of *Tape* shows the poem as a search for a “level of language” that can contain anything (“whatever the Muse/gives”). Almost 5000 lines into his “long, thin poem,” Ammons is still invoking the Muse! But as always, there is a dynamic or dialectic: “the denominator/here may be too low: the/lines may be/too light, the song/too hard to bear:/still, it’s not been/easy: it’s/cost me plenty” in what was then a “month of Sundays” at the typewriter waiting for the “marginal red/ink” to roll up at the end of the tape. The denominator: the lowest common one, another way of phrasing Leibniz’s principle. One would have thought that the constraints of the tape were more toward randomness, but that was not the movement of Ammons’s mind. While no review can do justice to Ammons’s long poems, **it’s** worth noting that he did find a level of language able to contain whatever he wanted to put into it—whatever he wanted to say. The width of the tape limits the line lengths, narrowing the possibilities for line breaks. He is working a possibility space that became available to poets only

after the free verse of modernism had been explored and absorbed by Williams and Pound and because the constraint is entirely artificial and arbitrary and “rightness” is a criterion an earlier poet is unlikely to have thought of.

In addition to *Tape for the Turn of the Year*, he wrote two other very long poems, *Garbage* and *Glare*, on adding machine tape, though not necessarily single continuous strips. To write *Garbage*, he wrote when it came out in *The Best American Poetry 1993*, he “tore off the sections in lengths of a foot or more,” adding that “the arrogance implied by getting something right the first time is incredible, but no matter how much an ice-skater practices, when she hits the ice it’s a one-time event.” Ammons’s attitude toward revision was not as simple as it sounds. He said he didn’t revise *Garbage*, but Cornell has three different typescripts, one a computer printout typed in by someone else, one with edits from a copyeditor. One [*Glare*] manuscript has revisions the poet made by hand. Nevertheless, to a great extent these long poems try to get it right the first time and accept some “clutter” of failure. His poetic strategy stretched from a Kerouacian “first thought, best thought,” once mocked by Truman Capote as mere “typing,” as Ammons ironically observes, to working on poems (some quite short) for several years. The only clue to his process of rewriting comes at the end of the poem, where there are dates, the one in parenthesis indicating when he published the poem. So, for example, if the two dates are a couple of years apart, we can imagine the interval meant some “working and reworking.” But poems such as *Tape for the Turn of*



*the Year* and *Garbage* were written, as a painter would say, *premier coup* or first strike. (His other long poem, *Sphere*, involved more revision). The remarkable thing about the first-strike poems, including those he called improvisations, is their *rightness*. Those he worked and reworked arrive at rightness by a different route, but he invoked the “pre-established” nature of both.

One example of a poem “worked and reworked” until it’s right must be quoted in full:

I found a  
weed  
that had a  
  
mirror in it  
and that  
mirror  
  
looked in at  
a mirror  
in  
  
me that  
had a  
weed in it  
  
(i, 351) 1963 (1965)

Even difficult poets like Ashbery (with whom Ammons shared eminence) want readers, and Ammons always wanted more readers than he had. (“The only royalty I’m interested in,” he says, ironically commenting on Wallace Stevens’s search for his coat of arms, “is royalties.”) Yet the attention he received from readers (and students) could also annoy him; in *Summer Place*, he complains about having to buy stamps for recommendation letters “commanded” by students. In this poem he speaks of attempting, in *Sphere*, to write something unreadable, to put

readers off, a “big gritty poem that would just stand/there and spit, accommodating itself to nothing,” which nevertheless sold a lot of copies. “My book on roundness/dissatisfied me some . . . I meant/to write one unreadable, but a lot of people have/bought it . . . I wanted something/standing recalcitrant in its own nasty massiveness.” (ii, )

It would be a mistake to suggest that Ammons is not a difficult poet like those he looked at over his shoulder. His language is bare of poetic frills and reads like plain speech but what he has to say and the ways he says it are complex and ambiguous. Richard Howard called him a “literalist of the imagination,” yet even this strikes me as somewhat off the mark. His mountains, rivers, estuaries, coasts, creeks, waterfalls, his perceptions and observations are his metaphors. Many of his poems, thought without frills, turn on sound patterns that involve internal rhyme or assonance, while others progress by turns of phrase. Absent is a specifically poetic diction and he makes it clear that he believes his “sway” will alter the course of American verse, as I believe it will.

The fifty years since Ammons began to develop a major reputation have been good to his poetry. I read Ammons when I was young and then for many years I paid no attention to his work. I am happy to say that he continued to grow throughout his life, that it was an expansive growth, and that his language remains as fresh and lively today as it was fifty years ago. The greats of the generation before him have begun to look wilted around the edges to the extent that they mimic Elizabethan or Jacobean “poetic” diction, whereas Ammons was fiercely committed to anxieties

and resentments that made him strip his poems of the merely poetic. “Nobody has established a more cordial relationship with the heights than I have, a fact/which has already caused the elegance to shrink/even before it’s going to have a chance to wilt: but my sway will, as/time goes on, become the new elegance, bumpy and roughshod.”

Other poets were moving ever closer to the spoken word, but Ammons is among the most successful and today I read him with the feeling that he did more than anyone else of his generation to make spoken American English a language for poetry and with the certainty, fifty years on, that his poetry marks a turning point that fifty years from now will be seen as of historic importance. Something gave Ammons the nerve to write in a colloquial American English idiom that was governed by an active wit. Ammons, like Whitman as praised by Emerson, “led The States there—[has] led Me there. I say that none has ever done, or ever can do, a greater deed for The States, than your deed.”

Like many of his generation, Ammons benefitted from the GI Bill of Rights after WWII, which made it possible for him to go to college and graduate school, an opportunity he would not have had without the war, for the family tobacco farm failed just before Archie enlisted in the navy and trained as a sonar operator. He was later pleased to learn that James Schuyler and Frank O’Hara had also undergone sonar training in Key West. “Ping jockeys,” he called them, and joked (I think he was joking) that he was a New York School poet by association.

He chafed at his isolation but he chafed more at the idea that he was an undereducated farm boy, the “nature poet,” who writes something that would go well with dinner, a hick. “I’m not just trash or white trash or country trash, I’m/tobacco country trash, high-principled Scotch-Irish,” he wrote, explaining that “trash” is, among other things, the word for the bottom leaves of tobacco, cropped off first, cured later. “I have/become, if not king of the cats, prince of the hogs & snakes,” a “born aristocrat, as anybody will tell you.” He talks ironically of lacking book learning, but read widely all his life. He was always sure of his vocation. “From where I started the/route was up or forget it, and I’ve come most of the way.” Insistent reference to his rural and southern roots is finally condescending and dismissive. Lingering class prejudice places Ammons as an “outsider” poet, or a folk poet of some kind. Helen Vendler in her introduction finds it necessary to tell us that he grew up in a house without electricity, only kerosene lamps, and an outdoor privy (then quite common on farms since cesspools were unknown and there were no sewers). The editor of this edition of his poetry teaches him as a southern writer at Mississippi State, but he was no primitive regionalist. Ammons’s poems return to childhood memories, but the locales that are local to his poetry are mainly Ithaca and the Jersey shore, not the North Carolina tobacco country. Around the age of forty he became friends with the critic Harold Bloom, whose children were the same age as the Ammons’s son John. That friendship grew into a correspondence which, we may hope, will someday be published. This must have been

when Bloom was writing his great book, *The Anxiety of Influence*. I don’t believe Archie felt too much influence, anxious or not (for example, he said he had little interest in the content of Williams’s poems, but borrowed their forms), but his poems are written out of what Bloom would call achieved anxiety, mainly the anxiety of the blank page. Bloom’s advocacy was important for Ammons’s reputation because he placed him in a line from Emerson and Stevens. Even at a distance of more than forty years I hear Ammons’s speaking voice as I read his poems, and I was surprised to learn that he was too shy to give readings—which Vendler attributes to his isolation and lack of fame relative to others such as the New York “school.”

Still:

I said I will find what is lowly  
and put the roots of my identity  
down there

(i, 81)

And, in *Corson’s Inlet*

I went for a walk over the dunes  
again this morning  
to the sea,  
then turned right along  
the surf  
(i. 91)

“The walk liberating, I was released from forms,/from the perpendiculars,/straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/of thought.” Many Ammons poems turn on a dialectic, one/many or light/dark, speech/silence, fullness/emptiness, something/nothing. “One can’t/ have it/both ways/and both/ways is/the only way I/want it,” he wrote, his disyllables precisely evoking his dialectic (“Coming Right Up,”

ii, 215). He seeks to reconcile opposites. He likes to keep things in a kind of contrasting (reflective) equilibrium. In “Two Motions” he says “It is not enough to be willing to come out of the dark and stand in the light, all hidden things brought into sight . . .” However:

in separating light from  
darkness  
have we cast into death  
(ii, 365-366)

These oppositions lead to *Zone*:

I spent the day  
differentiating  
and wound up  
with nothing  
whole to keep  
(ii, 374-375)

A poem like *Small Song* is apparently syllabic, made of three-syllable lines until the last one. And the extra syllable in the last line, the ‘a’ in ‘away,’ is so short as to be almost nonexistent, except that it gives the whole point a sudden suppleness. Ammons was not a writer of free verse, but neither was he a writer from a theory (as were Williams and Olson). He was playful. “Wind and give/the wind away” is quite a beauty as a pair of rocking linked lines:

The reeds give  
way to the  
wind and give  
the wind away  
In other poems, such as *Room Conditioner*, the meter is more dominant and more intricate.

*Room Conditioner*

After rain I *trochees*

walk and looking *trochees*

down glimpse *spondee*  
 the moon: I *iamb*  
 back up to see *trochee/*  
*iamb*  
 and the puddle splices  
*anapest/trochee*  
 onto two hundred *anapest/*  
*trochee*  
 thousand miles of *trochee*  
 height two *spondee*  
 hundred thousand *trochee*  
 miles of depth iamb (*iamb*  
*acatalectic*)

Close examination of the meter reveals that this poem, like many of Ammons's shortest poems, is in a dimeter. Disyllabic lines (*down glimpse* and *height two*) are spondees; most of the remaining lines are strongly trochaic, with several anapestic substitutions that in effect make the lines iambic. I have the impression (though to do an adequate analysis would take a great deal more time) that his poetry tended increasingly toward iambic as he went on, and that he broke lines to vary the pentameter, perhaps to avoid what became a drone in Stevens's pentameters. Some of his poems are syllabic, but I have not found that there is a dominant pattern to these, as in some other poets such as Marianne Moore or Philip Levine. I once asked Archie how he decided to break his lines, and he answered, evasively, that he broke them when he felt like it. I was disappointed because at the time I wanted to know more precisely what a foot in English was and what a line was. One eventually comes to hear the feet. In English—and

in particular in American—poetry the dominant foot is the iamb, with substitutions (anapests and trochees primarily) and sometimes with omitted syllables. Dactyls are rare. Ammons's poems follow this pattern strongly enough, I think, to say that they are metrical (that is, not merely rhythmic, and certainly not prose). I think it is evident also that he was a conscious practitioner of metrical writing, though not rigid about it. His poems are stressed and one hardly ever finds the strings of dactyls followed by iambs that characterize prose. Trochees, spondees, and anapests are all functionally iambs, but serve to vary the *rhythm*. In versification of this kind the distinction between meter and rhythm is unusually clear.

Other short poems might be called epigrams because they depend mainly on Ammons's characteristic wit and wordplay, as in *Metaphysic*.

Because I am  
 Here I am  
 (nowhere)  
 else

A brief review can't do justice to the long poems, so I will simply state an opinion and end on it: that they are real, long poems, not stretches of free association that sometimes rise into brief lyrics. I suppose what bothers people who are uneasy with the long poems (I am not one of them), who think they are boring or sometimes stumble, is that Archie insisted on their rightness even when he did not revise or revised only minimally. It is true that they record both failure and success; like the skater to whom he compares himself, he sometimes falls. But more often he skates out on the thin ice of sense and keeps making

more of it. To vary the analogy, he was like a tightrope walker, American poetry's Phillipe Petit, and he almost never fell. A long poem by Ammons is not a practice run but an extended performance.

A short poem like *Way to Go* seems at first like a haiku captured in a zen-casual way, but then you look again and the complex sound pattern emerges that is not casual. "West light flat on trees" leads to a bird "deep out in glue glass" and then the wind stirs the leaves—"this is/the world we have."

West light flat on trees:  
 bird flying  
 deep out in glue glass  
 uncertain wind  
 stirring the leaves: this is  
 the world we have:  
 take it

(ii, 395)

*I'll take the poems.*  
*It's good to have these*  
*two fat, heavy volumes.*  
*Anyone could read*  
*them all her life.*

**David Rollow**  
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# Your Stuff

by David Rollow

The Muse came knocking at the writer's window on a night of wild weather. Her skin seen through the windowpanes was luminous and pale, except for her flushed cheeks. Her green eyes glistened. Never had she looked more beautiful. Gladdened by this unexpected visit—for the page lay empty on his table and the pen lay untouched by the page—the writer stood and unlocked the window, his heart surging against his ribs as if they, too, somehow, were to be unlocked and his heart set free.

The Muse tumbled in and fell in a heap on the floor, her legs trapped in the folds of her gossamer gown. She hummed to herself with her eyes closed, as if she heard a tune inaudible to mortal ears—as was so, since she sang off key—and she plucked distractedly on her lyre.

The writer heard her humming and strumming as discordant noise, since her lyre strings were out of tune as usual. She was a little drunk, as she often was when she came to visit. Sober, she had perfect pitch.

So she always presented herself, in a state of disarray, as if just before visiting him she had been to a wild party—her breath short as if from recent exertion, her color high, her eyes lit with a kind of excitement that raised the hairs on the back of the writer's neck and sent a tremor up his spine. She'd come from dancing merrily in some

bright green place, or from a lover's passionate embrace. What difference did it make, so long as she favored him with her visits? The writer loved her. He realized there was something dull and earthbound about his thinking, and that she herself would have no patience with his petty misgivings.

How like you to take the dark view, she'd say. Of course it's only a false spring, but why should you be so blue? Why be reminded of winter's inevitable return, just because it's inevitable? Even a false spring should give you new hope of the real spring, the renewal of the world. Be positive! Have some hope!

Of course he hoped against hope for her visits, so it couldn't be said that he was a total pessimist. And he kept right on working when she didn't show up. And sometimes she didn't come for weeks, even months at a time. But she was right about his basic nature. He looked on the dark side.

Craftsman! she called him. Wordsmith! Drudge! But never—the more praised she!—Poet! Writer, she called him. Because he was her writer, not because he was generic.

"Get up off the floor, will you?" the writer said. "Let me get you a towel. You'll catch your death."

Her eyes opened wide again, as bright as before.

"Well, writer," said she, "I've found you at your work. Things don't seem to be going so well with you."



"We'll talk about that after I get you a towel."

"Never mind, never mind. I'm immortal, I can't catch cold."

"Of course you can. You've got a fever already. You may not be able to die, but you can always get sick." Besides, she was a demigoddess and had a moral part.

"If I have a fever it's only because I'm excited. What a night!"

The writer wrapped her in a towel and sat down in his Morris chair, an old desolation wrapped like a blanket around his heart. He had deadlines to meet and bills to pay, which left him no time for interruptions, and he hadn't written a word in ten days. It wasn't the fault of his Muse—she was flawless—

but just the same the sight of her filled him with shame and despair. His life had been miserable without her.

"What are you working on?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Come on, I know better. Tell."

"You don't want to hear. You'd only be bored."

"Not on a night like this! I feel so glorious, so exalted, nothing could spoil my mood! Come on, what are you working on?"

"A story about a childless couple whose marriage stagnates and falls apart because they have nothing to do but be together."

"You're right, it's boring."

"You asked. I have a living to make, you know."

"And you think that's going to make your living? I'll never understand why you waste yourself on junk like that."

"I want to write a best-seller. A potboiler that will make me a pile of money so I can spend a few years working on the real stuff in financial security."

"Pish tosh. You don't want security, you want fame. You want *sudden* fame. Your vision has been dulled by glamour. The kind of fame that can be yours is the kind that comes slowly or else not at all. Listen. Do you have any ideas for potboilers? I mean, anything that gets the kettle on the fire and bubbling on page one?"

"I've been sitting here trying to think of one."

"Lovely. And in the meantime, the fairy host is out in the night, and the lower regions are—for this night, and possibly never again!—as wide open as the grave on Judgment Day."

The writer cast a long, melan-

choly look at his beautiful Muse. *He could suck melancholy out of a stone, as a weasel sucked eggs.*

In her two worlds met, the real world of every day and the world of imagination. His imagination. The real world of every day was a suburb on the slopes of Mt. Parnassus, just out of the city. The embossed metal sign at the border read, "HELICON, A VILLAGE OF PARNASSUS."

"I don't know anything about stuff like that—"

"Phooey! It's your stuff!"

"I have no experience with such things. It's not in my nature, either. I deal in the hosts of ordinary things that make life real, the dust and clay of daily life, the grit and grime, not fairy routs and dances. You should find someone else, someone who would be more receptive to your inspirations."

"Oh, just listen to yourself, already old and decrepit. The way you talk, you'd think there was only one Muse."

"Isn't there? You said there was only one, for me. Aren't you—I mean, aren't you it, her?"

"There's a potboiler Muse. There's a soap-opera Muse, poor

girl—a lifetime assignment. There's a serious fiction Muse. Of course, in the end, we're all one . . . facets of a single reality . . . but I'm your Muse. What I bring you is yours alone and no one else's."

" . . . no secondhand ideas?"

"Good lord, no!"

" . . . not stuff another writer would be better equipped to write?"

"Again, no, goofball!"

The Muse giggled. Then she looked at him reproachfully, as if it offended her that he would make her giggle at such a moment, as if he thought of her as nothing but a flirt, and then, unable to help herself since it was part of her nature to be a flirt, she giggled again.

"I'm your Muse," she said.

"What should I do?"

"Come along with me."

**David Rollow**

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*Did I hear  
you call me  
"Honey Pie,"  
Sweetie  
Bumps?*





## Reiki: Just The Facts Take Me To The River

By Don Brennan

It was Wednesday morning, July 6, three days before the 2016 Gem & Mineral Show. I was heading down the driveway with a cup of coffee in one hand and a well-worn copy of *The Celestine Prophecy* tucked under my arm. *The Celestine Prophecy* is one of those spiritual adventure stories that I'll never get tired of reading. Whenever I read it, I get caught up in the history of humanity's spiritual evolution and see the influences of my ancestors on my own spiritual journey. This particular copy, I bought from Bob Canino, the "Book Guy." Every time I opened the book it reminded me of his gentle presence.

The sun was shining and I was looking forward to reading at the picnic table in the back yard. The narrator was about to describe seeing energy radiating from people and plants in the gardens and orchards of Vicente Lodge in the Andes and I wanted to immerse myself in the energy of my own trees and plants. As I turned the corner of the driveway, I couldn't help noticing a beam of sunlight illuminating a large stone that had been washed out of the rock garden and into the driveway. It was sitting there, sparkling with energy, as if it had been waiting a very long time to greet me that morning.

"Whoa! Where did you come from?" I set it down on the picnic table as fragments of memories washed over me. It was an old friend that I had found as a child, on a family vacation, somewhere one summer. Even though it was still covered with bits of soil, it was easy to see that it was loaded with interesting minerals. "I'm going to have to hose you off."

The next two mornings, I spent more time staring at the stone than reading my book. The words were creating images not from *The Celestine Prophecy*, but from the day this stone first came into my life.

***I had glimpses of it  
sparkling  
in a shallow pool of water at  
the bottom of a riverbed.***

By now this new old friend had been scrubbed several times and I could appreciate the raw beauty and intense energy of white calcite, smoky quartz,



black tourmaline and garnet.

It was clear that this stone had found me...twice. It's certainly no coincidence that it reintroduced itself three days before the Gem Show, where I was going to be doing Reiki Healing with Crystals. How could I not take it to the Gem Show?

As one image led to another, I began to see a scenic rest stop or destination at a long winding river in New Hampshire. But we visited so many places in the New England states that it was almost impossible to say where or even when it may have happened.

Regardless of how it came to me this stone was meant to do healing work. Its shape and white calcite reminded me of the sacrum and I knew this was going to be a great stone for the spine and other skeletal issues. The calcite, black tourmaline, smoky quartz and garnet are all good base chakra stones. And they are all wonderful for grounding, clearing and cleansing. Again I think of the cleansing forces of the river in which it was found.

Finally, last November at the 2017 Canastota Psychic Fair, I had the chance to ask Kris Faso if he could tune in to the stone to see where I found it as a child. He agreed that it came back into my life for healing work. There was something about wisdom from the future, that was known in the past and is being remembered now. He thought it was an amazing stone as well, and suggested that I imagine the feeling I had when I first pulled it up from



the river.

So the next morning at home, I was thinking of that moment. There was a picnic area where we ate lunch. There was a covered bridge. I seem to remember wading downstream in the river. There was a large outcropping of rock above the surface, washed in sunlight. And then the river deepened and twisted around a bend leading to a little pool where something sparkling was calling for my attention.

I had found other sparkly stones in that river. Some have reemerged from the rock garden. But none compare to this one. To my childhood mind it seemed like it was full of jewels as I scooped it up from the river. And for the rest of the summer anyway, it was my precious.

I asked my brother about it, and his memory of our family vacations was worse than mine. But in talking with him, it seemed to make sense to look at some maps, rivers, picnic rest stops and tourist destinations, especially in New Hampshire. I already knew that the calcite, tourmaline and smoky quartz were regional to that area. And there were a couple of old garnet mines not far away in Maine. It seemed very likely that garnet would also be found in New Hampshire.

As visualizations led to other visualizations, the mystery seemed to be solving itself. Once I nailed down the geographical location, the visualizations were being validated by places that really do exist.

New Hampshire has an amazing state park in the

White Mountains, called Franconia Notch. At the base of Mount Liberty, is an 800-foot long gorge with 70 to 90 feet high walls of Conway granite. 200 million years ago, the Conway granite was deeply buried molten rock. As it cooled, the granite was broken by vertical fractures. Fluid dikes of basalt were forced up through the fractures, forcing the Conway granite aside. Basalt is finer grained than granite so it eroded faster as the waters of Flume Brook carved out a deep valley, creating the gorge. Water erosion and frost heaving continue to sculpt the Flume Gorge and bring up through cracks and fissures the hidden treasures from deep within the earth.

At first, I just used the stone to ground the earth chakra between the feet, because it was such a great grounding stone. I used it for every treatment and eventually it seemed to want greater, more active participation. The very last person at that fair was Kris Faso's front person Melaine. She wanted to learn Reiki and Kris told her, "You've got to take it from Don."

Her lower back was killing her and my river rock wanted to help. I said, "this might be a little heavy, but you're going to love it." Other stones were used as well, and by the end of the session her back pain was gone.

At some later time, I was talking on the phone with Melaine. She said she had a message from Kris. "Make sure you tell him. Don't forget. The stone he found as a kid...put the stone where you want the focus of the healing."

I had already been doing that because the stone

last raft dotted steal apricot crumb swale  
varnish gate imminent uprooted juniper  
case pipestem ingrain tilt spoon gambrel  
faucet garden pray abridge startle icy split  
nudge struck cod Wm. Shakespeare very  
carbon worsted scour twin light shirt  
knee zinc strut bearing stirrup attic  
laundry kitchen basement sunroom  
forest traipse jug stretch caster patio  
brine clump perish handbill teem whine  
stacked torrent peg catch starboard flask  
slab piece herb bleed flatter breeze justify  
blade pun icicle right cowed harry reverie

would tell me where it wanted to be placed and how it wanted to be positioned. When we begin to listen to the stones, they are more than happy to guide us.

The last person treated at the November 2017 Psychic Fair was Mark Shaughnessy who was suffering from a previous back injury. His back had been facing a very cold wall, all weekend long in his booth, and he was extremely contracted. I put the stone in the middle of his spine, where he had the biggest energy block. "Let me know if this is too heavy or painful." His response was one that has become very familiar, "It actually feels good."

Mark reported that all the other stones felt like EKG connectors sucking out discordant energy. He said the river stone pulled and cleared the block in the middle of his spine and moved it down to the sacrum. When I put the stone on his sacrum, it cleared it and moved it into his hips. And then I stroked from his hips to his toes and all the pain and tension left his body.

Just as the river performs its cleansing and releasing this healing stone works to wash away whatever is no longer necessary to hold on to. It clears away the energy patterns that no longer serve us. It pulls out the pain of the past...allowing for renewal and rebirth.

I had just turned 12 when I found that stone in the summer of 1964. It was the transitional summer

between elementary school and junior high school. As childhood fascinations gave way to teenage interests, the precious stones of my past became buried in that little rock garden out back. 50 years later, when we were both ready, it called to me, and came back into my life once again.

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*How'd you like to go up  
the river with somebody  
that knows the way?*

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# When I Have Thoughts That I May Cease to Pee

by Franklin Crawford

My brain, which I am very attached to even though we've never met, is doomed to liquefy and bubble out of my ears, nose and mouth, shortly after I am as dead as the DNC.

It's not the most pleasant thought my mind ever conjured, given that I suspect my brain doesn't like to imagine its post-mortem condition any more than whatever this self – this symbiont with whom I share my weathered hide – wishes to dwell upon.

I was prompted to dwell upon the body's decomposition process after reading a piece by Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of "Nickel and Dimed" (Henry Holt). To my surprise, she holds a Ph.D in cellular immunology. Sexy! So I stole some of her language. How I came across her piece called "Running to the Grave" is of no consequence. But reading it jolted me; I was just getting over a flu that robbed me of the good sense to peruse something light, like "The Making of the Atomic Bomb" or maybe Herriman's Krazy Kat cartoons.

Ehrenreich takes to task the faddish anti-aging movement – from dieting and eating alleged super foods and exotic elixirs – to old timers like me who drag their pale fuzzy butts to the gym every day in the hopes of keeping death at bay and maybe getting laid again before their 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.



She then gives a proper ass-kicking to our Beat the Reaper culture with some vivid particulars regarding the death process. We all die. And then things get ugly. It gets ugly for the good, the bad, the healthy, the ill, the aged, the young.

This is not a synopsis of her piece (Harper's March 2018 edition), but it's Ehrenreich's fault that I'm writing this.

I used to live for extremes. Extremes made an otherwise ordinary life interesting. I have a binge and purge personality and it does not discriminate across categories. Age has a way of interfering with that lifestyle though, and after about 50, I saw that extreme behavior, while certainly a terrific distraction, was the fast road to hell and beyond, sans bed and bath. Nothing new there.

I'm damn glad I didn't kill myself doing crazy shit like binge drinking and drugging for weeks, binge

exercising, binge caffeinating, binge insomnia, binge sleeping, binge juice fasting, binge purging, binge writing, binge bingeing.

But I miss it. I miss the extreme sport of testing the limits of mind, brain, and body. It got the ol' encephalon up to speeds that I considered ... professional, I guess. Or binge doping, to slow the roiling gray matter down to a simmer when it got away from me. Numb is a feeling, too. What I always hoped to avoid was the deceptive instance when I crossed the borderlands of tolerance and Mr. Brain, this rumor between my ears, started misfiring, spluttering and taking orders from an angry liver, an ulcerated stomach, pissed off kidneys – times of crisis where simply deciphering the instructions on an Immodium label became a Dick and Jane exercise: Words ... hard ... Me ... stupid ... Him devolve now, drag knuckles back to couch, cry.



Forget writing during such a fugue state. Writing is out of the question when the brain and body are in cahoots to survive: "Abstract thought? How about we just puke, learn how to breathe, get the heart beating steady again. Later for the executive functions okay? There's a wildcat strike down below decks."

Seeing the early onset of senility due to my bingeing put a halt to my going ape-shit over anything – up to and including – chugging maple syrup right out of the jug (my g-d is that good stuff!). Or trying to pull a collegiate drag ratio on a rowing machine 36 percentage points above what a college athlete would train at for twenty minutes. Exactly what am I trying to prove during those episodes? That I can suffer cardiac infarct just like any other geezer?

On the creative side, "running to the grave" is a good way of describing how I meet deadlines. Deadlines. Nice word for "get your shit done on time."

Extremism rules my otherwise harmless avocations. I discovered picture-taking about a decade ago and binged-out on that. Now I am culling the results of that digital foray – which I add to almost daily. It's kind of a rigged system, my own little Xeno's paradox.

I became a digital image hoarder. My archives hold some 50,000 images and most of them don't mean squat. The bulk of them are crap: A shoestring on the floor, the shadow of a parking sign against the sidewalk, someone's prodigious belly sticking out beyond a corner behind which I am hiding; a blurry duck in a mud puddle; the mud puddle.

All of that stuff caught my eye. It was a good diversion. The eyeball is connected to the optic nerve which runs to the occipital and bingo: Pop the card out of the camera, insert into computer, voila! Instant fix. It

got me high.

I'm not blowing any twaddle about moderation. F\*\*k moderation. A person like me who works in spurts will never become a plodder – unless disease makes it so. I'm talking about death-avoidance by any means necessary; about trying to outrun The Reaper.

I met The Reaper a couple of times when I was very ill. She showed me her bona fides so I had no reason for doubt. The sick room got cold as a crypt and my body chilled and clammy and death was right there. You'll know it when it comes if it ain't sudden. BTW: The Reaper is called Grim for a reason: She and I (my reaper is not gender-neutral) do not share the same sense of humor:

Doesn't matter. She wanted a Green Card if she let me live!

During those dreadful hours, I was void of humor. Even though Ms. Reaper, who bore a striking resemblance to a Bollywood starlet, was not much for the one-liners. Mighta been my delivery. You try making jokes while your teeth are chattering and you're about to crap the bed. My job was to stay alive – or succumb to it. One of these episodes lasted more than a week until the Grimstress vacated the premises – with promise of return – my soul for a Green Card! Why would any Reaper require such a document?

Other meetings were of shorter duration, but no less menacing.

Nope. I am not in a hurry to have that beloved jellyfish in my think-tank turned into a hasty pudding that dribbles out my face-holes. Please dear gray

matter, stay intact for the duration, if only for old time's sake?

That's why I'm here now, throwing this word salad together to beat a deadline, so that I may live to see another one. Otherwise, it will be time to call the Brain Drain folks and have that cranial vault sucked into oblivion. Place the remainders in the oven at 1,400-1,800 degrees until very, very well done. Toss ash into litter box. My cats will take care of the rest. Until such time, ciao bella.

### **Franklin Crawford**

Administrator/Writer/Photographer  
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 TinyTownTimes.com (on FaceBook)

***The Grim Reaper came by riding on a vulture that sat on my sea chest and said, "Do some Smores," so I did a few ...***





Villaggio Mall Shopping  
Center, in Doha, the  
capital of Qatar

by Peter Fortunato

1.

Nine years since I left Doha, the capital of Qatar, where I lived and worked for four years, the experience in retrospect conflating to become one continuous heated day and night in the desert—only it's not only a desert, and, also, like the sea, the desert is never the same desert from one day to the next. Didn't Heraclitus say something like that—he was talking about never stepping into the same river twice, but you take my point. You can't go back—and I haven't been back to Doha, and yet, and yet, it also seems as if Doha has never left me.

From a distance, sitting at my computer in Ithaca, I've kept abreast of all the obvious developments, including, of course, the recent saga that's daily unfolding around the embargo imposed on tiny Qatar by its large and powerful Gulf neighbors in an attempt to bend that sovereign state to their will. *The New York Times* just did a long front page spread on this mess, which incidentally, seems to have been urged along by some comments the resident of the US White House made while he was in Saudi Arabia last year. So far, Qatar has been able to resist and even to continue to prosper thanks to the strength of their economy and their ingenuity at circumventing the impediments

their formerly friendly neighbors have imposed.

My contacts at Weill Cornell Medical College (where I taught writing to Pre-Med students from all over the world) have ratified that the *Times's* reporting is a fair summary of things, insofar as things can be "known" to outsiders. And outsiders aren't just people living abroad, but include anyone in-country who is not a Qatari national, and, actually, among the nationals, only the inner circle of the autocracy probably know what's what. Yes, it is an Islamic state, a kingdom or *emirate*, whose legal system, the *sharia*, is based on the local interpretation of the Quran. No, it's not a dictatorship, and in fact relatively liberal by the



standards of other Islamic states such as Saudi or Abu Dhabi. Maybe its government will someday be more democratically representative. Maybe, someday. *Inshallah*—if God wills it.

Qatar has around 313,000 citizens, or nationals, the rest of the population being comprised of around 2.3 million expat workers, white collar and blue collar foreigners, most of whom work in Doha, the capital city. A peninsula poking its finger off of the larger Arabian peninsula into the Persian Gulf, its total area is more or less equal to that of Connecticut. Only two generations ago, Qatari tribespeople walked sandal-strapped through the dust of a small port town, but today, thanks to their natural gas reserves, among the nationals, per capita, Qatar is the richest country in the world. That's surreal.

## 2.

Nowadays, people tend to use the word "surreal" rather loosely, to denote anything that seems so "super real" as to be out of the ordinary. Basically, surreal has come to mean extraordinary—yet because of the way we live now, driven by the latest technological or medical advances, instantly absorbing tragic news from around the globe even as the stories unfold amid ads, say, for chocolate candy and cosmetics, interrupted and distracted by handheld devices whose powers surpass those of a room-sized computer two decades old, because of the way we live in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the extraordinary has begun to seem commonplace. Because of this, I would argue that our imaginations and capacities for wonder are being anesthetized, and that among other things, the wonders of the natural world, our home, our planet, are to many people more "virtual" than actual.

Ironically, our imaginations are failing us because of the astounding feats we have trained our silicon chips and microcircuits

to accomplish. How else to explain the dreary repetitions of capitalist hegemonies the world over? How else to explain the failure to imagine and feel others' pain amid the numbing continuation of business as usual? New computer applications abound, but have they as yet radically altered the global perspective so as to free us from corporate tyrannies? Since we can't as yet imagine and actualize on a global scale better alternatives to consumerism, our home planet is steadily being degraded, its resources squandered, spoiled not only for humans, but also for all other forms of life. A further irony is that we've heard this complaint so often, that, alas, it too fails to rouse us: ecological disaster comes to sound ordinary and unavoidable. Some futurist thinkers have begun to hypothesize off-world migrations and in particular Martian colonization as the best solution to the problems we've caused by soiling our nest. Absurd! We'd probably do the same to Mars! What a surreal proposition!

\*

But why do I use the word *surreal* so often with regard to my experiences in Qatar? For starters, I witnessed "the world's fastest growing economy" first-hand, participated in it while being regarded as "capital" because of my professional value to that economy. I watched Doha rising from the gypsum flats of the Qatari desert to become a futuristic city on the waterfront of a one-time fishing village. All this is a result of a breakthrough process some thirty years ago that allows the liquefaction of natural gas so that it can be shipped through the Persian Gulf and out the Straits of Hormuz to any port in the world. Surreal: I could watch on an international television station a government sponsored advert soliciting global investments in Qatar, a British inflected voiceover touting the economic boom while the visual imagery featured the

Qatar Financial Center, a building I'd watched growing from the desert floor outside my apartment window.

Yet Doha is more than a marvel in steel, glass and marble: in its replication of more developed urban centers, it is also incurring their problems. Air pollution is a big one. I found it was inescapable: indoors because of the reliance on air cooling and the resultant molds to which I am often allergic; outdoors because of the dust and sand on the wind sometimes carried here from hundreds of miles away, or else due to the latest nearest desert excavation. Eye problems were common long before the present day pollution, but today's air quality is further compromised by the ever increasing traffic choking the motorways, as well as by the toxic byproducts of the petroleum industry. Flared off gases, for example, lace the hot air with odors that were to me the scent of modern Qatar.

And what about labor practices, specifically those concerning the guest workers who have built all the shining towers? Their employers in white *thobes* might have willed a modern society into being, but it is the labor force at the bottom of this pyramid that literally supports it: anonymous guys in blue coveralls imported mostly from impoverished villages in Pakistan, India, or Nepal. House maids and nannies come here from those countries too, and from Malaysia and the Philippines—preferably Muslims, but if the price is right, sure, Christians and Hindus and a few Buddhists too. Slavery was made illegal in Qatar only during the 1950's—that's a shocking fact, but at least slavery *is* technically illegal nowadays. Unfortunately, what is no longer shocking is the way that all the wealthy Global Cooperation Council States tend to treat the scads of foreign workers on whom they depend. These millions, mostly single men under contract to large companies, comprise an under-class,



practically a serving class, usually bound in place by contracts whose hidden clauses prevent them from easily leaving. Segregated from the rest of the populace because of economic status or ethnic identity, they are often disparaged, feared, or ignored.

I remember one English language newspaper story that ran in installments several times until it disappeared from sight (not uncommon, as it was not complementary to the Qataris) about a Hindu housemaid whose mistress accused her of worshipping a cow and repeatedly beat her for these acts of idolatry. Reading between the lines, I could only imagine the nature of the misunderstanding—but I also heard worse stories about maids who'd been raped and had to have emergency abortions at a facility known for doing this discreetly in order to protect persons of influence. Stories. I had no way to verify them, but such stories circulated often enough to lend them credibility. I myself was warned by an American friend who'd been in the country longer than I not to advertise my political viewpoints or the fact that I am a shaman, and to remember always that persons with "clout"—it's called *wasta* in Arabic—might be watching, and could easily have me deported. Even within the classrooms of Weill Cornell, we were careful in choosing our readings and topics of discussions and visual content, as did colleagues at the other American universities the Qataris also host, for fear of inadvertently offending the sensibilities of students from powerful conservative families.

\*

Let me give you a more complete definition of the surreal: it is the quality of imagination that allows supposedly ordinary perceptions to resonate more deeply within. A surreal event or object of art does not depend on spectacle or on the extraordinary, per se. The intention

of the surreal event or object is to *surpass* the rational mind and evoke the powers of the unconscious mind. For this reason, objects and images not usually found together often comprise Surrealist artworks. Dreams and taboo-breaking fantasies were central to the original Surrealists, European artists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As the art critic Celia Rabinovitch puts it, a surreal work is intent on jarring its viewer in order to cause a moment of *epiphany*; that is, a moment of revelation or insight.

My life in Doha continually supplied me with such experiences. Most importantly, and perhaps least surprisingly, at this international crossroads I came to see how much like me other human beings truly are, especially as we seek a balance between the inner life and the outer one.

I would say that during my first year in Qatar I was probably enduring a condition of "culture shock," largely due to the ubiquitous contradictions in so rapidly altering a society. And yet, because there were so many disconcerting aspects about the place, I looked at everything closely, marveling at the rearrangement of a traditional Bedouin culture to accommodate lavish 21<sup>st</sup> Century life styles. The rate of change was continually dazzling, often humorous, often tedious: to give you one example, throughout the country, roads might literally appear or else disappear overnight, and one morning I lost my way on my morning drive to work, meandering along a dusty track through a village I hadn't previously known to exist so near to Education City! That was surreal.

3.

Just after my arrival in 2005, during my first free moments to explore the gigantic City Center shopping mall across the street from my home, I went looking for books and periodicals to help

ground myself. There were almost no English language bookstores in Qatar at that time, but in the supermarket of this mall, at a French Carrefour store reminiscent of Walmart back in the States, at a paperback rack, among the other sanitized novels permitted for sale, I spotted Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion*. This young adult novel about a boy who is shipwrecked on an island with an Arabian horse was a childhood favorite of mine, an early link to the world of horses and also to the Arabic World. Immediately I pulled it from the shelf, opened at random and read. I knew exactly where I was in the story.

The next day, having given a second thought to the symbolic value of that cheap paperback, I returned to Carrefour wishing to purchase it, but it was gone. Throughout four subsequent years, I would never again see an edition of *The Black Stallion*, nor spy any other of Walter Farley's many books about horses, despite the eventual appearance of actual bookshops in Doha, despite the plethora of publications devoted to Arabian horses and equestrianism.

Here was my epiphany: standing in that busy supermarket while reading words so precious to my childhood gave me a sense of the soul's power to draw into reach the sustenance it requires. Soul, psyche, mind: whatever you call it, we have this capacity by the power of Imagination (I capitalize the term, as William Blake does) to link disparate things and events into meaningful patterns. As a result, we feel more alive, more animated. You can argue that the brain is hard-wired to search for ways that objective events might be connected to each other and to us, and that it's an evolutionary advantage perhaps, and that the mind will probably find some kind of relationship to exist between almost any experiences juxtaposed in time or space because we so desire to perceive patterns and connections. Fine. What I'm talking about is the quality of the felt experience,

and about the power inherent to subjectivity. I call it Imagination or Wonder. Referring to my Black Stallion moment as “coincidence” is so paltry in comparison.

We are always in contact with other kinds of energies that we hardly comprehend at a rational level, and so attention to what our “magnetic fields” attract—i.e., our perceptivity—can reveal truths at first hidden but ultimately satisfying to both our rational sense and our poetic sensibility. The recognition of these patterns helps to remind us that without meaningful relationships, we are pretty much lost souls. Then too there are the sudden flashes of insight, the epiphanies, the illuminations that are sparked off from the thoroughly unexpected contacts between disparate elements: like a torch lit by flint striking steel, by this light we might glimpse something of the extraordinary reality that is always dwelling within the “ordinary.” This is the spiritual dimension of everyday life.

These shocks can impart a sense of the “super realism” that the Surrealist artists working in Europe during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to induce. All of the strange sights and experiences about which we nowadays exclaim, “That was surreal,” are precisely those moments when something out of the ordinary breaks suddenly into the field of consciousness. Before the flash subsides to become nothing more than a memory of a peculiar moment, there is the possibility of recognizing that reality is actually *always* like this, that *we ourselves* are always like this: both extraordinary and ephemeral. Without the felt presence of Spirit, without Soul in the World—your own psyche reflected back to you—the world and everything in it can feel lifeless and incapable of touching us emotionally. Doha becomes just another petroleum fueled collection of architectural wonders, not so different from Dubai or Riyadh,

not so different from Las Vegas or Miami.

In Qatar, a place that seemed for so long alien to me—and worse, sterile, boring, repressed, “soulless”—I learned again and again that what my spirit hungers for cannot be acquired “out there,” as if it were a commodity stocked in an aisle of Carrefour. Gold might be said to be wherever you can find it, but prospecting is also its own kind of reward.

\*

Here’s something from my journal, dated September 2007:

“First day of autumn: weather clear, sun hot, low humidity. Yesterday I’m sure the temp reached 104 F, and poolside, despite the seasonal changes—fewer tanning rays in the angled light—one hour of sunbathing and dunking was quite enough. Especially since it’s Ramadan, I must be sure my quasi-nakedness is concealed from observant Muslim eyes. Behind our walled-off living quarters, we expats are more or less allowed to carry on as we like. And I for one like the sun.

“In my tiny bathing suit I am true to my Italian heritage as I lounge among other males, mostly pink-skinned Brits in baggy trunks who take the sun in sips like tea. There is rarely a woman to be seen here, although sometimes, like a bright migratory bird, for a few minutes a bikini-clad lovely, one of those temporarily housed in my apartment tower, does alight. This is inevitably eye-popping in a country where so many of the women—who are in fact a minority of the total population—are “covered.” In public, the Qatari women wear long black cloaks called *abayas* and swath their heads with *hijabs* and *shalas*. The most conservative wear face coverings of various kinds called *niqabs*. The Qatari men meanwhile are all in white, but they too are extremely modest about their bodies, and I’ve even seen a sign in a men’s locker room asking that people avoid

complete nudity if possible.

“I am 100 % Italian by genotype: dark complexion, dark hair. In Naples, on the island of Sicily my ancestors’ blood might well have mixed in Arabic genes, and as a result, I’ve been mistaken for a Jordanian, a Lebanese. Once, when my students insisted on dressing me up in traditional Qatari garb I was told by them appreciatively that I might pass for a local so long as I didn’t try to speak Arabic! My salt-and-pepper beard is also a plus because it earns me respect as an elder. Out-of-place though I often feel in Qatar—indeed, because I have no place in public, not even at the college, to be completely my uninhibited self—I have found new strength within. My private life is turned deeply inward toward the spiritual. This includes my curiosity about Islam.”

\*

The Quran says, “The soul is the concern of my Lord, and you have been given of knowledge but a little.” That might be interpreted to mean: do not concern yourself too much with your essence, since you can’t grasp it, and besides, God has told you all you need to know about your place in the universe; rest assured that he loves you and takes good care of you. The implication for Muslims—literally those who submit to the will of God—seems to be that since you can’t know God directly or communicate with God personally, you should faithfully follow the *sunna*, the tradition established by the Prophet Mohammed. God will judge after death if you are worthy of eternal reward.

By contrast, practitioners of esoteric Islam, the Sufis, who also study the Quran closely, turn directly toward the experience of the Divine. Because of their thirst for God’s love and their ecstatic celebration of it, like the mystics of many traditions, they sometimes behave in ways that shock

ordinary people, for example, by dressing rather haphazardly, or by indulging in spontaneous, sometimes outrageous behaviors, or by espousing religious views that go beyond those typical of Islam. Many Sufi teaching stories satirize human folly and hypocrisy, especially among the so-called religious, because for the Sufis the most essential elements of the spiritual life are self-reflection and a deep yearning for union with the Divine, poetically conceived of as the Beloved. When their way goes beyond the constraints of Islamic law, *sharia*, they might suffer terribly at the hands of conservatives. Where Sunni Islam is at its most conservative, for example in Saudi Arabia, and to some extent in Qatar, Sufi teachings and practices are largely secretive because they are misunderstood, dismissed as aberrant, or reviled as heretical and therefore punishable. Others' ignorance and hatred are not obstacles to a true Sufi or *dervish*.

#### 4.

Arabic language television at night live from Mecca during the month of Ramadan connects viewers with thousands in prayer at the Great Mosque in Mecca, many of them circling the *Kaaba*, the most sacred shrine of Islam, while verses of the Quran are soulfully chanted. It's very moving, very meditative, even if like me you don't understand much Arabic. In general, during the Holy Month, the programming on all the Arabic language stations is toned down, and on the English language stations, there are fewer of the usual action-adventure movies intended for male viewers and fewer soppy, censored love stories aimed at female audiences. However, this year, 2007, I sense another sort of difference on all the TV channels.

The programming seems less

focused on the religious dimension of Ramadan than in the past, with more emphasis on the family pleasures of the season. Also, there is more commercial advertising for the consumer goods that symbolize home comfort, as well as for numerous holiday shopping deals. There is one commercial I see over and over, a bizarre ad in Arabic, for "gold" Chevrolet SUV's available in Dubai—perhaps it's only a gold car key, but still. . . . The Dubai stations also seem to be broadcasting a lot of reruns of American TV shows that feature Thanksgiving and Christmas episodes. The target audience is obviously Western non-Muslim expats, and I wonder if perhaps this scheduling is supposed to be a way to help us relate to the family flavors of Ramadan? None of these shows features anything whatsoever about religion, but perhaps they are intended also as a way for Muslims to relate to the popular culture of the West? All the shows have Arabic subtitles, and they intersperse adverts in Arabic for local favorite products like that creamy cheese spread so popular in the Middle East, *lebenah*.

Across the street from my apartment, City Center during this particular Ramadan is decked with strings of lights and large attractive banners, red and gold drapery hanging on high from the glass dome four stories over the ice skating rink. (At Christmas time there are also some seasonal decorations here, a big tree, for example, but never a sign of the baby Jesus and his family, or of angels and shepherds.) The foyer of this shopping mall is quite literally the coolest place in the country, because of the central ice rink, and I have often joked that the Qataris will eventually put a dome over the entire peninsula and refrigerate it. What they have focused on so far are larger and larger interiors of all kinds—indeed, later tonight, I will go to one of the most unusual, the Italianate *Villaggio* shopping mall.

And I shall be in the company of my dear Italian friend, Dr. D.

\*

D is two decades younger than I, (it seems that almost everybody in Doha is younger than I am), a 35 year old bachelor, a colleague at Weill Cornell, a professor of physics, an assistant dean, and a fellow horse lover with whom I have formed one of my deepest friendships in Qatar. He is from a little town outside Turin in the North of Italy, although he has family roots in the South, which must account for his warmth, I think, and his lack of pretentiousness. He did his PhD in theoretical physics at Cornell in Ithaca, and then a post-doc at the prestigious Max Planck Institute in Munich. M is an agnostic in the best sense: while he has no special interest in organized religion, he is fundamentally curious about life, and as a physicist, he looks always for the relationships among life's parts. A native Italian, he is steeped in the cultural heritage of the Church of Rome, and, like me, finds many similarities between it and Islam.

Dr. D is fair skinned, avoids the sun, suffers from the heat, and as far as I know does not swim. He has a high forehead, and while his auburn hair is these days parting wider and wider across his pate, he has a thick mustache that is always precisely trimmed. He dresses with true Italian panache; however, since he has partial color-blindness, some of his combinations are perhaps more striking than he might have intended. Also, he sometimes wears a bowtie, and in the entire country, I have seen only one other person, our Argentine colleague Dr. L, wear a bowtie regularly to work.

D's eyes glitter with excitement behind his shining spectacles whenever he has had some wonderful new idea or has experienced a breakthrough in solving a difficult equation—and yet he is anything but pedantic: D is passionate about knowledge, it's what makes him



such a beloved teacher at WCMC-Q, and he has retained real intellectual curiosity about many different subjects.

A brilliant student his whole life, Dr. D also spent years in his youth practicing to become a concert pianist before deciding he would never be among the greatest; he then withdrew from competition to play solely for the love of music. He loves literature as well as music, and he has memorized long portions of Dante's *La Divina Commedia*, as well as parts of Goethe's *Faust* in German (which he also speaks rather well), and even some Russian love poetry that he once memorized in order to impress a girlfriend. He speaks quite a bit of Arabic and is teaching himself Farsi, the language of Iran, which he has not been able to convince me to take up. I think that because M is such a generalist it would be difficult for him ever to find a home as a tenured professor in a university physics department.

So why does so interesting a person remain in Doha, hardly the most fun-loving place on the planet or the most interesting culture of the Arabic World? His love of teaching is of course the main reason—it was for me also the primary reason I stayed four years. And it's not for the lucre, the "golden handcuffs" as the hefty salaries here are sometimes called by expat professionals. I suspect that the reasons D has stayed so long (and he's there still) also have to do with the ease of life that's possible in this controlled society. Whatever its disadvantages, life in Qatar can be very comfortable for the well-off. And there's this too: time slows down in the desert as it does in the tropics because the seasons are less distinguishable from one another; inertia sets in; years flow by. If you're among the professional class, there are various perks, for example regular and much anticipated flights away to more interesting places for holidays and on company funded business trips to

the world's capitals.

When my wife Mary visits from the States (I am in Doha something of a "forced bachelor," living apart from my wife like thousands of other male expats), Dr. D always greets her with a warm hello, bows slightly from the waist, taps his heels together in a form of salute, and then seemingly drops out of sight. Accordingly, when he is smitten and in pursuit of a particular *innamorata*, I will wait on the sidelines until he calls me with an update on his progress. D has a great interest in feminine beauty, but finding a steady relationship has proven to be a continuing challenge because of his reserve around women, his high standards, and Doha's limited possibilities. Despite various platonic friendships and infatuations he has never yet found *her*. We have spent many nights together on this quest. In our continual conversations, D and I are as much interested in women as in the origins of the universe—I hear him now: "*Ooh, you mean they're not the same thing?*"

\*

Dr. D pulls up in a cloud of dust outside the gate of my tower, having phoned me on my mobile ahead of time so that I can emerge from the chilled air of the lobby and cross the broken open street in front of my home just as his car appears.

"*Buona sera, bouna sera, professore!*" he says, as I open the door and slide into his air-conditioned Camry. "*Buona sera, dottore. Come si va?*" I reply. It is our familiar greeting on these nights out, but henceforth we will converse primarily in English, except for certain choice exchanges, usually having to do with women.

Because we're on our way tonight to the Villaggio, we are both somewhat giddy, feeling as we always do how positively mad it would seem to people actually living in Italy to hear about this fantasy land in the Qatari desert.

"Extraordinary as it is, a singular form of experience in so many of its aspects, of course we could never do it justice!" he pronounces, thus setting the tone for our evening. In truth, we will enjoy various kinds of pleasure at the Villaggio, primarily in each other's company, as we wander among the shops and sights almost never purchasing anything besides coffee, cake or ice cream.

Tuscan inspired, the Villaggio—"the Village"—has no individual buildings *per se*, and from the outside looks to be a kind of continuous movie set forming the outline of *palazzi*, bell towers, domes (no cathedrals or basilicas, of course) and roofs painted in pastel colors and earth tones. Indoors, the surreal quality is accentuated: two long marble-floored parallel avenues completely lined with shops on the ground level of the Italianesque "buildings." Overhead, there is a continuous blue painted sky replete with billowing white clouds, softly lit to suggest sundown all through the day and all through the night. There is almost no natural light, by the way, and therefore time as well as space soon loses its ordinary coordinates.

And then there's the water filled canal complete with motorized gondolas and European guys (Bulgarians? Romanians?) dressed as Venetian gondoliers pretending to pole you along, for about \$3.00 US a ride. And beyond the boutiques and typical mall stores, there are numerous restaurants, a rather expensive Café Paul imported from France, and an extremely pricey Italian café we tend to avoid. No alcohol is served anywhere, but the best bookstore in the country has opened here: a Virgin Megastore that actually has books you want to browse and perhaps purchase, as well as some CD's and DVD's of interest now that many of the country's censorship controls have been lifted.

There is also an indoor ice-

skating rink here, less extravagant than the one in City Center, surrounded by fast-food joints, a neighborhood favored by little kids and parents who watch from Formica-topped tables, as the little ones bend their ankles, step, glide, and plop. At certain hours on the weekends, slightly older adolescents, many of them Qatari, in separate packs of boys and girls—*thobes* and *abayas*, usually, but not always, I've noticed—wander around until maybe 10:00 p.m. The place stays open until 1:00 a.m. every night.

This is "international mall life," is it not? Ultimately boring, it is a systematic disjunction from all that is specifically local; a recombination of disparate parts appropriated from afar; a grand imitation that becomes a destination in itself, and all under one roof. Despite its predictability, or because of it, a shining shopping mall is a temple of commerce, and surely something you or your children want or will want is waiting here at a reasonable price. And if you can't find what you came for, why not just buy something else?

\*

"Look over there. At the door of that shop. It could be Omar Sharif."

"Does he drive a motorcycle?"

"Maybe. Maybe he just likes to wear the leather clothes."

"It's not him."

"No. But it could be."

"Yes, it could be."

"In the Villaggio it could be."

"In the Villaggio it could be—poor guy!"

\*

Surrealism: originally an aesthetic movement and philosophical outlook that sought to represent the spontaneous functioning of the mind through its unconscious contents unmediated by reason: a "super realism," whose

mode of operation places priority on the irrational in human life, arguing that it has far more influence on human experience than the rational mind likes to admit.

Hence, the emphasis on dreams in the works of artists such as Salvador Dali and Giorgio de Chirico (who also founded an art movement called the *scuola metafisica*, the metaphysical school): the sovereignty of unfettered Imagination, provocative, witty, often hilarious, and sometimes frightening. This art naturally moves through the provinces of the Greek god Hermes, the trickster and shape shifter, with works that feature weird juxtapositions of objects and the depiction of characters traversing dreamscapes that haunt us down the decades. The significance of the movement's influence upon the modern intellect practically goes without saying, but it is worth noting that Surrealism came into being at about the same time as Psychoanalysis.

Whatever its particular content, a work of surrealist art seems to beg the question, *why not?* It demands that the authentic products of the unconscious, even when they appear nightmarish, be regarded as potential sources of liberation from past assumptions and received meanings. No wonder the contemporary poet Adonis, perhaps the most important living Arabic language poet, an expatriate Syrian who has lived for years in Paris, wrote a book of essays titled *Sufism and Surrealism*.

In this respect, although the Villaggio at first feels totally out of context in the midst of the Qatari desert, like a recurring dream, it soon becomes strangely familiar—as do so many of our era's disjunctions and re-combinations. Because of continual exposure to it, even the "super real" can seem commonplace (and, ironically, a painting such as Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* becomes difficult to view as

anything other than a "Surrealist masterpiece.") Meanwhile, the desire for novelty is such a feature of the modern zeitgeist that we have come to demand it constantly and always at a faster pace. There is something frightening in this, yet so habituated are moderns to their distracted, adrenaline driven ways of life, so used are they to their dependence on novel sensations, that the accompanying tensions are often ignored or actually accepted as simply another price to pay for the way we live now. (Who dreams of slowing down, of simplifying, of dangling their feet in cool water—well, actually, quite a few. . .)

Because of the ease with which it seems that everything, anywhere can be accessed electronically, purchased and then physically shipped to us on demand, we ourselves are, metaphysically speaking, delivered to no specific place at all. Globalization sacrifices the "local" for an illusion of the "international," with the result, it seems to me, that few persons ever know where they actually stand in relation to the Planet beneath their feet. Our moment is populated by alienated and sad souls, victims of materialism, manipulated by economic and social forces far beyond their command. And so, shopping for familiar products becomes ever more important under these circumstances, because, oddly, this activity reassures us about "reality." How can the word "surreal" be applied any longer to this pervasive condition?

Even if you do accept the architecture and the contents of the Villaggio as transparent folly, the fantasies of a fantasyland labeled Fantasyland, and recognize that as with Disney World, nobody can actually live here, still, well, *it looks like they could*—and maybe the glittery shopping mall's significance is in this: the objects of your desire actually do "live" here. *Join us,*

they seem to plead, as in a dream.  
*Consume us. You too can become shiny, fashionable, creamy, sheer. . .*

And ultimately boring, I reply.

*Ah, but you are here, are you not?* whispers Hermes the trickster into my ear. He is as much at home in the Villaggio as in any other dreamscape. *Surprise yourself*, he prods me.

I look up from a bowl of ice cream at Doctor D's twinkling eyes, and we launch into another cycle of disquisitions.

\*

Are the Qataris merely moving fast-forward, seeming to have skipped over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century into the 21<sup>st</sup>, acquiring its problems along with its benefits? They say they want to build "a knowledge based economy"—hence all the branch campuses of American universities, and the terrific investments in scientific research and cutting edge technology projects; hence all the international conferences they have hosted (at least until the June 2017 embargo began.) But here as elsewhere, the engines of capitalism rarely pause to address the problems that quickly appear alongside the benefits. "Let the people choose what they want!" the daemon of the Free Market bellows, as if the freedom to choose among largely unnecessary objects and activities

were the highest form of democracy in action, and as if there will always be a technological fix tomorrow for the mess we've created today.

"Freedom to choose luxury condos and brands of shampoo and diamond wristwatch bands for a people whose religion and cultural traditions are so *bare* of iconography!" I muse aloud to my friend who is sipping the last of his coffee.

What other kinds of visions might all of these glittering baubles crowd out? I wonder if the boredom I see already among the privileged youth, who have never worked for their purchasing power, will result in a debilitating ennui before long, and if this will lead to despair that might erupt with even worse consequences than the lamentable incidents of "chicken" played out to the death on deserted highways or the gunfire between rivals at midnight roundabouts. Writing this in 2018, I wonder if, ironically, the embargo will inspire these youths to a healthy patriotism and a willingness to work harder on behalf of their country? Inshallah.

At our café, preparing to call it a night, 11:00 p.m. and ready to leave the Villaggio, I let my eyes follow a pair of ample hips swinging under a passing skirt. To Dr. D I say: "At a roundabout this morning, stopped

in a Ramadan morning prayer traffic jam, I was face to face with a billboard showing a young blond couple, he and she dangling their bare feet off the deck of a yacht, with the subtitle in English and Arabic, *Glamour*. Background: waterside condominiums, probably those being built right now out on the Pearl archipelago. Honestly, I was scandalized, scandalized!"

D follows my eyes out into the flow of human desiring.

"I'm glad to know they're making such progress," he chuckles.

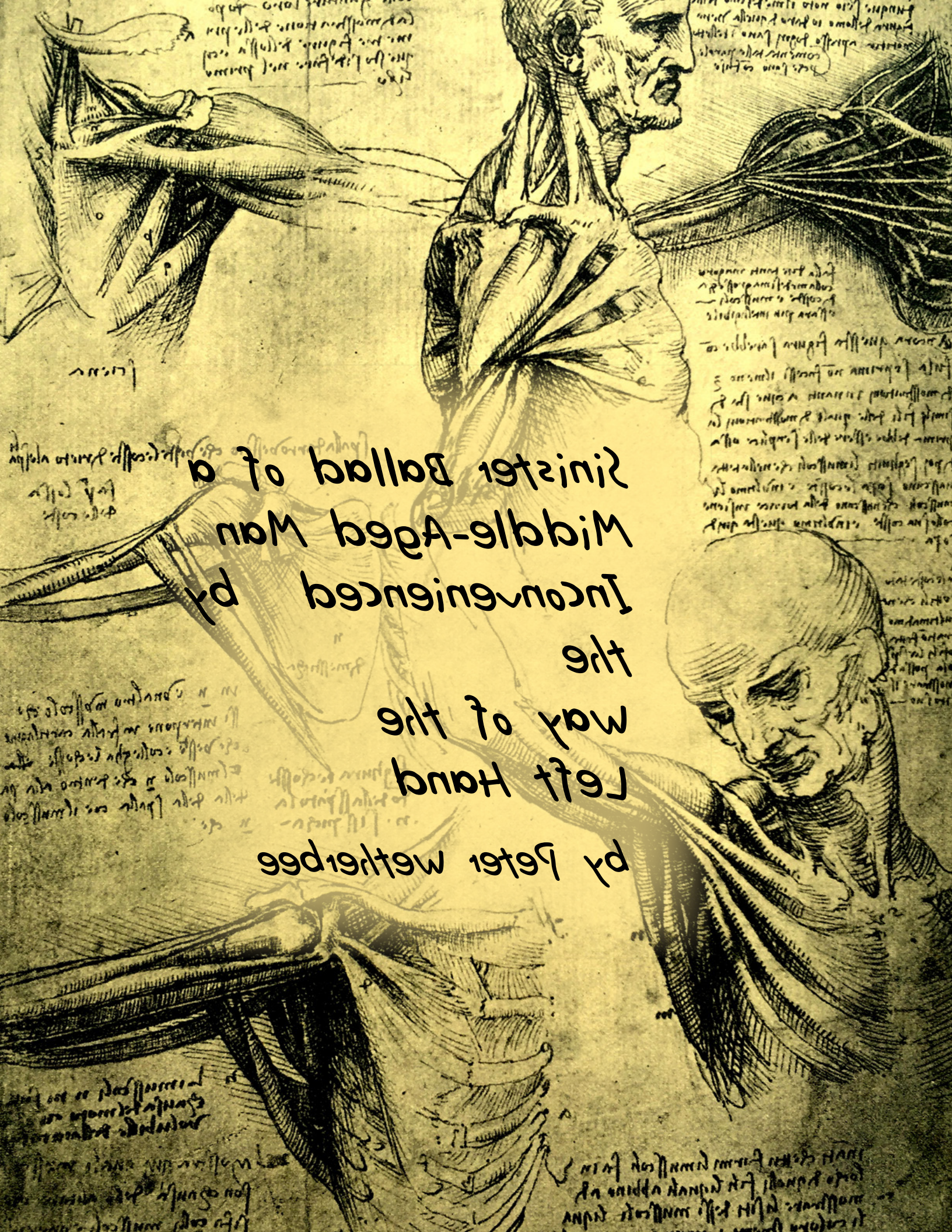


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*This morning,  
along about  
three, I looked up into  
my head, or maybe I  
just dreamed I did,  
but I can tell you this  
much- it was  
EMPTY*





by Peter Wetherbee  
Left Hand  
Way of the  
the  
Inconvenienced  
Middle-Aged Man  
of a Minister



# Sinister Ballad of a Middle-Aged Man Inconvenienced by the Way of the Left Hand

by Peter Wetherbee

The experience of breaking my right wrist has been just as enlightening as it's been a pain in the butt. It turns out everything I care about doing is with my hands: plural. To add insult to injury, I'm finding that I'm a conservative stiff — which is definitely not how I like to think of myself.

It all started a few weeks ago when I wiped out and busted up the radius bone in my right forearm. For six weeks I have a cast from elbow to knuckles that leaves me barely able to do the OK sign with my thumb and index finger and little in the way of strength or dexterity.

The cast gets in the way of things like using a pencil or clicking a mouse. I tried moving the mouse to the left side of the keyboard but was surprised how hopelessly awkward it felt. Simple chores like cooking and laundry take more steps because I have to dumb everything down to one-handed versions of things that were normally a breeze.

It was also annoyingly humbling to receive a glimpse into my own deep-rooted prejudices as a right-hander. Simple things like brushing my teeth are strangely disorienting

when attempted with my left hand. Mundane activities become baffling lessons, and I'm forced to use literal and figurative muscles that are definitely not accustomed to what I'm asking of them.

I've always admired the idea of being ambidextrous, whether talking about athletes, fellow musicians, or basically anyone who can swap hands doing whatever they do. I myself have little in the way of switch-hitting skills, but I think it would be cool to be able to throw a ball equally well with either hand. So it was dismaying to find out that I'm decidedly reactionary about my polarity. I always thought I was a flexible, open-minded guy, but the rigidity with which I cling to right-handedness betrays deep underlying inertia.

Suddenly I have to confront a serious Achilles' heel! Who knew? I've been a carpenter most of my life, and certainly pounded plenty of nails with my left hand when reaching a difficult spot. I've likewise tried using various other tools in the opposite hand when logistics required, but my ability to switch hands with any finesse (or safety, when it comes to bigger tools) goes downhill fast.

I play various weekly gigs as a guitarist and drummer, and it was music that most brutally revealed the extent of my new-found handicap. The first thing I did when I got home with the new cast was to see if I could still play anything, to mostly disastrous result. Guitar was out, or at best painfully awkward, so I reluctantly cancelled a couple of upcoming

shows. Hand drums were not even an option without a free right palm, so I was forced to figure out what else to do for my regular job as accompanist for African dance classes.

I've never given much thought to the idea that everyone has a "dominant" hand (10% of the population is left-dominant, if not actually left-handed; see footnote 1), so it was a rude awakening indeed to face the fact that I am straight-up right-handed. Playing a simple pulse with a gourd shaker in my left fist was a mind-scrambling experience. I had anticipated it as a no brainer: my right arm is out of commission, so I would switch to shaker, which I normally play one-handed anyway. If anything, I was actually worried I might get bored, but boy was I wrong.

At first it just felt awkward and strangely disorienting to play kolomashi in my non-dominant hand. Though I was sitting, I felt a little off-balance. Little twinges betrayed muscles in my left shoulder that don't regularly get used, and various ligaments throughout my arm became apparent as I struggled with unaccustomed clumsiness. I never imagined I needed — let alone had to synchronize — so many parts of my body to play a simple shaker.

I found myself outside the fluid comfort zone of familiar actions. After a lifetime of practice, I was suddenly once again just a simple beginner. A pseudo-intuitive idea that we have some kind of internal symmetry — or even a hope that binary form would follow function reflexively within my own body — simply went the window.

Of course my little harangue here in no way compares to the kinds of real crises that people face every day with injuries much more severe than mine, but I can't forget that it's only as a result of my broken wrist that I have been "invited" to see things in a new way. The shaky, crooked letters I pencil with my left hand look like the work of somebody still teething, and I look forward to regaining the use of my right hand in the months ahead. I would love to have even a fraction of the facility with my left hand that I enjoy with my right.

One of my all-time favorite musicians is the late left-handed virtuoso Jimi Hendrix. It's strange to admit, but as much as his playing knocks me out, it nevertheless weirds me out a little to see films of Jimi performing. He frets with his right hand and strums with his left, which makes me slightly queasy to watch. It's just different for me to watch a lefty string-puller, and it feels like it simply makes more sense somehow to play guitar the normal way. It appears I'm facing a bias here that I wish I didn't have.

The implications and limitations of my predisposition dawn on me. It's hard to explain, because although I would never in a million years wish Jimi had played right-handed, I know in my gut there's a tiny selfish desire that it was more comfortable for me to enjoy watching how he plays. So there's more bias.

It also occurs to me that I spend a lot of time playing music on a kind of auto-pilot, where muscle memory

allows me to not have to think much about what I'm doing while I play. This may or may not be a good thing, and it has certainly caused me to reconsider my own mental and physical comfort zones. I guess the signal from brain and heart to fingers is at least semi-autonomous at this point, like the impulses that control walking and breathing. The idea of playing music in a routine way, however, seems closed-minded to me, like not being able to think outside the proverbial box.

I think my biggest epiphany has been about what it must be like to be left-handed in a world that rejects that tendency in ways both subtle and overt. I get to do things according to my preferred, naturally-dominant hand, but I realize this is not how it is for southpaws. In fact, right-handed chauvinism seems to have been pervasive throughout history. Superstition has vilified left-dominance, and contributes to traditions that force lefties to conform and pass as righties.

The word "sinister," which comes directly from Latin for left-handed ("sinestra"), certainly carries no positive meanings, any more than "goofy foot" (a contemporary term from the world of skateboarding) sounds cool. The French word *gauche*, a word usually used with scorn, also means "left." But there's more: "dexter" is Latin for what 90% of us are: right handed. Dexterous is good and sinister is bad, and these are the fundamental adjectives that label the preferences we are born with. And "ambidextrous" actually means "right-handed both ways."

Leonardo da Vinci was a flagrantly left-handed artist and inventor in the right-handed world of 16th century Italy. Perhaps it was his overwhelming genius that allowed him to flourish un-"corrected," but da Vinci nevertheless faked right-handedness as well. Did he do this because even he had to endure societal pressures to conform? The church certainly didn't look kindly on lefties. When presenting his designs and theories to the public, he wrote and sketched "normally" for a right-handed world. Yet when sketching and writing his extensive notes to self, he wrote backwards, right-to-left, with his left hand, in what is known as "mirror writing." I'm pretty sure he painted the Mona Lisa with his left hand.

Michaelangelo and Einstein popped up in a quick internet search of famous lefties, and arguably all left-handed people use extra skills, out of necessity, on a daily basis. I found out when traveling to Ghana last year that left-handedness is seriously discouraged there, to the extent that waving with your left hand is universally considered an insult. I wonder how many people in the world are forced to adapt and adopt the polarity that isn't their natural preference? Although there are various genuine health and cultural elements involved in the societal norms here that are way above my pay grade, it nevertheless strikes me as a real loss.

I remember encountering the idea of left-handedness as a child while first using scissors in elementary school. I came



across a funny-looking pair of scissors that didn't seem to work right. The teacher explained that some kids use different scissors to cut paper the same way most kids do with regular scissors. It's chilling to realize that certain power tools (such as the ubiquitous hand-held circular saw found at every construction site) would be difficult and dangerous to try to use with my left hand. Lefty users have no choice but to confront these obstacles head-on when they first learn to do any number things, whether it's scooping ice cream or using a can opener (see footnote 2). How can the world be so rude to left-handed people in so many ways? If nine out of ten humans are right-handed, it's a brutal democracy that calculates and enforces the convenience of the majority upon the other 10%.

I even find myself guilty of promulgating the cult of right-handedness here — albeit unwittingly — while writing this article: I used the word “dexterity” (trying to mean “well-coordinated”) in the second paragraph above, before I had learned its original meaning!

I wonder if children in Ghana have access to the other type of scissors. The luxury to be right-handed in a world that has been molded and designed for me is a gift indeed. As George Clinton says on Funkadelic's first album, “Freedom is being free of the need to be free.” Depending on one's natural or enforced hand preference, this means very different things. People who have to struggle with polarity can't help but see what I couldn't

until very recently: there are two ways of doing things with your hands. One way is natural and the other is more difficult. So when it comes down to it, there's only one right way for each of us. Right?

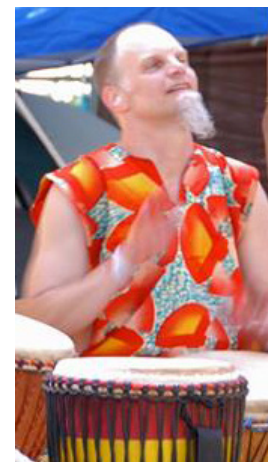
footnotes:

1. Wikipedia: “Bias Against Left-Handed People” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias\\_against\\_left-handed\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias_against_left-handed_people)

2. “23 Soul-Crushing Problems only Left-Handed People Understand” [https://www.buzzfeed.com/daves4/lefties-unite?utm\\_term=.csmJJJaZz3#.mkdLLLZ025](https://www.buzzfeed.com/daves4/lefties-unite?utm_term=.csmJJJaZz3#.mkdLLLZ025)



*My one side has a short attention span, but is a lot happier and more melodic*



Peter Wetherbee is a musician. He has produced albums of spirit music from Haiti, the Philippines, and NYC, and written liner notes for various Gnawa and Jajouka music CDs. As label manager for Axiom/Island/Polygram Records, he worked closely with Bill Laswell on spirit music releases from all over the world. He lives in Ithaca, NY, and his mind is controlled by his cat, Larry. [peter\\_wetherbee@yahoo.com](mailto:peter_wetherbee@yahoo.com)

# Memory



The cat starts to knead a pillow, her mouth opens and closes as she remembers the sweet warm taste of her mother's milk.

Recalling a trip in the Austrian Alps he and his friend took together fifty years earlier, the author over-compensated for what had faded from memory by inventing a morbid, international smuggling scheme. His companion on that journey, a good sport and a storyteller himself, only quibbled about minor details of his friend's account. But when our fact-checker looked into the matter, the truth appeared to be more like the fiction than not.

A woman has vivid memories of Paris: the sounds, the smells, the feel of the pavement under feet, the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, the museums, the shops, and the cafes. She knows she was never there.

The cat stretches, yawns, curls up, and takes a long nap.

**The next edition of the Metaphysical Times will focus on memory.  
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