

A Pilgrimage

He broke the ocean's surface, salt water washing down his pelt, his jacket, his trilobite's carapace, and back into the ocean. He soaked in all the fresh air around him, soon wondering what other fresh matters awaited him in the nearby forest. Saddled atop a 20-foot arthropod that looked like it belonged more in a King Kong film, Deané Dubble rode onto the shore and forward into the village.

The townsfolk couldn't help but stare, not just at the trilobite but at the coyote steering it. It wasn't the fact that he was a coyote; sapient packs scattered the streets aplenty, along with herds (sheep, horses, and cattle). Sundry other classes gave pause, like chickens, snakes, toads and flies. None of them were worth so much as a first glance. No, it was what the coyote was wearing that had them all awestruck. He wore a top hat with carved wooden faces draped around it like a beaded necklace - daring travel could be its one price. Resting on his muzzle was a glittery winged "Phantom-of-the-Opera" style mardi gras mask. Shrunk komodo dragon heads hung out of his jacket pockets where you might expect to see a watch dangling from a chain, if you lived around Bark Twain's or Darl Chickens's time.

So much staring here. He found the crowd less worthy of inspection; he knew what he was getting into. The Nirvanese islands settled hard on their track of uninventing everything, little by little. The reasons, be they electrical conservations or a desperate chase for temporal nostalgia, were never clear in the greater anthropological fields. He passed a backward moving clock, evident by a second hand, the third one, thin with iron shaped like curled ivy. He also passed housewives staring out their windows at him. He half expected a policeman to obstruct his travel and demand the identity of the shrunk heads, but he arrived at his destination without interruption. Perhaps they were all too entranced to let alarm surface.

There was the villa. There was the cobblestone pathway that led up the hill between oak rows to the front door. Deané couldn't help lamenting his position for a more exotic, tribal location -- the Amazon, perhaps, or Macchu Picchu. He tied the reins to a fencepost and left the trilobite to hibernate. Other cultures stuck to him; he'd so diversified his travels that the culture that created him buried itself under exotica, whether tribal, operatic, Eastern, or paleozoic. These Irish blokes were curious, yes, but they wouldn't know the first question to ask. It might be, "holy mackerel, what is that colossal insect doing here?"

A child-gaggle clustered a few yards away at the foot of the hill. Deané pictured them daring one another to go and touch the giant thing's shell. He called out, "I wouldn't if I were you, it's predatorial." It wasn't; algae was its entire diet, but that didn't mean it couldn't flatten anyone. Had they uninvented lawsuits here yet? What he was sure of was that they had no business bothering it. A window. That would be a must. He'd need to keep an eye on it.

Deané took his eyes off his trilobite so he could find the way in. The door had a knocker shaped like a yew with a ring in its mouth. Surely this was less because doorbells had been uninvented than because she wanted an animal emblem sporting itself on the front of the house. He swung the knocker three times, and each caused such a theatrical blast throughout the house that he couldn't help but picture book pages boarding the ensuing winds, traveling amongst the rooms and picking up sheet music on their way down the door. In real life, did he just hear some shuffling papers? His imagined metaphor might be more true than he thought.

After the papers were all done, there came a hurried tapping towards his position. It all gave him the impression that she hadn't anticipated his arrival. He stood back. The door would open inwards, but he preferred to stay out of her face, should his own head need to pivot towards his trilobite (the children hadn't moved closer, but they hadn't retreated either). Through the open door stood an Irish wolfhound, wearing a beaded taffita with an empire bodice and princess rused skirt.

Lovely. I've just been led to a shotgun wedding. He didn't peak over the hound's shoulder to check for barrells. He wasn't ready to have his head blown off just yet.

Based on the expression (wide and round) on the woman who answered the door, she looked as though she was the one facing a firearm.

"Are you Mr. Dubble?"

"Yes, I am. Miss Wolf?" The query was a complete unbroken sentence in his own mind, but in reality, between the honorific and the title, he'd paused to absorb a little more of that gown she was wearing. It wasn't all white, thank whichever deities oversaw this place. It still looked too formal for the interview he was about to conduct.

"Yes, Furginia Wolf." She stepped backward into the house; it would seem his own attire and accessories blasted so much radiance that she could only intepret it at a minimum three-foot distance. "I must say, I hadn't expected so much exoticism, if you don't mind my saying."

What even was there to mind? He couldn't pay her the same compliment

She moved aside and beckoned him in.

Just as he unsuspected, there was no forcible father-in-law behind her. All that the manor had was plain furniture and cabinetry, plain carpets, plain hardwood flooring. The most distinct things were a few portraits on the wall . He failed to notice anything remarkable about the plants, or the insects squatting in them. It was actually admirable; a house free of distractions. Perfect for cultivating utter concentration.

"I'd like a seat by the window. I saw some riff-raff outside, and it was written all over their faces that they'd interfere with my transportation if they had half a chance."

"Oh... well, I'd have to move the chairs and coffee table." She saw for herself the children Deané so distrusted. They did not appear to be making plans to untie the reins; rather, they were scampering up the hill and pushing and yanking one another off. All of their clothes were too fancy and polished for

what they were doing. They yanked fistfuls of furs and feathers. The cloth would be stained crimson if they weren't careful. They weren't careful. No self-respecting warlord would agree to a careful game of "King of the Hill."

They setup near the window anyway. Deané sat down and pulled out his Antroid - his least anthropological accessory - and pulled up the recording ape.

Furginia took the other chair. "If I could ask," she glanced out the window, "what is it, that animal tied to a fencepost? I've never seen anything like it."

Deané took all the might he had to hold back a sigh. "It's a trilobite."

"A tribu-" never had her maw needed to arrange itself to repeat sounds in such an order. "A tribulant... I was so taken aback by your apparel, and yet you bring greater spectacles still." She was like a child who'd never looked out her window before. Based on what she said next, it became clear that window-gazing was to her a long lost past time. "You'll have to forgive my previous arrangement of the furniture; I like to keep myself in a room with little distractions, and heaven knows how many distractions nature provides us with. If it were up to me, I'd do away with all the windows, or at least position them closer to the ceiling. That way, they would let in light, and not tempt me with..."

Good God, he might never get to ask the first question on his clipboard if he didn't intervene. Not one to directly interrupt, though, he cleared his throat and tapped his antroid. Finally, that got her to stop.

"Down to business, then. Where you in Paradice at the start of the uninvention movement? There were, no doubt, writing supplements at the time that sped your efficiency."

As he asked, he checked the children outside. The hill currently held an adolescent lamb as its ruler, with everyone else who wasn't a lackey gathering ammunition - rubble, mostly - for their next coup.

"Yes, the movement started during the last plague when Prime Minister Herring developed an acute isolation of the mind. He hadn't lost contact with us, he just... well... even with all the electricity and metal casing around him, his thoughts took him to morbid places."

She opened up a nearby desk drawer and brought out a manuscript. "I've chronicled... well, perhaps chronicle is not the right word. I have..." There she was, lost in another thought jungle looking for python gut to slide down. "I have translated to words what his thoughts, not just his thoughts but our collective thoughts, might have been." She flipped a few pages through it. "There is so much we don't say, and so much we can't, not because we don't try to, but because we can scarcely shape it into words."

Given all the things this woman did say, Deané could hardly imagine the pinhead on which she could write the things she didn't.

She pointed out the window. "Do you see the clock? If you watch it for long enough, you will spot the hands moving in the opposite direction the hands would normally go. It's the Island's way of tracking how far back we go."

Deané looked instead at his antroid clock. It was not moving backwards; just goes to show he lived in an era bound not by the local philosophy.

"How far back," he asked, "do you think you will go before the movement comes to a standstill?"

It was just for a flash, but he could have sworn he saw her eyes spin counter-clockwise. Or had they made the sign of the cross? It went up, down, left, right, didn't it?

"Well... when there's nothing left to uninvent. I'd prefer not to be alive the day they unstitch everyone's clothes. In some neighborhoods, the idea has already come out. My colleague, Jaybird Joyrce, christened it 'literary nudism.' I see little call to paint our ideas in such vulgar colors. And yet, now that it has been spoken, it saves me the effort of having to include it among that which we do not say."

Thank God for the recording ape. Deané had caught the word "nudism" and otherwise afforded Ms. Wolf little ear, so enamored was he with the battle about to commence atop the hill. A few young colts had hustled up the hill carrying brick crumbs in their apron, and were now hurling them towards the sheep. They broke through his defenses easily enough; being literal armor hadn't been part of their job description. He tumbled down the other side of the hill himself before Ms. Wolf called to his attention.

"Mr. Dubble?" She said, letting her own attention wander to the scene outside. She stifled a chuckle. "You can see my reasons for hiding my view. Even when there's nothing out there, can you really say there is nothing? The hill, the village, the nature... is there ever nothing at all?"

When he looked back to Ms. Wolf, his mind was aswarm with all the places he'd ever been, and it brought to mind someone else he'd interviewed, a child from the pacific islands, who reported his favorite pass time of jumping in the air, naked, just to glimpse the experience of feeling no tactile sensations whatever. "I'm never in the air long enough. I could feel it longer if I could get down to the beach and climb up the lifeguard post so I could take it all off and jump into the water, but I never got that far." At the time, Deané had doubted a tactile free plunge were even possible. If he didn't feel his clothes, this iguana boy would certainly feel his scales.

In all his years experience, the one thing he'd never located was just that - nothing.

"I don't think there ever is pure nothingness."

"No, not ever." agreed Ms. Wolf. "Except as in between the somethings. That's what I seek, that elusive thread between solid happenstance. You know what you see. I know what I see. But how do we share the sights? Oh... think of it this way..." She swept up from her chair and glided into the kitchen to fetch a glass and fill it with water. She stared through it on the way back. "A glass full of factuality. We both know that the objects on the other side of the glass are not shaped the way they appear. But what else bends the light? What phenomena alters the truth's direction and form on its way to our brain?"

"And I take it you'd get a sharper view of the truth without computurtles, the interntest, aPods, and libroaries?"

Ms. Wolf put the glass aside. "Well... that's what one would hope, but I expect that even so much as the air around us would shade the raw facts in biased hues. After all, there are some facts that even Ben Sheepiro can't incorporate, crucially the ones involving changing other peoples' minds. That is to say, even when citing the sturdiest of facts, it isn't enough to incur a consensus... speaking of sturdy..."

Her gaze was fixed out the window. Deané turned, and was out of his seat in an instance. His departure from the house came soon after, for one of the kids had untied the trilobite's reins and now led it up the hill, where the other kids readied their bricks.

"Stop, you're committing theft!" he shouted. On sight of him, all children ran screaming from the hill, still armed with their brick rubble. He seized a branch off the ground, should he have to deflect any oncoming projectiles. Only one turned back to heave her stones at him, her whole batch, a juvenile donkey. This was enough to scare the trilobite down the hill; it looked like it had taken some of the blow.

Deané spun around to see where it was headed, and not far behind him was Ms. Wolf, holding up a manuscript and a pen. It took Deané a few moments of concentration to notice the clipboard. He understood then that not everything was being uninvented at the same rate.

Another question came up in his mind. "I realize ownership wasn't there at the dawn of time. Are you uninventing ideas too?"

"Yes, but we shouldn't have uninvented that yet. We still deter burglars in the usual time-honored way."

Deané looked back over the hill. There was no sign of the children at first. They could be hiding behind trees, behind doors, ready to strike again. There was no uninventing delinquency. That particular concept would span infinity in both directions.

There would be more questions to ask, but nothing more telling that afternoon would come from Ms. Wolf's mouth than what she said next. "I think we have a destination. That creature... the tribulant?" He corrected her. "Well... I don't think we could go back further than when something like that thrived. I don't want to know what they were planning to do with it..."