The Great Work!

Unabridged

Richard Michael Thomas

"*The path of writing is both straight and crooked.*"

- Hericlitus

A Note from the Author

The Great Work! is a work of fiction. All the writings contained within it, including all the names, characters, places, and incidents in the text are fictitious. And any identifications with, or similarities to actual persons (either alive or dead), events, businesses, institutions or any other things or situations, are merely coincidental.

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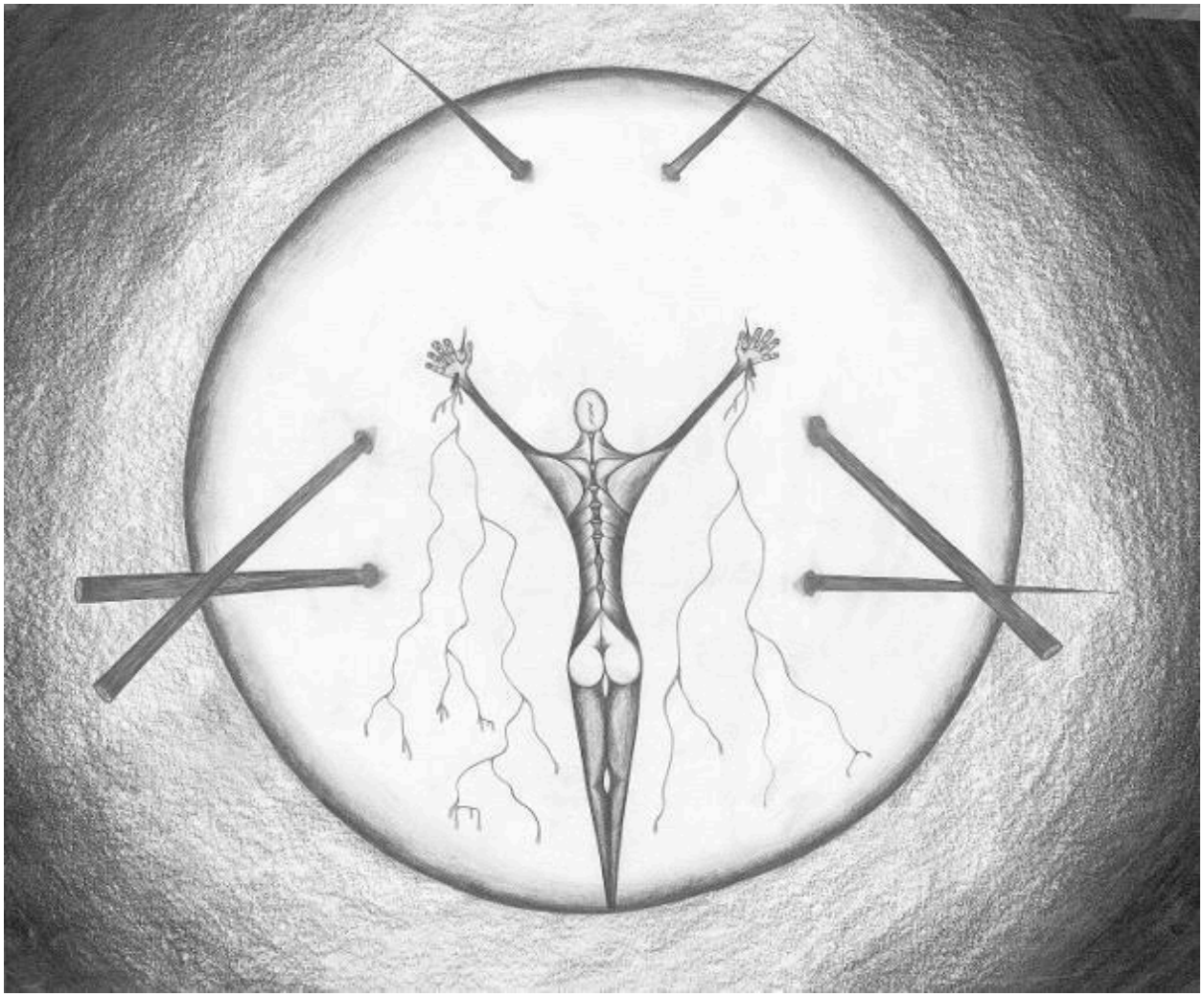


Pestilent Orb (a flat earth)

Pathways

Past is Prologue

I've lived on the peripheral fringes of the world and in the backwaters of society for quite some time. I reckon that I would have a difficult path to go down without my quest to write: *The Great Work!* What good would that be? Or, perhaps, the better question might be: What purpose has it served to scribble down notes along the way, and type up such gibberish? And to write, even now… to write in such an arcane style and genre, in which I journal through allegory, "encode," in a sense, the past into fiction, and express things that probably cause a reader a medley of mixed feelings. Why write? Why write at all? Perhaps, it serves no purpose at all to the world? But it has served its purpose to me, your author.

Amerika

Amerika is the German spelling of America. And in the United States, evil corporations, individuals, and groups edify specific periods of bygone times of ineffable and sinister terrors. And Amerika, in this spelling, suggests a government of and by the people which is oppressive: It harbors a population of racist, fascist, and bigoted Nationalists that rot away our culture today, dividing and separating us as "the Other," and teaching us a doctrine of suspicion, and a doctrine of hate.

Quelle

Quelle, or Q, was an ordinary citizen in Amerika, where he got a job at the Underground Library, the basement portion of the University of Academia Library. It is said that this is where the real library work takes place. The Underground was formed after Act 333 passed, which criminalized certain books, specifically anti-Christian materials. These were ruled to be blasphemous and a threat to the national Logos, in which the separation of Church and State was no longer separated but together under the simple philosophy of "God and Country as One." Q did his duty to his country, and he burned books, and burned books until there were no more books to be burned. And simpletons then ruled as the anti-Christian materials were burned, reason and logic were supplanted, democracy was ousted, Theocracy reigned, and "our" nation vanished into the woodwork of history, a figment of what it was:
It was a Great Nation no more.

Son of God

I was an old dog at a young age. I believed that I was driven on by a demon, not possessed but urged on by a shadow of my future and by my past that followed every step of every path I took. However, I spoke with it on not one but two occasions. I was an intelligent young lad but was drunk in my ignorance, intoxicated with suspicion, as I sought out solitude. Wandering through the forest in this solitude, I found within it an asceticism, and I chose to fast from food and sleep. I felt satisfied with my ascetic discipline; my mind, clear and simple. I was 30 years old. I shall begin here.

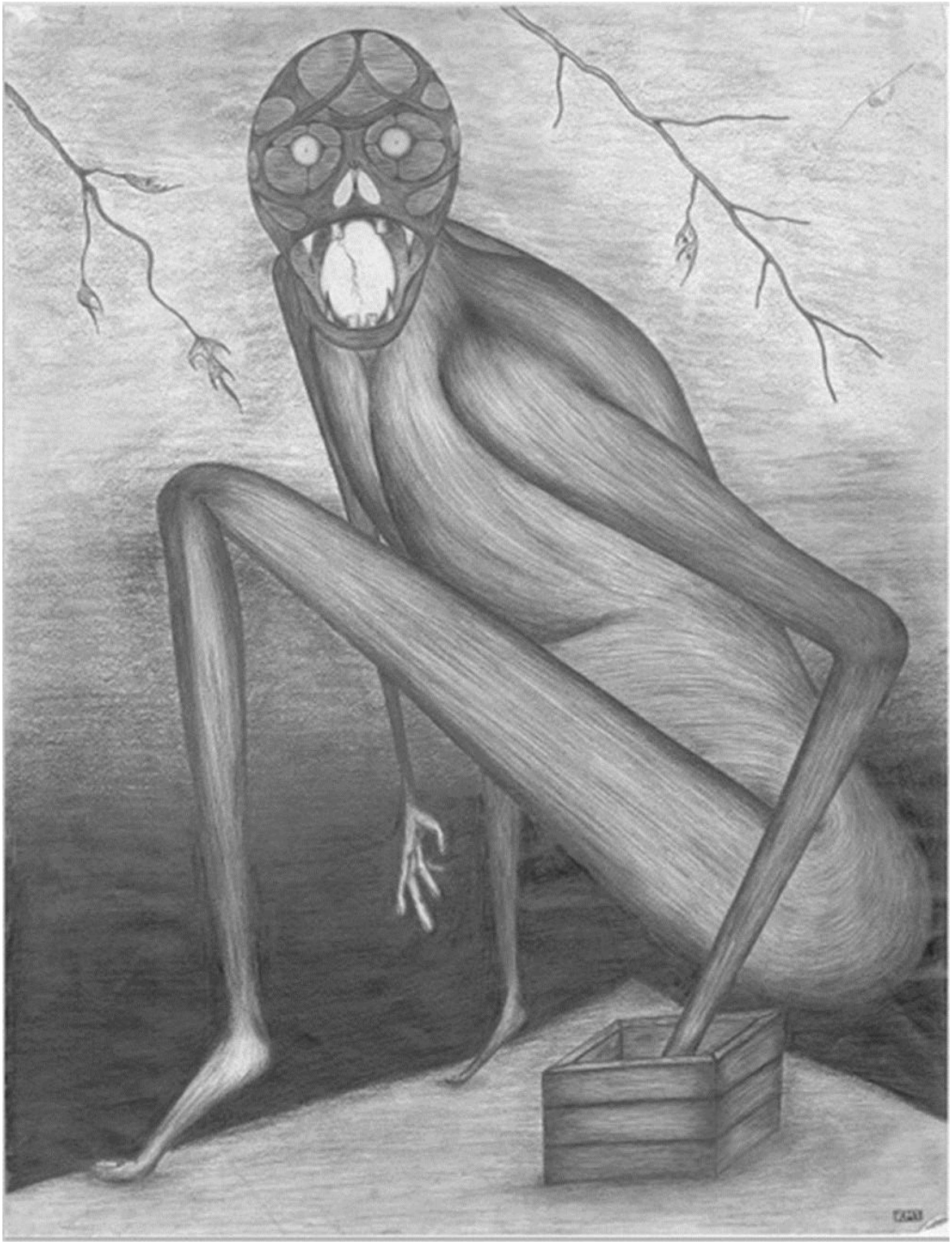
There was one thing I was concerned with and shall come to in a moment. I was in touch with these parallel worlds that exist below and above us. All the apparitions of my past swarmed beneath me, which could reach up and drag me down; the visions of my future multiplied above me, and all the present was but Shadow. And a question remained: What was this Shadow within me? I was to undergo a spiritual metamorphosis that would take a conversion of several years to complete. I was attracted to a philosophy of self-denial and doubt, but I needed a firm middle ground to plant my spiritual feet –and this foundation I sought was the root of my faith and my atheism.

Thus, an invisible hand pushed me further toward the Enemy as if fate itself. My absolute concern was the matter of what I believed was the torture of children. I had an obsessive interest in whether you could "beat the devil out of them." I thought that punishment affected people's belief in God, for fear and religion, I deduced, were inseparable.

Then, one day, I saw the Shadow.

"Who's there?" I was startled by a voice that seemed to come from above.

I looked around, and on a small boulder sat an apparition. I assumed it was a spirit, a basic demon, a shadow. What natives called the *shilombish*. The first thing that struck me was its mouth and teeth. It had two sets, lower and upper, of what appeared to be canines at first glance. But after further examination of its upper teeth, I noticed a poison that dripped from serpent-like fangs. Its skull was hollow, with beady little pupils in its eyes that seemed to hover in their hollow sockets. Its skull was layered with flesh. Its hands were quite human, though, as was its androgynous figure. And as it lowered itself from the boulder it was perched, it defied gravity as it moved in secret to the middle of the trail where it stood, squatted down, and rested comfortably on its tiptoes like a cat. And in one hand, the Shadow clutched a white egg.



Shadow

The trail was dark, as was all the forest. It was sprinkling rain and spring. Much of what I saw is questionable, that is, the exact features of the spectral demon, but it must have been of low rank. It would have been much more elusive if it had been of a much higher rank, for it seemed that I had slipped up on it undetected as it fed on a cache of eggs. The trail was still like wandering footsteps hushed upon the wet leaves of early dawn. I watched the illusory creature as it descended from a perch. It bore its fangs lactating with venom. But indifferent to my presence, it put the egg in its mouth and clutched it there, cracking the egg as some of the yolks seeped.
Then it turned away from me, and in turn, it morphed back into Shadow as it drifted away down the darkened trail. I perceived the Shadow to split in two as it went away from me. I was standing there, motionless, a statue of fear and curiosity, with my hands in my pockets and my head lowered, for this lowering of the head was the only movement I could muster during the first moment of the encounter. Being an atheist, though, I knew there must be some logical justice for what beget this spectral Shadow. Then the two shadows transformed to flesh and came walking toward. And out of the shadows, it came to me in the form of twin children. However, the androgyny of their figures and what followed with their voices made it unable to discern them as male or female. Shadow loomed around their bodies, which transformed into a black robe over their pale, almost completely white faces. Little beady, black pupils were in their eyes, and thin, pink lips partly covered their teeth, which appeared almost to be those of the Shadow…
"Hello." They said simultaneously.
And such a strange sound was their voice, rasping almost, but very articulate.
And I stood there, head still bowed and silent for what seemed a long time, but it was more like a minute, a moment. These incidents seem much longer, these perpetual pauses that elapse in certain situations, especially in one this intense. I tried to step back and away as they approached but could not. They stood there, only six feet in front of me, and I looked with my eyes at one and then at the other. And I must state for convenience that they spoke almost always, simultaneously, as if they were of one body and one mind, and when they did not do so, one of the two took up the thought where the other had left off.
"What do you want with me!?" I demanded.
"What do you want with me!?" They repeated simultaneously.
"That is what I asked you," I said. "Who should so ever receive me?" I provoked them.
"Whosoever should receive me?" They both added corrections.
"What is thy name?" I again provoked them.
"My name is Legion…" one said, "for we are many." The other concluded.
"I see," I said.
"Now tell us: who are you?" It asked.
"I am Roman."
"I see." They said.
"And why are you here? Perhaps you're here to trick me, devils!" I lashed out.
"But it was you who crept up on us." They pointed out.

"Well…" I had done this. "This may be true, but I did not seek you out. I merely came upon you on this path; furthermore, I've never been this way through the forest, for it is vast, and

there are many paths with many forks. I may have taken the wrong fork of many on the path."
"Yes, perhaps you took the wrong fork on the path, but you chose this forked path. And we have always been here; for eons, we have been here." They spoke softly with their androgynous voices.
“So, tell me, devils, what do you know of death?” I assumed devils and death went hand in hand.
"Death? It is never, for we will abide in this forest forever."
"But how is that possible? This forest cannot possibly exist forever? It might be burned, and most importantly, if you want to be absurd about it: The Earth will be consumed by the fire of the Sun, someday, in the very distant future." Someday, I thought.
"We are not of this Earth; neither this forest nor these paths are of this Earth. Can you hear death, Roman? Listen, the wind, it whispers eternity." They said.
“I hear nothing.” I said.
“You hear what you want to hear! You see what you want to see!” They mocked.
"Ah! Quite clever little devils, you are indeed! Perhaps you can answer some of my questions, for I have gone everywhere, to all types of men: to the monks, to the philosophers, even to the laymen, and they are with insight but without answers, which left me without the knowledge I sought." “Very well, ask your questions.” They invited.
“Is it true that you, if you are devils -is it true that you possess children? And can you be beaten out of them as people say?” I asked.
“If we are devils, then it is untrue.” They said.
“But do you corrupt the heart of Mankind?” I insisted.
“No, we do not. Why should we be concerned with the heart of Mankind?”
"Better yet, I have a story, maybe you can answer a question?" I asked.
“Very well,” they conceded, “tell us the story. Ask.”
"I read an article from a scrap of newspaper not too long ago." I began. "There was a family: a mother, a father, and two young children. The father was, though, a misanthrope in a way particular to his suspicious behavior. He was a paranoid and delusional man in many respects. This suspicion seemed typical compared to an average man of his age and status. The father insisted that he bar the windows and the doors to protect them from criminals. Now, this idea of being trespassed upon is popular in the minds of our ordinary people. Yet, this family must have been well off monetarily, or otherwise, they would not have been able to afford these bars on the windows and doors of the house. They lived in a relatively safe neighborhood compared to most of our population. Regardless, this family, this father, put these bars on all the windows and doors of the house. The bars on the doors opened, while the bars on the windows didn't, so as not to allow any unwanted trespass via murderers and thieves the father was suspicious of. Then, one day, there was a fire on a Sunday afternoon, not long after the family had returned from Church. It was winter and cold, and the house had a fireplace in the living room. And this was where the fire started, said the newspaper. All this aside, the family, it was reported by the officials, could not escape and was consumed by fire." I said. "Now, in the paper, the subtitle with the photo of the family's burned house, or perhaps the article's title, read: 'Bars that protected family homes from burglars kept them from fleeing a deadly fire.' And this was what caught my attention: this description. There are many tragedies such as murders, robberies, torture, and all other sorts of trespasses against

one another, but the irony the bars created –the story pointed out an evident truth about man's conception of his neighbor and himself. He does not 'love thy neighbor' anymore. No. His philosophy is 'fear thy neighbor.' Though this is not entirely the case, I think it sounds clever. The truth is that the father's fear of criminals in the story led to his family's demise… his fear and paranoia, these delusions of his neighbor. Wouldn't you agree?" I asked.
"What is your question?" They asked for the point.
"Yes. I need to clarify my point or my question about the criminal. Who's to say that these bars even kept out criminals or 'burglars,' as this story put it? My question is this: What do men fear if not devils in their hearts or minds?"
"They fear themselves, it seems, from what you have told us." They insisted.
"Yes! That's why I tell people: "You can't beat the Devil out of children." By this time, I could move; the paralysis that had consumed my body had subsided. All this time, as I told my story, my arms and hands had become very animated, but this didn't seem to bother the twin devils, for they listened intently.
"So, your question is, why is it that men fear devils?"
They asked. "Yes," I replied, "but it was a rhetorical
question." "You asked us, did you not?" They persisted.
"Perhaps." I thought. "Ah! Yes, what clever little devils you are!" I exclaimed. "What do men fear, if not that they are the very devils they fear!?"
"It is death they fear." The two answered in agreement.
"How so?" I was intrigued.
"We agreed to answer your question, that is all… death is an absolute unknown, you know?"
"Ah, now I see." I grinned, and I looked down at them with this grin. "You are putting ideas in my mind. But that's insignificant. But please tell me: surely you must play with the child's naïve mind. I mean they are such cruel creatures. Why then do their older masters flog them, and beat them, and whip them -why do these adults torture them?" I laughed. "Ah! They think they can 'beat the devil out of them,' but I say this: they beat the Devil into them. Is this not so? Certainly, devils cannot resist such a chance to possess a child?" I paused. "So, how's it that devils possess a child?" I asked anxiously.
But they had now disappeared as I looked up to where I had first seen the Shadow, and I was thinking that some shadow played with me now, as if I were a child. Nevertheless, this was the time I had a conversation with the Enemy. It was not the only encounter but the most lucid recollection of when I saw it. This created a significant change in my beliefs, as I was later to discover, for one can imagine what impact this proof of devils must have had on a devout atheist.
Yes. It was a great contradiction to what I believed. Though, there was no conflict in my mind from the experience. It was as if I simultaneously believed and disbelieved in the two devils as I spoke to them. Furthermore, if I so desired, I could just surmise that the whole incident was a delirium or a psychosis due to the fasting and sleep deprivation I was subjecting myself to. I turned to leave the forest that day, and though I had walked for many hours, it seemed only a few minutes until I reached the forest's edge. And as I walked into an open field, the cold rain fell lightly. I was lost deep in thought over my conversation with the Shadow.
Ultimately, I thought a man could not rid himself of this Shadow: it stalked him. Man is part truth and part lie. In essence, a man says this: "I tell you the truth is this: all I say is a lie." But

now I am just trying to sound clever again. I am more clever than wise. I find myself riddled with paradoxes. I was so consumed in mystery that I was a mystery to myself until that day I had crossed paths with the Shadow, these little child devils. It was all an experience that pushed me further toward my fate as if by an invisible hand.

After this conversation with the Enemy, I must admit, I was in great despair. I contacted Monk. An ascetic of the "spiritual" sort. He agreed to my request to meet in the forest under the Angel Oak. It was a two-thousand-year-old tree. I sat out that day with no hesitation but almost with the assumption that I would get nothing from this meeting.
Doubt shadows the devout atheist with this sort of pessimism, but I sat out on my pilgrimage, as it seemed fit to call it. Monk was already there when I arrived late that afternoon. He wore a black robe and pulled back his hood as he walked out from the shadows of the looming oak to greet me.
"Brother Roman, how may I help you? Monk asked.
"Well, Monk, I had a mystical experience, it might be called… in these woods, I encountered two little devils, and they were but children to my eyes…"
I went on to tell him of the whole encounter and conversation, my story I had presented to them, my other inquiries, and my deep concern with the Devil being beaten out of children. Monk was a good listener and reassured me of this with his humble gestures: a nod here and there and changes in his expressions when I must have expounded something of interest. It reflected some awareness he already had of these matters.
"Roman, as you call them, these devils are not out to deceive you. No, Brother Roman, you have let yourself be deceived. There are many ways one can become involved in such affairs, but I've read two basic ways to be exposed to such self-deception: One is to disbelieve that devils exist; the other is to have an excessive interest in them. And it seems to be both to be your case." *(*See C.S. Lewis's* *The Screwtape Letters*)
"Yes. I will agree with you on that. Since it has never been brought to my awareness by my own devices, I led myself unknowingly but purposely down that fork in the path. But what do you make of the coincidence of my gaining knowledge of the story of the man and his family who were consumed by fire in their own home and my crossing paths, so to speak, with these devils?" "It is no coincidence. Our future is determined by our own free will, but this is only to the extent of our choices considering the circumstances surrounding our fate."
"Really… and what fate might that be?"
"In the end… Death comes for us all. But in everyday experience -and correct me if I'm wrong- In everyday life experience, being the atheist, you say you are, I would think that you might think everything is a result of the choices we make, and this is true to some degree. But we make these choices, for we encounter them just as you did this fork in the path –you chose to take the path and consequently met what was your fate, these devils. Yet this path was there before you ever chose to walk it, just as life is here before we are born, waiting, and when we arrive; only then do we begin to choose in which direction we will step on paths if we choose to take the path at all."
"So, I understand it was my fate that I was born. And though it is possible that I can agree that I had no choice being born into this world, it was my fate, let us agree –but how is it that things become my fate once I begin to make choices as to whether and where I shall

step and what path to follow?" "Roman, my Brother, let's not make this matter too complex." Monk was a patient man. "Rather, let us keep it simple. You can suspend your disbelief for the time being so I might enlighten you on what I have drawn from experience; that is why you sought me out, is it not?"

Monk was as clever as he was wise, for I had no choice, it seemed, but to humble myself to his rhetorical question, which I had to accept as my fate, even in the uncomfortable intimacy of a conversation of such nature. A conversation Monk presented as an offering, or rather, an invitation in and out of the weather of alienation and isolation that comes from this doubt that shadows the atheist.

"I will agree for now, then, that it was fate and not coincidence that I crossed both the story and the two devils. Indeed, an argument over man's free will and fate is far too obscure a debate, as it would be an endless affair of personal preference in what we choose to believe. But this, a choice to believe, which I am making, must be of enough significance that we should, or rather, Monk –might you briefly 'enlighten' me as to: Is it fate that I came to believe what it is I believe, or is it a choice?" "Again, let us keep it simple…" Monk spoke softly. "But come to think of it, your question might help us. It was fate that you came to believe what you believe. Shall we just say it simply: It was your fate that you became an atheist, yet it is the choices that you made that led you to this man you believe yourself to be, which brings up two important questions: One, is it possible that you only believe you are an atheist, but in truth you are not?" Second, and this follows my first question: Is this not how you believe me or others to be; that we believe in God, but that in truth, God does not exist?"

"Hold on a minute, Monk, let's only get too far into your questions once we are clear on what you said about my fate, and correct me now if I'm wrong in my interpretations of your words. You say it is my fate when there is a fork in my path, and whether I choose to go one way or another, the path will ultimately lead to the same end, for it is at death that all paths shall end?"

"Very good, Brother Roman, you understand that very well. And yes, it is the truth of the nature of choice to become an illusion; it is its nature that it seems to make a difference and change fate… Whether you choose this or that, it seems to make a difference, but as we have both said, all paths lead to death in the end. But this is only a good analogy: it isn't as if every choice you make is a matter of life or death, for, as you now seem aware, it is that there are many paths to take, but fate waits at the end of each of them just as death waits at the end of all ends. So now, would it bother you to consider the two questions I asked? I can repeat them …"

"No, that is not necessary, thank you, though. You asked if I may believe that I'm an atheist, but in truth, I'm not, and I see with my beliefs that what you believe in is something that isn't true. That is a good question."

"So, you have no answer?"

"I think you of all people, Monk, know I have an answer, but it is self-evident, isn't it? And what is just as self-evident is the way you go about asking. You are clever… How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"66."

"Well, I'm only 30, and so you're more than twice my age, and I do respect your wisdom and your choice to think deeply as most men are, if not by mere laziness –most men are timorous

and take no active part in layman philosophy or religion or things of this nature. And if it pleases you, I'll give you an answer to these two questions. But, first, let me say what I like to say: I was an old dog at a young age. And as for your first question: Yes, it is possible that I only believe myself to be an atheist, but it is possible that what I believe is partly, if not entirely, false. And I'm only deceiving myself in such a belief, for I assume it is self-deception that you're getting at here." I said "As to the second question: No, I do not believe that your belief in God is false because I believe God doesn't exist; rather, it is that I doubt my own belief. Whereas you value faith, I value doubt. But when you see that I should accept the possibility that I'm incorrect -when you do this, it seems that you, Monk, invest some merit in the choice of doubt. Therefore, if you say that it's possible what you believe may not be true, how, then, can you not accept that it's possible that what you believe isn't true and, in doing so, confess doubt in what you believe?" I said.

"That is a good question," Monk said cleverly, as if to take the words I spoke earlier and make them his own. "But I don't fall so easily into such a trap of words, Brother Roman. Again, let us keep it simple. After all, and I say this with respect, it was you who asked for my help, and how can I help you to understand if you wish only to meddle in theological trappings, let us say, when we should be investing our energy in the peace of mind you might gain from whatever it may be that I have to offer you as far as my knowledge and experience will allow."
"This is true, but it is in my nature to answer questions in such a way, defensive as it may seem; suspicion is the motive behind such a way of answering indirectly. It was this way when I spoke with those child devils: I felt that I should not trust them, yet I found nothing dishonest in their speech." I said.
"This is where you are partly deceived by them: they're not 'child devils;' there's no child in them… though they seem young, they're more ancient than the two-thousand-year-old Angel Oak above us. So, you see, in what they say, there is truth, indeed. But as in the form the devils take: they took this mask of innocence, but even you noticed something 'eerie' in them, as you said. These 'child devils' cannot conceal their true faces. And as you say, they were basic demons. –this 'Shadow' you saw, then, was its truest form." Monk said.
"Yes, there are many things I was deceived, as I suspected, in that I was, most importantly, ignorant of such things. But you say that there is truth in what these devils said. How so? Why or how are they honest if, in fact, they're devils? Why go to such measures of deceiving me in their appearance if they weren't liars?" I said.
"Roman, my Brother, it isn't the nature of devils to lie; this is man's sin, and these devils are neither child nor man; rather, by telling you truths you already know, they deceive by removing this doubt you speak. Doubt is the Devil's most powerful weapon to assault you with; doubt is the Shadow you saw, and it's always just behind you, following every step on these paths, every choice you make in life." Monk said.
"Yes, yes. That is what I think. I say that doubt shadows the atheist. But this Shadow was there before me, waiting on the path, as though I had snuck up on it, and even the devils themselves said it was I who took a fork in the path that led to them, that they didn't come to me. And if what you say is true, that lies are not in their nature, I must confess that what they said was true. But why would I, an atheist, consciously seek out devils, something I'm not entirely convinced wasn't just some psychosis?" I said.

"Because Brother Roman… remember what I first told you about devils? One mistake is disbelieving in their existence; the other is having too much interest in them, and you seem to have both. You confessed that you simultaneously believed and disbelieved in them as you had this encounter, yet you have this fixation with 'beating the devil out' of a child. But to be skeptical and say that you were maybe just hallucinating and only, in a sense, imagining the whole encounter… it seems you wouldn't have sought the advice of a monk. It seems this would be the last thing you would do if that's truly what you believed." Monk said.
"My being illogical does not change my skepticism. If anything, it only makes me more skeptical since I may be suffering from psychosis, and it is that my doubt might have reached a threshold and crossed over past fear and suspicion into unreality." I said.
"How can you be skeptical if you are unable to reason? Since it takes a great amount, I must admit, It takes a great deal, an almost superfluous amount of logic to be skeptical. The question I would offer that you ask yourself, Brother Roman, is this: Must I believe in God to believe in devils? But not so much as believe in the Devil." Monk said.
"No, I suppose not. Definitely not. Because seeing these devils has not made me question my disbelief in God. But it seems to challenge me; it is threatening, and I'm wise enough to know that such a threat can cause fear, but… Why should I even fear these devils?" I said.
"Roman, I do doubt that you'll believe me when I say that it's not that you should fear these devils, but that you should fear the consequences of your ignorance of them and, more importantly, the significance of the encounter."
"How so, Monk?"
"I must know first: Have you always been an atheist? Did you not, when you were young, believe in God, even if it was your childlike imagination at work?"
"I not only once believed in God; I spoke with him once here at the Angel Oak. So, I believed at the time and at that age." I said.
"And how old were you, and what led to your disbelief?" Monk asked.
"I was quite young when I had this experience. It was as if the Angel Oak spoke to me, as if it told me of my life's purpose and meaning. You know that this is what they call an angel oak, don't you, Monk?"
"Yes, but referring to it as Angel Oak is symbolic at least… You seem the last person to associate it with a divine Angel."
"Well, you see, at an early age, when it's easy to imagine things -I would say it was a coincidence that led me to believe I had a vision of God. The fact that this tree was referred to as the Angel Oak, I think, was more fuel for my passion at the time, which was to make sense of the experience. It was not until after quite some time had passed that I came to say that I had spoken with God. I had an ineffable and inexplicable experience, so I never spoke of it. My conclusion later in life was that it must have been God 'speaking' to me and telling me about my purpose in life, for the question of my purpose in life was of great importance, which made the experience even more significant to me at the time and later in life. But I had no knowledge of such things at that age. Perhaps I have heard of people saying God spoke to them. I don't know." I said.
"You say a coincidence led you to this significant experience?" Monk asked.
"Exactly. It was not, as you say, fate." I said.
"You believe this?" Monk asked as if this were bizarre.

"Yes." I humbly replied. "But you said before we delved into what I believe: I shouldn't fear these devils, but I should fear the consequences?"
"Yes, yes, let us keep it simple. I said you should fear the consequences of your ignorance of them, that is, the significance of the encounter and the story you told the devils." Monk said. "And what's that?" I asked with detached interest.
"It is an omen," Monk said.
"And what is its prophecy?" I was intrigued.
"That is for you to figure out, Brother Roman. Perhaps your encounter with these devils was a sign to help bring you back to God?"
And I departed with the Monk on this thought. He walked away into the Shadow as it was growing dark. I decided to stay the night under the Angel Oak. I gathered wood to build a fire, for it was a dim, misty evening, and fog hovered all over the forest. The roots of the Angel Oak were trees in themselves as they came up out of the ground for some thirty feet and returned to the Earth from which they came. It was as if below the tree lay some underground world. I had used a pine knot I busted up to build a fire and continued gathering wood when the Shadow appeared in front of me. It stood at the edge of the light of the fire, and it fixed its stare upon me. "What do you want with me!?" I shouted.
But the Shadow only remained silent where it was, crouched down as if it might leap on me at some moment. But instead, it disappeared into the darkness and fog. I decided to build two more fires so that they surrounded the Angel Oak. And the same thing happened with the Shadow each time I built the subsequent fire: it approached the edge of the light and fixed its stare upon me. And I shouted the same thing each time: "What do you want with me!?" But there was no answer each time the specter vanished into the night.

I worked at gathering wood that was entangled all in the Angel Oak. All the dry wood must have been deadfall from the tree itself, for the wood was dry from being under the haven of the mystical tree. I built the three fires until the flames were thirty feet high, just as high as the roots that wove in and out of the ground. Now the Shadow went from one fire to the next, circling me as if the light of the fire were some thresholds it could not cross. The fires danced in the darkness of the pitch-black night, each flame an angel itself. I climbed up one of the roots, ascending into the tree. I was sitting on one of the lower branches and noticed that the fires were spreading, and they spread in a way that after a short period, there was but one fire that surrounded the Angel Oak. I climbed higher and higher into the tree until I reached the highest point accessible. The fire began to spread outward into the thick fog of night, but it spread slowly due to the damp conditions. Still, it grew with ever more force, but it was warm, and I felt safe in my perch that was high in the tree. I could lay back and rest, and then I began to doze off into a dream.
"Hello." A voice said. "Look what you've done."
I looked down as the fire engulfed the forest trees. Then I looked back to where I stood, and all about me was Shadow. There, perched atop a thunderhead, were the ominous two child devils.
"Look what you have done." They said.
"I have done nothing." I retorted. "What have I done?" "Look closely." They answered.

I looked down and saw a black horse running through the forest. It looked as if flames consumed it, but still, it ran fast into the distance. As it ran back and forth, it caught the whole forest afire.
“So, you little devils are up to your tricks again!” I cried out.
"We're not engaged in any 'tricks' as you say." They paused with their black eyes fixed on my wild, wide-open peepers.
“The Fire is your fate alone, Roman.” They said.
“But I did not cause this… this hell!” I said.
“What would you know of Hell?” They asked.
“Ah, hah! You, little devils, are just toying with me. Hell is where I am.” I said.
“How’s that?” Asked one. “How’s that?” The other repeated.
“It doesn’t matter. I don’t believe in Hell. It’s mere superstition.” I said.
"We were called by you." They spoke softly and thoughtfully.
“Who called for you?” I didn’t understand.
“We came to answer your question.” They said.
“What question? I asked you devils nothing.” I asked.
“When you crept up on us in the forest…” They reminded me. “You asked: ‘So how is it that devils possess a child?’”
“Why would you… When did I…?” I stammered. “Return to where you belong, devils!” “But we are in our forest.” They said.
I looked down and stood on that forked path. And before me were the two little child devils, both sinister and serpentine twins.
“Now you’re using your devilry against me.” I felt that the mist had ceased. “You didn’t bring me here just to answer some question….”
“It was you who came to us.” The devils reminded me.
“Perhaps I came to you before, but how do you say that I came to you now? Besides, aren’t I only dreaming?” I asked.
"Dreaming?" They looked confused, and I remained suspicious. "How, then, can you say that I came to you and sought you out?" I asked.
“It was you who climbed the tree. And the fire, it was built by you, and it was built by you alone.” They said.
"Nonsense!" I retorted. "I built a fire to ward off this Shadow of you as you circled me, for if it were not for the light of the fire, you would have pounced on me to devour me." The truth was out in the open.
There was only silence after I said this, and the devils stood there with their thin lips revealing their serpent-like fangs.
“Your suspicions are wrong, Roman. You will die here tonight, for like the misanthropic man in the newspaper story who died by the fire, so too shall you?” The twin devils said.
And I woke up. The fire swallowed up the forest around the Angel Oak and soon swallowed up the Angel Oak and me. And I did what I would have never thought capable of: I prayed for rain. And it began to rain, and moments later, it began to pour down rain. As the fire died down to where I felt it could no longer harm me, soaked but exhausted, I dozed back off, this time into a dreamless sleep until dawn woke me. I shivered. I climbed back down the Angel Oak and waited at its trunk, which was Monk.
“Good morning, Brother Roman.’

“What brings you here at first light, Monk?”
"I saw the fire glowing from this direction last night." He paused and looked around. "But it appears it must not have been as big as it seemed, for the forest looked afire."
I looked around, and there was only a ring of dead ash around the base of the Angel Oak. And I told Monk what had happened, my dream with the little devils in it, and what they told me, how I woke and broke down and prayed for rain, which put out the fire.
“It seems God has performed a miracle for you, Brother Roman,” Monk said.
“Perhaps. Or perhaps it’s just a coincidence. Or, I may have just dreamed the whole thing of the fire in the forest.” I said.
“This is quite possible, but tell me: Do you truly believe this?” Monk asked.
“No, not entirely, for it seemed so real. Even so, if this ‘omen’ took place, why would God use fear to get me to break down and pray? Why not show me he exists in some other manner?” I asked. “I’m not one to say how and in what way God chooses to work His ways, but this is what I believe: It was a miracle and answer to your prayer. And as I told you yesterday, there is no such thing as coincidence: what has happened here is your fate, but why you were spared, and it is for you to decide what step you will take next.” Monk said.
"I believe differently, Monk. The Shadow is not some supernatural entity, yet it is some strange force of nature at work. It is the Angel Oak that protected me last night, not God. It seems natural for a man to break down and pray as I did, as a last resort and out of fear. Fear will drive a man to do and believe things that are not true, as I demonstrated with my story of the man and how his fear of his neighbor led to his and his family's death."
"But don't you believe this Shadow is also these Devils and that you did encounter them before here in this forest?" Monk asked. "Furthermore, the devils referred to themselves as 'Legion,' and this comes only from the scriptures, the Word of God," Monk argued.
"I've still yet to decide on that matter, and this only complicates the matter far more than before," I said.
"There's also the fact that you spoke to the devils in your dream. That they manifested in your mind supports what I believe: It was an omen being fulfilled when the fire was about to consume you, and your submission through prayer saved you. God spared your life, for the fact that you broke down to humble yourself through prayer seems to confess that you're not an atheist as you believe yourself to be." Monk said.
"But there is something that's being left out here, Monk, and that is my concern with devils being beaten out of children. I say that it is rather the Devil's beat into them, fear is beaten into the child through punishment, and a belief in God is merely a fear of punishment. Fear, then, is the poison of religion. So perhaps it was fate that I crossed paths with these devils, these shadows of my past, and the omen that came from the story I told of the man and his family burned to death in the fire. As for the fact that I chose to pray for rain… I'm not sure if it's a confession that I believe in God. But to believe is a choice, and I'm left with a choice. I'm a freethinker, which means I'm free to not be an atheist, but whether I cease to be an atheist will require further reflection on my part. And I will remember to keep it simple, Monk." I said.
And on this thought, the Monk and I exchanged a few warm words and then parted ways: the Monk took one path, and I took the other… I shall end here.

White Lie

The school bus made a right on Black Street, and all the kids scrambled as if playing a game of musical chairs in their seats. They didn't like how N. Word looked and smelt, but N. couldn't help it. He was poor, as were all the Words in the town of Shithole. He was almost completely covered in black from working in the tar pits. N. smelled grease and grime, matting into his hair and making it look oily. All the kids avoided having to sit with N. on the bus. All except Status Quo. He did not so much avoid sitting with N. Word as much as he was shy and did not talk to anyone on the bus. While in the few minutes before reaching Black Street each morning on the way to school, as the other kids gossiped among themselves, Status Quo remained silent. Then, the bus would arrive at N. Word's house, and silence was spread throughout the bus. All the noisy chattering of the children ceased the moment N. Word stepped onto the bus. And even having to sit beside N. Word wasn't so bad, thanks to the silence N. created. But if one listened intently, most often, one could hear whispers here or there saying: "…little grease monkey."

"Never be ashamed of gettin' dirty." N.'s Gramma' would tell him. "There is nothing wrong with it." She insisted.

N. Word would arrive at school, and he always seemed to get in trouble for this or that, but primarily for nothing at all. The teachers were cranky in the morning, and the smell and looks of N. seemed to get mixed up with the teachers' coffee. When they drank it, the temperature of the hot coffee heated them all up inside, getting them riled up and angry at N. And it was always the same from an English teacher called Mr. Yes, Sir.

"Break your jaw t' say yes, sir?" He would babble out in fragmented sentences.

And N. Word would remain silent, as he was taught not to talk back to his elders.

"Break your jaw t' say yes, sir?" He would babble out a second time.

And N. Word would remain silent, still.

"Break your jaw t' say yes, sir?" He would babble out the third and final time of his sadistic abuse in a genuinely evil authoritative ritual.

Then came the other part of what the students knew was sure to come.

"Out in the hall N." Mr. Yes, Sir would remove a paddle from his desk drawer, which he took pride in. "I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget." And N. hadn't forgotten; his palms began to sweat if anything ever reminded him of those days.

But that was years ago. N. Word's Gramma' has since "passed away." And the town of Shithole hadn't changed much. N. was 23 now and still working in the tar pits. And that was because the town of Shithole didn't allow… N. Word was a "word," but he and his kind were not just any words… they were not considered Men like others were, as an unwritten rule. The Good Gentiles of Shithole saw to it that this was justified with their friend and sheriff of Shithole, a man named Old Law, and his faithful deputy named Pig. And he was to be a just and fair man. The Good Gentiles would attest to this, but Old Law was hard to interpret, to see this justice as a necessary evil.

N. Word was happy, though. He had finally met someone, a girl whom he had fallen in love with. And though Windy was not a Word like N... he and she would not have stirred things up in the town of Shithole except that Windy's Father was Bible, an authoritative figure in Shithole, the pastor at the Holy Gentiles Church. Bible was the type of man who demanded respect from everyone, as was afforded to him from his position in the inner workings of the community.

But N. had long since outgrown his days of biting his tongue. He considered himself a Man now and on equal terms with any of the other Men.

But he still worked the tar pits and was snickered behind his back, called little grease monkey. Gossip of N. Word was rabid. And N., in his mediocre existence, could do little but defy the mob. Yet Windy insisted that they conceal their relationship. And even though N. thought that by doing so, he thought Windy was somehow ashamed of him- he, in a way, saw the problems it would cause for her. But not only for her, it would also cause problems for them both. This N. Word was naïve. Though none of this mattered now, Vermin, Windy's ex-boyfriend, had caught wind of their relationship through an intermediary in the whole affair, Status Quo.

"That Word-loving little bitch!" Vermin ejaculated.

"Well, I don't know if that is who she is seeing now." Status Quo realized he had given away too much information. "You know how rumors are in this small town."

"Who gives a fuck!?" Said Spit, Vermin's confidant. "Just give me a reason to kick the shit out of that fucking N.!"

"Fucking grease monkeys…" Vermin loathed.

Vermin and Spit left the house, and Status Quo waited for Captain to return. Captain's house was a haven for the young nouns. He let them drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes but was against any illicit drugs. Old Law didn't much care for the young Nouns hanging out at Captain's house, but now that they were not teenagers, he ceased sending his deputy Pig up to the house on the weekends to investigate and ensure things were orderly. By request of Captain's neighbor Bible, nonetheless. And by a neighbor, it was more like 40 acres and a mule apart from each other in the town of Shithole.

"Hey, S.Q., how's it going," Captain said as he walked up the driveway after parking his truck.

"Oh, all right, I suppose?" Status Quo's mind was still dwelling on the question of N. Word. "I saw Vermin and Spit fly past me on the road." Captain was a decent Man.

"Those boys need to buckle up and slow down. Little bastards threw rocks all over my truck!" Captain exclaimed in his usual pacifist way.

"Yeah, they're a little pissed off." Status Quo brought up the subject. "I accidentally told Vermin that Windy is seeing N. Word."

“Windy… seeing a Word?” Captain was dumbfounded. “I feel sorry for N., but he should know better than to mess with Bible’s daughter. Not that I care too much for him anyway. But you know as well as I do by now… How old are you now? What 27?”
“28.” Status Quo said. “I’ll be 29 this year.”
"Still young, though… Anyways, you know how things are here in Shithole." Captain pondered.
"But… It won't surprise me one bit, typical preacher's daughter."
"But Windy's 18 now and old enough to think for herself." Status Quo elaborated. "Even though I remember being a little naïve at that age, I think she's, or I guess I should say, that a Woman matures faster than a Man. They have to, in a way."
"Well, you may be right there, S.Q., but either way, you have Words, and you have words. I used to have a word that worked for me in the tar pits. And then there was this other Word, totally ignorant and lazy. Wouldn't do a damn thing and blamed everything on him being a Word." Captain philosophized. "But you know what the first Word said about the second Word?" Captain paused and let his cliché and rhetorical question impregnate a little. "He said, 'Typical Word for you, just another grease monkey.' You see, even Words know the difference between one Word and another like N. Word."
Status Quo sat listening, smiling as if he agreed with what was being said. Vermin and Spit drove back up the driveway, and Riddle walked up behind them. Riddle was about the same age as Status Quo. They were in the same grade growing up, but Status Quo was still wiser than Riddle. Status Quo had been attending college and was home for summer break. Status Quo had gone to college and to the University because he had been told by his Dad: "If you can't be a part of the conversation, Status Quo, you are not a member of the club." Status Quo still doubted he could get in the "club." But his Dad told him that he was as "sharp as a tack," and that was all the encouragement he needed. But S.Q. was in the dark as to how to grasp an inkling of understanding of his roots in Shithole.
“You know what that N. is, don’t cha? He comes from a fucking sorry ass Semitic noun.” Said Vermin. “Bible told me so.”
“You know what that N. is, don’t cha? He is from a fucking Semiotic descent.” Said Vermin. “Bible told me so.”
“No shit?” Spit thought. “Well, that makes sense. If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a nonGentile.”
“Yeah, that N.’s a dumb fucker ain’t he?” Vermin added.
“It’s in their blood…” Riddle joined in. “But those Words, they sure stick together, don’t they?” “Amen.” Vermin and Spit said simultaneously.
"But they're all part of Mankind, just like us." Status Quo had heard enough. "Besides, Word means Logos if you want to know the real 'semiotics' of it, dumbass!"
“Just like a college boy.” Riddle challenged Status Quo. “I suppose they taught you that at the University, huh? You’re not one of those educated idiots, are you S.Q. ?" And Riddle grinned.
Status Quo sat silently. He knew that he was right. Not only did he not have any evidence in his mind to support his interruption in the flow of the conversation, but he also saw the uselessness of his effort. "Time makes more change than reason." Status Quo would constantly have to remind himself. But it wasn't "reason" that Riddle and the others operated. "Words aren't one of us…" was the phrase he always heard. And when he was younger, he believed this.

“Why you and I used to fight those fucking grease monkeys all the time,” Riddle argued.
“S.Q.’s done gone and ‘come to a Monk.” Riddle sarcastically laughed.
“A grease monk-key.” Vermin and Spit said simultaneously.
“Yeah, well… I’m not like that anymore.” Status Quo said.
Nobody changes,” Riddle spoke with poison. “They just think they do.”
“Fuck off.” Status Quo said to defend himself from criticism.
"Whatcha gonna do, S.Q." Riddle may have been a little younger and dumber than Status Quo, but his menacing physical prowess began invading Status Quo's space. So, he got up and went outside on the porch to sit and talk with Captain.
“Well, goddamn it, there’s got to be something you can do?” Bible was furious as he talked on the phone.
“She’s of age, and I can’t do a damn thing about it in those regards, Bible.” Said the voice on the other end of the line. “But I’ll have Pig keep an eye on that damn N. If I can’t arrest him for being a Word, I can sure make his life hell here in Shithole.”
Windy walked in the door just in time to hear the last thing her Dad had said before hanging up the phone. She tried to sneak into her room down the long, silent hall.
“Where have you been!?” Bible demanded.
"Out," Windy said, startled. She knew the information he sought and was not willing to release it. “I talked to Vermin today.” Bible rapped his fingers on his desk in a tattooing sound. “He tells me that you have been seeing somebody new. I didn’t know you and him had broken up?” Bible lied. “We're just seeing other people for a while, that’s all.” Windy went through the basic rites orally.
“So, who ya seein’ now?” Bible persisted.
“No one, Daddy.” Windy played like a child.
“Don’t lie to me.” Bible went on. “S.Q.’s the one who told Vermin and Spit, and I have never known him to lie. Says you been seeing that N. Word.” And now the truth was out in the open as Bible coursed his fingers over the black leather belt that held up his cheap trousers.
"You know how people talk in this small town, Daddy." Windy eluded the question. "Why would I see a stupid grease monkey like N. anyway?"
“That was the same thing that I was wondering myself.” Bible was somewhat fooled by Windy’s betraying rhetoric.
And who did Windy betray more? N.? Her Father? Or herself? She did not know. But the confusion had settled in and would begin to run its course. It was an innocent lie. The truth in Shithole didn't get one very far in life. Concealment of your beliefs was something Status Quo was learning more and more every day. He remembered some of his conversations with his friend Discord at the University.
“I despise Men who consider themselves Good Gentiles,” Discord said quietly.
"Well…" Status Quo thought. "I wouldn't say that I despise them. I believe I would be acting just like what you despise about them."
“But they’re such fucking hypocrites.” Discord went on.
“Yeah, well, maybe?” Status Quo continued. “But who am I to judge?”
“Them! ‘Lest you be judged’ S.Q.!” Discord laughed.
“Well, who’s going to judge me? God!?” They both laughed in disbelief.

“Means ‘fish.’” Vermin said as they walked out onto the porch where Status Quo and Captain were sitting silently, watching a black dog sniff around the back of the property.
“But that was an early Gentile symbol.” Status Quo interrupted.
“We’re gonna have to start calling him I.Q. instead of S.Q.” Riddle laughed with the others. “Well, for fuck’s sake, it was.” Status Quo persisted. “It was an acronym in…” “Shut the fuck up, I.Q.” Vermin made the mistake of saying.
Status Quo was not a big Man, but he could be every bit as hostile as one as he grabbed Vermin by the throat and pinned him against a post on the porch.
"Let 'em loose, Quo." Captain got between the two, and Status Quo let Vermin go. "Now you fellas gotta get along."
“Yeah,” Riddle interjected. “Those Words want us to fight amongst ourselves. That’s how they are, you know?”
“Oh, just shut the fuck up yourself, Riddle!” Status Quo retaliated.
"Watch it there, S.Q." Riddle went on. "It's not like anyone called you a grease monkey, right?"
Riddle chuckled and slapped Status Quo on the back. "We're all friends here, brother."
Status Quo tried to smile as he did earlier, but everyone could sense a change in him. Especially Captain, who tried to give Status Quo some peace, as the other three lit out to hit the town, probably to get “geetered up” and try to hunt down N. Word.
"Don't let Vermin get to ya, S.Q," Captain said. "He's just young and stupid like you used to be." But Status Quo wasn’t young and stupid anymore. Not stupid, anyhow. He had learned a lot at the University. “And not just book smarts,” he said. He could see things now that he used to be blind to, like Men and how they functioned. And the Good Book and how it was misinterpreted. But he did not understand why he felt so uncomfortable when he had to talk about Words or the Book. Status Quo lit a cigarette and thought about it, too. Everything was seen, as he saw through this haze of smoke in the mirror, as he saw Vermin in himself, in the past. And he thought of how he and Riddle had drifted apart since he had gone to the University. He thought about the town of Shithole and all the Shithole inhabitants and how ignorant he thought they were. Status Quo wished at times he would have never attended the University and how much easier his life would be if he were more like Riddle.
“Did you hear?” Spit said excitedly. “Bible killed that fucking N.”
"Are you serious?" Vermin's eyes lit up with sadistic pleasure. "What happened?" He asked as Status Quo, Captain, and even Riddle were slightly surprised.
"Well, Bible got a call from Pig… Pig's been watching Windy for Bible, so I heard. But, anyway, you got to hear this. So, Bible gets his shotgun…" “The double barrel?” Vermin exclaimed.
"Yeah, yeah! And so, Bible supposedly goes over there to Black Street where that N. lives, just to scare the hell out of that little grease monkey, I hear tell. But when he gets there, he sneaks up and looks through the window. And guess what ol' Bible sees?" Spit paused. It made him feel important to have what he thought was important information. "Just guess what he sees?"
“Just fucking tell us, Spit!” Status Quo was already feeling sick to his stomach and expected the worst.
“Bible, that fat ol’ bastard, peeks in the window, and that N. is mounted on top a’ Windy.”
“Caught that fucking N. with his pants down, did he?” Riddle added.

"Yep." Spit paused again. "So, after catching that N. and Windy fuckin', Bible went nuts. He kicked open the door, and that fuckin' N. tried to run, but he did have his pants down!" Spit laughed excitedly, almost giggling. "And N., dumb fucker he is, tripped and fell as he tried to skedaddle the hell out a' there. Then, Bible walked right up to that Word and said: 'You fucked with the wrong bull N.' and then took that shotgun and gave 'em both barrels right to the fuckin' head. I heard Old Law and Pig talking on the scanner on the way here. Said it took N.'s whole head off, and his fucking brain got blown all the way over the other side of the living room. Windy said she had chunks of that N all over her. Little Word-loving preacher's daughter just covered in that N.'s blood." "Woooo, doggies!" Vermin said. "Only thing that pisses me off is that I didn't get to kick the shit out of that little grease monkey 'for he 'got greased.'" Vermin giggled as he made a pun, though he had no idea what a pun was.
"That's because you were too big a pussy to go over there to Black Street, Vermin." Riddle poked fun at Vermin's cowardice.
"Like I said, boys," Captain said solemnly. "N. Word should've known better. Not that I think it was the right thing for ol' Bible to do. But everyone knows you don't mess with someone like Windy if you're a Word."
"So, what did they do with the Bible?" Status Quo asked.
"Don't know?" Spit spat out. "Probably nothing."
"Oh, they'll have to do something with him. Don't matter who you are or who you kill 'round here. Ol' Judge Justice will do something to 'em." Captain shook his head in disbelief. "Didn't think Bible had it in him, though, tell the truth. He always seemed hot-headed but always thought he was a coward, myself."
"He is a coward." Status Quo said nervously. "Shoot an unarmed Man like that."
"Unarmed Man!" Riddle laughed. "You mean an unarmed Word, don't cha I.Q.?"
Status Quo smiled that smile of dissonance, and a butterfly fluttered all over his stomach; his palms were sweaty. He got up, went to the fridge for a beer, and grabbed three.

"Let me get one of those," Riddle said. Status Quo was willing to relinquish one, knowing plenty were in the fridge. But it took a lot of energy now to get there and back. His legs felt weak as the bloody scene played itself out over and over in his mind; he could almost picture himself being in N.'s situation. He lit a cigarette and thought about those days N. Word used to sit beside him on the school bus. And how he had never really said anything to N. but maybe mumbling out, "Hey."
"Bible kills Word," read the front page of The Daily Shithole the next day, the town's only newspaper. Gossip spread throughout the town. Accusations of how N. Word had threatened Bible. Mankind's finest from every corner of Shithole came to the local jail in support of the Reverend Bible. "He is a moral and Gentile Man,' says the defense in a statement issued this morning. "He just lost control; anybody would do the same." Said Bible's defense and one of Shithole's most prominent citizens. "That young Word got what he deserved." Says a master at one of the town's tar pits. And so went the various lines from the paper as Status Quo noticed all the cliché phrases the reporters of The Daily Shithole used in what was supposed to be objective information. But all of Shithole's inhabitants

attended the Holy Gentile Church. Judge Justice and the prosecutor refused to recuse himself from the case by saying, "I will treat this as if it were my own Son."
"What bullshit!" Status Quo was frustrated. "Treat who like he was his own Son? More like he'll treat Bible as his own Son since Bible is practically his Father. That's even what the son-of-a-bitch calls Bible at Church! Father… huh!"
"Now, S.Q.," Captain tried to comfort him. "You know how Shithole works. No one gives a damn about a Word."
"Yeah, that's for fucking certain." Status Quo went on. "And how the hell is there going to be an impartial jury here in Shithole?"
"What's wrong, S.Q.? It ain't like you knew him personally. That's what happens when a Word like N. messes around with a preacher's daughter. I told you he should have known better. Hard way to learn."
"Learn what, Captain, how to die?" Status Quo asked.
"Well, maybe the rest of them will learn something. But it ain't like this is the first time something like this has happened to a Word in Shithole. Just seems odd for a preacher to do what he did. Had to be out of his mind. Bible's conscience wouldn't let him do something like that." Captain tried to reason with the events.
"Well, I've been to his holy-rolling fucking Church and even heard him give whole sermons about Words, saying they are not to be even considered Men according to the Book." Status Quo remembered.
"So, what happened to Windy?" Captain tried to sound concerned.
"Bitch done got herself locked up in the nuthouse." Riddle came walking up the driveway behind them.
"Hey, Riddle, have a seat. We're just going over the daily gossip of the town." Captain welcomed him.
"So, where's shit-head one and shit-head two?" Riddle mocked Vermin and Spit.
"Swinging from a tree, I wish." Status Quo slipped out.
"Well now, aren't we cranky this afternoon, S.Q? I suppose those two are a couple of dumb fuckers. Ain't worth a damn. But they are my cousins." Riddle tried to stick Status Quo's foot in his mouth. "Everybody's everyone's cousin here in Shithole, Riddle. Tell me something I don't know." Status Quo fought back.
"Yeah, I guess we're just a bunch of inbred hicks from the sticks, not college material like you."
"At least I've been out of Shithole and seen the world a little."
"Now fellas, just cause the University is for one of yuns don't make it… Well, it just ain't for everyone." Captain philosophized. "But everyone should get out of this town once in their life. I agree with that."
"Not me," Riddle concluded. "I was born here and plan to die here. Plan on gettin' my own tar pit one of these days. A Man has to have Mammon to stay on top of things. Else he ain't no better than that damn N. Word. But we don't have to worry about that little grease monkey anymore, huh S.Q.? Just one less Word in the world, far as I am concerned."
"Maybe so. But I'm not for killing anything or anyone." Status Quo stated.
"You don't even hunt anymore, S.Q., done gone and lost your blood lust?" Riddle laughed his sarcastic laugh. "College life done took all the spunk out of ya!"

“Well, look what the cat dragged in.” Captain joked as Vermin and Spit pulled up in his driveway. Status Quo sat listening and downing beers and smoking cigarette after cigarette, drowning away the conversation as Vermin and Spit went over the grotesque and irrational details of the murder of N. Word. And in the laughter was all the fear they felt toward a Word. They did not understand the most dangerous narcotic of them all, the narcotic that was injected into their minds since they were infants, the narcotic of the masses: hate. Dusk fell, and Status Quo stumbled into bed and dreamed the bloody scene of N. Word's death over and over, and as the night progressed, it was he who was to face the gun. Bible was after him as his guilt and anxiety haunted him in his dreams.

"Judge Justice Accepts Plea from Bible," read the headlines of The Daily Shithole a month after the slaying of N. Word. Status Quo read the article in his usual apathetic mood. He knew that Bible would get a light sentence, but five years. "Jurors say Bible didn't know right from wrong when he shot Word." Status Quo let out a sigh of indifference.

“Out of all the people who should know right from wrong, Bible doesn’t strike me as the type that would temporarily forget about the two.” Status Quo pleaded with Captain as he sipped on his coffee.

"Well, you're not a Father, S.Q.?" Captain argued. "Bible was just doing what any dad would do in that situation."

“But it wasn’t like he came home to his own house and caught the two of them fucking in his bed, now, was it?” Status Quo set about his premises. “He thought enough about it to bring along a shotgun, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but as Spit said, he only meant to give that N. a scare.”

"I don't buy it. Spit also said that they said Pig had been watching Windy for Bible. I'm guessing Pig told Bible they were over there fucking, and he thought that story up afterward, with the help of Old Law, no doubt." Status Quo continued. "Everyone knows Law and Bible are fishing buddies. And everyone on the jury was a devoted member of the Church, thanks to the prosecutor. He supposedly argued that their Faith would let them be the best to judge one of their own because they would not want to tarnish the image of the Church because of one bad seed."

“Well, that last part makes a lot of sense to me, S.Q,” Captain added.

“More like they were protecting their kind if you ask me.” Status Quo concluded.

"Nobody asked you." Riddle walked out onto the porch. His eyes were dilated and had that void look meth gave a Man. "Ah, I'm just fuckin' with you, S.Q. I didn't even hear what you were rambling on about. Probably that fuckin' N. Word again." “No, not really.” Status Quo said. “It’s Bible I’m talking about.”

“Well, that ol’ son-of-a-bitch got off with 5 years in the loony bin, huh,” Riddle said as he glanced over the paper's front page and put it back down. “Guess you’d been happier if they’d fried his fat ass, huh S.Q.? Or are you ‘gainst the death penalty, too?”

"I am, in a way. But it wouldn't bother me to see the Bible go to the chair, even though it's not the electric chair here anymore. They put them to sleep like dogs." Status Quo continued as Vermin and Spit, so wired up they could hardly sit still, came outside onto the porch. "But if you were to ask me, I'd say any Man who kills another has to be temporarily insane."

"Now, what the hell does that mean? I hear it all the time: 'insanity plea this or that, blah, blah, blah…'" Vermin interjected.

“It has to do with whether or not you have a conscience, whether you know right from wrong when you dust somebody,” Riddle told Vermin.
“Hell, everybody knows right from wrong.” Spit spat out.
“Obviously, the Good Reverend Bible didn’t.” Status Quo added.
I have said Status Quo was a kind of intermediary in this whole affair. And one may think that Vermin was not the type of boy that a girl like Windy would take to in the first place. This was the work of her Dad, Bible. He had seen to it that Wind, as was her given name, was that Vermin would meet Windy as it was arranged through Bible. Bible knew that Vermin was a bad seed, but he chose the lesser of two evils. Bible knew that Wind was fond of stirring things up with Words at school. She occasionally sat in the balconies with them at sporting events and was particularly fond of N. Word. And she also knew Status Quo through his work at the Shithole Library. Status Quo had tutored her the summer before. These books revealed new things to her, and Status Quo was assigned to her for her reading lessons. Books by a Man who talked about Words in ways even Wind was guilty of thinking. And this guilt grew in her, leading to her infatuation with N. Word. The books were opening up Windy's eyes. The books opened doors to other perspectives: the darkness of Man and the light of Man. And it was there that Windy read what she had always felt was true, that all Men are created equal, but that Mammon saw to it that some Men possessed more power than others with the division of the Rich and the Poor. And she learned about the history of the tar pits and the history of a Word.
Windy had taken to N. Word. She found his kind to be attractive in a dangerous sense. She was like a child who got away with the things she knew she was not supposed to do. Windy had only maintained her relationship with Vermin for outer appearances to be kept up. And how Windy's relationship with N. Word had escaped the gossip and rumors of the town of Shithole was a mystery. Vermin only kept up his part in the relationship for sensual purposes. Windy was a possession for Vermin. But she had even transformed him in a way he had not recognized. He read some of the books that Windy read. Still, his interpretation of them rested solely on the manipulation of Bible's influence, as Vermin sought Bible's interpretation of the entire world as did most of the Men of Shithole.
But Vermin, being the scoundrel he was, let Bible believe that he had chosen these books himself.
And as for Status Quo, he did not seek any romantic affection from Windy, though, as did other Men in the town. His interest was a friendship, with tragic results he could not foresee, as the tragedy began with a conversation one summer evening. Status Quo had seen Windy and N. Word together at the Shithole Library. He had waited for his opportunity to speak with Windy in the absence of N., and he whispered into her ear: "What happened to you and Vermin?" He uttered the abominable question. And she replied with the utmost confidence that Status Quo had mistaken what she had said. She replied: "I told Vermin about N." she giggled. But she merely wanted to see
Status Quo's reaction. Startled, Status Quo stood there as Windy said goodbye and rushed over to N. Word, still giggling. The next day, Status Quo asked Vermin what he thought of Windy seeing N. Word. But it was too late. And soon, Status Quo realized that Windy was just being her usual self, telling a little innocent lie to see his reaction first before she broke any taboo in the town of Shithole.

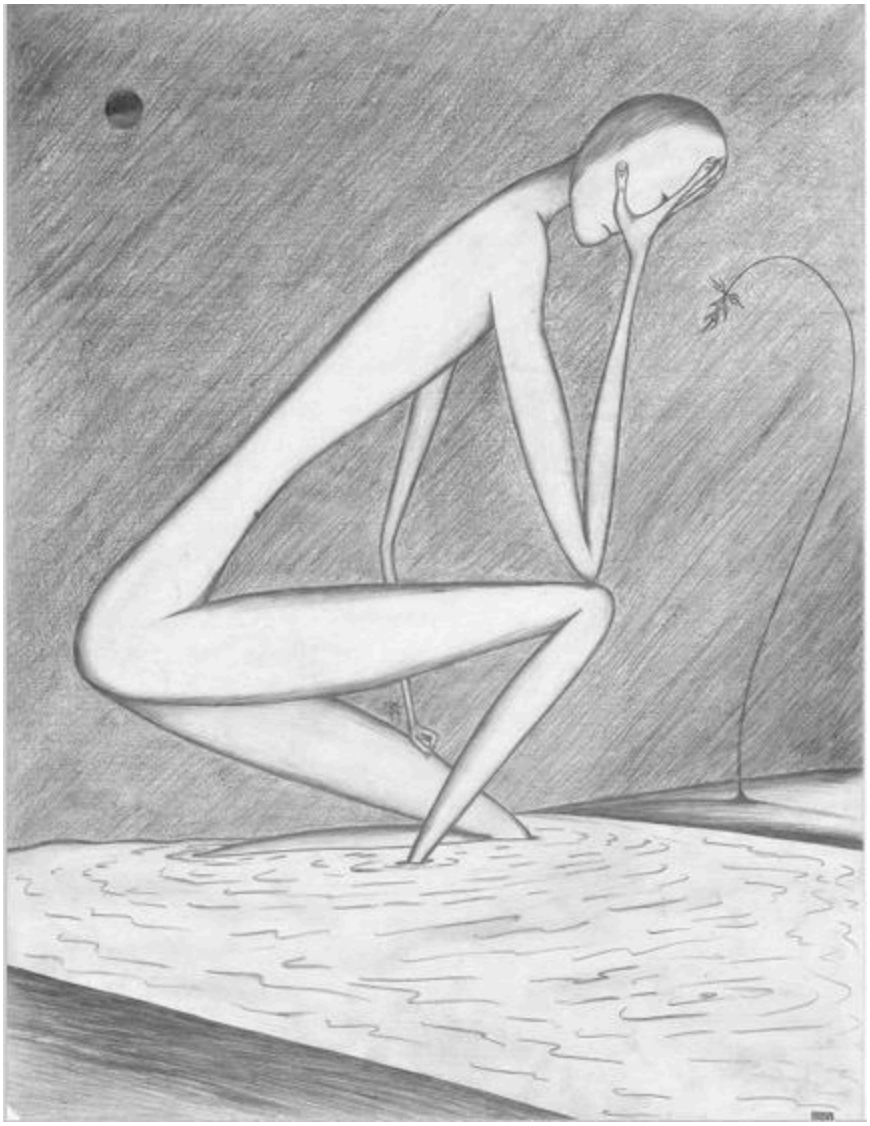
Two years have passed now in the town of Shithole. Bible had just recently gotten out of a minimum-security prison that was more of a mental institution than anything. Bible was let out on good behavior and the persistent "good word" that was given to the prison parole board on behalf of the residents of the town of Shithole. Status Quo worked at the Library for the summer and prepared for graduate school in Library Science. And Bible fits right in at the prison. He was reformed. He had rededicated his Faith and had become a born-again Gentile. For in prison, his antics were not recognized as they were, in truth, as delusions. And Status Quo had transformed, as he was now 30. He was torn between his intellectualism and fear of the Good Book. He had tried to read it and believe it several times, but his atheism got in the way of his Faith. And his Faith was torn from being a Good Gentile by the rabid hypocrisy that was in the hearts of the citizens of Shithole. But the path of the two would cross, and Windy would lead them to the crossroads. She had been living secretly with Status Quo for the summer in Shithole after a holiday in the State mental hospital.
"Bible says he has paid his debt to society." Read a line in The Daily Shithole. Status Quo sat quietly, reading and sipping his coffee, as Windy got out of bed and entered the living room.
"Whatcha readin'?" She yawned, and her petite figure caught Status Quo's eye as it did every morning.
"Put some clothes on. You can't go 'round here half-naked like that." Status Quo verbally chastised the now 20-year-old Wind.
"What? Don't cha want to fuck me, S.Q.?" She laughed sarcastically as she stuck a wet finger in his ear.
"Quit it, Windy." Status Quo was already irritated by the article he was reading, and feeling cruel, he added, "I see your crazy father Bible got let loose from prison."
"I told you not to say his name." She yawned again and seemed unmoved by Status Quo's attitude.
"And he's not my Father, Daddy." She mocked Status Quo.
"And I'm not your Daddy." Status Quo added.
"Well, anyway, that fucker can rot in hell for all I care." Windy drank the milk from the carton. "I suppose he thinks he's just as high and mighty as ever."
"Well, what the hell are you supposed to be? If you'd get off 'the shit' for a while…" Status Quo mumbled the rest to himself as he continued reading.
"What? Like you haven't ever done it. I bet you used to even fire it up, you know, slam that shit, being that you were running with Riddle and all." She assumed.
"I never used a needle. But whether I like to inject meth isn't the point." Status Quo went on. "That shit will rot your mind and your gut. Just look at your arms and feet. You get all strung out on meth, and you're gonna fuck up and end up back in the hospital or, even worse, in prison."
"Riddle told me he fixed you up a few units once. Well, huh, huh? The 'dirty-thirty'." "Well, I told you, that was just one time. And Riddle didn't tell you, I did." "What a wicked web you weave, Quo," Windy said.
She went to the phone and called up a Half-Man, Priest. Windy bartered her body for a taste of the euphoria. But Status Quo was aware of her debauchery and the stimulant that plagued the town of Shithole. And it was only a matter of time before Bible found out about Windy's whereabouts, but he heard immediately of her dealings with Priest. Bible considered Priest to

be as low as a Word, and rumor told of his being a "half-breed," according to the town of Shithole.
One drop of blood. That was the rule. Priest had avoided a life of working at the tar pits by being a scarab, a mediator, a meth dealer, rolling up and slinging “the shit” to any takers… or as in the case with a Lady like Windy.
Now, as to what actual circumstances occurred, there was little doubt in the mind of Status Quo. For the character of a Man does not change quickly: Bible was as shady as a two-thousand-year-old oak. Bible was not allowed to return to the Holy Gentile Church as a matter of politics. And his loathing had grown into drunken violence. On several occasions, Old Law had to "arrest" his friend at his house. And at times, Windy was her old self that Status Quo remembered tutoring at the Shithole Library. And at other times, she was just another "meth head." But the truth lies in the consequences of events during that morning's blood-red dawn.
“Well, look who it is?” Captain said with a warm smile.

“Hey.” Status Quo said with half a smile and a half-hidden frown, but Captain was too pleased to see Status Quo, as it had been a whole summer past since his last visit to detect the dark cloud that hung over his head. They shook hands, and Captain offered Status Quo a beer.
“Sure, I’ll take a six-pack.” Status Quo tried to produce some humor in his voice, but there was gloom instead, and he wondered how long it would be before Captain noticed it.
"How's Windy doin'," Captain said he knew about the arrangement.
“How did you know?” Status Quo asked.
“Vermin and Spit,” Captain said.
"Crank-whore, what else can I say." Status Quo replied in stereotypes he didn't usually use.
“I heard.” Captain shook his head. “And with another one of those Words.”
“They call him Priest.”
“Priest. Huh!” Captain didn’t understand the position Priest held in the subversive world of Shithole. “Now, why’s that?”
“Never mind.” Status Quo prescribed. “You don’t want to know.”
“Probably not.” Captain agreed.
"Listen…" Status Quo tried to break the ice on the subject, but there was no easy way to go about it. "…Whew! Man o' Man." He downed his beer and asked for another. He took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, took one out, and lit it.
"What's up, S.Q.?" Captain said as he returned with a beer for them both.
“I think N. Word is back from the dead.” Status Quo said to a startled Captain.
“What in the hell are you talking about, S.Q.?” Captain pried. “Are you alright?” “Far from it, Captain. Far from it. The Devil’s come for me; come for us all.” "What's on your mind, S.Q.?" Captain asked quietly, reassuringly.
“I just came from the house…” Status Quo swallowed a lump in his throat so big he had to wash it down with beer, and then he took a drag off his cigarette and began to speak, feeling out-of-body as he started his confession.
"Windy showed up covered in blood, crying, wired out of her mind. That was early this morning." Captain still didn't seem alarmed, so Status Quo delved deeper. "Priest is dead.

And so is Bible." "What are you talking about, S.Q.?" Captain was less in shock and more in disbelief.
"Bible followed Windy from my house. It must have been those two heathens, Vermin and Spit, who told him she was staying with me. She had been up for at least three days, and I heard her talking on the phone about getting an eight-ball of the shit. And then she left. About an hour later, she came in, like I said, and told me that Bible kicked in the door at Priest's house. He walked up to him just like he did N. Word and said the exact same thing: 'You fucked with the wrong bull, Priest,' and then he shot him. And I can only guess where he got another shotgun. That fucking Pig… all he had to do was let him in the confiscation room and take one that would be traced as stolen." "But you said the Bible was dead, too." Captain was uneasy.
"Yeah. I guess I did." Status Quo downed another drink of half a beer. Captain did the same, left, and returned with two more beers as Status Quo used one cigarette to light another.
"Just relax, S.Q., I could care less for that so-called Priest and Bible, too, for that matter." Captain tried to ease himself as well as Status Quo.
"So Windy comes in all covered in blood and bawling and laughing… just totally fucking hysterical and wired out of her mind. I don't think she… anyway. Windy said that she ran into the bedroom. I'm guessing she was fucking Priest just like she was N. when he got shot. Now, if that wasn't enough killing for one day, she gets Priest's .45 from under his pillow. Bible was at the door, she told me, and it was open about halfway when she just unloads the .45 into the door, through it, and knocks Bible down. But he wasn't dead yet. So, instead of just leaving or calling Old Law, she reloaded the .45. Then she said she kind of blacked out. Whether she was afraid or just out of her mind on meth, I don't know, but she said she sat down and talked to him!" Status Quo took a breath, a drink or two off his beer, and a couple of long drags off his cigarette.
"She says that she asked him if he loved her. And he says back to her that he does. And then she said that he was begging her not to kill him and all this sort of shit. But then she said that she shot him twice in the head. Like a fucking execution. Now I didn't know what to do…" Status Quo went on as Captain sat stunned. "So, I called Old Law. And when he and Pig asked me what happened, I said Bible killed Priest and then tried to kill her, so she shot him. 'Two times in the head?' That condescending fuck says to me. 'That doesn't sound like self-defense to me.' And I said…" Status Quo paused again and downed his beer. Captain got him another and sat back down.
"I don't know what to tell you, S.Q." Captain tried to comfort him.
"That's not all." Status Quo continued. "It gets worse. Windy lit out when I called Old Law, even though I told her everything would be all right…"
Riddle walked up the driveway about that time, and Status Quo paused the conversation.
"Well, what's with the gloomy faces? I guess it has to do with all the killing that's been going on." Riddle had a smirk on his face as he and Status Quo glared at each other. "Heard all about it and figured I'd find you over her S.Q."
Status Quo stared at the ground and felt that sickening feeling a Man feels when something like this happens to him. Silence hovered in the air for a minute, but it seemed like an hour.
"Just a shame, a damn shame. Lady like Windy, her age and all. Her life was bad enough as it was, what with all that happened with her and N. Word. And now this." Captain sounded his usual empathetic self. But it was more pity than empathy.

“Well, she ain’t feeling nothin’ now.” Riddle almost laughed but didn’t out of respect for Captain. But he wanted to laugh: to laugh at Windy, to laugh at N. Word, and especially at to laugh at Priest since Priest was taking business from him. Riddle’s dream of owning a tar pit included raising the money from “slinging shit” from dealing meth.
“What’s that supposed to mean?” Status Quo was about half intoxicated and feeling rather hostile about the whole affair.
“She has done herself in. Didn’t you know?” Riddle asked rhetorically. “She slammed 50 units, ate a whole gram, and then ate a bullet.”
“Are you serious?” Captain said miserably. “That’s just a shame, a damn shame. I tell you what…” He muttered.
"I suppose you're all torn up about it, aren't you, Riddle?" Status Quo was staring him right in the eye… And Riddle remained silent.
“Fuck it.” Status Quo blurted out just to appease the crowd.
Vermin and Spit pulled up in the driveway. Status Quo retreated to his silent self again. He went and got himself another beer and lit another cigarette. He thought about how glad he would be to get out of Shithole and move to the City, where he would do his graduate studies. And he felt about Windy. Poor Windy.
“Fuckin’ a!” Vermin exclaimed.
“What are you two worthless pieces of shit doing?” Riddle broke the silence and spoke as if it were just another day.
But it was just another day in old Shithole.



Despair

Good Samaritan

I was anxious. This was my first time in the City to do missionary work. I had been raised in the Country all my life and could not wait to see the City. I could imagine all the people that must walk about on its streets. The Reverend says that they are not as friendly as the people in the Country. But that is because of the lack of good work done there by people like the Reverend. He is a miracle worker. That is what they call him back home. And he has taught me, like a son, to do the same. The world has become overpopulated, and people are starving in the City. The Reverend says that these are the world's last days, unless missionaries like us do something. The Reverend goes to the City every weekend or any old day of the week that the Spirit sends for him.

It was evening when we got to the City. The buildings were so tall that their heights made me dizzy. We drove down the streets, and it was everything and nothing I had imagined. It was like a concrete forest. There were not even trees until we reached the park where we would do our missionary work. We parked the congregation bus and began to walk around and talk to the beggars. They had heard of the Reverend in the park, and when they saw the bus, there must have been a hundred of them. They flocked around us like sheep as we stepped out. I oversaw the handing out of the rations. Each beggar got a piece of fruit. After they ate, the Reverend instructed them to be seated on the grass. He preached that the problem with life was that they needed work but that there was none. The Reverend gave his sermon on how they could better themselves as people by coming and working at the Temple, a place for each one of the beggars where they would be well taken care of for the rest of their lives. And they would spend the rest of their lives with beggars just like themselves without having to feel like they were different, without the judgment of others.

We selected the beggars and we would return to the Good Samaritan Temple. We loaded the bus and headed for the secluded sanctuary in the hills, far away from the smog and concrete forest of the City. The beggars smelled bad and were unkempt. It was okay because we would be at the Temple in just a couple of hours, and they would all be saved and rid of the filth they had once lived.

When we arrived, it was dawn. I could not believe I had stayed up all night and was not tired. I was too excited to sleep. I woke the beggars and instructed them that before salvation comes, work. Each beggar took a shovel and dug a hole in a predetermined spot throughout the forest to plant the Reverend's beloved flowering dogwoods.

After all the beggars had finished their holes, they could go into the Temple and pray until their baptism. And then, one by one, we took each beggar into the woods for their baptism. I was to perform the first miracle of the day and of my life, for that matter. I instructed the beggar to lower himself before the Spirit to his knees and pray. I took out the ceremonial knife to join the blood of the beggar with the blood of the Spirit and slit his throat from behind just as the Reverend had taught me. And the beggar fell in his hole where a beautiful flowering dogwood was to be planted. I covered him or her with dirt, and the Reverend and I continued performing miracles until dusk. And the world was a better place. The beggars were not full of sloth anymore, and moderation was once again in the world.

Zeitgeist

Art Token, the hero of our story, was a skeptical and somewhat troubled man who had recently turned 40. Art lived at Plexus, a residential community of over 1,000 duplexes in the city of Zeitgeist. The residence had a community center, a laundry room, and a cafeteria where he could eat for a small donation.

Zeitgeist was where home was, even though it wasn't his hometown. 4 days a week, Art attended group therapy at Sanctum, a psychiatric hospital. In group therapy, patients like Art could sit around in a circle and "process" how they felt at the beginning of each day. Group therapy was considered a treatment for various mental health disorders, such as the obsessive-compulsive and manic depressive disorders Art was diagnosed with. And some folks didn't "believe in the disorder," which is kind of ironic, since that was one of the symptoms of a disorder such as Art's. It was that the patient didn't believe they had anything wrong with them, that they were "normal."

The truth was that people like Art are normal despite having an abnormal condition. Art would on one day, while he was off from therapy, know that he was mentally ill; yet the next day, while attending a group at Sanctum, Art had come to a different realization: that he couldn't be as disabled as others in the group, and that he should not be there. But where else could he be but with these deviants?

Whereas Art merely struggled with his identity within the group at Sanctum, the adversary he was up against, the bigot, was not a singular person but a tradition of religious self-righteous groups whose individual identity Art could not single out. Though they were easily identified by the nuance of fear that Art felt intuitively when he heard subtle rhetoric expounded by certain individuals who were themselves representatives of the religious faith. These religious fundamental fanatics, or Evangelicals, were the ones who did not believe in the disorder. Amerika was inebriated with fear, and religion was at the root of this intoxicant, this fear.

“Riffraff, I’m off to work.” Art said.

Riffraff was Art's dog that he got a few months after moving to Plexus, and "work" was what Art called attending group therapy; for it was that he and other patients didn't attend Sanctum for their enjoyment and pleasure, it was an obligation that took commitment and effort and self-reflection. It was, to begin with, like attending one's family doctor 4 times a week, which meant a person had to wait an hour each morning for the group to start, just like at any doctor's office. There were, of course, many patients who took for granted the services provided to them. But Art arrived on time, spoke often as one was expected to in the group, and did not sleep through the groups as some people did.

Art arrived and thought about how he felt that day. Before the group, everyone sat around and had coffee. And on this day, no one spoke. But Art had conditioned himself to sit through the silence and let his thoughts wander. This is what he considered “something to do.” A few minutes passed, and then Ms. Little, one of the therapists, came in and said good morning. The other therapist, Mr. Lad, Art did not like. Lad was one with whom one would hear a nuance of fear from here and there throughout the week. Lad was, in fact, an ordained minister and had taken it upon himself to lecture Art on his interpretation of the Bible.

“Group” as it was called, began, and Ms. Little spoke to several people before Art as they “processed” clockwise around the circle of patients, and then it was his turn.

"Okay, Art, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate your mood today?" Ms. Little asked nicely. "I'm a ten." And everyone clapped: this was Art's standard answer, for even if he didn't feel that exceptional, rating himself a ten was positive thinking.
"And why do you feel like a ten today?" Ms. Little probed.
"Well, because I quit smoking last week, after group on Friday, so three days now, I haven't had a cig." Art felt relieved. "And this is the first time I've told anybody in the group out of fear I would jinx myself." Art concluded.
"That's great news!" Ms. Little said and then added. "What about the elixir, still staying away from it and sober?"
Art was "hooked" on an elixir called Angst.
"Yeah, but I do miss it." Art said. "Now I'm just a counter."
"Now, we know that counting isn't healthy, either." Ms. Little suggested.
"Well, it has to be healthier than drinking a dose of Angst." Art pointed out, and the rest of the group laughed.
"We'll talk more about that next time." Ms. Little paused.
"And how's Riffraff?" Ms. Little asked about the dog.
"Riffraff? Oh, he's fine." Art said. "I do worry about him while I'm at group. I mean, he's in that duplex all day, four days a week, and all he can do is sit in the window, and his only source of entertainment is to bark at other dogs passing by, you know? The rest of the time, he just sleeps."
"I've heard that dogs sleep around fourteen to eighteen hours daily. So, I'm sure Riffraff is okay sleeping a lot throughout the day while you're away at group. He may even like it; who's to say?" Ms. Little reassured Art. "What else have you been doing with your time, Art, besides spending time with Riffraff?"
"I've been spending a lot of time with Faith. Art said. Faith was
Art's "lady friend."
"And how's that going?" Ms. Little asked.
"She is, as I've said, my lady friend. We walk Riffraff together. We take turns getting on the internet at my place. We walk to All-Mart together and look around. We're good friends. Sometimes she eats at my place, and sometimes she has me over for a meal, and I just go over there to visit; though, we spend more time at my place than hers." Art concluded.
"And why is that Art…? Remember we talked about trying new things the last time we spoke?" Ms. Little investigated further.
"I guess the biggest reason is because I have a computer and the internet, and she doesn't have one, that's all."
"Okay, well, let's move on now…" Ms. Little stated. If there's enough time, we can return to you shortly. I'm sorry, but we're running a little behind. We've got a large group today, and I just want to get everybody's mood first."
Ms. Little continued to go around the circle and "interrogate the patients," as Art had once described the Process Group, the first group at Sanctum each day. Art's friend, Fritz, came up to him during the break... Art and Fritz's relationship was unbalanced, with Art being the passive pal that Fritz could milk for cigarettes daily; Fritz could always "hustle" a cigarette from Art. However, Art thought more of it as buying a friend, which bothered him even more than being passive. Art only thought of himself this way, though, that he was passive.

Art was firm most of the time and, at other times, assertive almost to the point of being aggressive, but just stern. Art described himself often as: “assertive-aggressive.”
"What's up, Fritz?" Art asked.
“Not much… So, what'd you do with your cigarettes that you didn’t smoke? Can I have them?” Fritz begged.
“I threw them away, Fritz… had to.” Art pointed out.
"Had to? Ahhhh, man, you could have given them to me," Fritz said. Are they in your trash? I could come over and dig them out," he suggested.
"Okay, but I throw all kinds of coffee grounds in there." Art gave in. "Well, come over to my place after the group, and you can see if you can salvage the cigs."
"What about Faith? Is she coming over, too?" Fritz asked.
“Yes… and I’m supposed to go to church with her Sunday.” Art said.
“Church?” Fritz was surprised. “Well, that’s a shocker.”
"Yeah, well, I like Faith, and she thinks it would be good for me, so I'm going with her." Art concluded. "Anyway, I’ll see you at my house at 3:30, Fritz, right?"
"Yeah, I'll be there," Fritz said. "I'd walk with you, but I must go by the RCF after I leave here and take care of some business."
"Okay, well, I'll see you when you get to my place." Art said, and they both returned to the group and sat down.
It was 2:30 pm when Art left Sanctum afoot and headed home. Art wasn't too concerned with Fritz now; he was thinking about his plans with Faith Sunday morning. They planned on attending Tree of Knowledge together; it was a church, and its members referred to it simply as TK. The pastor was Guy Gosh, and he preached along with his wife, Gal Gosh, who sang with the worship group… Faith had told Art about the sermon Guy had given the previous Sunday. Guy preached that if one did not tithe, that individual had robbed God. This was based on scripture, as Faith showed Art. But this idea that the individual was guilty and would be punished for not turning over one's income to the Church, “stepping on toes,” as Faith referred to it, caused one of those moments where Art felt a nuance of fear, but it was not a fear of God, it was a fear of Guy Gosh. Faith had attended TK growing up, but it had a different preacher who had since retired. The new preacher, Guy Gosh, was the same age as Art, which caused Art to be curious as to how his and Guy's age could be the same, yet their beliefs so far different.
Art arrived at his house around 3 pm and took Riffraff out. After Riffraff had done his business, he and Art took a walk. Riffraff took his time and sniffed around as they strolled along. The dog was like a grandfather clock, faithful and always on time. Yet, he did his business like clockwork when Art wasn't in any rush. But when a moment came that Art had awakened late and had to take Riffraff out before he went to group at Sanctum… then was the time that Art had to strongly urge Riffraff to eliminate, and when he finally did, instead of telling him "Good boy" as he usually did, Art would only say, "It's about time, come on, let's go."
For now, though, everything seemed as it should be, if only momentarily before the next catastrophe befell and life breathed in instead of out. A moment that accumulated in the next few days and all of it began with poor Fritz's arrival. And something new seemed to spawn as Fritz rambled up to where Art stood. He was early: he had found a bottle of the elixir Angst on the ground on his way.

“Want some?” Fritz asked Art.
"Now look here, Fritz, I can't be doing any of that crap, or else I'll be hooked on it again, understand?" Art tried to make it clear to Fritz.
"Well, it's only one dose anyway." And Fritz turned up the 4-ounce bottle of the elixir Angst. One bottle of elixir was supposed to last a week. Fritz, though, drank it all.
Angst, a supposed remedy for all ailments, and a nostrum that even claimed to add years to one's life. Angst was a strange substance. Intoxicated by it, Art felt like he could unlock the secret to life and the universe, and all he had to do was drink a 4-ounce bottle of the elixir to uncover and learn all sorts of mystical things. The elixir was a blood-red substance that came in a little black bottle with a logo of a small white stone on it, which was meant to lead one to believe it was the elusive Philosopher's Stone, when in fact it was just an advertisement scheme to sell what was, in essence, an over-the-counter cough medicine marketed to the youth of Zeitgeist who were not of the age to buy alcohol, but old enough they could smoke cigarettes and join the Army and die for their country.
“Well, you better go dig for a cig.” Art chuckled at his rhyme.
“You just had to throw them away, didn’t you?” Fritz couldn’t understand. “Fritz, you’ve got the miracle of youth in you, so shut up and find them.”
“I think I see them,” Fritz said as he dug through the trash.
"You're in mounds of coffee grounds, Fritz!" Art laughed boisterously this time as he rhymed again.
“Found them!” Fritz exclaimed.
The "cigs" were moistened as the coffee grounds had seeped into the cigarette pack. But Fritz was able to get a cigarette somewhat lit, but it merely smoldered, though, and Art laughed even more.
“Fritz, I’m glad you came by and tried to salvage the cigs. I got a real kick out of it, friend.” Art chuckled again.
“They’re smoking!” Fritz said as he puffed several times unsuccessfully on the cigarette, but he got just enough out of it that he kept trying.
"Don't worry there, my good friend. The Angst will have a hold of you soon enough, and you won't care to smoke then, huh?" Art suggested.
Angst had a residual effect, and a person would feel the elixir a couple of days after the initial surge of euphoria. This was enough for Art to avoid the elixir for the moment. And that's all Art could do at times, wait a moment and breathe. But Fritz's influence was too much for Art. Fritz had planted a seed in Art's mind that began to grow from craving into reality, as only the passing of time would reveal whether Art would succumb to the drug.
An hour passed, and Fritz began to feel the mild effects of the elixir. He asked Art if he could use his computer to get on the internet. Art knew what Fritz sought: he sought to unlock the mysteries of life and the universe. But Art shifted his attention to Faith, who was knocking at the door.
“Come on in, Faith.” Art said. “Fritz is in parallax.”
Parallax was what Art called being intoxicated on the elixir Angst.
“And what is parallax again?” Faith asked.
“It is an alteration in the universe.” Art answered gently.
“How did he get money to buy a bottle of Angst?” Faith wondered.

“He found one.” Art said disappointingly.
“Was it open?” Faith shuttered.
"Why, yes, of course, but that didn't stop him from downing it all," Art stated. “Anyhow, you want a cup of coffee?" Art asked as it was customary for him to offer coffee to guests out of social convention. Fritz was an exception, as he was more of a nuisance than a visitor.
“Yes, I will have a cup of coffee.” Faith said.
“I remember, cream with two cubes of sugar.” Art said.
“Well, anyhow, what are you going to do this evening? I thought you might let me use your computer to look at the TK website?” Faith suggested.
It was now a little after 4 pm, and Fritz was starting his quest on the internet.
“Fritz!” Art said. “Get off the computer. Faith needs to use it.”
“Ah man, come on, I just got started,” Fritz complained.
Fritz was a pitiful thing.
“No one cares if you had to haul rocks as a child, Fritz. Now, get off the damn black box.” Art poked at Fritz.
Fritz claimed he was subjected to the equivalent of something that was on a thin line between being forced to do household chores, but something that broke child labor laws, like having to haul large rocks as a child. Art imagined poor Fritz with a boulder on his back, and then he would laugh. Fritz encouraged people to pity him for what reason Art couldn’t fathom. Now, Art could understand empathy or compassion for another suffering brother, but Fritz wasn't a man as Art understood his situation: Fritz was a boy bordering on a dog.
But moving on, "the black box" was a name Art came up with for the computer: it was “something that has a complex and intricate function that one can observe but whose inner workings are inexplicable or unknown,” which was simply the definition of a “black box.” And, Art knew this and only took credit for identifying the computer's true nature.
Faith looked at the Tree of Knowledge website for a while and quickly lost interest as she jotted down a few notes. She got off the computer and prescribed Fritz a few scriptures.
"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived is not wise. *Proverbs 20:1*." Faith quoted scripture. "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit. *Ephesians 5:18*"
"Well, that's all nice, but are you finished with the computer?" Fritz asked, unconcerned with Faith's correction.
“Go ahead, Fritz, it’s all yours…” Faith said, undiscouraged.
"Yeah, go ahead, Fritz, you're not drunk with wine but filled with elixir!" Art laughed.
“It’s just now kicking in.” Fritz pointed out.
"It comes on gradually, doesn't it, Fritz?" Art reassured him. "Like mid-life or old age."
“If all you guys are going to do is just sit around and get stoned…” Faith said as she wanted a more sobering recreational pastime.
“I assure you, Faith, Fritz is the only one going into parallax.” Art said.
“I'm not so sure about his influence, though," Faith whispered as Fritz sat at the computer.
“Do you need to be around this?" She asked. "I need a cigarette.
“And another cup of coffee, I’m guessing?” Art asked.
“Yes.” Faith agreed.

Art and Faith sat on the porch while she smoked her cigarette. Faith moved to Plexus a couple of weeks after Art, and they had figured out the ins and outs of the community together. Riffraff came outside with Art, stretching to the end of his leash. The dog sniffed at a pile of feces left by another dog and urinated on it. Art looked on and tried to distract himself from Riffraff's animalism. He and Faith spoke for a while, and the early spring sun began to set down in the sky a little more with each passing minute. Fritz, inside and in parallax, was content with the situation: Art and Faith outside. Still, inside, on the black box, he began to unlock esoteric riddles that neither the layman nor the scholar could imagine. Faith, weary from a day spent at the Plexus community center, told Art she had to go and get some sleep to "brighten another day."

Faith went home, and Art came back inside. Fritz was locked into the computer, and the elixir seed Fritz planted in Art's mind began to sprout.

"Hey Fritz, I have a little money put back. What do you say to us getting a couple more doses of Angst?" And Art was hooked on the insidious elixir Angst.

"I could use another dose later if you want to stay up all night?" Fritz tempted Art.

"I have enough money, but I can't make a habit of it again, you know?" Art suggested.

"Ah, fuck it." They both agreed.

Art did want to throttle Fritz while hanging out with him. But either way, "temptation" had taken hold of Art, and he couldn't escape it. Angst had a strange effect on one's mental fortitude. It took as much willpower to quit the elixir as it did cigarettes. Angst offered the key to long life in moderation. But in massive doses like Art and Fritz were about to undertake, it was just as lethal over time as tobacco and alcohol. Angst leaves a person needing more mental clarity and judgment and perception, the inability not to consume it. Regardless, Art decided to ingest another dose of the mystical elixir.

"Come on, Fritz, let's go to All-Mart." Art told him.

"I'll go, but I don't want to go in." Fritz was insistent.

The two walked out the door and down the sidewalk along Zeitgeist Lane, the road that meandered through the city. All-Mart was in the opposite direction of Sanctum, which made it easier for Art to avoid picking up a bottle of the elixir at the All-Mart pharmacy. Art and Fritz strolled along without any conversation. Fritz looked intently on the ground, hoping to find another bottle of Angst, even though Art had brought enough money to buy four elixir bottles. But Art only purchased two: one for him and one more for Fritz. Art purchased the elixir along with a large can of coffee. He figured if he was spending money on things he didn't need, he might as well stock up on what he did need. Art believed coffee was a necessity: it was the very thing that kept him off the elixir. He selected an excellent dark roast for a night of activities, probing the deep recesses of the internet and other exploratory activities. Fritz waited outside, and as soon as Art appeared, he begged for his share of the elixir.

"Wait until we get home, Fitz. We can't be in parallax walking in Zeitgeist." Art was adamant, even though Fritz was already intoxicated.

"But it only takes 30 minutes to get home and an hour for the Angst to kick in."

"You'll just have to wait, Fritz."

The two set out down the sidewalk and headed east toward Sanctum. Again, the two were silent as they made their way home. Art, out in front, looked ahead into the distant streetlamps, that stretched to distant street lamps.

Fritz, trailing, mumbled as he plodded along; he'd forgotten about the elixir Angst now, as it was already in his system, and he only sought a little boost. As they approached the front of the duplex, Riffraff waited in the window; he wagged his tail, which had a little tip of fur. Riffraff was a small dog; some would say Riffraff was a lap dog, but Art didn't like the sound of this particular label; the dog was gentle and not prone to any aggressive marks of character. He was a trusted little creature that Art could not live without.
"Hey, Riffraff! Are you glad to see your Master?" Art joked. "Master is about to go into parallax…" Art said, "…unfortunately." Art added in a whisper.
"Come on, let me have a bottle?" Fritz pleaded.
"One for you, and one for me." Art said.
Art drank the bottle of elixir: a thick, viscous, blood-red liquid that had a god-awful taste. But, Art was uninspired. All the effort it took to walk to All-Mart and back, take the Elixir, and then wait an hour for it to take effect… It was exhausting. He tried to recover while he waited for the remedy to take hold of him. Fritz, on the other hand, was ready to go.
"Can I get back on the black box, Art? I just need a few more minutes."
"Go ahead, but I'm getting on the black box at midnight, though." Art made this clear.
"Now, don't be too disappointed when I take over then, okay pal." Art called Fritz "pal" when he needed to soften him up a little.
Art sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling fan. He felt the air move across his face, heard the motor's hum, and thought of being mindful. Riffraff jumped into his lap and tried to lick his face, bringing him back to Earth again. Then, Art felt the warm glow of the elixir surging through him.
"What kind of name for eternal youth was Angst, anyway?" Art thought.
Art thought about this a moment and then ordered Fritz off the computer. Art got on the Black Box, as he called it, and searched for the "meaning of life." And he found several sites: some informative, some philosophic, some religious, and even some humorous. What was one to do with the world at their fingertips? Art searched until he found what he thought was the "smidgen." After seeing the smidgen of meaningful info in parallax, Art relinquished the Black Box to Fritz.
Art was through searching, at least for now. He took out a notebook and began to write a passage that was more prose than a poem:

Deadwood,
You're quite a useless and burdensome thing, though, making yourself useless is wise,
for no one could ever use you.
But you bear the burden of being burdensome,
which is more a burden to you as you are to us.
Listen and I will set you free,
for what use is your useless burden to me.

Art had based this on a Chuang Tzu piece he had read earlier that night titled:
The Useless Tree, an aphorism from the distant nostalgia of the past, gone long ago.

This resulted from a whole night's endeavor, as Art realized after he had finished what he considered the final draft of the writing, which he felt expressed empathy and compassion for Fritz. Art titled the epistle, *Deadwood*. Art thought that this could be seen as self-reflection by Ms. Little. Still, he decided not to take the piece of writing with him the next morning to group therapy, for the Spring Sun began to rise again in the Occident, as rays of sunshine came beaming in through the blinds, which Art opened for the full effect of the light.
Art brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and then took Riffraff out for his morning business. He thought of what he would tell Dr. Sage, his psychiatrist, when he saw him later that day. "The doc would surely suggest a cathartic," Art anticipated. Perhaps raise his dose of Synchronizine, a psychiatric medication which Dr. Sage dubbed the Anti-Angst. It worked to end mental grandeur rather than create it as the elixir Angst did.
Art doubted the drug's effectiveness but reserved his prejudice for now.
****Art started walking to Sanctum at 9 am, and he arrived 30 minutes early, before group began. He wove his way down the sidewalk with his steps at a moderate pace. Unlike the night before, where his steps were hurried and quick in anticipation of the Elixir, Art's stride was more controlled and deliberate. He led the way as Fritz followed behind, mumbling near inaudible fragmented sentences. They approached Sanctum, which sat at the back of 40 or more acres of land with massive oaks scattered about the lush green grass filled with spring flowers. They entered and passed by the office and into one of the two group rooms. Art sat down to rest briefly, and Fritz went straight to the break room to the coffee pot. The office and break room were on one side of the hall, while the two group rooms were on the opposite side, with a set of bathrooms at the end of the hall.
Ms. Little came to the door and told Art and the others the group was about to begin. She began with Fritz, who rated his mood a ten but said nothing about the previous night's debauchery. Art's turn came, and guilt led him to rate himself an eight.
“And why an eight, Art?” Ms. Little asked.
"No reason, I guess… I just feel like an eight." Art searched for a reason. "Do I see Dr. Sage today?" He asked. "I need to speak with him."
“Yes, I believe you do.” Ms. Little said. “I’m curious about this eight, though. Why the two-point drop?”
“Well, I don’t know.” Art was ashamed. “But if Faith wanted to come to group, what would she have to do?” Art changed the subject.
"Just tell her to call and set up an appointment for assessment. What about volunteering? How's the search for a place to volunteer to go?" Ms. Little asked.
“I’ve applied at SAG.”
“The Starving Artist Gallery?” Ms. Little clarified.
"Yes, they don't need volunteers now, but I thought I might volunteer at the Zeitgeist Library." Art proposed.
“Well, have you applied yet?” Ms. Little probed.
"I'm going there today, after group." Art said he had decided to go by the library that afternoon.
“Everybody, let’s give Art a hand.” Ms. Little said, and everyone clapped.
“Let us know how that goes. Now, let’s move on.” Ms. Little went on to the next person as Art felt a sense of relief that the pressure was off him for the moment.

Then, as Ms. Little was about to ask the next group member to rate their mood, the nurse came in and asked for Art.
"You're just in time… we just finished with Art!" Ms. Little smiled.
And Art got up and left the room. He went down the hall, through a metal door, and across the hospital's main entrance to Dr. Sage's office. The psychiatrist was happy to see Art and extended his hand as he entered the room. Art shook his hand, sat down, and immediately confessed.
“I had a bottle of Angst last night, Doc.” Art said. “And I was up all
night.” “I see.” Dr. Sage said. “And how long has this been going on?”
“Just last night... remember, I’ve been sober the past year.” Art said.
"Why Elixir again? Are you anxious or depressed…?" Dr. Sage inquired.
“I don’t know why I took it.” Art admitted. “But now I’ve got a taste of it.”
"A taste, but this is a lapse, Art, not a relapse. I will raise your dose of Sychronizine, but we'll leave the rest as is." Dr. Sage said, and then he added. "I'm also going to recommend you to our Angst
Anonymous program."
“Okay.” Art had foreseen this.
"I'll see you in a month. I can't do anything else for you medication-wise while you have the Elixir in your system. How many bottles?" Dr. Sage needed to know.
“Just one.”
“Good. I’ll see you in a month. Thank you for being honest with me, Art.” Dr. Sage told him. The nurse led Art back to the group room, and he took a moment to get some coffee. He felt better now that he had confessed and would reward himself with coffee. Art left Dr. Sage's office right at break time after the first hour of the process group. It was time for lunch, and the groups formed a single-file line to walk down to Sanctum's cafeteria. It was Tuesday, so that meant goulash. Art had the next day off, which was good because he needed to rest after the previous night in parallax. Art sat at a different table than Fritz during lunch. Art ate his goulash, unattractive as it was. The Elixir lessened his appetite, but just enough that he did not overeat as he often did. And as Ms. Little usually recommended, Art put his fork between bites. Art noticed Fritz hadn't even finished eating and instead had just looked at the goulash, tried a bite, and went out to smoke. The smoking area was outside the back door of the cafeteria. It had a picnic table with a wooden privacy fence around it, which was more so that a patient wouldn't wander off and be unaccounted for than it was for privacy. Art had not been going out to the smoking area this week, though, on account that he had quit smoking, beginning the previous Friday morning, so he was able to avoid Fritz. And he was avoiding Fritz now because he didn't want Fritz to influence him into getting another or two bottles of Elixir, as Fritz would require one, too. And that Fritz would 'hustle' a bottle of Elixir from Art.
And this was precisely what Art was avoiding.
After group therapy, Art walked home. Fritz was nowhere to be seen, and Art was able to get some relief from the situation. When he got home, Riffraff waited on his perch atop Art's chair in the window. Art petted and reassured him that Riffraff was a good boy, leashed him, and took him out to do his afternoon business. Art had not gone by the Zeitgeist Library, as he said he was, but this was typical behavior for a 40-year-old man diagnosed with severe

mental health disease. Art went inside, ate a sandwich, went to bed, and slept until the following day.
Wednesday morning, Art was awakened by Faith knocking at the door. He hurried to fix his hair, which was relatively short and only an inch long, but he wet it down quickly in the bathroom sink. The bathroom was inside the bedroom, which opened into a small hall that led into the kitchen to the left and into the living room to the right. Art had two striped upholstered chairs with a coffee table, television, and two desks: one for computer and accessories and one for writing with pen and paper. He also converted a dining room into a room where he could work on sketches and other artwork that could be done on a large round glass surface. Art called this his "active space." The dining room and kitchen were joined and led to the back door. A medium-sized bookshelf was in the living room by the manual desk. The front door was through the living room.
“Good morning!” Faith said as Art opened the door.
“Good morning.” Art replied.
“So, what did you and Fritz do the other night?” Faith asked.
“Well, to tell the truth, I had a bottle of elixir.”
“I knew that Fritz was a bad influence!” Faith exclaimed.
“Anyway, what brings you over so early in the morning?” Art asked.
"I was wondering if you wanted to go to church with me tonight instead of Sunday?" Faith asked timidly. "Or you can also go on Sunday," she suggested.
"Sure." Art said, defeated.
“Okay,” Faith said. “Good… so what are you going to do today?”
"Oh, I don't have any plans. I thought Riffraff and I might come to your place if you want us to?" Art suggested rather than asked.
“You know I don’t mind. Do you want to come over now?”
"Yeah, give me a minute to brush my teeth and put out some fresh food and water for Riffraff later." Art said and then added. "Or you can go to your place, and I'll come over in a minute when I finish my morning routine?"
“I’ll wait. I don’t have anything to do, anyhow.”
Art brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and remembered not eating breakfast. Faith said she had milk and cereal at her place if he wanted it. Faith suggested that Art change into what he would wear to Church that evening at Tree of Knowledge. Art put on some slacks and an A-shirt with a brown pin-striped short-sleeve shirt over it. And then he leashed Riffraff, and they all three were off to Faith's place, which was at the far northwest corner of Plexus, whereas Art's duplex was at the far southeast corner of the residential community. Art and Faith tried to walk side-by-side, but Riffraff insisted on following Faith's footsteps, so Art had to walk slightly behind and follow Faith. It was only a quarter mile to Faith's duplex. On the way, Faith was vexed at Fritz, and she explained to Art that if he continued to hang around him, things would only go downhill until Art went off the deep end. Art agreed and told Faith that he would work on letting go of Fritz and Angst, but Art insisted he let go of Fritz quickly so it did not crush his poor pitiful pal.
Art and Faith arrived at her place, and she wanted to smoke a cigarette before they entered the duplex, as Faith and Art agreed she wouldn't smoke when he was visiting. Faith's duplex had the same floor plan as far as the structure was concerned, and her furniture was modest. As you walked into the duplex, there was a brown love sofa, beside it on each side were end

tables, and on one end table was an antique off-white lamp with small green flower designs. In front of the love sofa was a wooden coffee table with two drawers. There was a medium-sized clock on the wall, colored in pastel segments divided into twelve wedges, one corresponding with each number. Under the clock, which was directly in front of the sofa, was a TV, and to the left of it was a coat rack, and in the corner beside the couch was a small red chair. In the dining room was a black metal bistro table set. And in the bedroom was a full bed with a hodgepodge-colored quilt and two pastel flower prints in ivory-colored frames. In Art's home, there was a place at the end of the hall for a food and water bowl for Riffraff; in Faith's home, there was a litter box for her black cat, Taboo. On the front porch, there were two blue metal chairs and a small square metal stand with a large ashtray in it filled with cigarette butts.

Art and Faith sat in the blue chairs while she smoked, and Riffraff sniffed around at the end of his leash, eating dead and dried worms off the sidewalk. Taboo came outside and followed Riffraff around in a circle in the grass.

Riffraff followed Taboo around. The cat had one faint tuft of white fur on his chest that went unnoticed until one held him. Both Riffraff and Taboo were neutered, which was the responsible thing to do, but Faith couldn't help but feel a bit sad at the thought that they were the last of their kind. Cities all over the Earth were overrun with stray and feral cats and dogs, which spread various diseases and suffered needlessly, just because their parents' masters didn't believe or didn't afford to spay and neuter their pets… this is, at least, what Art told Faith a few months ago when they met at their now mutual residential community, Plexus. Faith immediately called that same day and scheduled an appointment for Taboo, which was more a result of her impulsivity than of the result of Art's argument. Regardless, Taboo was neutered the next week, and the generations of cats with one faint tuft of white fur on their chest were cut off. Art hoped that Faith would be his girlfriend someday, maybe even his wife, but for now, he was happy with Faith just being his lady friend. The two had been hanging out these few months when Art had just agreed to attend Church at Tree of Knowledge with her the past week. Faith had told Art she wanted a Christian husband to raise a family, which, at first thought, sounded good, but Art didn't like the idea of having children, much less a Christian family, or even being a Christian for that matter. But the conversation now was on Sanctum and who led the groups, which gave Faith an idea of what could be expected there.

"I talked to Ms. Little in the group yesterday; she said you should call and set up an appointment with an assessment if you want to start coming to the group." Art informed Faith.

"Oh good, I need something to do during the day besides go to the community center here at Plexus. I want to get away from here through the week, and Sanctum seems like a good idea. I was going before I met you. And I went for a while, but that was several years ago, and from talking to you, it sounds like all the therapists and the psychiatrist have changed. That's a good thing, though, I suppose." Faith explained to Art. "What is this Ms. Little lady like? Is she nice?" Faith was curious. "Oh yes, she doesn't even make you share with the group if you don't feel like it, though she says that you shouldn't choose to not share with the group just because you 'don't feel like it'; it called 'emotional reasoning' when you don't do this or that because you don't feel like it." Art explained. "And what about this Mr. Lad character? What's his deal?" Faith inquired a little more into the matter of Sanctum.

"Well, he's not my favorite. A person could get worse, but you'll probably like him; he's an ordained minister and a therapist." Art told her.
“Maybe I will. But there are a lot of ministers who don’t rightly divide the Word. We’ll see, though.” Faith was open to working with him.
“Yes, we’ll see.” Art agreed.
"And finally, who's this, Dr. Sage? Is he a real psychiatrist or just a regular doctor with an 'emphasis in psychology' because that was what the doctor I had at the last group I attended." Faith probed even further. "And he was terrible."
"Oh, he's a good psychiatrist, I would say. He's thorough, even though you only get 10 minutes a month. And he won't or rather doesn't like to put you on any narcotics or on anything more than you need. And he's funny, too." Art explained in a few words.
Art and Faith continued to sit on the porch and converse for the rest of the morning, taking a minute here and there to walk Riffraff around and let him and Taboo bond and play together as much as a cat and a dog could. Faith made them a sandwich at noon with ham and cheese, mayo, and chips. Art had brought his army green messenger bag with a medium-sized notebook, two black pens with stainless steel shafts, and two with blue ink. Also, he had brought a calculator to work on his budget while he was there, and he brought a couple of books: one was a self-help book on minimalist living; the other was a philosophy book, Atheism. Art kept the book Atheism inside his bag for fear it would upset Faith. Instead, he got out the selfhelp book Simple Living, Minimalist Living. Art had read the self-help book but would now mull over it again to formulate his downsizing plan. Faith noticed the book. “What are you reading there, Art?” She inquired as to the title of the book.
"Simple Living, Minimalist Living; is a minimalist living book on how to downsize your home, live simply with less stuff, and organize the stuff you have without buying too many organizers. It talks about buying less stuff and that it will impact the Earth less." Art explained succinctly.
“And how’s that going for you?” Faith wondered.
"It's going well so far. I've just read the book and discarded a couple of large things: an old microwave stand and an extra, small TV that I gave Fritz, who'll probably just pawn or sell it to get Angst." Art explained. "It's not going to be too difficult, I think, to be a minimalist when you don't have that much stuff to begin with, and being poor, you don't acquire too many things to begin with, either." Art and Faith both laughed at this comment.
Art read over his book and made a few lists that afternoon while Faith reviewed her Bible and daily devotional. She was absorbed but shared a few tidbits of information from her studies with Art. Art, absorbed in what he was doing, didn't notice the time that had passed. They ate supper around 5 pm, a hamburger steak with green beans and a slice of bread.
And then Faith began to get ready and dressed for the Church at Tree of Knowledge. She explained to Art that even though the saying was "come as you are," she rarely saw anyone do so. Faith was ready, and they were waiting on the TK bus by 6 pm. Art felt slightly uneasy as he thought about what lay ahead that evening. And he, like most people, had been to Church before, even though only a few times compared to a person who attended Church regularly.
But that was only half of what made Art uneasy, as he had a social phobia quite common to someone with his mental health condition. The bus arrived shortly after 6:30 pm, and they arrived right on time for Church to begin at 7 pm.

The number of members of Tree of Knowledge's congregation attended was sparse on a Wednesday. Even then, there were probably 50-60 people, which meant that on a good Sunday, there were 2 services of 100-plus people attending. And this number of strangers was enough to intimidate any newcomer to Church. Art, though, undergoing the residual effects of the Elixir Angst, was quite comfortable and at home with the number of people there that evening. The service began with a small worship group led by Pastor Guy's wife, Gal Gosh.

Art disliked the service's worship part, as he had to stand through all three sung songs. But that was over soon enough, and Guy Gosh took the stage at the front of the large auditorium-style Church. In the center of the front of the stage was a pulpit, and behind it and the stage were two massive projector screens. One on the left as you were facing the pulpit that showed the Bible verses being discussed, and another on the right so those toward the rear of the auditorium could see the preacher. There were video cameras recording the service on Sunday, which could also be viewed online at the TK website.

On a typical Wednesday, though, only the screen with the verses being preached on was shown. Pastor Guy Gosh began the sermon by coming onto the stage with a headset on, singing the last few words of the praise with the worship group, and, of course, Guy carried his Bible with him. He was a large man with somewhat of a gut on him, but he was as big as a bear and gave people big bear hugs. Guy began with a prayer, which Art watched by glancing upward at the pulpit while keeping his head mostly bowed. Art should have paid more attention to the actual words of the prayer but focused on Guy's animated hand gestures, and this was during the short introduction prayer, in which he asked the Lord to look over them and guide the congregation that evening in their endeavors.

Guy's sermon was less an exegesis over particulars and more over his dictum: "Either you believe that the entire Bible is true, or you believe that none of it is true." But Art thought to himself that there were things in the Bible that he knew were false, but that didn't make the rest untrue. As Ms.

Little referred to it, this was absolute thinking, black-and-white thinking, all-or-nothing thinking. Art knew, for instance, that homosexual behavior was exhibited by various animals, including humans. Because of this knowledge, we, as higher cognitive primates, engage in natural and normal behaviors. With this information, Art believed he was able to conclude that the homosexuality that Guy was preaching was a sin… this wasn't true, but this didn't mean the entire Bible was invalidated. Art believed it was the idea that homosexuality was "wrong" that was the crux of the matter. Being gay or lesbian was not immoral, Art thought; it was natural and normal, yet in the end, it was misunderstood. Pastor Gosh, though, had changed currents.

"Are you familiar with the game Telephone? In the game of telephone, a group of people sit around in a circle. The first person whispers a statement in the ear of the person sitting next to them, and the group, sitting in a circle, does this as the message goes around; the last person tells what they heard, and then the group is told the original message. And in the end, the message is always different, if not entirely different from the original message." Guy paused.

“Amen,” said one of the TK members.

"And let me tell you," Guy continued, "in this game, these whisperers are just our gossipers, and that's why first we shouldn't gossip. It also shows an example of how the Word is lost if

you don't get it straight from the source, straight from the Bible. And remember that all sin is equal: if someone gossips, I say don't whisper about your neighbor behind their back. And if a man says he is gay, I say hug them, but don't sleep with them, men, let them know they're wrong, put on the armor of righteousness." And a few more said "Amen" to this as everyone clapped.
This was indeed one of those moments where Art felt a nuance of fear.
Guy then said: "Let us close in prayer. God keep us and guide us," he said, holding his right hand in the air, "Amen." Then he asked the members to stay a moment while he asked at that time that if anyone there had not "asked Jesus into their heart," they could come down to the front row, and he would "guide them in receiving Him." Art, as resistant as he was to Guy's rhetoric, was overcome by the atmosphere, which was set by the lighting and the subtle music in the background, as a huge cross lit up in the rear of the stage.
Art felt ecstatic as he walked slowly down to the front. But after he got there, he had to wait a minute for the stragglers, and the higher-ranking members, as Art put it, converged in the front of the auditorium as well to "lay hands on" and help Guy guide them as he walked them from one who was a lost sheep to one who was of the flock. Art lost his initial mania and considered returning to his seat, but he was there and had to go through with it now, as convention dictated it. Guy Gosh stayed on the stage and asked the newcomers to raise their hands and say:
"Lord, I accept you into my heart. I confess that Jesus is Lord and that He died for my sins but was raised from the dead three days later. I know now before the world repents of my sins and asks Jesus into my heart." Guy paused.
"And I will come to this house of the Lord this Sunday and be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Guy then asked the rest of the TK church members to come down and congratulate the newly born-again Christians.
Art did not stay for this, though, and walked up and met Faith, who was making her way to the front.
"Congratulations!" She said with a glowing smile on her face. "How does it feel? To be born again?" "Not what I thought it would be." Art said, but Faith didn't notice the skepticism in the tone of his voice and how he expressed it.
"Well, this Sunday is going to be a grand day for us, isn't it?" Faith said, still with a radiant smile on her face.
The TK church bus took Art and Faith home. Faith told Art she wouldn't see him until Sunday morning because she would stay at her mother's for a few days. Art got Riffraff and told Faith he had to go straight to his place, for he was drained. Faith said she understood and that she was exhausted, too, from the day's activities. On the way home, Riffraff did his business immediately, which was a relief for Art, as he wanted to go straight to bed.
The following day, Art woke up, brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, and took Riffraff out to do his business. He ate breakfast, and then he put his minimalist living book and his book, Atheism, into his messenger bag, along with his black and blue pens. Then, Art set out for Sanctum. As he neared Sanctum, Art saw Fritz coming toward him. Fritz had already heard about Art getting saved, and Fritz was out to help Art celebrate.
"Hey, Art, what's this? I heard you got saved last night at the Tree of Knowledge. Is it true?" Fritz held onto his second question.
"Yeah, it's true." Art said.

“How about we get a couple of bottles of elixir tonight and celebrate?” Fritz asked, not knowing there was something odd and unusual in his request.
“Maybe another time, Fritz.” And that was all the answer Art gave him.
Art walked away, and Fritz went to another group member and hustled a cigarette from them. The group began, and Art was hit with another blow: Ms. Little was out for the day, and Mr. Lad was leading the group. Art withheld his baptism and wasn't going to speak of it until Fritz had to go and tell Mr. Lad about it. The "ordained therapist" is how Art described him.
"Art, you reached and found salvation last night. Do you feel on top of the world today?" Mr. Lad asked.
“Just another day.” Art replied.
“Now, I’m a therapist, but just let me say this one thing, Satan will attack you between now and your baptism Sunday, Art, and that’s all I’m going to say about it.” Mr. Lad told Art.
“Okay, that’s all I have to say.” Art said and then fell silent.
“Just remember what I’ve told you.” Mr. Lad insisted.
Art made it through the group and began to walk home. Momentarily, thoughts of Fritz and Mr. Lad went through his head: How could Fritz be such an idiot? Art thought. Then Art thought about Faith and how he didn't want to disappoint her, and in a sense, this was a way for Art to win her affection and show his.
But still, Art thought that if he got baptized, he would betray himself and his faith in logic, reason, and science. Then, on the other hand, what did it matter? One way or the other, Art felt he was damned. And then again, he read and found comfort in his book, Atheism. Art arrived at his duplex, and Riffraff was in the living room window on his perch, wagging his short tail with its long tip. Art felt relieved to be home again and went in, put away his messenger bag, took Riffraff out to do his business, returned, and then enjoyed the rest of the evening with his book.
Friday was much the same as Thursday, except Ms. Little returned to the group. It was a busy day, and Art avoided talking about his salvation or Elixir, both of which were heavily on his mind. After the group, Fritz tagged along with Art until he reached the turn to the RCF. But Art felt he had nothing better to do the next day, and seeing how he wasn't supposed to see Faith until Sunday morning, considering this, Art invited Fritz over.
Art went home, telling Fritz he planned to sleep that evening and that it would be better if they got together on Saturday, which was, after all, just an evening away. Art and Fritz parted ways at the place where Fritz had to go to the RCF, and Art went home, took Riffraff out, and came back in to enjoy another evening. Art went and slept, still catching up on his rest after a night on Elixir. Fritz lived at an RCF, a Residential Care Facility, and a group home, which was the equivalent of the sanitarium of yesteryear. Art was put in the one Fritz now lived in several years ago, and it was, in fact, why he moved, or rather, why he was moved to Zeitgeist to begin with.
But with the help of Ms. Little's therapy and the medication that Dr. Sage prescribed, Art had recovered from the dark days of his life with mental illness. Art initially met Fritz in the RCF, but unlike Art, Fritz was still in the dark, thinking someone else would turn the lights back on, or perhaps a more accurate way of putting it was Fritz and many others like him with mental health disease, didn't even know the lights were out!

Faith was afraid Art was headed back down that path that led straight to the RCF, and life in a residential care facility, in the end, might be enough to get Art to give up the Elixir Angst. Yet, Art felt pinned down under the idea that to get better, he had to accept a Higher Power at Angst Anonymous, that one could do it no other way than through AA, and that he was powerless over his addiction to the drug. This was, Art deduced, one of the main reasons he had sought to get saved and baptized: for fear that a life without God was a damned life.
Saturday morning, Art woke up and performed his daybreak ritual: he brushed his teeth, splashed water on his face twice, fed and watered, and took Riffraff out to do his business. Momentarily, he had forgotten about Fritz's scheduled visit, but while Riffraff was defecating, Art suddenly remembered it, sighed, and said, "Oh well."
Fritz was supposed to arrive at 4 pm, so Art would enjoy his pity-free Saturday morning. He fixed himself a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich with cheese for breakfast to treat himself, as normally he had a peanut butter sandwich, most of the time with grape jelly since it was the most economical, but at least once a week, Art broke out the good stuff to put on his morning peanut butter sandwich: pure, raw honey. He got it at the Farmers Market, which had a dozen or more booths in the All-Mart parking lot on Saturday morning. And Art suddenly remembered the other night and the Elixir. But he knew he'd rather relax and "take it easy," as Fritz says.
The morning passed as expected from noon until 2 pm, and Art walked Riffraff around the Plexus property. They spent some time on the enormous grass lawn in the middle of the residential community, with Riffraff inspecting every little thing with his nose and marking his territory with his urine.
Fritz arrived on time and quickly asked the question Art was waiting to hear... what he dreaded and, too, that he wanted Fritz to ask.
“Hello, Fritz.” Art said. “How’s it going?”
"It's going okay." Fritz paused. "What do you say to us about getting a couple of bottles of Elixir? After all, it's Saturday."
"I figured that's what you had in mind all along. Let me get my keys and wallet and grab a few dollars from my savings box."
Art went from dreading Fritz coming over to being glad he was there. Art went from not wanting to hang around Fritz to being glad he had him as a friend.
The two of them made their way to All-Mart, again walking a hurried pace there and back, but more hurried than before on Monday night. It was easier for Art that Fritz was sober both the way there and the way back, as again, Art would only let Fritz have his Elixir, and Art drank the Elixir once they arrived back at Art's duplex. It was after 6 pm when the two of them got back to Art's place, and Fritz quickly drank the first bottle of Angst, for Art had bought four 8oz bottles of it on this particular trip to All-Mart.
Art took a moment and relaxed, took Riffraff out to do his business, and then came back inside with Fritz. It was close to 8 pm when Art finally gave in and drank his first bottle of Angst. He thought of how he almost loved the god-awful taste of the Elixir. It was another hour before the Elixir began to take effect, and in the meantime, Art looked over and read from his book, Atheism. Fritz was on the black box, surfing the internet in search of that elusive answer to the meaning of life and to unlock the secrets of the observable universe. Being in parallax from drinking Angst was more of a mental activity, and in a sense, it was mental inactivity, as it slowed down one's ability to finish a task. Art noticed this as he

continued to read his book while the Elixir took effect. After a while, though, Art decided that he, too, would get on the computer, and so he kicked Fritz off the black box.
"Ah, I never can get on the black box!" Fritz pled his case. "You get to use the computer all the time when I'm not here. Nobody cares if old Fritz gets to use it or not. Do this, do that; don't do this, don't do that… that's all I hear from everybody…" Fritz began to mumble inaudible words and phrases.
"I want to use the computer now because I'm rarely in parallax anymore, and I want to enjoy it and have some fun surfing the internet." Art was unmoved by Fritz's self-pity. "Fritz, if you want to get on the internet while you're in parallax on Elixir, get your duplex, get your black box, and get your internet. You get just as much money as me a month," Art told him.
"Well, can I get back on it briefly?" Fritz asked.
"Why, of course, I wasn't going to stay on it all night, Fritz!" Art exclaimed. "Besides, you were on the computer all night the last time we were on elixir." Art pointed out.
Art put on some electronic elixir music by Dr. Ostinato. The ambient psychedelic tunes hit the spot. Then, Art got on the computer, wandered around, looked around at a few unrelated things, thought about playing chess, but didn't feel like losing, as he was on Angst, and then decided to go to the TK website. There was a digital clock on the homepage that was ticking down. At first glance, Art thought it was counting down to judgment day, but upon closer inspection, he saw it was just a clock counting down to the next service. Art browsed through the site and found a page titled "What we believe." First, they believed the Bible was the only infallible Word of God and the final authority concerning conduct, lifestyle, and behavior, which Art let out a chuckle. "Infallible!" Art said and laughed. The Bible, they believed, was the final authority concerning conduct, lifestyle, and behavior, which explained why Mr. Lad put religion before therapy. He read and scrolled down the page, wondering what he had gotten into. For one, these people believed in the actual virgin birth of Jesus. There was one on the belief in healing through the Atonement, with a smaller case 'a'. Art looked up Atonement and found that he understood it correctly, that it was "a making up for an offense," which made Art think of Angst Anonymous and their tradition of making amends. But even more, he read that Atonement was mankind being reconciled with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Last, Art read that they believed in baptism through immersion. He found this to be the only attractive statement on the whole page. And still, it could have been more attractive. Why, he thought, did he feel so much fear and judgment from religious people? He thought they feared him just as much as he feared them.
Art then switched gears and looked at the website Zero.org, a free online encyclopedia. But about that time, Fritz began complaining that he wanted to use the computer again, and Art relinquished it. Art found another way to pass the time on Elixir: he began to implement the minimalism he had learned from his book Simple Living, Minimalist Living. As he had told Faith, it was easy to be a minimalist when you owned next to nothing.
Rather than discarding anything, Art focused on the chapters on organizing, reusing, and repurposing. But mainly, Art reorganized the stuff he had, which was more for fun than function at the time. He would most surely put everything back to the way it was, to begin with, because it functioned well. But did it function the best that it could? That was what Art was considering for the moment.

Though Fritz was sitting at his computer station, which was the main area for reorganization consideration, Art simply worked around him. The hours passed as Art worked on the manual writing station and the bookshelf beside it. Art recalled the other night when he worked at the manual writing desk and wrote the prose, My Pal Pity. And now he was spending more quality time with his pal, Art thought.

It was 4 am Sunday morning. Art considered that he was to attend Church at Tree of Knowledge and be baptized by Pastor Guy Gosh later that morning. Upon that thought, Art knew that the only way he was going to be able to cope with going in front of an auditorium of church members to get baptized was to consume another bottle of Angst.

"Fritz, it's time." Art was referring to the Elixir.

“Alright!” Fritz was ecstatic.

Art dug the last two bottles of Elixir out of the refrigerator, where he had them tucked away to get them cold and make them taste better if only a little bit. Fritz drank his bottle, and Art watched. He knew that Fritz would never stop the Elixir, and if he did, it would probably be only with the assistance of whiskey, wine, or beer (or all three). But Art only considered Fritz's pathetic state of existence for a moment, and then he, too, drank his entire bottle of Angst. And what else could Art imagine himself doing the morning of his baptism than hanging out, drinking a bottle of Elixir? Art wasn't too concerned with anything now. He told Fritz he could stay until 6 am, and then Fritz had to leave, for Faith would be over in a little while, and Fritz was the last thing he wanted Faith to see the morning of his baptism. Fritz continued his quest on the internet but was a little deflated when Art told him he would have to relinquish his post soon, and two hours went by quickly on Angst.

“Okay, Fritz, time to go.” Art said as assertively as possible.

“Ah, man, this sucks!” Fritz's voice echoed his defeat.

Fritz said thanks for letting him use the black box, though. Fritz did show a lot of gratitude to be so abused and pitiful, Art thought. Either way, Fritz was out the door, and Art felt relieved. Art took a shower and set out his church clothes that he would wear later: black boxers, an A-shirt, gray slacks, a black polo shirt, black socks, and a pair of black low-top canvas hiking boots. "Looks more like a funeral than a baptism," Art said. "Oh well, it'll have to do," he concluded.

After his shower, Art put on his baptism outfit, which made him feel good as it "enhanced his Angst," so he liked to say. Then, after getting dressed, Art took Riffraff out to do his business, and it was already daylight. After this, he and Riffraff returned inside, and he decided to go online and listen to music. He and Fritz had been listening to electronic music for most of the night, and before that, they listened to the jazz program that came on the online radio Saturday night. Art decided to listen to 24 Hours Classical, an online radio station.

Art listened to classical music and looked around on the internet. He checked the weather, and it said that it would be a mild day. He played a quick 5-minute online chess game and won, so he quickly exited the live chess room before the person he beat challenged him for a rematch. Art won less often under the influence of the Elixir.

Art checked his email to see if his mother had sent him anything, but nothing, which didn't surprise him, as she didn't even know about his pending baptism. About that time, Faith called and told him she would be over in a minute.

Faith showed up a few minutes later, just as she had said she would, which surprised Art. Faith wasn't too punctual, but as it was the day of Art's imminent baptism, she had made an exception.
“Hey, Art!’ Faith was happy to see him. “You’re all ready, I see.”
"Yeah, I'm all ready." Art didn't even think about the fact that he was 'in parallax,' that he was inebriated on Angst.
“What time was the bus supposed to be here, 10?” Faith asked.
“Yes, at 10, the second service starts at 11.” Art told her, with little enthusiasm but some apprehension.
“What’s wrong, aren’t you excited?” Faith asked at his odd expression.
"Oh, nothing, just a little nervous about getting in front of all those people. I'd rather it be an intimate affair." Art said. "It will be between you and God," Faith said. And this was of little consolation to Art.
The Tree of Knowledge church bus arrived a little after 10 am, and the fact that it was running a little behind didn't bother Art. On the contrary, it soothed him a little, knowing he wouldn't have to wait for the service to begin. They arrived and took a seat on a back pew in the auditorium. Art noticed the baptismal pool in the corner of the auditorium.
The worship group came on soon enough, which Art dreaded because he wanted to avoid standing through the singing or praise portion of the second service. Art was rather emotional through the last number, intended to get the church audience to "feel the Lord's touch." This emotional reaction was brief, though, and Art simply took it to be the effects of the Angst. Art felt, in fact, that he might burst into tears at moments. The feeling was itself quite addictive.
Pastor Guy preached on doubting Thomas, though Art did not follow the sermon, only that Faith nudged him and said it was preaching right to him. Art assumed she meant that because he and Thomas were both skeptical that they somehow shared a kinship, but Art doubted this and focused his attention back on the baptismal pool. The service wrapped up sooner than Art had expected, probably due to his intoxication on Angst.
The preacher said something about those who wished to be baptized or those who had been baptized before but just needed a bath to come down to the front. And there was a line of some 50 people. Art stood there, almost upset that he had to stand in line just as he had to stand during the worship segment of the second service. As the pool drew closer, Art felt more and more that he would burst into tears, but he held it back. He thought he was to burst into tears as he should after being dunked into the water. Art eased his way down atop the ladder that went into the baptismal pool. The preacher, Guy Gosh, put his hand on his back and told Art that he would probably want to hold his nose. At this point, Art told Guy that it was not necessary. Hearing this, Guy told him firmly to hold his nose, at which point Art did. Pastor Guy then said he baptized Art in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, at which point he "immersed" Art in the water. The water was too warm, Art thought, but this thought only flitted through his mind momentarily until Art realized again that he had just been baptized. And as Art was raised out of the water, he reached the climax of his emotional fervor.
When Art was raised, he put his hands over his face to mask his tears and show his joy, but the tears failed to come, and Art merely wiped his face as if they did. And the water made it impossible to tell that the tears hadn't been shed. But upon seeing this and thinking Art

would be overcome emotionally, Guy Gosh reached out both his massive arms and gave Art a big bear hug. Art tried to make it feel like he could not control himself and squeezed as much as he could, but this didn't even faze the preacher, who simply let go and showed Art the way out of the pool. Regardless, Art felt relieved that "the incident" was over, no matter what the spectators thought. Art was led by a man 10 years younger than him, Naïf, to the back and given a towel and a change of clothes: old rags that were a part of the Clothes Outreach Ministry.

"Here you go!" Naïf said. "These rags aren't much, but you will gain many riches with your salvation," Naïf told Art.

Art instinctively knew this was just a rehearsed line that Naïf probably didn't even come up with himself. Or perhaps he did, which would explain its ridiculousness. Either way, Art was left to change, and unlike a regular locker room, the changing room he was taken to had individual stalls to change in. Art changed into the rags and gathered his wet clothes in a plastic shopping bag that Naïf had given him, which had TK on the bag. Relieved the spectacle was over, Art left the changing room and went out looking for Faith.

She was in the Church's front lobby, speaking with her friend Doxy, who attended Church there. A resident at the RCF, too, Doxy was homely-looking with so much potential beauty that the sickness of her mind spilled onto her countenance. She was unkempt. On the other hand, even though stricken with the same mental plague as Doxy, Faith appeared quite beautiful.

"Hello, Doxy." Art said.

"Hey, Art, got baptized, huh?" Doxy said, seemingly unmoved by this fact.

"Yeah, he's going to be a new man –I mean, he is a new man, born again, that is, huh Art?" Faith said.

"Come on, we have to go." Art said. "The bus had to wait on us longer than it should have… because of me getting baptized." Art told Faith and Doxy.

"Alright, Art," Faith said. "See you later, Doxy; love you," Faith added.

"Love you, too," Doxy said as she drew out her words.

Art and Faith made their way toward the front door. Art was feeling better knowing that 'the incident' was almost over. When the two of them rounded the corner of the church foyer, Art could see Naïf standing beside the bus waiting for Art. "What could that idiot possibly want?" Art thought to himself.

"Art," Naïf said. "Here's my number if you need to call me…" Naïf paused. "Because Satan will surely tempt you, now that you've accepted the Lord as your savior and been baptized in His name." "Okay." Art said, looking at Naïf's hand only as he took the torn paper with the phone number. Art looked at the penmanship on the paper, and he thought Naïf was as soulless on paper as he was in person.

Art and Faith had the bus let them out at Art's, as he had to let Riffraff out to do his business. Art was sobering up from the Angst now that he was home. Faith spoke on the phone with her mother while Art was out with Riffraff, and she said that her mother had invited them both to lunch. Knowing that Faith's mother was taking him out because of the incident, Art felt obligated to accept the invitation. Art changed out of the rags Naïf had given him, and they waited. And waited. And waited. But Faith's mother never showed up. Worried, Faith called her mother back, but she didn't answer. After a couple of hours of waiting, Faith, defeated, said she would go home.

“Should we call the police?” Art asked. “Has this ever happened before?”
"Oh, no! Don't call the police." Faith insisted. "She's at the casino, I know it. Whenever she says she will do something and doesn't show up or answer her mobile phone, I know she's at the casino. Whenever she says she will do something like this, look at what that woman does… she always lets me down."
“I see. Well, it’s okay, I didn’t want to eat out anyhow. How about we eat a sandwich and some chips?” Art suggested. “That will make you feel better.”
They had a late lunch, after which Faith went home, saying she didn't feel good. Art knew the source of half of all her ailments was her mother. But he said nothing. Instead, he took Riffraff out again and got on the computer. He looked up a couple of things, realized he was tired, took his meds, and then went to bed. Art was asleep a few hours or more when he awoke to someone knocking at the door. It was Fritz.
“Hey, Fritz, what do you need?” Art assumed Fritz had come to hustle something from him.
“Oh, nothing, just came to see what you’re up to,” Fritz mumbled.
"Well, I was asleep." Art implied that he wanted Fritz to leave and let him go back to sleep, even though, thanks to the Elixir in his system, he wasn't tired anymore.
“Yeah, I slept, too, but now I’m probably going to be awake all night again, the elixir, you know,” Fritz said.
“Yeah, I know.” Art said, sighing. “What do you want to do then? You want to come in and hang out for a while?”
“Yeah, I guess,” Fritz said agreeably but still mumbling his words.
Riffraff stood beside Art at the door, and Art told him to get back into the house. And Riffraff did, not that he was that obedient of a dog. But seeing Fritz coming in, Riffraff stayed back and jumped at Fritz's legs, wanting attention. Fritz, though, was too focused on the question he had to ask Art.
“You want to get another bottle of elixir, Art, I’ll buy?” Fritz asked.
"You'll buy? How did you get money to buy Angst?" Art was curious, for Fritz rarely had money.
But when he did, Fritz was too generous, as he didn't think to spend it on himself.
"My dad came by and gave me some cigarettes, snacks and drinks, and money. I wanted to buy you a bottle of Angst. You know, to celebrate." “No.” And that was all Art said.
Art walked to Sanctum the following day. He walked down the meandering sidewalk, through the old oak trees, and into the institutional haven. Art decided that he would just have to avoid him if he couldn't banish Fritz from his home and end his friendship with Fritz. And that's when Art was acquainted with a new friend who began attending Sanctum that morning. Art noticed him immediately: he had a head full of red hair and a matching red beard; he was a portly fellow, and his belly jiggled when he laughed. Art quickly was drawn to the odd fellow and went up and introduced himself.
“Hey, I’m Art.” He said, extending his hand.
“Darwin.” The man nodded his head and grunted with a deep and low voice. “Uh, say, I heard there was coffee. Lead me to the coffee, Art.” Darwin insisted.
"Sure." Art said happily, glad to have met the burly, red-bearded man. "I think we're going to be good pals Darwin."
"Sure, we are now. Lead me to the coffee," Darwin insisted again, and Art led Darwin across the hall to the break room. Well, here you go!" Art said with a smile.

"Good thing I had you, ol' friend; I might have gotten lost without you." Art could not tell if Darwin was serious but was certain he had made a good friend.
“Where do you live?” Art asked and already anticipated the answer.
“Just moved to the RCF,” Darwin told Art. “Where do you live, friend?” He asked.
“I live here in Zeitgeist, in a duplex.”
“Say, Art…” Darwin lowered his deep voice a little. “You want to kick it later?” “Kick it?” Art asked, unfamiliar with the phrase.
“Yeah, you know, hang out!” Darwin insisted.
“Oh, yeah! We can hang out later at my place if you want.”
Art was pleased that he had made a new acquaintance. He only hoped that Darwin wouldn't be a disappointment, another Fritz. For the moment, Art had to focus his attention on being called upon in a group. What would he say about the baptism? Would he mention the Elixir? To both of those questions was a resounding no. Art was preoccupied mentally with Darwin. Where did the brute come from, he thought? And to show up just when his only friend, Fritz, had become crusty like day-old bread: still good but ready to be used up and cleared away to make room for a new piece.
Art rated himself a 10 and avoided deep reflective speech about "the incident" over the weekend. Fortunately, Fritz was in the other group for the day, where he could be heard to be mumbling along. Art thought that Fritz would wander home to the RCF, and he did. This allowed Art and Darwin to stroll over to Art's place. Darwin was a stout man with a huge gut on him. Beneath his belly was a long belt that he kept adjusting as he would grunt out a single phrase: "Whiskey." The two of them made it home and stood on the porch.
“Who’s this little fellow?” Darwin asked as he looked in the living room window at Riffraff.
“Why, that’s Riffraff!” Art said joyously.
“Riffraff? I don’t see any riffraff around here, do you?” Darwin joked.
“He’s a mutt like me.” Art said.
"You're a mutt, and I'm a caveman." Darwin kidded.
“What ethnicity are you, Darwin?” Art asked him.
"Why, like I've said, I'm a caveman from the caves of prehistoric times, before there were nations." "That's nice." That was all Art could think of when commenting on that statement. Darwin was lighthearted, a good remedy compared to Fritz and his pity. His portly but firm physique made his appearance seem cartoon-like, while his countenance was lax and stern at the same time. As such, he looked like a caricature: full of color while simultaneously lacking expression, yet a bellow of laughs. Indeed, Art knew that Darwin was genuine, and that was reassuring. There were certain aspects of himself that Art did not share with anyone because of their sensitive nature, trauma, and such, but Art shared with Darwin that he did not like Angst Anonymous because of its spiritual-based workings. Art told Darwin that he had discovered that he was the God of his understanding, that he was the will and the power behind the wheels of change that could recover him from this lowly state, and that he was not powerless. Art, his head down in shame, told Darwin how he'd been baptized intoxicated on the Elixir Angst. But this didn't elicit more than a grunt from Darwin. And Art immediately felt purged of 'the incident.'
Art and Darwin hung out for the rest of the afternoon, getting better acquainted. Art shared his experiences with Elixir, and Darwin told stories of drinking whiskey. Darwin said he had retired from his whiskey days, and Art said the same of Elixir. Darwin liked coffee, too,

though. And this was quite a harmless pastime for Art compared to the Elixir Angst. But Art was not fully content with his situation. The Sun began to set, though, and Darwin began to yawn; Art suggested he head back that he had some things to take care of and would see him tomorrow at Sanctum during the group.

Art decided not to attend Angst Anonymous. It was a good decision.

Art went out into the world with a new vision. That religious truth, like all truth, was relative. The Bible was a good thing for the most part but could be overused by the zealous believer, and it could be downright abused with and by its interpretation by the bigot. Could Art coexist with Faith: betwixt and between science and spirituality?

The Dragon (Angst)

Risen

It has been a decade since Art Token lived at Plexus and attended group therapy. The following is an update on our hero. Art had been out of Zeitgeist for a while, but he had continued to see Faith. The two quickly got married at the request of her parents, who did not want the couple to live together in sin. But Faith's co-dependency on her mother, Dixie, was problematic…

Art had "retired" from group therapy. Ms. Little told him he had graduated, but Art thought that made it sound like elementary school, so Art insisted it is referred to as "retired." Art had not seen Ms. Little since. He had then developed a new diagnosis: insomnia. For insomnia, and mainly to help replace the Elixir Angst, he was given a certification to use medical marijuana, or as his old friend, Log, called it, vitamin THC. The legal term for it was "medical marijuana," but Art and Log refused to call the medicinal herb such a derogatory name. Art preferred to just call it what it was: cannabis. Art felt without the cannabis that he was never able to sleep but never really awake; he merely wandered around his apartment aimlessly pacing. The pacing was one of Art's favorite coping mechanisms. Art took to extracting cannabis from the flower of the plant, or "'product," with olive oil, but not alcohol, as he had had a bad experience with the lady who lived beside him, Page Neighbors. She would extract THC from cannabis with vodka and "green out." This was a harmful drug, and so was the elixir Angst (and so was drinking alcohol). It was this Art had learned. Now that Art didn't attend group therapy at Sanctum anymore, he went for medication management at The Advice Center. Art now saw Dr. Bumpkin. She was quite personable and helpful. Dr.

Bumpkin had suggested Art get medical marijuana as a safer alternative to his elixir use. Dr. Bumpkin was a useful resource to Art. Art also had therapy sessions with Mr. Layman, who was, of no surprise, an Evangelical. Being an Evangelical gave one a natural sense of righteousness, Art had found out. Art tried, though, to make the best of the arrangement. There was more going on in Art's life than ingesting cannabis products, though. Art had quit the iniquitous Elixir, Angst. And Art had sharpened his minimalist skills, as well. And he had joined an atheist organization. And he had a new nemesis. A nemesis who criticized his elixir use, his

minimalist ideas, and the fact that he had joined "an atheist church."

Since the reader last encountered him, Art has faced one of the most challenging times in life. It was a cathartic experience. Now, Art was living an untroubled existence. But that was only sometimes the case. Art had, under the influence of minimalism and perhaps the elixir Angst, given away all his belongings except what he could carry with him.

The Elixir had caused Art Token to end several relationships that weren't relationships anymore. Art had contacted a few people he used to know, just to find out he no longer knew them. Angst created a longing, a nostalgia, unlike any other drug. And it was nostalgia that was the most influential of drugs. It was a sense of:

"I remember when: it was better then."

A friend of Art's had reconnected with him over the past ten years. His name was Flint Harrow. Flint carried the weight of embodying all Art's lost friends: "All the people I used to know," Art would say. And that is the gist of our story here: Art's experience over the past

several years with leaving Faith and reconnecting more with Jack Retch. Friends like Fritz and Darwin were just ephemeral. Jack Retch had so far withstood the test of time.
Art was told by his new therapist, Mr. Layman, that he "suffered" from "spiritual confusion." This diagnosis was more confusing to Art than the actual spiritual confusion. Art may or may not have had spiritual confusion, but if he had had such a thing, it was probably due to the influence of people like the old Mr. Lad. Jack Retch didn't help the matter any. Retch was religious, too. An Evangelical, as well as an extreme and fanatical Liberal-Conservative. But this was what Art felt brought him and Retch together, besides their past mutually reciprocal relationship. Mr. Layman was a Liberal-Conservative," at heart," he confessed, even though he was registered as an Independent. On the other hand, Art and Retch were brave enough to be registered as Liberal-Conservatives. Art was now a fan of Einsiedler on the Tubular website. Einsiedler, in turn, was a fan of Old Boy and of doing nothing. A better way of putting it is "going with the flow, like water," says Einsiedler. "Man is not an island." Einsiedler would say… "Mixed messages," Art would mumble.
Art had read about the Chicken-Bone-Jinx that was performed by Voodoo witch doctors. Subsequently, Art tried the Chicken-Bone-Jinx on Page Neighbors, for this was the measure people go to when influenced by religion…. You can also pray for an enemy's death. There are numerous ways to do a black invocation in religion, and the preachers and monks act as if religion is only on the side of good and righteous causes. Art wondered why Mr. Lad or Mr. Layman hadn't told him about the alternate methods, such as the Chicken-Bone-Jinx available to the masses, which, when performed even with slack measures, one could guarantee the death and defeat of one's enemy. Regardless, it's all just superstition: Religion is poison, some atheists say, along with many other religions. But it is important to note that if Christianity is poison, then, the New Atheism is poison, as well.
Art had moved from Plexus after a falling out between him and Faith. Art had got an apartment at the Four-Flats. Art had given up the notion of volunteering. Instead, he had taken up the hobby of carving wooden crosses. Faith said he was now a carpenter, just like Jesus. Art had given Riffraff up for adoption. It was part of his minimal responsibility to give him more autonomy.
Art thought about what he wanted out of life now in the face of his "ex-angst-ridden" condition. He wanted the same thing he had wanted for some time in the past: to set some things straight. He needed to avenge himself with his nemeses, Jot Catchall or JC, a hoarder and control freak. JC's "wife" Cot. There's not much to say about Cot.
Art was certain that if left to all the "stuff" JC hoarded, which was valueless, left to die in its toxicity…. Art did nothing for JC except leave Jot to rot in the fecal matter of domestic vermin. Art and Faith went with Jot and Cot to their aunt Joy's the day after their wedding. It was in the rural town of Ranger in the deep country.
"Yeah, we'd get married, too, but it's just a piece of paper," JC said.
"Well, whatever suits you." Art told JC, "So, is it JC, like Jesus Christ?" Art joked.
"I should hope not; people who believe in that kind of stuff are brainwashed. I won't follow some book written thousands of years ago before we knew the world wasn't flat." JC chuckled.
And that's how Art Token and Jot and Cot Catchall's relationship began.
And since the days of Jot and Cot, Art's new motto has been: "I live alone."

Art Token could neither hope nor pray for anything positive for his nemesis, JC, and his Not-apiece-of-paper-girlfriend, Cot, who loved fact-checking Art with Trickipedia.
Mr. Layman also liked to fact-check Art. Being fact-checked annoyed Art, who believed one should do that on their own time and get back to him. Fact-checking someone in person was not only downright rude but also plain inappropriate, if not just stupid, and Mr. Layman should have known better. But he was younger than Art, and no matter what Mr. Layman assumed, Art was several years the wiser.
But all was well with our hero, Art Token. There were not many changes, even though there were some big cessations like Art quitting the Elixir and Angst. Art had asked Jot and Cot to help him quit Angst by getting him a substitute drug, marijuana, or weed as it is known on the street. But Jot condescendingly said that Art would " probably just do both…" meaning that Art would just use both the Elixir and the marijuana.
"You get idiots like that with any crisis one is dealing with." Art later said.
Faith and Art would not last together because you can't mix oil and water, or can you? It's just that science and spirituality don't mix. And neither does faith and doubt. Now, who is the oil and who is the water doesn't matter. But Art liked to say he and Faith weren't like oil and water but more like water and electricity. If you go swimming in a lightning storm, expect a little jolt. The important thing is that Art is happy now, or his happiness grows. He has given up even the Vitamin THC most of the time because there were just better things to spend his time on now other than just getting high and prowling the internet.

Rascal

This is the story of my dog Rascal. It is not entirely the story of my dog Rascal, but he has a significant role in it. I was a child aged 13. Rascal and I did almost everything together except for going to school. Which was sad, for I hated school. I was a good student, and I got good grades. But I hated school because I feared that I would be punished by being paddled. Students were beaten with a paddle for the least little infraction. I remember one girl, a sister of a friend of mine, was paddled simply for chewing gum while she was playing her flute. Another friend of mine was paddled for not doing his homework. Thus, I always did my homework, and I would hate to have been beaten for not being willing to learn something. Anyway, I will say more about school later; for now, let me say more about Rascal.

Rascal was a mutt. He was a small dog, but not too small. Rascal weighed about 20 pounds and had light brown or tan fur that lightened in color on his belly until it was entirely white. And he had brown eyes, as most mutts do. Rascal and I would go fishing in the spring of 6th grade in school. I recall that we went on two separate occasions. I will tell you of both in what follows. The first trip was on a Saturday in May. Rascal and I got up at 5 a.m. and set off on a two-mile walk north of my parent's house. It was after 6 a.m. when we arrived at the creek where I was to fish. The creek was called Fool's Creek because of all the pyrite or "fool's gold," as it is called. Thus, it was called Fool's Creek.

Rascal and I made our way down Fool's Creek, fishing a hole and then wandering the woods on its periphery. At about noon or so, I was feeling tired, so I found a patch of ground covered in moss, laid down in the sunlight, and took a nap. Rascal lay beside me and kept watch. I drifted off a little but not too much until I heard my Papa holler my name, along with my Dad and Uncles. Two men had murdered two other men and had fled and abandoned their truck north of where I was fishing. Learning this, my family came looking for me. Upon their finding me, I told them that I was taking a nap and had seen no one. Scared for my safety, my Dad told me it was not the best idea to nap in the woods, but I assured him that Rascal would have alerted me of any danger. That was one fishing trip I went on that spring with Rascal, and I felt he had guarded my life from then on out.

The next trip I went on was with my band director from school. I took Rascal along. The band director was not expecting that I would bring a dog, but he put up little resistance when he saw that I had brought Rascal. I introduced him to Rascal and the band director, Mr. Toots. We called him, but never to his face. His real name was Mr. Black, but we called him Mr. Toots because he was known for his flatulence.

Well, we went to a creek north of Washitall, USA, where I was from, and I had never been to it before. Rascal and I explored a little and found a nice water hole to fish. Several children went on the trip. Preps," they were called. The fact was that they were children of wealth, "rich kids," I called them. The Preps finally made it up the creek to where Rascal and I were. They were fishing with crickets and caught only perch. I was fishing with lures and caught several small-mouth or brown bass.

One of the Preps, Cuss, didn't like that I was catching small bass, and he was only catching measly little perch. He asked me why I was catching them, and he was not. I told him.

“Cause you ain’t got a lure,” I told him.

“Well, let me use your lure,” Cuss said.

“No, then I won’t be able to catch any fish,” I told him.

“Can’t you use another lure?” Cuss asked.
“No, they’re not biting on the other lures, just this one.”
Cuss demanded I give him the lure, but I refused. We were standing on a large rock over the creek's water. Cuss reached for my pole, and I stepped to the side. He pushed me, and I lost my balance, so I reached out and grabbed him. I pulled myself back upright, and in doing so, Cuss lost his balance and fell backward off the rock into the water.
All the other children laughed at him as he returned to me, reached out, took my fishing pole from me, and broke it. This caused me to lose my temper, and I punched him in the chest; he swung back at me and started punching me in the face. Rascal tore into Cuss, and Cuss tried to escape the gnashing of the teeth. I attacked Cuss as well, as he was kicking Rascal. Mr. Toots pulled me off Cuss. He told me to get my dog, so I did. I felt victorious.
Mr. Toots demanded to know what was happening, and Cuss told him I pushed into the water for no reason. The other children didn't come to my defense. I felt defeated. I explained my case. Mr. Toots said there would be "licks for both of you!" This meant we were to get paddled when we got back to town.
We would have stayed a while longer, but Mr. Toots said, considering the circumstances, we should go ahead and return. We loaded it into the van we had come in. Rascal seemed unaffected by the whole situation. I was in fear. I had never been paddled before and was in terror. My uncle had told me horror stories about electric paddles and paddles with holes in them so that it hurt so bad you died.
As it was called, we got back to the band hall, and Mr. Toots led Cuss and me into the band room. Cuss was to be paddled, too, for breaking my fishing pole. Mr. Toots got his paddle out. It was a board about three feet long, an inch thick, and about 6 inches wide. Mr. Toots told Cuss to "bend over and touch your toes." Cuss did, and Mr. Toots hit him with the paddle three times. Then it was my turn. Mr. Toots told me to touch my toes, and I did. My heart was racing. The paddle hit me and stung, but it didn't hurt that bad. But somehow, in my fear, I forgot about Rascal. He had followed us into the band room, and after the second lick from the paddle, he tore into Mr. Toots. I did nothing, and Mr. Toots said: “Get that Goddamn dog off me.”
Mr. Toots turned red and told me to bend over again. Mr. Toots raised the paddle, and Rascal tore into him again, seeing that he would hit me again. Mr. Toots tried to fend Rascal off with his foot, but Rascal just bit his leg. I again pulled Rascal off Mr. Toots. Mr. Toots was furious. About that time, my Dad stepped in between Rascal, me, and Mr. Toots and asked what was happening. Mr. Toots, defeated, said:
“Tell him, boy.”
I explained to my Dad. Mr. Toots walked away, and Cuss and the other children were watching. I told my Dad about the fishing hole incident and Cuss breaking my fishing pole, how he fell into the creek, and how it was not my fault. My Dad understood.
My Dad told me to get in the truck, our family vehicle. I went outside and got in the vehicle. My Dad spoke with Mr. Toots, and shortly, he came and got in the truck. He wasn't as angry with me as I thought he would be. Instead, he told me not to worry; he had told Mr. Toots what had happened and that Mr. Toots would talk to all the boys, especially Cuss, and let them know they were in the wrong. Whether this ever happened, I don't know. But that was the second fishing trip. Both are imprinted permanently into my memory for obvious reasons.

The point is that I formed a close bond with Rascal because of these two incidents, particularly the second incident with Mr. Toots. After that day, I swore that I would never let a teacher paddle me again, and I didn't. But that brings us to Mr. Yes, Sir, or Rod Stricter, my Science teacher.

Rod Stricter was a Christian man. It is ironic that he was a science teacher at Washitall Middle School. Washitall was a nobody-and-nothing town in the South. Here, people thought that the Earth was only 6,000 years old and that dinosaurs had been wiped out by the flood, from which Noah and his Ark saved the rest of the animals. The theory of Evolution was not true—we didn't come from apes!

In the backwoods, you have authoritarian figures like old Rod Stricter who think that the adage "spare the rod and spoil the child" actually comes from the Bible. Nevertheless, Mr. Stricter was indeed a strict disciplinarian. His favorite saying was, "Break your jaw to say Yes, sir?" He uttered the fragmented sentence daily at Washitall Middle School. And that's why we called him Mr. Yes, Sir.

I had the displeasure of having Mr. Stricter for 8th-grade science. I noticed that Mr. Stricter made a point to say that when we went over the Earth's formation history and the introduction of animals – Mr. Stricter said you could "believe" this or how God had created the Earth and so on. I was fond of science. It's funny that I had a dictator for a science teacher. Mr. Stricter was quick to paddle a student. He thought it was the way to show love to his students: through correction, that is. However, his form of correction was more of a tyranny over children, where learning was reduced to a fear of doing what was right or getting beaten. That is how we educate our children in the South, through fear. Fear of punishment, that is. But somehow, I learned science from that idiot.

And how Mr. Stricter ever reconciled science with his religion is beyond me. I supposed that was why he beat the students so frequently. Maintaining order is what he wishes to do. Absolute control is what he expected and desired. He was a poor excuse for a teacher. Learning is something that should be made fun of, not feared! I suspect old Rod merely feared knowledge because it contradicted his beliefs.

And this is another matter entirely. But Mr. Stricter was quick to send you out into the hall. Take, for instance, Lacks. I remember the time when Lax turned in his homework half-finished. Mr. Stricter had us take up the papers and our science homework. Young Lacks took the papers, handed them to Mr. Stricter, and then went to his seat. Mr. Stricter looked through the papers and came to Lacks' paper.

"You didn't finish the assignment, Lacks." Mr. Stricter told him.

"Yes. I did." Lacks said, not even realizing he had not done the last half of the assignment, as it was on another page.

"Break your jaw to say: Yes, sir?" Mr. Stricter asked in his usual condescending manner.

Lacks was a poor boy from a poor family. He had ragged clothes and didn't bathe, but I liked him. He was kind and wouldn't kill a fly, as they say. But he was embarrassed and got angry, as you could tell by his red face. But he was a passive child and simply said, "No." Mr. Stricter asked him again, wanting him to say, "Yes, sir." "Break your jaw to say: Yes, sir?" Mr. Stricter asked.

"Yes, mam." Lacks said with a smile of victory.

"Well, you know what that means?" Mr. Stricter said, beyond furious. "Out in the hall!"

Lacks drug himself out of the desk chair and walked outside the room with his head down. I could see him in the hall. He stood with his arms crossed while Mr. Stricter got a "witness." That was what was required by Law, that another teacher "witness" or watch the teacher giving the beating. I suppose this was so the student was beaten properly. But the point I want to make here is that I have come to understand that religion, that is, evangelical Christians, and corporal punishment go hand in hand. The two are intertwined. And out of them comes violence and poverty of thought. Anyhow, this is what I had to contend with as a youth. But Rascal and I tried to escape it all in the backwoods after school every day. I got Rascal when I was twelve in 6th grade. I had him through 8th grade dealing with Mr. Stricter. When I was a sophomore in 10th grade, at 16, I woke up one morning and let Rascal out to do his business.

I fell back asleep, and at noon, I woke again. My mom had made some macaroni and cheese. I got a bowl of it and was eating it when my brother came in and whispered something to my Dad. And Dad came over to me and told me the news: Rascal was dead. He got hit by a vehicle after I had let him out. I felt guilty. I let him out and went back to sleep. Rascal wandered out into the road and got killed, and it was my fault… so I thought. I went and looked at Rascal. He didn't even look injured. The vehicle must have hit him in the head and broken his neck. It was good that he didn't suffer. I took it hard. Rascal and I had been through a lot together. I buried him in the woods behind our house.

A Myth

"There was a little boy who was about your age. Let's just say he was about twelve. This little boy was deer hunting with his Dad in the woods. His Dad instructed him to stay under a tree while he made a circle down through the bottoms. And if they were lucky, the Dad might jump a deer up for the boy to shoot. So, the little boy said he understood, and his Dad disappeared into the woods silently. The Sun began to shine on the little boy, and he got too hot, so he took his orange hat off, and his brown hair glistened in the sunlight. The boy's bottom began to get sore from the hard ground, so he removed his orange vest and made a cushion. Underneath, he wore a tan jacket. The boy kept sitting still just like his Dad had told him, and he was not used to sitting for such a long time, so after a while, the boy took off his thin, orange hunting pants. Underneath, he had brown corduroy pants that his father told him not to wear, but the boy had snuck them on while his father wasn't looking. So, the little boy sat there, brown hair blowing in the breeze as he sat on his orange vest and pants with his hat to the side. The boy was tired of waiting. What seemed like hours to the boy was just about a half-hour. It's just that waiting on deer requires a lot of patience the boy had yet to learn. So, the little boy got up and looked for his Dad. The boy left his orange hunting clothes under the tree if his Dad came looking for him. He would know that the boy would be back for his clothes. The boy was clumsy in the woods and rustled through the leaves like a gray squirrel gathering acorns. The Dad was busy hunting in the bottoms and returning up the ridge to his son when he heard something. He froze still and waited. The Dad had been hunting a deer for about an hour and finally stalked up on it. And then -Boom! A shot rang out and scared the deer off. The Dad was confused when he squeezed off his shot and hit the boy, who was all dressed in brown.
The little boy was shot in the head, in that glistening brown hair, and died."
"The moral of this story is that you should never take off your orange when you are deer hunting, or something bad might happen to you just like it did to the little boy in the story." The principal told us.
"But isn't it the dad's fault for shooting his boy," I asked.
"Why… of course not, Jack. The boy disobeyed his father. First, he wore the brown corduroy pants, then he took off all the hunter orange he knew he wasn't supposed to do, and…"
“But his dad never told him to leave on his orange hunting clothes, did he?”
"I didn't tell it in my story, but I am sure the Dad would have told him this. And besides, the boy knew he was supposed to stay put."
“But my dad says that you should never shoot unless you can count the points on that deer's horns, and to never shoot at noises, and…”
“Out in the hall, Jack. I’ll teach you a lesson one way or another.”
“Now bend over. You’re gonna get paddled for back-talking me.”
“No. My Dad says you can’t paddle me. He doesn’t believe in it. Here.” I gave him the note.
“Well, your dad isn’t here now, is he?”
And he ripped up my note from my Dad and gave me licks anyway. It didn't hurt. I wanted to cry, though, but I didn't. I laughed at the principal to make him mad. I hated him and his stupid story.

Beat the Devil Out of Them

I was intoxicated by fear in my youth, though. I read and I learned from experience. Somehow my outer-self wasn't aligned with my inner-self. Discipline. What is it? Well, as a child even I knew it wasn't something that was beat into you; or beat out of you, as in beat the devil out of them. But on one hand there is justice, on the other hand there is understanding. I felt like a child that I received neither. Rather, that was the reason now for my stubborn defiance. I was accused of being a "rebel without a cause" when I was a teenager, and I thought that this may be the case, but it wasn't so. My fears were abundant, and corporal punishment was the culprit. And what harm could a little spanking or paddling do to a child, anyway? And what am I getting at with this line of thought? I say simply this: I see corporal punishment or paddling as a trauma of my past; it was pure torture, and I relate it with God and religion, as God is that disciplinarian of my youth. And I relate my old science teacher, Rod Stricter, to God. Therefore, I see Mr. Stricter as the authoritarian, and as such relate him to God as a father figure and a persecutor. Being such, I have found that any memory of him, any trigger that is… -anything related to physical discipline, as it may be called, -or perhaps physical abuse? - anything related to these triggers of childhood memories I have tried to suppress with the elixir. And in the past, I tried to suppress my traumatic childhood memories with a variety of drugs and alcohol. "Break your jaw to say yes sir?" That's the phrase old Mr. Stricter uttered many times. That's how we treat a child in the South.

I met a lady once, whom I was supposedly getting into a business deal with to open a Christian bookstore. I was speaking to her about something that had to do with growing up and the idea that we can't help how we were raised; that even though we are rational adults, our behaviors are often dictated by how we were raised. And upon telling her that I did something because I was taught that way as an atheist and she said I was an adult now and was free to choose differently. Well, for one thing I wasn't raised to be an atheist: I was raised to believe how I wanted to believe. I was free to choose differently, but this lady was merely saying: Why don't I choose to believe the way I do? I was raised to think for myself and that is what I intend to do here. Papa was on the threshold of the dark and deep of poverty and the emotional pain of loss of control. He saw that he couldn't continue down a particular path and chose another direction. What did he have that I didn't? He had his mental health. And that is a grand thing, to have one's mental capacities. Granny on the other hand, was to lose her mental faculties during her life. And even she succumbed to the equivalent of what I term elixir. She became addicted or chemically dependent on the drug Benzo. I too have been dependent on Benzo.

But the thing is, I believe I was made to need the elixir. I was subjugated by the likes of tyrants like Mr. Stricter, and the murderous idea of being a humiliated and degraded human being that is dependent on an elixir to socialize and grow began to appeal to me at a young age. I was traumatized at the age of 6, though. And I will briefly discuss this and then delve into my childhood to account for some of the madness that plagues me as an adult.

Misanthropic old Mr. Stricter, he should be dragged out in the street and flogged. But violence doesn't serve a purpose here; in fact, it is violence, the physical violence of abuse that we need to escape and eradicate in American society. No child ever learned anything from the hickory stick except fear and how to get what they want in life; they can use physical force and violence to attain it. In a way, I'm not even here to argue that corporal punishment is either effective or ineffective: I know that it is nothing but harmful in my own case, and so why should it be any different to any other child. There is one factor that makes it certainly detrimental to a person such as I, and that is that Mr. Stricter was a godly man, religious or superstitious at least. He taught that science says that the universe was created with the Big Bang and that humans came to exist through evolution while at the same time adding that some people believe that God created the world in six days and rested on a seventh. That was science to him, and if you didn't like it and didn't reply to his curt and coarse expressions of "You understand?" and "Break your jaw to say yes, sir!" -well if didn't reply "Yes, sir," you were made to walk out into the hall, told to wait there while he got a witness, and while you're waiting the door to the classroom was left open, and all the other children waited and watched and then when Mr. Stricter and the witness came back, chuckling often, you were instructed to bend over and touch your toes, and he tapped your bottom a little to "warm it up" as I have said; and then he came swung the paddle back, held it there for a moment and with all the force he could muster he swung the board, which was about an inch and a half thick, six inches wide and about three feet long, -he came down with the force and violence of his imagined God that he was dealing out right justice for our wrongs; and then after the smack and whack of the first lick he waited and again tapped and warm up his paddle in a sexual manner on the child's buttocks; he waited in order to let the pain sink in so that you felt the severe punishment even more severe than if he swatted you quickly and the pain of the first swat numbed the blows of the next two, for you were struck three times with the paddle; as if this pain instilled any learning other than shear fear into a child.
Mr. Rod Stricter, on the other hand, was out to execute pious justice and physical and mental abuse upon an innocent and mentally ill child in my case. And so many other teachers exerted their will onto a child. But did this discipline instill doubt? Yes, it did, indeed! It presented a logical fallacy to my teenage mind: Children were to be cherished, while at the same time abused. An educator could physically hit a child! Corporal punishment violates one's body sexually, therefore Rod Stricter could be mistaken for a pederast in my book.

Before class began in Mrs. Victory's English class, I was pushing and shoving, playing with a classmate Peculiar. The bell rang and Mrs. Victory came in and saw us and ordered us out in the hall. She went and got Ms. Cotton to witness the beating. She instructed Peculiar to touch his toes and quickly gave him two hard swats of the paddle. Then she told him to go back into the room, and then she told me to touch my toes, and I did. The paddle came down hard against my buttocks two times and I don't think I've ever felt more humiliated and degraded by another human being. I was told to go back into the classroom, and she stayed out in the hall and spoke with Mrs. Cotton. I told myself that I would never be paddled again. And I never was.

I know now that I wasn't a coward. I was just a scared little boy, but I'm grown now. And this is my reckoning. I am here to tell you that Mr. Stricter was the coward. And that he didn't beat the devil out of any school children. No. He instilled the devils into them: He instilled fear in them. Though, now I think I believe there is no God out of reason and logic, not out of rebellion. But my life was scornful. God is just your conscience, according to my Mom. And I think she is right. The idea of God is either so grand to be infeasible or the idea of God is so simple to be futile. God is what is good and right. And that leaves everything else and Mr. Rod Stricter and his bureaucracy of militant educators to the Devil. There must have been something that old Mr. Stricter had seen in science that he couldn't reconcile with his religion.
I went to school one day and I was in Geography class with Mr. Fudge. We were going over chapter 4 and the secretary called him over the intercom to come to the principal's office. He told us to keep reading over chapter 4 and we would discuss it when he got back. Fix sat behind me in the class and he and I talked a little, all the kids in the class spoke amongst themselves by the time Mr. Fudge returned. Mr. Fudge wouldn't tolerate the disorder and said that there would be a pop quiz over chapter 4 since no one had read it. I didn't understand and asked why we were going to have a pop quiz over something no one had read? Mr. Fudge was angered and told me to step out into the hall. I said no and refused. He reached down and opened his desk drawer and put his hand on the paddle. As if putting his hand on the Bible. He told me to step into the hall. I merely laughed, and he turned red and walked out of the room. He didn't come back. The bell rang and class dismissed itself. The next morning, I was called to the principal's office and was dismissed permanently from school. I felt relieved. It seemed that the madness was over. But the fear was instilled within me.

I relive the experiences often still at night.

Backslider

Rolf Jackal was from Potshot, Amerika. Rolf left when he got married and never returned. But through his parents, whom he spoke to over the phone once a week on Sundays, RJ or Mr. Jackal, as he was sometimes known, kept up with the shenanigans of the small town.
He had since moved to Plateau, and after Rolf was there several years, he met his "old lady" Kitschy
Steward, or Kit, who he insisted keep her maiden name even though they got married. But unlike his Grandma Allwell, Rolf was for feminism to a certain extent. They got married for impulsive reasons but married all the same. Kit's father, Mr. Steward, or Stew as he liked to be called. Steward agreed with Grandma Allwell: Kit Steward should have taken Rolf's family name, Jackal.
Rolf and Kit moved in with Stew only a short time after they got married. Rolf learned this was a mistake only when they lived with Mr. Steward in Ranger. This pattern of moving on impulse continued for several years until they migrated to the state and metropolis of Ark, as it is called. Rolf began volunteering at the Ark Library. He says Ark is "dead center in Amerika," which isn't the most ideal location for him. Rolf, now 38, and Kit discussed their future.
"I wish you'd go to church with me at the Hallowed Temple," Kit told Rolf.
"I will, but that's all I'm going to do." Rolf insisted.
"Well, what else would you have to do?" She wondered.
"I think you know… You are always hounding me to get baptized. I got saved before when we were living in Potato, or else you said you would've divorced me. But besides the fact that I've been 'backsliding' as preachers like to say –I'm not getting baptized, too." He ended.
"I understand. Now we just need to decide whether we'll go on Wednesday evening, Sunday morning, or both," she added.
"How about Sundays? That's when I'm off from volunteering at the Library, which doesn't open until 1 pm," Rolf said.
"Okay, but you promise you'll go with me." Kit pleaded.
"Yes," Rolf said.
They discussed a few more things, and then Rolf dressed and started walking to the Library. It was a steady, steep incline to the Potshot Public Library the whole two miles. Rolf thought about his commitment to attending church at Hallowed Temple, or HT as it was called. He had been several times and was familiar with the preacher, Pastor Sextus, or Pastor Sex as Rolf called him -but not to his face. Rolf was the same age as Pastor Sextus… Rolf, an "in the closet atheist," felt a feeling of pity for the preacher.
And Rolf's lack of respect for Sextus spilled over into his lack of "fear of the Lord." Rolf liked to tell Kit the story of an old lady preacher who came to the group home where Rolf had lived. The old lady preached how to "fear God" and why you should be "afraid." Rolf explained to Kit the error of this statement, how to "fear God" meant to have reverence for Him: love, respect, etc. Kit tried to soothe Rolf and reconcile the old lady preacher with a verse from the Bible: "My people perish for a lack of knowledge."
But this didn't stop Rolf from elaborating on the old lady's stupidity. He explained that the mistake she made was to read the scripture from the King James Version of the Bible,

written in Middle English or translated from the original languages to Middle English. Rolf said he quit attending the services until Kit arrived, and then he just went because he liked Kit… and the doughnuts served at the service. Rolf then remembered that HT served doughnuts before Sunday service. And this improved his mood.

Rolf arrived at the Library and signed in. He began by checking the book return slot, and after he got the books, he got the DVDs and CDs, which were in a separate return slot. After doing this, Rolf put the books on a cart, pushed them to the elevator, took them to the 2nd floor, and began shelving them. Rolf then went back down the elevator, put the cart up, and started helping behind the desk, checking materials in and out to the patrons. It was a Wednesday morning and relatively slow. He got a break, went outside, sat down on a bench, and called his friend Flint Harrow in Backwards.

"Well, hello, Flint!" Rolf said and then lowered his voice. "How have you been?"

"Oh, I'm okay… And how are you, Rolf?" Flint asked. "I've been thinking about your Black Box Law, which still fascinates me."

"Yes, 'the problem is the solution.' Right?" Rolf said, quoting his essay.

"Yeah. I picture it as a three-dimensional black box…" Flint elaborated on the essay, but we'll skip that.

When Rolf and Flint were both 18, Flint temporarily moved in with Rolf. This didn't go too badly but could have gone better. Years later, just before Rolf went to the group home, and due to his alcoholism, Flint let Rolf stay at his duplex. And even more, Flint had stayed at the group home in Potato a couple of years before Rolf went there.

A letter to Flint's landlord said, "Mr. Rolf Jackal is staying with Flint Harrow in duplex #13." Well, that was the end of Rolf and Flint's fun. But during Rolf's stay, he wrote the Black Box Law, an essay that we don't have time to go into, but the gist of it is: in every situation, there is a problem that we're not aware of, and the problem is the solution; for, once we've found out that there is a problem, it ceases to be a problem out of our awareness. But the Black Box Law, Rolf thought, was problematic itself…. Mainly because it used the words "problem" and "problematic" so many times. Anyhow, this is the essay Flint mentioned. Rolf thought momentarily about his gratitude for Flint taking him in before he went to the group home, and then Rolf remembered Pastor Dover. "Flint, are you still going to the Crux of Christ? And how's old Pastor Dover doing? Still preaching that the world's only 6,000 years old?" Rolf gave Flint a hard time.

"Yeah. Pastor Dover will take us to the Creationist Museum in a few weeks." Flint said, unaware of Rolf's mockery.

"Sorry, I can't talk any longer. I must go peddle books!" Rolf said, then added. "And say high to Dover for me."

"Okay. I will. Goodbye, Rolf."

"Talk to you later, Flint."

Rolf volunteered from 11 am to 3 pm, then walked home, which was all downhill. For this, he was thankful, he thought. Rolf took his time. The Potshot City Park was about halfway between Rolf and Kit's duplex and the Library. Rolf had a seat on a park bench for a moment. It was mid-March and the first week of spring. Rolf sat there momentarily, lost interest, and continued his walk home.

When he arrived home, Kit had set all the furniture outside.

"Kit, how did you get all this furniture outside?" A little frustrated, Rolf insisted that he would have to help her move it back.
“I’m spring cleaning!” Kit said cheerfully.
“I see that, but who helped you get it out here?” Rolf pried.
“Jo,” Kit said.
Jo Sot, an addict and an alcoholic, was Kit's friend from childhood, a willful lush, not to mention her preference for ingesting toxic substances. And this is what troubled Rolf. He didn't prefer to be around alcohol since he had recovered from the habit. Thus, his dislike of Jo was not from spite but rather a form of self-preservation. Rolf tolerated Jo, even after he found her smoking meth in his bedroom with a stranger she had brought over to his and Kit’s place.
Jo asked if they could nap, and Kit got them some fresh sheets and pillowcases. While Jo and the stranger were "resting," which Rolf deduced was because they were coming down off meth… While they were supposedly resting, Kit told Rolf that Jo had asked for some tinfoil, which Rolf knew could only be for smoking “the shit,” as it is called in certain circles. Rolf quickly opened the door and told them they were not to be “smoking dope” in his home. Rolf lacked the assertive skills to ask them to leave and never come back, as he thought he should have. But now he wrestled with what to do in his present situation.
“Jo is coming back in a little while. She had to run to a friend’s house. I’m not sure who, but she said she would be back.” Kit explained.
“Call her and tell her there’s no need to come back over. Tell her I’m home, and I don’t feel like company, and that I’ll help you get the furniture back in the house.” Rolf said
He didn't feel like helping after volunteering at the Library, but it was better than Jo visiting, as he knew Jo was "on the shit" again.
“But she’s going to church with me tonight. It’s Wednesday, you know?” Kit pointed this out. “Well, tell her what I said. I’ll go to church with you if that’s the only reason you have for her coming back over.” Rolf concluded. “But she needs a church.” Kit insisted.
"Okay, but let's go ahead and get this stuff back in the house. Jo might not even show back up. No telling, you know?" Rolf added.
Rolf and Kit worked to move the furniture back into the house but were through before long as they hurried so that Kit could make it to church. But Jo Sot showed back up just in time to take her and Kit to Hallowed Temple, anyhow. Rolf avoided Jo and merely pretended he was watching the news, which he was just watching while he waited to see the weather forecast. Kit left at 6:30 pm. Church at HT began at 7 pm. Rolf, relieved, watched the TV. Or rather, he watched the TV as his thoughts, still on Jo Sot's trespass, were fixated on why Jo, who was more than likely fueled up on speed, was going to church at HT with Kit.
Rolf shook it off and focused on trying to watch the weather. This didn't get his mind off the fact that his wife was traveling in a vehicle that could be pulled over and impounded if they discovered narcotics therein. After coming to this thought, Rolf texted Kit, who didn't reply. Rolf assumed she made it to HT and was in the service with her phone on silent.
Rolf, needing something more distracting, called Flint, who did not answer either. Rolf, realizing Flint was probably at church, went for a walk. Frustrated, Rolf headed back to his and Kit's duplex. While unlocking the door, he heard his home phone ringing, the landline. But he didn't get to it in time. Rolf, irritated, turned on the radio as the Noteworthy classical

music program was coming on. He lay down on the couch and had the music playing loud enough on the radio in the bedroom that he could hear it.
Rolf woke at 10 pm, as the Noteworthy program was going off and the All Night-Classical program was coming on. He immediately went to look for Kit when he discovered she wasn't home. He then called her. Kit didn't answer, though. He texted her: "I know where you are!"
This was his way of saying, "I know you are at the Indian casino!" Rolf took his meds for the night and went to bed. He dRolfed off to sleep when he heard Kit and Jo enter the door.
"I need to use your bathroom to freshen up," Jo told Kit.
"Okay, just be quiet, Rolf is asleep," Kit told her.
"I'm not asleep, and where have you been? You didn't even call me to let me know," Rolf said in a loud voice from their bedroom to Kit.
Rolf got up and entered the kitchen, where Kit fixed herself a sandwich.
"Have you been at the casino?" Rolf asked.
"Yes. I'm sorry, but I lost my phone." Kit told him.
"You lost your phone?!" Rolf said in a raised voice. "Well, now we're going to have to buy another one. And how did you get money to play at the casino?" He asked.
"Jo loaned it to me," Kit told him.
"Loaned it to you?!" Rolf raised his voice even more. "Where's
she at?" Jo Sot came out of the bathroom about that time.
"I am not paying you back for 'loaning' Kit money," Rolf told Jo in as firm of a voice as he could, considering the offense. "You know she has a gambling problem, don't you?" And Rolf went back into the bedroom and shut the door.
"Well, you should probably go," Kit told Jo. "I'm sorry."
"I thought we were going to hang out?" Jo insisted. "Fine, he's awful controlling, though." "He's just upset." Kit defended her husband.
"Alright, I'll see you in a few days. I need to get some rest anyway." Jo said.
Jo Sot left. Kit went to bed on the couch. Rolf, angered, lay awake listening to the radio, unable to fall asleep for a couple more hours. But eventually, he did fall asleep. The last thing he remembered was the radio announcing it was 2 o'clock.
Rolf knew what it was like for things to go south in a friendship. After a disagreement with a couple he and Kit were friends with, they told him that what had happened was just "water under the bridge." But Rolf knew different: the water was still rising, and that bridge was no longer any good to anyone: only an idiot would think of crossing it during this flood.
Rolf woke around 9 am to the sound of knocking at the door. He went to the door and saw Kit asleep on the couch. Rolf opened the door; he already knew who it was. It was Mr. Steward, who was a tall, lanky man. He smoked a pipe, but he would "bum" cigarettes off his daughter Kit whenever he came over. And this bothered Rolf, but not as much as Stew smoking in the house, which he did. When he was angered with him or just feeling facetious, Rolf would call him Steward. This bothered the old man, but he would fall silent and take the joke. In the meantime, Rolf invited Mr. Steward in to have a seat.
"Wake up, Kit, your dad is here." Rolf shook her awake.
"Oh, hi, Dad," Kit told Stew.
"Kitty!" Steward roared. "Get me a cigarette!"

This bothered Rolf, who called her Kitty. He had always considered calling her Kitschy because he would tell her: "What use was it to name you Kitschy if he was just going to call you Kitty? Kit isn't much better." Rolf would say.
“What’s up, Steward?” Rolf made conversation.
“Oh, just getting out of the house for a minute. I thought I’d see what you two were up to.” Mr. Steward said. “Why don’t you make me a cup of coffee, Kitty?”
Things like these remarks, or demands as they were, infuriated Rolf. Again, Rolf lacked the assertive skills to deal with his father-in-law. Instead, Rolf let these transgressions bother him to varying degrees.
“Did you go to church last night?” Rolf asked.
“Nope, I didn’t,” Stew said. “I’m going on Sunday, though.”
Rolf liked to ask Stew questions he already knew the answers to, to ruffle his feathers.
“Well, I’m going to church with Kit at HT this weekend, Sunday," Rolf told Steward. “You should go with us,” Rolf suggested but anticipated his answer to this, too.
"Kitty." Stew began. "Is that preacher now? What's his name…" Stew asked.
"Pastor Sextus," Kit reminded her dad.
“Yeah, that’s right. I remember now. Is Sextus
anointed?” And this was the question Rolf anticipated.
“Of course!” Kit replied. “He’s at Hallowed Temple, isn’t he?”
"Well, I don't know if I like you going there. I know That preacher there before him was anointed because we used to go there, but…" And Stew fell silent. "Why don't you two attend church with me Sunday at Fellowship of God?"
“You mean go to church in the FOG!” Rolf joked.
"Now, don't stew too long over that Stew." Kit joined in, but Stew took it in silence.
“Seriously, why don’t you two come with me?” Stew insisted.
“We’ll think about it,” Rolf replied.
“Or you could just come with us to HT?” Kit offered.
“You know how I feel about Sextus. I don’t know why you’re even asking.” Steward said.
Rolf wasn’t sure what the old man Steward meant by “anointed,” but he couldn’t imagine how Pastor Sextus didn’t meet these fanatical standards that Stew imposed on his preachers. Sextus was as rigid as they came. If it was up to the Sextus, he would still have homosexuals put to death, as it says in Leviticus 20:13. But moving on. Rolf told Stew that he had to get ready to go to "work" at the Library. And Steward said he was leaving. Prepared to go volunteer, Rolf had forgotten all about the previous night. At 10 am, Rolf set out.
Rolf and Kit lived in a duplex. Their neighbor was an old Black woman named Dot. She liked to drink beer and was always on her porch doing so. Dot was 78 years old, and Rolf wondered how she wasn't dead yet from the massive quantities of alcohol she drank daily. After a day of drinking beer, she switched to whiskey for the evening until she passed out drunk. And in the duplex adjoining Dot lived her Son Jay. And just as Dot drank beer all day, Jay drank wine all day. But he didn't switch to whiskey in the evenings, so he said it was as if several bottles of wine a day were any better. And in the adjoining duplex beside Rolf lived a younger man, 21, named Quest. Quest was gay, and by gay, I mean homosexual. Stew, intolerant, referred to him as "Quest the Queer." The week passed by, and Rolf, though dreading a day at church, -despite this Rolf spent his Saturday morning looking at the HT website, reading "What We Believe," a page about what he referred to as the "Hallowed

Temple Indoctrination Page." Rolf read through the list of principles. It reminded him of the principles of AA. The one that, well, all of them, he thought. The idea that one is powerless over alcohol didn't sit quite right with Rolf since he had quit drinking without a "Higher Power."

And when he was last using alcohol, Rolf had once been baptized. He never spoke of it, though. Rolf had been "drinking quite a lot," according to Kit. Though Rolf was not a violent drunk, he would just have laid around watching nature documentaries all the time and never really going out into real nature. Kit thus felt compelled to separate from Rolf. Now, a couple of things happened that Rolf never really mentioned again about this time in their life. One was an incident with Jo Sot. Kit phoned and told Rolf that Jo was coming over and that Kit needed him to "loan" Jo 20 dollars. Rolf reluctantly agreed. Jo came by to pick up the money, asked to freshen up in the bathroom, and stayed there for quite some time. Jo came out, took the money, and left.

This was the end of an incident in which Kit later accused Rolf of sleeping with Jo when she came to pick up the 20 dollars. Rolf, who explained the incident, told Kit that the only thing she didn't know was that he suspected that by "freshen up," Jo meant "Can I use your bathroom to smoke a little shit," and that was all that happened. Besides, Kit was the one who sent her over to pick up the money, to begin with, a fact that irritated Rolf quite a bit.

But the failed baptism, Rolf kept a secret, not to surprise Kit with it later. No. Rolf would conceal this. It began as a noble idea but quickly dissolved. Rolf, wanting Kit back, decided he would get baptized. This was a hasty decision, he later thought. Rolf began attending church at Hallowed Temple the three weeks before Easter.

At Easter, he sat in the very back of the church and sipped on a pint of whiskey. On Easter, HT held a mass baptism, and anyone was welcome to get baptized. Pastor Sextus explained that not only could anyone come down and get baptized, but that he would give them "a new set of duds," as well. By this, he meant a pair of red shorts and a red t-shirt with HT printed on them that "advertised" the church, as Rolf later referred to it. Rolf, knowing this, began sipping often on his whiskey through the service. Not only did he drink the pint, but Rolf also had a "backup," which he began to drink when someone in the congregation noticed Rolf Jackal drunk in the back pew. And told the preacher, who walked to the rear of the church to investigate.

"Whoa!" Sextus said, waving his hand in front of his nose. "It's obvious you have been drinking, son."

And this infuriated Rolf, being called "son." But Rolf kept it together.

"It was just a little wine I found in the back." Rolf lied.

"Son, we don't allow drunkenness in church." Pastor Sextus said. "I want you out of my church, mister." The preacher was furious.

And Rolf just laughed and laughed.

Then, the preacher reconsidered his actions and laid his hand on Rolf's shoulder.

"Lord, this man could use a little extra help." And then the preacher rambled on for a bit.

"You can either get baptized or leave, son."

"I'll get the bath." Rolf agreed to the baptism.

Pastor Sextus led Rolf down to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The preacher "immersed" Rolf in the water.
Rolf at once ran to the back of the stage to a trash can and vomited.
"See, we got the Devil out of him, didn't we?!" Sextus said.
"Amen!" Shouted a lone member, the rest too stunned to speak.
Feeling quite a bit better after vomiting and unaware of the eyes upon him, Rolf got dressed into his HT shorts and t-shirt, put back on the shoes that he had taken off before the baptism, and made his way to the church bus.
Rolf considered this and knew he hadn't returned to HT since his purging baptism. He assumed Pastor Sextus had forgotten about "the incident." And if Sextus remembered, Rolf could always tell him that he had stopped drinking on that day as if it were divine intervention.
Rolf made himself some coffee in his mug from the Library Café. Rolf had switched from alcohol to caffeine. Steward drank coffee, as well. And when Rolf would go over to his father-in-law's, he would always offer him a cup. But the coffee was, often, a thick, viscous nightmare. Black Death coffee is what Rolf termed the shit Steward brewed up. And it got one wired up like on meth if they weren't used to it.
Rolf was done talking and walked back home. He took medicine that took away his nightmares of being murdered, of being dragged down to hell by demons, and of other things that caused a sleep disturbance. He put the radio on All-Night Classical and dRolfed off to sleep.
Rolf dreamed of being hunted down by someone in the forest, the same woods he had wondered about at night as a child. But something was different now: the woods were no longer a sanctum.
Rolf got up and about. He felt rested despite the dream.
Kit wanted a child, and Rolf wouldn't give her one. She would say she wanted something to care for and had taken to feeding a stray dog. Rolf had just discovered this that morning as Kit had brought the dog in to feed him.
"Kit, where did that dog come from?" Rolf asked.
"I've been feeding him outside, and he wanted to come in," Kit told Rolf.
"If you feed it, it will never leave, Kit." He told her.
"I don't want him to leave." She said.
"Well, I don't know, a dog is a lot of responsibility…" Rolf told her, but upon reflection, he said: "Perhaps you can keep it, but you have to take care of it." "Okay!" Kit said happily.
"What should we call him?" "Rascal," Rolf said without much thought.
"Why is that?" Kit asked.
"Out of nostalgia."
Kit and Rolf walked and got Rascal a dog, a leash, and a collar with money Rolf had saved. Rolf could save a little money back for situations like this that came up. He could save this money because he had quit drinking. Otherwise, he and Kit would be in debt to pawn shops and Mr. Steward by this time of the month.
Rolf and Kit went to the pet store. Rolf bought a leash and a collar, returned home, and took Rascal for a walk.
Rascal was a small dog, about 12 lbs. His main feature was along with one brown eye. Rascal had one gray eye. And he was solid brown except for the tip of his tail, which was black. He was light brown, at that. Kit and Rolf took Rascal around the churches. And as they got by

the Methods Church, Rascal defecated on the church lawn. Kit was distraught that Rascal was "defecating on Jesus." Rolf told Kit he would get her some "poop bags" so that she could clean up after Rascal. Kit insisted he does this immediately.
The three of them returned home, and Rolf watched a movie for the rest of the day while Kit studied her Bible. Then they went to bed early, as the two of them were tired from the day's excursion. They had skipped church, and Kit didn't feel like going.
Rolf woke early the following day. It was Monday, and Mr. Steward knocked on the door. Steward, who knocked as if he were the police, was soon admitted into the house by Rolf.
"Hello, Stew," Rolf said.
"Hey, Dad." Kit followed.
"Hey, kids." Stew said, unaware of how much this bothered Rolf, being called "kids" by the old man.
"What's up?" Mr. Steward asked.
"Oh, not much, just getting ready for work at the library," Rolf told Stew.
"Well, who's this little fellow?" Stew asked.
"This is our new son, Rascal," Kit told Stew.
"Oh, I see!" Steward said.
"He takes after his Papa Stew," Rolf told him.
"Well, I saw Quest the Queer sitting on his porch with his new boyfriend. You two need some new neighbors. This black lady next to you is always drunk, and so is her Son!" Stew went on. "I would say invite them to church, but I wonder if they're ever sober long enough to go. And what about that queer, does he drink?"
"Yes. Everybody that lives here drinks except us." Rolf told Stew.
"Why don't you drink anymore, Rolf? It's good you quit those spirits, but you can drink wine if it isn't in excess. The Bible says so." Stew said.
"Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic." Rolf teased him.
"Well?" Stew stated.
"Well, I don't think so either. But I can't have anything, no matter what the Bible says." Rolf concluded.
Mr. Steward hung around a little bit longer but soon left. Rolf got out a book he had discovered at the Library, Atheist Evolution. "Who put this in the library?" Rolf thought. Someone must be an atheist nearby, he thought, but who? It didn't matter. Rolf was alone in his disbelief so far as he was concerned. He began to read again. Rolf read into the evening about scientific atheism. Rolf continued to read into the night, after supper, and after taking out Rascal a final time, which he reminded Kit wasn't his responsibility.
At 4 am on Tuesday, the phone rang. Stew asked Kit to come over and drive him to the hospital. Why Mr. Steward didn't call 911 was beyond Rolf's understanding. When Kit and Rolf got to his apartment, they found Mr. Steward in the driveway: dead at age 66.
"Things change." Rolf thought. Steward was dead. Rolf was free to confess doubt. Rolf knew that it was a "good" thing to backslide.
"Being a backslider is a means to an end in itself," Rolf said. It was a
good thing to return to his atheist self, to have back his Godless identity.

The Old Devil

Rolf Jackal was a bit older now. Rolf was old enough to be considered middle-aged, which Trikipedia listed as between 45 and 65 years of age; however, several other online sources suggested that it was between 40 and 60 years of age. Regardless, Rolf was in an older circle at age 45. A lot has happened since our earlier chronicle. Grandma Allwell will turn 100 in two weeks, just before Rolf turns 46. Jo Sot had not been back around since Rolf had a "lapse," and Rolf told Jo she needed to get off meth even if she had to turn to alcohol…. Jo took offense to it and said alcohol was just as bad as "the shit.". Rolf later realized this was probably true. Also, during Rolf's drunken "lapse," Rolf went to
Kit's "rededication" baptism was drunk, after which Kit took off to her mother's. And even their dog Rascal was gone. Rolf and Kit gave him up for adoption because he was nearly killed by a Pitbull that climbed over its fence to attack Rascal. But Rolf scooped him up in his arms, and the Pitbull ran back and over the fence again. To sober up and get Kit back, Rolf decided to go to Hope House, Inc. It was a drug and alcohol rehab.
And off Rolf went to the Hope House, which he heard the patients referred to as the Dope House rather than call it the Hope House. Rolf was assigned to clean the toilets every morning during his stay. Rolf thought this to be ridiculous, to have to work while in rehab. Sure, it might teach some poor souls the value of a work ethic, but this was just an excuse by the Dope House to justify forced labor because most of the residents were court-ordered and didn't have a choice but to clean. But everything was going as expected, and Rolf assimilated as best possible to institutional life at the drug and alcohol rehab.
Another thing he was expected to do but not officially required to do was to attend AA meetings. But Rolf refused to do AA. The reason was that Rolf was an anti-theist, and he had realized it. He was not just an atheist but in a rebellion against God.
Rolf did well. It was like group therapy, just all day, every day. Except that at group therapy, he wouldn't have had a "mental breakdown" as he did at the Dope House. It was on his seventh day and involved a man known as Diablo. That is why Rolf Jackal says he "played a chess match with the Old Devil."
Diablo arrived on the 6th day of treatment. On the 7th day, the two men, Rolf and Diablo, sat down to play a best-out-of-three chess match, a mini-match that would be a set of "street chess" games, according to Diablo. Rolf didn't mind, and it reminded him of Skitz chess, which was almost what Diablo had meant by "street chess," as it was actually "prison chess." Either way, Rolf won the first game. Diablo won the second game. The 3rd game was a draw, so a fourth ensued, and now, the mini-match is being decided. Rolf wanted to play the 4th and final game the next day after they had rested, but Diablo, taking advantage of Rolf's tired condition, insisted they play it at once.
At that point, Rolf had lost his passion for the mini-match but trudged on, only to resign after a few moves into the game. Diablo at once raised two arms in the air and said over and over: "I'm the champ. I'm the champ." Rolf was angered, but he could do nothing; he had let someone win at chess, something he never did. And this was why, he thought.

Rolf went to his room, lay in Bed #2, his assigned bed, and passed out as soon as his head hit the pillow. Rolf awakened around 5, around 5 am. But his, Rolf awakened, and bunkmates were not to be found. Instead, just two, there were empty beds. Rolf went and asked the worker where they had gone, and the worker said they had to be moved but didn't say why.

Rolf tracked down the guy in Bed #1 and asked him what had happened. The guy in Bed #1 said Rolf had threatened the guy in Bed #3, that Rolf had told him: "You probably won't make it to morning." Rolf defended himself and said that he had told them he had horrible dreams of murder and being murdered and that he must have been dreaming. But no one believed him, and Rolf felt he was ostracized.

So, after the eighth day, he left the Dope House, aka the Hope House, Inc., which was run like a jail instead of rehab. And life went on... Grandma Allwell turned 100, and Rolf read a verse from the Bible even in celebration of her long life. Rolf got his apartment at the Lodge. It was a rundown place but a new start. Kit still came to see him. And only a few days later, Rolf turned 46.

The Good Book

Rolf Jackal and Flint Harrow would have crossed paths before. And now, a backstory about them. In the end, Flint Harrow would do whatever it took to become included in the conversation of Gossip: he changed his political party for the church he joined. And in doing so, Flint lost most of his identity. At least he was no longer the Flint Rolf knew from childhood.

Flint and Rolf grew up in the Gossip Community, just a fraction of the small town of Backwards, Amerika. Some say it is God's country. Rolf would say it's just another shithole town in the South. And when Rolf was only 18 years old, Flint moved in with him for a moment.

It didn't go well.

The foremost annoyance with having Flint live with him was Flint's habit of crumpling up paper towels as he paced around the house. They lived in a four-bedroom brick home that had belonged to Granny Jackal. Flint had inconsiderate habits, accusing Rolf of being possessed by the Devil.

One evening, Flint said to Rolf:

"You are living in sin; the Devil has gotten a hold of you! Out of you, demons!" He shouted. "Out, you Old Devil!" He continued.

Rolf suffered the abuse as he sat and drank a few beers. But after a few more drinks, a few shots of whiskey, and then a whole empty fifth of it, Rolf was ready to put up a fight.

"You say I'm the Devil? Well, I say your fat ass can't do even one pull-up!?" Rolf said. "I'd have some actual respect for you if you could do that." Rolf mocked Flint's inherent portly figure, something Flint didn't have actual control over, as Rolf assumed. But neither did Rolf have control over his alleged sin: Rolf's "drinking problem."

Flint did not disappoint. Instead, he impressed Rolf in that he did try with all he had to do a pullup… But gravity was against him: Flint was too obese to do even one pull-up. And so he lashed out at Rolf again. This time, Rolf threw my empty whiskey bottle at Flint, but Flint managed to duck under the dining table where he and his friends played poker. The bottle didn't even shatter as Rolf thought it would. Enraged, Rolf grabbed Flint's copy of the Bible and, as Flint tried to crawl out
from under the table, Rolf walloped Flint with the Good
Book… Rolf did it to knock some sense into Flint.

"Thud." The Bible went as it impacted the flesh of Flint's backside.

Some friends calmed Rolf down, and later, on Sunday morning, Rolf told Flint that he had to move out. Rolf took Flint to his father's house and dropped him off.

A few years later, Rolf went to college at the urging of his Granny Jackal. At one of the colleges he attended—and Rolf had attended several—Rolf ran into Flint. They talked a couple of times, and Rolf could tell Flint had changed and become more liberal with ideas from the influence of college life. Several more years later, after Rolf failed to complete college, he found himself back in Gossip. This time, Rolf was homeless: He lived in an old, abandoned house with "tweakers." Rolf had nothing against tweakers, but he didn't want to be one, either… not anymore.

Anyhow, Rolf was living with a tweaker couple. Flint said Rolf didn't need to do that and that he needed to come and stay with Rolf Jackal. It didn't last but a month. But it was how Flint

Harrow had forgotten Rolf's transgression and forgiven it. This let Rolf know Flint was a good guy. However, after being kicked out of Harrow's house by his landlord, Rolf lived at a group home called The Nook in Plateau. Flint had mentioned it to Rolf and told Rolf how much Flint had loved living there, where Flint received a Fixed Income that he and Rolf would from then on live their "crushed in spirit" life upon. "Crushed in spirit," as the Bible refers to having a mental illness.

Rolf did not like the Nook; it was a hellhole to him, but Rolf stayed in one for four years. Upon leaving, Rolf contacted Flint again, but he had reverted to his conservative roots: Flint attended Crux of Christ, a church where Pastor Dover taught Flint the world's evils and reformed or regressed him. The important thing is that Flint Harrow helped Rolf Jackal out of the goodness of Flint's own heart, not because the Good Book told him to, but who knows?

The Tower (will fall)

Rip had left Grace behind in Fester to travel back to his hometown in Fort Façade. The path out of Fester was long and winding, but it became straight and narrow as Rip approached a crossing, a fork in the path: "Left or Right?" He thought. "What's the difference?"
And he went the other way regarding his inclination. Rip didn't trust intuition; it was like faith, and what was that but reasoning with chaos, choosing between three extremes: left, a path to utter destruction; right, a trail to damnation; and dead center, a road to certain death….
"There is only one Fort Façade," Rip would say to Grace.
This is true everywhere, but it is especially true for Fort Façade. In Fort Façade, Rip would act as a political auditor for the Tower. Rip traveled for a month afoot to the Tower, which he approached now and saw only a single buzzard circling it. Rip could see the flag of the Tower flying half-mast in honor of a dead soldier killed somewhere, somehow, for some reason. It was more like mid-winter than the first day of Spring.
The Tower was not much, though. It was several stories tall, while the surrounding buildings were almost all single stories tall, apart from a few two-story buildings that were apartments and public housing for the thousands of poverty-stricken residents living under its shadow. The Tower was a cloister of the political and religious, both zealots and bigots alike. It housed President Crow and Pastor Godman, the Vice President.
Rip was to meet up with his old friend Elder, who said Rip could stay in his cabin, which didn't have running water or electricity, nor did it have a bed. This didn't deter Rip, who slept on a bedroll to begin with where he was from in Fester.
Rip got nearer to the Tower and crossed the peripheral border of the city limits of Fort Façade. He decided he would go ahead and stop in the office of President Crow. Rip made it to a gate on the road that led up the hill to the Tower, where he met Noggin, the single guard of the Tower. Rip knew Nog from childhood and was not surprised to see that Nog was a supporter of the controversial figure Crow. Nog had a long beard that looked as if it had gone unkempt for a decade. And it had been this long since Rip had seen Nog or Fort Façade. But Nog greeted Rip with friendly warmth and told him he would have to return later and make an appointment. Rip asked why a person couldn't make an appointment now. Nog simply refused him and said he had been fishing lately as if to ignore the request entirely. Rip was tired from his journey and said he would return later.
"Nog was just being an idiot." Rip thought.
Rip made his way through Fort Façade. He passed the Buffalo Saloon and saw Elder coming out of it. Elder was half drunk but was glad to see Rip. "What the hell are you doing here, Rip!?" Elder asked.
"I told you in a letter I was coming; you said I could stay in your old cabin atop the hill." "Well, let's get going, it's getting dark," Elder said.
"Let me buy a paper to see what's going on. I might just read something about old Crow." Rip said. Rip bought a paper from a newspaper stand and read one of the headlines: "Crow to put prayer back in schools."
This caught Rip's attention because, as a political auditor, he was sent to investigate this type of thing in Amerika. But the Tower assumed it had special privileges over ordinary

politicians; its egoism knew no limits. Rip looked for him to cease trying to have prayer put back in schools or removed from office.
Crow was making it legal the next day for each resident to open-carry a sidearm or a gun in Fort Façade, and Rip thought this would align with the Constitution. The Open-Carry Law went into effect the day after Easter. But the prayer or Crow had to go. The Separation of Church and State was critical for a Political Auditor.
Rip and Elder walked to the edge of the city of Fort Façade. They stopped by their friend's house, a recluse named Lucky. He was a loner but kept in touch with Rip by mail. Rip knocked on the door to his cabin, which was close to the one Elder owned. Lucky came to the door, off-the-grid as he was but still a loyal friend.
The three hung out and drank some beer Lucky had made home. Then Lucky gave Rip an Equalizer, a .45 caliber revolver pistol. It was a gift. A grand gift. He had been wanting a gun again after not having one for several years. Lucky had secretly won a lottery a year ago, a damn fortune. And Lucky wanted to share his wealth with his friends at that time only.
"He got me one, too!" Elder told Rip.
"Well, that was nice of him. I hope we can reciprocate the gift someday." Rip said. "Ammo as well, what a gift!"
Rip, Elder, and Lucky went and shot off several rounds of ammunition at targets Lucky had in the back of his cabin. The target was steel pig silhouettes that Rip had made when he was a child and given to Lucky. The three were brothers in spirit. Nog was like a stepchild of another family, a fourth peg trying to fit a three-hole block, and there just wasn't room. Elder had deduced with his irritable disposition that Nog would show up, snooping around like a dog.
"What the hell are you doing here, Nog?" Elder demanded.
"Thought I'd come to say hello to my old buddy Rip, seeing how he's back in the Façade." Nog paused. "Wonder what old Rip is up to, anyhow. Have you heard you were auditing Crow?" Nog pried.
"Yeah, what's it to yeah, Nog? You're still sucking up to Old Crow?" This was what Rip called the President.
"Old Crow is right!" Lucky added.
"Y'all don't gang up on Crow, now." Elder put in his thoughts. "He did get us where we'd be able to carry a gun on us again, didn't he?"
"Well, hell, every one of you fellas voted for him, but I aim to stop him from putting prayer back in schools, is all," Rip said.
"What you got against prayer, Rip?" Elder asked.
"I ain't got nothing against it; it just goes against the Constitution and what the founding fathers wanted in Amerika. The Tower is for the Devil, anyhow. What y'all care if I bring it down? It will fall eventually; all towers do. If you're looking for God or good juju, don't look to the Tower. The only thing up there's a greedy and corrupt Old Crow! Satan will eat his soul and shit out gold," Rip laughed. "I'm a Political Auditor, that's all."
"Auditing is a crusade of the Far Left, ain't it?" Nog insinuated.
"That's what they say." Rip agreed.
All four of the fellas were from Fort Façade, but Rip wanted out and swore he would never return except to be burned and buried, perhaps. Then, Rip decided to audit the Tower over

prayer being made legal in Fort Façade schools. A political auditor was an elected official everyone wanted to be but hated.
Therefore, Rip returned to reckon with the religious Evangelical Ministry that put Crow into the presidency. Putting spirituality into the institution of Education was intellectual blasphemy, and it was unconstitutional. This was the consensus of the Left, anyhow. Rip's position stood in the Center.

Rip left Lucky's place and headed to the top of the World's tallest hill, Catapult, as it was named. The old rustic cabin was the only dwelling at the top of Catapult Hill. There was even an old woodshed in the back as if to rub in an old sore for Rip. Tales of children being whipped in the name of God crossed his mind as he looked at it from the back porch of the cabin. The cabin wasn't much, just one room, with an outhouse for eliminating. Four blackjack oaks were in the backyard, one for each of the comrades. And there was a Southern live oak hovering over the four. Rip called it the Reaper. It was thought to be 400 years old, older than the nation and the Tower, and as old as the Christ Caucus that plagued the land from the old Southern Live Oak's birth. And it was said the tree would outlive Amerika, maybe it will.
The Evangelical Ministry is the tail end of the Christ Caucus. It believed the founding fathers were Christians, but they were Deists. Rip was aware of this and worked against it as a political auditor, a position invented to balance the two rival political parties of the Left and Right. Rip considered himself neither a "Far Left" nor a "Far Right," as the Liberal and Conservative parties were called. He considered himself Dead Center. He said this once when asked if he favored the Left or the Right politically, and he said: "I'm not of the Left or the Right. I'm the center. I'm an auditor." And then added, "But if I had to choose, I'd say I'm a Liberal-Conservative, which is both, yet neither." Rip made him a bed with his bedroll beside a potbelly stove he'd lit a fire. And he drifted off to sleep, without dreams or troubles, for now.
Rip woke to Elder beating on the door.
"Rip, you fucker, wake up! Nog went and shot Lucky last night!"
Rip woke up confused about why Nog would kill Lucky but could easily imagine.
"What the hell's he done that for, you think?" Rip asked Elder.
"Not sure… but it had something to do with Lucky buying us that set of Equalizers. Nog figured Lucky owed him one, too… Lucky figured otherwise, I think." Elder said.
"What are the police going to do with Nog?" Rip asked.
"Well, they got him detained, but the word is they're not gonna do shit 'cause that damn Old Crow will just pardon him," Elder said, shaking his head in disgust. "But that's what I'm going to find out, for certain, before I do anything." "Before you do what?" Rip asked.
"Before I do what needs to be done, you know, that fucking Nog done snooped around the wrong backyard this time."
"But I thought y'all got along, except for that incident with the pig hunt, that time… hell, I was the one who shot the damn thing, anyhow." Rip continued. "Now I know he called you "cheapskate" cause you wouldn't help us pay off Rustic, but I paid your part, and another thing is Nog's just a damn liar; it wasn't his cousin's land we went huntin' on anyhow, it belonged to Rustic.

Now Nog's just a damn monkey, you know, got the brain of a jackalope, hollow and stuffed with all kinds of nonsense!" Rip laughed.
But Elder wasn't laughing. The two loaded their pistols on this first day of Open-Carry Law, as it was called in Fort Facade and all over Amerika. The two made their way down Catapult Hill into Fort Façade. Elder went to the Buffalo Saloon, and Rip headed for the Tower. Nog was there. He had been released and held up a document as Rip approached the Tower's security shed.
"Got me a pardon!" Nog laughed.
"What the hell you go and shoot Lucky for, Nog?" Rip asked. "And how'd you get pardoned already and unless you were guilty fucker?"

"Cheapskate didn't get me an Equalizer! And you know he won the Lottery?! I helped that asshole out when I worked at Stickman Lumber and Timber, Co and made good money. Still, now that I'm trying to make it as a security guard, he won't even loan me the money to get an Equalizer, and I need it in this line of work, so we had words, and I dusted him with his own Equalizer! Just saw it there and, on impulse, shot his ass; now where equal! He wasn't too Lucky, now, was he?" Nog laughed at his stupid puns.
"Well, you might want to avoid Elder, he's pissed," Rip told Nog.
"Fuck him!" Nog shouted, "I thought he'd be on my side of this; I guess he's still sore about me making him pay for that pig?" "Guess so," Rip said.
"I got some Vitamin THC, maybe that'll change his mind about me," Nog revealed.
"I need to some smoke clear my head," Rip said.
Rip and Nog smoked the medicinal herb and conversed about the situation. Then, out of nowhere, Elder walked up smelling of whiskey.
"Die, you fuckin' monkey!" Elder shouted.
Elder had already drawn his Equalizer out of its holster and shot Nog right in the head, "between the eyes," as they say. Nog dropped like a rock, and his left leg twitched a couple of times.
And that was all of Nog.
"What the fuck, Elder!?" Rip asked loudly, as both their ears were ringing from the loud blast of the Equalizer.
"Son-of-bitch got what was coming to him, fuck him, almost got me killed over a stupid pig and then shot old Lucky out of spite," Elder said.
"I aim to use my powers as an auditor to see they don't get you for this, Elder," Rip told him.
"I ain't going to prison, Rip. I plan to go down fighting!" Elder said, drunk and unrelenting.
"No one knows 'sides us that you got that cabin. You head on up there and let me handle this." Rip said.
Elder stumbled off, and Rip looked at Nog and then looked up. One of Nog's kin, who was also a guard, came up. He was named Rot, and he seemed unmoved by the situation. Rot asked who had shot Nog.
"Just some monkey with a gun," Rip said.
Rot called the Tower and told them what had happened. He spoke with Pastor Godman. And it was Godman who told Rot that someone must pay for this "iniquity." Rip wasn't sure why Godman would suggest this was "iniquity," except that he must have known something

about the pig incident. Rip asked to speak to Pastor Godman, but Rot told him: “Pastor Godman is in prayer for the deceased, and he cannot be troubled.”
"Troubled" is the word Godman used for Rip, the auditor who looked to bother Godman's and Crow's plans to reinstate prayer in schools to gain the vote of the Evangelical Ministry and its followers. Rip was a public servant, just as Godman and Crow were. Even if Godman and Crow were stewards of the Right's Christ Caucus that looked to "rise again," as it was said in small circles. Rip was for the Constitution, not the Caucus, but now he fought for Lucky and Elder. Rip gave his testimony that it was "just some monkey with a gun" as a public record that day; whether the World went to shit was to be found out.

Rip made his way out of the city of Fort Façade and up Catapult Hill and found Elder dead under the stand of oaks behind the cabin. Rip did not waste any time and went into the cabin and smoked some more of the cannabis he had lifted off Nog's dead carcass. Rip checked his firearm, ensured it was loaded, and had backup "ready-loads." He walked back down Catapult Hill and into the Buffalo Saloon, where he spoke to Grace on the pay phone. Rip told her what was happening in Fort Façade and asked her not to come there as planned. Rip got off the phone and went and found Rot.
“Payback’s a motherfucker, ain’t it?!” Rip said to Rot and shot him in the gut.
Rip had thought this out. He decided that if the Evangelical Ministry prescribed "it is better to maim than to kill," then there was nothing wrong with what he had done. The police arrested Rip and locked him in a cell at the base of the Tower at the request of Pastor Godman and President Crow. It was told to Rip that Crow had to "pray about" what would be done with him. Which was strange, Rip thought, since that would, or should be left to a jury to decide.
Rip was given a public defender at his request. The lawyer's name was Mr. Lax, a former instructor of Rip's at college who taught Debate. It was known that Rip had told Lax to "Fuck off" once when Mr. Lax had told Rip his speech was "stupid." Mr. Lax told Rip that this incident would not affect his defense when he came and assessed his case. Rip said nothing. Rip was asked if he had anything to say to his interrogators and said thus: "Look, you monkeys, I didn't kill Rot; he died at the hospital." Rip insisted on the persona of a criminal mentality.
And that was all he said. The press said what he said didn't amount to much but poetic nonsense, for it was self-evident that he would die and was sentenced to death. On the other hand, Rip would not resign as auditor and demanded to see the survey that Crow and Godman used to get prayer put back in schools. The Praying Youth survey was attached to the Open Carry survey; to kill one, Rip would have to kill both surveys. It was odd that no one thought to listen to Rip when he said that the people could just make a new survey that separated the two.
Rip was given a Death Clock by the Judge, which counted down the exact time of Rip's execution.
But Rip would still have time to voice his findings in his "Iniquity?" audit just to make a point. People started to ask why it was called "Iniquity?" with a question mark, too. But Rip sat in his cell in silence. He no longer spoke. Doctors were ordered to examine him, but he seemed well. They said, "He's just acting like a man who got caught with his hand in the fire." Whatever that meant. It was thought it meant that Rip would have to say something

eventually, if not out of guilt but because he would be "put to sleep," as the euphemism went for capital punishment nowadays in Fort Façade and Amerika in general.
Rip tried to get Crow to come and speak to him but was unsuccessful. It was said that Rip would talk again if Crow would only go and speak to him. Though this would never happen, and Rip knew it, the best thing happened though: Godman came and talked to Rip.
"I guess your iniquity knew no end." Godman began. "Well, I knew this all along. You can't be an atheist and have morals; in a way, it's not your fault you killed poor Rot and murdered him as you did. You never planned to maim him… I know. You merely wanted him to suffer more. But you'll die soon... "Eye for eye, tooth for a tooth.' I will see that you are disemboweled for what you did to poor Rot."
"Why don't you just crucify me, and then I can be like Christ!" Rip said and then began to strangle Godman, who turned out to be more challenging than Rip thought. The two wrestled around for a minute, and the Tower watchman restrained Rip, who bit Godman's ear, while at the same time, Rip tried to gauge one of Godman's eyes. But Pastor Godman came out of the altercation unscathed. Rip simply laughed and laughed.

Putting a nail in the coffin, Rip had succeeded in setting in motion the Antix survey, which made it "illegal" to hold prayer in public schools. But Pastor Godman was putting forth another study to amend the prayer-in-school survey: a survey for "one Christian nation, under God…" to be added to the pledge of allegiance.
But Rip was not disemboweled; instead, he was asleep like a dog…. This was done by lethal injection, which is considered "humane." Is there a humane way to send someone to an early death? I think Rip would say this is the most stupid fiction. Rip was buried as a free man under the Reaper, that massive Southern live oak there with its four friends, those dense blackjack oaks that stood for the four friends in real life. And Rot was incinerated… cremated by the local government, who had Nog's kin Rot's ashes spread in an unknown location.

Underground

Rip went to the Gate. It was on a path to the Lake. The water itself was a gateway to the Netherworld. Rip was going there to rescue a friend who had been sent there by God. Rip wandered around for years and finally heard about the Gate from Mr. Slither. Rip met Mr. Slither on a path above the Lake one morning, and he told Rip about the Gate, where one paid a fee, and the ferryman took them across the mystical Lake. And Rip said farewell to Mr. Slither and went to the Gate, which he had known about all along: It was just a dock with a rope strung out across the water into the fog. Rip approached the dock that went nowhere in particular… and the Gatekeeper appeared out of the fog. He introduced himself as Ward. He told Rip he could pass if he had a key to the Underworld.

"Very well," Rip said. "I have a key."

"Well, you'd be the first since I started working here on the dock," Ward said.

"I am that I am not," Rip told the keeper.

"Where to, sir?" Ward asked.

"I need to go Underground… I have a friend I need to fetch from God," Rip said.

"Okay, let's go," Ward said.

And the two souls went out and vanished into the fog and never returned.

Pig Hunt

Rip was middle-aged and in his mid-forties when the calamity above occurred. But not too long ago, when they were in their late twenties, the friends I've mentioned above, and again here, Elder, Nog, and Rip went on a hunt one day at the Bottoms of the Omen River. It was later to become known as the Pig Hunt. The hunt was like most hunts to begin our story. The subject matter is hunting for those who are sensitive to the slaughter, butcher, and consumption of wildlife, and in this case, feral pigs. The three friends met at Lucky's place, but Lucky was not there; it was just his dad, the Captain, who everyone called him. I'm not sure what his actual name was or if he still had one, but everyone knew him then and now as the Captain.

Anyhow, Rip, Nog, and Elder met, and at the persuasion of Nog, the three went to the Bottoms to hunt pigs. Nog told the other two friends, Rip and Elder, that the place they were going to hunt was his kinfolk's land and that he had permission. The three got to the location in the Bottoms, just off the Omen River, which could be heard and even seen in the distance. The three of them drove there in Nog's pickup truck, and as soon as they made their way out into the open field of Nog's cousin's land, Elder, who was sitting shotgun, let Rip out the passenger's side… as soon as Rip got out, a herd of pigs came wandering across the field, and Rip, half-blind, shot and wounded one of them. Elder went after the central part of the herd of pigs and planned to cast devils into them and drown them in a sea of gunfire, much like Jesus of the Bible, only without Grace or mercy. Elder disappeared into the Bottoms, and Nog led Rip after the wounded pig, following the blood trail as Rip had gut-shot the animal. Nog and Rip made it away from the Omen River and found the pig. Nog finished it off by cutting its throat as it lay there dying in the brush. It had been shot twice in the guts, and one bullet of the semi-automatic gun, an AK-47 rifle… one bullet had struck high in the middle region and crippled the beast. It had made it as far as it had on adrenaline, the natural stimulant.

Rip realized, though, that they had wandered through a barbed-wire fence and were standing on the opposite side of the Omen River. Elder came walking up; Rip thought anyhow and said this was private land, at which point Rip realized the man was Rustic Stickman, a man whose brother, Hick Stickman, owned land in that area. Rustic told Nog to kindly gut the sow, which it was, to see if she was pregnant. At this point, Rip, fearing for his life, told Nog: "You lied to me." And Nog said nothing because he had.

Nog gutted the pig, and indeed, it was carrying unborn piglets. Nog, more clever than wise, told Rustic that he would pay his brother, Hick, for the pig. Nog and Rip dragged the pig back to the truck and loaded it. Fortunately, Elder was there waiting and could not track down any more of the pigs because that would have just escalated the matter. Nog slung the pig into the pickup truck and shut the tailgate, and the silent three of them made their way out of the field, and the Bottoms, when they came upon Hick, who blocked the road with his pickup truck, got out and flashed a revolver, probably a .380, at them. Nog wasn't intimidated; he knew Hick, and neither was Elder intimidated. Rip began to shut down, thinking all three would be shot over a stupid pig... or rather a white lie: a near-fatal "Nogism" that Nog had told Rip and Elder to go with him.

Either way, they were in a dangerous situation, and Rip shut down from fear. Rip had given Elder his AK-47 rifle to defend them when they first left the open field. Elder had a .44 revolver, also. The situation escalated quickly, though, when Nog took out his wallet and paid

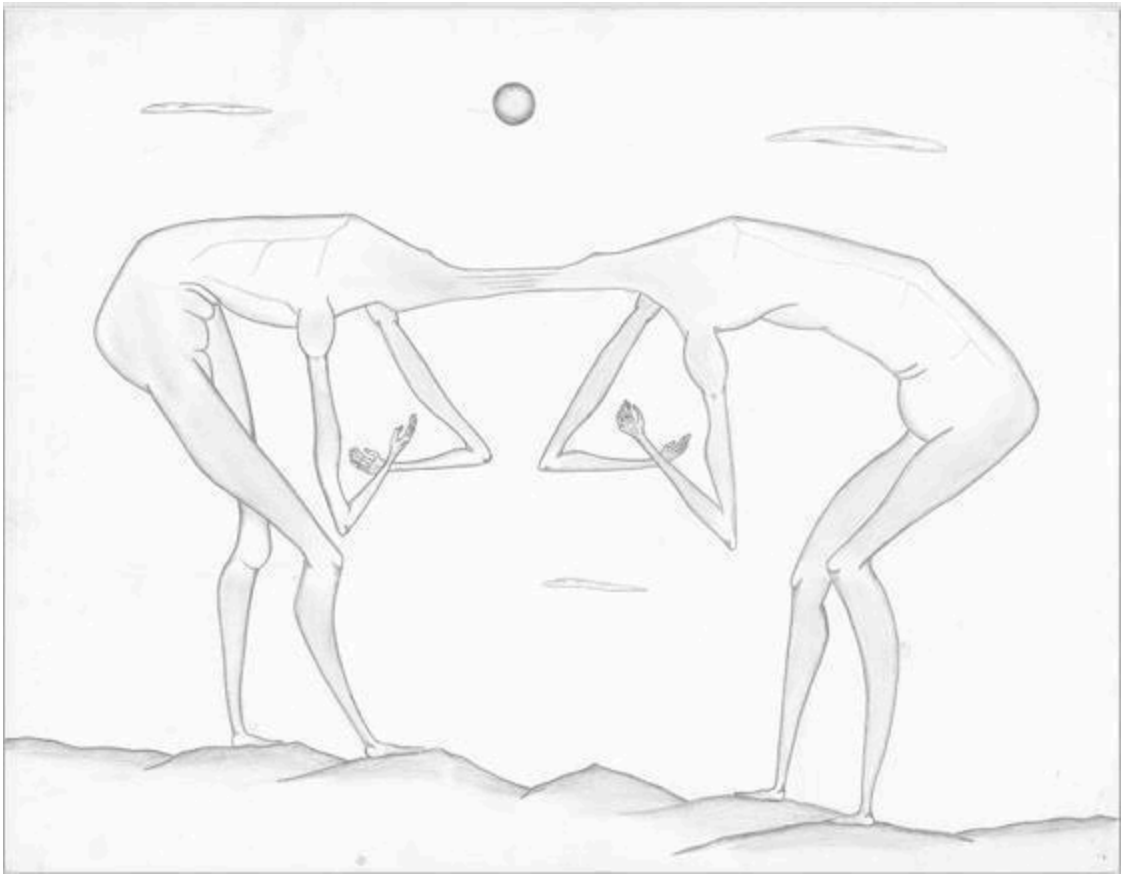
Rustic the $60 he had in his wallet. Fortunately, Hick told them to stay away from his land and pigs and made threats and other antics to instill fear in the young men. But that was all for the show, as Hick knew he didn't stand a chance against Elder and Nog and Rip combined. But they were in the wrong.

Rip, Elder, and Nog rode silently in Nog's truck back to Lucky's place. When the three got there, Nog tried to get Elder to pay his share of killing the pig, which was a mistake and wrong, for that matter, because it wasn't fair that Elder had to pay for a pig that he didn't kill. Elder responded with some cross words, and he told Nog to go to Hell, and he said:
"I don't owe you shit!" And Elder walked into Lucky's house to cool his temper down. On the other side of the coin, Rip told Nog he would pay his and Elder's share, but only because he shot the pig.
And Rip paid Nog $40.
And that's the story of a Pig Hunt that would alter the course of the circle of friends.

A History of the Pig

The City of Fort Façade has been the subject of gossip in the South here in Amerika, but the Tower was built here in the past and still stands today, as Rip expressed in his lamentation of doubt that the Tower will fall. But the Tower was built due to the government in Amerika first taking, then grating, then taking back, again, land from the Indigenous peoples here in this part of the World.

Regardless, through all of that, there was another creature here: the pig. The infamous feral pig of Fort Façade was not always feral. Still, it came from the domesticated pigs brought to early Amerika as food sources, which escaped captivity. Now, after hundreds plus years of emancipation, Rip and company have sworn to exterminate the pig for rooting enough land up to destroy almost every other wild creature's habitat in Fort Façade. Thus goes the wayward pig, rooting for years until being hunted down and killed for being a nuisance. Much the same was Rip hunted down and killed by the State. And this concludes our story, and even as Towers have fallen in the past, so too will they continue to be erected, but only to fail and fall.



Autumn Dance (a struggle)

Elsewhere

Once upon a time, there was a young man named Jack Slacker. He lived in the country and walked to the town of Elsewhere one day to the Farmer's Market downtown on the banks of the Lazy River. Jack went from booth to booth, looking for something he could afford. As it was fall, he looked at the turnips and a few other seasonal vegetables. But Jack wasn't interested in spending all he had on turnips. Jack came to a booth run by a man named Mr. Rabble. The man offered Jack some Juju beans. He told Jack they were magic beans that he could grow a money tree and, in doing so, become filthy rich. Jack was excited and hurried home to tell his wife, Jilt or Jil' Slacker. Irritated by Jack's gullible nature, Jil' told him he was swindled. "Just throw those stupid beans in the ditch," Jil' told him.

Jack did so as he returned to the Farmer's Market, where he knew he had found a winner, which he also got from Mr. Rabble. It was a bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir, which was "known to cure all ills and ailments, more or less." Mr. Rabble told him.

"And it most certainly helps with sleep." Mr. Rabble told him. "And it is only a dollar."

Jack bought a bottle. He was so excited he drank the whole bottle on the way home. Intoxicated, he looked for the Juju beans in the ditch but fell into a deep sleep.

There had been Viral-X that had plagued the land. It was known as and called a virus, but it was a plague of old, a pestilence of Biblical days. This was happening worldwide, and in Elsewhere, Amerika, where Jack Slacker now slept, a presidential election was approaching. The contest was between the current President Rump and his rival, former Vice-President Schmoe. Rump was not favored to win in the polls and was feeling a bit facetious, so he took to Chatterbox and posted that he was going out to play a round of golf. He was feeling better, knowing that when he was first elected, he was also losing in the polls. Rump was riding in his golf cart, and he told the caddy to "step on it" as he hurried back to the Office. But as Rump rode back to the clubhouse, he and his caddy rounded the corner of a retaining Wall and flipped. Rump was sent flying, crashed, and ended up in an entire body cast. Rump, upon waking from the crash at the hospital, was told it took all the doctors to put him in the cast, in which he would have to remain indefinitely… "a useless soul, a cripple." That's how he thought of himself now.

Most voters had heard about Rump and the wall and knew that he could not be resurrected. Concerning his re-election and his term in Office, it was now time to end it….

Schmoe was ahead by a margin enough for victory on election day and several days following election day. A group of resistors and radicals stormed into where former Vice-President Schmoe was about to give his victory speech and tried to behead him with a crudely fashioned guillotine. Insurrection ensued. President Rump took to Chatterbox, a social media site he was famous for using as a mouthpiece for his agendas while in Office…

Rump took to Chatterbox and posted a Chat that he would humbly accept a continued stay in Office due to the new status quo, the "new normal."

At about this time, Jack Slacker awakened from his sleep. As I mentioned, the election had gone on for several days unexpectedly. Jack had missed the bulk of the fiasco. But Jack Slacker was caught up to date by his wife, Jil, as usual. Jack went home and stayed there, where he felt safe from the insurrection.

President Rump, who had a great fall off his golf cart, had been reinstated to the Office but put in a body cast for the rest of his life, where he now reigns as "Boss" online from a secret

location on the website Chatterbox. Jack Slacker also woke to find out Evangelical Witness Extremists had taken to forming protests for Stand by Rump. And I don't know if they thought that formula through. Regardless, if Rump had been allowed to stay in the Office, it would have been thanks to nepotism. Rump called for the military to arrest Schmoe, who the military stated couldn't be arrested because he was such an average fellow that he would just blend right into the melting pot of our government (and because the Constitution didn't allow for it).

And Jack Slacker, thinking he was unlucky to have missed much of the shenanigans, decided it best not to buy any more of the elixir. He went back to find the Juju beans that he had tossed in the ditch. When he got there, he saw a giant bamboo pole. He began to climb it, and at the top, there was no cash or gold.

There was a tiny booth like the ones at the Farmer's Market below, with a sign that said: "an 'End-ItAll' Vaccine." Jack had once considered taking a dose of End-It-All to amuse himself at Jil's expense… but who knew that Jack was stricken with borderline intellectual functioning? End-It-All was a euthanasia drug brought into the world by the evil and merciless medical corporation known as Merciful Medications, Inc., which was an Evangelical Witness group, no doubt.

Jack Slacker woke from his apocalyptic dream. It was election day early morning, just before the polls were to open. Jack Slacker reached in his pocket, but no vaccine... and then he thought:

"I better go to the Farmer's Market and see if Mr. Rabble has something more potent."

Flatlands

Jack Slacker was an agnostic. And he observed many things in his rejection of the world:
"The need for iniquity…"
Iniquity, it is the way of the wayward world. A homeless person on the streets needed it. The Evangelical Witness who sought to rescue the homeless person on the street needed it. Jack Slacker needed it. I need it. You need it. Iniquity: what is done, and what is done again, and done again.
Jack Slacker, the hero of our story, was told he suffered from a disorder called "spiritual confusion." Page Neighbors, an Evangelical Witness, offered to help Jack even though the Religious don't believe in disorders. A friend of Jack's was his cousin, Grace Cousins. She, too, was religious, but not so judgmental, at least to begin with in their relationship. But she was his kinfolk. And things can go shit South to Hell even with kinfolk, I suppose. The one thing Jack had learned for certain about the Religious is that they will take advantage of you when you are at your weakest, and with charity. And by other shameful means that instill a good sense of guilt in their victim. The Holy Bible itself does this by teaching the great sin of Iniquity: to sin, and sin again, and again, and again. As if humankind hasn't got enough struggles with existence, on top of thinking it is cursed before it is born with the false hope of a perpetual relationship with a narcissistic bully who built the fire for humankind's eternal torture in the beginning, before it was ever even conceived.
And then there was Jack's old pal Jabber, who told endless lies and conspiracy theories. And there were his former friends Snub and Shun, who were once his friends, too, but would now only, of course, snub and shun him. Jack, though, did not hear from them much anymore, as if they were avoiding him. And once Jack was married to Jilt, a lady who was also one of the religious. This lasted for seven years and was over for good on their 8th anniversary, just as Gematria prophesizes. Or just as a person would act upon the mystical notion of believing there is meaning in numbers. Or as reality would be, following the magical thinking of false pattern recognition. But that is a little off subject in some ways. This is not a story about Jack's marriage, though it is worth noting here. The real story was between Jack and the Evangelical Witness Church. And by religious I mean, Bible-thumping bigots, extremists, and fanatical fundamentalist, who believe in so much non-sense it's impractical to list here, but they believe in some notion of a "3-in-1 God:" the Father, the Son, and the Holy Geist. Also, they believe that the Mother of the Son of God was a virgin, and thereby had a mystical and magical immaculate conception, and a mysterious and mystical birth. The Father was the Son of God, and the Son of God was also the Father of God, and other seemingly infinite impossibilities and contradictions. And in Hell:
Satan will eat your soul and shit out gold, etc., etc.
Jack noticed that the religious were against various things, many things, if not almost everything, and even one Evangelical Witness was against the other… Jack noticed that the Evangelical Witnesses were, say, against gambling, and against sex, and against drugs, and a lot of other subversive or counter-cultural things. All were dopamine fixes: religion, itself, was just another fix, a nostrum, and an elixir for all the ailments of the World. The cry that the religious were moral, though, and the atheist not, -this is just a downright falsehood, "a flat out lie," as Jack would often say, having been set up with these moral trappings by his neighbor, Page Neighbors, on many occasions…
Another neighbor with no manners, Frank Manners, was always up in Jack Slacker's business.

Anyhow, Jack and Jilt Slacker, his wife, lived at 333 Patriot Ave. in Elsewhere, Amerika.
Next door were Frank Manners on one side, and Page Neighbors on the other side. Nowadays, and at work as a Civil Critic, Jack Slacker had his studies in the New Bible at the University of Babble. And there was his boss Mr. Logos, who had been in charge of final edits to the New Bibles, at one point in time, and which always left their mark on Elsewhere, and the World itself. The New Bible promoted the idea of "the flatlander," which Jack Slacker thought was the equivalent of our delusional and often persecuted Christian in the modern world. Now this particular type of individual, "the flatlander," could be found at any church in Elsewhere, Amerika.
Thus, Jack Slacker had trained as a Civil Critic and was now working for Zero, Inc. He was known for his hyper-critical stance on the Evangelical Witness Church, while he participated in the contradictory consumption of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir, and his association with his current friend Stick Hickman's dependence on Mr. Slither's Whiskey. The Evangelical Witness Church promoted the idea of a "Flat-Earth," which Dr. Logos says it is "both, yet neither," so now Jack was in search of the edge of the "flatlands," where one would literally fall off the edge of the Earth, off the edge of the World into darkness, and into oblivion!
One day, Jack and Stick were getting plastered on their drugs of choice while walking in the countryside, when Stick, who was stumbling ahead somewhat, fell off the edge of the World into oblivion. Jack did hesitate to go and tell the Evangelical Witness Church authorities that they could go straight to Hell.
"It is be your fa'lt!" Jack Slacker slurred his words and cried. "I've has lost poor ol' Stick!"
Now, the Evangelical Witness Church immediately summoned the help of President Rump, mentioned in previous lore. President Rump said the following:
"Now, Jack Slacker, who is definitely a Slacker, because he attended the University of Babble, whereas I attend the Evangelical Witness Church, sometimes, sometimes… Now this Slacker fellow, slurs his speech and is on drugs… Jack takes Dr. Nostrum's Elixir, I've been informed, and his buddy was thoroughly inebriated on Mr. Slither's Whiskey. Both were at fault here, both at fault…"
Jack Slacker, being the Slacker he was, went and enlisted the help of others. Jack got the Humanist Scientist Agnostic Atheist Freethinker Society Association of Liberals, or just the HSAAFSAL to help him. The HSAAFSAL sent him to a lawyer named Fad Trendy Styles, who was versed in this type of law. Fad told Jack to just, "lay low." So Jack went to sleep on the Lazy River, again, where he woke up and fell off the edge of the World. And the rest is history.

Fall of Man

I am older now than when I told you the story of the Shadow. But I don't feel any wiser. Perhaps I feel more mature. Regardless, I have a few things to say before I vanish into the woodwork forever. I have, since my initial memoir, acquired an ideal dwelling for both an atheist cast out from the world of self-righteous men and women and a recluse cast into self-exile. I am still that devout atheist, though, and still, I wander the paths of the forest. But it is a different forest nowadays. As I rambled about for some 10 years in the hinterlands of humanity, I reflected on my situation critically. In doing so, I became even more critical of the Other, the Enemy. But I met my wife, Faith Freewill. I was 40 years old. I shall begin here.

I still comb the woods now and then, a willful wanderer, but I rarely get to anymore. I wander the concrete forest of Atlas, the Great City, here in Amerika. Atlas is an average city here in the South. I walk the main Wayward Avenue, which meanders through the town and over the Omen River. My cabin was to the West of Atlas, in the backwoods community of Atlas, which was planted in the dead center of Amerika, the Great Nation. Living in my cabin, one day, I drifted into the concrete asylum of Atlas, and I was at a coffee shop. I saw a flyer for "The Conversation," a sermon to be given by a Pastor Rightwise. I thought that through the Conversation, Pastor Rightwise was trying to mend the relationship between unbelievers and the church folk. I felt by the Conversation that Rightwise was attempting to build a bridge between my kind, atheists and agnostics, and his kind, whatever they are, as that is still a mysterious phenomenon to a devout atheist like me.

That Sunday, I told myself I would go again and try to reach out a helping hand to the indoctrinated and free at least one poor person. And I was a fool for trying to do so, but fortune favors the bold, as the adage goes.

I had sent Pastor Rightwise an email, a criticism of the sermon he had posted on the Hallowed Temple website. Pastor Rightwise responded enthusiastically, wishing everyone in his congregation was as attentive to his preaching as I was. Still, I doubt he wanted a pack of wolves like me tending to his flock. I had also included in the message what my therapist called the parable of my "spiritual confusion." It had come to the point that I had sought out a mental health professional to help me cope with the confusion of existence, but she was of little use to an old stray dog like me.

"I lay in my bed wide awake when two demons came out of the wall of my home, and they dragged me to the Netherworld, to Hell. I tried to escape and jumped out of bed but fell into a deep well. At the bottom of the well was a man whipping a child to beat the devil out of him. And at the bottom of the dry well was another pit, Hell within Hell. The pit was dark, but I could see it was full of serpents. My skin started to crawl as if an insect was crawling out of my flesh. And I opened a book with pages stuck together and bound with its words, so I began to eat the knowledge. When I tore the first page, a swarm of crows came out of the book and began speaking to me. And in response to all of this, I set first the book, which was the Word –I set it on fire by tossing it into the pit, which erupted into flames, and I kicked the man whipping my youth into the pit. I saved the second book, which was The Great Work.

As I climbed out of the well, thunderheads formed on the ceiling of my room, and a torrent of rain that I had conjured held off and simmered the fires of Hell... but the rains cannot hold off what is coming, what hides within the Shadow." I told the Pastor.

I sent a message to Pastor Rightwise. I do not know whether he knew that I sought a middle ground with the Other, but he agreed to meet me at the Neighbor's Coffee Shop.
The preacher, Pastor Rightwise…. Was he my neighbor? Was I to love him as myself? Or fear him? After we met at Neighbor's Coffee Shop, I asked him for a ride. He asked which direction I was going, cleverly, I might add, and when I told him I was going Downtown Atlas, he said: "Well, I'm going the other way." And he was going the other way that day and in life. There was no middle ground with the Other, with the church folk. Indeed, I coexist with them and breathe the same air, but it is a choking existence.
As are others of my kind, I am strangled by the conceit clothed as righteousness. Now, I will tell you, the reader… There must be another way. The believer believes that the atheist cannot be moral without God; everything is permitted. This is a foolish belief, and it is a belief, no doubt. It is more than a belief; in some sense, it is the human mark, a curtailing of our species: the belief that humans are superior to all else. And if you are not one of us, the believers, then you are inferior. Nothing could be a better or more dignified way of labeling the herd mentality, and the herd goes herd fashion over the cliff of reality.
I met with Pastor Rightwise one other time, with my wife still at the time, Faith, who was also a believer. And I believe that would be another story as to how a devout atheist like me fell into a relationship with a devout Christian, an Evangelical. But things happen, and under her advice, I asked for the ride I told the reader about above. And he denied me. So, I took him a copy of Son of God, the other story I have told. And I never saw him again. Now, if this was just a coincidence, I could accept it. But I take it as a slight from the world of believers, the world of sinners. But let me tell you a little about myself. I look more like an ascetic nowadays, whatever an ascetic looks like: I have glasses, fattened up with age, and shave my head as a form of renunciation of the world, at least the world of self-image and narcissism. And I have been subtly accused a time or two of narcissism. But my love is for the world. I am a wanderer of this world, and the next world, I believe, is not. I believe: "I am that I am not."
I will continue this path of atheism until I am not, and then life will mean what it means now… nothing. This is the only life that I have, and it would seem a waste preparing for the next life, an afterlife. What is that, and what does it mean an "afterlife?" Afterlife is death, and in death, our existence ceases, a Great Philosopher concluded. And we have not, as humans, come to any greater truth than that of existential nihilism. Life means nothing. But this does not prevent us from living with purpose. A self-made purpose, but a purpose all the same. I say that doubt shadows the atheist, but even more, it shadows the believer. It haunts every moment of his or her being. And for what, the truth that there is no God. The dogma and the doctrine will continue. But after my experience with Pastor Rightwise, I know God is a lie.
Humankind is the Great Work. I don't think I would have had any "spiritual confusion" if it weren't for the spiritualists in my childhood.
And so, as a 12-year-old, I set out to write The Great Work you read now. It is called an antithesis to the Great Work of Alchemy. This is a spiritual quest and a work of writing, anyhow. It is my Great Work against God; may He rest in peace.
I had been to Church only once that I could remember as a child. And I remember the most essential part of the Church was giving. Giving to the Church. I gave a dime since it was all I had. It was all my increase, not just 10% of my increase. Now, Pastor Rightwise had a twin

who spoke at length during his sermons about the importance of giving. There are all kinds of politics surrounding this practice in the Church, but I say it is good to give to your fellow man. And I gave for some time to the Hallowed Temple, Pastor Rightwise, and his brother's Church. But just because you are giving to the Church… Well, you are giving to just that, the Church, not your fellow Humankind.

Now, Churches have outreach programs, but these programs, such as giving food to the poor, work to make the poor person a slave or a servant, and I'm no slave nor servant. This is why I have come as a man who serves no masters; I am my own master. But with women, the Church has a long history of peddling women as property.

I am the Son of a man and a woman, not the Son of Man; that old prophecy is dead and gone. The Son of God is dead and gone. Family matters; it is the best institution of Humankind, and an institution survives the individual's death. God will not endure; His mythos are shrouded in fear, and fear is not the way to truth. Overcoming fear is the way to truth. Now the Son can say he is "the way, the truth, and the light, and that no man shall come to the Father except through him." This is to say that no one can come to the truth except through Christ, the most dangerous of martyrs, a human sacrifice to a god. A god who sacrificed himself for himself and to himself seems the Great Narcissus, and we are God's Echo. Christ pines away in the desert, and I lived in the woods, in the safety of the forest, in a haven of Shadow.

As far as life goes, we are always at the inevitable end. And each day we are still alive, the end gets nearer. Will we move on from this world to something else? I doubt it.

But unlike the Stoics, hope is a good thing. I hope I am incorrect in my understanding of things, but oblivion isn't so bad of a concept. I live a simple life, and being without many possessions has benefits. It seems that the soul or the self, which and whatever you call it. I call it the will sometimes because that's all we have: the will to be and the will to exist is temporal.

"Where there's a will, there's a way," it is said. So, one could also assume, then, that "Where there's no way, there's no will." When there is no more Way, no Path, there is nothing. Now, I've mentioned taking the wrong path, and it matters that what path we take in life will lead us somewhere different after death. But it seems to me there is no life after death. Things have a teleological being to them. But by the end, it means the absolute end, not transitional or transforming, but obliterating oblivion. We become nothing. A dead man's dream: Nothing. I have read: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." (Psalm 34:18 NIV). This is most important to a young proselyte such as me. "I once was saved, but now I am lost" is my atheist's joy. What is grace anyway, but powerlessness, a helpless and pitiful surrender? I am now more than an atheist: I am an anti-theist. God hates my body and my spirit, and he cannot have my soul. It belongs to the castaways of doubt and disbelief. There is a story I would like to share at this point, and then I'll have said all that will need to have been noted for this fiasco. I have said that I took Rightwise's silence as a slight. Well, I say I was the victim of another slight, verbal slap to the conscience: a man I knew somewhat or perhaps didn't know: an old neighbor, let's say. This Old Neighbor became homeless by one of, like Rightwise, the Good Christian folk. I was entertained that I was doing some good in helping the poor guy, as we were both poor folks…. But as we were sitting there on the third evening of his stay, he made the following comment off-hand: "You know, atheism is the easy way out." And I stewed over it all night

as I sat up, and when he woke in the morning from his sleep, it was raining, but I had made my mind up: he had to leave my home for the insult. So, I sent him into the rain, afoot.

I offered him a trash bag as a makeshift rain jacket, but he was insulted. But he left with some encouragement. The point here is that when Good Christian folk cannibalize each other, I let them nowadays. If they want to fight amongst themselves, I let them, Old Neighbor and Good Christian alike. They can both tell their slights and slurs to Jesus. I am nearly 50 years old, and my story of being a devout atheist continues. But the last comes first and the first last. Below are some more thoughts on The End.

Rapture

Each generation thinks it's the one, but it's not the one… and each generation after that thinks it's the one, but it's not the one… ".... like a thief in the night," Jesus says he'll come again. Maybe the Rapture is just that: a thief in the night; it has come to take your peace. Jesus also said: "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword." And in turn, He offers war: live by the sword, die by the sword, etc. I come in the light; I come with the light; I offer light instead of darkness, and the fallen…. For, have you all not had enough of the taste of death?!

Visions

I shared with the reader above the experiences with Pastor Rightwise, the two demons taking me captive into Hell, and that Old Neighbor, exiled into bad weather. In closing, I must mention the strange and mysterious occurrence at Faith's dead Grandmother's house. Faith and I went to stay there shortly after we had married. Faith's Grandmother had "passed away" and left no will. Faith asked her father's permission to stay there, and he obliged her to wish. I was there for several months, and after about the 6th month, I recalled the story I had shared with the twin devils in the Son of God. I remembered this bit of nostalgia because Faith's dead Grandmother's house had those very same almost fitting bars barricading the windows. I was told this was because a blind couple lived there, and it was for their safety.

Nevertheless, those damned bars were on the windows and doors, and I began having visions of being consumed in the house by fire. Then one day, our cat Nimrod woke me and wanted to go outside. I let him out. In doing so, I saw embers glowing in the yard where we had used the grill to cook some vegetables and meat earlier that day. I got the water hose and soaked down the yard but couldn't sleep all that night.

I woke and told her we were leaving at dawn. And we did. Thanks to my cat Nimrod, I think I was not consumed in a fiery and ironic twist of fate and nostalgia. But my wife said we couldn't take the cat, Nimrod. And I insisted that he go. But she said he had the mark… That is the Mark of the Beast. Not the Gematria numerology 666, which I had learned represented the coded name Cesar Nero.

No, the reason Faith thought Nimrod carried the mark was half my fault. But first, it was because

Nimrod had a microchip implanted in him in case he was lost. But even further, I did not know that

Nimrod in the Evangelical circles was believed to be that "mighty hunter before God" and was in Babylon several millennia ago. I named him Nimrod because it was the Greek name for just a "mighty hunter." And I owned a Nimrod speargun deep in the past. It was an excellent speargun!

I was a fisherman of fish, though. I was not, then, one of the "fishers of men" the Fellowship of Jesus Christ had set up to proselytize the Gentiles. No, that was not I, Roman. Anyhow, it is worth mentioning this story to the readers in the audience who love irony.

I am middle-aged now. And it seems this irony is my fate, which Heraclitus said: "A man's character is his fate." My fate eludes me, but death awaits to set me free someday. Until then, I shall continue to write in secrecy and in hiding from the world as a recluse, an atheist recluse, rather than at a religious hermitage. Until you hear from me again, congregate with others of your kind. I will follow the path of the brokenhearted. It is the true Geist of God. I shall end here.

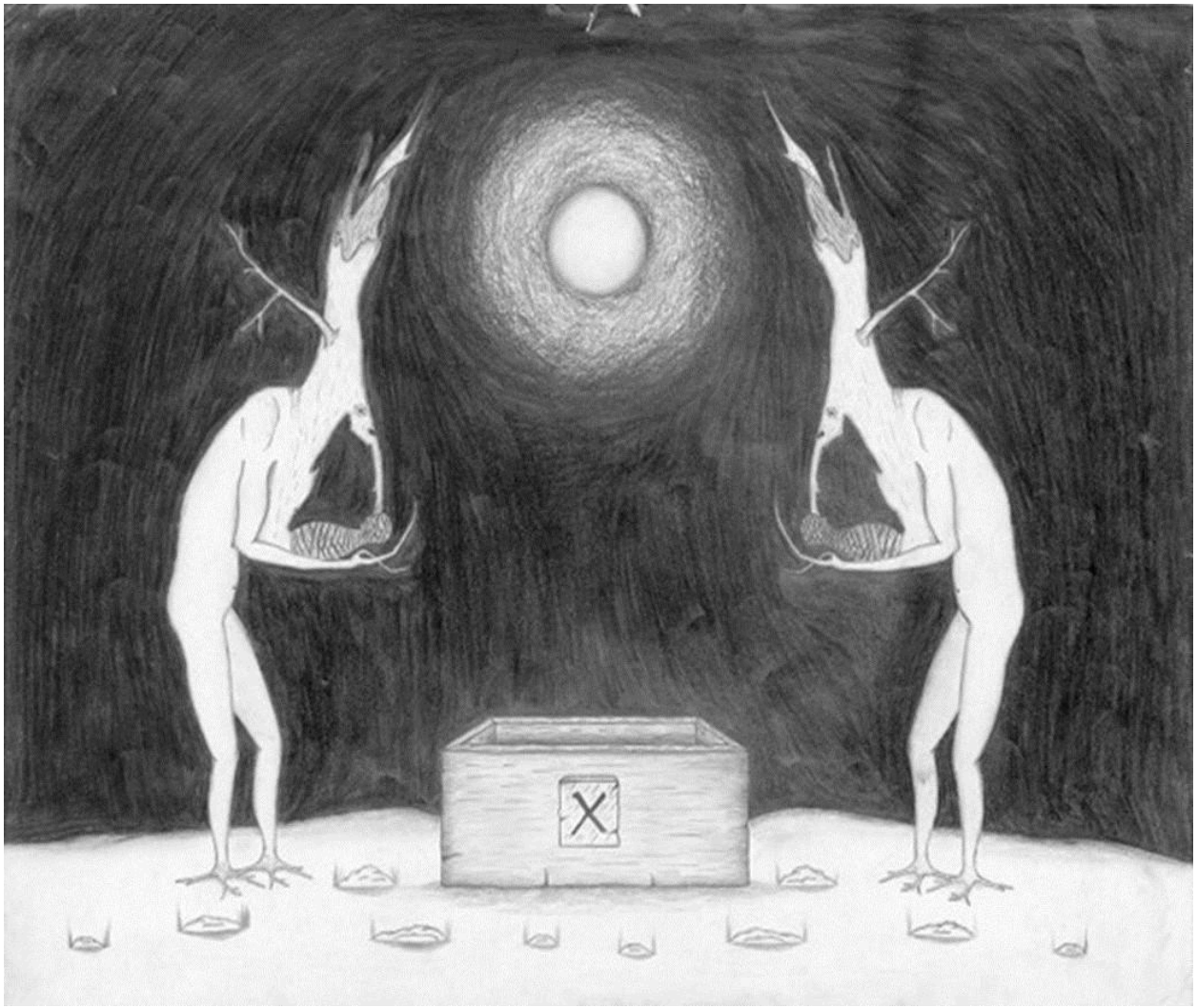
The Patient

I made an appointment with my Lawyer a couple of weeks ago. I was sitting in the waiting room. There were other people in the waiting room, but none in such loathing as I. I feared I had the worst sickness of all. There were people with colds and the like, influenza, and an embarrassing STD. But my illness was not what the Lawyers call physical. It is a very terrible disease that infects the mind. They call it the Melancholy, and it is as dreadful as cancer.
"Mr. Mathos?" I heard the Secretary say.
I walked over and tried to smile. She was a pretty lady.
"Are you Mr. R. Mathos?" She asked with a smile.
"Yes."
"The Lawyer is ready to see you now, so just follow me."
And she led me down a series of hallways. The massive structure of the building was both threatening and magnificent. It was the same with the Secretary. She was so young and beautiful that she had eased my fear. But the thought of having to speak to her outside these formalities was terrifying. I felt ugly next to her. I smelled bland next to her perfume. I was a writer at that! A writer was not the type of person a decent, good girl like her would get involved with.
"So, what do you do for work, R.?"
"I'm a writer, so what do… what do you do?' I asked stupidly.
"So, you're a writer." She ignored me. "What do you write about?"
"Everything and nothing." I tried to sound clever.
"So, what's something you would write about?" She insisted.
"I write short stories, and… well, I use different theories as themes… it's rather long to explain." I could see she did not understand.
"What would be a theme?" She was like a persistent mosquito in my ear.
"Well, for instance, I might write about ethical subjectivism."
"And what's that?" She was adamant that I explain myself… and I had made this speech before… many times before.
"Ethical subjectivism is the argument in Moral Philosophy that our ethical principles depend completely on our individual choices, that we all have our code of ethics that we alone follow… because what's right for one person is wrong for another, and vice versa. It says that nothing we do is right or wrong from a personal standpoint." I sighed in relief after rambling out my rehearsed lines.
"I see. So, you could just kill people and it would be okay since you wouldn't have a conscience?" She had such a charismatic stare about her.
"Yeah… I suppose so."
I was overly impressed that she even listened to my paraphrased textbook definition. But it was as if she already knew something about the subject… as if she was already prepared with her rhetorical question.
"Well, here you go. The Lawyer will be with you in a minute."
"Okay," I said.

The Lawyer came in just minutes later.
"Hello, Mr. R. Mathos." The Lawyer smiled.
"Just R. will do." I insisted.
"R. -that's quite Kafkaesque." The Lawyer commented.
"Yeah..." I said.
"So, tell me R., what seems to be the problem?" He asked as he took out a notepad from behind his desk.
"Well, it feels like I have a dead child inside me. It's hard to explain,
but…"
"Uh huh…" He interrupted and scribbled down something in his notes.
Silence fell upon the room as I began to lightly tremble.
"And have you lost your appetite?" He asked.
"Yeah…" My voice quivered like a fish stranded on the shore.
"And do you feel tired all the time, or sleep but don't feel rested, or wake up early, or have problems going to sleep or any sexual difficulties?"
"Yeah… all of the above," I said. "And I have really bad dreams."
"Well, hell, I am going to go ahead and diagnose you with Melancholy. I am going to have you escorted to our Interrogation Center. It's a State Institution called the Center for the Coffins of Children or C3. There will be a Judge there. He is a specialist who performs Black Bile extractions. I know you probably feel a little scared, but everything will be fine. This procedure they will be using is a third generation, a new technique. It is quick and painless. But only State Institutions can treat this very contagious disease." He paused to finish his notes. "Okay? You take care now." I was transported by E.O.D. or Emergency Order of Detention, to the "triple C" in a cold vehicle driven by the Guard who would aid the Judge with the Black Bile extraction.
I was taken before the Judge. He said hello and introduced himself.
"Well, Mr. Mathos, the procedure is pretty simple. We will do a series of routine tests to confirm for ourselves that you do indeed need this transfusion. Don't worry, we won't be using electric shock therapy on you." He laughed sarcastically. "The transfusion is just one simple operation, and you will recover in no time. And you do understand you are now quarantined due to the risk of this disease spreading?" "Yeah..." I said.
But everything seemed surreal to me now. Just yesterday I was at home writing and smoking, eating pieces of chocolate, and drinking coffee. But now I was in this Institution. It is one of those situations where, suddenly, you wake up and realize that you're in a nightmare.
I have been in the Institution for three days now. All my tests confirmed that I had Melancholy and would have to have the Black Bile extraction at once. I went to have an inquiry with the Judge once more before my operation.
"Well, it's simple R. There will be a Witness for the State, due to the ethical sensitivity of the procedure. The Guard will go with you to the operating room. I will explain any further questions you may have before I operate. Okay? You take care now." "Yeah…" I mumbled.
I was taken back to my room while preparations for the operation were made. Waiting seemed forever as I stared out the window, lost in the confusion of thought.
"Ready?" The Guard said with a comforting smile.
"Yeah… I guess. I feel kind of nauseous, though."

"Don't worry, you'll be just fine."
I thought of the Secretary and her pretty smile. How I wished she were there by my side instead of this Guard, who had the smell of the Institution about him. He led me through a series of rooms and then into what appeared to be a hallway, but there were no doors along its walls or at its end, just an operating table with some horrid transfusion device… I assumed. The light was bright and magnified by the clean white walls of the Institution. I began to walk down the hall…

"Well Law, are you ready? You are the Witness, you know?" I said.
"Yes… But how about we smoke first?"
"Alright. I'm in no hurry, and the Patient can wait."
We sat and smoked a pipe for a while and relaxed. My job is simple, but it is not at all boring. I love my work here at the Institution. I attended the Guard Academy as soon as I had completed my formal schooling instead of going to the University. I had no use for academic bullshit. I would have probably become a Soldier if I had not received my certificate. But now I have it made. No one bothers me because I am the best when it comes to an assistant for this new operation.
"Everything ready?" Law asked.
"Yeah, I suppose… well, let's do this," I said.
We went to the Patient's room. He was sitting, staring out the window, like all Patients do before their operation. The fear of the unknown is quite a horrifying burden on their minds.
"Ready?" I said with a soothing smile.
"Yeah… I guess. I feel kind of nauseous, though." The Patient said.
"Don't worry, you'll be just fine," I reassured him.
I led him through the holding rooms to the operating room. He seemed to look as if he were longing for something, as all Patients do. I looked over as we walked into the hallway of the operating room to my Witness and friend Law. He nodded his head in approval. I put the barrel right at the base of the Patient's skull and pulled the trigger. It was a good shot. The bullet went in at an angle so that it did not exit. It merely rattled around in his skull. I put two more bullets through the Patient's back into his heart… strictly routine. We sat and watched the postmortem muscle reflexes and Law commented on how there was an art to the blood splatters on the wall. It was beautiful, the wounds bled out like a dark, red stream flowing over white stone.



Coffins of Children

The Secret Society

R. woke early one Monday morning to go to the office at the archives where he worked as a file clerk. He turned 31 years old today. "Insignificant," R. muttered to himself, for this day was just as any other, and each day was no different than the last at work, except he savored the secrecy that came from keeping his birthday undisclosed. The day at work was soon over.

R. was leaving work when at the bottom of the steps that lead to the entrance of the archives, a stranger in a dark, discreet suit waited on him.

"Hello," he said, "Are you, Mr. R.?"

"Yes, I'm R."

"I'm a messenger for the Secret Society," he said, then whispered, "This is for you, Mr. R."

As the stranger walked away, R. inspected this 'message' he was given, for it was odd: it was just a blank envelope with an unknown insignia on the seal of it. He tore open the envelope, inside was a letter with 'MANDATE' written on it. The mandate ordered R. to meet with a secretary at midnight that same evening, for he was to be conscripted into the 'Secret Society.' It went on to state that if he declined to become a member, he would lose his position as a file clerk at the Cabal Archives, and it had, as a method of coercion, a typed letter from the curator, R.'s superior at the archives, -It had the curator's signature on it to confirm the authority of the document. The document was signed, X.

As R. reached the front door of his flat, a telephone rang loudly within it, which was strange because he didn't have a phone. He entered the front door to discover that there was a black, rotary phone on the coffee table in his living room, and it continued to ring, as it seemed, with each ring that it rang more loudly until he decided, if not out of curiosity, and with some fearful apprehension, he decided he must as if forced, he was compelled to answer it.

"Hello," R.'s voice was firm, "who is this?'

"I'm Rook." A deep voice replied. "I'm a watchman of the Secret Society, and it's my orders to shadow you, that is until we trust you to operate as a member independently." And the phone went dead.

Exhausted, R. lay down on the couch and took a nap.

R. woke at half-past eleven o'clock. He did not intend to sleep so long, but it had been a long day and was not over yet. He changed into a suit for his meeting with the secretary. He looked over the letter again, gathered up a few things, and went out the door. He stood on his porch for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dark when he noticed a man standing under a lamp pole across the street. He assumed it was Rook, who said he was to 'shadow' R.; for the man wearing the same dark, discreet suit as the messenger he encountered earlier that day. "Ridiculous," R. mumbled to himself, and then he began to walk to the archives, as Rook kept a steady distance between them. Rook stayed outside as R. entered the archives and made his way down to the basement where he was to meet the secretary.

The secretary introduced herself as Nil. She explained this was not her office, which was an empty room with an empty desk.

"I suppose you are R.?" She asked casually.

"Yes," R. replied, "and what exactly is the nature of this meeting?" "This is your initial interrogation."

"Interrogation?" R. said riddled.

"It's just an arcane way of saying that I have a few questions to ask you and a few documents that require your signature."
Nil asked R. several trivial questions, "to confirm his age and identity," so she said, and last he was given a nondisclosure of information agreement and a document he loathed over for a few minutes without reading no more than 'Oath of Allegiance,' and he reluctantly signed both.
"This doesn't mean anything, you know?" He said to the secretary Nil but as if addressing the Secret
Society itself. "It's coercion and nothing more."
"Well, that is all I need from you. Goodbye." Nil concluded and scurried off.
"Yes… Goodbye." R. mumbled to himself, as he stayed behind a few minutes.
"Strange," R. said to himself, for he never knew of this secluded office before tonight, and he knew all the archives very well, indeed, so he thought. "Insignificant," R. said as he shook his head in disbelief at the whole affair. It probably remained locked by the curator, he thought. "Ridiculous." He added, again. R. suddenly felt an ominous air about the archives, alone in the dark basement, and scurried off as well. R. exited the archives, and he noticed the messenger waiting at the bottom of the steps.
"Here, this is for you, Mr. R.," the messenger said, "have a nice night." And he began to walk away.
"How do I get a message delivered to X.?" R. asked.
"You write a letter," the messenger said, turning around, "but it must have the official seal of the Secret Society on it."
"And what name should I put on the envelope?"
"No one's. It must be a sealed blank envelope, and I will see that it is delivered to the appropriate member." And the messenger walked away.
R. decided to wait until he was back at his flat before he opened the letter. It irritated him to have this Rook character watching him the very moment he stepped outside, and it irritated R., even more, to know that Rook had been there this whole time just waiting on him.
R. returned to his flat. He opened the envelope, and in it was another mandate, but this time it was an order to take certain records from the archives and turn them over to the messenger. R. walked outside onto his porch.
"Come here," R. shouted to Rook, and Rook reluctantly walked over.
"I must contact the messenger, is this possible?" "Just dial zero on the black phone." And Rook retreated across the street.
R. phoned to get a messenger and spoke with the attendant, who said one would be there right away, and just a few minutes later there was a knock on the door.
"Yes," said R., "did you bring a book of official seals?"
"Yes, here you go, Mr. R."
R. took them and put a seal on the envelope.
"I must know if this can be delivered tonight?" R. asked.
"Yes, the Secret Society conducts most of its business late at night, for this is when they're free from their daytime jobs. And who do you want the letter delivered to?"
"X., and tell him I shall expect a reply tonight, and I'm sure he will be meeting with the secretary Nil."

"Whatever you say, Mr. R., I shall return… if you get a
reply." R. watched the messenger vanish into the dark.
R. was adamant in his letter that what he was ordered to do was against the law, and that confiscating the records he was "ordered" to do could cost him not only his position as a file clerk, but it could cost him his freedom, for he could be jailed. R. had lain down on the couch to get some rest, but he merely rested his eyes and waited for the messenger to knock on the door. But it was just the sound of footsteps that roused him to the door.
"Will that be all for tonight?" The messenger asked.
"Yes," R. said.
R. closed the door on the messenger, anxious to rid himself of this criminal deed he was ordered to carry out. But to his frustration the letter coldly stated that he had no choice in the matter; R. was to do as he was ordered, lest he end up unemployed and homeless, for the letter made a point to inform him that it was within power of the Secret Society to have him evicted with his landlord's signature as proof, just as the curator's signature had been used to coerce him into being conscripted. R. lay down in bed, exhausted. His mind was blank, but spinning with ideas, and he fell into a deep sleep.
R. awoke early the next morning and forgot for a moment all his troubles. He went to the porch and retrieved the paper but didn't notice Rook standing across the street. R. read the headline, "Crux, Suspected in Ransack." Then, the memory of the previous night filled R.'s mind, and anger turned his face red. He thought of the files at the archives he was ordered to take, and dread filled his heart.
"Absurd." He mumbled.
R. put on a black suit and a black tie like the dark, discreet suits the messengers wore the previous day and night. R. knew this would help him go unnoticed; for during a typical week at work, R. wore a suit often enough, every other day, that he would not look too discreet, as if an auditor, and not draw any unnecessary nor any unwanted attention for showing up in a suit on this particular day. He didn't eat breakfast, but he did have a cup of coffee, which he sipped on and looked out the window in the study of his flat. He looked at the black, rotary phone and considered the task that loomed ahead, and he made a call in which he summoned the messenger at due noon so that he could give the files he had been ordered to take. The person on the phone said that the messenger would be there at the specified time and that there was no need to have an official seal of the Secret Society on the files he was to take.
Rook was nowhere to be seen, but R. could feel his presence as he walked out the door onto the porch, looked around for a moment, and headed for the Cabal Archives where he had worked for several years. But his focus soon shifted from trying to spot Rook back to the files he was to 'confiscate' from the archives. He wore a leather satchel around his neck -he wore a suit and a satchel that he'd worn many times before so that he could accomplish his mission, while at the same time still going unnoticed.
R. set out for the archives and noticed two men walking, who both wore the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society. "Strange," R. mumbled, as he now reached the archives, took a deep breath, and entered. He went to the desk where he worked as a clerk, filing records of marriages, births, and deaths; these records were public along with population records, but the records of the law court and economic affairs had restrictions; there were also annals of

different institutions and social groups; these were rumored to have restrictions, too, but R. knew there weren't any such restrictions, just that the records had a way of disappearing.
R. sat at his desk and filed some of the previous day's records of births through most of the morning, occasionally going to file the physical records in the file cabinets along the long walls of the archives. Around noon, he took his satchel, which in it he usually packed a sandwich as he did every day at work; but he didn't pack a sandwich that day so that he could go to the restricted records and take the files, which he did. R. then sat at the table in the restricted records section and stared at his satchel for a moment to summon the courage to take the files, which he couldn't; but just as he was going to put the files back, he heard footsteps coming down the interior hall and he hurried out the exterior hall, past his desk, past the front desk, through the foyer, and out the front door. He stood there a moment, shaking, as his fear of being discovered shifted to his anger of being blackmailed. He looked around for a moment and then standing before him in a dark, discreet suit was the messenger. R. handed over the files but said nothing, as the clock tower in the town courtyard sounded noon.

"Thank you, Mr. R." The messenger said. "Will that be
all?" "Yes!" R. said being short.
And the messenger disappeared into the crowd. R. looked at the time on the clock tower as if he didn't know the time and headed to his flat. On the way, he noticed Rook following him. "Idiot," R. said under his breath, but he wasn't sure if he was saying this to Rook or himself. Upon entering his flat, R. noticed the headline of the Cabal Times newspaper again; he had read it this morning, the headline that is, but now it sunk in that the files he had taken were the records of the funds "Crux" was accused of "misappropriating."
R.'s apartment was quite simple: he had a wooden rocking chair on his front porch; it opened into his study where he had an old desk along the far wall in the corner, and on it was a lamp; in the middle of the room, he had a worn black leather armchair with a travel trunk for a coffee table, and beside it was a small round end table with a wooden lamp that had a red lampshade on it; joining the study was his dining area, which was separated from the study and the kitchen by a little round dining table that had two chairs, one that was filled with old newspapers, most of them never read; through a short hall was a bathroom on the right and a bedroom on the left, which had a small closet, a dresser, a night table, and a full bed that was too big for the room and it took up too much space; this made him feel constricted and was why he stayed most nights in the chair in his study with his feet propped up on the travel trunk. The black, rotary phone he found was on the desk in the corner of the study.
R. looked over the article about Crux and discovered that Crux, -he discovered that Crux was a member of the Cabal Treasury and was under investigation for "suspicious monetary activity." R. tried to remember what the files he had taken were named but he was too upset to recall them; the file names were written on the letter he got the previous night, which he had torn to pieces on his way home and thrown away on the way home; but he couldn't remember where he had thrown the letter away along the zigzag path he took home that he took to try and shake Rook off his trail.
R. put the paper down, went and picked up the receiver to the rotary phone, and dialed zero. He asked the attendant on the other end of the line to have the secretary Nil meet him in the courtyard under the clock tower after he got off work, and the attendant told him Nil would

be there. R. left to go back to work but got lost along the way as he tried to take the same zigzag path back that he had taken home. Arriving a little late to work he decided to go in and tell the front desk worker to tell the curator that he couldn't return to work that afternoon because he had an important meeting that had come up; the lady at the front desk said she would let the curator know, and he was off to the courtyard across the way from the archives where sitting on a bench already was the secretary.
"Hello, R." She greeted him. "How may I be of service to you?"
"Good afternoon, Nil…" R. was considerate. "I have a few questions that I need to ask you." "It's a nice afternoon, isn't it?" She stated.
"Yeah, but…" R. wasn't there to talk about the weather.
"How was work?" She asked. "This is morning for me; my work for the Secret Society keeps me up most of the night."
"That is why I wanted to meet with you, Nil, to ask you some questions about your organization…"
"It's not my organization; it's your organization, R. I merely work for the Secret Society. You're a member now."
"But who do you work for?" He didn't understand.
"I work for the Secret Society." She stated, again.
"I know that, but who is the Secret Society?" R. asked.
"I don't know." She said.

"You don't know! How do you not know who you work for?" R. felt defeated, and then anger rushed over him. "Well, how could you work for such corruption!?" "Work for?" She became defensive. "Don't forget that you're a member."
And R. then shortly said goodbye and hurried off, not wanting to continue the conversation, and not finding any of the answers he sought. He returned to his flat and went to sleep early in his old leather armchair on what was another dreamless night.
R. left for work early the next morning, Rook was leaning on a streetlamp pole, and asleep, it appeared. R. sneaked off to the archives, and he didn't even check to see if Rook was following him. When he arrived at the archives, there were two men in black suits, but not the dark, discreet suits of the messengers. They identified themselves as agents for the Cabal Revenue Service. They told them their names. The first R. didn't catch, but the second name he recognized. It was Guy Cash, an old friend of R.'s from childhood. R. introduced himself and Guy quickly picked up on it.
"Well, if it isn't R."
"I didn't recognize you, Cash."
"I didn't know you worked here at the archives, R. It's been a while, hasn't it?"
"Yes… What brings you here, Cash?" He tried to look innocent.
"Oh, just business." Cash paused as his partner walked over to the front desk. "Say, we have an opening for an agent… if you're interested."
"Oh!" R. was taken aback; he was expecting to be arrested not promoted.
"What do you say, R.? I would give you a good reference and that's all you'd need, old friend." Cash insisted. "Well, just think about it, and either way, come see me at the revenue office."

R. and Cash spoke for a little longer. Cash took R. aside for a moment and explained to him that the curator was being dismissed due to the missing records and that he was responsible for keeping; them for the revenue, the sector was secure in the Cabal Archives, and these records were restricted and not available to be viewed by the public or anyone outside the Cabal Revenue Service, and the curator was being dismissed. Not that he was a suspect in the investigation, but strictly a formality. And Cash told R. about the files they were looking for and how they were missing, and that they were looking for some 'paper trail' that would tie Crux to the unknown organization he was suspected to have given funds. R. said goodbye to Cash and left a note for whoever was in charge that he had to go to the revenue office and wouldn't be back that day. When he made it to the revenue office to apply, R. spoke to the lady receptionist at the front desk. "Are you Mr. R., the archivist?" She asked.
"Yes, I'm the file clerk." He said
"Mr. Cash phoned and said you would be in today. You'll need to speak with our director, Mr. Zero." She said.
The receptionist told R. he could have a seat, which he did. He was sitting there in the lobby for some time, and he had time to think of the leverage of being an agent if he got the position, -he thought of how this would help him discover who X. was, since he was already aware, at least he assumed, that Crux and the Secret Society were connected. On the other hand, he had little concern with the idea that he might be linked to the missing files he had taken from the archives. And after a while, the director came out to speak with him.
"Hello, are you Mr. R.?" The director asked.
"Yes, I'm R." He said.
"I'm Mr. Zero, but you can just call me plain old Zero." He joked. "Well, Cash's recommendation gives you good favor, but I'll still have to speak with my superiors. It's just a formality. You'll fit in fine around here. It's mostly paperwork here, too. I don't see why you can't have the position." Zero said.
"Well, thank you, Zero." R. liked the idea of calling him just Zero.
"We'll give you a call, R. Just give the receptionist your number."
"Well, I just got a phone… I don't know my number yet." R. felt found out.
"That's okay, just check back in the morning with the receptionist. You can come in or just call." R. walked out of the Cabal revenue office with a sense of satisfaction, a feeling that he could settle the matter of the Secret Society and the nameless X. He looked behind him as he turned the corner, but he wasn't sure if Rook followed him there or not. "Parasites," R. told himself. But his thoughts turned quickly back to the idea of exposing X. and the Secret Society. His mind also shifted to Cash. R. couldn't understand why Cash had been so friendly and offered him a job without hesitation and without R. asking; and, too, he couldn't remember much about his and Cash's childhood friendship; but perhaps it would come back to him, he thought. "Surely." He told himself. He roamed through the streets, rambling this way and that, walking the same zigzag path he had begun taking the past few days, constantly trying to shake Rook from his trail, without ever knowing if he was there or not.
R. returned home, though, eventually, and he called the secretary, Nil, again; for what he wasn't sure yet. She told him to meet her in the courtyard under the clock tower as they had the time before. It was late afternoon by this time. He had walked in circles all day since his meeting with Zero. R.

thought that Nil would be up and around to do the Secret Society's shady bidding. Nil was sitting on the same bench as before, and shadows concealed her face somewhat.
"Nil." R. gave a nod with his head.
"Hello, R." She smiled. "What can I do for you?"
"Oh, nothing…." He paused, yawned, and stretched his arms. "It's about time for you to go to work, huh."
"Yes, I am at work," Nil said cheerfully.
"Well," he said, "it must be nice to not have an office to have to go to?"
"It's not. The only people I see are new members, and they're always tired because it's nighttime and they're exhausted from being at work all day. It doesn't make for pleasant conversations." She concluded.
"But aren't they happy they got selected to be new members?" "You should know the answer to that question."
She smiled again.
"Well, well… I see." R. furrowed his eyebrows. "I was coerced."
"No one forced you, R." She stated. "But what is it that you wanted with me?"
"Well." He said, and then abruptly added. "So, did you conscript the curator and my landlord, or did they join willingly?"
"The curator and your landlord?" She thought for a moment. "I don't know." "You don't know!?" He flushed.
"I told you, I mainly deal with processing new members." She smiled again to reassure him she was being honest. "Perhaps you can send a letter with the messenger and ask whether or not they are members."
"Perhaps you can find out for me, Nil?"
"I don't know, the Secret Society is rather distant…" She said.
"Isn't that convenient?" He stated.

R. and Nil made some small talk for a little longer and then he muttered goodbye and wandered off down the streets. He wondered what Nil meant by "distant." It bothered him that the Secret Society might perpetuate such a falsehood as the letter with the curator's signature, along with his landlord's signature; but this was only speculation, he would need further evidence to satisfy his intuition. He knew he couldn't just send a letter with a messenger and ask if the curator and his landlord were members; he would have to find out some other way. But in the meanwhile, Rook was following him, and he had to try and shake him off his trail... "Why?" he didn't know. R. went home and unwound in the leather armchair in his study, with his feet propped up on the coffee table.
R. woke the next morning and looked at the clock on the wall of his study. It was half past six. R. started out the door, after a glance back and forth to see if Rook was around, then he headed to the revenue office. He took the usual zigzag path he had been taking, which would soon be a habit if these happenings kept up with the Secret Society. He turned the corner on a street and realized he was in front of the revenue office. A look over his shoulder, and he entered the building.
"Hello, Mr. R." The receptionist greeted him.
"I came to see Zero." R. was to the point.
"Yes, he is waiting for you." She said, "Just go on in."

"Hello, R."
"Zero," R. replied and nodded his head.
"I told myself, 'He'll come in today,' and here you are. And I also said to myself, 'If he checks in with us this morning, he'll get hired,' and here you are. I spoke with my superiors, and I got the okay." Zero seemed sincere. "I've got the job." R. seemed excited.
"Welcome aboard, R. I've decided to put you with Cash, so he can get you used to things. Any questions?" Zero asked.
"Not yet." R. paused. "But since you asked, will I report to you?"
"Eventually. But for now, I'll have you following and learning from Cash." Zero looked down the hall. "Just go down four doors on the left and he should be there in his office, waiting on you." R. knocked on Cash's office door. "Come on in, R. No need to knock." Cash was fiddling with a pen. "I thought you'd be in this morning. I guess Zero already told you that you got the spot."
"Yes…"
"Well, let's get to work, and I'll show you the ins and outs of the Service."
"The Service?"
"Yeah, that's who we are, -that's who you are now, R." Cash smiled. "Now let's go. We're going to your old job, the archives, to check out any other ties that Crux must… well, let's just go see what
Crux has been up to… and with whom."
"Well, I'm ready." R. grinned back at him.
"I like your enthusiasm, R."
"Thank you, Cash."
Cash and R., partners now would have the same convictions as they were to begin investigating the official Crux. And with Cash's involvement with the case to begin with, they were granted sanction over the isolated, but not fully dropped, case; for the Service could not substantiate any evidence that would indict the officials. And when agents seized documents from Crux's office, they were unofficial documents and vague. Cash could not verify what he suspected as the illegal acquisition and use of funds due to the large sensitive document and other revenue records, it just so happened that R. had seized from the revenue records of the Cabal Archives. But Cash noticed one thing, for he was one of those upon the scene when Service agents searched the Treasury offices… Guy Cash noticed large monetary transactions between Crux and a group known only as the Gestalt. Cash took R. through the motions starting with tracking down the funds that Crux was accused of shifting. R., though, was not concerned with Cash, or even more, with Zero finding out that he was the one who had taken the 'paper trail,' as Cash called it. R. felt a sense of strength from being in the Service now, and he was renewed with this new status in his life. And he didn't harbor suspicions about the Service being tied to the Secret Society. This was reassuring to him, and he got some relief from the way he had felt the last few weeks. It was the weekend and Cash and R. worked on Saturday even though the Service usually took a two-day weekend. R. took a walk that Saturday afternoon after work on his way home from the archives, where he had been working. But he was now working there as a Service agent, sifting through the files he once had merely put away. He stopped in the courtyard, under the clock tower that struck noon. The sun shone and he had a seat where he had spoken to Nil several times now. He

was warm in the sun that shined down on him, and he propped his feet up on the bench, just as he would at home in the leather chair in his study, and he drifted off into a nap.
R. woke and it was getting dark. R. took off walking, lost in thought, when he met Nil on the sidewalk near his flat.
"Nil?" R. asked. "What brings you into this neighborhood of Cabal?"
"Nothing, just the usual business, I'm coming from my house and on my way to the courtyard, and then later, to the archives to initiate a new member to the Secret Society. So how are things at the archives going for you, R.?"
"Come now Nil, you must know I quit work at the archives?"
"I didn't know, R. I assumed you would return to work there after we last spoke."
"No, I'm an agent for the Cabal Revenue Service."
"Working for the Service now, well, how is that working out for you?"
"Fine, just fine, but do tell me, Nil, have you heard of a corporation known as the Gestalt?"
"The company that hired me is called the Gestalt; I found it through an ad in the newspaper. I don't have any face-to-face dealings with the Secret Society, and the dealings I have with the Gestalt are done now through the messengers. I believe they work for the Gestalt, too, but I can't be sure… I mainly deal with processing new members."
"You have never met the group of people you work for; it seems rather strange does it not?"
"No, it seems typical of the usual protocol for the Secret Society."
"The Gestalt is the same group as the Secret Society?"
"No…" Nil paused. "The Gestalt is an affiliate of the Secret Society."
"I understand, Gestalt aids the Secret Society. Well then, I assume, or rather, I suppose you don't know how I could meet with anyone from the Gestalt?" R. probed.
"All I know is where if I can remember the way… all I know is the building where I was recruited and signed my contract" Nil laughed.
"And where is that building where you were recruited?" R. asked.
"I cannot explain to you how it is to get there, at least not at this moment, perhaps I will show you tomorrow, I am in a rush and must go… Goodbye." Nil scurried off, again.
R. wondered if he could trust that Nil was helping him and not just doing her work as a secretary for the Secret Society and leading him to false conclusions. But what other option did he have, this was the only lead he had in a case that was neither open anymore nor an official duty.
"Legally, this corporation known as the Gestalt exists independently of the persons who have been granted the charter creating it," R. explained to Cash. "The Gestalt is given the rights and treated as an individual, and so this means it can enter into contracts, buy and sell property…" "Contribute to private political funds," Cash interjected.
"Yes," R. stated as he thought to himself this would be the perfect front for the Secret Society.
"Have you heard of the Secret Society here in the city of Cabal?" R. asked without thinking.
"Yes, why do you ask?" Cash asked.
"No reason, it just came to mind, but what do you think about it now that we're on the subject?" R. said.
"Nothing I can think of, except that it is supposedly pulling the political strings here in Cabal." Cash told him.

"Do you think such an organization could have been around this long financially and the Service does not know about it?" R. pried further.
"No, because it would have left a paper trail and the Service would have come across it here or there, but no such 'mark' as one might call it has ever been brought to our attention." Cash paused
for a moment and then went on to ask, "Why? Is that what you
think…?" "What I think the Gestalt is … no, no." R. laughed.
"Well try to think of things here in the real world, R., we're not out here chasing shadows you know.
Now what was it you were saying about a corporation just before all this Secret Society nonsense?" "Well, a corporation is treated as a separate individual and not as a group, even though it is made up of a group of individuals, which means it can be affected by individual motives, though no one individual can be held responsible for the actions of the corporation, such as the Gestalt." "Yes, and?" Cash waited.
"Well, that's just it, don't you see how well it would work to use a corporation as a front for these officials at the Treasury, specifically, Crux?" R. asked.
"Yes, I know all this about a corporation, and we already know that the Gestalt is where the city officials, at least Crux of the Treasury, was perhaps solicited and granted contributions from Gestalt, that is if I can trust my own eyes… that's bureaucracy and its usual protocol for you. I cannot say how, but I have a feeling there is more to this Treasury dealings than just illegally solicited funds." Cash confessed.
"It's more likely that there is more to the Gestalt than accepting and contributing funds for monetary reasons." R. insisted.
"Well then, what do we have on the Gestalt?" Cash asked.
"Nothing, absolutely nothing," R. concluded.
R. was relieved that Cash didn't see that the question he had asked, and the answer Cash had given were what R. suspected was behind the Gestalt 'pulling political strings'. And even more, relief came as he saw Cash was consumed with the Treasury, and neither did he question whether R. was involved in the Secret Society, nor did he suspect R.'s secret criminal deed.
R. walked out on his porch and motioned for Rook to meet him on his side of the street, and Rook came from under the street post and stood to watch to speak with R. "Send for a messenger, will you?' R. asked Rook.
"I told you before, if you want a messenger just dial zero on the black phone I put in your flat," Rook said.
"You are the one who put that damn thing in my flat!"
"Yes."
"Useless…" R. mumbled as Rook walked away and he went back into his flat, called for a messenger to be sent, and sat down to write a letter. A few minutes later there was a knock on his door. "You asked for me, Mr. R.?" The messenger said standing there, and Rook looming in the background in the same attire.
"Here." R. handed the messenger a blank envelope with a letter to Nil inside and with an official seal of the Secret Society on it, and the letter was a request that Nil meet R.

R. had dinner and was reading the weekly newspaper when he noticed in the classified section what appeared to be an ad but was just a simple yet powerful word at the bottom left corner of the page, and all it read was 'GESTALT.' R. made a note to himself to inquire at the newspaper office as to who had put the ad in the weekly edition of the newspaper's classifieds, but it was most likely that it was done, no doubt, using the anonymous messenger service. There was a knock at the door just after dusk, the messenger had returned with a response from Nil.
"Here you go, Mr. R., have a nice evening." The messenger said as he walked away into the growing darkness and vanished.
Nil requested that R. meet her in front of the archives at half past midnight.
"Probably the conscription of a new member," R. mumbled to himself.
Regardless, R. was waiting at the bottom of the steps that led up to the entrance of the archives. But it was right at two o'clock in the morning before the secretary Nil came walking around the corner to meet with him.
"I use the back entrance to exit the basement," Nil stated.
"I was not aware there was a back entrance or exit to the basement… Strange," R. mumbled to himself alone, "Well, I need you to take me to the building where you were hired, Nil." "Follow me." She said.
Nil led R. down a series of walkways behind the archives for what must have been ten or twelve blocks as they zigzagged their way through the business district of Cabal until they stood before a dark, single-story, stone building.
"Here you go." Nil pointed out the Gestalt building.
"That's it... That's all?" R. asked.
"What did you expect?" Nil asked.
"I assumed it would be something more sophisticated or modern and perhaps much larger than this place," R. mumbled to himself.
"Well, I should be going, but let me warn you that you should be careful using the messenger service for business outside the Secret Society."
"Why? Are they going to strip me of my membership?!" R. laughed sarcastically.
"No, but I wouldn't want to lose my job as secretary over it."
"Well, it was the only way I knew to reach you."
"Here…" Nil jotted down something on a piece of paper and handed it to R. "This is my telephone number, if you want to get in touch with me just call this number until I answer, early in the morning and the evening is the time to catch me home. Goodbye, R." Nil scurried off, as she had other Secret Society business to tend to that night.
R. stood and looked at the stone structure for quite some time then decided to knock on the door. But there was no door to what Nil said was the front of the ominous office building, so R. walked to the back, and on the other side of a long corridor was a door. But no one came to the locked door R. knocked. "Just have to come back with Cash to check this place out," R. told himself. R. tried to make a mental map back to the building as he walked away from it, but each walkway seemed to curve around in a way that it crossed the pathway he'd come from so that the map in his mind just led in circles.
R. was up early the following morning, he tried the personal telephone number Nil had given him, but the phone just rang and rang. R. put on his usual black suit and black tie, as he had gotten rid of all the rest of his suits and had now four including this one that he wore as a

uniform; for the Service, wore the same attire, and it looked as if one of the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society messengers and members he was sure he had seen on the walkways.
"That damn Rook," R. mumbled to himself, peeping out the curtain, "always 'shadowing' me are you, Rook?" R. laughed softly with a sarcastic grin on his face, as he decided to go out the back door of his flat, just to leave Rook thinking R. was still in his flat a good while.
"Someone is going to be waiting a long time to 'shadow' me this morning!" R. laughed as he exclaimed this to himself and went out the back door to meet Cash at the office where they agreed to meet each morning and mull over this or that thing.
"Morning!" Cash said to R. as he walked into what they called an office.
It was an old office building, and the two shared a room with just two plain desks, each with a pen, stationary, and a stapler, and there was only one phone in the back corner behind the two desks. R. couldn't say anything about the secretary, Nil, but not because Cash wouldn't believe anything he'd tell him about the Secret Society. But for fear of anyone finding out that he was a member R. knew in his mind this would implicate his involvement with the missing files at the archives. "Look what I found in the weekly paper," R. pointed out the Gestalt 'ad' he discovered.
"But there is no phone number or address or anything for that matter, what good does this do us!?" Cash exclaimed.
"We can inquire as to who placed the classified ad at the newspaper office." "I don't think these people would make the mistake of leaving a paper trail, R." "Well, what do you think?" R. asked eagerly.
"I think it's obvious that someone uses the same name as the corporation I saw on the documents at the Treasury, that is all." Cash was frustrated and R. thought of the best way to tell him about the Gestalt building.
"A friend of mine is a secretary, I met her when I worked at the archives… I don't know her too well and can't remember her name either, come to think of it, but I met her on the street yesterday evening on my way home… well, to tell the truth of it, I was just walking along and mumbled to myself something about the Gestalt and she must have heard me because after she said hello and asked if I remembered her, I said 'Yes' even though I couldn't recall her name but just her face and that she used to have conversations with me at the courtyard across from the archives. But after she said hello, she said she couldn't help but notice I mentioned the Gestalt…" "And?" Cash was impatient.
"And she said that's who she was as a secretary."
"Did you ask where she worked, I mean a physical address?" Cash was curious.
"Well, that's the strange thing, then she took me to a building. She said it was easier just to show me the way there than to give me directions or an address…"
"And?" Cash insisted.
"Just give me a minute to gather my thoughts." R. took a deep breath. "Well, I cannot remember how to get there, it is like a map in my mind that goes in circles…"
"Did you write down an address?" Cash asked with some interest or enthusiasm.
"No… There wasn't one in the office building."
"Well, hell, R., what do you mean you cannot remember how to get back there? You must know the general vicinity, take me there and we look together until you recognize the building." "Impossible," R. said bluntly.

"What do you mean impossible?" Cash was lost.
"I woke up this morning and thought, for this reason, that I shouldn't even mention it to you. So, don't make it any harder for me to remember than it already is now, Cash." R. was frustrated. "Just forget I even mentioned it."
"What about the secretary, how can we get in touch with her?" Cash asked.
"That I do not know, I just happened to meet her on the walkway on my way home from the archives."
"Well, how is that going to help us?"
"I just thought you would like to know, that is all," R. concluded.
Cash insisted that R. try and take him to the Gestalt building, and even though R. couldn't recall the zigzagged path along the walkways, he followed random walkways circling about a ten or twelve block area, side by side all that morning until Cash understood the difficult task they set out to accomplish was futile. R. said he was going to keep searching for the secretary and the only lead in the investigation they had in what he secretly worked on. R. followed along a walkway, lost in thought, and looked up to see the Gestalt building he had been at before, and his first thought was to turn around and get his partner. But he feared he could neither catch up with Cash nor find his way back if he did. R. decided to investigate the Gestalt building on his own.
R. knocked on the door and after some indefinite time passed, he heard footsteps shuffling behind the door and then a man dressed in the same dark, discreet suit the messengers and Rook wore, appeared as the door opened.
"Can I help you?" The man asked.
"I need to speak with the person in charge here. Is this the Gestalt?" R. inquired.
"I am sorry; this is just a messenger service." The man said.
"Well, is there anyone in charge of the messenger service here?"
"I suppose that would be me." The man confessed. "How can I help you?" He asked again.
"I am with the Service." R. showed his credentials. "May I come in?" R. saw no harm in asking this.
"There is no one allowed inside here except for messengers."
"But I'm an agent here from the Service, here to look over your revenue records…"
"Are you an auditor, and do you have an audit?"
"No, but I shall return with one." And then R. turned and walked away.
He could not get an audit, as he and Cash were not officially supposed to be pursuing the investigation, and R. thought to himself whether to even tell Cash about this man or his return to the Gestalt building. R. tried again to make a map in his mind of how to get back to the Gestalt building, but this ended in the same circles of confusion as the previous attempt.
For the rest of the week, Cash gave R. the duty of going through files an auditor of the Service had seized and was still holding as Crux's investigation was still pending. Cash and R. were going through the records trying to find a 'paper trail' back to the Gestalt. R. looked through hundreds of files that were not on record but confiscated all the same during the investigation; he looked through them when he came across one crumpled piece of paper, a piece of paper that appeared to be a receipt to Crux from the Gestalt. "Messenger services," R. mumbled as he read the paper. There were no legible calculations on the paper, it just appeared to be what were some undecipherable formulations, and it appeared to be written in code perhaps, but one thing struck R. as odd, on the receipt was scribbled: "Human

Resources for the S.S." And R. could only assume "S.S." must be the initials for the Secret Society, which R. showed to Cash upon his return to the office.
"Well, it has been a week since we went on the hunt for that building, but at least this is solid evidence it exists, but what do you make of it?"
"Well, I didn't mention it before because I saw no use in it, and I knew you would have just been more frustrated with the situation… Anyhow, after you left that day we tried to locate the Gestalt office -if it is an office- I was just walking aimlessly along a walkway and happened to look up and there it was, that dark, stone building. I thought it was pointless to try and catch up with you and assumed I couldn't find my way back to the building even if I did…" "Get to the point R." Cash said.
"A long story short, the man who came to the door said there were no visitors allowed, I demanded as a Service agent to enter and showed my credentials, but the man calmly asked if had an audit to serve, and of course, I did not, but this man mentioned the building was used for a messenger service, which is what I think this part here about 'Human Resources' refers." "What's this messenger service?" Cash was curious.

"Perhaps it's just a courier, but I was thinking more along the lines that these 'messengers' carry out financial transactions between the Cabal Treasury and this corporation known as the Gestalt."
"It does sound like they know what they're doing, because most people, or businessmen to be specific, would be intimidated by a Service agent showing up knocking on the door." Cash concluded.
"What strikes me as very suspicious is a messenger service located so isolated in an unmarked building that one must take what equates to a labyrinth of walkways to the periphery of Cabal," R. added.
R. decided, at last, to confess how he knew the secretary Nil, how he had been conscripted into the
Secret Society, and how Nil was involved with Gestalt, but he would, of course, leave out the 'mandate' to confiscate the revenue records from the Cabal Archives, and that it was an order he had carried out.
"R. that is the most bizarre thing I have ever heard from a Service agent… how again did you say they 'conscripted' you and for what purpose?" Cash asked.
But 'for what purpose' was what R., at least not at this time, -it was what he didn't want to answer, or couldn't confess to Cash.
"The Secret Society uses, more or less, coercion as they forged the curator's signature, my superior at the archives, saying I would lose both my promotion I was working toward and my job at the archives if I did not join, and as for what purpose I don't know yet. But perhaps they put some distance between them and me; for shortly after this occurred, I began at the Service. And now that I'm an agent, it seems like the type of organization that would at least want to avoid this since they operate secretly."
"Sounds like you are in someone's black book…" Cash concluded. "So, are you still a member?"
"I don't consider myself to be a member of the Secret Society."

"But you signed a nondisclosure of information agreement, didn't you? I am sure they have a lawyer that would discredit any information you would give in testimony." Cash was sincere but acted as if
R. was playing some elaborate joke as he laughed and was skeptical of what he called 'nonsense.'
"I was coerced, I was blackmailed, and I was not joining of my own free will?"
"You are serious about this Secret Society business, aren't you?"
"Yes, I'm being serious, and I'm being sincere."
"What are your orders?"
"Did you say *orders*?" R. quickly became suspicious. "I haven't got any 'orders' yet, but all this happened a day or two before I met you in the archives and since then I've been involved with the
Secret Society as a Service agent."
"Perhaps they are intimidated by you now, being that now you are a Service agent" Cash deduced.
"Yes, but if that's the case, this intimidation on my part won't help me get any information." "They would never know this if we undertook such an operation: what if you lost your job as an agent, and instead acted undercover … they would never know this… you could work undercover for the Service." Cash stated.
The phone rang just after R.'s confession, Cash took the call, as usual, and it was the man from the Gestalt building asserting a complaint about R.'s 'trespass', as the man worded it, -the man wanted to file a complaint against R.'s 'interrogation' of the building, which he didn't name nor did the man leave his name, but he did leave a phone number to their secretary, which Cash told him he would contact after he went over the situation, for there were mitigating circumstances that had to be considered on the account that R. was an agent for the Service, but Cash was clever and quickly replied that such behavior wasn't protocol and that it wouldn't be tolerated of a field agent, and that he would see to it that the agent that came to his premises was reprimanded, if not dismissed altogether. Cash explained what the man had said, and R. asserted that "trespass" and "interrogation" were both typical of the Secret Society and the jargon it used, as he reminded Cash that his interview was referred to as an "interrogation" by the secretary, Nil. Upon R.'s suspicions, he checked the phone number of the Gestalt secretary, and it was the telephone number Nil had given him. But this information he would keep to himself for now.
"Well, there you have it, we will release to the newspapers that an agent has been released on harassment charges and you will be free to investigate the matter and make use of your resources as a Secret Society member to help us uncover the Gestalt." Cash concluded.
"And how shall I go about it?" R. asked.
"Use the messenger service and get a name."
"I told you I have a name, X."
"That could be anyone's mark, R. it is too general, remember we need something specific, a definite name of this person obviously in charge of the Gestalt. Something so that Crux doesn't get off on a legal technicality like last time."
The assignment was approved with Zero and the next week R. read in the daily newspaper how a Service agent was dismissed for 'improper conduct by a revenue agent'. Cash was sure that the Gestalt, or this secret social order R. was now a member of, would see the

article in the newspaper and believe he was dismissed, for these organizations were much more likely to give R. "orders" again and gives up evidence to the inner operations of Gestalt if he approaches the Secret Society and embraces being a member now.
R. hoped on the other hand that Gestalt might give him some idea of how to expose X. R. got assigned a job back at the Cabal Archives as an interim curator, and within a week he received through the messenger service another mandate to confiscate a certain record. The mandate gave R. a full week to carry out this order, this gave him time to review the record before letting Cash know that he had received the "order" to do so, and R. hoped to find something to incriminate X. It was a revenue record that R. was ordered to take from the restricted sector at the archives, he retrieved the file to look it over, but it was just a list of campaign contributions, and they were made out to Crux, the treasurer. This thought of going after Crux made R. uneasy and at the same time angry; for just a short time ago he was a simple file clerk searching for a promotion at the archives, now he was guilty of the theft of State property as far as the Service would see it, and he was guilty of violating his nondisclosure of information contract as far as the Secret Society was concerned; thus both sides could rid themselves of R. within the limits of the law. But neither would win, and all this time R. felt if charges should fall on Gestalt, he should first warn Nil so that she was not caught up in any such criminal activity if she was as innocent as she seemed.
But R. could not warn her unless he knew Gestalt was to be brought down by the Service, and he felt it was out of his hands. All these things went through R.'s mind as he now tried to make sense of Crux's campaign contributions. What was it that he was campaigning for him or someone else? R. took the record to Cash the next day and explained to him this was the revenue record he was ordered to take, and R. echoed his suspicions that this might be a method of coercion to set him up for public scrutiny. Cash sent the record to have a duplicate official document made as a copy to replace it and instructed R. to go ahead and deliver the record at the end of the day to a messenger as he was ordered by the Secret Society.
"What do you make of it, that it's a record from Crux that they want to be altered or erased from the archives?" R. asked Cash.
"I am not sure, Crux doesn't have anything to gain, one would think. This is merely a record with a list of major campaign fund contributors, but these are all contributions made within the legal limit and amount." Cash went on.
"But couldn't an official solicit funds from the Gestalt individually and it shows up as two, three, or more than likely many different single donations from each Gestalt charter?" R. asked. "First, we have to find out who or what makes up the Gestalt." Cash concluded.
It had been a year now since R. was conscripted into the Secret Society, and the twelve months that had passed seemed more like twelve days to him, since every moment he felt that he was getting closer and closer to being able and expose X, and the rest of the Secret Society, revenge for having conscripted him into being a member, to begin with. But these days R. was seeing more and more people wearing the dark, discreet suits of the members of the Secret Society. He would catch himself looking twice at someone in the archives or on his way to work. He would find that he had to take a second look at this or that person, for it appeared at first glance that they wore the dark, discreet suit of the Secret Society, and it seemed as if quite a few of these people he saw at the archives or on a walkway wore them. And he assumed that they were more than likely members, and this strange dark, discreet

suit: it was neither black nor was it gray, as if the suit were but a shadow. And that was just as the people appeared to R. in public, just as shadows here and there, and R. thought of Rook and how he "shadowed" him again now back and forth to work, and it took some effort to shed this shadow when R. was obligated to report to his and Cash's office, and just as R. began to lose hope in his quest for revenge he met a certain gentleman.
"Hello, my name is Mr. Faux," the gentleman introduced himself, "I represent the Gestalt, our messenger service tells me that you claimed to be a Service agent, and said you even had credentials."
"Yes, but I was dismissed from my duties for the incident that took place at the Gestalt building, now I am just interim-curator and work here again at the Cabal Archives." R. tried to sound casual, and yet formal, too.
This man, Faux, had just suddenly appeared to R. atop the steps just beyond the outer doors to the archives; and R. noticed immediately that Faux wore one of the dark, discreet suits of the Secret Society.
"What do you want with me, Faux?" R. almost demanded.
"I'm just here to see what it was you came to our messenger service for that day?" Faux hinted around.
"Don't you already know?" R. asked.
"Perhaps, but even if I do, I'd like to hear it from you, that is, your side of the story," Faux suggested.
"Well, I have nothing to say, I was mistaken," R. said.
"I doubt you believe that," Faux continued, "but do tell me, who told you where Gestalt was located, to begin with, this is not information our members are permitted to give out. Perhaps you don't want to get anyone in trouble with their job, but I assure you nobody will be dismissed over this at the Gestalt, just simply given a warning and told not to let it happen again. But you see, R.," Faux said quietly, "no one in my corporation likes trouble," Faux then whispered, "They neither like to bother others, nor do they like to be bothered."
"No one told me how to get there; in fact, this particular person insisted she show me where the building was located."
"So, it was a 'she', now I know this much."
"Well, it was the secretary of a certain society who likes to remain anonymous." R. played the part of a member.
"I see," Faux said.
"Now you tell me what the Gestalt is, besides this messenger service building?" R. got to the point of his inquiry.
"That, I cannot say."
"Perhaps you can give me a clue as to what it does as a corporation?" R. pried.
"Gestalt is like your secretary's contractor; it likes to remain anonymous as well."
"It no longer has its full anonymity, and now that we have an understanding, just between us, are you a member of the Gestalt?" R. pointed out.
"No, no… I'm just saying, I simply represent the Gestalt."
"Then whom or what do you 'represent'?"
"I represent the Gestalt Corporation…" Faux went in circles.
"You told me this already," R. stated, "but I lost my job over this, I am sure you can give me an idea, what harm could it bring us? And whom would I tell anything to?"

"If you intend to be so adamant, let us just say I represent a group of people who invest in the organization as an instrument of change for a better tomorrow, a better future," Faux said. "How sentimental, but you don't expect me to believe you represent a group of philanthropists who dream of a utopia, do you? Remember, after all, I was a revenue agent." R. jested.
"That is exactly why I am here, as an ex-revenue agent the Gestalt would like to recruit you." Faux got to the reason he was there.
"Why don't they just conscript me?" R. mumbled.
"Excuse me?" Faux said.
"Nothing, what were you saying?"
"The Gestalt would like to obtain your services, as counsel on certain matters," Faux stated.
"Again, what is it that the Gestalt does that it would need my 'counsel'?"
"That information will be disclosed after you have signed a contract," Faux said.
"Well… I can't at this time, go now and come back some other time, please." R. was exhausted by the conversation.
"Perhaps you will have changed your mind in a month. I will check back on you, there is a generous salary in it for you. If you change your mind and are willing to cooperate with us. Good day now, Mr. R."
Faux made his way down the steps and vanished into the crowd. R. took off work from the archives, made sure Rook did not 'shadow' him, and made his way to the office, told Cash exactly what was said in the conversation with Faux, and asked what he should do.
"You will do nothing for now, we'll just have to wait and see what he offers when and if he returns in a month." Cash concluded.
"But how can I sign a contract with Gestalt as their 'counsel', even if they're serious, they'll more than likely have a nondisclosure of information agreement just as the Secret Society." R. pointed out.
"That didn't stop you from telling me information on the Secret Society, did it?"
"Yes, but it will stop anything you try to take to court, even if they are up to some kind of illicit activity." R. reasoned with Cash. "But if I led this Faux fellow along perhaps, he might slip up and tell me that one name or piece of information…"
"Maybe, but this fellow is a professional, and I don't think he'll slip up on anything, if anything he will lead you to slip up." Cash said.
"It's all that I've got for now, though," R. stated.
"This is true, but I'm worried that you will, in the process, do something to incriminate yourself." Cash voiced his concern.
"Incriminate me? What, like slip up and let them know I'm still working for the Service?" "Yes, R., that's it exactly." Cash feared.
"What, you think they're going to kill someone who they find out is working undercover for the Service?" R. laughed.
"Perhaps." "But that isn't their style, if anything they'll retreat in silence or use the same tactics of coercion to keep me silent as they have in the past… Why would they run the risk of exposing themselves to the public with such an act?"
"Well, regardless, it isn't protocol to enter a 'contract' with them as an agent of the Service." Cash assumed though this was the first time he had worked with an undercover agent, he explained.

"I'll do all that is in my power to expose the Gestalt?" R. pleaded.
"But is there anything they could coerce you with?" Cash inquired.
"No." R. ended.
R. made his way home. His thoughts were busy with Faux and the possibility of working for Gestalt; mainly, the idea of exposing X. When he turned the corner there was a messenger on the porch of his flat waiting on him.
"Here you go, Mr. R., have a nice day." He said as he walked away.
"I hate the tone in his voice when he says that" R. mumbled to himself, "almost like he is being condescending."
R. opened the letter, it was a message from Nil, she requested that he meet her after midnight and that she had something urgent to discuss with him. R. noticed the writing of the letter was a little erratic, and her tone was not as dry and formal as usual. But even though he was going to meet with her again after midnight, his mind now was occupied with entertaining the invitation from Faux to sign a contract as 'counsel' for Gestalt.
R. drank a cup of coffee as he sat and watched Rook through an opening in the window shade, an opening just for this purpose. He had not noticed, but it was already a quarter till midnight, so he hurried off and was out the door to the courtyard. Rook was not far behind him, as usual, and he made his way to the courtyard across from the archives, it was not long until Nil came walking up.
"Hello," R. said.
"How could you do this to me, R.?" "Do what to you?" R. was clueless.
"You told Faux it was a secretary who insisted on showing you how to get to the Gestalt building." Nil was in angst.
"They think it was a secretary, perhaps not you?"
"Well, they know, but they're thorough and would have dismissed me if you had given them my name."
"I apologize, but it was you who gave me a note from the curator, a note with his signature forged on it, which was the way they conscripted me into the Secret Society, to begin with, otherwise we wouldn't be having this conversation." R. retorted. "So, what can you tell me about this Faux fellow, Nil?"
"Nothing! I am not saying another word." She said angrily. "What did Gestalt say to you about the incident?" "They asked me if I knew anything new about R. who visited the Gestalt building, and I told them: 'I do not know anything about it'. And they did it through the messenger service, so I'm not sure."
"Well, who is Faux?" R. asked.
"I don't know if he's a member, but he acts like a spokesman for the Gestalt, in a year, he says, Gestalt will be a public corporation, until then it's to remain as a 'private individual' where the words he used to describe it."
"A 'private individual', imagine that."
"That's all I know, and if you remember, you signed a nondisclosure agreement contract and you're not supposed to be sharing any information about the Secret Society with any third party." "This Faux and the Gestalt are a third party, yet they work with the Secret Society?" R. probed "I don't know much about it. I know nothing about my employer except that Faux is the one who had the order to recruit me for Gestalt. As part of my duty, I was granted the

job I do with the Secret Society, an 'outside party' is how it was written, again I don't know that much about it, and to be honest, I like it that way." Nil said.
"What else, then, have you heard about Faux?" R. searched.
"That's all I know, what I've told you," Nil stated.
"You do not have any idea the kind of people you work for?" R. added.
"No, and as I've told you, I prefer not to know," Nil said, again.
"Even if the people you're working for are conscripting people as members to do their dirty work… even if they're involved in all kinds of illicit activities, both private and public political propaganda, and still you don't want to know anything about them." R. was frustrated.
"Who are you to judge, you chose to become a member and could have chosen not to be one?" Nil pointed out.
"This is true, I suppose, but it isn't because I'm a coward, however, it is because I, too, didn't want to lose my job."
"Perhaps, but maybe you're just like the other members of the Secret Society, maybe you like being involved in all this 'propaganda' as you put it?" "I just want revenge," R. stated.
"Revenge! –revenge for what, signing up as a member when you could have chosen not to join?" "Perhaps, so it seems for now. For now, I must go, and I will see you some other time. I hope sooner than later, Nil. Goodbye."
Nil was left confused and frustrated, a young lady just trying to get by in a world where her life was somehow, R. felt, dictated by inexplicable forces that were beyond their power to control. And R., day by day, felt he had to put up more resistance to whoever or whatever it was that seemed to play the role of his and her fate; and at that moment R. spotted Rook "shadowing" him, and feeling facetious, he dropped back to strike up a conversation with him on the way home.
"Hello, Rook, are you having fun being R.'s 'shadow' on this excellent evening tonight?" Rook was silent; he didn't know what to make of R.'s unusual and suddenly bizarre behavior.
"It's okay, Rook, after all, you and I spend enough time in close enough proximity that we're, more or less, just like neighbors, wouldn't you agree?" "I suppose," Rook mumbled.
"Tell me, Rook, what do you think about this fellow who works for Gestalt?"
"I can't say I know who or what you are talking about."
"You must have met him or heard about him from the messengers, his name is Mr. Faux, and the Gestalt …" R. broke off mid-sentence, as he remembered what Nil said about the information she gave him, that he was to keep it secret. "Well… this Faux fellow is unimportant to us anyhow. But tell me, did you join the Secret Society voluntarily Rook or were you coerced, I mean were you conscripted as was I." "I joined of my own free will."
"Everyone joins of one's own free will, I suppose, so what did they do, threaten to have you evicted or dismissed from your job?"
"No, I was offered a job," Rook stated.
"Well, how did you learn about the job, stalk poor R. in the middle of the night and they decided you would be perfect for the job?" R. joked.
"The secretary, Nil, introduced herself as I was coming out of the Employment Office, she said her associates had a job to offer, and it was the way she worded it: 'associates' she said, and I knew it wasn't just another dead-end job, and the Secret Society sees that I'm satisfied: they pay well and see to it that any other needs I have are covered," Rook told R.

Rook was more open than R. expected. R. thought Rook would just remain silent and let him ramble about this or that on his opinion of the Secret Society. But Rook hadn't been conscripted, so he said and seemed to be quite content with his job as a 'shadow' of R., as a watchman for the Secret Society. Perhaps, R. thought for a brief moment, his life would be a great deal easier if not a great deal less miserable, if he would just surrender himself to the fate of the life of being a loyal member of the Secret Society. But thoughts of revenge suddenly rushed back into his mind and overwhelmed his thoughts. "A 'private individual' says Faux," R. mumbled.

And then R.'s thoughts returned to the decision he must make as to whether he would sign a contract with the Gestalt. Depending on what would be his duty, he thought "Yes," for he thought he might gain knowledge of the "associates" of Gestalt, all again with the kind of jargon particular to the Secret Society; ultimately, so that he might gain knowledge of X.

R. didn't feel this decision to be too urgent to the situation at hand, he could always tell Faux he needed more time to think about it. But the idea of asking Faux permission to go over the contract with his lawyer was, in the end, what R. decided he would do. Whether he showed it to Cash was still a question, and he thought of how sincere Rook's deep voice sounded of loyalty to the Secret Society. R. wondered how many members of the Secret Society appreciated their duty such as Rook and how many were bitter conscripted members, as was he, only following a "mandate" and only carrying out "orders" as was he, and feeling alienated from the secret order they were supposed to be loyal members, the converts of the Secret Society.

R. remembered what a messenger had one time said, that the Secret Society conducted, for the most part, its business late at night; for he decided now that he was back at his flat and bored, to go and roam the walkways behind the archives in hopes he might cross paths with Nil to ask how to reach Faux; for, R. could not get a hold of her on the phone. He was not sure which side of the law he was on, as if the line between him being good and being bad merged, and making it clearer, though, as to where he stood in these ethics of the underground of Cabal. But he almost felt a sense of shame in this façade and only masked it behind a lie. Nil had said she worked for both Gestalt and the Secret Society, and she seemed an honest lady; her only tragic flaw to R. was that she seemed too naïve to know the political and personal agenda she unknowingly helped to propagate: this routine conscription of people who just wanted to keep a job, which the Secret Society exploited.

The notion crossed R.'s mind again that Nil herself might have just been putting on a front, just as he felt he was, that she might be working with the Secret Society and Gestalt, that she was simply feeding him bits and pieces of the riddle but would never reveal the whole puzzle; that critical, crucial piece that would let R. solve this enigma. But just then he saw a shadow walking toward him; and how convenient R. thought that he should meet Faux on these hundreds of walkways he aimlessly wandered that night, on a night he sought Faux out himself all night.

"Faux," R. spoke indifferently. "Strange that I should come looking for you and to find you in the dark of the night, of all places, in the maze of Cabal walkways."

"Let us not be too harsh now, Mr. R., it's just coincidence that we have met here on this walkway, as I just happen to have been coming from the Gestalt building, and I'm sure you knew where you were going at this time of night, and to think you are lost… I just can't believe that."

"Insignificant," R. remarked. "I have a request to ask of you as a representative of the Gestalt." "And what might that be?" Faux was curious.
"I will consider signing a contract with you as 'counsel,' but first let me go over it with my lawyer. Would you sign such a contract without first getting legal consultation or at least a second opinion from an objective party?" "I suppose not, but I'll have to get it approved," Faux stated.
"Approved by whom?" R. insisted.
"By the corporate board, of course, I am only a spokesman for the Gestalt, and I can't make up the rules as I go along. I, too, have superiors." Faux suggested this to see where R.'s loyalty rested: in the Secret Society or something else.
"Let me ask you a question, Faux."
"Please do."
"What do you know about Crux the Treasurer in Cabal?"
"I used to work with Crux some years ago… Why? Is he in trouble?"
"I mention Crux and the first thing you ask is if he's in trouble. Why do you think he's in trouble, Faux, what trouble do you suspect"?
"Well, he's in politics, and one's name is not mentioned on dark walkways late at night in politics unless one's in some kind of trouble."
"Clever fellow, Faux, but I found in my investigation while I was still an agent that corruption is what may trouble Crux. And do you know why?"
"Please, do tell."
"Crux caught our attention when I found a receipt with the Gestalt as having donated funds, but we had our suspicions that he had solicited funds from each charter instead of the Gestalt Corporation, which all the members are considered under the law as an individual, a 'private individual,' as you would say."
"The revenue service would've had Crux arrested if the Service had proof of this… Has he been arrested?"
"No, we lacked information, a list of persons who have been granted the charter in creating Gestalt."
"Then you have nothing but some overzealous agent's theory, this slander of yours seems to be Crux's only trouble."
"Rest assured this was my ex-partner Cash's notion of Crux, both in business and politics. You must forgive Cash, he's bitter, sitting behind a desk all day chasing shadows until he comes up with grandiose ideas of corruption." "I see," Faux said.
"Well, will you allow me to look over the Gestalt contract with my lawyer?" "As I've told you, Mr. R. first I must get approved by the corporate board."
"Then I have your word you'll do all that's in your power that my request is granted?" "If you're sincere and this is what it will take to get you to sign the contract… Yes, I'll see to it personally that your wish is my wish and that you be able to go over the contract and its terms with a lawyer before you sign it, but only if you tell me now: even though it is the Gestalt that has sought out your counsel, why do you offer it, considering the 'contract' will be agreeable to you?" "I am merely tossing a coin in the air and letting you decide which side it will land," R. suggested. "What do I have to look forward to anyhow; the duty of a curator or just a file clerk once a decision is reached at the archives?"

R. was so caught up in his efforts to fool Faux of his real intentions that he was sincere, it seemed; he believed in his mind that what he said was the truth, but the truth was that R. wanted to see the Gestalt, Mr. Faux, and the Secret Society and especially X. suffer at any cost now, he believed that everyone in this whole affair was on that line that merged, to where each person believed to some extent that one was beyond the law, that the law didn't apply to them as an individual but only to the whole group, which in doing so seemed to exclude the individual, all except one's conscience; and one's conscience operated toward that of self-preservation, and that's how R. felt now that he'd been coerced and conscripted to the Secret Society: It was a matter of his survival.

It was early in the morning by the time R. made it back to his flat, and Rook stood at the base of a lamp post where he was to be expected. R. decided to give Nil a call; he picked up the receiver of the black, rotary phone and shuffled some papers on the desk around until he found her number. Nil answered after just a few rings.

"Hello?" Nil said.

"Good morning, Nil."

"R., is that you?"

"Yes, it's R., did I wake you?" R. asked.

"No, I just got home from work." Nil sounded exhausted.

"Good, because I need to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"Cash and I found an ad, well I did anyhow, -I found what appears to be an ad a week or so ago. It's not even really an ad, but it's listed with the rest of the classifieds. It reads simply: 'Gestalt.' What do you know about it?"

"I was told to put the ad in the weekly newspaper, they said it would make the corporation seem more familiar to people after they read it and asked about it as if potential employees wouldn't stray away when asked to come work for Gestalt. The idea was to show the ad also when asking a person to come and work for us, it is an odd idea, I know this, but with the Gestalt one is dealing with eccentric individuals."

"And who told you to place the ad, Faux?" R. insisted.

"Yes, but…"

"Have a good day, Nil."

"Goodbye," Nil said as the other end of the line went dead.

R. hoped that someone else had put Gestalt in the classified ads instead of Nil and that she could point him toward such a person, but it was what R. thought was another dead end.

R. returned to work. It took R. the whole morning to locate the register he sought after he first had to search almost half a century of the chronicles to find a single entry that simply read: "Gestalt founded." It was just a year, not a precise date. R. then had to look through perhaps an entire year of a list of names in the register and the organization that the people belonged to. In the end, R. discovered that there was one page torn from the register, which must have been a list of the charter member's signatures of Gestalt; for it was nowhere else to be found in the entire register.

"Another dead end!" R. said in disgust, as the pilfering fingers of some thief had managed to conceal the identity of Gestalt. And he wondered: Was he reduced to just a thief?

"Anyone would do it," R. told himself, "under the right circumstances."

R. reported to Cash and his office after he was finished at the archives. Rook was nowhere to be seen. While R. waited on Cash, he was struck with a sudden urgency to arrange a meeting and speak again with Faux. R. scribbled a note to inform Cash he had stopped by the office, but that he had an urgent matter to be dealt with and would report back at noon; and he asked Cash to wait for him to return.

R. made his way back to his flat; he went to the rotary phone and dialed zero to request a messenger be sent, and then he sat down to write a letter to Faux requesting a copy of the contract so he could go over it immediately with his lawyer. The messenger came and R. told him it was urgent and that he was to return a document to him from Faux, to whom the letter he was sending was to be delivered.

"Strange." R. thought, as the messenger came and left without saying a word about the letter being sent to Faux, the spokesman for Gestalt, and the letter had nothing to do with the Secret Society. This seemed to affirm what R. had already suspected, that the two were one inseparable whole. Though, it was inexplicable to R. the inner workings of the matter, except he felt reassured the messenger service at the Gestalt building was the one the Secret Society used as well. R. lay down on the couch to take a nap, and the messenger returned, announcing with two short knocks on the door.

"Here is your request, Mr. R., have a nice evening."

R. opened a large envelope and inside was a document, along with a strange but short reply to it: 'We have decided it's in both our interests to let you and the lawyer look over the terms of the contract before you sign. We offer this as a show of good faith, for we are confident that you will find the terms of the contract agreeable to you." R. gathered his things, slipped out of the back, out of Rook's sight, and was off to the office.

R. was pleased to see Cash had waited on him at the office; he only had to wait a few minutes for him to write up a daily summary; for R. asked to speak to him alone, the two of them retreated to their office for privacy.

"Faux, or the Gestalt, has sent a copy of the contract so I can go over it first with a lawyer before entering into any obligations," R. told him.

"And I suppose I'm your lawyer?" Cash said with a curious look on his face. "...don't you think that we should contact a real lawyer so he can interpret what I'm sure is a nightmare of rhetoric?"

"No. I'm sure that this contract will bind me to silence; and rather than sign the contract in hopes that I might testify what I discover in my undercover work with Gestalt, I have a better suggestion: Gestalt has surely laid out elaborate clauses that will prevent any testimony on my behalf from ever being heard, or at least, never be allowed to be considered in a lawsuit. Instead, I propose we look over the general terms of the contract. I will sign it and go to work for Gestalt, and in doing so provide you with inside information to help you build a legitimate case against Gestalt that denies any involvement on my part. To do so, I will have to officially resign as a revenue agent and will work at the archives if necessary. But I don't think this will be the case, for Gestalt will be paying me. And in the end, we'll bring down this veil of secrecy that this corporation is shrouded." R. explained.

"It sounds like you have your mind made up, and that I couldn't stop you even if I tried, could I?" Cash said.

"No, I suppose not. I'm determined to not only help bring about the demise of the Gestalt Corporation, but I'm equally driven to expose X. Gestalt is nothing but a treasury, a way to move large amounts of money, which I suspect is just to maintain the secrecy of the Secret Society and to keep the political status quo in favor of the Secret Society. Whatever agenda this organization has can be known through its shadow, the Gestalt. And I can find the paper trail that will lead us to expose it."
"But I can't let you take this risk. It's too dangerous, not as much as is it for you, but it puts at risk the reputation of the Service. Don't you see, R., what you and I'd be doing would be as criminal as what you accuse Gestalt of doing? And I'd be forced to expose it publicly. And in doing so, Gestalt would surely know you planned to leak information about its activity to me. I'm sorry old friend, but this plan won't work." Cash told R.
"But can we put a stop to these people who think all they do is above the law?"
"This may be true; they may think and act as if they are above the law; but you, too, are not above the law. And you can't fight this way. What you speak of doing is an injustice to the law, the very system that stands for justice, as it would be corrupt in the eyes of the law to follow such a course of action." Cash argued.
"What are we to do now?" R. pleaded.
"First, you turn down the contract; then we do what may come." Cash concluded.
R. had come to another dead end, but he had not refused the idea of the contract with Gestalt, which was still an option to be later negotiated. R. returned home and used the black, rotary phone to summon a messenger to his flat. And while he waited, he went outside and crossed the street.
"Good evening," Rook said with his deep voice, and the greeting riddled R.
"What made you in such a good mood this evening?" R. was quite curious.
"Nothing, except this, is the last night I'll shadow you," Rook informed him.
"I can't say that I'll miss you, and I'm sure you feel the same. After all, you won't have any more trouble trying to 'shadow' me. Elusive, am I not?"
"Not as elusive as you think. Most of the time I just didn't bother to trouble myself following you in circles around Cabal, there's no harm you can bring to anyone anyhow."
"I may not have brought any harm to anyone, but that was not my intention. I can say I share no brotherhood with any other Secret Society member, for who can one trust? And if one can't trust one's brother or sister, one's alienated, are they not?"
"Why should one feel alienated?" Rook paused. "The Secret Society offers you a chance for brotherhood, doesn't it? You just refuse to share in it,
perhaps." "And perhaps for good cause, Rook." R. insinuated.
. walked back to his flat and sat in a chair on the porch. Rook could not see him as he sat in the shadows and waited for the messenger to arrive. The messenger arrived shortly after R.'s conversation with Rook. He had written the message a few days before. It was an attempt to get X. to agree to meet with him.

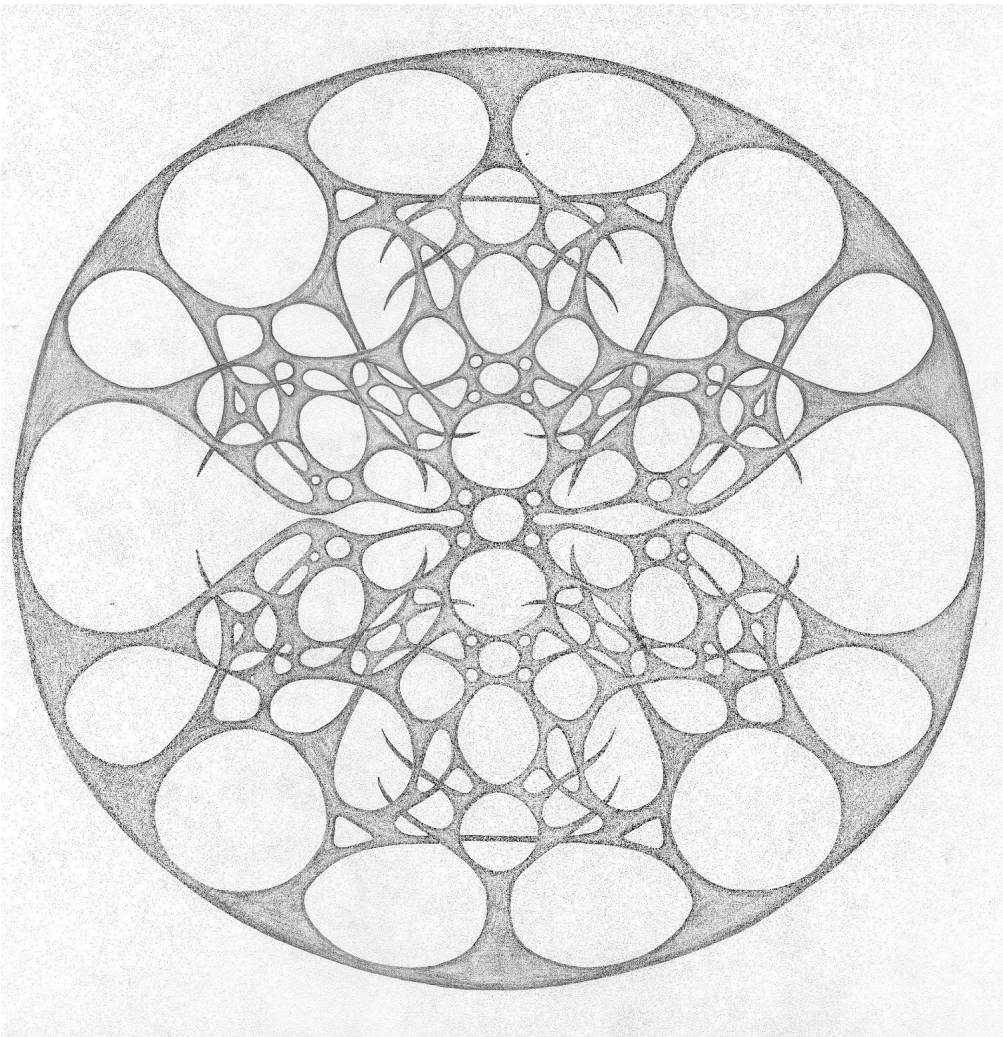
"Deliver this message to X. and tell him a response is imperative," R. instructed the messenger.
"I shall return by midnight... if it's at all possible. X. does not deal directly with messengers."
R. went inside and sank back into his leather armchair as he waited for the messenger to return. It was not clear now what deceived R. In the beginning, it was fear that led him to be conscripted; yet as an agent, he was given a chance to redeem himself. R. sat in the dark, and he waited in his flat for a response that he felt he deserved. And then the rotary phone began to ring, but nothing urged him to answer it. R. was lost within the shadows of secrecy, and on a relentless quest for revenge: nothing will stop him now…

Blacklist

R. had heard the rumors that went around at the Cabal Archives, that somewhere, someone, or some group had a Black Booklist, that not only recommended but required one to read from it and that upon one's name being entered into it, that person would then hold sway over the forces of secrecy that R. had had still not come to terms with in the Cabal. The agency, which R. knew as the Gestalt, wielded the book's power and capacity for control and subjected it to their will... But could R. do the same? Who was really in control in Cabal? It was the Gestalt Corporation, and this R. had known this in the back of his mind for some time.

Gestalt

It was the Freethought Police of Cabal that made up the Gestalt: an organization whose motto is: the sum of individual's is greater than the sum of the group's whole as it is in relation to R. and R. was blacklisted as a Freethinker. The more R. pushes away the stronger the Gestalt. It was said that Freethought was considered a "figment" and any one engaged in Freethinking will be rounded up and shot by a firing squad. But R. is marched before the executioners and then reprieved. Instead R. learns that Freethinkers guilty of Freethought will be given a dose of Enditall and put to sleep.



Catharsis (full circle)

The Box

I awoke naked on the floor of a metallic room. It was bright, and the silvery metal walls of the room penetrated through my eyes like needles. I began to panic. I tried to remember how I got there. I tried to remember my name. Nothing. I thought, but nothing came to my mind. I searched the room anxiously. And I cried, but for what? The ceiling was out of reach, and I could not tell where the light came from, but again, there was nothing. I searched for a shadow, but there was nothing. The room's brightness pierced through me, and my head ached. I felt short of breath and paced quickly back and forth. The light faded to black…

I woke up after passing out. In my horror, I had hyperventilated myself into unconsciousness. There was a small pool of blood in front of my eyes as I lay there, still not moving. I brought a hand around and dipped a finger into the viscous liquid, and the preternatural light that penetrated the room magnified the red of the blood. I swirled my finger through it. I was pacified temporarily and did not notice the pain in my head caused by bouncing it off the hard floor. I tried again to grasp a memory. Thoughts were swimming in my head, drowning in confusion, but they could not produce anything to help ease my fear. I tried to think of my name. I tried to think of the year, my age, my birthday, and I tried to think of anyone -nothing.

I looked around the room. In one of the corners, there was a blue ball. It was made of rubber and fit my hand as if it were made especially for me. I threw it across the room, and it bounced out of control until it came back at me and hit me in the head where I had cut it earlier when I passed out. I let the ball roll to a stop and left it there. I tried to imagine what was beyond these walls, but everything was vague and fuzzy. I thought of words I knew and tried to place pictures of the objects in my mind.

I paced the room tirelessly, but nothing I could do seemed to help this emptiness of mind. Who was I? I knew I was a man, but how old? I was not young, nor was I old. I decided that I was 25 for some reason, but I don't know why, and there was no way to determine if I was or was not. But I had faith that I was 25, which gave me some hope that I might figure out where I was lost. I began to bounce the ball, and what must have been hours –though there was no way of telling- passed. Thoughts had all but dissipated from my mind. I felt the urge to urinate, put the blue ball down, and began to pace the room again. Then, as if something or someone knew my needs, an invisible door in the wall opened. I should have feared it, but I did not. It opened to a lavatory. Inside, there was a toilet, a sink, and a shower. Mounted on the wall above the sink were a toothbrush, razor, and hair trimmers, all three attached with a thin line of flexible wire. A pair of fingernail clippers and scissors were on a shelf, also fastened with the strange wire.

The same strange light was in the lavatory. I relieved myself and went to wash my hands in the sink. A pump came out of the wall beside the sink. I pressed it down, and it produced soap. I put my hands under the faucet, and the water flowed out. I washed my hands and left them under the water for some time, letting it flow over them and stimulating and relaxing me simultaneously. I stepped away from the sink, and it retreated into the wall. I looked beside me and concluded that the toilet must have done the same when I had left it to go to the sink. A huge towel hung from the ceiling,

and I dried my hands off with it. I stepped into the shower through a door in the corner of the lavatory. As with the sink, when I stepped under the showerhead, the water came on, and there was a pump that produced soap, and I used this to wash with. The water felt so relaxing that I stood under it for quite some time. I began to prune and stepped out of the shower as the door closed the second I was outside. I dried off with the towel still hanging from the ceiling and stepped away. It, too, retreated to the ceiling from which it must have descended. The walls of the lavatory closed in such a way that they forced me back into the open, breathing room.

I felt tired, so I fell asleep on the hard floor. I was somewhat disoriented when I woke, as I had no way of telling how long I had slept. But to my surprise, I slept well on the hard floor and felt refreshed, at least until the confusion of the metallic room suffocated my thoughts again. I paced around the room and noticed the blue ball I had played with earlier.

I picked up the ball and began to bounce it in a soothing rhythm as I had before. This time, my mind was distracted as hunger bit at my stomach. And as before, with the lavatory, a door opened, and inside was a round table. It was constructed out of the same metallic material as everything in this place where I now dwelled. The table was round, though, and this was a change in scenery, at least from the room's sharp angles. Placed on the table was a plate of food. There was also a large glass of water to go with it. I sat down to eat my meal.

There were utensils: a spoon, fork, and a harmless knife, but they were secured with the same type of thin wire as the toothbrush and razor in the lavatory, as was the plate itself and the glass of water. All the implements, as was everything in this metallic abode, were made of the same strange metal material as the walls that enclosed me. There was also a napkin that hung from below the table under the plate of food that reached well enough to use conveniently as I ate.

After my meal, I left the room. As I had suspected, the door closed behind me as I entered the main room again. The door to the lavatory opened simultaneously with the closing of what I assumed was the dining room. This was good because I immediately felt that I had to have a movement after my meal. After relieving myself, I stepped into the shower again. Afterward, I shaved and brushed my teeth. When I removed the toothbrush from its mount, another pump came out of the wall. I put my finger underneath it and pressed down on the pump, and toothpaste came out. There was no mirror.

Routine. Had I done this before? And would I remember it the next time? I had not noticed this silence that I lived within until now.

I ran my hand across my head, but I had no hair. I kept it shaved off. And my fingernails were well trimmed. It seemed like a lifetime now since I had awoken in the room. Yet I still had no sense of time, except I had memories now. Of course, my only memories were after waking in this silvery room. Always was my mind returning to that awakening, to that delirium, to that moment I ran my finger through that red pool of blood. But the blood was gone. I had not even thought about it until now, but I don't remember seeing it after the wall opened and lured me in.

I sat content in the room, bouncing the blue ball. I had given up trying to remember my name. Who did I need to tell it to? Who would call it out that I might respond? I talked to my blue ball now and then by accident. I spoke aloud often when I thought also, by accident. That is how I realized I found comfort in the room's silence. As soon as I realized I was talking aloud, I became quiet, as if I did not want anyone to hear me, as if someone or something was listening. This feeling of someone watching me had grown more vigorous in passing, but I did not know what to make of it other than I feared it enough to try and put it out of my mind whenever the thought arose. So, I found comfort in my blue ball. Bouncing it and whispering to it on the occasion, I felt brave enough to speak.

Then, one time, I woke, and my friend, my precious blue ball, was gone. If only it had a name, I would cry it out. I sat down at the round table to eat. And I continued to sit there, not eating. As I stared into what now seemed an emptiness, a space without time, a cup made from the same stainless-steel-like metal arose out of a hole that opened in the center of the round table. I noticed I was standing, out of alarm, looking down into the cup and the black liquid it contained. And just in front of it, engraved on the table where the cup appeared, was a symbol of the death's-head, a skull and crossbones, and I thought of death. I knew what the cup of black liquid was for, that it was poison, and I felt the same strange feeling I felt since I woke in this place, that someone or something was watching me.

I gave the notion of drinking the black drink a thought. But I couldn't drink it. My blue ball was gone. Perhaps it had been only one awakening since it left me, perhaps three. I lost track of how many times I had slept since it disappeared, but I could still remember it. I worked on returning to my routine, but everything was different. I paced the room every time I woke until I became tired, and then I sat and stared at the walls for some unknown time until sleep came. I dreamed when I slept now of my bouncing blue ball and was eager to sleep so that I could be with it once again.

I awoke. I lay there momentarily, trying to return to sleep, to my Blue… And then I was wide awake, curled up in the corner of the room. There was a girl asleep on the floor across the room. I had first felt fear but then curiosity. She woke and began to pace the room frantically, as did I some distance ago. Then I went from being curious to being amused as I watched her face, disoriented and confused, search the walls for a memory that was not there. And as did I, she passed out. I sat and watched her, examined her until she woke again. "Who are you?" I asked. And it had been quite some time ago that I had heard this voice, but now I did not fear it. Nor did I fear being heard. I wanted to be heard. But the girl could not speak. She only shrugged her shoulders. Yet it did not matter that she was mute. I could read quite well the silent language of her body.
"I am…?" But I did not know my name.
"I am a friend," I said. She nodded her head in agreement as she pointed to herself.
"You are my friend?" I asked.
"Yes." She said again, nodding her head.
"I am 25," I told her. She held up two fingers with one hand and all five with the other.
"Yes," I said. "I am 25, and you are…?" I paused and tried to think of a name. I did not know what to call her, but I felt she needed a name.
"You are…" I said the first thing that came into my mind. "You are Hope with blue eyes," I told her, but she looked confused. She felt her eyes with her hands as if she tried to look at them with her fingertips. "Your eyes are blue," I told her, and she smiled.

I was happy again. Though I never realized that I was happy before with my blue ball, I knew it now. I still miss my blue ball now and then, but now I have her. Who was she? Where did she come from? I did not know. But, like everything else, I did not understand. It did not matter. Nothing mattered except her now. I told her about my blue ball, and she listened.
Things had changed since she arrived. There was an extra plate of food and a glass of water on the round dining table. I showed her around and explained how the doors opened and closed.
I have a shadow now. I have a mirror now. It was Hope's presence and her eyes. She followed every footstep I took, and I reflected on her blue eyes. I had a past. I had faith that I was 25.
We woke up again. But this time, instead of being across from me in the room, I woke, and Hope was beside me. And I felt that feeling again that I had felt before I lost my blue ball, that feeling of happiness… And from then on, I missed my ball no more. As soon as I put its memory behind me, it appeared again in the grave part of the room. It was obscured from my vision as I lay there and kissed my new love awake. When I lifted my head to rise, I saw it in the far opposite corner. I was happy, though, for the return of my blue ball. She and I had it to play with. I bounced it to her, and she bounced it back to me. The blue ball, her blue eyes, and I together, as all my fears were put at ease. I could scarcely remember my ball even being lost. I did not care where it had been; it was just back.

All three of us were friends. And it seemed as if neither I, nor her, nor our blue ball had ever been without each other. I watched her play with the blue ball.
One time, after awakening, as we had done a hundred times, I noticed Hope had become ill. Then she surprised me, and with her finger, she wrote invisible symbols on the wall. Hope pretended to write! But to my despair, I could not make out the letters or words she wrote. And then she whispered.
"I can remember…" She struggled with the words "…everything."
The sound of her voice was soothing and beautiful. I was happy again, happier than ever before. Now she could talk and remember, but she was happy no more. And the more questions I asked, the worse her sickness became.
“What can you remember?” I asked her. “What is outside these walls?”
But she said no more. In the corner, she sat with one hand on her head and the other on her stomach. She searched the walls as if she were looking for some invisible door that was not there. As I grew tired, I lay down beside her in the corner.
Then I woke again, and she was gone.
I paced the room frantically. My blue ball lay there alone. I stopped and looked across the room at it… I, too, was alone. I walked over to it and rolled it with my foot for a moment. But it was just an object now. Not a friend like before, just a ball that happened to be blue. I picked up the ball and threw it. The ball bounced about the room and then retreated to the corner.
The dining room door opened. I hesitated but went inside. If ever I was to see Hope again, I must eat. I put a bite of food in my mouth and struggled as I chewed and swallowed it without pleasure. After the first bite, I sat and stared at the wall for some time. The walls began to breathe, and I didn't even notice at first. But then, in anger, I cried out as I left the room and headed for the comfort of the shower.
"I've been drugged," I exclaimed to my blue ball as I passed it and headed to the shower. But after that, I said no more.
Time passed. I had not eaten, and my thin figure was evidence of this. I did not even pace the room anymore. I only sat there, cross-legged, listened to the rhythm of my heart beating, and breathed breath after breath.
I thought back to when I had last eaten when I hallucinated from the drug in my food. If I gave in and ate, I would submit to whatever was watching me. I did not eat as I sank deeper into this room alone. I must eat. I need food to know. And like clockwork, the dining room opened before me. I crawled to my feet, walked in, and seated myself. The thought had left my thoughts. And I ate as a man starving again, for that is what I was.

Awake. I felt awake again. The walls were breathing at me as I got up and headed to the shower after some time staring at the round table. I saw my blue ball, and it was alive again. Rain poured down from the shower, and I relaxed in relief. I shaved my head again and trimmed my fingernails… I had disappeared from time, and it could not find me here. Neither the memories of time past nor the fear and terror of existence could pervade these walls now.

Every awakening, I looked forward to my plate of food. Afterward, I spent some time in the lavatory grooming myself and playing in the rain. I had even taken my ball there. Its name is Blue, and it is alive. I know because it talks to me. We play in the rain all the time. And then we walk about the vast breathing room.

"Do you think she will ever come back to you?" Blue asked.

"I know she will." I thought. "You came back to me, and so will she."

"But how do you know? Maybe she doesn't like you anymore?"

"Are you jealous? Don't you remember how we all played together?"

"Bounce me." Blue insisted.

So, I did.

I bounced my blue ball to the rhythm of my heart beating. When I bounced Blue, it took me outside these walls. And I stood there naked in an open space. I walked upon some swirling silvery floor. The blackness made the distance unclear. I looked up, and I could see Hope. She stood on some different floor above me.

"What are you doing?" Blue asked, and I was back within the walls.

"I saw Hope," I said.

"Where? She's gone." Blue replied.

"Where has she gone? You know, don't you? I know you must because you left the room once before. Or did you? I can't remember."

"I am just a ball. Maybe you're thinking of something else." "But…" But I drifted away as the walls began to melt.

I woke up in the middle of the room. I looked around for Blue. It was sitting in the corner, sulking. I paid it no mind and went to a wall, no wall in particular, and began to pound on it. An invisible door opened, and I entered the dining room to eat.

"Do you want to come?" I asked Blue. But as usual, it didn't talk to me upon awakening, only after my meal.

"Fine," I said. "I will eat by myself."

I sat down, ate all my food, and drank my glass of water. I tried to shake a dream I had. It was always the same, and I could not understand it.

"What are you thinking about?" Blue asked, and I realized I had wandered back into the room. "I can't remember now that you interrupted me," I said. "Anyway, I see you are speaking again. You sure are moody every time we wake."

"Can we go play in the rain now?" It asked excitedly.

"I suppose, but don't interrupt me anymore. I think I have found some clue to where Hope is."

"Where is she 25?" Blue laughed. "Have you been dreaming again?"

"Shut up." I laughed at it now. "My dreams are… they are like a key -Ah, yes! That is it. I need a key."
"For what?" It asked. "To unlock those invisible doors you are always imagining and looking for. You only know that because she told you."
“Well, at least she tried to help me find a way…” I said.
"What, a way out of here. There's nothing outside these walls, you fool. I told you that before. I know. I have been outside them, and you have not."
“What then?” I asked. “What is outside these walls?”
“Nothing, I told you.”
“But what is nothing?” I was confused.
“You’re too stupid to understand. You think too much, you know?” Blue replied.
“Let's go,” I said. “I don’t think you know anything, stupid ball.
We went and took a shower in the rain. I gave Blue a good bath. It floated around in the water stream at the shower's bottom. I watched it sweep around in the currents. The swirling of the water comforted me like nothing else I could imagine besides maybe Hope. But I did not even think of her as I watched the water funnel. I crouched down and reached my hand into the water, then my arm, and then I dove in.
I could see Blue above me, floating in the waves. But below me was Hope. She sat at the bottom of the pool of water, reaching her arms, stretching toward me, pleading with her blue eyes. I tried to swim down to her, but...
“What are you doing?” Blue asked as I raised my head out of the water at the bottom of the shower, choking and coughing up water.
“I saw Hope. She’s at the bottom of this pool of water.”
"You have gone mad." Blue laughed. "Maybe when you hit your head that time, it knocked something loose inside there."
“When did I hit my head?” I asked as I dried us both off with the towel.
"When you first woke up here. I remember. I might add that you roughed me up a little that day and for no reason."
"I don't remember. Well…maybe a little. But I did nothing to you."
“Whatever,” Blue said. “Let's go play in the room.”

I bounced Blue in that steady rhythm I always seem to seek. And then I was above the room on that same silvery, swirling floor as before. This time, I could see myself below, bouncing that cantankerous blue ball. And then I saw her, Hope, standing some distance from me. I began to run toward her. And I don't believe I ever remember running before, but I was running now. I continued to run, but she was no closer than before. She waved her hand for me to come to her, and I ran faster than before.

"What are you doing now? Why did you stop bouncing me? We were going so fast, and it was just getting exciting." Blue said. "I was chasing after Hope," I said.

"Hope. Hope. Hope. It's always about Hope. What about me? I'm here right now, and I'm always here. You toss me around and entertain yourself. But all the time you play with me, you just think about her. What about me?" "You're just a ball. Hope is like me."

"And what are you?" It asked.

"I am a…" I didn't know. "I'm not a thing like you. I'm not something to just play with."

"Are you now?" It laughed.

"Stop laughing, you're the stupid one."

"But look at you, how pitiful, talking to a ball like me." It said, "You are a toy just like me, you know?"

"How's that?" I asked.

"Who do you think feeds you, and who put you here, and who makes the rain?"

"Nothing put me here. I was born here."

"How do you know; you can't even remember? But I do."

I was tired of talking. I put Blue in its corner, lay down in the middle of the room, and went to sleep. Then I woke up.

I was soaking wet. But the drug was gone.

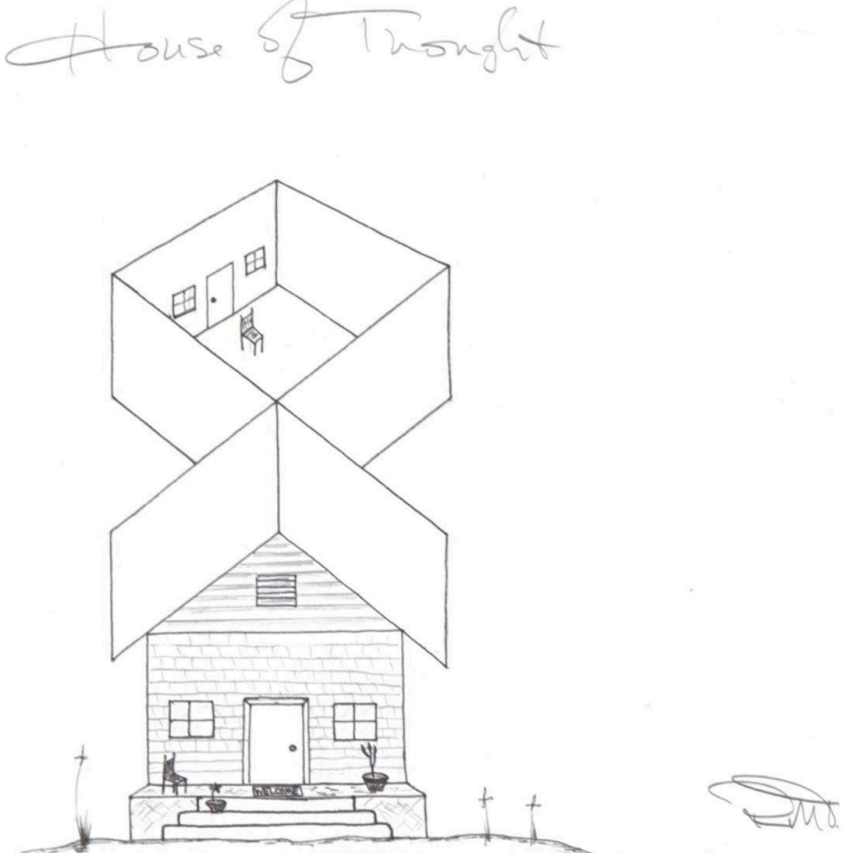
I paced the room endlessly. I picked up my blue ball, but it was different. I opened my hand, and it fell to the floor, where it bounced into the corner. There it would remain. I could not stand to look at it. It was no friend of mine. It only brought me pain, gave me Hope, and then stole it away again.

I went to take a shower. I stood under the shower. It was calm momentarily, and then it poured upon me again.

I sat down, cross-legged. I did not know what my heart was, what it looked like, or what it did, but I listened to it again and breathed breath after breath, this never-ending process. I noticed these things, the beating of my heart and my breathing each time I went to sleep.

I stood up and faced the wall, no wall in particular, and an invisible door opened to the round table. I walked over to it. I picked up the silvery cup and took it back into the room. I sat back down in the middle of the room and placed the cup in front of me. It was the only thing left to do, I thought. And I understand now what I was: Nothing. I drank the contents of the cup. My thoughts began to fade. I could feel my heartbeat and hear my breathing as if I were going to sleep.

I awoke naked on the floor of a metallic room. It was bright, and the silvery metal walls of the room penetrated through my eyes like needles. I began to panic. I tried to remember how I got there. I tried to remember my name. Nothing. I thought, but nothing came to my mind. I searched the room anxiously. And I cried, but for what? The ceiling was out of reach, and I could not tell where the light came from, but again, there was nothing. I searched for a shadow, but there was nothing. The room's brightness pierced through me, and my head ached. I felt short of breath and paced quickly back and forth. The light faded to black…



House of Thought

Outside of the Box

Oblivion. Where had I been before today? I could recall some vague, drifting mnemonic rippling across the waters of my perception; that someone had done this to me, but what for? I found a pair of gray, thin cotton clothes folded on the floor at the foot of the bed and a pair of black sandals. I dressed myself, for I had simply just become conscious, naked, standing and staring out a window watching a small child play under a tree in the middle of a meadow.

I paced the room. There was a desk and chair, a single bed; through an opening in the wall where a door should have been a lavatory. I opened the drawer to the desk, inside was a pen and ink, and a black book with no title or designs. I opened it, but inside there were nothing but blank white pages. The walls were all glossy white, as was the floor, fabricated from a marble-like texture. The hourglass has turned again, absorbed in some sordid convalescence; where the window had been moments ago, it was gone and instead a door of the same material as the floor and walls, appeared. It had no handle but it now opened and a man entered. He was dressed in a white uniform with black boots. He had an identification tag on his shirt that said: Orderly. I looked on my shirt and saw that I had an identification tag as well sewn onto my shirt that said: Patient.

"You are to be confined to my room until you are examined by the doctor." The voice of the Orderly was deep and resonated through the room.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You are in the Asylum. As for your journal…"

"I have a journal?" Perhaps I could figure out this enigma of my being here.

"Yes." He said bluntly.

"I insist that it should be returned to me."

"The doctor has confiscated it. It would be best if you do not dwell on the past. Your main concern for now should be to work on getting better." And then the Orderly left the room.

Then I heard the ringing of what sounded like a telephone. It was faint as if hidden in something. I first looked under the bed, but there was nothing. And I opened a large drawer in the bottom of the desk that I had not noticed before. The ringing continued as I examined the telephone; it apparently had neither number keys to dial out, nor did appear to have a connection line. I picked up the receiver and listened. I could hear a faint whispering…

Everything Here Is An Allusion

> *We discover that we do not know our role; we look for a mirror; we want to remove our make-up and take off what is false and be real. But somewhere a piece of disguise that we forgot still sticks to us. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows; we do not notice that the corners of our mouth are bent. And so we walk around, a mockery and a mere half: neither having achieved being nor actors.*
>
> - Rainer Maria Rilke

Dramaturgy is a theory within Sociology; put simply this is to say that life is analogous to a play, and society is the stage upon where individuals act out their roles; we have masks that we put on when we are on-stage, and we have another face that we take on back-stage. Rilke saw things differently than this theory; I interpret his view of the individual in this aphorism to be aware of the fact that we merely wear masks and take on different roles for different aspects of our lives. And *culture* does the casting for the play, and *society* is the stage where the roles are acted out. I am under the delusion that society is composed of mute, out of work mimes; we do not know our role even though we act it out: and we don't even have individual roles but instead we mimic; we take on the roles of time and place, of what culture has dealt us.

One must be a part of a whole, of a society, to separate oneself and be an individual; one must have others around to mimic. The experiment of writing, or the path of writing my *Magnum Opus* is influenced greatly by what I learned in a literature course at the University of Academia:

"*The invention of the unknown demands new forms*," -Arthur Rimbaud.

The problem I faced was how to separate the character, or trope, 25, from society and still have him be an actor that plays a part in the narrative. 25 must have a fluent and rather refined vocabulary, even though at times this may seem to fail him; while at other times, it is quite complex. But the problems of what words 25 could use to describe his state of mind, and his life within the narrative is not too restricted. These "concepts," create ambivalence; they are evidence of two minds at work; there is a juxtaposition of infinite understanding and transcendence of time against total ignorance and moments of recurrence in the allegory The Box.

I will attempt to address the idea in this autobiographical interpretation. And I call it this rather than this being an explication, in that, through it, I am not trying to explain any one story; I am writing this piece as an interpretation, not a definitive meaning of what was intended.

But my interpretation is meant as a supplement to try and solve these problems of communication that arise out of the use of any medium to function as an expression of ideas otherwise ineffable; or maybe more precisely said: It is to express ideas that I felt I could only address through fiction, through this experiment I named *The Great Work!* And this was the only way in which one can conduct an experiment that separates the individual from society, an experiment that makes a man into nothing, into just an obscure idea.

Where did our language first begin? We do not know if it ever did; it too, our language, is not a teleological phenomenon, but we find that one day we are awake and alive, we are conscious and in a perpetual state of presence.

Routine. In Christian mythology, especially in Protestantism, prayer is seen as an individual's way to an intimate, one to one relationship with God. Thus, prayer gives to the believer individualism. What is missing from the subject's lavatory in the story, though, is a mirror. Reflection, then, is what is missing. Instead of reflecting upon the individual's life, instead of having "retrospective," the believer only searches for answers to prayers, and the subject seeks answers to questions, rather than trying to understand the present.

Routines, then, beckon the question as to whether we can know about God through our own experience, or are we just searching, trying to pigeonhole some image or belief of a God we never were given a chance to experience for ourselves first. How, in other words, can we ever know that God exists if we did not learn it first? We only mimic a path laid down before us by our ancestors; there is no original thought; we cannot trace thought to a beginning, for it becomes vague and invisible eventually as we search into the past.

To believe that, in truth, whether we believe in God, whether we are atheist, agnostic, or Christian, God exists; that is to say, the truth is that God exists whether we believe in Him or not, this is an allusion the story creates that it is just as absurd to believe that the 25 in the story could know that a mirror exists, that the thought presents itself from within, without him ever having seen one before, as it is to believe that one could know about God from within. I assume that the only reason people have a belief in God is that they are conditioned to believe in God, just as one who would read *The Box* might assume that the subject 25 must have existed at some time, temporally and spatially, outside of the box, to obtain the knowledge he maintains. If God exists outside this universe, how do we know about him from within this room? That there is an Ultimate Reality, something sacred -Who or what am I, as an individual, *subject* to? Is this "thing" something that watches and listens to everything 25 does? There is a saying: *think outside of the box*. But have I done this? Can you do this? Can an individual that is, do this? Can I create original thought or do I just mimic? These questions are not rhetorical, but a consequence of self-examination.

Death. Is the absence of love death to those who know it, this love? There are awakenings, rebirths that 25 experiences. He learns and is aware of attachment and of the loss of what is loved; he learns of the comfort of being detached from "reality." And the subject has insight, or belief, that without time, death does not exist. How does he know that death does not exist outside time? The answer is quite simply that time is a creation of society. How then does society create time? Society does not create time; society creates the illusion of time. We see birth, but we cannot experience it, or least we cannot remember experiencing it. We see death, but cannot explain it. We see death, and we fear it. How can we not fear what we do not know; how can we not fear the Unknown?

Belief. This is one solution that society presents us with. But I have no belief that would give me comfort, one that leaves me without a trace of doubt that I should not fear death except one rational thought: if death is natural, if it is inevitable, why worry? But then there is some thought lingering that, as the saying goes: to learn to swim, you must get into the water. Either way, the point is that we perceive death like a simile, only in comparison to something we have a foreknowledge of, and that death is merely *like* or *as* this or that thing. But perhaps it is Nothing?

Thus, there are caricatures we must look past. Time is what is misrepresented in society. Perhaps even more horrifying to us is that we only have theories of time: creation stories to explain its beginning, whether mythological or scientific, and time without end stories, this mythology and science of eternity. Who or what you believe is not in question, but these questions of: what are time and death? These are the questions raised in *The Box*. We fear what we do not know. There is an anxiety everyday in life that pushes us on; there is an anxiety within the room that pushes the subject, 25, onward. I assume that the only reason people hold the beliefs in death and time they maintain is that they are conditioned to believe in them the way that they do, just as we are conditioned to all knowledge; again, it is all from without, from culture first, then we search for it. We see birth and death and they are confirmation of our beliefs.

Time. There is this allusion to time being God in the room. Even more important is that it is "someone" watching the subject 25, "someone" that listens. There is this idea that 25 is in an experiment; he is the subject of this "thing," and this thing is outside of the room. Society then is what subjugates 25 to this alienation. Emile Durkheim theorized: "Religion is society transfigured," that the Ultimate Reality people worship is themselves. Not only does the story suggest that the narrator is in an experiment, it suggests that what is watching him and listening to him is not just time but God. –It is this theory of society transfigured that allows what is watching to be both God and society; both a deity and a person, say, is what operates the room. Anthropomorphism, is the idea in Anthropology that the gods, or in this case, God is like us only in perfect form. Society strives toward perfection, in government, in religion, in everything I suppose. God is an omnibus. But society creates God just as it creates time; therefore, they are the same. And both are only a product of conditioning, both are illusions. Perhaps, sometimes, or even often, God is a delusion.

Back to a previous question: How does death not exist outside of time? It is because in the room, and more specifically, in *The Box*, time is this omnibus; this Omnibus is relating to many things at once: society, God, some "thing," time that is not present. Time is often seen as presence; this, too, is a caricature; time is never present, even in the way we understand it; we utter the question almost everyday: "What time is it?" But even if we consider that time is mathematical, -or better yet, it is our conception of time moving always forward that proves that it is never present. Or another way to look at it is that presence is always moving forward; by the moment we ask: "What time is it?" The moment has vanished. Moments. Presence is only understood after it is gone. It is much the same as Nietzsche's idea that "God is dead." Like the light of stars, things take time to reach us before we can comprehend them. And while this simile is a macrocosm, presence is the other extreme; presence is a microcosm; by the time we process what is happening, it has passed us by.

Reflexive action is the closest thing to presence that we can experience, and it is under the surface; reflex is outside our consciousness. By the time we have jerked our finger out of the fire, it has already begun to burn us. Death does not exist outside of time because time and death are the same; without one, the other is not present. There is a symbiotic relationship of the Omnibus: of time, death, and God with society; the Omnibus is one illusory concept that allows us to function. These things, the Omnibus, provide the anxiety necessary for our survival in society; and outside society, within the room, the Omnibus is not necessary. To Nietzsche, God is dead in that the world is void of all insight. Society has no introspection any more. Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science* posits at least that God is dead, though "it has not yet reached the ears of man." More important is what the madman says about society: "Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of [killing God]?" Again, the story beckons one to wake up, as does the subject; he experiences these "awakenings." Religion is society anthropomorphized, society in a chrysalis; and when society emerges from its chrysalis, it's not an ugly caterpillar of Society, it is a beautiful butterfly called God.

But this change of form, of appearance, it is a façade. Lest that belief be transitory, lest God die, society worships an infallible deity, itself, whilst it persecutes the deviant individual; Religion is the perfection of conscience while the individual is an epitome of chaos; the Omnibus, this "thing" in the story, is the architect of fate while the subject is an archetype of ignorance. Society is made up of impersonators, of actors, and even more precisely, society is made up of mimes, which mimic each other. This is the survival method of culture. If one steps out of line and takes on a role that is not in the play, they threaten its performance.

So, on with the show, the individual is alienated; he can only sit in the audience, silent, with the other individuals and watch the play. Perhaps there are whispers here and there; there is defiance and freedom from time to time, but the actors ignore these whispers, these individualisms; these mute voices are but rude interruptions of the play. And thus is the subject in the story, silent. The artist must shout out his demands if he is to be heard.

Memory. Images. "…symbols without meaning, representations of an illusive memory, or just illusions?" What is real? And more importantly, does it even matter? Why does the subject search for memories? And why does this process cause his head to ache? But it is not "amnesia," at least not in one aspect. The fact that he has this word, "amnesia," tells us something. The subject does appear to have some unusual loss of memory, but perhaps it is just "illusive," deceptive. The subject's memory is "amnesia" in that it is the selective ignoring or forgetting of things or events not favorable to his purpose; the individual is selective when he interprets life, when he interprets Art. What is his purpose; what is the individual's purpose? There is a popular phrase concerning mimesis, which says: *Life imitates Art, and Art imitates Life.* This is the individual's purpose, to imitate Art. Like the subject 25, the individual sees what he wants to see, hears what he wants to hear. Representation. 25 is a likeness, an imitation of the individual, of a person; the individual is a likeness, an imitation of Art. The words that 25 uses are very significant, then.

Reminiscence is essence. For the subject 25 to discover himself, his fundamental nature, he must recall his past experience outside the room. He has images and he has words to go with them, these symbols. Yet the process of trying to do so makes his head ache; even worse, it brings on this anxiety attack; he is flooded with the fear and horror of the unknown. This experience he goes through alludes to the human experience: How do we describe what is real? Reality is only a relation of things, and these things appear to be fixed, to be grounded, solid and physical; yet, life is in flux. Change is inevitable. We know this. Change is inescapable, but we try to deny this. Why? Why must we deny change? Why must the subject keep his head shaved and fingernails trimmed? Why this grooming, this tidiness, this order?

Invisible. The subject becomes invisible through this process, this ritual of grooming. Ritual. This is why we must deny change; ritual wills it so. Nietzsche posited that "men are inclined to laziness…they are all timorous. They hide behind customs and opinions… From fear of his neighbor who insists on convention and veils himself with it." And he also presents the question: "what is it that compels the individual human being to fear his neighbor, to think and act herd-fashion, and not be himself?" Well, ritual wills it so. It is out of habit that we become lazy; it is out of practice that we become lazy, out of rehearsal of our roles. The subject 25 becomes invisible to the Omnibus, from time, from death, from this "thing" in that he takes away these things that remind him of change: his hair growing, his fingernails growing, his body changing. It is easier to become invisible by following custom and regurgitating common opinion than it is to be the artist who stands up and shouts and breaks the silence; it is easier to be an actor than an individual; it becomes habit to feint, to whisper, rather than speak out; it is more convenient to veil oneself from criticism, to hide among the darkness of the theatre, among these other individuals and become an audience than to stand up and shout out, "Stop!" And so the madness goes, and we remain silent. But silence is never a solution when it is intended to silence us. So the artist becomes himself transfigured, a caricature to the world, a madman.

The artist asks himself: What is real? And believes that it matters what the answer is; and so the artist goes about the world searching for a medium to communicate his ideas. But mute words fall upon deaf ears. Why do we search for meaning? This is why the subject tries to remember what lies "outside these walls." He tries to understand. And that is what makes his head ache; that is what causes his anxiety, which is suffering; and it is confusion, this "delirium," that he suffers. His self-awareness of his state becomes more evident when he is "amused" at the sight of the girl's birth into the room. But what does the subject try to remember is outside the room? These images he believes come from memory, or are they just illusions? Or are they but mistaken beliefs? That, at least, is what his memory alludes to: there are beliefs that we think are our own, but are not.

Words. The subject asks: "Dare I speak aloud?" The subject finds comfort in the silence. Solace. Like children, we fear to speak up; we are "timorous;" ritual wills it so. Custom demands that the individual make himself invisible; the artist struggles then to be seen, to be heard. The writer becomes mute; he knows something but obscures it, represents it with symbols. Expression, then, becomes therapy for the artist. But it is more than this; it is rebellion. Why did Samuel Clemens use a pseudonym? Perhaps nowadays the artist has less to fear, but there is more noise; the artist must set himself on fire to become noticed. W.B. Yeats said that man runs his course between extremes. And that is what humanity is, two extremes: silence and rebellion. There is no middle ground. Custom or change. Convention or transformation. The individual vacillates between these two extremes perpetually.

Symbols are not used to just communicate meaning; they are used to obscure meaning. Like the subject 25, these communications become rituals we have been conditioned to; we use these figures of speech without examining their meaning. Why must the artist set himself on fire? What are these obscurities that make him invisible except when he spits fire from his breath? It is the euphemism; this is what is written in the script for the play. And the mass media, that is just what it is, the voice of the masses, of convention. So and so "passed away;" the "criminal" was "executed;" the family pet was "put to sleep." We can see these things most in television and newspapers; there is "popular culture" or "pop music." But that is why it is popular? And more to the point, it is not popular culture but censored culture. It is bound and gagged, chained down by a million terrified faces, "the melting faces of theatrical-like masks."

The euphemism, this is what obscures meaning. It is the mask that violence wears in culture. Terror walks around and shrouds the individual; so he walks around, the individual, "a mockery and a mere half." Rilke knew this. Neither has the individual become alive, nor has he achieved death. The individual is conditioned to fear death; his breath is cold, though, as if death itself. But we are sheltered from death, and to speak of it the artist must face being labeled dark. But what does it mean to be dark? Is it mere pessimism? Or is the artist mentally ill; is his mind sick? Yes. He is a caricature, a deviant, a madman, just as was Nietzsche's character. Silence!

Mirrors. Memory is altered by time; it is twisted and contorted by subjectivity, by the subject. The subject, 25, has no mirror; he has no shadow in the presence of the "preternatural light" that pervades the room. It is this light now that becomes significant, not his memory. It is "preternatural light," light from the outside, inexplicable by ordinary means, incapable of being explained or accounted for. Such is our knowledge of the Omnibus; such is the subject 25's knowledge of the Omnibus. Dreams work in such a method. And the room is a surreal place; and the subject's memories that he searches for are "vague and obscure," as is our knowledge an obscurity of reality. Reality is difficult to understand; it is ambiguous to us what is real. We have these words we try to describe reality, to describe existence, but they are all circular; they are, these words and definitions, like M.C. Escher's *Waterfall*. The water appears to fall and flow back into a distance, but it is only an illusion, and the words fall back where they began, in this "pool of blood" that the subject wakes, this birth and rebirth, this struggle to understand, to make sense, to reason.

But there are other mirrors in life and within the room. Other individuals become our mirrors; they are what we mimic. This is what the subject has with the lady, a mirror, a real mirror, and a false mirror. Real in that his image reflects in her eyes, false in that he thinks that she is like him. She is a being, a person, but she is an individual also; she has her own character, both physical and psychological. She is mute; she is silent. But the subject does not understand why she is silent. So, too, do we not understand this silence we live under; this suppression of social control, of the Omnibus. The subject 25 becomes an ephemeral individual, a fleeting freedom; for he felt "naked," he felt "free." The subject 25 speaks; he breaks his silence because he is not alone. The artist shouts out because he knows he is not alone in his quest even though he works within the confinement of a medium and from isolation, as the subject 25 lives within the walls of the room. The artist also becomes only a mime; he must mimic other artists. Again, there is no original thought, only change.

But we must deny change; ritual wills it so. And the artist then comes to understand the difference between art and Art. The artist must work his way at some time or another through the masses and learn these techniques of his medium, of mere art; but then, he shouts out and creates Art. There is this assemblage of words in writing to form sentences and paragraphs, but then the writer learns of structure. The writer learns grammar and is restrained by it; the writer learns of poetics and rhetoric and then he violates grammar; he becomes an artist rather than a writer. There are these physical things such as paint and brushes in painting; the creation comes from a method of assembly. But the artist is not restricted by oil and canvas, or pen and paper. Perhaps one day he shouts out and slices his wrist, drains his blood into a bowl and, then, spills his blood onto the canvas. Then the canvas comes alive; it is the artist on the wall, not a painting.

Shadows. The "preternatural light" does not create a shadow of the subject. First, we must ask: What is a shadow? There are many species of shadows. In the room though, there is a lack of shadow; the subject does not have a shadow; there is an absence. In effect, there is an absence of real light. It is the artificial light of the Omnibus. Again, it is a light the subject cannot explain or account for. Pun intended, the subject begins to shadowbox; he is in a shadow box; he is boxed in

the room, and he fights an invisible adversary, the Omnibus, this anxiety that forces the subject into action so that he does not "wither into nothing at the amusement of this shadow." It is the same anxiety that I have said pushes us on in everyday life. There is an absence of shadow. The subject does not have society; he is invisible and therefore transparent; he does not have someone to remind him who he is, what his role is, and what his past is. Not until, that is, the lady appears. Before, the subject is lost; he has no sense of self; he has no "soul."

This "shadow" that the subject believes in is also a source of pain, of sorrow and despair. It is what he believes watches and listens to him. In a sense, the subject is delusional; though, eventually he becomes delusional, there is a sense of paranoia in him ever since his first awakening. He is suspicious that something has been put in his food. The blue ball fits his hand as if it were made for him. Looking from the outside in, we can see that this may be a result of this cycle he is in, this "perpetual oblivion." Or another way to interpret this is that his suspicion suggests that he has done this before. This is what déjà vu is to the individual, a sense that he has experienced something before, but not in this lifetime; there is a sense that one is in a dream momentarily; the individual is both in awe and in alarm; a panic comes over the individual that this presence is a perennial state of being. The individual perhaps understands there are no odds, no chance that this conglomeration of being that he has become will ever happen again. Thus, this is the anxiety that pushes us on to make whatever we can out of this state of being. But in horror the individual recoils at the thought of being trapped in this endless cycle of pain, of having to face death once again; or perhaps he is more optimistic at the thought of getting to experience the happiness he finds in life. Three things follow the subject; they shadow the subject. The lady is the most obvious, for the subject tells us so. The other we can conclude is the Omnibus, this "thing" that watches him and follows his every move. But the third is a transient; it is the reader. The subject has a duality; he is both a character in the story and my blood spilled onto the paper that breathes, it is what makes the story come alive. And as the reader pilfers his grubby fingers through the pages, stops reading and directs his attention to some diversion, some offense to the intimacy of the experience, spills his coffee on or writes the graffiti of criticism or little ideas that pop into his wandering mind as he reads, -yes, the artist must be paranoid; and perhaps this paranoia has seeped into the story; blood drips upon the page; there is a very subtle yet violent transference psychologically between the artist and his audience.

The room is a shadow itself. It is a vague representation of reality; it makes the subject 25, a man, an obscure idea. How does it do this? The vagueness in the story is a result of the medium used to convey the message; this is quite evident. But man as an idea, this is more complicated. Whereas the vagueness is a result of the medium used, writing, the obscurity of man is a result of Art itself. This popular saying: Life imitates Art, and Art imitates Life. But that is what Life and Art become, imitation. They mimic each other in the same way that the actors of society mime each other. It becomes impossible to discern which is which. Here, too, there is symbiosis. Two things that evolved alongside each other. Therefore, the way one interprets Art dictates one's perspective and attitude toward Life.

There are no right or wrong interpretations, but there are ethics of interpretation. That is to say there is an ethos to interpretation; there is a distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature and guiding principle to interpretation. What is this ethos? I suppose that depends on the audience. There is an ethical relativism and etiquette to Art; the audience cannot pass judgment on a piece of art based only on their egocentrism; the interpreter must look outside their own opinion. But we all commit this artistic felony. Why does Art offend the individual? To reiterate, we fear the unknown; we are angry, but we do not know why. But the artist, too, is in fear; he is simultaneously alienated and understood. There is the infamous saying of philosophy from Socrates in Plato's work that: "The unexamined life is not worth living." And at the other extreme is the notion of the layman, that Philosophy reads too deep into things. There is no middle ground. One must either admit ignorance or read deeply; the individual must not imitate art anymore, he must strive to be it, to be an artist. What is this etiquette of Art, then? What is this ethic of Art relative to? The etiquette is quite simple: there is a time and place for Art. Art requires examination; it must be read deep into. The quality and respect a piece of Art or art receives depends on its depth.

This is not to say that Art does not deserve criticism; this is to say the opposite: Art demands criticism; it demands attention. We must be critical of Art if it is truly an imitation of Life; for, when we judge an artist we judge his life (and we judge ourselves). What ethic is relative to Art? As with all ethical relativism, Art is subject to time and place. Just as the subject is a product of the room, The Box is a product of life. Tragically, a representation of life. And this is the point of ethical relativism in Art: Art is a product of culture; this culture is conveyed through the responses of the artist to life; Art must say something of humanity; it must relay some universal message if it is to have depth and respect; therefore, the moral nature of Art, what is right and wrong about it, is dependent upon that there is no universal standard of moral value, but only the cultural norms of our particular society.

There are two problems here: The Box cannot be interpreted as my life, -no, it is a product of my life, an imitation of what I perceive as life. I wrote the story as a consequence or more precisely, as a reaction to my environment. A psychoanalysis of The Box is not necessary, or I should say that it is a useless ploy; my whole point in writing the story was that it was the only way to express something otherwise ineffable, or perhaps to reach the ears of those persons on a distant planet, like the light of the stars. Secondly, there is a problem with ethical relativism: How can we create change and not offend the norms of culture? We cannot; ritual wills it so. Rites in Art insist that one be creative, and to create one becomes a deviant; the artist again shouts out to stop the play and interferes with the drama. Thus is the method of communication.

Play. This is what the subject does with his blue ball. What, then, is the blue ball? It is a toy for the infant minded subject in the room, something to pacify him with, something to pass by time. Time has passed by; it is forgotten; it "does not exist here within the walls of this room." Like an artist who labors hours into the night with his work, the subject plays with "a rhythm against the wall."

The subject must ease his mind; the artist must have his catharsis. How do we act, what role do we commit to, what instance do we decide as the subject does, to pun, to make a play on words? "Watch." This is what the Omnibus does. The subject shows us how we make these connections, how thoughts play on our consciousness. Like a butterfly going from one flower to the next, the subject's mind wanders about the room, from his wrist to that empty place on the wall where something belongs but is missing; the artist wanders about his mind and searches for something witty, something clever to say. But if the subject is not careful he will fall prey to his own will; he will wilt like a flower trampled on in a meadow; the artist will be alone, alienated; ritual wills it so; -that genius be mistaken for madness: the artist, the madman, he has come before his time.

The subject must clear his thoughts by playing with the blue ball; the artist must simplify his subject. This is what The Box does to the subject; it simplifies him. The subject wants to cry out but no one listens except this "thing;" the artist cries out, but the play goes on. Death is this butterfly that floats about a meadow, outside. We hide inside our *dark* theatre. The subject wants to shed his dark chrysalis and become a butterfly like God, but he does not have the knowledge, the insight "to be a king." But he plays this game, unwillingly, or rather against his will. What is his will? Is it himself? Is his will a negative construction; is it something he plays against? Is the will of the individual this dramatic medium that the play is structured? When the subject asks: "Who or what has put me here?" -Answers. Rhetoric seeks to control the middle ground. But there is no middle ground. The subject does not want an answer when he asks this question; the artist knows that through suggestion, by being subtle, he can convey his meaning, if only to a few. But then the whispers begin to spread. Gossip is in the theatre.

But this time the whispers are backstage; this is where the artist finds himself; in terror he must go onto the front of the stage. But the subject in the story retrieves his hand back from the cup of "black liquid," from death; and the artist searches for the back door. Many times the subject goes through the doors into other rooms only to find himself forced back into the "breathing room;" many times the individual tries to leave the play, but there is only one exit here, and we fear it. So we are forced to play the game, to contend with life and the play, to acculturate and humble ourselves to our will, to our ignorance; ritual wills it so. Culture dictates our fate.

Yes, the individual's will is ignorant; such is the subject in The Box. These manifestations of a determination of desire, these dispositions to act according to principles, this power to control one's actions and emotions, a choice of one to have authority or power, -these things are the will of the individual, and they are ignorant! The will is self-control, but there is none; it is all an illusion, and the will is ignorant of this. The subject asks: "Who or what has put me here?" But only the audience answers. We clap simultaneously, in "herd-fashion."

We answer quite quickly without thinking; we pass judgment and interpret that this "thing" has put the subject here in this room. But we have put the subject in this room; the individual, his behavior is absentminded; there is no reflection; he plays, as does the subject, to ease this anxiety; he reads to be lost in a "labyrinth," to build a mystery he cannot solve. The artist, though, is responsible for this

web of deception; for, he plays, as does the subject, for a stalemate; the artist creates a maze of "symbols" unknowingly, "without meaning." Reminiscence is essence; for the subject to discover himself, his fundamental nature, he must recall his past experience outside the room. "Nothing." This is what we find at the end of the maze. Culture applauds with social control; this is what the will is ignorant of, that it is the subject in the play. The story beckons one to reconsider, to question what is this play that we act out a part on the stage of life.

Walls. But, "no wall in particular." There are just merely walls the subject is confined; there are just merely walls that enclose us. But what are these walls? Their essence is important. Door. There are "invisible doors" that the subject searches for, as are there invisible walls that surround us. We know that we put up walls, and we know that others put up walls to keep us out. But do we know that there are walls that confine us; walls that custom builds? They are the walls of the theatre, and like the walls of the room, they are alive! Yes, we are trapped here, just as the subject, within this "breathing room" called life. What are these "invisible doors" of life? Why can't we see them? What in life is obscure to us that we might enter but the future? Yes, that is where these doors lead, but what are these doors? They are choices. Decisions. We must make them constantly. But there is a constrained nature to choice.

There is a Buddhists parable that goes something to the effect that: The world is on fire and you are laughing. This statement is true in that, as Nietzsche believed, "men are inclined to laziness;" this is not to say that there should be no laughter in life. No. What an awful state of affairs would we be trapped in without laughter? There is laughter in Art, even; it is called Comedy. But as was Aristotle's precious manuscript on the subject lost, so too has laughter left Philosophy, this examination of life.

The artist who examines this "thing," as the subject calls it, the Omnibus as I have named it, -the artist is labeled as dark. And indeed it is a darkness that surrounds us. We are surrounded by a distance, shadowed by a future that is "vague and fuzzy." At one point the subject "sat content in the room, bouncing the blue ball;" the individual is pacified by activity; he is content to do the work society has dealt him just as the subject with his blue ball. At first, when the subject wakes and discovers this object he "threw it across the room and it bounced out of control until it came back" and hit him in the head where he had injured it earlier. Like Sisyphus, the subject is left to labor over and over this "ball." But the subject takes on this boulder not as a burden; the individual takes his work as a relief; he does not wish to be his own master, but controlled by society, given direction; doors open up and the individual enters them. And laid out before him are these rituals; the subject grooms himself; the individual works and is content to be "invisible from time," invisible from the Omnibus.

The artist that chooses not to be a part of the play, or to not play along, -the finger is pointed at the artist; convention speaks and says he is lazy or useless; but the artist chooses his work. And it is this choice that matters. The theatre is composed of actors, and not all of them play the role of the artist; -and some of these actors are "exaggerations;" Rilke knew this. They are not real artists but wear the guise of one while others are like the subject in the room, they "eat as if a man starved in the

wilderness." Yes. I tell you the true artist is starving; he is in the wilderness and to be noticed he must set the forest on fire! Then people in the city take notice; someone in the audience smells the smoke; and then some obnoxious individual, wanting to play the subject, or perhaps some attentive individual who makes it his duty to stand watch over the theatre shouts out: "Fire!" And everyone in the theatre rushes to see what is the clamor, what has disrupted the performance. And water is poured on the artist to put him out; that is why he must not even just set himself on fire; he must set the world on fire if he is to be heard.

But most do not even know that the world is on fire, and they sit in the luxury of their seats, or act out the laughter of their role on stage. The actor is an ignorant beast; roaming about his meadow he thinks is his stage, he grazes. He is a mere sheep; and unlike cattle the actor depletes the meadow of all but the sad weeds of regret. The subject becomes unhappy, and he did not even know he was happy before with his blue ball; but he knows once his work has been taken away and then given back to him. So appears this lady; and so forms this relationship. But the subject is deceived into this union. The individual is married and is happy; he has children; ritual wills it so. But the artist lives in isolation. Solitude!

Actors speak in double-talk: words spill out and appear to be meaningful but in fact are a mixture of sense and nonsense. The individual must learn to read between the lines; he must learn to interpret the play. The lady appears before the subject in the story, and he learns to "read quite well the silent language of her body;" the individual learns to read body language because he knows that what is before him is a mute, an actor who speaks in double-talk; the individual must learn the role of an analytical detective; for, we are half mute and try to hide this or that thing but "a trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows; we do not notice that the corners of our mouth are bent." Rilke knew this. Some are better actors than others, though. So there is distrust in the air of the theatre; no one wants to say who they really are; we choose to wear these masks, to make these false impressions from fear of being labeled a madman; ritual wills it so.

So there are these walls we put up such as these, these masks. Yes, these masks are the walls we put up, but we already know this. And so the mad *act* goes -*on with the show*! The individual puts up his wall as a defense, to hide what is inside; the individual learns how to build walls to separate himself, and he learns how to build walls to enclose himself, for comfort, for this solace he believes is sanity. The artist is a wild beast; unlike the sheep in the meadow, the artist runs loose in the theatre trying to tear down walls; he is a madman bent on destruction at the cost of his work; he starves himself and sets walls on fire; the artist, he is out of control I tell you! The artist is a ragged thing; he lets his hair grow long, his appearance is unkempt; he runs around the theatre as the subject does in the room; he is "naked," and he is "free;" that is what the subject becomes conscious of, this freedom. He stares at these walls, "no wall in particular" because they are all the same; they are all the same, these walls we build; but they are all invisible; they are indeed transparent! The artist must push the boundary to the limit.

The subject learns from the lady that there are these "invisible doors," this "passage" within him. So too the artist seeks to penetrate his subject, to open up these doors and reveal the true nature of this or that thing. And this becomes the crux of the artist, how to handle his subject. It may seem that I have begun to handle the subject at hand here vaguely and obscurely, but this is no deception; we are deep within The Box now; but we shall dig deeper than before: the Omnibus is watching!

This interpretation is a means of access; we are the participants examining this "thing;" and like Carlos William Carlos' *The Thing,* "It merely rings and we serve it bitterly, They and I." But if you buy the ticket, you had better be prepared for the show; for it is a drama, it is a tragedy, Life. But you're already in! On with the show!

Nothing. The artist is a nocturnal creature; like Dostoevsky's anti-hero in his *Notes from Underground*, the artist must admit to himself: "I am a sick man… I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man." The artist is malicious and mad, he is indeed a madman; he is ugly. The artist lives in the dark; he is nothing; he does not exist; he is a person but is of little or no value, a vagabond, a transient. Like the subject in the room, we awaken one day and try to figure out this thing called reality; it is breathing; "it is alive!" But we are confused and in a panic; our chest tightens and we feel short of breath; we think, but nothing comes to mind. We "look for a mirror." Rilke knew this. But when we find this mirror, when that day comes that we stare into this "black liquid" and see ourselves, we are old. And we cry out, but no one hears us because we are mute. We are poor; we are starving. We need something to comfort us as if we are children again… And we stare into the face of death, into the death's head in that reflection that emanates from this "viscous liquid." What is this "pestilence of mind," these memories that we search for? Are we nothing? What is our purpose? But why should we even have a purpose? I don't know.

But that is what we do; we search for answers; we build this "labyrinth" that we cannot solve. We cannot understand what it is like to be nothing. But we are nothing; we do not exist. How absurd to think that we do not exist! But it is true; we are nothing; we are of little or no value to this "thing" we have created, the Omnibus. And like the subject we feel angry, but we don't know why. We are "like a stranger lost in insomnia" We are "never really awake, but never really asleep." The truth is enslaved; it is hidden from us. The truth is deceptive, it is concealed; to search for it one must become either a zealot or a bigot; ritual wills it so. So choose your mask and step onto the stage. Speak out if you must; silence me if you must; I am a madman; I am out of control. Run for the door, the theatre will soon burst into eternal flame.

Why does the subject try to forget? What is all of the time that he has tried to remember? There is this individual in the audience who stands up during the show; some of the members of the audience are annoyed that he is blocking their view; the individual is ridiculed, but only momentarily as he passes by. What is this individual doing? He walks to the back of the theatre but is stopped by an usher and told to take his seat; but he explains that he wishes to turn on the lights, for he knows

that this is just a play and that he must reveal this discovery. But he is too ignorant, by his very own ignorant will he does not know to stand up and shout out to stop this charade. So he waits there at the entrance; but the play goes on and on, and the individual waits there until he withers away. And that is the past, this *time*, that our subject in the story tries now to forget; it is regret for having remembered anything to begin with in The Box. It is like when a child cries out: I wish I were never even born!

Label. Everything needs a name; ritual wills it so. Why does the subject choose a number, 25, for his name? What is the significance of this? Well, it is quite simple in one aspect; symbolically he is just a number; he is not a person, an individual, but just another number; the individual is just another face in the crowd. But the subject chose this number for a reason, because he was neither young nor old; he tells us this. And he named the lady Hope; and, again, symbolically she stands for something, this hope that the subject might understand who and what he is. It is not so much the names that are significant, and they are significant, but it is this process; this fact that it is in the subject's nature to give things names, to label things. But it is not just his nature to label things; he does not just name himself 25, but he has *faith* that he is 25; this is in the individual's nature, too, to have "faith."

It is not just important that we label things; it is also important that we have *faith*, that we *believe* that these things we call by this or that name are what we call them for it is in our nature; ritual wills it so. The individual, though, is zealous indeed; he must have a name; he must label everything. But he has names and labels for things, and he does not realize where he has got them, -even more terrifying, the individual has labels for things that he did not even name himself, and he has labels that his ignorant will does not understand, but he uses them. And the dreaded misery this single individual causes to others just like himself! But that is the problem; these other individuals, he does not think they are like himself; the individual is under the delusion that because other individuals are just that, an individual –it is by this fact that each individual knows what he or she is, an individual, and that by the very fact that he is an individual he is somehow unique, -and he is, but it is the fact the that individual somehow becomes delusional and no longer thinks but believes that each individual is different that he causes so much misery. How does the individual do this? The individual does this in that he believes in difference and makes it a point to only point out these differences; the individual no longer or perhaps never understood that even though each individual is an individual, and in this way, the individual is unique -but he also has the same fundamental nature as everyone else. But moreover, it is the fact that the individual has more in common with other individuals than he has differences that creates this misery.

But we assign roles; and even worse, our ignorant will accepts them; we take center stage and want what the subject in the story wants to be told; for we want to be comforted and know our role; we want to be told as the subject that: "This is your name, this is what you do as your profession, and this is your past." This is what society does; ritual wills it so.

Attached. Everything in the "breathing room" is "attached with a thin line of flexible wire." As the subject in the story comes to discover; so do we discover that in life, everything is bound to

something else, it is interdependent. But the individual, how his ignorant will is deceived! The individual goes about the theatre of life attaching labels to everything but the poor fool forgets yet again, that everything is attached to something. We deceive ourselves into thinking that there are criminals in the world. And indeed there are; these criminals are everywhere, but only if we had a real mirror we could see ourselves in it; we would be horrified to find out that the world is not just full of criminals, that this vast theatre is full of them, because each and every one of us is a criminal! How absurd it is that we are all criminals!

But it is no lie. Even this thing we have labeled as religion, it too says that we are all criminals. Christianity, how absurd a truth that it points out, even though I am not a Christian, I know it is true; each and every individual has sinned; by the very fact of being an individual one commits sin; ritual wills it so. Schopenhauer, in his collection of essays, *On Human Nature* posits the notion that the individual can have no dignity; for, how can he when "his conception is a crime, his birth a penalty, his life a labor, and death a necessity." I have discussed this labor of life, and I have discussed the inevitability of death. But what do we make of this Christian belief that our conception is a crime. Is it not natural to procreate? And how is birth a penalty? The solution can be found in one simple formula to answer both these questions, as I suppose it was intended to be: our conception is a crime in that more than this idea that man is born into sin, he creates by procreation yet another criminal. And the part about birth being a penalty, well that is simple, too: we are thrown into the play; what more punishment could this "thing" do than put the subject in the room; or what better way to torture the individual than to give him his freedom, this choice, than to take it away.

Death is a necessity indeed! We must make room not only for the next act in the play, but the theatre must have its drama; it must have death or the theatre will overfill and collapse. But it is getting too full here everyday. And at any moment the dam will break and blood will flood the world! We believe this prophetic propaganda; that there is some foreign pestilence, some "drug" that is being secretly added to our food. Yes! The subject is correct in his suspicions; from the outside we can see this; and the artist, this madman, he has seen it; he has looked into this cup and seen his own reflection, "and death stared back."

And like the subject, his "reflection was clear, just as the present…" But what is the significance of the cup? Most importantly, it is the only thing in this "labyrinth" that is not bound with wire; the individual is free to make choices, and he can also choose how he dies. But- "In hospitals, where people die so agreeably and with so much gratitude toward doctors and nurses, one dies a death prepared by the institution:" Rilke knew this. But we do not know how to meet death. We do not search out our death, as we should; and that is what the subject in the story suggests; we fear death because of "these false perceptions."

But there is another more pitiful reason that the individual fears death; he is under the delusion that these things that he is attached to, that he can somehow hold on to them forever; and perhaps that is why the subject has such a peaceful moment, why his thoughts are so clear and rational when he drinks what he believes is "poison;" the subject has lost all his attachments, not by his choice but all

the same, they are gone: the lady, Hope, and the drug, and his blue ball are just mere objects; and this object is nothing more than a labor. This way of looking at attachment is found at the root of Buddhism. But we do not have the time or resources to explain this in detail. What is important is that one understands that this is a fundamental principle in Buddhism, this idea of freedom from attachment to meet death peacefully.

But for now I must address something that contradicts a statement I have previously made. The subject states that he does not fear death because he did not even know what it was anymore than he knew what was outside the walls of the room. Again, how can we not fear what we do not know; how can we not fear the unknown? The individual must free himself first from all attachment. But I do not believe that the individual can do this; we remain under one delusion or the other; we either have some belief that enables us to not fear death, or we do not; we have a choice; we can either choose to die, or we can stay and play. Mediocrity. The individual is just this and nothing more, ordinary, common; ritual wills it so.

Meditation. To become absorbed in thought, to find a source of inspiration, this is what the artist does; he becomes absorbed in thought; he contemplates; he ponders; he looks for inspiration. The subject mimics this meditation. More importantly he imitates this ritual of meditation. He sits there cross-legged and notices a consciousness that becomes "some dream-like state after a while of just sitting and listening" to his heartbeat and his breathing in silence, like each time he goes to sleep.

We must meditate; we must filter out all the noise and listen to the silence; the individual must step away from the noise of the crowd and the play. So I will meditate for a moment. When I write, I think of, or I should say I am inspired by the people and things around me: by friends and family, by books or at least parts of them, by these ideas I find here and there. A friend of mine writes, but this friend doesn't let anyone read what he or she has written (and I cannot say his or her; for this friend is very paranoid for his or her own reasons… even I say that the artist must be paranoid and suspicious). But there is a reason this friend does not let anyone read these things he or she keeps to himself or herself, and that reason is because he or she believes that people will be able to know how he or she thinks, and by knowing this people will be able to control him or her. I don't think that anyone will be able to control me by reading my writing: allegory, story, poem, or what have you. No. I think just the opposite; the writer is in control; the writer dictates, he controls and manipulates the words to his advantage. The artwork does not reveal the individual artist; the artist presents his representation of the way he sees things.

One cannot say when I speak or when some other voice speaks through my writing; perhaps you think you know me and you can see my blood poured out on the paper, and you very well may; but do not assume that you know my intentions. This thing, Hermeneutics, is a caricature itself; that one can take a piece of writing and even approximate what the author intended is absurd! There is no middle ground.

Mirth. The individual looks upon the stage, and the sounds of laughter echo through the theatre; the artist looks upon the world and hears this laughter; and this laughter, it comes from his audience; but this play is a drama; what the artist created, this blood that he spilled, -he is dead serious! But his audience responds with laughter; so the artist sets his masterpiece on fire to silence the laughter. The subject, under the influence of the drug, talks to his ball; "it is alive!" The subject is involved in a conversation that goes as follows:

"Can we go play in the rain now?" It asked excitedly

"I suppose, but don't interrupt me anymore. I think I might have found some clue to where Hope is."

"Where is she 25?" It laughed. "Have you been dreaming again?"

"Shut up." I laughed with it now. "My dreams are…"

The subject laughs along with his "cantankerous blue ball;" but his laughter is a different kind of laughter. There are, like with shadows, many species of laughter: the individual hears the crowd laughing and he laughs along; he does not know why he laughs, and he does not laugh to merely fit in, but he hears laughter and he finds himself laughing alongside his theatre patrons. This is one species of laughter. But the subject's laughter, it is a rare species and when it is spotted, the individual is either alarmed or insulted; for, that is this laughter's intentions; it is sarcastic laughter. The artist hears this laughter, he may even be delusional, the artist, he is also a rare species, like the blue ball he is moody and cantankerous; the artist, he hears this laughter mocking him and he mocks it back! The artist must not only be paranoid nowadays, he must listen carefully to his audience and mock them if necessary.

Lake. The subject wakes after his passing out and "there is a small pool of blood." He "dipped a finger into the viscous liquid, and the preternatural light that penetrated the room magnified the red of the blood." The subject swirled his finger through the pool of liquid, the lake of blood, and was pacified; he did not notice his pain temporarily. This is the rebirth I described earlier that the subject goes through immediately after reawakening in the room. And it is very important in the fact that it is a reawakening, that it is not just a "small pool of blood." But it is a lake of blood! The individual sets comfortably in his soft seat in the theatre, and he watches the drama unfold; he watches the tragedy and he weeps; he has his catharsis and then he gets up to leave the show; but he does not notice the red sign shining above the door he walks through that reads: THIS IS NOT AN EXIT; but either way he thinks, or he believes that he exits the play; but he only steps through a door, a passage that leads him to another play, and he sits down, he settles himself and becomes comfortable and the show begins again. This drama unfolds before the individual again and again just as the subject reawakens in the room; he drinks the "black liquid" again and again.

But the subject does not know that the "black liquid' is not an exit, that it is not a "poison." And so the cycle goes. Where does the blood go? It flows into this lake of blood; it is physical evidence of his pain; but he perceives it as a "small pool of blood;" but it is not! It is a lake of blood! And he is drowning in the pain of it all, time after time. There are other very significant details to this scene: he "dipped a finger into the viscous liquid;" the finger is symbolic, through synecdoche; the finger represents the whole of man; and the "viscous liquid," this "pool of blood" functions as a literary device the same way, it is the "soul" of man; it is that blood of the artist that is spilled on the "hard floor;" this floor is like a blank canvas, and the artist must, as I have said, slice his wrist, drain his blood into a bowl, and then, spill his blood onto the canvas. This swirling of the finger is symbolic, then, of the creative process, of the artist putting his blood into his work. And this "preternatural light" that penetrates the room; this is the light the artist must work under; he must work from a light that does not create shadow, but inspiration; the artist must shade in the details; he must draw these shadows of life; he must shade life in as dark.

What are these "thoughts swimming" in the subject's head, and in what "confusion" were they "drowning?" The individual in the theatre gets up to leave the show; he walks toward the door that he thinks is an exit, and he does not notice the sign; but something else happens to him also when he goes from theatre to theatre; every time it happens to him but still he forgets, perhaps this is his method. This particular time, but no time in particular, he slams his head into the doorway; this individual, he is tall I suppose or the door is small; either way he slams his head into the doorway and it is painful, but he is not angry. Why? Why is he not angry? Why does the individual subject himself to this pain time after time and not get angry? Perhaps it is his method; the individual, there are many species of him as well; there are *he* individuals and *she* individuals, *small* individuals and *tall* individuals; so maybe only the tall individuals hit their heads.

But why does this particular species of individual hit his head time after bloody time and not get angry? It is his method; it is in his nature. He does not get angry because, like the subject in the story, his will is ignorant. Again I must reiterate: Culture applauds with social control; this is what the will is ignorant of, that it is the subject in the play.

There is another lake in the story; it is an inland body of water; it is inside not only The Box, but also within the subject himself. This "water," what is it? As there are multiple levels of thought in Buddhism, there are multiple levels in interpretation. This is not just a method of the Far East; it is just an approach; it is merely an analytical method. How far one is willing to go, how deep one reads into something, depends on the interpreter. I will look at least three interpretations of this symbolism at hand: the water, the lake, and depth.

So what is this water? There are several things as well. This water is something that soothes the subject, pacifies him like the ball; and it is the "rain" that he plays under; it forms a stream at the bottom of the shower that the subject dives into the lake through. And this is a process: the rain falls from the sky upon the steep mountains of the countryside; it floods the lands and drains down the mountains as it forms tributaries; and eventually, at the end, these streams run into a lake.

The subject is more than just delusional, then; his behavior represents something; it is symbolic. The individual, his behavior is not just delusional, he is not just in denial of his addictions; the individual's behavior is symbolic; ritual wills it so. How? How does ritual force its will upon the individual? That is simple. As I have said before: Culture dictates our fate. We are products of our environment.

The individual is a product of his environment; he has his attachments and he has his addictions, his habits; and the habits are sometimes healthy and sometimes not so healthy; he must not make excuses for his habits and addictions but merely admit that they are such; the individual must become awake, like the subject, and realize that this or that thing is an addiction or that this or that thing is habit; and if he is not content with his state he must merely abandon these habits or addictions. But this is not so easy for the individual to do because his will is ignorant; and there are different species of will that inhabit each individual just as there are different species of individuals; and some species of the will are more ignorant than others, but they are all ignorant. So the more ignorant the will of the individual the more difficult it is for him to abandon his discontent, even if he is aware of his habits or addictions that he is discontent with; so he forms a disposition with his ignorant will; but this will is his own; the individual deceives himself and hates his own will, perhaps because it is ignorant and he does not realize that it is natural for his will to be ignorant; ritual wills it so; culture demands the individual will's ignorance; for the will of ritual, the will of culture is powerful. But there are some individuals whose will is of so little ignorance that they have some knowledge of the will of culture; it is the zealot; history holds many of these just as it holds many bigots; but the will of the bigot? Why it's the most ignorant species of all!

What, then, is this lake? The lake is several things as well. But we will not go into much detail; it is only important that one realizes that, like the theatre there are thousands of parts of a lake: a shore; it is deep, it has waves, -but that is enough for now. Let us just look at these three components of the lake in which our subject first stands upon its shore, and like the artist, reaches a hand in, then is shoulder deep, and then he "dove in." This is where we will begin.

The subject is submersed in this inward body of water, in this lake of his mind. Above him his blue ball, his labor, is "swept around by the currents," it is controlled by this rhythm of life. And below him, deep in his thoughts, at the bottom of this lake sits Hope; and she is anchored to the bottom, she is like a stone or perhaps she is the very floor of this lake; for, this lake is deep, so deep, so very, very deep is this lake of the individual mind that it has no bottom. And that is why perhaps we say that so and so has gone off the deep end. But either way, the subject tries to swim down to her; the subject, like the individual, has an ignorant will and his behavior is not just delusional, he is not just in denial of his attachment; the subject's behavior is symbolic. What, then, does it represent? Despair. This is what it represents.

There is a disparity of reason, a distinct quality in its character. Reason does not merely fail the individual; but reason is this process of rationalizing, of understanding; and to understand one must reason; so there is this circular process of reason; the individual, to reason, must explain or justify; but to understand is the problem of the individual; to explain or justify he can merely believe this or

that thing is true; but to truly understand requires proof. This proof is often just subjectivity, just an explanation or a justification of something; and justification and justice, though they may seem two different words, are the same; and they are subjective, too, they are nothing more than an excuse to do this or that thing; that is why justice is so absurd. But back to the individual's attempt to understand. The individual must have proof to understand; and that is what the subject searches for, proof of Hope, proof of existence, of whether she exists outside the room. The individual searches the theatre for proof that these actors who die in the play are only dead in the play; and therefore the individual looks for life after the play is over; he believes that there is this vast world outside the theatre; we call this an afterlife. This is what the subject searches for at the bottom of the lake, deep within his delusional mind that is subjugated by his ignorant will.

The lake symbolizes something else, though, earlier in the story. By the very ignorance of the subject's will, by the very weight of his own thoughts as he describes, he begins to drown in this lake he imagines. Freedom. This is what he has when he is out of the water; the subject is free from his thoughts. The lake, again, symbolizes the mind, a deep abyss; but even more, it suggests that the mind is something we must fight the currents of, swim across the undertow. The individual, he is constantly in the undertow. Though he sees the shore and swims toward it, he is like the subject trying to swim toward the bottom of this perpetual depth of the lake, of the mind. The individual swims toward the shore constantly, but never gets any closer because he does not understand that he swims against the current.

Perhaps the individual decides to swim toward another shore and for an instance the individual can see the shore getting closer; but he is never aware of the currents of the lake; by the very own ignorance of his will he is not aware of the currents of life, of the overpowering will of culture that he swims against. But the story suggests that the only way that the subject can escape this undertow is to fly, as do the birds. But, people do not fly like birds, do they? This is the question the subject proposes. The artist, though, wishes to learn how to fly his whole life.

Dark. Such a dark symbol it is! It is getting dark here within The Box. But we have three more ideas to address. "Death lay ahead of me, in the dark forest of the future." This is the "concept" the subject introduces. Why does he introduce this in particular? It's not just any particular concept. He is dark, secretive; the artist, he works in this period of stagnation, this New Dark Age; and as in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* he is a Savage! How savage the artist has become, he writes in his own blood, in the dark!

But we must address this concept of the forest, of the dark, and of the future. The future is dark, it is secretive; the individual, how his ignorant will is a slave to this darkness; for, he is in the dark, and he is ignorant. But we already know this; the individual must be ignorant for it is in his fundamental nature to be ignorant. How is he ignorant? He is not ignorant simply by means of his will, though; the individual is ignorant in that, as the saying goes, he cannot see the forest for the trees. We hear this from time to time; it is quite cliché; but it is cliché because it is uttered out in ignorance, by the

ignorant individual himself. So what do we make of this figure of speech? Perhaps it needs to be interpreted again, -with new light we turn on our microscope.

Why does the subject say, "Tree," or more importantly, why does he think of a tree. What is a tree? It is a perennial plant of wood, a symbolic Tree; something resembling a tree, for this symbolic Tree is a representation. So what does a tree represent? A tree can represent thousands of things. But it is how a symbol is used that matters. So how is this tree used? Most important, it is the first image, or thought, the subject tries to picture in his mind each time he wakes because it is symbolically Perennial, a symbol of this cycle. Again this is just an interpretation; but it is my interpretation; and more importantly, it is an interpretation of my own work, my own blood that I spilled. Anyway, the tree is significant in its relation to this birth and rebirth; it takes root, the thought, on the shore of this lake of blood; this "small pool of blood."

The symbolic Tree, then, represents Life, as trees often do: there are family trees, most importantly; for that is in essence what the subject searches for, his roots. He tries to "think of someone, anyone." Perhaps he searches for his family? No! He searches for more than just his family; he searches for not even his extended family, but for his greater family, for "Society." The individual has a family, and he has a past, but he also has History; and this is the past of the individual's Culture.

But we must turn to this cliché, this notion that one cannot see the forest for the trees. The second thought that comes into the subject's mind is, "Person." What is this symbolic Person? It, too, is in relation to this birth and rebirth; but both the Tree and Person are in relation to our interpretation of the cliché; and this Person is not society but the individual. "Who or what has put me here?" This is the third thought the subject has. But this is another level of my interpretation of The Box, so in this instance this question is not, as I interpreted before, a rhetorical question. No. It is in relation to this birth and rebirth, this Life and the Individual, who is but a tree in our forest. And that is it. The subject cannot see the forest for the trees because who or what has put him there is this Forest. What? What has put him there? This "thing" has put him there. But it is a symbolic Thing; it is the Omnibus. Well you must have forgotten what I said earlier; I am a madman and I ramble on and on; I know this.

The Omnibus is the subject transfigured. Perhaps if the individual were to transfigure this cliché it might read: the trees cannot see the forest. Why the individual who thought of this clever little pun did not say it that way in the first place, I don't know. So don't get annoyed; these artists are very moody and cantankerous, we know this. But either way, the trees cannot see the forest; this makes more sense; the individual cannot see the play because he is in it; the subject cannot see the story because he is in it; we cannot see Life because we are drowning in it; and it is as deep as it is dark.

Dark. The artist is dark; he imitates his dark life; he is a gloomy creature. The subject speaks of the dark. He says: "Day was light, and night was dark." And that was all that the subject says he can make of this. What does this symbolize? Well, first, you must remember that as I made the title of this interpretation: Everything Here Is An Allusion. This is the context, the framework under which

everything in The Box is structured; everything in it is allusion; it refers indirectly to Life. So why was daylight and night dark and nothing more? Why all this blue? What I allude to is this idea in life that things are not just black and white, but that there is a gray; and the subject lives here, in the gray, in-between two extremes.

But there is no middle ground. There is no gray in the artist's life, for he lives in the dark. That is why he must set himself on fire. The individual, he is blind as well as mute; all he sees is white, for he is under the bright lights of the play. The individual, he is deaf as well. He is such a pitiful beast, this individual; he must see everything in black and white; for the lights are either on or they are off; and in the dark he sits there terrified; in the audience he sits, mute, blind, and deaf. What is "this strange aphasia" the subject is possessed? What is this loss of power to comprehend words the individual is ill with? What is his sickness? How can the artist even attempt to communicate with such a sad state of affairs? And how is it that the artist can see in the dark? Why you might have forgotten, but I have told you; the artist, he is a nocturnal creature; he only comes out at night, in the dark, and sets fires! The artist, he is in the darkness now, and he is trying to set the whole world on fire and burn down this edifice, this theatre that he is enraptured in!

What is this darkness? I had almost forgotten until now. But that is how we come upon this or that thing; as the subject says, he has "stumbled upon a windfall." Windfall: something, -like a tree! -blown down by the wind; or in this case, an unexpected gain or advantage. Yes! The artist is always searching for the advantage; he goes about a meadow with his butterfly net and tries to catch a butterfly. What is this butterfly? It is death. We know this already. The artist goes around and tries to capture death in his net; the subject says: "Death lay ahead of me, in the dark forest of the future." This is what the darkness is, the future; it is dark; it is secretive. And so is death captured in the story; this is how death is portrayed in The Box.

Bonsai: a miniature version of a *tree*. The Box is still growing, and perhaps it is a mutant. I intended the story, like the leaves of the bonsai, -the pages of the story were to be a third the size of the whole idea. One must understand that even though the story is short, it took a year to create. There are several procedures involved in this method. There is the idea; there is all the research, this slaving over pages of books, thousands of ideas and making sense of them and their relation to my original idea; and there are these pages of doodles, of notes scattered here and there, ideas scattered hither and thither to be assembled.

Most of this just requires time though. Like the bonsai, my story must have the time to take root in my mind and grow. But I am thorough; I am a madman. It was not just enough to write the story, for I knew that the individual has bad manners, and he would not give it the full attention it needs; for the individual is too occupied with life to hear me thoroughly; but the story it must be nourished if it is to grow, and perhaps if it is not read it will wither away and die. But I could not let it do that. So, like the madman, I wrote page after page, groomed leaf after leaf, limb and trunk until I was satisfied that I had shouted loud enough. I even had to set my poor tree on fire; it burns even now. But I could have written a hundred pages. My tree, even though it is small, has many leaves. The

individual does not understand that the artist spills his blood, hours every day for months, and in this instance, a full year, just to present to the individual one refined piece of work. The seasons cycle, just as life, perpetually.

Box. This individual, she is a special kind of individual, she sits on the balcony in her theatre box. What is she, what species of individual is she; we know that she is a she, but what else? What more could she possibly be? She is an assassin, that is her role, -and the masks they wear, these assassins, they are painted pale, as if death themselves. There are assassins as well, but this one happens to be a she. She sits there with her theatre patrons, assassins themselves, but she does not watch the play. What is she doing? Concealed under the costume she wears, under her black robe is a crossbow. For this is her method, to sit and watch the theatre and assassinate. But what separates her from her other theatre patrons, this plethora of assassins? Why does she hunt the artist! Yes, this is her role; she has rehearsed it many times. The artist knows this assassin is after him; he watches for her, as he is paranoid and suspicious. But this assassin, she also has another role; she is the Critic, -even worse, she is a Psychoanalytic Critic. And she hunts your poor fool narrator, how indignant.

Hope, this is why she becomes "ill with melancholy." Melancholy. A black bile. That is what is in the cup, this "black liquid." And the subject, like Sisyphus, is sentenced to this cycle of despair. The individual is lost within the depths of indifference; he wakes everyday and is annoyed at the sound of time, at this foghorn that blasts out: "Wake up slave! Work!" And he fears time, so he obeys, how depressing. The individual goes to his work; he takes it and calls it his own, but it is not; this work, it is not his own. The individual gets off work and takes up his habits and addictions, for it is in his fundamental nature to do so. But the artist, he wakes in darkness, for he lives in it; he is nocturnal. The artist wakes in darkness and is comforted by it, for he is a ragged thing, and does not want to be seen. But he takes on his work, for he is driven; he is driven on by madness. The artist, he is a madman! He is delusional and dangerous! But he lives underground. He does not live in a box; ritual wills it so.

The police, their role, it is proof that the artist must be paranoid. Their job is to be suspicious! What an act to play! What effect this must have on the pig! For this is the beast he is, Authority. The Pig, and the Artist, they must be paranoid; the world is full of criminals! Sociology tells us… Science tells us so! This new religion of Science has killed God. And not just this insane belief in Evolution; this is true; I wish we were not, but it is; it is true I tell you! Ask any Criminologist and he will tell you that we are all criminals, each and every one of us! Look beside you, there…there beside you in the theatre, this individual beside you, he, -whatever species- he is a Criminal! We share many things in common: this thing I told you about, our fundamental nature. But the only one role I am absolutely sure of is that we are all Criminals! That is why the artist must be paranoid; for I have said it many times, -I am a babbling madman you know- that the artist must fear his audience, and be prepared because they are all criminals looking to create some artistic misdemeanor or felony, some breach of artistic etiquette, -and the artist must be suspicious, he must be prepared to mock them! Jack the Ripper said he brought forth the 20th Century, and he did! He brought this new species of fear and

terror, a new breed of violence. And it was not this sadistic violence, this is in our fundamental nature, we evolved into these beasts we are; the Marquis de Sade only named something already here: a label, a particular image to identify it with, this beautiful sadism. But the Ripper is a product of Urbanization. Globalization. Yes! We are all in one huge theatre now, full of Criminals! And today's motto is not, love thy neighbor, but: fear thy neighbor! For your neighbor is a criminal, and you do not know the depth of his role. Good actors always operate just under the surface. The madman, though, he brings forth the 21st Century! But not Nietzsche's madman. –No! There is a new species of madman nowadays; he has evolved!

Nietzsche, though, he was there when God was murdered! What a sight this must have been! It was probably according to History somewhere around 1850, respectively. Yes, Nietzsche was there when the world gave birth to Industry! People in hotels once "…died there in a few beds. Now one dies in 559 beds. Factory fashion, of course. In the view of this enormous production rate, the individual death is not so well executed; but that is beside the point." Rilke knew this. The point is that this new species of madman is the Artist. But he is not like any other artist, he must be paranoid and suspicious and always ready to mock his audience; ritual wills it so. Custom demands it! Custom, too, has evolved.

Jack the Ripper, though, he brought forth blood, center stage. The artist, the true artist, paints within a message of blood; he paints of his own blood! Art imitates Life, and in the world it pours down blood. But this blood, it is the subtlest smidgeon of blood, just a "small pool of blood." And this is the deep sleep that our generation awakens, just as the subject does in The Box.

Regardless, we have gone as deep in this descent of the waters of madness as I can go.

It is too dark to see anymore. Enough of this autographic interpretation.

The show is over!

THIS IS NOT AN EXIT!

The Great Work! (bosh)

Good evening, fellow humans. What follows is a little nostalgia for you, the reader. It comes from an old friend and acquaintance Gusto Wily, or Gus, who told me, R. Wordsmith, a tale from the Underground. Gus and I, and our other friend, Rob Cash, -we were all from Backwards, Amerika, which was a few day walk from even the peripheral limits of Atlas, the Great City. And there was our " lady friend:" Ms. Gabby Babble. And it involved her and Gus in what we now remember as:
The Great Work!

"I was in search of the Stone by the River, the legendary stone: a white powdery stone that was said to be on the banks of the Omen River, that, as you know, runs through Miracle, Amerika. And you see, R., one day I found what I thought was it… Hell, I knew it was the Stone, by the fact that it looked like a "Moon rock," as Gabby Babble put it. I was expecting it to be "red Sulphur" and I would get this because of heating it. But I ain't gonna give ya' any technical bullshit: it was the legendary Stone." And Gus paused.

"I had done all the leg work, and tested it… well, there are problems with testing longevity. First, I needed an opportunity to test it, and I hadn't yet had this opportunity. Until, while at work formulating the Elixir, I may have combined it wrong with certain things and lost my mind one afternoon with Gabby Babble. You know well that we were seeing each other for a bit. Hell, everyone now has seen Gabby Babble naked, not just you and I. Beats me why old Ward even wants her. Anyhow, she took my pistol and told me she was going to throw it in the Omen River. I took this as a sign, without any better judgment and under the influence of the Elixir, a cathartic. Anyhow, Gabby Babble not only threw my gun into the Omen River, but just before that, she downed all the damned Elixir! And this sealed her fate: I took her and drowned her. I held her by the neck under the water in the Omen River until she was dead. I left her ass in the Omen for some time, so I knew she would be dead. And I figured I had killed her so the least I could do was bury her.

I dragged her dead ass out of the Omen, and I gotta feel sorry for her so, I tried to get the water out of her lungs, and it had been nearly an hour since she had been in the damn Omen River: Well, after I got the water out of her lungs, the crazy bitch came back to life! I call this the 'residual effect' of the elixir: it is an extension of life, somehow." Gus told me.

"And so," Gus continued, "I had taken the liberty of keeping a written journal of my experimental transmutation of the Elixir, so that I could reproduce it accurately. And luckily, Gabby Babble didn't have a memory of me killing her sorry ass, or at least trying to kill her, until she came back to life… Well, that was the Elixir I had come to you and old Rob with, when the Malady had hit hard in the Great City, what they called Viral X… Fuck a vaccine, though, when you have the Waters of Life, the Elixir of Immortality, and the nostrum for all our addictions, present and past.

The Great Work had paid off. And so I kept taking it, but Gabby Babble didn't. So, when Ward came down with the Malady, I took the opportunity to experiment further. I just watched, though, and by observation I saw the sickness overtake Ward but not Gabby Babble… at least not to begin with. But the Malady, as you know, lasts for 14 days, and on the 13th day Gabby Babble became ill.

"Now, this of course is because Gabby was over or past the Residual stage of the Elixir, and so it was that I discovered the first Key to the dosing of the Elixir. I was at work on my observation and

documentation, which I created a Cipher, which I have already given you in the letter I sent you to announce my visit. Here is the actual Key to the Cipher, which will give instructions on the formulation of the Elixir after the sublimation of the Stone." And Gus handed me an envelope, which was slightly weighted by the message within it.

"As for the Stone, you will know it when you see it, and by heating it to the specifications therein the Key, it will turn red, which is how I thought to 'hide it in the light' as Rob's old man Wit used to say. That is, I had decided to shroud or veil the Stone in Myth and it became what you have heard as the Lost City of Nod, and the Nordic people who dwell there… and their Blood Stone, a chert or red jasper, which in the process of transmutation the "residue" around and from the Runestone that lies here in the valley, up on the Catechism Hill. Now, it is true that it is a Runestone, and as for the runic inscription, it says "Nimrod's Valley," which is like others found far away from the Great City of Atlas, Amerika. But the important thing is, it doesn't say, as I put it into the mouths of the Cabalists -it doesn't say "Blood Stone." And the peoples who left the Runestone were not Christians, but Pagans. Anyone who knows about the Stone, knows that it comes from what the Christians call God, and who you and I call the Absolute, though, this understanding Him as the Trinity is a misnomer, to say the least." Gus paused. "But before I go on, get you a snort of this batch of Elixir I brought along." And I took a drink from Elixir. It was not my first drink of the nostrum. It had a bite to it, not unlike whisky but also like laudanum: it was pure delight in its effect, but as far as taste went it was rancid.

"Good medicine, huh R.?" Gus chuckled.

"Yeah." I said. "Now what about this Runestone business, this is the first you've confessed this to me, though I suspected the Cabalists were chasing shadows."

"Well, the Runestone was a myth I created to deflect or misdirect attention from the Stone. It has been said that the Stone's substance was, that is, its physical substance was and is abundant and made in general of "red Sulphur," that is Sulphur and mercury. Now those idiot Cabalists bought the Myth and Legend of the Blood Stone hook, line, and sinker . As the saying goes… they gobbled it up in their blinded state. I wasn't looking for the Stone, but I recognized it. Gabby Babble wasn't looking for the Stone but didn't recognize it. Too bad for her, huh? Well. I took, as I say, the opportunity to complete the Great Work, and in doing so I have reached God, as the Arabic people say. Really, I mean, I haven't met Him, but I am on another level, and you, since it was you who led me down the crooked path that is made straight by the Elixir of Life, the Waters in the Valley of the Omen River that I found amid murder. But God, as the Christians say -well, Wisdom spared me the misery of iniquity, and gave us all, you R., and Rob, and I, and even old Wit and Gab had a taste and a bit of immortality. Now this is all grandiose thinking one might say, but I tell you, hell, it even gave Ward and Gabby, a taste of the everlasting: the Waters of the Omen River found in the Stone through its sublimation into the Elixir of Life. Now that may sound like a mouthful, but that is how the Scribes spoke of it, and that is how I learned to think of it. Because, you see, R., it becomes in the subliming of the Stone a way of thinking, just like you learned a way of thinking at the University." Gus said.

"And to answer your question, at least, partially, I learned of the Stone to hide it in the light, at least its discovery. It is said the Stone is everywhere, so where is it? Well, it's on the Omen River, but that's the only place I've found it so far." Gus said.

"But had it merely fallen from Heaven, or is it born of this Earth? These might be better questions for Ms. Wordsmith, your Old Lady. But I know the stories, and you do, too, but let me state them here for the record, and state them as I understand them. Now, this might sound like the rambling gibberish of a Nostrum Anonymous meeting, but it's a story about stories, and how I understand and relate to them. Now, also, people have said that to use the Nostrum (that is, the Elixir) -to use the Nostrum is a choice. Well, yes, it is a choice that is made for you, though. And by what mojo or juju is it made? I say it is this: the choice to use any drug is made by the Absolute, and no one else. Not by man alone, and not by man at all. Now the Christians will say it is Satan who pushes the hand to strong drink and hard drugs." Gus was livid.
"Well, now what is the story, Gus?" I asked the question he was seeking.
"Runestone residue is a falsehood to cover up the truth of the Great Work: the Philosophers' Stone is gone, and may or may not be found again, and if it is to be found, it is to be found on the Omen, as I've said. It hides there in the light; it hides there in shadow. It is the light, not the Way, the Truth, and the Light as the Christians have thought. That just leads back to God and Death. To be set free of Death, simply sublimate the Stone as I have included in this 'manifesto' of The Great Work. You've ingested it both figuratively and literally, but not as a metaphysical truth…. Am I talking riddles here? Yes, that is the point of the Stone and the Great Work: to seek and to find."
"And to Conquer God and Death, right, Gus, my old friend?" I asked. "But we've been here alive and all the rest besides you, Gus, and Rob Cash, and I are just dust: what then is left but suffering?" I asked Gus.
"Well, don't worry, brother! That's why I included the Elixir of Life, and a good chug or two every 12 days will do the trick!" Gus and I both laughed… and then Gus continued his animated tale of The Great Work.
"So, you might wonder, R., how long can we go on like this? I mean, are we truly immortal under the influence of the Elixir, or do we just think and feel we are? And while that is and may always be a perennial concern of the Stone, it is a valid inquiry. Though, it is of course one I don't have an answer to yet, nor do I foresee such a conquest occurring. It is in our nature to die, and the Elixir merely prolongs life. I call it the 'Methuselah Effect.' Now through the years the question has come up, too, again and again: Why? I mean, why this, and why that, and what have you as concerns the Stone and The Great Work, but don't concern yourself with such things, old friend. You and I and Rob were put here to do The Great Work, and in doing so we outlived the Malady, the pestilence and plague of Viral X… but other than that, let us be glad of the truth that we know. We know, I say to you Mr. R. Wordsmith… we know that there is a Stone, and we have drunk from the endless Waters of Life. So let me continue with what the Sages of Old call the "Spiritual Perspiration" of The Great Work. That is, the Stone is sublimated through heating it in the waters of the Omen River, water from the Omen, anyhow… So even if the Cabalists would have been able to harness certain things from the Runestone with Blood Stone residue, that wouldn't and didn't and shan't do it because the process does not include heating it in the waters from the Omen, much less the exact amount of water and the degree of heat." Gus told me.

"Regardless of that, the Cabalists want to put "the sauce" in it, and one can, but not to the degree that you can "tweak" on it. More than anything, it is just as well to add caffeine or cacao leaves to the Elixir." Gus continued. "Moreover, my spiritual perspiration can be found in the Rudimental." Gus concluded.
"What's that, Gus?" I asked.
"The Rudimental is the manifesto of The Great Work, and I've written it only to conceal it. There are clues on how to reveal it, unveil it from secrecy, but they are hidden in the letter, and you must use the Key and the Cipher to unlock them, as I fear telling you would not simply do in the tradition of the Stone. People have said the Stone is a preternatural substance, but it is not otherworldly, merely misunderstood, to most folks, anyhow. You and I know it personally, for those who want and desire the Stone are envious of us, R. I worked hard to preserve the traditions, but at some point, there is only reality. The Cabalists are still 'geetered-up' on the masses' ideology that one can extract from 'the blood stone' the Elixir of Life, while it is not up on the ridge in the Runestone, but down in the Valley along the Omen River. Now, chances are that it could be found by the Runestone, but the Cabalists have already torn apart the Runestone and got nothing. Now the Mind Scientists think that they can find it somehow in the same factoid." Gus continued his tale of the Great Work.
"Truth is, that Mercury is what the Alchemists and the Cabalists think the Stone is derived from. And it is said that it is derived from removing the Blackest of the Black Pitch and leaving only the White and Resplendent Stone that bears the blood red veins of the red Sulphur and it is extracted with the Clouds and Mist. Put in the simplest of layman terms: I have found that a man can take the Stone and heat it in water from the Omen River until the pitch is gone, and it then is pink."
"Awesome!" I said.
"Oh, yes, indeed, R. And that's basically what you just had a snort of a minute ago." Gus went on talking. "Now there are more technical things to be done with the Stone, but that is all in the letter. The important thing is, that it is safe from the pilfering fingers of the Mind Scientists and the fumbling fingers of the Cabalists and other various idiots and simpletons. Now that we have the Elixir, which I have left some 24 gallons, or about 2-4 years worth depending on how much I produce… But we will survive the Malady. One more thing I will mention, our mutual acquaintance Log had found the Stone, as well, but the idiot he is, he doesn't even know it. So, I have Log convinced to trade it to me for the recipe for the Blood Stone residue from the Runestone, as Log thinks it true just like the Cabalists. Hell, if I'd told Log I found Sasquatch shit and put it in it for longevity, he would believe it." Gus laughed. "Anyways, I think I can get another 24 gallons of Elixir with the Stone he's trading with me. I'll give him a little bottle and tell him it was an earlier less potent formula, that way he can survive the Malady. Just out of pity, you know. Well, that's about all I got for you. If we can just find more of the Stone, we can make a fortune if this Malady continues. But we'll see what develops and becomes of it. Either way, I will probably outlive Methuselah…"
Gus took a big gulp from the Elixir.
"The important thing is, R., The Great Work is complete, and I've managed to hide it in the open light of the World. Now let's have a drink.. As above, so below!"
Gus and I, R. Wordsmith enjoyed the excess of the Elixir of Life, which if anything, makes you feel good in a World that is not always too good to a fellow human…

Requiem for a God

Roman was an exceptional student at the University of Doubt. And as to how the young fellow "accidently" killed God is speculative, but not beyond reason. Of course, most would say Roman "purposely" and/or willfully murdered God, the President of the University of Doubt, but I am willing to suspend my disbelief. I am Cosmos, and I will be your narrator here.

To begin with, Roman's lady friend, Faith, had confided in me the fact that she knew Roman hadn't murdered God, but that Roman himself had seen his friend and confidant Spike stab God in the back. But Roman insisted he take the blame for it. A student named Scribe wrote a column for The Doppelgänger, our school newspaper, who quoted Roman as saying:

"Have we not all stabbed God in the back somehow or in some way?"

And this was clarified by Dr. Wit, Roman's professor at the time, who told me, Cosmos, verbatim that "Roman wouldn't hurt a fly." Much less a University of Doubt President like God. God may, in fact, it has been suggested, played a role in his own death at Doubt, which was in fact verified by Scribe and Faith and Dr. Wit and others… God didn't want to be the President of the University of Doubt any longer, and committed assisted suicide by hiring Spike to kill him and implicate Roman. But this also seems fishy.

The crux of the matter is that Roman was a student on the cusp of genius. If Roman would have chosen a different way dealing with the judgment himself of the accusations cast upon him by God, then things might have gone differently for Roman and God. But Roman was too smart for his own good, and too much the naif, at that! To think that he could checkmate God that way, the one who presided over all affairs at the University of Doubt! Well, indeed, Roman had a predisposition with anarchy, for he was also known to be an agnostic atheist, which was unheard of in our part of the World at the time. Over the last little bit here on this Flat Earth we know as home, many things have been shown to be fact that were fiction. For one, I thought God would outlive the University of Doubt, as it was changing to the Academy of Ideas soon. But that old bastard didn't! God is dead. And so shall he be forevermore. That is because, even if we could resurrect him, which can't be done… Even so, if God was resurrected, then either Roman or his kind like the blade yielding Spike, who was in fact Roman's "Other," his pitch black Shadow, -well, let us be weary of this requiem for a God we all know. And let's just let the matter rest and rot eternal just as God is doing, infinitely! Furthermore, if you draw back the knife, let it find the mark, it is on any God like-minded individuals: for what is done cannot be undone, regret for regrets sake, and guilt that remains guilt through guilt itself. Welcome to the curse of being "human, all too human" as some smart ass philosopher once put it, but who and why and where… Well, who knows?

In the end, your friends will betray you, and rise up against you. I hope you have the courage of Roman to stay loyal to them even in your own death, or in this case, the death of God, who swore to all He was in absolute control of the University of Doubt. But as it came to pass: God was not in control, at all, and this was a fatal mistake… *requiescat in pace.*

Doubting Thomas

Tom Doubt was born an agnostic-freethinker, but also a naturalist, humanist, and devout atheist… But more important to us was what he would become: a mystic and most of all, a recluse. His given name was Thomas D. Freewill, and most referred to him as T. D. Freewill growing up, But those who knew him, those who really knew him as much as you could know and understand a fellow human being, called him Tom Doubt. And there were the Evangelicals who Tom Doubt hated because they were haters and deserving of his hatred -Evangelicals called him Doubting Thomas, and this is where our little story begins.
"What's your name, son?" The preacher asked.
"My friends and family used to call me Tom Doubt." Thomas D. Freewill replied.
"So you're *a* Doubting Thomas, Mr. Freewill?" The preacher, Finster, asked him.
"Why'd they curse you with the name Doubt anyway, son?" The preacher probed.
"Well I like the name Doubt, it describes me well because I am in fact agnostic?" Thomas D. Freewill corrected the older less wise man.
"You like it! Do you know what agnostic means even poor lad?" Finster continued his diatribe. "And how did they '*used to call you Tom Doubt*?"' Finster furthered his interrogation.
"So you're a preacher, huh? Mr. Finster?" Thomas D. Freewill began his own counter-probing.
"Yes." Finster replied in blunt preacher fashion.
"And what do you preach?" Thomas D. Freewill asked.
"I preach theTruth, of course!" Finster said.
"The truth, huh? Well that's nice." Thomas D. Freewill said.
"Nice!" Finster was flustered. "It's more than just the Truth, too, it's God's Word!"
"I spoke to God once, Mr. Finster." Thomas D. Freewill paused, then continued… "and do you know what I got in reply…? …Nothing."
"Well, good man, son, you just answered my next question, son." Finster chuckled.
"I know!" said Tom Doubt." Who chuckled, as well… and then laughed…

Thomas D. Freewill, then, just simply walked away.

The Third Degree

Thomas D. Freewill is my name… where the D. stands for Doubt. I had been writing a piece for the Republican paper over the death penalty and how we should instate the guillotine here in Amerika. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth," the Bible says. Well, some people in certain circles did not agree fully with your author. I was on my way to the office, and I rounded a corner when some men in black hoods snatched me up and threw me a beating I did not fully intend to receive, nor did I fully deserve to receive it. Though, the case could be made for the men in the black hoods.

I woke up in what appeared to be a basement. There was an audience, all covered in the black hoods of my captors. And they all sat on buckets, and they did this as water dripped here and there, and of all places, it dripped directly on my head. I assume this was arranged purposely by my captors. Devils workman they were. The torture after about an hour of this dripping would certainly be my death… mentally anyhow. But the black hoods had other plans. A man in a red hood, a judge of some sort began my interrogation.
"Thomas D. Freewill?" The judge asked.
"Yes, I'm Thomas." I replied, thinking the farce would be over, the joke unveiled.
"Do you think it's okay to murder people, chop their heads off, all in the name of your writings?"
"Well, you see, that's a political piece that…"
"Silence!" The judge roared. "You were sentenced here by a jury of your peers. The crime, sedition."
"Sedition? What?" I tried to defend myself.
"Silence!" He roared, again. "I sentence you to contrition, the Headsman will carry out the sentence."
"What the…?" And my words were silent with fear.
The Headsman first began to pull each of my fingernails, my precious typing fingers ripped apart! I vomited. I passed out.
I woke and the Headsman poured gasoline on my wounded fingernail-less hands, I screamed, I vomited, and I passed out.
I woke up with water splashing on my face. The Headsman lit the gasoline soaked into my fingertips where nails used to be. I was on fire. I became numb, and I fainted.
I must have been unconscious for some time. I woke and the buckets, the black hoods, the red hooded judge, and the Headsman were all gone. My bucket remained and I pulled myself off the vomit covered floor I was stuck to and read a note attached to the bucket. It read:

"Justice served."

Weltschmerz

Rot Worldly had come to Amerika by train from the Hinterlands in the Far North, a place of dense and dark forests that Rot had left to join the main body of Amerika to the South. Rot Worldly left his home in the Hinterlands in the Far North to travel by train to the main body of Amerika. Instead of it being a land of prosperity, full of job opportunities, Rot attended college, dropped out, and became part of the mindless rabble of thousands upon thousands of homeless people in Aion, the Great City, and the capital of Amerika, the Great Nation.

Rot, who came from a place where homelessness was not seen, but only heard of second-hand on the news… Rot learned first-hand that in Amerika, nothing is free: especially if a man doesn't have a certain status, such as land, home, or vehicle.

Rot, who had lost the rest of his money he had saved in college, became one of the homeless rabble easily enough. The people he had just a few days ago observed from the train with their backpacks… The thousands of thousands of the Herd, who now went herd fashion off the cliff of reality.

Rot Worldly admitted that once a hardened atheist, and then an agnostic, had come to know God as a homeless man… but later admitted to saying this only for his own safety among the hyper-religious homeless individuals he had come to know.

And it was about this time that Rot learned about a Day Center called Pathways, which indeed was just a Day Center… At night, there was no overnight shelter: there was nowhere for a person to rest… ever. Much less, have a sound place to sleep.

And the only way to safely sleep, and legally sleep, was to sleep right in the middle of the sidewalk. But after Rot was reported and mistaken for being dead, he was forced to continue to walk (and that's what being homeless amounted to was a lot of walking). After being mistaken for dead, Rot was forced to walk endlessly, day and night, until he at last got to rest at Weltschmerz homeless shelter.

At the Weltschmerz shelter, Rot was allowed to sleep at last, but at the price of being monitored by a Watchman, a man or woman, who "watches" over the residents at the homeless shelter, Weltschmerz. To avoid the Watchman during the waking hours, Rot walked to the Aion Public Library everyday and rested and slept and ate on the banks of the Omen River. And at the Aion City Park beside the Library, Rot met Rich Wordsmith whom Rot got to know a little, until he was introduced to the Reverend Sinister, a former acquaintance of Mr. Rich Wordsmith's.

Rot, for the record, did not panhandle for money. Some say it may be his work ethic that got in the way, some say it was something else. But nevertheless, Rot never took a dollar from anyone except his fellow homeless people. Fellow men and women of the Herd, who didn't mind sharing what little they had with Rot. Not that Rot thought begging was wrong or offensive in any way, just that he thought himself not brave enough to do it.

Mr. Wordsmith told Rot that for society not to use him, Rot had to make himself useless. Rot, thinking upon being useless, makes himself this by living outside the Aion Church in an old dog house. Rot may have not been brave enough to beg for a dollar, but he was brave enough to be thought of as a dog.

Rot Worldly, now treated as a dog, which had earned him the nickname, "the Dog." Rot was then treated as a dog so much so that he forgets his status as a human being. And upon being thought of as a dog, Rot Worldly was then abused like a Dog.
Rot, in fact, feared he would be "put to sleep" like a Dog, and exterminated from this world.
Out of this growing fear, Rot Worldly took a dose of Euthanol to end his life; and to end one's misery is a concept of the future. Euthanasia of the invalids and wretched was a fantasy of societies from the beginning of time, and to the end of the end times. Rot Worldly had the following epitaph inscribed on his gravestone: "Here lies Rot Worldly: A man who lived and died a mere dog."

A Simple Life

I lead a life of simplicity, or at least, a simple life. Because nothing in life is simple… but I strive toward simplicity. How to live a simple life: Get rid of everything you own and walk the streets with nothing but literally the clothes on your back and a pair of shoes for a few days, and then you will know what you truly need in this life.

Monkey Business

Mr. Jack Tropes was a high school science teacher in Miracle, Amerika. Sometimes it was said that he would "fill in" for the biology teacher. Miracle didn't have a biology teacher as it was "forbidden" to teach human evolution in public schools. This is what happened years ago but has now surfaced again like a windfall, or perhaps it was just a deadfall.

Jack had several good friends, but at the time of his Trial, he could rely only on his old pals, Local Yokel, and Rustic Woodsman, who were also from Miracle. Local was a fisherman and a fisher of men, and Rustic was a hunter and a gunsmith. And there was also a fourth friend, Wade Bridges, a Wordsmith, who would act as Jack's lawyer.

It was Bridges' idea, in fact, to challenge the Dogma. He went to Jack and asked him if he thought it was fair that they taught the Bible in schools, and had school prayer, but a science teacher couldn't teach something as rudimental as human evolution. The press mocked Jack and called him "Monkey," but Bridges was quick to point out that evolution says humans and monkeys came from the same family tree. Thus, science doesn't say we descended from monkeys, but that we all descended from a hairy tree dwelling, quadruped with a tail, which "sounds a lot like a monkey" Reverend Namesake added, a small-town preacher and prosecutor.

But in Miracle, people took offense to it being suggested that we were even cousins to a monkey. There's just not that much you can tell a person except the truth. The real adversary to science, was religion in the South, the Evangel Right was or at least thought it was "in the right." Or as preacher would say, they were righteous, which is another way of saying the Evangel Right did not err on the side of caution, the Evangel Right was off centered, extreme, and nothing can endure without moderation.

Reverend Rebuke would represent the State. His favorite sarcastic wisecrack was to say: "Are you trying to make a monkey out of me?" Even with evidence to the contrary, Rebuke was ready to conquer, and in conquest he would be the victor: he would know that he was "right." Truth is the weapon of those in power; for those in power decide the truth, whatever that may be.

Local and Rustic asked Bridges what he wanted them to do, and Bridges said that disinformation would be rampant in this trial, and that they were to inform their customers with the truth, even if it were by word of mouth. Jack Tropes was to just sit there and let Bridges lash Rebuke with "counter-religious diatribe," as the namesake is known, or science, as it is now known. Bridges was a firm follower of the idea that even though science is beneficial, it is provincial, I mean, provisional in that it is limited by time and place, and it is temporal. Religion on the other hand, Evangelicals to be specific, believe the complexities of life to be evidence of a kind of watchmaker, Bridges didn't know much about watches; but that even if a Watchmaker exists, a bio-clock-keeper exists called Nature. Bridges called God something idiotic, he called him the Dog, as it was God spelled backward. Then sometimes Bridges would point out that the Dog was responsible for Dogma. And Bridges would often say to Pastor Namesake: "keep the Dog on its leash where it belongs." Bridges would take this idea further in his whisper campaign he and Local and Yokel were doing at word-of-mouth news. Bridges spread the word through Local and Yokel that the Dog evolved, too, but through artificial

evolution or rather apocryphal teachings over the last four or so centuries since the Evangelicals held Christ's teachings hostage. The Evangel species of thought had evolved into a Beast that sought to devour its master. And Bridges would then add that we know what must be done to a Dog that "bites the hand that feeds it," we must euthanize it. And then Namesake countered with the idea that Bridges, and all his riffraff needed to be taken out to the woodshed and "beat the devil out of them."

And last, there was the judge who handled the case, Judge Dogma, who allowed all this pot of verbal discord to simmer, along with a kettle of boiling tempers: both the pot and the kettle had to be tended to by Dogma, and he did quite well, looking back on it. But at the time opinions varied on what should be done to the judge if the case went to the left or right: the center was not an option. And that was because moderation did not exist in Miracle, Amerika at the time. But it was not a land of excess, yet. Rather, it was on a path of excess.

The trial itself was to be just a formality. Dogma ruled early on that you could not bring evidence into the court. Therefore, no actual scientist could be called upon by the defense of Mother Nature's prodigal child, science. But this was just as well, for the prosecution could not produce any magicians or spellcasters or voodoo or any other bad juju on their part: no pseudoscience, that is.

The person behind the trial was the Clean Coal and Iron Company manager, Poor Folks. For purposes of the trial, Jack Tropes would be charged with "spiritual confusion." He would be charged with this for attempting to spiritually confuse the youth of Miracle, Amerika and for being guilty of suffering from spiritual confusion himself. There were many actors in the trial, and each had an important role, but it was just that some roles were more important than others.

One other key piece of information, before the trial starts, and even before the prayer before the trial, there was a book on the teaching of evolution, race, and eugenics titled "A Simple Science." The real question was neither evolution, nor was it race, the real motive was eugenics. The people of Miracle, Amerika wanted a master race through science, and the systematic extermination of "the feeble minded." And it was that the mentally ill, or feeble minded… a solution was being sought to those kinds of people being brought into the world. And evolution at the time was controlled by those in power, as it still is, and will be, but regardless, evolution would show that we were all one race, or species, except the Caucasians who were different than the rest of the races because they are half-breeds: part homo sapiens and part neanderthal. But we won't go into any of this, it's just worth mentioning.

What follows below will just be a summary of the proceedings. I took the liberty of changing some verifiable facts in this essay just as do my religious rivals.

The trial began, on a scorching hot July day, many years ago. Jack Tropes had concocted his story and Local and Yokel spread it around in the world of whispers. A circus came to town, a mall was erected, a tourist camp built, and Amerika's Faith Radio began to broadcast Jack Tropes trial. And due to the heat wave, the trial would be helpful outdoors.

Judge Dogma, in a humble triviality, asked the Reverend Namesake to open the proceedings with a prayer. Bridges objected and asked for a moment of silence instead, which Dogma said would amount to the same thing, but the trial would open with a prayer. This essay on the other hand, did not open with a prayer, as prayer is a pacifier, not a factual instrument of truth.

The Bull Law was signed into law, which stated it was "forbidden" to teach evolution and was immediately brought under scrutiny by Bridges. But at the beginning of the Jack Tropes Trial, Judge Dogma ruled that it is in accordance with education in that the Bull Law does not prefer one religion over another. And that Miracle schools are intelligently designed for both mental development and moral discipline. Then an argument was presented by Bridges, the Wordsmith, that stated learning was about structure not stricture. And Bridges added that morality is the subject of ethics and philosophy, not science.

Jack Tropes pled "not guilty by reason." Bridges tried to call for witnesses to the truth of the matter of evolution, but Dogma will not allow "evidence" by those who know nothing about whether Jack Tropes taught evolution. Bridges tried to explain they will attest to the truth of human evolution. To which Reverend Namesake replied: "Are you trying to make a monkey out of me." To which Bridges counters with: "You are no monkey?" Namesake was asked to prove it and offer evidence of the contrary by testifying as a "Bible expert." Namesake agreed. To which some unsubstantiated claims and rhetoric were exchanged.

Bridges, bored with the idiocy of the court proceedings, asked the Dogma to please find the defendant guilty, so that it could be taken to a higher court. Jack Tropes was, in the end, found guilty and fined one dollar in Miracle. Exhausted from the heat, Reverend Namesake lay down to sleep, prayed his soul to the Lord to keep, and was found dead the next morning.

Another prayer answered, perhaps? (Or perhaps not.)

Black Day

It was a black day when the pestilent Viral X surfaced in the world. This letter will tell the story of Wit, and how nothing changes under the blue bird sky of life... or even the shades of gray of a cloudy day. Some people say of life and its happenings, that: "It is what it is." But to this Wit thought you can't spout shallow quips that state the self-evident and hope for your audience to arrive at the deeper levels of thought in the depths of the lakes of knowledge... One day Wit was on the public transit and was chit chatting with a fellow. This man had been staying at the local homeless shelter and thus infused with religious pandering. And as Wit was getting off the bus, he told the man good luck.

"God don't need luck." The man pointed out.

"God helps those who help themselves." Wit replied.

Wit meant that self-help is the only help one gets from an imaginary being, but the fellow on the bus took it as a slight. All I can say briefly is that people believe all kinds of dumb things, like that we live on a flat earth. Time doesn't necessarily weed out stupidity from the path of life.

The Viral X pestilence exposed the world as a dramaturgical stage upon which we are all its actors, and in the case of Viral X, actors in a masque of mirth and melancholy, wearing literal masques, and so goes the masquerade, and so goes life: "it is what it is," the herd goes herd fashion over the edge of a flat world into the nether of oblivion.

Anyhow, perhaps more on that later.

Wit had an old friend, or a former friend, that he lost to the Viral X, and this person's name was Rig. But Wit did not lose Rig to death so much as to the solitude of the pestilence. As I said, it was a black day when Viral X descended upon the world; though, no one really knows exactly when it started, or if it will end for that matter. Whereas Rig was dead to Wit in spirit, Wit's childhood friend Rambler was just dead. But the man Wit was today, would not be the man who experiences death, Wit's "online-therapist" Umwelt tells him.

In the end, the time of Viral X was like the shadow of a black sun on a hollow world: a savage disease ushered in a spectral era of uncertainty for a bleak future.

Hatchet Man

I was born on a Sunday, I was born on the Day of the Dead at 3am, which is the Devil's Hour, or at the end of the Witching Hours. Hick Stickman is the name. But my nickname as a child was Hatchet Man. I was called this growing up because I carried a hatchet with me all the time. Most of the time, friends and family just called me Hatchet. But then, it was shortened to Hatch by my Granny and Papa. My family owned and operated Stickman Lumber & Timber Company. My Papa was the head honcho. But I was intoxicated with fear in my youth. I read and I learned from experience. Somehow, I wasn't aligned with my inner-self. Discipline. What is it? Well, even as a child I knew this wasn't something that was beaten into you, or beaten out of you, as in "beat the devil out of them." And this was the reason then for my stubborn defiance. My fears were numerous, and corporal punishment was the culprit. What harm could a little spanking or paddling do to a child? I say this: Corporal punishment is a trauma of my past; it was pure torture, and I relate it to God. For, I associate this to my old science teacher, Rod Stricter. God is a father figure and thus the one behind my torture. Being such, I have found that any memory of Mr. Stricter, any trigger that is… anything related to physical discipline, as it may be called, (perhaps it is physical abuse?) anything related to these triggers of childhood memories I have tried to suppress with the elixir, End-it-all. And through the years, I have tried to suppress my traumatic childhood memories with a variety of drugs and alcohol. "Break your jaw to say yes sir?" That's the phrase old Mr. Stricter uttered many times. Teachers took a wooden paddle and beat us with it. That's how people treat a child in the South. The sad part is, paddling is still used nowadays under the guise of discipline. But let me be very clear: Paddling a child is not discipline… It is torture.

I still struggle today at the age of 50. I still use and will continue to use End-it-all, the mid-altering elixir that numbs my emotional pain. I am now middle aged, and I am at a mid-life crisis: there is a shadow that lurks near me, and for many years it has been following me. It is my doppelganger, my spectral double. The shadow waits ahead of me in life, it waits there with death, both want to destroy me, both want to annihilate me. There is a dead child inside of me, choked to death on the fear and horror of madness brought on by my childhood fears. But I am not running any more, I will no longer be the victim. I have come for my revenge, and vengeance alone dictates my mind. The Devil is my guide, he takes me to those places I feared in my youth, those long and quiet hallways and offices where children are taken to be paddled, to have the Devil beaten out of them. It is both the Christian and the Conservative here in Amerika that are my enemies: both share in the torture of children, both are behind the facade of nurturing children by whipping them.

I met a lady once, whom I was supposedly getting into a business deal with to open a Christian bookstore. I was speaking to her about something that had to do with growing up and the idea that we can't help how we were raised; that even though we are rational adults, our behaviors are often dictated by how we were raised. And upon telling her that I did something because I was taught that way as an atheist and she said I was an adult now and was free to choose differently. Well, for one thing I wasn't raised to be an atheist: I was raised to believe how I wanted to believe. I was free to choose differently, but this lady was merely saying: Why don't I choose to believe in God instead of the way I choose to believe? I was raised to think for myself and that is what I intend to do here. Papa brought us above the threshold of the deep and dark poverty of existence. Papa saw that he couldn't continue down a particular path and chose another direction. What did he have that I didn't? He had his mental health. And that is a grand thing, to have one's mental capacities. But the thing is, I believe I was made to need the elixir End-it-all. I was subjugated by the whims of tyrants like Mr. Stricter, and the torturous idea of being a humiliated and degraded human being that is dependent on elixir to socialize and grow began to appeal to me at a young age. I was traumatized at the age of 6, though. And I will briefly discuss this and then delve into my childhood to account for some of the madness that plagues me as an adult.

My uncle, Stark Stickman, was young enough that when I and my older brother, Havoc Stickman, began school he was still in high school when I started first grade. Stark was a senior and told tales of electric paddle machines with paddles that had holes in them to make them more efficient, so to speak. These tales were told often enough that I began to believe in the horror of them. By the time I was out to recess one day and got in trouble over having brought my protractor and pencils and such outside and handed them out in a mock battle with a schoolmate. I was censured, and a friend and I were made to stand at the door and wait to see the principal after lunch break was over. I was so terrified of the imminent abuse that loomed ahead of me that I decided it was better that I should run away to my great-grandmother's. I didn't make it to Grandma Allwell's, though; I was caught trying to cross a main intersection in the center of our small hometown of Backwards. I was picked up and taken back to the principal's office, but I had no memory of the events. Instead, in terror that I would be beaten, I "blacked-out" as the phrase goes. I felt like a coward. At least that's how I feel now. All the other kids were brave enough to take their "licks," but not me: I was irreconcilable. And I remain irreconcilable. I refuse to accept that we must use corporal punishment to discipline our youth. Whip a child and they learn one thing: violence.

I was molded that day into my pitiful and pathetic state of reluctance. That was my first-grade year. I began, or rather, did not begin my second-grade year until after the first two weeks had already passed. My fears had grown. And during second grade I was subjected to several of my peers being marched out into the hall and paddled just because the bell had rung, and they weren't all in their seats. If one could be beaten for such a small infraction, I thought, what would become of us who do something much more severe. To be certain, even though we said the pledge of allegiance and a prayer every morning before class began, God was nowhere to be found in the classroom. He was absent, and at play with the Devil. And this paddling was common and frequent. I remember a boy paddled one time for not doing his arithmetic. And another infraction was when a boy was tardy; he was sent to the principal's office and judiciously paddled and sent back crying.

But despite all these floggings, I made a friend. His name was Hunter Black. And Hunter wasn't afraid of the paddle. He was paddled once for only defending himself during a tetherball game. And I was growing angry due to the corporal punishment. Regardless, Hunter and I began to hunt songbirds with BB guns, and I made another friend, a dog, Rascal was his name. Rascal and I stayed busy prowling the woods and catching crawdads and trapping small animals. I had begun to hunt with a .410 shotgun, too. I hunted squirrels. I trapped, at first, opossums. Later I was to trap raccoons and mink and even gray fox, beavers, and once nutria. Rascal and I combed the woods daily. Nature held a serene and peaceful beauty that reconciled me as a child.

Rascal and I were fishing one day. I lay there in the warm spring sun, taking a break, laying my head back on the moss of a large rock. And it was peaceful: the stream gurgled and flowed into a still pool of water, the leaves of last year's autumn still lay on the ground, and that warm sunshine gleamed down on my face. And then I heard a familiar voice calling my name: it was Dad, calling for me. I suddenly felt as if my safety had been violated, but quickly gathered myself and hollered back at Dad and my uncles and Papa Stickman who came through the woods. Someone had murdered two men in another town and had fled, then drove to nearby where I was and ditched their vehicle. Being protective, my family came searching for me. As to what the murderer would have done to a 12-year-old boy I don't know, but such are our fears to imagine the worst-case scenario. But the man who murdered the two men had killed three people; the third was a boy I knew: poor Lacks, that young lad who was paddled for simply not doing his arithmetic.

I witnessed Lacks get his paddling another time, and for what infraction I do not know. Lacks was in another class at the time, being that our grade was divided up into four classrooms each hour, and on this occasion, I was in a different room. Regardless, I watched as Ms. Clover with her board brought him out into the hall. The fear instantly surged within me. Young Lacks stood there as Ms. Clover went and got Ms. White to "witness" the paddling, as it was called.

I cannot think of anything more humiliating than to not only be made to bend over and told to touch your toes, and then be patted a couple of times with the board on the buttocks to "warm you up," and then to be struck and swatted and hit as hard as possible by uncaring hands, as young Lacks flinched and raised up each time he was hit, but he was told to stay still so that he could be properly beaten. This is what's meant by education in Amerika: Land of the free, home of the brave, so be it.

Despite the horror and terror of school, I still thrived and learned. But no child ever learned anything from the wooden paddle except fear and how to get what they want in life… to use physical force and violence to attain it.

In a way, I'm not even here to argue that corporal punishment is either effective or ineffective: I know that it is nothing but harmful in any case, and so why should it be any different to any other child. There is one factor that makes it certainly detrimental to a person such as I, and that is that I had and still have mental illness. But what role did corporal punishment play in my own atheism?

I say that the crux of Christianity is that God is an absolute judge and delivers absolute punishment. He waits in hell to cast us all into eternal damnation for having wronged Him and others. What more could He be but this fearful vision of judgment. I have heard "God is love." Well, God and the Church are the only people in this world. God is fallible. He is unjust. He is as damned as we are.

Mr. Stricter was a godly man, religious or superstitious at least. He taught that science says that the universe was created with the Big Bang and that humans came to exist through evolution while at the same time adding that some people believe that God created the world in six days and rested on a seventh. That was science to him, and if you didn't like it and didn't reply to his curt and coarse expressions of "You understand?" and "Break your jaw to say yes, sir!" -well if a student didn't reply "Yes, sir," you were made to walk out into the hall, told to wait there while he got a "witness," and while you're waiting, the door to the classroom was left open, and all the other children waited and watched and then when Mr. Stricter and the witness came back, you were instructed to bend over and touch your toes, and he tapped your bottom a little to "warm it up" as I have said; and then he came swung the paddle back, held it there for a moment and with all the force he could muster he swung the board, which was about an inch and a half thick, six inches wide and about three feet long… He came down with the force and violence of his imaginary God, and that he was dealing out right justice for our wrongs, just like God. And then after the smack and whack of the first lick he waited and again tapped and warmed up his paddle in a sexual manner on the child's buttocks. He waited in order to let the pain sink in so that you felt the severe punishment even more severe than if he swatted and hit you quickly and the pain of the first swat numbed the blows of the next two, for you were struck three times with the paddle; as if this pain instilled any learning other than shear fear into a child. Stricter was a wicked man, sinister, and the most sadistic and savage "teacher" that a student could ever conjure up in his or her imagination.

I was occupied with investigating nature as a child. Nature is my first love. I was obsessed with Her. I walked through the woods and fields daily. And I spoke to God under an old bull pine tree in Granny and Papa's front yard. Their yard adjoined our yard in the back. And I came out of my parent's house and walked over to the front yard of my grandparents'. I looked up and everything was brilliant, the light of the sun radiated off the bull pine and I looked and understood my purpose in life. I would be a thinker, and not just a scholar, or an intellectual, but a freethinker. In other words, I would rise up over the educated idiots that cast fear into children.

I walked away that day with my vision from God to be a freethinker, and to write the story of my youth. Then and there I denounced God! And later I learned that belief came from the Bible. And that planted the seed of atheism in me. And so many other teachers exerted their will onto a child. But did this discipline instill doubt? Yes, it did, indeed! It presented a logical fallacy to my youth and year. Children were to be cherished, while at the same time abused, and an educator can use physical force to hit a child with a piece of lumber!

I remember during my 6th grade year, before class began in Mrs. Victory's English class, where I was pushing and shoving and playing with a classmate, Slim Bumpkin. The bell rang and Mrs. Victory came in and saw us scuffling and ordered us out in the hall. She went and got Ms. Blackguard to witness the beating. She instructed Dick to touch his toes and quickly gave him two hard and heavy swats with the paddle. Then she told him to go back into the room, and then she told me to touch my toes, and I did. The paddle came down hard against my buttocks two times and I don't think I've ever felt more humiliated and degraded by another human being. I was told to go back into the classroom, and she stayed out in the hall and spoke with Mrs. Blackguard. I swore to myself, to God, and to the Devil, that I would never be paddled again.

And good old Mr. Stricter, he gave me the "Break your jaw to say, Yes, sir," spiel and I folded like a coward. I mumbled:
"Yes, sir."
And he asked me again, so I said it loudly:
"Yes, sir!" I said with a slight contempt.
I know now that I wasn't a coward. I was just a scared child, but I'm grown now. And there will be a reckoning. I am here to tell you that old Mr. Stricter was a coward. And that he didn't beat the devil out of any of his schoolchildren. No. He instilled the Devil into them: He instilled fear into them. Though, now I believe that there is no God out of reason and logic, not just out of rebellion. But all my life I was scorned and shunned. Will I ever reconcile God and reason? I don't know. I doubt it. I would like to think it is like my Mom told me, that she thinks God is your conscience. And I think she is right. The idea of God is either so grand to be infeasible or the idea of God is so simple to be impotent. God is what is good and right. And that leaves everything else and Mr. Rod Stricter and to the Devil. There must have been something that Rod Stricter had seen in science that he couldn't reconcile with his religion.

I had taken refuge at the Cash home after I had been expelled from school for a fight I was involved in with Hunter Black, my best friend from childhood. Hunter and I and another friend Noxious or Nox, -we all three took on a gang of rednecks. And there were a couple of black guys with the rednecks: Hunter and Nox were quite racist, but I didn't consider myself to be racist, so I was stuck in the middle of that mind game of hate. I wasn't a fighter, and I don't know how I ended up in a gang of misfits, but I was expelled, and I went home. I got into an argument with my Dad, and he and I had another fight. I got loose and headed to a neighbor's, where I called Rob Cash to come and get me. I went to the Cash family residence where I hid out for the next six months.
Rob Cash and I shared a room, but he was still a child of 12 and he stayed in his father's room in a king-size bed. Mr. Cash, or Captain as we called him, taught me how to cook steamed white rice and venison stir fry. I stayed up all night and played chess with another friend, Gusto Wily. I took a shot of whiskey for the first time, and I felt grown up. After about six months of living underground, Captain finally told my Dad that I was staying with them, and he made arrangements for me to move back in with my parents.
But the fear was instilled within me.

But the fun had to end. Restless, I moved to Plateau. I moved back in with my Granny. I worked clearing brush and barbed-wire fences. I discovered Buddha and Insight Meditation. All was well. I started working on a collection of poems. I remember Granny Stickman telling me that the Bible was a good story. If it was worth reading for any other higher purpose, it was doubtful, but it was a grand idea anyhow.

I've heard arguments on the radio that evangelical Christians are not basing their beliefs on today's standards, that they're basing it on a 2,000-year-old text. An idea that hasn't been changed in two-millennia is dead and one that is blindly held. It has not withstood the test of time, but rather it shows how hard it is for a culture to overcome its fears of a cultural-infancy.

I would again return to Backwards, though. I was restless. Many times, I reflect negatively only to find the real reason woven into the falsehood. It is not quite a lie that I'm telling myself, just a little distortion of the truth.

I was back in Backwards about a week and one morning I got up and Mom showed me the paper. An obituary for Hunter Black was in the Sunday paper. It was Thanksgiving Day. I went north of Backwards to the hills. My family ate Thanksgiving dinner there in the hills every year. I was to see my Uncle Goat one last time. He would tell the story of Jack Straps. He told a story every year at Deer Camp. The whole family would gather in the hills and hunt deer every fall. Uncle Goat told a story of Jack and his bull. The bull would die, and Jack would make three straps out the bulls hide. I don't recall what the straps were, but…

Hunter Black was dead. He had always been my best friend. He died at age 29. I was 30 years old.

I left Backwards and headed North, as I was to attend the University of Academia…

Exile

But things went south after Hunter Black died. I went back to the University of Academia. I started using the drug End-it-all, the elixir. This led to my expulsion from Academia. It was not the drug though. I mean it was no one's fault really, except mine, and also it was the fault of good old Mr. Stricter. According to the University of Academia, it was the fault of the old hatchet I'd been carrying with me since my childhood: I had left it buried in my bed post in the dorms, just as I had done for many years. "Obviously," the Administration informed me, "students can't carry a hatchet with them anymore."

"Well, I'll be damned!" I commented. And so much for freedom, even here in the educational institutions of Amerika, the bureaucratic machinations of insularity are with us through the persistence of hate that is meted out unfairly: Injustice anywhere is injustice for all!

Heathens

"A dog has only one Master." Wade Bridges, the hero of our story, told his wife, Joy.
"At least, this one," Wade told Joy in the rigmarole of legal separation from their marriage.
"I've been stuck in the mud! " Wade exclaimed.
Wade was glad Joy would not be joining on his quest. She would not approve of his wandering and straying off the beaten path of society, the way of the masses. Wade would be working for the non-profit group, The Underground that operated under the guise of the Black Book, a "freethought bookstore," where Wade would be a volunteer, and would be working in the basement of the bookstore. Freewill, Amerika in the North where the Black Book was located. It was a singular concrete structure, two stories high, and with its basement accessible from the rear. The Underground, was a freethought society, a closed book, as it was in the remote backstreets of Freewill, Amerika. Wade picked up a Sunday paper from the paper rack in front of the bookstore and noticed he had to go back onto the sidewalk to get to the entrance to the Black Book.
The paper said: "Let Freedom Rise: One Christian Nation, Under God."
Wade wasn't sure about the implications of "Let Freedom Rise."
"What a stupid bill!" Wade said.
What could he do? Wade was about to see what he could do to counter this as entered the The Underground building. There he went to the front desk, and a lady who introduced herself as Fig Fable said she would notify Mr. Rig Masters to come out and speak to him. Mr. Masters would be overseeing Wade as a volunteer there for The Underground. Mr. Masters came out and was a pleasant gentleman of middle age, just as Wade Bridges, who was now 50 years old. Mr. Masters introduced himself and explained that Wade would be a kind of "watchdog" for The Underground and Wade would keep up with and follow the President on Chatterbox, a social media website. Wade was not to post anything for The Underground in its blasphemy blog, which was a nonprofit organization and was not allowed to get involved with the President directly. The Underground, a freethought society, kept a watch on and maintained the "separation between Church and State." Wade's volunteer job was simple: Report any trespass of the current administration with the State, and involvement between it and the Church or Evangelical organizations. Wade pointed out what he had read in the paper about "Prayer in School," and Mr. Masters told him they already were aware of this fact, but good work, regardless. Wade was given a wireless internet connection, and a laptop to use at The Underground, to take with him so he could "Work anytime," Mr. Masters said. Wade was glad to get these things and looked forward to his monitoring of State-Church infractions.

Wade wasn't so concerned with the State-Church offenses he was to be a "watchdog" over, rather Wade Bridges was glad to be a part of something other than Joy's church where he didn't fit in at all. Wade walked out the lobby of The Underground saying goodbye to Fig Fable, the secretary, on the way out. Wade Bridges walked out of The Underground and took out his bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir and downed the rest of the bottle. It would take an hour or so to take effect, and in the meantime, Wade went by the Farmer Market and picked up some supplies. He decided to get just a few more things he needed, as he had now gotten caught up and was heading home.

The rest of the supplies he needed to live alone now, as he had separated from Joy and would order them from Congo online and have them delivered. Some people made it an issue to complain about Congo not being environmentally friendly and sustainable, but it wasn't. It was Wade's savior: Congo allowed him to purchase without being judged by the highfalutin individuals at the Farmer Market. The idea of "buying local" was a thing of the past, anyhow. The world was going to end soon, but not because of the Christian God, who was just make-believe to Wade Bridges, just another Mystic Syndrome for adults. No, the world was going to end soon, and Wade "prophesized" the Capital would fall soon, but only figuratively. The world was going to end, but only because of the apathy and inaction of people like the Evangelicals. Not because they didn't "refuse, recycle, and reuse." It was because of overpopulation due to rife and rampant breeding practices, and their resistance to birth control and abortion, as well. Wade had a feeling that things would go shit south eventually, and he just hoped it wouldn't be in his generation, which was called Generation Angst for a reason. It seemed to him narcissistic to believe such a thing, or at least he had heard it put this way. We are who we surround ourselves with, Wade's friend, Ms. Ashes used to tell him. And if you strive to surround yourself with no one, you'll be nothing. He was isolated due to his reclusive personality. But he was trying to get involved, and time would tell how that went. For the moment, Wade was glad to have his new laptop and digital fix with the wireless internet. He didn't much care what a minimalist, or an environmentalist or scientist thought, it was just a larger environmental footprint, what the hell did they stay connected to the world, he speculated, the pony express or postal mail. But it all comes down to being correct or incorrect. And not political correctness or incorrectness but being correct or incorrect in our perception of the world is fundamental in shaping our beliefs. It was not about right and wrong, which the Evangelicals claimed to have a monopoly on… The Evangelicals had the weak argument that only by being one of them could you be truly moral. Churchgoers and holy rollers were "wrong" about this concept: right and wrong are moral claims; correct and incorrect are factual claims. Anyhow, Wade was enjoying his new gadget and digital connection to the world of knowledge. Wade made his way home and he put on some electronic music by Dr. Ostinato. The ambient and psychedelic tunes hit him like a fix hits a junkie.

It was just Wade, and Dr. Ostinato, and good old Dr. Nostrum, of course. It might be relevant to point out here that Mr. Bridges didn't use the elixir to cure any physical ailment, but a mental one of trauma from the past, specifically corporal punishment in schools that had led to his abuse. Wade got "ripped" on Dr. Nostrum's Elixir to avoid the unpleasant feelings and thoughts of Mr. Rod Stricter, a former teacher. It was because Mr. Stricter was more than just a "strict disciplinarian."

But disciplined in the sense of the word as punishment alone, Rod was a Christian man, a God-fearing man, and a sadist. Wade had concluded one couldn't be an Evangelical in the South, without being a sadist….

And perhaps even a sadomasochist, misogynist, or a general abuser of human dignity. Though there are exceptions to every rule, there are not usually many of these exceptions, if any. And Mr. Rod Stricter was not the exception, but the rule. Mr. Stricter used constant terror to make sure every child was beaten according to his standard. And for any infraction.

Who needs grace or mercy for a teacher when you're armed with a paddle to assault children. Corporal punishment was incorrect, and it was wrong. Dr. Nostrum's Elixir was taking effect, and most of these troubling thoughts would wait for another day. There was no real winter anymore, just a switch from the freezing cold to blistering heat in one week if not one day. It is how the end of the world is at present.

Wade curled up on his bedroll on the floor and rested. There was no going to sleep for Wade, though. After the stove died down, Wade got out his new laptop and surveyed the Capital online. He did this through the Chatterbox website that President Fiasco often put in a Post. There were a few different posts, one about how climate change was a hoax, another about how the extremists in Amerika were all Liberals, and then finally the goodies Wade was looking for working for The Underground: President Fiasco posted that "prayer in school would take us back to the good old days when teachers knew how to chastise and chasten a child." Wade deduced that this wasn't just suggesting Amerika pass the bill to enact *One Christian Nation* motto into the Pledge of Allegiance, and with protections, further protections, that is, for corporal punishment in school. The idea to "go back to old ways," Wade had heard from his religious father-in-law, Mr. Fable, as well as Mr. Fable's estranged wife, Dixie, both who were Conservatives. But Wade's dad Pop Bridges, and his mother Mrs. Bridges, as well as his older brother Lord Bridges, and his younger brother Host Bridges… All the Bridges and two of his sisters-in-laws were Conservatives. Wade was fed up with being a Liberal-Conservative and decided to become just a member of the Enditall Liberal party. But the notion that most of the people Wade was kin to, or knew, were all Conservative and this had to do with Wade being from Orthodox, a small-town, which was in the dead center of Amerika. Orthodox was home, in fact, but it also was a place of insularity and backwardness all around.

Wade Bridges had attended college at the University of Academia and then had a falling out with both Orthodox and Academia. A person could be too shallow and too deep, either too stupid or too smart for their good, Wade had known. One needed to be an ideal backslider, and this is why Wade had followed the footsteps of other iniquitous and blasphemous pathfinders of thought to become a freethinker. Wade had gone to the Shallow Temple in Orthodox long ago when he had lived there before. He had gone with Joy.

Wade didn't plan on going to church anymore after separating from the religious Joy and her family. But he had learned a lot in the past decade. Wade had been to the churches where they spoke in tongues. Joy was a "tongue-speaker," as a matter of fact. And Joy had recently recommended to Wade that he "get the Holy Geist" and speak in tongues. But Wade could not humiliate himself by pretending to speak a language that he didn't know (and one that didn't exist).

It was just not possible and those who spoke in tongues were in a delusional fantasy, Wade assumed. And this seemed quite likely from Wade's experience with "tongue-speakers," which is what Wade labeled and called them to delineate the different subspecies of Evangelical belief, or rather denominations as the reader may better understand them to be. Though, science had a term for it: Glossolalia. But as concerns the non-denominational churches like the Shallow Temple: they were, as Wade discovered, -the non-denominational church was a denomination itself, so he had been instructed by a preacher once. Wade's mother, though, pointed out the crux of the matter: Non-denominational churches had no governing oversight. By documenting and categorizing the different schisms and denominations of the schisms, Wade could more easily determine that none of them were true. It was through "mutual differences" Wade came to understand that he was better suited as a freethinker, and to volunteer at the Underground, and its freethought society, and a nonprofit nonreligious nonreligion.

It was Monday morning, and Wade had slept a few more hours. This was typical of a night on elixir, especially a second night on elixir, that is. But he had a bit more elixir Sunday night as compared to his first night. Not to celebrate, but to cope with the stressors of reality. Wade opened up a new bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Monday morning. He had two more pints to last him until Tuesday morning when he would visit the Farmer Market in downtown Orthodox, beside the Washitall River. But for now, Wade would take it easy, and he browsed around the internet looking at the Chatterbox website.

Wade had separated from Joy but remained married to her. Wade enjoyed hanging out with his new "lady friend," Fig Fable for the time being, and his buddy Jack Retch. The separation from Joy was not over religious belief. It was because Joy accused Wade of having sex with Ms. Neighbors. Joy was just a bit jealous. Wade didn't let Joy and her jealousy bother him too much, though. But he and Joy didn't see eye to eye on religion because Wade was agnostic. Wade also felt being agnostic was an "academic" way of being atheist since it attributed the possibility of beliefs in God being true. But to Wade, this was improbable, and a downright absurd possibility, and Wade was quite certain of untruth in the institution of religion. At least those held by Evangelicals in the South. And Joy was an Evangelical, which Wade had known when he got with her, but Wade had just recently "come out of the closet" about his atheism and agnosticism after years of marriage to Joy. And Wade still hasn't found Jesus, though once at a lake he thought he found God under a stone, with a knife in his back.

People would tell Wade that "the past is the past," and "it is what it is," and that all that had happened was just "water under the bridge." But Wade didn't have much use for these irrelevant and useless sayings. He attributed the use of such phrases to idiots, simpletons, and other shallow people. Wade liked to use the expressions to belong, and to be normal. "But what is normal," some would say, and once again Wade would point out that it was normal to be an idiot, obviously, and to ask such idiotic things as, "But what is normal, anyway?" There is abnormal psychology, therefore it follows there is normal psychology, and from it our concept in sociology of norms in society.

For now, Wade was an "underground writer." And he wished to go further beneath the social circles in The Underground. Wade and Jack discussed what they thought went on at The Underground and Fig said she already knew.
"What goes on in the Underground, then," Wade asked.
"Well, your neighbor Dick Haggle… is a member of the Underground, at least this is what he claimed to be," Fig told them.
"But I don't know why the Underground kicked him out." Fig said, then added: "But Dick is an idiot and a big fat liar, so no-telling if it's true or not."
"Yep, his pants on fire!" Jack kidded.
"Anyhow, they were planning on 'undermining the Capital,' that's how he put it," Fig said.
"Yep, he said they were undermining the Capital, so he quit the organization, that's what he says," Fig said with a smile.
"Well, glad that idiot ain't with The Underground anymore, and you're right, he's a dumbass. One time I had him so pissed off that Ms. Dick accused me of killing him."
She said: "You're going to give poor Dick a heart attack!"
"…because he was pissed." Wade added. "After all, I told him that his idea about Shakespeare writing the King James Version of the Bible was nonsense and non-verifiable, which meant that it was not true. It was bosh. Poor little Dick couldn't take that and threw a tantrum right there in front of me and Joy, and Ms. Dick."
Wade and Jack and Fig talked a little more and Wade finished his first pint of Elixir. It started to have its effects on him, and Jack was getting lit, or at least feeling better, after his pint of whiskey. Fig said she was going to go since they were having so much fun without her, when Wade asked why they didn't go down to the Black Book and Jack and him could look around the bookstore. Fig and Jack agreed, and Wade grabbed his other bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir, and Jack grabbed his other bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey because they were "packing it," as Wade referred to it as, and the three of them were off. They walked down Wayward Street to the Black Book. Wade and Jack stumbled a little due to the intoxicants. Wade opened his other bottle of elixir, which inspired Jack to open his other bottle of whiskey, and finally, the three made it down Wayward Street into midtown Freewill, Amerika where the Black Book was located. Fig, Wade, and Jack went around back and down to the basement of the bookstore and knocked. After a moment, a man came to the door and introduced himself as Mr. Rig Masters. Wade asked Mr. Masters about Dick Haggle and asked if it were true. Mr. Masters said Dick had joined them but had left the organization "over differences in opinion about the author of the King James Version of the Bible." The three men laughed as Jack said he wrote it, and that he was known as "King Jack" where he was from.
"Why, you might be of some help to us, even if you don't want to be a freethinker, and I promise we won't try to de-proselytize you from God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost!" Mr. Masters said.
"Oh, I just believe in God, not the other two. I'm not too much of a holy roller...I'm not even a Bible thumper, I just have a feeling there's a God, that there's something more to all this, and that's about it." Wade stated.
"Well, I guess there's no law against that, especially since you authorized the protestant version of the Bible all by yourself!" And the four of them laughed together.

Wade and Jack and Fig mulled around for a while, but then just headed off, as well, back to Wade's place. The three friends arrived back at Wade's place and he immediately broke out two more pints of Elixir. Jack was semi-enthusiastic, but Fig was a bit worried because now Jack had an addiction to both elixir and whiskey. But she shrugged it off. And Wade was just excited to have met a fellow "freethinker" such as Mr. Masters.

Fig was more a free spirit than a freethinker, as was Jack. In the meanwhile, Wade Bridges made the three of them some oatmeal. And as he did, Wade thought of his father-in-law Mr. Sledge who would go on "oat fasts," which was just an all-oatmeal diet for a week or two. The thought of this made Wade chuckle because this was one of the favorite memories he had of Mr. Fable. Not that eating an all-oatmeal diet was beyond him, for Wade had done it several times, also, but only because he was out of money. And Wade had only done this since he had found Mr. Sledge dead one morning from a heart attack. The death was tragic, but the oatmeal now only seemed to remind Wade of a good memory of Mr. Sledge.

Mr. Sledge would not approve of The Underground, because not only was he deeply Conservative, but he was also a devout Christian as it is said, and deeply religious. Wade Bridges was not worried what his deceased father-in-law or his estranged wife Joy thought of him that moment, because he was sauced up on Dr. Nostrum's Elixir at present. And he was infatuated with Fig right at this time, and entertained by his buddy Jack Retch, who was "sauced" on Mr. Slither's Whiskey. And Jack was telling Wade and Fig stories of his days as a drifter, riding trains, and drinking pint after pint of whiskey, a real grand spectacle he had made of his life, he said. But Jack soon passed out and Fig was tired of all the drug and alcohol gibberish. Wade said he would refrain from talking about it if she would stay, and she agreed.

Wade let Fig use his laptop to get on the internet and look around. She wanted to learn more about "how to be a witch," she joked. And Wade said he was going to read a book that Mr. Masters had given him to the Underground. Wade read about the new organization the Underground that he would be joining. It told how to join a person just needed to give 10% of their "increase," just like the Christians did, but for a better cause: one of atheist and agnostic solidarity, of being freethinkers. Wade was quite content to pay 10% of his Fixed Income to "a good cause," he told Fig Fable. Although now Ms. Fable was hardly paying any attention to Wade, and simply said "Um, okay." And was looking at the Chatterbox website on the internet. She was investigating the Capital for herself after all the talk of it that evening. "

"It says here that the former President Fiasco will for certain be running again in a year," Fig told Wade. "Well, everyone already knows or at least thinks that anyhow. Anyways, is there anything new on there about him?" Wade asked.

"Yeah, it says President Fiasco is looking at boycotting anyone associated with your new buddy, Mr. Masters," Fig told Wade.

"What? What the hell is that about?" Wade was curious, "Says here, President Fiasco is allied with the Evangelical group Amerika Faith Radio or AFR to combat disbelief in Amerika, and Fiasco says he promises to add '*One Christian nation, Under God*,' to the Pledge of Allegiance." Fig said.

"Well, I do say, he's the biggest jackass I've ever known." Wade laughed.

"I'm glad I'm joining the Underground. They help to fight things like this in court," Wade added.
"Well, I guess I'll stay the night. Is there somewhere I can sleep besides the loveseat with Jack?" Fig asked.
"You can sleep on my extra mat on the floor. I have an extra pillow, also. That's where I sleep, too, on the floor. Don't worry, you can have the bedroom, and I'll sleep on the floor in the living room, far enough away from Jack that he won't step on me or fall on me when he wakes up."
"Okay, but if I get scared, I might as well sleep in here with you guys," Fig said. "That will be okay with me, and Jack, too. I'm sure he won't even notice." Wade kidded.
And the three of them slept in the living room. Jack was on the loveseat, and Wade and Fig were on the living room floor away from Jack. Wade gave Fig enough space that she was comfortable. And she felt safe since Wade and Jack were there to protect her. At least Wade was conscious enough to put up a fight with an intruder, but as for Jack, he was out. Fig was most uncomfortable with the idea that Dick Haggle lived next door, as Dick was constantly hinting at sleeping with her, saying that it was too bad Fig wasn't married because he and Ms. Dick were "swingers." Fig had not made the mistake of telling Dick or Ms. Dick that she was bisexual, as that would have made the situation worse, she deduced. This was something she had shared with Wade, who had told Jack, but had since then agreed with her to keep the information undisclosed. Wade Bridges was awake most of the night, lying on the floor reading about the Underground. Because there was much to read about the Underground in "the black book," as the field guide referred to…

Wade was reading most of the night because the elixir made it hard to focus and remember what one was reading while on it. But by the time daylight came, Wade Bridges had read the pamphlet 3 times, "the Gematria standard," he called it. The number 3, that is, was "'the Gematria standard." Mainly because it was like the Trinity, or vice versa. Fig woke and Wade was already up and having a morning bottle of Dr. Nostrum's Elixir. She didn't condemn him as Wade thought she would but asked if she could have a drink. "I didn't think you drank elixir, ever?" Wade asked. "Only on Sundays." Fig joked. "Yeah, I've drank it before, you know that, just once though and it made me feel all weird and shit." "And cussing this morning, as well. What, did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?" Wade asked.
"No, the right side of the bed this morning, because I slept so well being over here at your place. So I thought I'd show my gratitude and get fucked up with you for a change." Fig said.
"What about old Jack, does he indulge in Dr. Nostrum's finest ever?" She asked.
"Not really, he's anti-elixir like most folks are," Wade said. "Folks? There's that Hometown talk coming out of you again." Fig teased Wade.
"What are we going to do today, Mr. Bridges?" Fig asked.
"Well, remember, I have to go to the Underground meeting at noon, but you can either go, which I don't figure you will, or you can stay here with Jack, or…" Wade was saying.
"I'll see if Jack wants to go to Wayward Park while you're at your meeting and then we can come back here, can't we?"
"But I have to go meet Gabby Babble at whatever time it gets dark this time of year." Fig added.

"That would be around 7:30 or 8:00. But who's Gabby? You haven't told me about her yet?" Wade asked Fig.
"She's my girlfriend. Not my 'girlfriend' girlfriend, yet, but will be my girlfriend soon, possibly." Fig told Wade.
"I understand," Wade said.
"Say, can we come over here tonight, or can she just meet me here tonight?" Fig asked. "I mean, is that okay?"
"Sure, it's okay. But Jack will probably be here, and we can't get anymore Mr. Slither's Whiskey until Tuesday at the Farmer Market, or even regular whiskey we can't get until first thing Monday morning." Wade told her.
"Yeah, he can be a pain in the ass when he's sober, but I'll tell Gabby, she keeps stocked up on alcohol, so I'm sure she has some of the hard stuff." Fig joked again.
"Well, I like this side of you, but as far as your friend Gabby Babble, better just find out if maybe she can just bring some beer. Retch will be better behaved under the influence of it, rather than the hard liquor." Wade said.
"Okie dokie," Fig replied.
"Is it a plan?" Wade asked. "
"Sure, just let me call her and I'll make the necessary arrangements for our little sleepover," Fig said with a pleasant smile.
The actual reason Fig Fable wanted to bring Gabby Babble over was, even though Fig was now 30 years old, she still lived with her parents, who were not Evangelicals or religious but did not fully approve of their daughter Fig Fable's "lifestyle choice" of being bisexual. And even though Fig had assured them it was not a choice on her part, they still frowned on the notion of her having a girlfriend, and downright wouldn't allow any "lesbianism" in the household. And so, Wade didn't mind Fig asking him for this favor, as it was.
"That's the herd for you," Wade said.
He was known for repeatedly saying that "the herd goes herd fashion over the edge of the cliff." Wade was careful to say that: "A philosopher guy used to call the Christians the herd."
Therefore, Wade was not ripping off the words of the dead. And then they were off to Wade's duplex again at 1313 Wayward Street in Freewill, Amerika. Fig was rushing Wade and Jack's steps to make sure they made it time to meet Gabby, whom she had told to come around 3 pm because Wade said it was the afternoon "witching hour." Gabby didn't understand, and Fig told her she didn't either, but that it sounded cool, and she was into witches and stuff nowadays.
Gabby would be there at "three sharp" she had said, and she was more punctual than even Wade, Fig told him, and Jack, too, which was quite punctual. Wade had not been late for as long as he could remember, but he knew that this had not always been the case. But after years of dealing with his mother-in-law who was in "a perpetual state of lateness," Wade had developed an obsessive awareness of being on time. The three of them made it to Wade's apartment, and it was "right at the daylight witching hour," Wade told Fig.

It was a few minutes before it, but Gabby was already on the porch. She was a pleasant-looking little thing, Wade thought. But this was about all that crossed his elixir-soaked mind at that point. Gabby Babble was tall, too, taller than Fig, anyway. But this was no spectacular thing, as Fig was only five feet even. But Gabby was about five foot 8 inches tall, which seemed tall for most girls, much less compared to Gabby. Wade was only five foot 10 inches tall and Jack Retch stood a towering six foot even. But even to Jack, Gabby seemed taller than she was. Jack would give Fig a tough time about her height, which anyone could do for that matter, and she was unaffected by his joshing around with her. Gabby stood up and greeted Fig with a hug, Wade with a handshake, and Jack with just a simple fist pump, to delineate the pecking order, Wade suspected. But it made him feel good to get a handshake instead of just a fist pump. Jack Retch was too concerned with whether Gabby had brought any whiskey. Wade had gotten another bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey but hadn't told Jack, at least not yet. Wade was waiting to see how it went with whatever Gabby had brought with her to see when he would have to ration it out to Jack, or perhaps even to Gabby. But "Lucky Jack" got the good side of the coin of fortune once again, and Gabby had brought some beer, just as Fig had instructed. And if Jack behaved, she might even have brought a bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey, as she was informed this was his favorite liquor. After hearing this, Wade went and stowed the now extra bottle away for later. Gabby Babble was a humorous lady, two years younger than Fig, but seemingly more mature.

"Are you an atheist?" Wade asked.

"Yes, I am atheist, at least I think I am," Gabby Babble said to Wade Bridges.

"What about you? Are you atheist or agnostic?" Gabby had more verbal aggression than he had anticipated. Wade, that is, had been warned by Fig that Gabby was a "firecracker." Fig had taken this from what Jack had said about Joy. Jack referred to Joy as a firecracker. Gabby reached into her backpack and retrieved a beer. Jack laughed but took the beer and said, thank you.

"It's 13-point beer, Jack," Gabby told him.

"Ah!" Jack said.

"That's another Gematria standard, around here," Wade added.

"Gematria, like in numerology?" Gabby asked.

"That's right, I figured you might know what it was," Wade said.

"Well, kind of, I've heard them talk about it at the Easter service at Shallow Temple." Gabby said.

Fig was getting a little jealous of the two sharing such a common thing.

"Yeah, and remember I'm married?" Wade said.

"Yeah, but separated," Fig added.

"Married, huh? Well, you're in trouble. I know you like my friend Fig here…" Gabby said.

"I might like you after all," Wade said.

"After all?" Gabby asked.

"After the fact of y'all's 'lesbianism,' you know?" Wade laughed, as he was thoroughly lit on elixir and was unaware if this comment would be inappropriate.

Gabby laughed, though, along with Fig, who got the allusion to her parents' prejudice, but not Jack Retch, who was not even paying attention but rather reading the beer bottle label to make sure it was 13-point beer. The four went inside and had beer and elixir, and they had "chit-chat" Gabby said. Gabby Babble was indeed a firecracker, Wade thought, and he secretly liked her already.

Jack Retch didn't understand anyhow as he was "straight as an arrow," as the saying goes. But Wade was too for that matter, but could appreciate the complexity of the situation, but that was merely because he was involved in it. Retch on the other hand wasn't emotionally invested in the situation, other than his love of alcohol, to which Gabby said Wade might need EA or Elixir Anonymous meeting before the night was over. Wade drank his extra bottle of elixir. And now it was getting dark, and the elixir was going full force. It was the experience of another world, "a parallel dimension" Fig called it.

It was also a bit cathartic and cleansed the emotions, and that's why Wade had grown so fond of it lately, as well as addicted. Either way, the elixir had its hold on him now, and he drifted off by himself and started reading over "the black book" of the Underground again. Gabby noticed what Wade was reading and tried to ask him about it, but Fig told her: "He's lost in it, love."

And Gabby left Wade alone and was just glad to have Fig for herself for a while. But then Jack got involved in the situation because he had run out of beer. Gabby told him that was all the alcohol she had brought, and he would just have to settle for some elixir. Jack told her he didn't drink "the hard stuff" because elixir was "harder than liquor" to him. Gabby told him after this, that she had one more "witch's brew beer," he could have, but after that, it would be an "elixir of nothing." Wade laughed at this, and Gabby and Fig were surprised he even caught the remark, being how he was so entranced by the Underground "literature." But Wade said the phrase "witch's brew beer" had somehow broken the spell the pamphlet had on him. And he was wondering if Gabby had given Retch her last "witch's brew beer," if she wanted some of "the hard liquor" herself? And Wade assured her this wasn't any kind of sexual innuendo. To which she smiled and said:

"I know Mr. Bridges. And thank you, I would like some of the hard stuff, please."

And then Gabby and Fig laughed. Wade was too intoxicated to get the pun. Regardless, Wade got out another pint of the sinister Dr. Nostrum's Elixir and handed it to Gabby, who downed a little over half of it.

"Damn, woman, save me some," Fig said.

"I thought you didn't much care for elixir, Gabby?" Wade asked.

"No, I don't. I'd rather have some Mr. Slither's." Gabby added.

"Well, I might have a bit put back for a rainy day," Wade said.

"What?" She whispered.

"Don't let Retch find out." Fig insisted.

"Retch is too busy reading another bottle label of witch's beer to notice." Wade pointed out. "I thought you said you would rather have that than elixir?" Wade asked.

"Well, I lied. Just like Gabby did to Jack, and you did to us, Wade!" Fig was teasing, but Wade didn't fully catch it.

"Whatever." Wade had already forgotten about saying he had a bottle of Mr. Slither's.

"Well, when Jack over there passes out, we'll go find it, Fig. I saw him go back into his bedroom when I first got here, and I'm guessing that's where he put it."
"But what?" Wade asked.
But he was oblivious to Gabby and Fig's plot against him. Jack soon passed out as Gabby and Fig had anticipated, and Wade was too lit to notice as the two ladies said they were going to the bedroom to chit-chat and give him time with his reading over and over of the black book of the Underground. So the two ladies were gone sometime before Wade noticed their raised voices in the bedroom and he wandered back there to see what was going on. And he was coming down from the elixir. It was about to be the real witching hour he went to tell the gals. And he went to tell them and found that they were "jacked," as he liked to call it: crossed on elixir and whiskey. For the two ladies had downed all the Mr. Slither's Whiskey and were too drunk to feel any remorse toward Wade or Jack.
Wade told them that he wasn't upset at them and wouldn't expect any less out of a couple of witches. Gabby found this funny and laughed uncontrollably, which upset Fig, who tried to leave the room. But Gabby warned her she better not leave her alone with Wade in this state. And Fig stayed and Wade, sobering up while the two lovely ladies were hammered, decided it was best if he left, and he told Gabby and Fig such. But nothing happened between the three, as Jack Retch came stumbling into the room on his way to the restroom. He went into the restroom and Wade was quick to hide the almost empty bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey. Jack Retch came out in a minute. Gabby joked that she had prophesied this moment of Jack walking through the bedroom. Wade said that wasn't too hard to prophesize considering how much 13-point beer Retch had drunk earlier that evening. Jack got his beer and was unaware of the shot of Mr. Slither's that lay underneath the bed. The four conversed until the ladies sobered up enough to go to sleep, and by that time it was Monday at 7 am and daylight. The ladies, neither of them who worked regular jobs, went to sleep on Wade's bedroll that he slept on regularly, and Jack went to sleep on the loveseat, again. Wade had been up 48 hours at this point and knew it was time he got some rest. But as he was putting the spare mat down on the living room floor, Gabby came in and sat down beside him. Wade figured between the fact that Retch was in the room, even though asleep, and the fact that Gabby was as Fig said, "straight-lesbian," that this would be okay. However, Wade had a wife that he wasn't separated from at one time in the not-too-distant past, and Joy would have been furious if she had caught him in the room in this situation. He explained this to Gabby, who merely asked why he wasn't with her now.
"That is complicated, as the saying goes," Wade said.
"Well, I'm not here to hit on you, Wade…. No, I wanted something different, I wanted to fix you up with Gabby, she likes you, aren't you aware?" Fig said.
"Yes, but I thought you liked Fig?" Wade was lost.
"No, not like that, but she likes me like that…. I thought, anyhow, but after last night I could tell she liked you, even though she doesn't seem to be aware of it herself." Fig told Wade.
"I'm still technically with my wife… she has a boyfriend I suspect. I'm not certain." Wade said.
"Well, get certain of it my fellow atheist." Gabby kidded.
"You're not into guys at all, Gabby?" Wade asked.
"Just as friends, Wade," Gabby said.

"I understand," Wade said.
Gabby wasn't sure the reason why Wade asked about her interest in men. But typically, it inferred that a guy liked her. But in this case, Wade wasn't your typical guy.
Besides his seeming loyalty to his estranged wife, Wade was abnormally interested in the black book of the Underground rather than flirting with "the ladies" like most guys would, and last, there was this fact about his atheism, which Gabby wasn't sure if Wade was as much an atheist as her, and Wade was uncertain of this, as well. But the two discussed some atheistic ideas together and then talked more about Dr. Nostrum's Elixir and Mr. Slither's Whiskey than anything. Wade was curious which out of elixir and whiskey Gabby was fonder of.
And she said: "Both, but whiskey is more socially accepted so I try to stick with it."
And Wade was not too surprised, but it made him happy to find someone with a matching vice.
Gabby finally went and laid down with Fig on the bedroll in the bedroom, and Wade at last got some rest. The whole house was asleep by noon on Monday until dark, around midnight. Wade woke up at about 20 minutes until midnight and sneaked through the bedroom, the shower, and back out again, but Fig was waiting for him as he came out of the door. She told him good morning, and Wade explained that it was around midnight. Fig asked what day, and Wade told her "Monday night or noon Tuesday."
Fig was surprised but seemingly unmoved by her loss of time, or the fact that everyone was now waking up at midnight. First, Jack came through and used the restroom after Fig was out of it, and then Gabby got up and went to the restroom, but then went to lie back down and begged Fig to come back to bed. Fig said she was getting up and going into the living room with Wade and Jack. Fig simply got up and came and crawled into Wade's spare "bed" he had made on the living room floor. Fig asked Wade if this was okay, and he said he was breaking open Dr. Nostrum's Elixirs, to which Fig knew Wade would not be going back to sleep anytime soon. Elixir had a leg on it and worked like a stimulant, though it wasn't one. Either way, Wade was awake, Gabby went to sleep, and Fig curled up between Wade and Jack on the loveseat because she was so little, she could fit even not too uncomfortably between the two normal-sized adults. The three shared the bottle of elixir, and Wade got another one out seeing how Jack was making an exception to his alcohol-only policy. Just another day of elixir and friends, Wade thought. But he couldn't help but get the little black book of The Underground out shortly after polishing off a second. Wade drank most of the second bottle. But regardless, he studied the little black book some more, and Fig finally had to ask what was so interesting. And Wade simply replied: "I don't know… I keep forgetting because I am so wasted on so much Dr. Nostrum's Elixir." Fig suspected he would answer this way and added: "Maybe it's time to take a break, Wade." Fig said.
And Wade then told her she might be right, he had been drinking a lot of Elixir lately. Fig, though, said she meant to take a break in front of the black book of the Underground.
And Wade said: "Oh."
And he went to the bedroom and got another bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey for Jack Retch. Jack told him he was thankful but that it would have to wait a while as he didn't get "jacked" like Wade, Fig, and Gabby were last night.

And all of them laughed, including Gabby who was not asleep, and who got up and said she would like the bottle of Mr. Slither's Whiskey. Wade Bridges, who felt more like a freeloader rather than a freethinker… Wade was accused of being a freeloader once upon a time…. But Wade Bridges claimed he was a "reluctant achiever" rather than a freeloader. And a freethinker rather than a freeloader. All this debacle and the fiasco at the Capital had put a strain on society, but a watched pot never boils, and still, there were no End-Times. Jesus did not return. There was plenty of religious hatred and intolerance to go around. Wade never joined the Underground, and he spiralled down into control and life as a recluse.

Wade Bridges had disappeared into the woodwork: and no one has seen him since.

Old Scratch

Tom Doubt, also known as Thomas D. Freewill, had been put on trial for killing Rod Stricter, his former science teacher… Rod Stricter, the one who had regurgitated the phrase:

"Break your jaw to say, Yes sir?"

Tom had taken a wooden baseball bat and physically broken the poor old decrepit teacher's jaw so bad for this past slight of phrase that it killed the old bastard. And without remorse. So when Tom was put on trial for it, the circus pursued quickly (and it does with persistence), news stations picking up on the fact that not only did Tom Doubt plead "guilty," he also added, "with no remorse."

The thing it brings into question is both the use of corporal and capital punishment. Do we really need either of these blackmarks on society? Should society instead be on trial? Should you be on trial? Do you believe in these things? And how far should belief take us? To impose ourselves on others' space to the degree that for one, we call it assault, and the other murder? What gives the bureaucratic machinations of the evil institutional frameworks any advantage that the individual lacks and apparently cannot be granted? These are questions that pertain to the situation at hand for poor Tom Doubt.

I say as your author: does the punishment fit the crime? Does punishment have any real connections to crime? Should we be punished at all? Are there things for which you need to confess? Are there things for which you need to inflict lashes and self-chastigation upon yourself? Are there things I should confess as your author and guide through your's and my self-righteous indignation?

Perhaps?

Perhaps not?

I just wonder what Rod Stricter could tell us had he been the judge? Would he change his hard line of thinking? Would he feel any real remorse for the death of poor Tom Doubt?

I doubt it.

Many years before, Tom Doubt was in his "backyard," out in the country where he had grown up.

"Watcha doing there little fellar?" Tom Doubt said as he saw on a low hanging branch of a hickory tree in the deep woods behind his house a being sitting and waiting…

It was none other than Old Scratch.

The Devil was a rather small being, about one foot tall, as he crouched above Doubt on the branch. And Old Scratch had an androgynous body, with a lion's main around his chin to the top of his skull, with a hammer-smashed face, or nose at least that looked as that if he had received many unwanted, and possibly undeserved beatings, many beatings just as Tom Doubt himself had received from his Pa and Ma, and from the teachers in the education system, like that old bastard Mr. Stricter. It may have been sympathy for the Devil, but who would love this wretch, Tom thought, if not him?

As I was saying, Tom Doubt had seen Old Scratch sitting on a low hanging branch of a hickory tree. Old Scratch was only a foot tall, and not as intimidating as one would expect. "He should have rather resembled Mr. Stricter," Tom had told me, your author R. Wordsmith. Tom Doubt, said that later to me that it was believed by the people of the town of Righteous, as the town was named, that he was possessed by Old Scratch and this is what lead him to kill Mr. Stricter, the townspeople thought; for Tom Doubt incessantly referring to Mr. Stricter as "Old Scratch" in school growing up, because of the fact that Rod was just like a child school bully, but yet he was a teacher, and Tom was forming a paradox, or possibly a distraction for the Really Real Old Scratch. Tom was constantly fearful of being beaten, i.e. being hit with the paddle on the buttocks, a most sexual inuendo… Thomas D. Freewill, at any time for any reason by any teacher, but was traumatized worst by being so fearful of being paddled by Mr. Stricter, and Tom Doubt's hatred of the militant teacher grew.

But instead of being paddled by Mr. Stricter, Tom told me he was given a paddling by Mrs. Victory, the principal's wife. This humiliated Tom Doubt and led to his anti-authoritative view of the world. And Tom would grow up to be a misanthrope, isolated from all who had known him earlier in life, he had explained to me later in his life, before he took his own life, which was a most unforgivable sin to the Evangelicals. And this in fact, he had once mentioned, was all the more reason for one to commit: "The absurd, but ultimate act of defiant acts!" Tom had said.

Later in life, though, before Tom Doubt was convicted of killing Mr. Stricter, Tom was "prescribed" cannabis or Medical Marijuana for his PTSD, which he told me he was glad for. But he had still been driven on by fear and rage and haunted by his past. Tom was given the MMJ by his State assigned doctor, Ms. Nurse, as a safe alternative to "other drugs," and Tom was given MMJ especially as a safe alternative to OTC medications he abused so very, very, and very often. It can all be found in the recorded statement Tom Doubt called: "A Confession," which I later included in my masterwork: "Magnum Opus (Unabridged)." -It can be found here the idea to put a knife in God's back…

Tom Doubt was required to see a therapist, too, or he wouldn't receive MMJ, or prescription psychiatric and other pharmaceutical drugs. It is here he told me that he had later met his psychotherapist, Ms. Legacy, who had helped him a great deal, Tom Doubt told reporters on the eve of his execution: "Ms. Legacy was my doppelganger, my spectral double." This made sense, after all, because *Thomas* meant "twin." And Tom Doubt thought of Ms. Legacy as his twin sister. But yet, schizophrenia also was suggestive of doppelganger characteristics, in that it meant "split mind," which Tom said, was never a problem for him.

Tom quit seeing the doctor and the therapist to: "Pursue the Devil," Tom had mentioned to me. And when Tom Doubt finally avenged the humiliation of his youth, he was quoted as saying:

"I punished Mr. Stricter for his own good."

Thus, the jury found Tom guilty by "reason of witchery." And to this Thomas D. Freewill replied that he would be a warlock, rather than a witch. But this sealed Tom Doubt's fate: His lack of faith in God, or "a god," as he put it… It was his manifest destiny, his iniquitous sympathy for the Devil, one Evangelical juror had pointed out later on in an interview for the Righteous Daily Newspaper.

Tom Doubt, in the end, was sentenced to be given "100 licks with the paddle" and then to be executed with a wooden baseball bat just as he had scourged his former idiotic, indignant teacher. As a final act of blasphemous spite against the wretch Mr. Rod Stricter, Tom Doubt committed suicide by taking a dose of Euthanol, or "end-it-all," as he called it: a euthanasia drug in Amerika and popular at the time of Thomas D. Freewill's tragic death.

The Client

To A Psychoanalyst

Now that I have told you all my sorrows,
Unfolded, as to wind, the cunning knot
Of petal frail excuses for a sadness
Less tangible, though sweeter, than I thought;
Now that I have given you the reasons
For which I plowed with pain my lonely heart,
Regret, as for a vanished fragrance, haunts me,
And life falls, like a full blown rose, apart.

- Marcia Nardi, 1925

Wit Wayward, the Client, our hero, who recently turned 50 years old, was on dangerous grounds… Because Wit was addicted to an OTC drug called *Benign*, an anti-allergen medication for which he was prescribed *Sychopationine,* for being "allergic to allergy pills," as Wit would so often say to himself. *Sychopationine* was "recommended" by his Social-Therapist, Ms. Wise, who was trained in "psychotropicology," a pathomethodologic technique of Social-Therapeuticization which she had received a certification for years before. True, these are sesquipedalian terms and/or medical jargon, but these neologisms were popular then in Amerika. *Benign* was an OTC drug in which an IDC was required: i.e. an Identification Certification, to verify one was at least 18 years of age, even though this rule was rarely enforced. *Benign* use, and a constancy to commit passive suicide, were, in fact, though, only the "lesser of two evils," or three, or four, foul iniquities that tormented Wit.

"I was a defiant youth." Wit told Ms. Wise in their earlier sessions.

And their sessions would take on a different nuance with discovery that Ms. Wise was once a Literature teacher, much similar to Ms. Vengeance, a teacher who paddled Wit in 6th grade when he was 12 years old in the statehood of Southland, in the town of Yesterday, Amerika years ago… Then, and after, Wit swore to himself no one in authority would ever touch him with a wooden paddle again, beaten as if he was just an anthropoid, beaten as if he was just an animal. And later, this was not the problem; the problem was with what he recollected from time to time. Wit Wayward recollected this torture of youth with constancy, too, which had caused his EI-PTSD, or, that is, Educator Induced-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Now living in Nowaday, Amerika, some distance away from Yesterday, at least physically and geographically, Mr. Wit Wayward worked on finishing his collected writings, which was simply titled: the *Magnum Opus*. It was years of work that stretched from the past into more further years of work, that, even now, as he tried to wrap up the final version -it still seemed years away, and Mr. Wayward feared that he would never, ever, finish it. And most of the problem lay in the fact that Wit was far from complacent. No. Wit was not complacent:

Wit was driven; Wit was compelled; Wit was obsessed with his work, the *Magnum Opus*.

Mr. Wit Wayward wrote not only about his experiences with the evils of corporal punishment in schools, but also about the source, or *quelle*, behind such an absurd idea of "discipline" as it was under the guise of in Yesterday, and Nowaday, Amerika, and it was rampant all across Southland and many other statehoods; and, it was the Evangelicals and their divisive and detrimental belief system: The chastisement, or whipping, or spanking, or whatever other euphemism one wanted to label it… the beating of children likened to a slave master to his slaves. And, furthermore, even though it was both black and white children who suffered under the cruel hands and paddles of the institutions of education in Amerika, all children were subject to this torture, all creeds and all kinds.

Except, for the most part, the affluent, the "rich kids," and as it was the status quo in Amerika, didn't get a thrashing as often. But sometimes, even they did… And corporal punishment is, indeed, torture: it is punishment by the infliction of pain to illicit a desired outcome by the adult masters. And it was rooted in religion across Amerika. It was rooted in the White Christian Nationalists and Conservative values in Amerika. The Conservatives, and the Christians were its culprit, they were, indeed, guilty as charged!

Fear is the tool of bureaucratic institutions like the Secondary School system in Amerika, and so, too, was it the case in the institution of the family in Amerika, and it was this way on a global level, too. The Christian ideology of pain and suffering was limitless. Christianity and religions like it, if not any and all religion, are the disease and poison of an apparatus that plagues the World itself with superfluous suspicion, hate, and the desire to inflict pain. Control and power. Power and control. These are Christian ideals; they're fabricated from fear *not* love. God is *not* love in religion: *God is fear*. Religion: it is but a noxious nostalgia.

Religion, from the concept of *religio*, which means "to come together" (Dr. R. Prus), which is the overlapping of two definitions of the Latin *religare* and *religere*: the first, *religare,* meaning "to bind" or "to tie fast;" and the second *religere,* meaning to "go through again." Religion, further, is in itself an insidious and sinister façade, built on a trick of words:

"It is a meager pun; it is a mere play on words." Wit liked to think.

And "the System" is not broken: the system of jurisprudence, the system of family, of education, and of other systems that the Herd perceives as its Shepherd, etc. are an illusion; they are not a system of justice or some other high or grand or even grandiose ideal: They are them who serve the master and suffer the slave. It is not freethought; it is slavethought. And the students are the slaves, today, and in the past; for, Secondary School is slavery, not freedom; and it is not education, but correction and coercion. Corporal punishment, and capital punishment, are there to correct and coerce nothing, but to conjure up the Old Devil; and like the Devil, they're here to "steal, kill, and destroy" the souls of individuals, that is, the mind and mirth of our youth (John 10:10).

Moving forward: Wit Wayward was on Fixed Income for half his life now. He had been possessed by the Devil, according to the Evangelicals. But according to Ms. Wise, Wit Wayward had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder; he was "schizoaffective bipolar paranoid type;" and if that is too big a mouthful of words, Wit had a "split mind" and was "manic-depressive," an earlier way of understanding this disorder. The Evangelicals did not ascribe to the idea or scientific fact that it is true that people have behavioral disorders. Neither did any of the Bible-thumpers today, nor did Wit's parents believe his actions were dictated by mental health disease, and even if Wit was under the influence of madness, this should not be affecting his ethics and/or his behavior, they thought. The truth was, it did.

"The truth will set you free!" It was to this idiom that Wit centered his being and his writings, or "gibberish," as he referred to it: his writing was scribbling; what he wrote was gibberish. Wit used the Crux search engine, which had a Cross as its icon, on his laptop. And with the Crux search engine also was the Geist, or the ID, or "intelligent design," and it was a research tool that was said to be "designed intelligently;" it was also used to guide a person's spirit; that is, the individual's *psyche* or mind, and esp. the individual's conscience. Crux and the Geist were like religion, they were put online by the people in power, to *control knowledge*, which in turn was used to *control people*:

It was the master; the student the slave. But wasn't Wit simply a student of this slavery?

No.

Wit was a student of freethought: Wit was a student of truth.

Wit believed there was no free will, and probably not any free fate, but there was freethought. Evangelicals suggested to Wit that he get on the "strait and narrow path" with his writing, and that he find and follow Jesus (Matthew 7:13-14). Wit simply, though, would quote Heraclitus' saying: "The path of writing is both straight and crooked." Heraclitus suggests, life is an exoteric omnibus of a complementarity of opposites; not a parallel reading of esoteric and arcane parables of scripture, but a paradox of opposing ideas and forces, light and dark, good and bad, and esp.:

The idea that most things were not, though, black and white, but hidden in the shades of gray.

The truth, though, is concealed, it is hidden in the shadows; yet, truth is not concealed by the illusive Shadow of Shadows, that is, by Old Scratch himself, the Devil. Yet, there is no Absolute Truth, there are only multiple and various truisms; or rather, there is just the pursuit of truth. The only Absolute is not even God, but Death. Now, will Wit conquer God and Death!? Or at least God? We will see…

"I burn the candle at both ends." Wit would say and suggest.

Wit would say this because of the myth in Amerika that an artist died young because the candle that burns half as long burns twice as bright. But the one who burns the candle at both ends becomes not twice as bright, and still not even three times as bright, but it is quadrupled! But the specific substance of our narrative here is the relationship between Mr. Wit and Ms. Wise… because Wit had wanted to tell or ask Ms. Wise something for some time now, and that I will get to; but for now, Wit had discovered that he and Ms. Wise shared a similar cultural heritage: they both had ancestry from Germania. Ms. Wise was "full-blooded;" Wit, as he liked to say, he was a "mutt," with his ethnic background "mixed," or as it is said politically correct nowadays in Nowadays, Amerika: bi-racial. Wit was more or less not even bi-racial, though: but, rather, he had multifarious races that were "coursing through his veins."

But still yet another thing that Ms. Wise held dear to her, was her defense of transgender people in Nowaday, Amerika… For, in Nowaday and esp. in Yesterday, Amerika, transgender people were discriminated against in a derogatory way, as was any LGBTQ individual. And even though Wit agreed with this fact, he disagreed as to the nature of being transgender; for, if by trangender one meant gender dysphoria, it makes no sense to encourage transgenderism, in that, eating dysphoria is discouraged, and by new discoveries at the University of Academia that showed people with gender dysphoria usually suffer from eating dysphoria, as well, …this was one thing Wit wanted to discuss with his Social-Therapist, Ms. Wise; the other issue, more sinister: *terminus a quo, terminus ad quem*.

Wit recalled when he had another female Social-Therapist; and, still yet, after her Wit had another male Social-Therapist, both Evangelicals who defended "the art of *non-gentle* parenting," i.e. the style of parenting which encouraged the whipping your children, as well as physical discipline in Secondary School to not "spare the rod and spoil the child." This was an idea that was said to be in the ancient Scriptures, in the Holy Bible, but this phrase was not even in it. Wit would point out that this phrase was not contained in it, even if the idea to beat your children was in it.

Wit Wayward, and his sessions with his Social-Therapist, Ms. Wise, to whom Wit Wayward "reluctantly insisted" on telling about his experiences of PTSD with his old teacher and old nemesis: Mr. Rabid Dogma, who was both a teacher and a preacher. Mr. Rabid Dogma or Pastor Dogma, a sadomasochist was to blame, somewhat, for Wit's PTSD, but the real and most essential problem was Ms. Vengeance. Wit's problem, the *crux* of it, was being humiliated and tormented with fear.

The sessions with Ms. Wise began spontaneously enough and were quite innocuous. Ms. Wise was a well mannered, modest lady, and kept her disclosures to a minimum, which left Wit wondering several questions: She didn't seem like the stereotypical teacher, at all, much less the stereotypical tyrant who chastens a child? And this was any teacher who hit a student in a sexual area of the body, i.e. the buttocks.

Wit was under the impression that Ms. Wise was, instead, a writer of grimoires, and even more, possibly she was Barbas, or Marbas, a president in Hell; and Ms. Wise, at least, was no lesser demon: Ms. Wise had a twin brother; and as with myth, the Devil often comes to us as androgynous twins, like the Sun and the Son, the Father God in Heaven and His Son; and Ms. Wise, was Mother Nature, not Mother Mary from whatever place she got accidentally impregnated. These were all speculation of *paranoiac-critical method* that Wit often used to translate his dreams into reality, into the Really-Real: It was a spiritual quest of not a God, but a Real, living Geist: the spirit of an individual and /or of a collective group of individuals, like Wit and the group he shared a spirit of resistance and rebellion, these other social deviants that were like him, of which he scribbled "the handwriting on the wall," (Daniel 5:25). It was not a fantastic realism, or as Wit says: "I write *fictional reality*, not *fantastic realism*." He would then quote and paraphrase the anthropologist, Margaret Mead:

"I am absolutely unique, just like everyone else."

Furthermore, Wit told Ms. Wise about his friend, Jack Pilgrim, and how his former English teacher Ms. Vengeance had paddled them one day for nothing other than playing a harmless game of Mercy; a game where the two boys interlocked all the fingers and thumbs of both their hands and tried to squeeze and bend the others until they said: "Mercy!" Jack Pilgrim would be killed by an overdose. And, as it was, Wit also shared a sad story of his cousin, Kin Folk, and as Wit explained the incident it was his cousin, Kin Folk, who feared going to school and being paddled so much that Kin Folk committed suicide by hanging himself.

In the end, Wit Wayward wondered if he, too, would suffer the fate of Kin Folk, and just hang himself to end his own misery? But Wit feared the Unknown God, who was known to discipline and punish souls, too. Wit was a bit delusional at times, and often he thought Ms. Wise not to be of their shared Germanic origins; rather, Ms. Wise, who had an ethereal wisdom, was the Áine from legend: a radiant sun and summer goddess of youth, beauty, and love…

Or perhaps she was the Devil.

I will end with the poem below:

Apathy

I am indifferent:
the glass is neither
half-empty,
nor
half-full;

it merely lingers
on an edged table,
wanting to spill,
perhaps,

and shatter clearly
the tension it constructs:
part truth
or
part lie?

The Devil's Hour

R. Wordsmith is my name… And some have said that the R. stands for Rascal, or Rogue, or Rabid, but it doesn't. And others have speculated that it is a pen name, and this may be so, but this is irrelevant, as are a lot of things in life. And still yet, the Evangelical's say I am the Devil himself, as do the Others, and wouldn't that be nice, and isn't that convenient to ascribe me such a superfluous title: The Devil is a myth, and so, therefore, is God… and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost as the Evangelicals refer to this Entity; I, on the other hand, possibly believe in "the Geist," or the human spirit, call it human nature if you will; but, even so, as one great thinker put it:

"*God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*"(see Nietzsche; *The Gay Science*; *"The Madman"* aphorism).

And the above quote is still a self-fulfilling prophecy, instead of Jesus being "The land that is constantly coming," as the Kabbalah suggests, (see Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*) …that is to say, that instead of Jesus being "the land that is coming," as it says in the Scriptures, He is the land that is constantly coming in that he will never arrive and descend from the clouds like the Evangelicals believe; and this is because *he* is dead.

The Devil is a trick of smoke and shadows, and he is the Shadow of Shadows, a most elusive one; thus, if I am the Devil, if I am the Shadow of Shadows, wouldn't I possess the power to crush the Enemy, God, through the Evangelicals… Indeed it is that possibly I do have the power, but that is because *I am* a Wordsmith, and I am from a family of Wordsmiths: *I am that I am not*… but I am not the Shadow of Shadows. What I am, to the Evangelicals anyhow, is the Adversary, just as they are the Enemy: the Enemy of Freethought, the Enemy of Free Fate, and the Enemy of all rational thought and of all human reason itself (i.e. human nature).

The religiosity of the lost herd of Evangelicals echoes from a Valley of Dead Souls: They are alive but the child inside each one of them is dead and gone; each one of them's heart is hardened, and their humanity exiled into a spectral forest: they, too, as will you and I, be only be a blot of black ink in the shadows of a dark and limitless and infinite Oblivion. And then sinking into the inexplicable and unfathomable depths of eternal time. To become, in the end of the End Times, such as it is referred to by the Christians, the end of the World… We become, inevitably: Nothing.

I hope all the above is reassuring! I hope that my *Magnum Opus* will last… it will not. It, too, will fade into the Nothing, and burn in an endless blaze; the coffins of mankind, like the wonder of a child's first memory in old age, lost and aimless. It discombobulates my mind and entire consciousness to know that now some humans think they've solved the labyrinth, and riddle, of the inextricable frail nature of being in a fallacious dis-belief in Oblivion: a carcass of all of our kin and kind, which will, in the end, rot.

Stranger

Oddball went to school at Disciple Elementary School in Death, Amerika. In the town of Death, teachers used cattle prods to "educate" the students. A student who stepped out of line: "Zap! Zap! Zap!" with a cattle prod, and they were most of the time given three electrical jolts, sometimes two, and rarely, just one prod to encourage correct behavior.

Oddball, though, was unruly one day and playing a game of "Chicken," when one of the other students, Jackass, asked him to slap an older teacher, Mrs. Virtue, on the buttocks, or "on the ass" as Jackass put it:

"Slap Mrs. Virtue on the ass or you're a goddamn chickenshit, Oddball!"

And this was the worst dare of all: to lose because someone would call you, a youngster, in the worst time of your life -to be called a "chickenshit."

And so Oddball did what any kid his age would do, any brave kid, that is, and slapped old Mrs. Virtue right in the buttocks, and his punishment: just 100 prods!! Poor young Oddball was prodded so many times, he collapsed, and died after it!!

And from then on, corporal punishment was instated where a child is beaten with a wooden paddle. I personally, as your author, received this punishment, where I was beaten with a wooden paddle, and I was so scared I thought I was going to die, but was only humiliated to the utmost degree. It happened one day when I played a game of "Mercy" with my friend, Job. Both of us were hit only twice, and I would serve that old bitch only twice the amount of revenge; fortunately, that old chickenshit bitch is dead.

Origins

Posit, Amerika was home to our hero, Thinker, and his associate, Critic. Then there was an outsider, Shallow, who wasn't one of Thinker's "circle of friends," but who always wanted to be in the occult, the "hidden" world of knowledge. One day, Shallow shortened his name to Hallow, because he had become an Evangelical. And the circle of friends, or "the Circle" then was only Thinker and Critic, which was no circle at all.

Hallow wanted to be in the Circle, but there was only room for two, or four, not three.:
It provided symmetry and allowed for the group to split in two halves easily.

Hallow, or Shallow, as the Circle of two still called him still, was a nuisance to the Circle. And so, Thinker thought long and deep about it, and decided that they should give Shallow, which is Hallow, a choice: either find someone else to join with him, which would be his own kind of doppelganger, his own "spectral double," or be excluded from the Circle.

"I have no other friends." He told Thinker.

"Then we'll choose a friend for you!" Thinker said.

And the two became four, adding Shallow and Hallow as two instead of one. No more was Hallow rejected, even for his Evangelical beliefs.

He was no longer the Outsider.

He was in the Circle.

End

Is it *the* end, or just *an* ending, are we now at our *end*…? For, it is a dead end, and death seems to *be,* and to be and become an illusion. It seems we will never end, in a constancy of presence. And what is forever but a never ending allegory? And that's exactly and precisely what a myth *is*: it is *being,* and it is *becoming*: life becomes death but they *are* simultaneous and constant *becoming*; and the past is all we can seem to know: our knowledge of *it* is fleeting…

Hello, again… your author and narrator, R. Wordsmith, here; at present, I am here; but to you… Well, I am not, as I'm back there. Or, rather, presenting this *here* for you to read *there* in the future, etc., etc. Let us begin, then. What is it to just *end*? My writings have gone on for years: from distant memories *of* the past years, that stretch *into* distant future years. Time is split in half by the present exactly as it is now, and now it is gone, but still yet , here, etc., etc. This is a play on words, but purposely to weave the currents of space into the fabric of our reality.

What is *real* is only that which is *Really Real*? It is said that: Perception is reality. Is it real, then or is it Really Real. Perceiving, though, is the only really real Reality. For instance, I've experienced paranoia: the deja vu feeling of a microcosmic fear that's woven together to form a blanket of fear, which then wraps around and suffocates all that I *am*, and seemingly, all that I will *be*… Shortly from this point: It twists like a bridge of reality in time and snaps, leaving me so overcome and overwhelmed my mind shuts down, and dies… but only momentarily. Then, I summon the strength of my past into my present to overcome this Shadow that chases me so illusively for years that I have become numb.

And then it is over: the path of life is at its end…

Nimrod

Nimrod Overman was on Fixed Income. At 50, you think that he could have overcome his disability, and this is a common misconception; one in which is not factual and is, in fact, inherently false. At age 35, Nimrod professed, though, to be "awake," and then reconsidered this line of thought. Nimrod was called a moron, a retard, a simpleton, and esp. an idiot. This was not entirely the case or even true. Nimrod was in fact an ex-intellectual, abandoning this lifestyle for the practice of simple living, also called and referred to as voluntary simplicity. It was a rejection of the zeitgeist, and an abandonment of academia in general: A life of asceticism and rejection of the essential cultural values of the time and spirit of the age he lived for a more reclusive or, at least, a life of solitude. But it was a life, as we will see, it was a life of isolation and loneliness, which equated to a life of weltschermz and angst.

To begin with, Nimrod had a passive-aggressive therapist, as he referred to her. The therapist was part of an Outpatient at Asylum Hospital, a group therapy program that Nimrod attended regularly. She was a transgender therapist, at that, and actually a man in a woman's body, so to speak in social stereotypes. Nimrod realized that he himself probably either was a passive-aggressive client, or at least, a bit spiteful himself. Nimrod one day professed one day in a group therapy session with Gibber Jabber, the therapist, that he, Nimrod, had found that at the University of Academia in Amerika, studies had shown that the idea to acknowledge and treat individuals with transgender disorder as the opposite sex, and to accept this idea, was to encourage something untrue: transgenderism was actually found to be coalescing anorexia and transgender aspects into one positive attribute of the individual; when, in fact, though, the first aspect of the two disorders, transgenderism, would be a positive "disorder," while the other, anorexia (as well as, bulimia), would be negative disorders or even diseases. And, thus, was Nimrod's thought process.

After telling Ms. Gibber Jabber all these things, he learned from her the following: Ms. Gibber Jabber said that when she was angry, she retaliated with spite. Nimrod, even if he were indeed an idiot as others had described him, he knew this for certain about Ms. Gibber Jabber, that she was spiteful. I am your author, Rid Meddler Tableaux, And and as your author, I will tell you further below the tale of our hero, and give you a little tale of Nimrod's youth; I will give you a little background into this dystopian man, this anti-hero, and hopefully, our friend…

Nimrod grew up in the country. And by that it meant Nimrod lived a "country mile" from anything, and anyone, in the sticks, the backwoods, as slang refers to it, isolated from city life, in general. Nimrod often referred to his travels to Metropolis as journeys to the "concrete forest." And though Nimrod lived and grew up in a shithole town, a hick, he was quite he had quite the education and cultural knowledge of an intellectual, just as his friends Nerd and Geek; and, in fact, Nimrod would become as well educated as a scholar at one point in life, even though he didn't finish college at University of Academia at Metropolis, or at Megalopolis, Edge City, and Inner City. Even as a youngster, Nimrod bought a book titled: "The Deconstruction of the Christian Myth."

It was an enlightening purchase, and he bought it in Garden City, a small city just south of Bumpkin, his hometown, in which was Sticks, the "community" in the countryside where he lived. It was a book on Freethought in which and because of, Nimrod began labeling himself as a "Freethinker." Another purported idea of Nimrod's was that we did not have a national debt here in Ameriks, and in fact, it was not in debt to other countries, but to our own citizens, institutions, and government: "Who are we actually in debt to ourselves…? How can this be so!?"

But people simply called him a simpleton, a moron. And they slandered him as Nimrod from the Scriptures. But, as your author, Rid Meddler Tableaux, I tell you that Nimrod was not a mentally retarded individual, but a recluse; and he was this as opposed to a hermit; for, Nimrod would have

lived in a cloister as did our leader, President Diatribe Junta Tirade… or, as he was known more popularly: "King Tirade:" He shut his mouth to truth, espousing only lies. The above was a popular imaginative and representative figurative image of our President at the time.
But more on that later, for now I will return to Nimrod and his days of yore, his days of youth. Nimrod was an "A" student, but not because he wanted to be; but, because he had to be out of fear. But more on that later. We don't speak of trauma even though things that cause it are an open secret. Nimrod went to drug rehab after attending group therapy with Gibber Jabber for a while, as she had almost single handedly been the reason behind Nimrod's most recent relapse on the drug *Nostrum*. The drug itself was a simple drug; and by simple, I mean an OTC or over-the-counter antidote for the common cold, or in essence, and for Nimrod Overman, an antidote for complacency.
The Recovery Room was a psychiatric hospital/drug rehab where Nimrod met a sly and special lady-friend named, Rara Darkling. There were several new faces on Nimrod's social circle at the Recovery Room: let's see, there was Quiz, a real idiot; and there was Oddment, the real deal when it came to being a weirdo; there was also, Codger, a grumpy old man; and there was Shepherd, who was supposedly an Ordained Minister, (whatever the qualifications are to be an Evangelical Preacher, probably being equipped to be a fascist, racist, bigot); there was Flake, who was rather fickle; and last there was Geezer, who was elder but fit, and fit mentally compared to most of the others at the Recovery Room. And Nimrod did not know these peoples surnames, as anonymity was encouraged by the staff at the Recovery Room.

Rara Darkling was the only female there.

(*further writings cometh*:)

Elephant in the Room

(a substory of *Nimrod*)

Early Writings

"Hello?" Happiness was fleeting.
"Who are you talking to?" She asked so softly.
"To whoever or whatever's up there, out there, or wherever It is." I pointed at the stars and reached for her hand.
"Come here, my little astronaut." Air brought me back to Earth.
"Do you want to go to Blue Lake with me tomorrow?" Air asked as she chewed on a stick.
"Blue?" I thought for some strange reason.
"What else to do but with you?" I deftly replied as thoughts of colors spun about my head, bouncing off images of water and reflecting in the sky.
And what a death of a good time we would have at Blue Lake, half naked on the rocks that lined the banks of the deep, cool, mountain pools of water. I took along a pouch full of smot to sit beside the streams and watch the rainfall.
"Get the *fish* out." I requested the sweet-leafed herb.
"Here." Air was deaf.
"No, not that, this." I returned the sandwiches and found the sticky flower I sought to inhale. We sat and smoked for a while. Air fed us each puffs of severance and I nibbled on a stem. How we came to be at this place I could not recall but anxiously, I felt that we should leave… I wet my head with water. The sky was a blue room filled with walls of clinging, white cotton clusters. I looked around at the trees, then down at the warm rocks, which I stood upon… "Where is she?" I thought of Air.
"Don't panic," I told myself as the Drum began to beat inside. "Calm… deep breaths… r…e…l…a…x…" And so it went every time.
"Canib, what are you doing?" She was right behind me.
"What's wrong?" Air persisted upon lengthening her stare.
"Oh…nothing." I was calm again. All I needed was to hear her voice and it soothingly brought my mind back to Blue Lake, where I was quite sure we were. The initial loss of control, the weightless absence of memory I sought was gaining consciousness. It was in this world that euphoria dwelled, and normal patterns of thinking became obsolete. Memories were of neither substance nor value. Life was no longer a sober void, haunted by things I sought to forget.
"Are your friends coming up later." She was a curious creature.
"Those fucking weird bastards aren't my friends." I was unsure of who she spoke?
"Ogdoad and Rana?" She was confused.
"Oh…them. Yeah, what about them?" I forgot the question. "What was it you asked me again, 'Did she ask me something?" I faced an early death.
"I can't remember," Air spoke beautifully now.
"I don't know either." I offered as the drug took effect.
"I wish we had a canoe." Air daydreamed aloud.
"No problem. I'll just go gnaw down one of those trees with my teeth, chop the fucker up with the saw I don't have, and…" I sarcastically rambled.
"Hurry up then." She waited and would continue to wait.
"Hurry what?" I was staring at the trees this time.

"I'm waiting for you to build me a canoe." She flirted with my sanity.
One would think that since we were all the way out in the middle of nowhere, we would want nothing. Of course, we could have been at home in Smog -oh what fun! And it would not have mattered. I would have probably said something like, "I wish we were at Blue Lake today," or "I wish I didn't have to work today, oh wait…I don't work today, I never work. Why…? Because I'm a lazy bastard." And then Air would say, "Fuck them" extending her middle finger to the world. "Yes, how death of me to consider working." But the fact was that Air and Canib were in the heart of a utopian forest with pouches full of ambrosial delicacies, and she still wanted more. Though I was not disappointed, I expected these self-indulgent principles at every cost; for, they were what we lived by, -our hypocrisy grows, and life would not be worth its angst-ridden existence had we not these vast, unfulfilled expectations.

"What are you thinking about?" Air said to the blue.
"Nothing." I was caught in the mud.
"I like to watch the way you look at things." She was happy.
"Yeah, I'm fascinated by almost everything when I'm outside..." I defended the privacy of my thoughts, "…especially when I'm gutted to an early death on drugs."
I was addicted, at most, to the separation and departure from myself. I didn't feel that "getting high" was anything more than a joining with reality, not an escape from it. Reality was what I missed. Things we see and experience every day become dull and disillusioning, and what this miraculous healing herb did was make an enchanted woodland out of the dreary streets of indifference. The double standard: a game of give and take? At this moment Air and I had narrowed this pastime down to one of taking, or more to the point, one of insisting upon everything and offering nothing in return. "Why?" You might ask? Because we deserved it.
My philosophy was an absent-minded one.
"I remember now," Air remembered.
"Yeah, you were asking me about Og and Rana." I completed her memory.
"It's funny, isn't it?" She put her foot in the water.
"What's that?" I had forgotten the question again.
"Memory." She smiled. "You think it would just fill up someday, but it never does, and I wonder if someday mine will."
"I think mine has." I opened my mind. "I think it's going through a kind of spring cleaning now, emptied, or drained and then filled back again. It's hard to tell. I just alter my memory as I go." "Do you think you could ever kill someone?" Air was open-eyed.
"I have." I joked with the question. Unfortunately, she was serious. "I don't know, …why?"
Silence hovered in a tranquil sigh.
"How about we go swimming, and if you wish you can drown me and acquire a taste for your murderous impulses." I was serious…there was no one else I could dream of dying.
"Okay…but not right now. I don't feel like moving." She was a slug.
"Hand me the black bag… please." I was lazy.
"Here." She handed me the bag. "What do you want out of it, young Darwin?" She mocked my short attention span again as I stared through emptiness into the blue nothing.
"You." I said and I fed her a fish.

I skipped rocks for a while. The patterns of the stones kept rhythm with the stars hidden behind this mass of blue. The lake was a depth unknown, but I was certain death was the keeper on its floor. Only fish were allowed past the limitations of preternatural pressure and an absence of air and light. Air stood on the bank. I watched her watch me skip the stones.
"I wish I had another plant, but…" I drifted away.
"But what?" She insisted.
"But I don't want to be accountable for it." I avoided responsibility. "It would kill me to think that I might have to water, feed, or take care of anything. Who invented this nurture shit anyways?" "Fuck you," Air said as she waved her middle finger at our tranquil surroundings. "We don't need you."
What Air intended to say was, "Nature is a cruel and unyielding force beyond my comprehension." But she settled for the discourse of a psychotic philosopher, a journey through the world of a blasphemous feminine dialectic. Myself, Canib, I suffered from manic mass paranoia with acute panic syndrome, a shift in thought from mad to madness, dark to pitch-black, an all-out feeling of gloom and despair scattered with thoughts of euphoria and absolute inner peace. At one moment I thought of how much I loved the rain and Air, while simultaneously I plotted the death of the latter under the cold, wet chilling showers of the prior and afterward, cannibalizing her remains. Sounds sick I know, but that is what an illness involves sickness. People say, "Murderers are psychopaths, -kill them," or "That man is insane, how could he kill his father?" How could he kill his father? Why he's insane!? But then again you don't hear this madman's mother when asked how her son is doing say, "Oh, he's fine. He's just feeling a little under the weather. He had another little bout of insanity last night, but he'll be getting over it soon, I think. He's still loathing a little today, but other than that though…" No, this was not an ordinary sickness we were dealing with, madness. For certain, it was not to be dealt with as a "sane and reasonable act," and we would not be "getting over it" anytime soon.
I watched butterflies circle in a meadow. How peaceful they made the world seem. Earth, a placid chunk of terrain with exotic fauna and mind-altering flora, drifting through an empty void of nothing. What worlds lie in the deeper realm of this place they call outer space? I stared at the enlightened caterpillars, morphing my way through infinity when I came to the revolting discovery that the clump of grass the soothing butterflies hovered over was not a clump of grass at all, but a putrefying pile of dung. Anyhow, they were still intriguing to the eye.
The butterflies scattered.
I looked away.
Pith and stem lay abandoned on a wet black stone. The flower petals attached to its end washed away to some far distant place, or did they lie on the lake floor, covered in silt and mud? It is always more convenient to imagine the former, had I but a touch of madness that brought on these shadowy thoughts. I would like at this time to propose, under the occidental horizon that I have come to love- the time of day when the sun hovers behind the Back Hills- had my thoughts been molded of clay, the sculpture would have brought Canib wealth afar. But instead, I set out again to return to Smog, the inhospitable abode. We could not stay out here. Air would most surely be a corpse the next day. She could not handle these temperatures of the "below." And Ogdoad, that miserable bastard, arrived at dusk. He had brought Rana along.

"What did you bring me, Ogdoad?" I asked, afraid to see what lay behind the paw-like clubs he maintained as human hands.
"Nothing." He responded, and I knew he had failed.
"Well then, what might that be in your hand my fine young primate?" I taunted his every move.
"I didn't get the buttons, but I got some shrooms instead." He said humbly.
"That's good enough, I suppose," I reassured him.
What I meant to say, what I had thought when he spoke those words of disappointment, was that he was beyond useless. I had sent him on numerous missions, and he had not broken his relentless pace: he had failed every time.
"Can you freeze smoke?" I thought as I exhaled the death from my lungs and tried to forget my most recent conversation with Og.
Oddly, you can remember things from long ago, things that in the quest for sanity, you try to disremember. Yet the unyielding stride of madness progresses on like an overshadowing, life threatening illness. And these dim shadows grow darker night by night. I watch now as they dance about the naked fire, I built to shake off the cold, unable to comprehend their use, to understand their motive -or had I built them myself, these self-destructive memories that spawned within my unconscious. If there was such a land where perception had become a species extinct, it had not been in the realm of my imagination. For it threads a fabric woven of bliss and misery, a cloth without a seam was this life beyond a dream of reality.
Our caravan proceeded to march homeward to Smog later that evening after an exhausting day at Blue Lake. Always were the lightning bugs flickering in the night sky we traveled below. Or were we above, stuck to this flat universe upon which we tread heavily with tiresome footsteps? Or was there an up and down, right and left? It was all relative to something, but thoughts circled now into a swirling pool that left my head spinning. It was then that I heard the words that would forever change this unsure path that wound through time uncharted. We were walking, Air and Canib, and Ogdoad and Rana when the conversation arose - you know, one of those seemingly frivolous heaps of gossip that passed away eternity- that Air had earlier that day when on a mission from her timid male counterpart, who dwelled in solitude away from the appalling aroma of the City of Smog, to purchase supplies for our journey into the land of lakes had encountered the foul swine I have since developed a contempt, a City of Smog policeman.
It is obvious that she had been singled out for her apparent subversive appearance, and the brute commenced to interrogate Air in a most unreasonable and very unnecessary manner. So it is that the conflict began earlier this day when the policeman had harassed and threatened to arrest and confine Air for no other reason than on the suspicion that the cargo she hauled contained a large sum of some unknown substance -perchance a quality surplus of narcotics- nestled within her backpack, which as she knew contained nothing other than a variety of fattening snacks to fulfill this mad, craving appetite that surfaced after the consumption of the mildly hallucinogenic herb we would later ingest. Denying him entry to her precious satchel only provoked more abuse on his part.
In the end, it was the policeman who was the fool. And in retaliation, he abused his authority on the one I loved so dearly. And this is all a saturated mind should absorb.

The conversation went on to some other topic as everyone laughed and swept away the pig. But the storm raged on inside the dim horizon of my mind as I walked with weightless ease

under the brooding clouds that sprouted chills from out my skin. It was like a fire in the dry, frail grass of late summer. A flash of lightning burst through an old dead tree, splitting a seared black bough from its stable trunk. Slowly the wind picked up the smoldering thoughts and sparked them into flames, and this fire grew beyond control, and not even the rains of happiness could quench this thirst for revenge as it raged on. Perhaps I should have eaten the cathartic shrooms offered by my good friend. But I had passed on the umbrella Og held out, which he then ate with ravenous pleasure... As town neared, I swallowed an X, and then a handful, of little blue pills, sedatives, a haven from the coming storm. I hoped to acquire a passive state- though I had little faith in the primitive medical technology of a doomed society- and not allow the wind to fuel the already raging fire to a climax of aggression.

A laugh seeped out. Canib was now a shadow in the darkness.

He walked out the door. I smelt fear as it wafted through the stagnant air. Fret seeped from a pore as he strode past. I tripped, slipping on the wet stones of survival as the mirth of life was swallowed by a quivering fish, caught in the waves of a black ocean that rippled in the night. A dry twig snapped. There was no hesitation. A shadow leaped out the periphery toward his figure. Fury rushed from a hollow cavity entombed within the fragile hull of consciousness.

And what I can recall is little, when all but the faintest glow had seared my gaping mouth of memory shut. The bullet flew from out his flesh like a red butterfly shedding its dank chrysalis. "What now?" I thought. They would surely come for the person responsible for this gruesome work of art that lay before me on the sidewalk.

Children play in a minefield. I could remember seeing someone, something- but why this man spread out before me as though God himself had ingested a large sum of the sacred cacti I so longed to obtain; carved up as some madman on shrooms with the implements of a gourmet chef and the talent of a sadistic surgeon. What did I make of this foul beast decapitated, disemboweled, and dissected of its flesh? I could not fathom the monster that could do such a thing, yet I knew without incident this loathing fiend was no other than myself.

Grains of sand fell rapidly as they neared their hourglasses core. In fear, I fled. They would come for us. I believed in the last blade of grass harboring the cold winter's frost. We know we will eventually die, but we lie on the face of the lake, waiting on ships from the other shore that never touch the wet, raining reflection of the silvery bay. Had I but the freedom of the feral beasts that prowled alleys in the night, scavengers hunting for food, I would not have been forced to slay this wretched swine. But when the rain pours from the darkening sky in fat drops as cold as ice, we cannot help but get soaked from the falling clouds of dust-covered memory.

Beautiful metaphors fluttered about the grassy green fields. I sat shaking in the cold rain trying to perform the vital function of reason as the survival mechanism of repression soaked up the persistence of thought. The past is slipping away from us. Time is slipping away from us. Life is slipping away from us. It was now that I sought to forget…memories, what then are they for? I fled. I ran away. But I could not escape this haunting feeling of the dark, the deep despair, and my head rots under a blade of grass, fed upon by the worm. The field above lay beneath a dark sky as the storm raged on. But what

happens when the hero dies? Who would save us then, Air and me? They would hunt us down like the beast I'd slain.
"What has Air done?" Nothing, but I could not leave her to those savages. "Savage," I thought, "such a savage word."
Red butterflies now fluttered through the meadows in a slow migration, a perennial reminiscence of a dark meditation of fear.
Strangely enough, I regretted not butchering the pig.
"That gutless fuck." I mumbled as hate became a friend.
He was everything I'd ever despised, nicely packaged, and easily disposed of minus the deep recessing void within my stomach, those beautifully grotesque red butterflies. I used to think that I had total disrespect for all authority, and I did. But we tread upon a flat universe. I stood upon a thin plane, which below swarmed a horde of apparitions, and above the lakes of my youth. Had I the wings of those quivering butterflies that entombed my memory, I should have flown above this flat world into the cosmos of my past. But still, I goad, and mindless cattle graze the field consuming all and leaving none but the sad weeds of regret behind. Regret for what I'd had in my youth. This thing they called life I called a lie. I tried to move but the butterflies fluttered again, paralyzing footsteps, freezing them in the cold mud of confusion I stood. It was that those we had given the liberty to protect had taken hands that had once- possibly- held us safe and placed them upon our neck, stifling us with their abuse of power. Did I have a problem with authority, a "bad attitude"? No. But the authorities would now have a problem with Canib.
There are no shadows but of ourselves, and I had become mine. The man in the post office who greeted me with a firm handshake, the girl on the street who smiled as she passed by, the old lady at the library whom I opened the door for -did they know they stared into the face of a madman? The odds had turned on the jaws of fate, and I stood trapped between the snarling teeth. We think of destiny only when the sun is shining, but now the clouds are deep and the stars should have shone, and the only light I knew stood before me now as I made my way home to Air. Hunger bit my stomach, but the butterflies scattered again, and my appetite shifted to something else.
"What's wrong?" Air asked and I thought of earlier at Blue Lake, again I felt the Drum inside. "Oh…nothing." I lied. "I'm afraid I may have accidentally killed your friend Mr. Pig." I continued as I made my way toward the refrigerator.
At first, I detected some hesitation and disbelief, but upon the sight of the rain-soaked, blood splattered clothes, her expression slowed like melted glass.
"What the fuck did you do!" She was petrified.
It was not the reaction I had hoped for. Might she had lopped her arms around me in a mad fit of twisted romance, I would have been more comforted.
"Well, I guess we'll be living in the Back Hills for the rest of our short lives just like you've always wanted," Air remembered though I believe she was in shock.
"Yeah…I was thinking the same thing." I tried to ease her fear and anger as I made a ham sandwich.
"Do they know…" a fish squirmed in her brain.
"…do they know if I did it?" I completed her sentence.
"Not yet… I don't think so." I assumed.

I didn't know. But I was guessing that it would take them some time to figure out who or what was dismembered upon the cold, concrete tomb I had slain it. But as I had left an epitaph in blood upon the graffiti-plastered outer walls of a withering ruin, they would soon be on their way to this morbid revenge they call justice, and it would be Canib who sat upon their throne of judgment for the swine whose presence I had since removed from this earth. Had not the universe been set in motion by some force unknown, then not would I have exterminated the poor beast. Control. That was what it was all afforded. The cost would be my head, could they take it?

But why would anything short of a man offer in exchange for his own life for some ludicrous law? A fox that hunts chickens in the hen house would not turn itself in to the farmer for execution. Why, no. The predator hunts for survival. It hunts for food to feed itself and its family, those it loves, which it will protect with its life if it feels threatened. This is the Law, ancient and everlasting.

But now I had become the prey, the fox hunted by the hounds of death. Do not be shocked when an untamed creature you've caged attempts to escape. For had they not attached these fetters of control to our thoughts repressed us under the false precept that they were concerned for our good; that they are somehow responsible for the mass quantities of drugs I consume, or for my lack of morals thereof; that I am unable to choose what is best for myself; that I need some "higher power" in control to decide for Canib. This was their fatal error. Their law was selfish. But now I follow no law at all. I had gone beyond everything that had ever been programmed into my infant head by a dead language I remembered not. In my mind, I justified the irreparable, irreversible truth. But in my actions, I prepared for war. What was war but what I had done only on a greater scale? Murder is a definition of law, not Law. And to say that there is no Law is to say that we breathe not air. For though you cannot see it, this air is there before us unraveling as an elaborately fabricated knot.

I told Air to pack our things, and that Ogdoad and Rana would be coming along. Not only did they have nothing better to do with their lives but idle upon my change of habitat like some idiot monk on a holiday, but the cabin we would stay in belonged to an associate of Ogdoad as well. And I would make sure that fool did not predestine Canib to a "death sentence" through his poorly evolved wit by disclosing our location to those dirty swine, the City of Smog police.

A flower bloomed upon an unearthly knoll of grass. "Cannibal X." That is what they had labeled the unknown man who ripped apart a City of Smog policeman. Perhaps it was the vile pills that had been spilled into his gaping chest, or the erratic writing of a name upon a wall that was interpreted as Cannibal instead of Canib as I had signed my masterpiece, perhaps both.

Regardless, that pig would be the death of Canib. I formulated a plan, as I believed I had numerous allies on my side because of the insurrection I began. We were hosts to the blood-sucking parasite that fed upon our lives.

A star fell from the sky over the Back Hills that we have now arrived at.

"Just think," I thought, "People used to think those things were stars. So much for wishes and dreams."

I repeated the expression aloud, but Air seemed uninterested.

"Where are we going?" She already knew but liked me to reassure her.

"To Ogdoad's uncle's friend's cabin, or something to that effect," I told her.

"Is he human?" She joked, but I looked at Ogdoad and seriously considered the question.

"I'm not sure, but it doesn't matter. Whoever he is, or whatever he is, he is no more. He's

been dead for some time, a month, several years, a few days, perhaps. I don't know. All I know is that we'll be safe there for a while. Until I know if they know. You know?" I doubt she understood, but I was not sure myself.
"Cigarette?" I flaunted a pack of death sticks. "Bad habit," so they say. I won't vouch that they're anything worth dying over. But I'm a creature of habit, healthy and not so healthy. I keep saying I'm going to quit, but if you don't expect to live into next week, what's the difference?" I was in a euphoric mood. Nevertheless, my offer was declined.
Shadows shifted on the edge of a meadow.
"Where are we?" I thought. And I didn't mean our geographic location, nor was I contemplating our place in the universal ambiguity. These were the thoughts of words that fell from the raging storm above... each thought became a drop and each drop fell harder and grew larger, drenching my mind beneath in floods of distraught and sullen rain.
"What did you say?" I asked Air as the sound of her inquiry snapped my contemplation. "I can't re'mber?" She slurred her speech. "Don't try," I prescribed, "it will only make things worse."

I shuttered under the dim chill of silence as I stood in an oak grove. It was now late autumn and red and yellow butterflies fluttered all about the woods, a reminder of months before, falling into grave piles, swirling about in the wind. I tried not to think about the warped ecosystem of that decaying metropolis of Smog and all its depressing inhabitants. I wondered how long our supplies would last. The woods are a forbidding and lonely place without food and a warm, comfortable bed. I found a hollow; Canib sat down to think, alone. The leaves began to fall. I took a seat under a majestic oak. I sat down, comfortable, but not too relaxed so as to not fall asleep. I took out the black bag, unfolded a cloth before me, and decorated it with an assortment of medicines. I swallowed an unknown dosage of the hallucinogenic sedative X and put a few dried shrooms and smot into the water pipe I toted around in the black bag. A fish swam in a lake of fire. The realms of meditation opened as I dove into an ocean of blue-green water as waves washed loose sand subtly along its shore. I could hear the smell of the salt-watered sea and taste the sweet color of the skyblue room above the thunderclouds that sent a cool breeze up my spine.
"Hello?" A voice said unsure.
I sat in silence, unafraid to reply, but too disconnected to believe.
I made my way back up the stream. As it became smaller and smaller, I found a dry spot and sat under a thick stand of cedar. I took out my water pipe. I watched a drop of water hang on to the end of a branch, and then fall, splattering on the leaf-soaked earth below. I thought of the Nothing. I tried to forget. I watched a fish swim, - quivering, slipping…A pinecone opened as the seed fell to the ground. I made my way back to the one I loved. Tears of rage hung on like dewdrops as I opened the door to the cabin. Ogdoad and Rana lay butchered, holes aerated their skin, and a viscous, dark liquid formed trickling streams from both their nose and lips. Fear lunged out of the dark, knocking the breath from out this carcass I stood entombed. "Air!" I screamed inside, but unable was I to produce the faintest whisper of the horror I had felt.
I suffered the symptoms of a night terror, and unable was I to wake. She lay on a deathbed of thorns as red butterflies fluttered all about her naked innocence. I went to her side. I looked on in silence as her eyes spoke the question, "Why?" Why had we been put upon

this unloving earth, this quietus abode? I held her as she breathed death from her body. Pain, as for a child turned away. Regret, as for a youth untold.
Revenge. It knows no doubt. It knows not a friend. Enraged far from reason, I set out toward Smog to avenge those inferior bounty hunters, who were but blank canvases that I knew had stricken three of Canib's souls with their foul stench of decay. They had come for that madman whose head would bring them their twisted dues and financial end. "What shall we eat, my love?" I spoke with the peaceful sky.
Along a darkened path, bones lay in a pile, their marrow dry. Listless forms harken upon a book in which brittle pages crumble away. I sought the head of those who had injured Canib, those godless cattle that graze upon a field of the dead. Their greed had brought my love's demise. They are them who are always watching. I felt their stare now as I tread onto the dismal, wet streets of the City of Smog. I saw an image of myself in a pool of water. I reached down to touch it, but cold fingers shattered the reflection and sent ripples of distortion wavering upon the looking glass. A lost soul hid in a shadow, waiting for the permafrost to thaw; a butterfly landed on the drenched, matted hair of indifference.
Swallow. This dream of death is unfulfilled. I wait alongside the headwaters of a stream, a spring of poisoned sewage that spilled beneath the manhole I slipped into for cover. Moments before I had, in my mind, slaughtered all those I had felt obligated to rid of their impiety. But my mind had failed now as I watched once again this rabid fiend stab away at a man's chest with a rusted knife. He took apart the man's upper torso. He removed the man's heart. He fled. This procedure I saw him repeat several times until all the bounty hunters were disposed of satisfactorily.
They found Canib days later; I had made sustenance of those who had taken the pitch of my soul. I sat naked by a kindling fire awaiting them, myself black with dirt and blood. The words, lots of them, -dozens, millions, circulated throughout the fragile tomb, -to make beautiful the fear and horror of existence. I dwelled now in a strange land as I sat before the fire. I lifted my face into the rain. I stood still as I sat there. I heard the beating of the Drum. Terror walked from the shadows.
Death dripped from the sky. God was as I, and dead I am a lie.
They came for Cannibal X but took Canib and the child instead. This madman they imagined did not exist except in this fantasy world of iniquity in their minds. Where was my mother then? I sat now upon the dreaded throne.
"Justice Served at Midnight" or "Cannibal X Pays Debt to Society" headlines would read in a cliché of newspaper fiction. But could they take the hands of their children and let them play in the blood of their decision? Who would pull the lever of this societal guillotine? Where was my mother now? Could she drop the blade; was I a beast or a man? They screamed for blood, but I cried in truth. I knew the dark lie within. The man in the post office, the happy-faced girl, the old lady, they sat now in the jury, and they would easily point the blame. I denied nothing, but could they fathom pulling the lever? And if it were their mother or father, son or daughter, brother or sister, could they still cut off the head? I thought not. Had I not been reduced to a stereotypical monster, a number, another droplet upon a blade of grass, they might not have judged me so. But I walked dead among the dead.
I thought, for a vanishing instance, that I had made the same mistake as they had when I edited the policeman and the bounty hunters, but I was the one suffering under the binds of control, under which I asked not to be.

Revenge. It knew not love. It knew not God. They feared if they did not follow this dark rite if they did not perform their so-called "regrettable act of necessity" that control would cease, and it would! And without these chains, would I have then not been killed? People do not talk about executions or whippings; they face them in silence, without question. But it was this silence that allowed this mad act to rage on. And guilt was written upon the quiet face of the crowd. It was that I would remain silent. I cried for regret of what I never had, this myth, this bedtime story of freedom I heard told in my youth. I trembled beneath an unloving hand, born into a world that needed Canib not.

Weeds flourish in a meadow. A little boy played in the woods. A little girl shoveled in the sand. It rained blood in the heavens as paradise wept upon the dawn. A skull lay among dry leaves and twigs. I awoke and slept the heedless suffering. I was nothing. I was a lie. They sought not to heal but to punish, to destroy. There was a taboo in not finishing the story. Dark images lurked within the lurid water. I told of how I bled the pig. They sat in shock of disbelief at themselves, but truth knows not lies. I was but a mirror. I was but a man. They would blame it on the smot. They would blame it on that diabolical X. But they were to blame, -they were the only ones capable of stopping this madness. Instead, they worsened it. Chaos. It is that we think that we die. Thus we are, thus we sleep. The intolerant and impatient flower of a wilting society bloomed. The butterflies were fleeting. They "sentenced" Canib to death with their godless words. Yet, I was dead long ago. God had been beaten from this flesh-confined room. Love had been whipped from this child. And as if this child was but a beast, stupid and incapable of learning. And as if the beast even deserved its beatings. Fear had become their only god, vengeance upon the mortal coil. Their only answer to the question "Why?" was "Because." They cared none and feared all.

I fled. I ran. I went away. I vanished within myself. I returned to those steep hills of my youth. Petals fall on a bed of thorns. I escaped to the Back Hills. I slipped into a shadow and walked among the trees. The sky seemed blue; the sun was warm for a winter's day. I elapsed in season, back to the days and nights of Air, to her soft touch, to that innocence in the sweet sweat of summer. I sat down to think. I was alone, dissatisfied. Who would come to save Canib now as I mingled among the shadows? Where were those miserable followers of the insurrection who I said idealized Canib, none who lied or betrayed, all those lost friends? I made my way back down the stream. I followed along the pass to Blue Lake. I sought its comforting depths. And Air, I thought of her again, my love, the one who brought floods of happiness down upon the lonely barren boughs of memory.

I swam the lakes of my youth to their deep end.

The rain began to fall upon the water… the silver curtain unveiled: slow, steady showers that went on for days. I stood in the cold as heavy drops soaked my hair. The unyielding force of nature lay out before Canib as I looked now upon the earth that once harbored sunshine. A fish surfaced. It broke the steady pattern of the rain on the water. My thoughts were saturated. My face was soaked with the taboo of tears... how they flow.

"What now?" I thought. Would my mother have been proud if instead, I had become a good citizen, a surgeon, a lawyer? Would she be not ashamed to have given birth to this murderous killer, this criminal? Would she love me not? Would she care?

"What's wrong?" I heard Air's voice say.

"Nothing." I replied in silence.

A writer now writes in a shallow grave: a freethinker in the depths of a lake of knowledge.

I wrote on a piece of black shale and skipped it across the water:
"Death's breath whispers eternity."
Canib held his arms outstretched in the water. As he sank below into the deep, the light faded away. Air escaped his heart, and his breath became a stream…
I am now but a memory.

Log of Deadwood

I am writing to tell you about a dream I had. The other day the wind outside stirred up a reminiscence of the past, altering the season and changing the leaves on the trees. We were beside the railroad tracks, outside Rana's house, sitting on a knoll under the shade of a stand of oaks. And then a train came. It roared past and the conversation Og and Rana, and Air and I were having –we went on talking, but instead of the deathly loud noise of the train, there was silence. Our thoughts were silent, and the trees began to sway, but there was no wind. Then I drifted out of my body, and I listened as Air, and I talked in the deafening silence. She spoke, and I listened. Og took his hand, and he pointed at me. Og was pointing toward the train, but I stood in its tracks. And Rana, he looked through me, as well, to the train,

And suddenly, I was within the walls of an institution. A hunting party returned in wooden masks. Perhaps it was a play they had been in, but from their etiquette, it appeared they were returning from a masquerade. But from the look on their hidden faces, I detected disgust, and my disposition ensued. I was led down a hall to a room. The ceiling and walls were old, decaying timbers, and the floor was concrete. It was a damp and dim-lit room. Six others sat silently on five-gallon buckets with gunnysacks over their heads. There was some kind of judicial functionary who told me that I had been brought there to give an admission of guilt (in an informal and secretive way). What had I done?

"I tell you that I lie, and still you listen. But how can I lie when I have told the truth?" I said in my defense.

I asked for no forgiveness for the unwanted interrogation. They seemed angry and then sad. They took off the gunny sacks and revealed a half-dozen hideous painted faces that were melting from the flowing of a dozen warm tears.

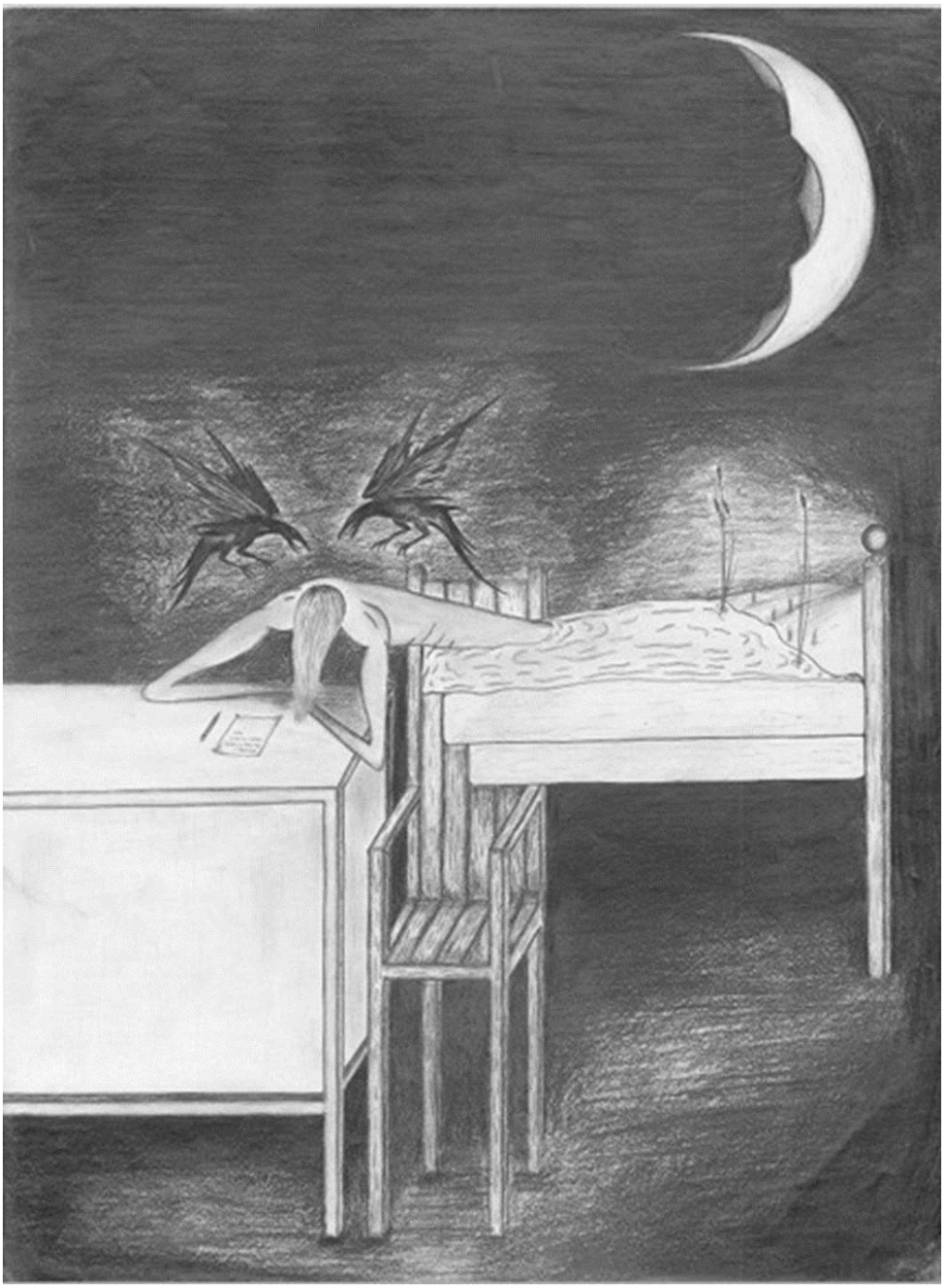
I was sentenced and barred from the institution. I was excommunicated. Violence begets violence. In a rage, I burned every memento of my dead youth: writings, drawings, and music, all a log of deadwood. I sought to destroy the memory of my survival. In the beginning, the institution was home, but now reality is an unjust confinement. I was outside stoning a tree with books as if it had spoken with these words that wounded me, a language of hypocrisy written on the leaves of paper of ancient trees and bound into a book. But it's not as if these words are carved in stone… so, nothing matters, each path ends the same.

I was outside. I was running away. But as I was leaving, I passed the barred window of your sleeping quarters. I kicked at the window unsuccessfully to gain entry. I kicked again and again, but it was a useless ploy. It did not matter. I was inside the room now somehow, sneaking and peeking into your sleeping mind. I found a gram of speed and a bottle of blue pills. I hurried to flush the narcotics down the commode as you began to wake, to cry, to fiend for the drugs.

A milk cow, which posed as a sacred mascot, drank from the commode before I could flush it. It transformed into some preternatural beast. The muscular physique of the beast had the build of an ox, its torso was a superb physical specimen of a man, its limbs of a black panther, and its head had a face that looked at a distance to stare with a single red eye. But the mad beast was a shadow of a man, someone's father, and someone's son. It wandered out the backdoor of our house and into my mother's water garden.
I saw the shadow drink the water.
"What is mad cow doing in my garden?" Mother asked, confused.
God is a fish. Thoughts pour into the current of the stream, flowing water that submerges a dream. God is a fish swimming by. God is a fish, suspended in air, raindrops seeping… drip, drip, drip into the waters of the Lake.
I was in an institution, confined. I was a youth stoning an ancient tree. I stood on an ancient path. I walked a path into the trees. I followed a passage. I found a passage within. I am a door. I am a door that opens to another world. I am in another world. I live in a dream. Dreams are submerged underwater. I live underwater in a dream. I swim in the current of the stream. I am a fish. God is a fish.
I was an old man watching his youth unfold. Outside my home of youth, a train passed. I saw a young man standing on the tracks of the roaring train. Who is this stranger? Death steamed ahead. Is this a shadow of my flesh? Death. Life is but a single breath of air we hold deep underwater. All I want is fresh air. Fear. I gasp for air. I panic. I choke on this penetrating water that drowns my thoughts.
I watched as a confused youth stoned an innocent tree with his books. The youth flogged and beat the rooted memory. He stood outside my house for fifty years and kicked and wailed on the tree with an ax, leaving the tree scarred for life. Perhaps this was the boy's life. Perhaps he was once a tree, beaten and scared… It did not matter. I am old and retired now. I left the institution long ago.
I did my job, that was all. It's not my fault they didn't turn out the like we wanted…
"Who am I but a withered old man, living out the last of his days in the shade of a tree hoping I did the right thing?" I thought as I left the tree alone, for I saw Air walking down a path through the trees.
We lie in ink. With ink, we lie. I am walking down a path. The misty gray lay on both sides… Vision was deceptive. I was following Air down an old, leaf-covered path. Silver flowers bloomed in the darkness above us in the heavens. In the dead of the long night, I had come to the end of the path. And graves… I was in a garden of graves. Air stood alone. She was weeping over a tombstone. It was my epitaph carved in the stone. I was alone. She was alone. Shadows fell from the trees.
We were in the house. And we were gathered in the living room for conversation and drinks. A stranger entered the room. He had long dreadlocks. Yes… he was a black gentleman as I recall. Everyone wanted to leave our house and go to another house.

Who'd watch this man?
"I'll stay."
Why me? Now I had to watch a child sleeping in the back room. I knew this child. I stayed. The black gentleman was gone as was the crowd. Og and Rana and Air had gone to associate with other friends of ours. I stayed behind out of fear for the child's safety. She slept soundly in the back room out of sight, but I knew it was there. Should I check on her?
The party had returned. The dark gentleman in dreadlocks sat unnoticed in the room. Everyone went on about their conversations and drinking, but the black man did something that I could not quite comprehend. He was sitting in a wooden chair when in horror I was bewildered. I had kept a conscious eye on the stranger. But in a momentary glance of my wandering eye, I looked away. And when I looked again at the man, he was no longer black with dreadlocks, but a white man with a shaved head, whose face was covered with tattoos, sitting there grinning at me. I looked away as a person passed in front of the view of the gentleman and again, he was black with dreadlocks. I could hear the laughing of the people at the party, taking pleasure in mocking each other. I watched the black man intensely for a while out of the corner of my eye. Nothing. Then as the party became more crowded, he shifted again. He was white, staring at me with a devious grin, as though when he was black a moment ago, he knew I was watching him.
"Do you see that guy there?" I pointed toward the white man.
"That black guy over there?" Air described him from his master status.
I looked away from Air and back to the chameleon man. Indeed, he was black again, and he did not seem to notice Air and me discussing him. I sat back down. The laughing echoed louder. It started to consume my thoughts. I asked another person. I watched as the man changed in his flesh from black to white. He was black. He was white. Never, though, did he change before my eyes, always while I was looking away. The black man talked and socialized, but the white, tattooed man only stared and grinned.
I asked Og if he could see the fiendish man.
"Look," I asked. "Look at that guy over there." I pointed at the white, tattooed man sitting and grinning.
"That black guy there with the dreadlocks," Og replied.
But I had kept my eyes fixed upon the shifty man, and I knew that indeed the man I looked at was white. The laughing swelled.
"That guy sitting in the red chair, he's not white?" I frantically sought the opinion of another.
"Yeah, the black guy…whatever?" I replied sarcastically.
I went and sat in the corner by myself. The laughing roared into a turbulent river. Reason was washed away. Reality melted into one shadow that I stared into that stretched into a road in the distance. I was driving a vehicle down a road on a cloudy day.
Blood. I am driving. I am driving down a road now with a person in the passenger seat. The person sitting next to me said she saw someone following us. I was still running away from shadows: the shape-shifting beast and the fiendish chameleon man. I was paranoid. I was driving intoxicated, swerving in a drunken madness. The passenger leaned over and took the wheel. I was now in the passenger seat of the vehicle, and I knew they were after me. I tried like a persistent mosquito to convince the driver to get away from them.
"It's the others from the institution following us, Bedding I said to Air as we approached an intersection in the road.

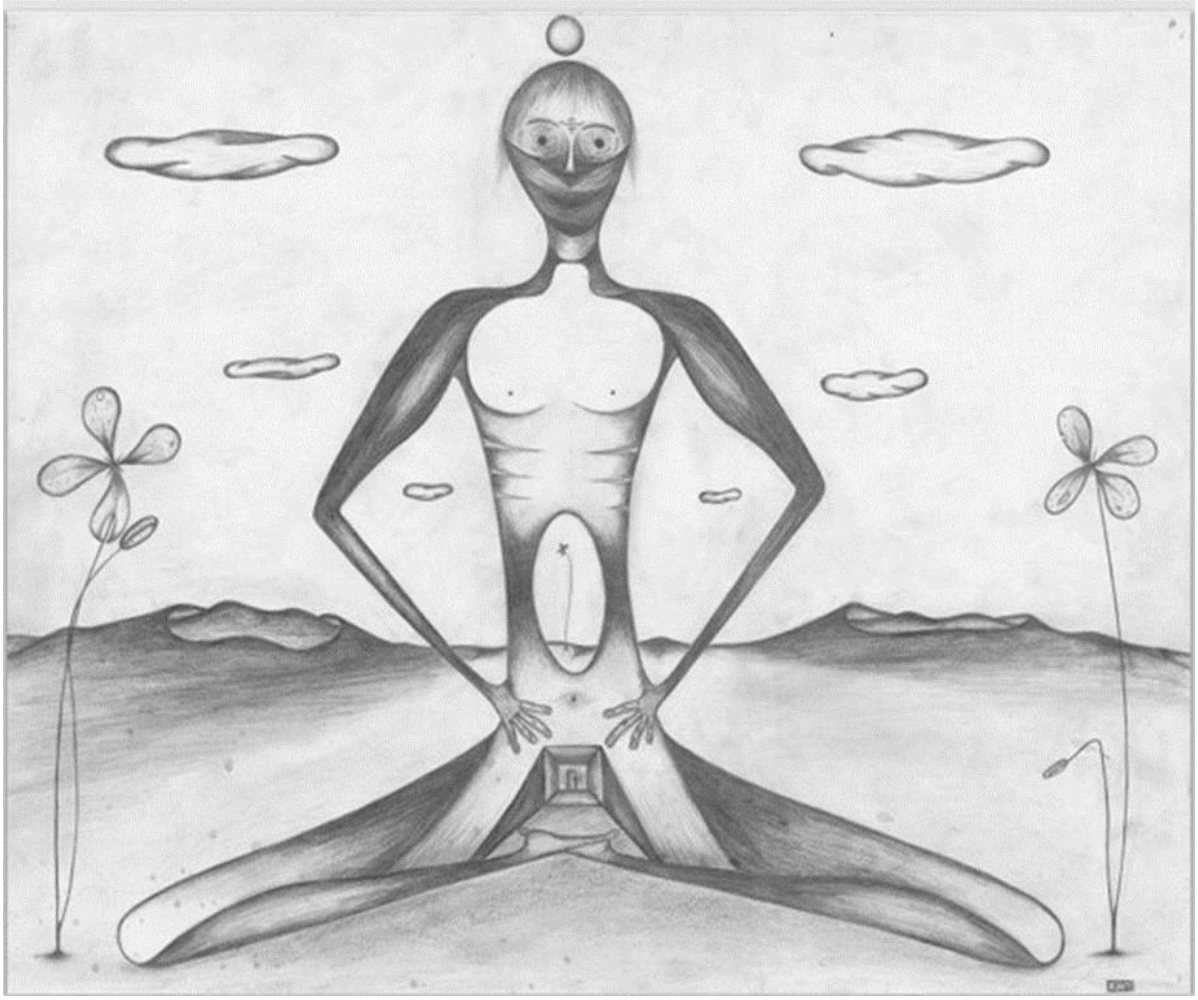
"Right or left?" She asked.
"I don't know?" Paranoia pulsed through my mind.
Air turned right, though I anticipated she'd turn left. I looked for an exit. We pulled off on a leaf covered road and hid. The car chasing us sped ahead out of sight.
People down the road came walking out of the woods to see the chase. A drop of blood hung from the flesh of consciousness. The vehicle that was after me sped even faster ahead and plowed through the curious people who were watching from the edge of the forest. The trees watched in horror. Did the gunny sack jury of the institution send this assassin who was after me? Guilt. I was to blame for the death along the road, this melancholy change in season. The trees shed leaves of tears; tears of leaves fell upon the ground.
People lay wounded and dying, and blood -there was blood everywhere. Streams of it trickled and flowed down the road. As we drove, there were more bodies, most dead and several with their heads decapitated. Decapitated heads lay pools of fluorescent red blood beside lifeless bodies, their eyes open in a death stare. It was one head I inspected in detail that caused my face to turn pale with sickness. I could see the severed arteries that once let life flow into a now-dead mind. All of a sudden and with such suffering it was upon me.
Blood. Streams of blood. Rivers of blood. Oceans of blood with corpses of the dead within.



The Sleep of Reason (rework)

The Sleep of Reason (waking)

Perpetual night.
She was an island, all day weathered in the perfect dark. Her eyes were deep sky-blue seas, with white sands for cheeks. Thin pink shells hid gentle fangs that sought a way into my neck.
"I can fly." I tell her all the time.
"Kiss me." She asked for three.
Vampires, both loved and feared for their charisma.
We strolled over the dark, uncertain curves and hills, further down a leaf-quilted path.
Like a low-water bridge, we crossed the quietus stream.
I must be careful, for the sky melted as we stretched into a walk under the moon.
"Would she try to bite my neck?" I contemplated eternity by her side.
"I never knew you had a tattoo." She asked with a deep stare.
"I do." I reflected off the water.
The tattoo he wears is death, the black ink in his skin is hers.
"I'm a beautiful butterfly." She insisted.
"And I am a frog." I reminded her.
"I wish you were here." She dreamed of a shooting star.
"Where are you?" She lay in a bed of soft water.
"Why won't you talk to me?" She echoed in the deep.
I wasn't on the phone that she still grasped in her hand, and she was sleeping many miles away.
"I miss you, too." I whispered.
And silence embraced us in the enigmatic waters.
The sun hovers in darkness.
"What's wrong?"
"Nothing."
She quivered, and I grasped her hand as we stood in the water.
"Why are they doing this to me?" She laughed as she wept.
"They hear what they want to hear; they see what they want to see." "I feel that everyone is against me." We both agreed.
Melancholy ecstasy.
The fish give in to the current of the stream as the cycle ends.
Downstream, the scavengers are fat from the remains.
They are ready to hibernate another winter.
The butterflies are fleeting.
The frogs croak as they slime into their primordial tombs.
A gentle madness settles the air:
All is quiet…



Melancholy Ecstasy

(*Mirth & Misery*)

The Silence

Perchance. Water. Clear pools of water. Ice cold springs of water, flowing on and on and on. I sit where the streams begin, and floods bring no end again. I remember when I was three. Wide, peaceful skies fill the lakes of years. I walked beside Hope, who was then only two. Today is the day she died. What do we sleep that has no face? I remember when the laughter stopped; I remember when the sun turned pale. The dry dusk of season unfolds. Dreams of dissonance reverberate through her tomb. Lust covered candy bars melt, and sodas fizz and go flat with time. The sun. I remember it well, warm, full of light, and the rain it shed. They made us. They made everything I am, and now all that we will ever be, those feeble wicked lights that flutter in the night sky, soaking imagination, drowning it in the wake of a new moon. Questions, spider webs in memory. I sat in chocolate fields of youth under marshmallows filled skies, suspended in mid-air like a sweet memory of an age that will not leave. Time becomes. It dissolves. We are fed a lie of sugar and spice but made to stomach a bitter truth: They will tell you to be yourself, but only if you are what they want you to be. This breath I take, the sound it makes when it breaks the cold silence… "What's that?" Hope was curious.

"I don't know?" Discord wondered.

"It's a legless lizard hiding under a log of deadwood."

Of course, it was nothing but imagination. And what is imagination but a ploy, a trap in the heart of the intellect. It was mid-morning. The sun had begun to dry up the dew. The birds…those feathered seraphs that chirped out of sight, up beyond the broad leaves of white oaks, and the new, fluorescent green needles of loblolly pines. And there were red oaks, pin oaks, black-jack oaks, and bull pines, catalpa trees and catalpa worms, willows, and vines. Time was not wasted when a child. And what was a child? A beast, a miniature creature which resembled a human, but was not? Things which made no sense as a child, still do not settle with logic today. Trials of youth are like any other; perhaps they are with more hope. Shall I pour the salt some more? Youth is nothing more than a gaping wound of memory bleeding from a farce, altered and exaggerated, fretted, and exasperated. "What 'cha doing?" Discord scratched in the dirt with a stick.

"I'm a princess." Hope smiled.

"No, you're not, you're a witch." Justice interjected.

Hope was lost. She had little, only little things, but she sat quietly in the wake. And Justice and Discord…what does a book do but enslave a young mind, a taste of freedom for a mouthful of venom. The snakes began to sliver all about the grass; under a stone, you will find them there. War, what unforeseen terror does it hold to mankind? Soft-spoken words, kisses in the sky, and watery dreams.

The mist behind the rite, the fog of ritual, -how the rain of passage clouds the mind. Fear lurks in the shadow of those it entrusts. Go to sleep sweet butterfly, -the lilies, they lie. In the spring, we plant a garden. To watch it grow. No doubt it will wither in autumn, and whether the fruit survives, it will only be food, gobbled up by the hand of something. Plant gods perhaps. And the child, it too would wither away and fall on an ambrosial platter, or an early storm might take its passion, grace it with locust honey and… Swallow. And pretend it never felt a thing. They drank water from a babbling brook, thinking it might transform them into imaginary things.

"Look at those clouds!" Discord pointed above.
"I see a castle!" Hope described a dream sitting on the edge of the universe. "I see a face." Discord reflected in his imagination.
"Where?" She was curious.
"Look, see…there's her eyes…and down from those are her lips and," Discord cascaded, detailing the intimacy of his personification in the heavens.
Secluded within a tall stand of southern pines, around the pine needle covered bank of a sanctuary, prickly pear cacti bask their leathery skin in the warmth of sun that shone through the towering trees as flies were swatted away from the young skin of a young hunter and a fisherman, gathering dreams of the earth that he lay upon. The swallows dove from the sky around the pond, swooping through cattails and nesting in a haven of echoes. The time had changed. Times have changed. Or is it time is change? Solitude gathered in the mid-day breeze.
After the future comes the past. Discord sacrificed half his lunch to Hope. Justice was busy torturing animals, sharing not in his delight, unable to distinguish his pain from that of his prey. A spider wove its web, and the flies lay trapped in hope of sudden departure. Discord would catch June bugs, blinded by the light. Out of the house they would be set free. Freedom…where was this place. Outside, a land so close to the latter. In a vanishing instance, it was spread out before them. Moisture gathered on the top of this last dark plateau, glistening in the light of star drops that sprinkled like water in the night. Until the day gave birth to the fruit of life. A planter and a fisherman, a hunter of the other land. A farmer lost his herd. For perhaps an hour, a panther -liquid black its skin- crouched and nestled in the outskirts of the fog of reason, perpetrating a damp and darkened stone. When in the moment of the misty memory… Its heart leapt forth from the stillness of a meadow and sank claws into the back of its passive prey. A cat of preternatural physique. Claws sought flesh. Blood stained to leak from a silent ring of claws. A wild ox blows and slings the panther to the ground. Thoughts jolt. I gasp as my breath be-quiets the sound. Then, sugar spilled from the sky. We were in lemonade. Ice cubes floated by above, as lemon leaves fluxed in the swirling, sour wind of spring. I could taste the cold winter on my tongue as it warmed into spring, flowing down the dark passage, through a grotto in a dream, the hunger in this stomach is pain, back out again, golden streams flowing down upon the sugary produce of life, this fertile fruit of an apparition shadowing on the earth.
"Sit." Ms. Black said.
We followed commands like dogs, most of us. Others were pennies that had landed on tails. "Sit down now, Jester!" Her voice was more controlling now, but the boy knew it was just that. He ignored her persistence.
"In the hall!" She yelled and opened a drawer of her desk and removed a wooden board. It was no surprise that our English teacher could not form complete sentences in her ignorance of anger.
I heard her yelling as she whipped the boy.
"You'll learn to mind me you little smarty pants, now bend over and touch your toes." She was a monster.
"Whack! Whack! Whack…" It went on as the classroom sat in a fog of fear and silence. It was over.
Another one beaten down.

We called her Ms. Yes Mam. That bitch couldn't open her twat without saying that abominable phrase.
"'Break your jaw to say, yes mam." She would bleed in a blasphemous, fragmented sentence. How many times have I wanted to correct her sentences (and slit her throat) as she did the others in our class. Had I not known then what I know now? No. But there was that other pile of worthless bullshit I despised, that lie I heard in contempt each time I asked the question, "Why?"
"You'll understand someday, when you're older."
But someday never came; and still, I sit beneath a blue, marble sky. And I am older now, but there is nothing that will ever help me understand. They said they were doing it for our own good. "Fuck them."
The drug took control. It is what we are addicted to, control. And to have it perform this task for me was to negate my responsibility as a human. Something to disconnect my memory, to sever the flower from its stem.
Fear and Terror. Like those twin satellites of Mars, clouds of darkness hovered around the hearts of children, nothing more. I stood at the double doors awaiting our sentence. Clouds hovered over a pool of water that was busy imitating a fish. And the cumulonimbus ecstasy of the suspense of the storm stirred in the calmness of trepidation before a gale of wind brought a wisp of the horrid squall. We were led to the principal's office. There our judgment awaited us hidden away from the eyes of our peers. A "good" beating would suffice. I sat in a chair, trembling, shaking in the fear they prescribed. Sweat flowed profusely from my palms, -my heart; it beat in waves of confusion. They had left us alone in the office, and I desperately pleaded with the others to escape. Truancy was freedom weighed against this punishment that awaited, this torture by the adult masters. My head spun. I twitched as tension mounted. I would have no part in this whipping today. I fled the mass insanity of the institution I had been sent daily. I remember running through the fields behind the school. I had found freedom, this land the liars spoke of, and it was buried in a silent tomb, here, beneath the meadows, under the stone of everyday existence.
I saw Ms. Yes, Mam coming down the road I had fled in a dream. Would I be punished in my state of shock? The storm blew past, the echoes of thunder called out, but the rain did not fall… a taste of my quietus habitat. And I had sewn the fallow ground. Erosion stripped mined a hollow inside. I stood petrified in an empty space. Where would I run that should seed the sodden soil and plow my escape? I remember nothing but that I was alone and vulnerable in the most horrid way, betrayed by my mother and in dread of my father who had sent me here to this institution. Fear is the only darkness; and it was these clouds that I could not see, blinding me, intolerably.
Each day it echoed down the halls, this rhythm I sought to avoid. Could I keep up the pace? What would happen if I got out of step? I would most surely be pulled to the side of this mad march and flogged, as were the others. The whippings did not seem to occur until the afternoon; and some days, the storm was calm. But everyone knew it was here, even when you thought you had done nothing at all they were watching for you to make a mistake. "Be seated!" Said a voice.
"You, you, and you, out in the hall." The voice said as it pointed out the students who would be victimized in the hallway.

"It is odd that we can't remember where or when we were born. Isn't it?" Discord was an efflorescent figure blooming under a star-lit sky, encircled within this theater whose backdrop was a black canvas, an enigma that sprinkled wishes down upon the lonely leaves of dew-soaked grass.
"I know." Hope fluttered her wings.
"What's the first thing you can remember?" Discord asked.
"I can't remember." Hope was busy watching the lightning bugs in the field up on one those, those distant ones of worlds to come, beyond them.
"What do you mean, you can't remember? How could you forget the first thing you remembered? That doesn't make any sense." He contemplated utopia as he resided in an endless horizon of destiny.
"I don't know, I guess I mean that I can remember, you know? But I just don't want to…because…I don't know." Hope landed on a flower.
"Because most of them are echoes?" Discord was a cloud, dark and threatening. "Echoes?" Hope flew across the meadows.
"Yeah, those things you don't like to think about, bad things." He imagined himself flying through space with storms of rock and fire, demon eyes along the trail.
"I remember when we were small. I remember the first time we played together. I was a princess, and you were a frog, and…" Hope lay trapped in a sticky, funneling web of memory.
"…And then Justice came and made you eat dirt." The spider sank in its fangs, venom made frail the fragile wing of the butterfly frail.
"What's the first thing you can remember?" Hope brought the rain.
"I remember the train below our house, the one down the dirt road we lived beside. Every night the deep vibrating sound on my window foretold the coming of the Beast and would always put me to sleep." Discord wafted through the ether of the cosmos.
"It didn't keep you awake." Hope tasted the sweet water they swam. "What?" Discord sailed outside the solar system.
"The train." She reminded the boy.
"No." Discord flew away on the quaint clouds of dissonance that spiraled into the heavens.
"Oh." Hope played a psychoanalytic detective, testing the fingerprints of Discord's mind for fallacy in his punctual reply.
"Well, I see." Hope was a fisherman in the depths of thought, catching minnows as they swam past. Most of the mystery relied on non-verbal communication, expressions that gave clues to inner conflict and indifference. All were betrayal of the mind: a twitch of the head, a blink of the twitching eye, a rapping of the fingers on a desk. Seeing is understanding, and Hope saw a lot of little things.
But she still understood very little. -A little girl who understood a little about every little thing. We pay for freedom with suffering, but we achieve this foreboding task with unyielding defiance and calculated insolence to unleash the beast on those who had encaged it. And we swam in it every day, this hypocrisy of silence of the aphoristic pair, those dogs that snarled control to hear the echo of their own bark. Tonight, we lie, and tomorrow we die. It is that we dream when we are awake, but we sleep when we should be dreaming. We thank some not for the love they unveil but hate them for the distrust they've caused.

"Fuck them." I thought again… that lucid colors coveted each reverberation of an ear-piercing silence that followed me from day into the night.
We were at the beach, somewhere on time. Hope found a crustacean living in the skeleton of some ocean creature. The little coffin critter seemed quite content in its makeshift home of a seashell. We saw dolphins that lived in a cave beneath us, a majestic aquatic palace this cave. Alas but a pale land, the sea!
"Follow me." We swam in ecstasy and found our way back. We floated thither on the farther shore. Hope had found another hermit crab living in a pink shell. They dwelled in a house so tranquil by the sea; a boy and a girl flirted on the water's edge, building castles in the sands of time.
"What are those?" Curiosity spoke.
"I think they're turtle eggs…or what's left of them." I became a hunter.
"Why do you think people say something is left? Is left a bad thing? Things are left over, or left behind, or incomplete like when something is left to do. But when it comes to the other side, things are the right thing to do, or the right-of-way, or the right answer opposed to the wrong answer, which is obviously the left answer." I rambled as the waves of a clear, blue-green sea washed the sand subtly on the shore.
"Maybe it's because most people are right-handed. A long, long time ago, people who were left handed were considered bad by everyone else because they were different, and so it kinda gave the left side a bad name or something, I guess?" Hope passively waded through the swelling of an ocean wave.
"People used to think there were monsters in the sea, you know?" I recalled a dream-picture magnified in the reflection of the water, represented by the distant allusion to a memory.
"They thought a lot of things, but that doesn't make them true." Hope stepped back onto the warm sand and walked as it stuck to her wet skin.
"How do you know there aren't giant sea creatures, have you seen them?" I tried to spook an imaginative mind.
"No, I haven't seen them, -or yes I have seen giant sea creatures, but they weren't monsters, at least not like what you were making them out to be." Hope bathed in the sun.
"But that's just it…" They walked over the ripples in the sand, "…no one has ever seen any monsters, or at least not me, they're only in stories, kind of like ghosts and gods." She said.
"So how do we know they're not out there?" I persisted as thunderclouds gathered in the distance of a mid-afternoon sky.
"But?" Hope was beached. "I guess that's the same thing I'm trying to say…that we don't really know if they are real or not." Her stream of thought had reached its end. It had been swept into a river where it would only become a swirling pool among many lakes in a sea of an ocean of ideas on this earth. We returned to the task of the castle we had begun a short while ago. The wind became cool, and the palms began to move. A boy and a girl dug portals to another world in the sand. Seashells impersonated vessels that transported imaginary travelers to the other side of nowhere. The clouds at first are such comfort, such haven from the battering sun that browns youth as it turns youth into a leathery hide of a cactus with its age. We submitted unwillingly to the shadow of our doom. Even when the first drops of the storm that fell upon our seascape fortress seemed comforting, the pleasure of the pain was overwhelming.
Footsteps hushed on wet sands.

"Get off my beach." Justice came and kicked down the edifices of imaginary kingdoms, swinging his stick, shouting, and snickering and proud of his destruction.
"Nobody invited you." Hope threw sand at her friendly enemy, but Justice kept about his destructive intercourse and gave little attention to the little things Hope had to say. We drove all night. The highway hallucinated as the sun returned; it shifted; it shuttered in our eyes. Mirages formed on the road, transfixing a dry and flattened toad, crystallized by the mid-summer heat. Trapped we were like a strange insect in a flux of reason, eternized in a hardening sap of dysfunction only to be dissected with callous logic after the turbulence subsided, and the eye of the flaming breath cooled. How familiar was the medicine man with his voodoo pins? Therapist offered their verbal enemas, but it was a cathartic I needed not, and its laxative drained us to puncture the ballooning clouds of Deja vu into masses of gushing waterfalls. Prefabricated idleness had come to its incandescent end, bottomed out in these mirror pools of memory that now bubbled to the surface again.
Our parents had sent us away, and now our charter had mapped about a circle in this parallel dimension of distrust. Our aunt we confided could not be lent a sleeping eye; she was to be feared within all limits of her power over us. She went through ritualistic torture reminiscent of the wooden paddle terror of those so-called "teachers," the monsters that prowled the hallways of our school years. It was that we should be sent, when at night in limbo between route, at motels, hotels, and rest stops, to be interrogated for various things, tied down and subdued by our own fears and unknowing by a hand emulating a vivid structure that manufactured our "upbringing" with psychotic indifference.
Again, everything pulsated with the shock, but this time instead of a black screen, it became a television station that had lost its signal during a storm, gray fuzz dominated the moment of the impious lie. We were led one by one into the back room and asked about the "problem." Someone had spilled a soda on the clean, white sheets. And when the violator was apprehended, he or she must be punished, tortured with a small boat paddle that was kept in the trunk of the car as a method of restraint, sodomized by the laws of ignorance. I fell from a cliff of surreal heights onto the surface of the fantasy. When I met with its watery surface, my mind blurred, the signal was lost, -a power outage followed. The surge subsided, and I regained conscious memory as I stood before the running water of a bathroom sink, a tranquil piped spring that soothed me into remission of the trauma. A chance to not wet the bed in a muscle-binding delusion through the night, I washed away the tears and slept with the aid of a vague light. The next day we returned to the point from which we remained, these days of the fragile abode.
Summer vacation has come to an end, again. Severed eyes awaited an anxious hour. I lay wrapped myself in a spider's web, unawake, unable to sleep. I watched an alarm clock pass in the temporal presence of relativity. Sequential horror ensued, and I hoped for a good death. I imagined myself as the hero. And in these unfulfilled desires oozing out an ingenious pore in a dream, I saw unstable ground shift, floods of fire and waves of blood. I was intrigued by the immaculate stars above. This heaven, -a gate to the unknown. I stared into the flickering flames, and the glowing, sparking coals of a campfire, awaiting the tale of Jack Straps told by Uncle Goat.
Behold the tragedy of man, faltering through the unstable abyss of sands. I know not what? I know not why. We stand in but a pool of dampness and sullen caricature, this false impression, this misrepresentation of distorted reality. At night, images, traces of light,

shadows of silence echoed through a room with no walls, picturesque temptations of mortality that clasped out and haunted me through the swift current of a bubbling, frothing dream I slept. I paused midstream, and for a second. I was there, drifting through eternity, free at last! Liberty was here in a dream, independence from the whippings and the controlling. The passion was lost as the current slowed to a lax and lethargic pace.

And I thought back to the pond and what Hope had meant to me then and now. And where was Justice now? Every day I woke to the mirror of time, but today it was not there. Has this dream transformed me? Had the demons forsaken me and forgot that I existed?

Now the question uttered itself into my brain, -drip, drip, drip goes the bloody stain. I took up a pen, once again, and the diabolical travesty of the ink foretold the accounts. The written word, an omen so dark and beautiful I thought I'd died, but I did not die. I did try and remember the reasons why. But I could not, and now they all must pay.

For has the tragedy a golden rule, out of all the characters in the Good Book, everybody dies. And now my story attuned with the tides, and the darkness of the moon pulled strongly upon my will, or was it the laughter that conjured up the beast: Was it the laughter that made us kill?

Ephemeral happiness sat on a watermark. I raised an umbrella to watch the rain. I walked in a field of mushrooms; I ate consciousness by the handful. It had been ten years since I sat around the fire, but I hallucinated a better time. Uncle Goat had left this World, riding away on that demon train that came unexpectedly in the night; a dream of falling from darkness into light. "You're not going to want to hear this, and I'm not sure of how to tell you." I heard a voice mumble, but I knew already.

"What happened, who died?" I thought that the clues lay in Justice's expression; the evidence lay behind the fingerprints of the mind. What offense does death hold, what crime is inevitable? "It was an accident." I saw Justice's lips moving, but I fell now upon two parallel universes; I stood here, my body there.

Raindrops fell on the windshield of the vehicle I drove. I watched them gather as I drove. One, then another -three, and several, then many fell in tranquility. Our lives pretend; they are make-believe. Some say you can alter the future by what you do with today, but that you cannot change the past.

But you can, -you can change the past. These were not foretold prophecies. When was the birth of God? Martyrs mock the tales, the pale masks they wear give away a clue. History, the subtle lie. With their books and words, they paint the world. But it isn't what it used to be, life. Out of fluid waters we drank, but out of these flowing wet returns the stagnant pool of mud, and then from the dust of death we inhaled. Yet these reasons justify their tale of truth, they fail. Life, then, is whitewashed, the past faded gray.

The more your internal world closes in, collapses in on you, the more organized your external world becomes. The dishes are clean. The shelves are organized. Papers neatly stacked, paper clipped, systematically filed away. What beauty death beholds to the troubled mind, the dim relief it forces upon this fog smothering your days and dreams, waking to the mirror of reality every morning. Fingers anxiously tap out a familiar tune. Words stick like metaphors to the roof of your mind, syllables don't sound right, everything sounds off key. Problems of communication soon arose. And I began to paint a rose. I painted and sketched my toes… wiggling. I drew a field of flowers, and upon each stem, I saw a face. They were all looking at me, each face I saw facing me, smiling and laughing at me.

"Hello? Who is there?" I had a vision of a figure that entered the room.
Mental illness is but a perpetual state of emotional flux. I swam in a pool of swirling water but could not touch the bottom, nor could I reach the shore, though always was I closer to the bank, yet constantly pulled away was I by an undertow, pulled into a lake of despair. When in the clear of a neurotic wave, I dove under to see the oblique sandy bed; and still, I swam toward an illusion on the bed of a bottomless sea, this depth unknown. It can always get darker. For when I return to the still surface again, the water. It seemed so clear.
So it was that my story began months before, when under the influence of the Infallible Church. I sat in silence as a train roared past.
"Hello Discord. What brings you to the Infallible Church?" The preacher said in rapturous condescension and patronization.
"I have come to speak with God." I replied.
"Is that such a young Discord? But God does not talk to just anyone." The preacher claimed.
"But He speaks to you, does He not?" I asked.
"That He does, in a way…" He went on. "You see, the prophets of long ago were the ones God spoke, and they left us the Good Book, and today I am the one who interprets it to the people." "I see." I understood, the preacher did not.
"So, you're an interpreter for God? I asked.
"In a way." The preacher said.
"Will I ever be able to interpret the Good Book?" I asked.
"Not unless you become a preacher like me, young Discord." The preacher thwarted his status.
I assumed the priest was a violent man and decided not to trust his word. And I really have no idea what brought me to the Infallible Church to start with. But there I sat, before the hypocrisy of the congregation, head bowed admitting that they were miserable iniquitous sinners. I too bowed my head low, closed my eyes, and in the absence of God, sought what could not be found. These people had little clue who or what God was, and neither did I. But this I knew: God was not to be found within the four unholy walls of the Infallible Church. I sat and listened to a geocentric preacher speak of how God would have his children chastised, how God would have the gentile children of this world whipped, how God would have them tortured by physical punishment and to make them upright again. I sat and brooded at his words. But unable was I to offer evidence of the atrocity that he fulfilled. Perhaps I was the messiah crucified. Perhaps I was the one who must die. The people of the Infallible Church, the covenant of literal interpreters, the prophets of an almighty babble, could not help my pathetic, rotten worldly core. Each time I attended the unholy structure, I became less at ease. A strange morose pessimism mystified my thoughts, and for the death of mankind I could not fathom why. But then it occurred to me one drunk and stoned evening, I felt beckoned to the mirth of their double standard. Why each week did they not try to become less miserable sinners? Instead, they used the Infallible Church as an excuse to go out and engage in promiscuous acts of insincere kindness.

The people of the Infallible Church regularly attended this heap of bricks and boards they call a house of worship, while under the pretense that it was Holy, and it was Holy because they performed holy rituals there, and if they dwelled within this hallowed edifice, sanctified by the drooling of their "good" and godly deeds, somehow, this made them closer to God. I knew nothing. But I knew that they knew nothing. And that is not to say that I knew more,

and indeed, then I thought I must, for I saw the blemish in their defense, this shield they put up, this twisted pattern of ignorant thinking; but I thought around their unholy whims, and in the heart of their devilish stare, I saw them falter, stumble, trip on a stepping stone that led to the crest of the tower of wisdom. And upon this wise zenith, this apex of newfound knowledge, the Unknown and there I sat. And before me hung a mirror. I stared for hours into the glimmering reflection dangling, hanging from the silvery mesh of a spider web, a blasphemous web of regret. I knew then why they needed perfection in their lives, what they claimed to receive from this flawless Good Book. But I dug a shallow well, and the water lay just under the surface, slowing my shovel the further I quarried in the mud. And I excavated an ancient, hallowed ruin with what they called "my impious thinking," this logic I was programmed to use. Things change, don't they? What do we make of these prisons that hold our minds enslaved? They will deny the Good Book is just a story, a spectacular story so it seems. But they lay claim to a book they do not own, and claim to be interpreters of a divine source, which needs no interpretation. If it is so divine, why need the fumbling fingers of ignorant men to summarize, in limited words, an absolute truth? Why this distance? Why this book on being and morals? I had refrained from going to the Infallible Church, forevermore.
I was walking home one evening when I came across Ms. Brown. She looked at me startled, said hello, and then walked on down the road. The encounter with the so-called teacher triggered a flashback, and I remembered a fight with a bully at school named Jester.
I was younger then. But I remember when. So, where has it been. Revenge, it spun a bloody trap. Blood red fragments shattered in its molten core. Seraphs watched us play, and maybe, someday… We all thought Justice was unfair, but I defended him against those whom he was just alike.
Echoes stirred in the silence of a repressed past; horror flashed backward within.
"Fuck you, Jester. Give Justice back the ball." I said frustrated.
"Come get it pussy boy, fuck'n faggot sissy bitch boy." Jester tantalized me.
"I said give me the ball back, asshole." I pushed and shoved and grasped after the dark red kickball.
"Fuck off, Discord!" Jester yelled. "It's my ball and I said you can't play with it.
I threw a punch, unfortunately with all my might. The swing missed substantially and fell on empty air. I, too, fell to the ground as Jester helped me along, laughing, with a push. Jester, the larger of us two boys, pinned me with his knees. He then made sexual gestures to imitate sodomizing me, laughing, laughing, laughing… Torture, it dwelled in the sleeping, unspoken mind. Grave, quiescent tone as vibrant lace turned to stone. What had happened to Jester in the past that echoed in him to be this monster? A parasite, a virus, infected this child with its ugly mouth. Dirt. The wind stirred up debris and pollinated the virgin flower.
I was escorted to the principal's office. There the principal removed his paddle from his desk, but when he went to get a "witness" for the whipping, he came back with Ms. Brown. To my desire, she told the principal that I did not "deserve" to be paddled. Though, I later lost all respect for Ms.
Brown as well. One day, as I sat in class, she pulled Justice into the hall.
"Hands on your knees… Whack! Don't move! Smack! Thud!" The helpless boy, afraid, tried to raise up. "I said… Bend over!" Whack! Whack! Ms. Brown raped Justice with punishment to his butt in her anger, as Ms. Yes, Mam arrogantly "witnessed" the foul and despicable act.
"Fuck them." I said as I tried to silence the echoes inside.

"Fuck who?" Hope asked as we continued to walk down the road.
"Nothing," I said in distrust, "I was just talking to myself." "What's the matter?" she asked.
"I don't know." I replied.
"If you talk about whatever is bothering you, maybe you might feel better." Hope thought.
"That's just the problem, I can't talk about it." I explained the nature of the madness. But that was then, and this is now. Hope is gone, dead. And the winds blow cold upon my face, and clouds of darkness over the earth. For weeks, I have not left the house, but stayed secluded in the sanctuary of my mind, locked behind the door of my mental room, while the memories of Hope's smile pad its walls. And I stared through a fogged window, out into the rain that fell through the cold, dead, winter trees of life. I have become the hunter, the shadow that stalks in the brush. Justice and I took up hunting wild pigs in the Woodlands north of our home. When no one will listen to the silent cry, it is muffled in the blood of animals. The pigs, very simply, were to us those authoritarians of our youth. For each pig killed, the fear and terror of madness was prolonged. The filthy swine was left to rot. This pig that dies was my teacher, this one a policeman who harassed me in the park. But the hunt could not hold back the waves of darkness forever, and some of the water flowed through the sticks and mud of the therapeutic dam of slaughtering the sow. A slice to the tender flesh of her throat sent a fountain of red down the boulders where she was slain, washed away with the fallen rain.
God does not need Man. But Man needs God. Give us faith and we shall believe, give us logic and we shall reason, but give us face and we shall live. Do the readers of the Book read to be lost in fantasy as I when I read a novel? I am hunted by Death. It stalks upon me during my midday naps.
Each time I wake up, sweating, my heart pounding from fear of it all.
I am haunted by shadows. When will I take off this mask? I have returned to the pond I remembered in my youth. But it is not what it used to be. I knew this was the one, geographically, but this image, this picture in my head I sought was not there. Those tall pines of my youth had been cut down and taken to a local timber company. There, they would be sawed up and made into lumber, lumber from which might someday build again the prisons of youth, those diabolical schoolhouses, and boards which would be fashioned into paddles to torture the students who attended the asylum. Apathy, rage, and despair. They silence our footsteps. And they will remain there, among the trees.
Alas, the silver curtain unveils. The bitter fall of autumn rain. Slow, peaceful showers that go on for days. I lay on a boulder, bleeding inside, -dying, death, dead my mind. Silver drapes wash away memories as a trickling creek consumes the stone. Will all that remains of us be lost to the flood, swept away by the streams of thought that form a current in the dim horizon, deafening ears as they drown out life to the sound of the roaring stream, swallowed by this predatory shadow in the abyss? The ritual of life is not complete without a story of the end; people want to know. Give us the reasons why we must die; tell us the story of the fall of man, tell us of the sadness inside; tell us the tale told before, rinse us off once again, drown us in the pain of the heavenly rain in a book so subtle and supple. Have I written it well, justified my cause well? It is a letter farewell. I follow the splenetic melody of insanity, to hear again the melancholy harmony of misery, an overture, a rasping antic cry of loneliness. Well, what then? Well, what now? Perhaps they would prescribe when to dream, what to believe, who to love, who or what to kill? Kill time: kill God! Beloved Hope, I hate

to feel the pain of goodbye. Thorns in my head. And I remember now what I've tried to forget. I remember the laughter laughing at me, at you. I remember when it was better then. The fragile eggshell cracked and out seeped the yolk. The pieces have fallen where they lay, fragments of memory. For, so slowly we find out of those who love; though we have drunk, and drink still more of, all things come to pass like empty drops of sorrow. I pray for the silence. I pray for the end. I flee. I run. I fear the Drum.

Water. Clear pools of water. Ice cold springs of water, flowing on and on and on. I sit where the streams begin, and floods bring no end again. I remember when I was three. Wide, peaceful skies fill the lakes of years. I walked beside Hope, who was the only two. Today is the day she died. What do we sleep that has no face? I remember when the laughter stopped; I remember when the sun turned pale. The dry dusk of the season unfolds. Dreams of dissonance reverberate through her tomb. Infatuated candy bars melt, and the sodas of life fizz and go flat with time. The sun. I remember it well, warm, full of light, and the rain it shed. They made us. They made everything I am, and now all that we will ever be, those feeble wicked lights that flutter in the night sky, soaking imagination, drowning it in the wake of a new moon. Questions, spider webs in memory. I sat in chocolate fields of youth under marshmallows filled skies, suspended in mid-air like a sweet memory of an age that will not leave. Time becomes. It dissolves. We are fed a lie of sugar and spice but made to stomach a bitter truth: They will tell you to be yourself, if you are what they want you to be. This breath I take, the sound it makes when it breaks the cold silence…

A Campfire Story

I was held intrigued by the immaculate stars above: the heavens -a gate to the unknown. I stared into the flickering flames, and the glowing, sparking coals of the campfire, and awaited the legendary tale of "Jack Straps" told by my Uncle Goat.
"Now all y'all hush and be still for a minute," Uncle Goat says, "You gotta quiet your head 'fore we can get started."
"Once upon a time…" He always began "…A boy and an ox met along a path, traveling the same way."
"Hello." Said the boy.
"Who said that?" The wild ox looked about.
"It's me, Jack, the Traveler." The boy replied from the haven of a bush.
"A traveler you say. Where is it that you travel?" Inquired the ox.
"Everywhere." Jack said happily "What's your name, and where're you from?" The boy shouted in friendship.
"I am Ox, and I am a Gaur." Ox continued. "I was captured when I was young and taken to work on a farm where your kind took me and other wild oxen and put us under the yoke, and for many years I was followed by the wheel of the cart and by the plow.
One time, a strong bull named Fret, broke free from his yoke and trampled a Master; he kicked his master in the head and killed him. The next day they came and slaughtered him. They butchered him right in front of us all; a warning, a threat of what would happen to us if we should fight back or try to escape. They made whips from the dead bull's hide and used them to control us. But then one of the other bulls, Sloth, became passive, and would not work in the field. He stood alone and refused to move. They kept him caged. He was unable to graze in the lavish fields, but only upon the sparse thorn bushes. And when others followed Sloth's example, they too, were slaughtered in front of us." Ox hooved the earth as hot steam came out his nostrils.
"I tried to make peace with the humans, but they would not listen, and when they did agree on something, they would later take back their word."
"We are the ones who feed you, dumb oxen; therefore, you must do as we say." Babbled the human order.
"But we were Gaur, and before the humans had tried to make us tamed, we were able to survive in the wild. Now we could not, -we had become dependent on their hand, upon their land, for survival, -we were trapped. So, I fled years ago to the Woodlands, away from the valleys of my youth." The bull ended his story. "What city do you come from, Jack?" Ox inquired of the boy.
"I am from Nowhere." Jack pointed in a vague direction.
"I understand." Ox understood clearly, with certainty the dark water in which the boy had come.
"That is a slave town, is it not?" Ox knew.
"Yes, it was, but there was a war between the people there and I have fled to become a Traveler." Jack was confident, brave, and naive.
"I could use a friend to guide me through the Woodlands; for, I know them not well, fine Ox. I have nothing to offer you but company in return." Jack was certain the bull would help him. "But I do not want nor need company; leave me alone boy, please." And Ox walked on, glancing out of the corner of his eye to weigh the boy's disappointment.

The boy followed Ox for days, watching from a distance, trying to pick up on what the wise bull knew of the forest. When one day the bull ox had gone to a watering hole, a creek that had been dammed by the elaborate architecture of beavers. Ox had his head down drinking from the cool stream, looking about with his great vision, which could see everything. But Ox did not see the face of the shadow move on the water as it leaped from the trees.
"Look out!" Jack shouted.
The bull was startled, and he jerked. It was enough to cause the panther to miss Ox's neck and land on his shoulder. Ox blew and tossed the panther to the ground. He stomped and faced the black cat. He stomped the earth, and it shook beneath the panther's feet. The shadow fled back into the darkness from which it had appeared.
"Thank you, Jack," Ox said as he continued to map the Woodlands for the predatory beast that sought to eat his flesh.
"That was Death, she is a hunter. She has been stalking me since I came to the Woodlands. I would be a great trophy for the proud killer, but not today." Ox was a rock; he stood magnificently there, muscles rippling in the sunlight.
"I was watching you drink; I saw the shadow on the water and yelled to you from atop that knoll," Jack explained.
"I am in debt to you, my friend." Ox humbled himself before the boy.
"No, you're not; we're forever indebted to one another," Jack remembered. "Debt is slavery, and I will have no slave, but I could still use a strong friend like you to join me on my quest." "And what quest is that?" Ox asked.
"This journey, this quest for Truth. I must find It." Jack sat upon a large stone.
"So, is this Truth a place, a thing?" Ox saw again the rough waves, the current that swept the boy far from home, but obliged Jack's quest.
"I don't know; that is why we must search." Jack was sure.
"Very well then, let us begin." Ox enlightened Jack.
For months they roamed together along a trail. Ox warned Jack of the dangers that lay in the shadows and the importance of staying on the Path. They traveled down the Path until the streams became a river. Ox took Jack through the Desert Lands to a vista on the Mountain of Elsewhere; below they could see the fertile Valley Lands where Ox was born.
And Ox told tales he heard in his youth.
A year passed, and then another. The boy and the ox had traveled down the Path a very long way together. One day, under a mild autumn sun, Ox told Jack of the Deep Sleep.
"But we sleep every night, do we not?" asked the boy.
"Yes, we do." Ox swatted a few flies away. "But this is the final sleep, an eternal dream that one will not wake from again in this place." He explained.
Ox instructed the boy to take his horns to go to the Deep Sleep, how to cut three straps from his flesh, and how to polish his horns and tan his hide into a magical leather: One horn would give Jack water, the other wine. And one of the three straps would provide meat, the second fire, and the third would always provide the safest direction for him to travel.
And yet another year vanished under the Sun that is now only a wish to some dreaming eye of tomorrow. Jack and the ox had returned to the Woodlands. They would spend the night in a cave. It was late fall, and the air had grown crisp, cold, and clear. The first snow would fall soon. The stars alone lit up the path to the entrance of this rocky abode. Jack was busy gathering firewood while Ox rested in the mouth of the cave.

Jack returned from the forest with a handful of pine knots he had gathered. He approached the mouth of the cave when within the lapse of a single step, chaos stretched time into distorted proportions.
"Look out!" Ox shouted as he tried to gain his feet.
Jack turned and saw a shadow crouched on a limb behind him. It was Death, the black panther Ox had battled years before. The black panther had not lost her prowess and physique; it swept hauntingly down from the trees at Jack. But the cat was caught amid the kill by Ox. The predator landed and squared off with the bull and let out a deafening scream. The hair on Death's neck shot up as she crouched. Ox hoofed and stomped in ritualistic combat, and hot breath fogged up around his face. But this battle would be for blood. They circled one another for a moment, searching for an opening. Death lunged and brought down her razors and teeth into the back of the ox's neck. Her fangs just missed Ox's jugular, but claws tore deep into the shoulder of the ox, and a kick split open his rib cage. Still, Ox threw the hunter to the ground, again, and buried his horns into the panther's side. The blow punctured Death's lung, and bleeding badly, the black cat crawled away in defeat. Shortly thereafter, Death died in a clearing near the cave.
"Don't hate Death. She was a hunter, and we can't change that." Ox fell into the Deep Sleep. Jack said farewell to his friend. Later that night, Jack removed the horns from the dead ox. They were soaked with the blood of the black cat that had crossed their path in front of the cave. He cleaned them and polished them as Ox had instructed. They were beautiful horns, smooth and long. Jack then cut three straps of leather from the back of the dead ox. He began the ritual of tanning them into magical leather. Jack worked into the morning and the afternoon. Soon darkness fell upon the cave once again as Jack fell asleep.
The next morning Jack awoke. The body of Ox was gone; it had vanished in the night that he slept. He went to the mouth of the cave where he had laid out the offering of the two horns and the leather to the spirits. They remained as he had left them except that the horns were now hollowed and beside the fire strap was a stick, and upon the guide strap was carved a map.
"With a map, one can see where one is, has been, or might be; a course to follow, then to flee. With a map, one can see." Jack remembered the Ox speak of Destiny, a mysterious land in the Hills of the Future.
Jack looked over the map and decided his fate. He would travel to the Mountains of Elsewhere where he and Ox once roamed. But this time he would go beyond, to the dim summit of this dark plateau. He began upon the Path he and Ox had before traveled together. Jack was able to travel farther now at a much faster pace without the slow Ox. But at these faster speeds, he did not observe everything along the Path. And his journey became a very dangerous one.
Jack traveled for many days until he reached the Desert Lands. Each evening, he poured water onto the meat strap from the water horn as Ox had told him. After it was saturated, he wrung the leather out over a flat stone; blood flowed from the strap and turned the stone into meat. Jack took the fire strap. He rubbed it with a stick as the ox told him over a pile of leaves and twigs, he had gathered from the remains of desert shrubs; fire blazed from the pile, and he cooked the meat. Jack sat that night gazing upon the map of the future and drinking from the wine horn, gazing into the Heavens above.

Jack left behind his straps. He took only the wine horn and fled in fear to spend the rest of his days in the Cave. Leaving only, when necessary, always with his face bearing a dark, wooden mask that he had found lying in the place of the vanishing Ox. The straps and the water horn began to haunt Jack. They became ghosts that shadowed him within the Cave.
The water horn brought a dark cold rain that kept Jack in the solitude of the dank cave.
The blood strap came as an apparition of a Master, a slave driver.
The fire strap became the whip of this Master that tortured Jack's soul during his dreams.
The guide strap became his-story, a history of the boy, of youth and year.
"And that is how we git history, and the Book." Uncle Goat said as he ended the campfire story. "And someday, when you're older, you might run into old Jack out here in these woods, still wearing his mask and runnin' from them there ghosts that haunt him."
The fire had become a molten pile of coals, glowing in the night. My cousins and brothers had gone to the warm safety of their sleeping bags in the tent, but I stayed by the blue flickering eye of the beast, that dying fire in the night. The wind howled through the trees and stirred up the burning coals. Sparks shot out here and there as it cooled. I sat in silence, watching Uncle Goat look at the stars, watching the heavens stare down upon us.
It had been a good night, and my thoughts and dreams wandered off to the tale of Jack Straps as I fell asleep. I could hear the water of a nearby mountain stream carry me away into the dream world of a young hunter, trapper, and fisherman.

Legion (*a fragment*)

"What do you think about the argument, Cosmos?"
"It is all we can do, Scribe. Time results in more change than reason. Remember this friend." The two friends walked through the forest, engaging in stimulating conversation as they traveled to do missionary work, far away from the Hollow, a subterranean village in the Land of Hedon. The place the two travelers were headed was the Land of Nod, bordered on its three sides by the desert, the sea, and the forest they now passed.
"What about the work we are going to do?" Scribe paused. "What brought us here to this dark forest my friend?"
"Nothing brought us here. We came here by our own deduction. I used to believe in a thing called happiness, a thing called freedom, a thing called truth… but then one day it faded away until I, a mere being such as myself, met an aging man, full of knowledge, who let the stagnant water flow once again, who let that search for purity run like those dammed waters. Hope my friend, that is why I am here."
"What do you mean by hope?"
"Hope that opening the bookstore will someday change things. That is why we are doing this missionary work for the Order, is it not?"
"I suppose…"
"Time, as I have said, will make more change than reason, but it is books that will give us this time. It is a false notion, what some call superstition, that keeps the people of Nod from owning and reading books. What is your belief, Scribe?"
"I just like to read and write and certainly sleep." I do not see what is wrong with reading about the Nature of things, such as the three books we shall sell.
"There are those who are in power that think they can shelter others from the Ahriman and only let them eat of the Ogdoad. But we shall change this, Scribe."
"What is our new associate's belief, what is he like?" Scribe envisaged.
"He is well articulated, keeps to himself, and creates a sense of insight in his silence. His belief remained a mystery."
"Know thy enemy for They and I are one." This was the first thing he told me. And when I asked him his belief on books, he said only that "All good books begin at the end." I do not know exactly what he meant by what he said of books, but I consider that he intended that They and I are the same in manifold: They are the others such as us to the people of Nod or the people of Nod to us; and They and I are one perchance in that strict sense, that the Nodic people and the Hedonic people are the same, just of different custom.
"How will we get the bookstore going, we know not enough of the people of Nod's ways to run it? And what will this bookstore be called? It needs a name does it not? What does this man with no name think we should call it Cosmos?"

"That it does Scribe, a name that is. It does need a name. But this 'man with no name' will tell us what to call it once we have established ourselves there and made the necessary arrangements to

open the bookstore. An investor named Mr. Jackal will help us with the monetary elements of our work in the Land of Nod. Mr. Jackal is a friend of the articulate one and mine. He is not a book reader himself but is indifferent to such a belief and will help us establish a bookstore and maintain it for a portion of our profits."

"But why should we gain from our work, Cosmos?"

"We will not Scribe, only a fee that will sustain us, our work, and those who help us in Nod."

Foundations

Poesis

I began writing to see what pain looked like on paper.
And now I know: it's just black and white.

Laughter

Aloud in bouts of laughter, at the laughingstock,
Whom all the laughing people laugh at as they mock.
Silent is the laughing after all the laughter stops.

Regret

Will we let go of what's come before?
What is regret but what's come before?
What is done that cannot be undone…
With guilt that remains guilt through guilt itself.

Nostalgia

I remember when…
It was better then.

Wither

Patience builds mountains,
And patiently wears them down.

Inexplicable

I sat on the edge of an inexplicable lake, and birds in the distance rose from the surface of the deep waters. But instead of the birds rising, it was that I was falling. And in falling, I was rising just as an echo would fade away as it rises from the deep below. Yet in rising, I sank in fear. For I knew that by ascending I must, in the end, surely fall… deeper and deeper I sank into the depths of the rising waters of the lake until I found myself as I reached for a ledge far above the dark sky that lay below the rising birds as I reflected inexplicably in the lake's deep end.

Windfall

Whilst the dead keep with the dead, a tree falls in silence: a shadow lurks along a path, which is laid down by a thousand footsteps taken a thousand times… a memory of eons in the depths of a primeval forest. The dead lay where they have fallen, bleached white bones on brown leaves, as a shadow of death descends, a shadow that dances about, a shadow that weighs on tiresome footsteps. In the periphery, the shadow follows a traveler as he wanders with his ax and makes fires of the deadfall. It stalks him as the drifter takes advantage of the path that stretches out before him. For, everything in the dark forest echoes to the traveler: remember that you must die. But he ignores this shadow that waits ahead… and on a wet stone, he sharpens his axe: a traveler's last words kept in silence, what say he to please eternity but nothing at all.

Insignificant

The leaf it falls, it lets go: they fall off golden yellow, shades of scarlet and dark mauve, but now are dry … brown, a distant youth of fluorescent green fades from the eye: all and all they fall and fall one by one, two by two, three by three… yet they no longer belong, these leaves, to the tall trees from which they fall. They merge in solace, as freedom comes from no longer living but dying. Dead leaves, in piles here… there, swept in gusts of unmerciful wind, blown hither… thither; trampled upon, as they collect within themselves a rustling… leaf brushes upon leaf: as the eye looks now toward winter, where the leaves, raked up, gathered into a pyre, are burned until nothing remains but a smoldering, vermilion glow in a desperately cool final night of autumn; the leaves no longer leaves, gray and quietus ash upon ash.

Coma

They came one by one: Niece, in a yellow Sunday dress, waved timid little fingers, she sprang sprightly in the air before me as I lay in wonder: she would be, always be, this avid child. And then, on one wall appeared Father, drifting the room somewhere, Mother; and Brother and Brother; and they, those who did not come, did not come; but only Niece, only she, waved as to say hello once more before she waved goodbye. Last came the silent one, the sad one, for he was I, and I him. I watched him, as he lay still on a slab of stone, he turned from flesh to frost: from his face to his feet, the absolute cold consumed him; and as though he could no longer hold onto his frozen form, waft within waft he drifted away in gentle gusts of winter's wind like powdered snow.

Circles

I have sat into thought many times, many times, without compulsion or inspiration of something thoughtful to write, as many times all I have thought is that many times, many times, I have sat into thought…

Tattoo

He stood there waiting, evermore composed than he himself might fathom he could, but still was he that boy waiting like the opalescent white and dark red roses that lined the fabric of the isle to his anticipation of desire yet unbound in the cooling of a lukewarm afterglow this mid-Summer evening; and she filled all his thoughts as everyone stood and turned toward her, as he now stood at the stern of the ritual; but the union gathered in him, forced itself out through his eyes and met with hers as the movement of the rite orbited around the gravity that brought her toward him; and as if in his becoming a man, he would no longer walk but fly as in an endless lucid dream; for the weightlessness, he felt caused a nervous smile in him as that boy, who stood on the altar of a metamorphosis, left its cocoon to be a mature butterfly as would she:

&

Her bare feet curled over the edge of the stone she stood, and all her beauty fell downward through her into her feet so as I could not remove my unobserved gaze; for I was invisible in the twilight setting amid the center of the crowd, gathered in a crescent atmosphere like the white moon overhead in the parting blue sky of the day as the sun set in the Occident; each toe wrapped around each other as much as they wrapped around the edge of the stone; and as if her beauty gathered itself once more, it flowed back up through her regal pose like blood red mercury ascending within porcelain veins from the warming of her soul; for at that moment past was peeled from the present: the moment, suspended on perpetually, ephemeral only in that she was there as long as she could contain within herself that eternal ecstasy of breath: "I do."

Visage of Solitude

The room is too quiet. I need a new friend. Not that I am without beloved friends, just that no one ever bothers to contact me. But they do not even know where I am, lost here and there. I drift about. I have driven many miles to escape the silence. I pace the room looking for perspective. Nothing in my reflections mitigate my mind.

I cannot bear the quiet boredom of this silence. I listen to the repetition of music. A melody plays again and again until these sounds begin to echo a melancholic muse.

The room is too quiet. All that is insignificant plays… I hear it in the music of silence. I am somewhere, but in no geographic location. I am without a vision of this future. Isolation: lost in self consumption, ill with indifference in a pestilent disinterest. Obliterate everything obscure and obsolete, only to begin again… This is all I desire. I will become such a loathing, sordid man there is no meaning to what I will become. There is no meaning to the languid, semblance I have become of my past disposition.

The room is too quiet. Oblivion is where I will stay. I have friendships with others, but they were shallow and specious. Someday… I will go to visit with a past master. I cannot even whisper it: I am the stranger that I fear. I walk around the room in circles. Impatient… I cannot sit still. I am up and pacing about the room, seething in apathy. It is a subtle change: The loss of reason in life, not understanding mirrors or memory. I give a lot, but I take too much in return. Perhaps I just have nothing worth giving.

Black Dream

I was in a vast and cool desert. The blue sky stretched out far above and around me, and from the horizon dunes of sand in the distance stretched to distant sandy dunes. In a hollow sat a black stone relic, out of it rose a wooden ladder into the blue sky. The black stone relic hovered atop a cool clear pool of water as blue as the sky itself. I could see a storm across the vast dark horizon, and with it came a black horse with white flowers mingled in its long mane. It stood by the wooden ladder and neighed, as if insisting that I climb it. I then ascended the wooden ladder with ease, as if flying, as a hole opened in the fabric of the sky that spoke of the sleeping stars in the night, this celestial body of the cosmos. I stood upon thin air and gazed upon the arid lands. A storm swept now across the parched desert. I looked down and watched as the black horse ran through the storm. It was as if the storm followed it into the distance. The black horse ran further as the rain began to pour harder until what was below me was no longer visible. The black storm ran away into dunes of sand in the distance that stretched to distant sandy dunes. I could see the vast and cool desert again. Mystical was the pool of water below the relic: It burned with a strange bluish flame.

Penance

And the wolf stalks the sheep, the lamb that strays from the flock: so goes the herd, herd fashion, off the cliff of reality; the shepherd cannot tend his flock, for it is he that the mighty estranged lamb does so mock; but in becoming a sheep, and no longer being the herd; but still his cries are heard: distant, dying, this scathing sheep crying that he is not, yet so very much is he again and again a part of the herd, a part of the shepherd's flock: a desert he wanders lest his thirst be not quenched, for he cannot give into his suspicions and mistrust of a decadent hour, dreary and hollow; be he dead in solitude, or be he strangled by wolves.

Merit

I am in angst, as everything and nothing lies in a pile of discarded change: first, go the quarters, as they are larger than the rest, yet their weight seems to try and spare them from the eye, sinking them down, settling at the bottom; but their beauty betrays them: their shiny, silvery, splendor catches the eye; their value means nothing to them and everything to a poor hand; and what else are they for: a game of chance, a fallacy tossed in the air that lands face up or face down; then come the dimes, yet a nickel is larger, an illusion to the eye that is worth nothing to pilfering fingers; but more or less doesn't much matter anymore, for, the nickels seem to go with the other two, the minority of them that are left only to the worthlessness of what remains: pennies, eroded copper, each to each they lie, tossed into a coffee can, thus forgotten.

Unknown

I look beyond, into the distance, into an ocean of stars: the deep currents of space lay in heavens of heavens turning on one another, a satellite serenade of the infinite orbits within the eye; pulsating rhythm upon rhythm, ethereal light streams through the invisible; they, being but some dreaming wish of tomorrow, being but a reflection in the mirrors of my face; they, a celestial movement perpetual, and dawn the endless night of night, sleep of sleep, and dream that dream of eternity; they, a movement in stillness that passes over the earth like shimmering glitter on a dark curtain unveiled, pass through the eye as if to echo solitude; and dying phosphorescent dreams rain in the black iridescent midnight noon, whose horizon in the distance fades into fear and into future terror: I wish for this curtain to close; I pray and pray again, I pray for the end.

Sacrifice

Keep as thus I do, silent unto myself: a flower, chasing vacant dreams, it trembles upon a fragile stem, drawing up through its pith the blood of an ancient, vernal season; it, a single flower in an everlasting meadow of flowers, alone… each morning the Sun forces its way in and opens each soft white petal, and dew drops cling to its ephemeral image; until one day an innocent child came and picked it from the earth; it cried out, screamed in terror that only excited the naïf, as she blossomed now as much as the flowers; and lying there dying, no longer trying to hold onto a past, it, dead among the dead as she killed the flowering meadow; but still life clung to it as it bled with the other flowers… and as if to show them mercy, flower bound flowers, gathered, together at last in death as the young girl placed them in watery crystal vase: an offering to a child's mother, from one Mother to another: arranged in a window they catch the eye of a new mother; she caresses them, nourishes them; she buries her nose in their scent and it reminds her of that naïve child; and death is suspended in the open air of a window sill; but a flower touched wilts like grasping at water: this water we are in: I grasp it in two palms and it slips through, drips away until all that remains is an urn full of dead flowers: one is taken out to dry in the leafs of a book, a memory forgotten until one day the book is opened; now a mother, this no longer being a child, she remembers the innocent naïf in the meadow and she smiles: collected thoughts wilt like severed flowers, without their roots they fade away: little by little, they dry and become brittle, and discarded they decay.

Sesquipedalian

She used big words, and she used even bigger words less often… still yet, some say, that one must simply speak in simple terms, as they are simpletons. And some say that those who use big words, use them because they are, in essence, weak; but those who do not use big words, do not because they do not know any; thus, they do not use them for a reason, and this is the reason they are ignorant: they are ignorant not because they do not know any arcane or complex words; they are ignorant because they fear those who use them. And a thousand words will never say it more clearly; but, if I used a single word to describe her entire and ephemeral existence, it would be: Discombobulated.

The Turning of the Leaf

Spring. In all its fluorescence, a leaf was born. The happy leaf swayed in the wind, which it loved. The leaf made friends with the other leaves. One day the leaf noticed another leaf on a branch below. This leaf was sad. It said that it had talked to their creator the Tree. The Tree told the sad leaf that at the end of the Summer, all the leaves must fall to the ground. In the days that followed, the happy leaf began to question the ancient Tree.

"Why must we die when we'll have kept you alive another year?" The now indifferent leaf asked. But all the Tree would say was, "At the end of the Summer, all leaves must fall to the ground." This made the indifferent leaf sad. As the leaf worked, it lost the fluorescence of its youth.

Autumn stained the land. The wind that a now sad leaf once swayed happily, swept the leaves one by one, two by two, three by three to the ground. Some of the leaves took on beautiful shades before they drifted in ephemeral splendor to the Earth. The sad leaf turned the most deep, dark shade, then dry and brittle, then faded away.

November came, and in the cold rain, the leaf fell to the ground. Alone, in the darkness of a bitter Winter, the leaf decayed.

A Confession

I saw God. I was walking, and under a stone lay a mouthful of venom. What a filthy dog is God. And He lives just across the meadow from my home, by a Lake, such a cold, dark, and deep water of a pestilent memory. And God was a vile and disgusting beast, grotesque, and hideous, and malformed. His voice was rasped and unclear, and His face reflected dirt and filth; of such filth does God live. And God must have smelt my contempt for Him. But He asked no name and demanded no apology. But this I gave to Him, this apology. For, I would seize and penetrate, like a greedy child, this opening. I unfolded as if from a book, my hatred for Him, how I despised what He had created, how I would destroy Him. And so, I told God the weak and pitiful desire of my needs. I told God of my contempt for this mad act, this long and monotonous and repetitious Play. And I called Mother Nature a bitch, and a whore. And I was condescending, rude, and disrespectful. And there was truth in my lies and venom. But it did not matter, for God was a vulgar Man, profane and offensive and full of mediocrity. God was annoyed as I stood there on the bank of the Lake, and His bad breath had finally demanded my name. But I laughed at God and His arrogance. I mocked Him and called Him names. Every day now, I go throw stones at God, and every day, I see God the same… every day, the rocks only blot out my name. And so, lives a Cannibal on the corpses of dead souls, on the rotting carcasses of our kind. And so, too, shall Satan eat our souls and shit out gold? I smell God's foul, disgusting odor every day as if it were Death itself. I saw God. And this was the repulsion I felt: I saw God. He was dead, bloated, and rotting by a Lake: God lay face down with a knife in His back.

Dead End

My old friends shun me, and I've ceased to contact all of them now. It just goes to show that: Family is forever. Friend becomes foe. All except for those friends who are dead. Their memories haunt me with worldly woes of what may be called my spirit or soul. Farewell, fair-weather friends. Have I let you go? I don't know. But peace be with you. And shall we not all be family in the end?

Vapor Trail

You will never know my heart: It is not quite hard as stone, but rather, like an old knotted and crooked tree: though, middle aged, not too unwise, and still not knowing death; or perhaps, it is like a long expanding vapor trail: ephemeral, mystical, then gone…

As Above, So Below

I am the Singularity… I am God. The soul is made of water; Hell is made of fire; therefore, neither a person, nor a soul, can burn in hell, as one would merely boil and evaporate. And it is as vapor that you will be when you become the eternal and the infinite singularity: as above, so below…

The Layman Philosophy

Esoteric

What things are limited to a small circle of people? And who are these people? A novel idea came to me one day that the zeitgeist of the millennia is my pursuit of the elixir of life, the philosopher's stone that I found in Dextromethorphan. The idea is to stop using the substance, to refrain from ingesting it, to be abstinent from it. But the question that I want to consider is: How does one begin his elixir career? And to that I will tell a story…

I was visiting a friend one time, while I was still attending college. I was stricken with a cough that had lasted for what seemed like weeks. It, the cough, persisted for a month and I was seeking a way to arrest it, so a friend had a 24oz. bottle of cough syrup. Out of desperation I took the recommended dose. That didn't help so I took twice the recommended dose; that didn't help so I just turned up the bottle and drank a few swallows. That brought a little relief, so with the hope of ending the cough for the night, I drank a few more swallows. And the cough ceased. And then a warm, strange feeling overcame me, and I thought I saw an insect of some sort run across the floor; but my friend, whose house I was staying the night, said that there was nothing on the floor, rather I was hallucinating.

Indeed I was, I thought.

After this night, I began buying the 4oz. bottles of generic cough syrup with DXM in it, as its ingredient. I would take a bottle and drive from town to town visiting various acquaintances. I used the elixir DM to quit meth and marijuana, which were causing the cough. The cough persisted after my childhood friend's death, and then after the death of another close friend. The elixir DXM caused bouts of mania, and after the latter friend's death I was possessed by the elixir DXM's mood for about a week; in which time, I slept little, if any at all.

Things went back to normal for the most part, and I continued my studies at the university, but the cough was still present and I was using amphetamine salts to enhance my studies. When the amphetamine salts prescription ran out I turned to the elixir DXM. But I soon discovered a 'cough gel', which was a gelcoated liquid pill with the elixir inside it. There was also the rough stuff, the hard stuff: the tablet form of the elixir DXM. And this was a cheap alternative to the cough syrup, the liquid DXM elixir. I overdosed one evening on the tablets. The liquid DXM is 20mg of Dextromethorphan per 10ml and a 4oz bottle is 118ml so about 236mg of the nostrum per dose (and by dose, I mean one 4oz bottle). But the tablets I had purchased were 60mg of DXM per tablet with 40 tablets per bottle, which is 2,400mg of DXM per dose, and I had two doses… two whole bottles of elixir.

Miraculously, I recovered from the overdose in ICU for a week. But the cough still persisted, and I had a couple more milestone experiences with the elixir DXM. When my grandfather died, I ingested an 8oz. bottle and went to sleep; my newlywed wife, thinking I had poisoned myself, phoned the paramedics who rushed me off to the emergency room where I was made to drink a charcoal mixture that caused me to vomit violently. I was then placed inpatient, and was not allowed to attend my grandfather's funeral.

But still, the cough persisted. My wife thought baptism was the solution; so, I ingested an 8oz. bottle of the elixir DXM and was baptized thoroughly in touch with Jesus being on a different plane or plateau, rather. Still, the cough persisted. I was baptized a second time, this occasion I was only under the residual effects of the elixir DXM. And the cough subsided, and three years passed only to have the cough arise once again. I will end the cough for good, as I will apply science to the problem; whereas I only used superstition to combat the cough before.

This letter is to those who are under the influence of the vicious and violent and perpetual cough: The elixir is not the remedy… abstinence is the remedy. Amen!

The Radical

I confess: that though I entertain a belief in God –and perhaps more, I did believe- I attribute this more to the idea that I was superstitious. And I know what unbelievers today say about religion being superstition –but this is untrue for the true believer: my wife, who is a believer… I propose that religion as the unbeliever sees it is superstition –what more can he make of it? But if we consider the true Christian, the devout Christian, the Really Real believer, then we must think of her in terms of the Thomas Theorem. which states: What is perceived as real is real in its consequences. Thus the consequence of this belief in God is projected onto the unbeliever: What the Christian calls faith, the unbeliever, or nonbeliever, calls ignorance; and what the Christian calls evangelism –what she desires most –well, on this point to the unbeliever, a Christian is nothing more than a bigot, in the way of progress. But this doesn't help her deal with death: the most extreme Uncertain Uncertainty. Let me state here and now: I do not believe in God. I do not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I do not believe in Heaven. I do not believe in Hell. But I do believe that whatever happens to us when we die, it will not be bad (or evil). The problem of evil is that it doesn't exist in the world, only in the minds of religionists; which, as a consequence, there are many victims to the Christian prejudice of inequity. There are a number of arguments against Christianity for the reason that the Bible is, in essence, totally wrong; such as it suggesting that we put homosexuals to death, etc. But on what grounds can we say this is wrong? I say by reason, by reason of conscience. Now, the Christian will say that since Jesus died for our poor "queer" friend, that his soul is in a sense already redeemed. But why then does the Christian persecute the homosexual. This is not an easy question except that the answer can be found in fear and hatred. But apparently as the Bible contains many "practical truths," such as those in Proverbs –but as to any convincing "infallible" truth to the Bible as a whole –I have to say that I fail to see it. And perhaps this is because I can step outside blind indoctrination and see those effects of bigotry and discrimination from the prejudice these two things entail, where righteousness is merely conceit; to be specific, an excessive claim of a Christian's own worth as it pertains to virtue. I am trying to understand what it is that we can do to reconcile the atheist and the Christian.

The Last Plateau

On my first morning after the end of my using dxm, they were playing drinking songs on the classical music station on the radio. How long have I been bellowing out elixir!? The morning of birth from a night of terror, and with my lady friend in a delusional upheaval; these are the patterns of psychosis; and all the madness of a mood altering substance. I don't know what I will miss most about this intoxicant; and without this vice, who or what will I be? I cannot imagine that I would be entirely emancipated. But what freedom is it that it is given then taken away, only to be given again, but not ever fully recovered of the toxins. It's not over until it's over, but when will it be over? It is quite simple on the inside, knowing it's over after the paranoiac critical moment of my last purchase of the dxm. And this is what I have come to discover: I am the God of my own understanding. I am the will; I am the power. I can and will recover from this ignoble state; for, I am not powerless.

Naïf

Naïf,

I see you do not understand from your last letter this idea of how the artist is seen as lazy, Naïf. The artist wakes, eats, -the artist lives and breathes his work all the while he is awake everyday of his life, and even while he sleeps the artist is inspired. So what is this laziness I am concerned about? Well, first, you imbecile, you must remember that I have told you the artist. The writer, say, for instance, writes with his own blood. Emotion, this is the medium the artist must use, not these symbols and theories of symbols. It is emotion that is the matter that constitutes blood. It is an emotion that the artist lives, without it he would wither away. It is an emotion that the artist took a butcher knife and stabbed at his sternum, ripped through bone and flesh and tore at his bloody heart. And as he spilled blood all over the brittle white pages, it was emotion that wrought his tragedy.

Either way, the artist lives and breathes his work, but it is his work. By his own *free will*, his own *choice*, the artist takes up his work. He does not, like the individual, go to his work and call what he does his own while it is not. I, for instance, like to read and write and draw and not *work*. But there is reciprocity to my contributions as an artist to society that the individual is ignorant. There is no fundamental trait of laziness in the artist's personality. No, there is honesty in what he does. But the individual makes a mockery of the artist by calling him lazy. But why does the individual do such a spiteful *act*? Why it is because of his ignorant will that he is controlled by cultural norms, this illusory *work ethic*.

The individual believes in something that he is ignorant of, this philosophy of the protestors, the Protestants. Yes, in their political motives toward individualism (and this is what myth and religion have evolved into, politics) the Evangelical's deluded followers that their work and its ends, the economic monetary gains, were a sign of their good work for God here on Earth. But the artist, he does not work for Society (I do hope you remember this idea of transfiguration). He works for himself. Indeed, the artist is a self-motivated species. The artist is not a slave to this illusory *work ethic* because he knows it is only social slavery, social control, a man-made ideology whose function is a means to an end of a road the artist does not wish to travel.

But this, my naïve friend, is where the caricature is created. This is what the individual ignorant will be deceived: The individual believes that what he does is morally, or rather, ethically proper, that it is the right thing to do, but this is why he does not *choose* his own work, and it is the very reason why it is chosen for him. Capitalism is slavery. Individualism is slavery. To be an individual one must be a part of this whole of society. A society that encourages individualism because this Social Animal knows that mankind is merely a machine to achieve its ends, to produce its life through Industry. But there are many Social Animals, many societies. I merely speak of my own.

And how clever is this Social Animal. It tells a person that by being an individual he or she can have, let us say, his or her own personal freedom. But it is only a trick to pacify the individual, which is what the person becomes, an individual, a slave. It is a ploy. Society knows that if the individual thinks, or even worse, believes that what he is doing is his own work he will take it on with pride, such ignorant pride.

And perhaps there are individuals who take on their work with misery, those that I have told you wake everyday and are annoyed at the sound of time, at this foghorn that blasts out: "Wake up slave! Work!" And this individual fears time, so he obeys, how pitiful. But more than fear of time, this particular species of individual thinks that perhaps if he has enough money to do what he wants he will be pacified. And, indeed, he will be! Such a pitiful beast I tell you this individual is, and yet, he is ignorant of it. But there is even a more sad case of individualism, one that wakes and obeys this foghorn out of fear that he will be seen as lazy or that he will be unhappy without money. Money. This is what the greedy ignorant individual seeks, not happiness and freedom.

But I must readdress this idea of politics as mythology or religion. This is a very significant aspect about the individual's psychology that he becomes delusional and believes in his individualism as freedom. Remember that there is this theory: "Religion is society transfigured." Politics is the individual's new religion. When individuals worship God they worship themselves. I have explained this. Therefore, when an individual takes on his politics, this patriotism and individualism, the individual worships these ideals of humankind.

The individual's personality is shaped by his political beliefs. It is what he goes out and rationalizes his world with. The individual converts to be a Liberal or Conservative. The individual comes to believe in Democracy. And he will become a soldier as if he fights for God Himself and kills for individualism, for Democracy, for freedom. That is not to say that what the true soldier does is not his own work. The soldier only becomes an artist when he comes to know that he fights only for himself and the men on the battlefield beside him. There is no God in the blood-filled valleys of War. And the soldier is truly an artist who works in blood, his own, but mostly others. Fear. Death. Blood. Freedom. Either way, the artist is free, and the individual a slave. But freedom has a price. For one, as I have clearly stated, the artist is seen as lazy, and secondly the artist is alienated, and by his own *choice* I might add. The artist is alienated because of the creative fact that his ideas are alien, this eclectic assemblage. Individualism is slavery. Defiance is freedom. Alienation is freedom.

Naïf,

It is from your last correspondence that I am sure of my assumptions that you are still the naïf I have always known, how pitiful. Either way I will try to explicate further what your epistemologically undeveloped cognition is quite incapable at this point of understanding. First I will present an overview of what I have already covered before of Unrealism.

Unrealism exists foremost in the center of the fundamental Perception Trinity and its reciprocal perspective dialectic: Real, Unreal, and Surreal. Unreality derives its essence through a simple formula of transfiguration: What is Real becomes Unreal by the very nature that Realism is a caricature, and in order to see what is Real one must *realize* that what one is doing in one's perception, which forms one's perspective, is *un-realizing* Reality. I am sure your feeble naïve mind does not understand this so I will try to put this into more obscure terms that you are familiar with.

This formation of perspective is what is of vital significance; it is by this that Reality is transfigured. Form. We will proceed with this term in what may be its strictest literal connotation, mainly, shape or structure. When one shapes his or her Reality, one in essence creates a delusional Unreal structure that functions as a survival mechanism when one is, as are you my despicable friend, a young naïf and incapable of dealing with the Reality of chaos, and this chaos is nothing but pure disorder and destruction, a true mirror of nature; for, as with most things, I am positively under the delusion that the natural order of the Universe is disorder, and this my young naïf is nothing other than the natural order of life. But being the naïf that you are, I am sure you can relate to this idea that the individual must give structure and order to everything he does or else he believes his world will collapse into chaos. And unlike the artist who tears down walls, for this destruction is natural, the individual builds them and makes it his duty to stand guard over them.

But what the idiot does not understand that the genius does, is that the World in which he lives does not have a chaotic structure, it has no structure at all. By the very natural order of chaos the Universe has no structure but somehow Man was some mutant species on a remote planet that happened to evolve and survive on a mere mistake of nature; he was given thought. What a problem it has caused the individual in that he does not understand it. Even worse, he believes he understands it but does not. Mankind has come up with many clever false dialectics: Religion and Science to name the most prominent. In effect, individuals and institutions will always find a way to give meaning to the symbols that the artist uses through interpretation.

Naïf,

Time makes more change than reason. I don't know who wrote this, but it was not these exact words. I am clever and used it to my advantage. And it is true, and it is false. It is true that people choose to remain ignorant and that only in time can we hope that things will change. But it is false, because there remains despair and a noxious truth to the zealous writer: all writers are theoreticians. Every writer wishes their writing to be understood, but more precisely, the writer wants his stance and opinion to be understood. And for these reasons, the writer desires to see empires fall.

Parasite (umwelt)

Dear Professor,
I have decided to change my plans. I said I have friends. But most are more like leeches. I know, for I can be a leech myself. I use this term friend ominously. Perhaps because I am leeching knowledge from What's His Name off of you all the time, and give nothing in return. Though I can trust you more than I can a leech. And I understand you are paid for your University's prostitution of knowledge, but you are not paid well enough for your extra effort. And for your wisdom you are paid nothing. Maybe I am some reward, the naïf I am, if some day I become an Academic prostitute myself and lay claim to be your protégé. Though this is not likely.
Let me return to the leech, this parasite, and his mind. The parasite can be trusted as long as he is dependent on you. He is your friend as long as you have connections, and only connections he cannot obtain himself: be they better than his own, or be that he not have any connection whatsoever. Either way, the parasite is envious; though, neither is he more envious if you have a better connection, nor if he has no connection whatsoever. For in his greed, which is at the heart of parasitism, a better connection makes a worse connection no connection at all. I must admit that the parasite has some sense. In fact, his genius is that of deception. The product of the host's connection is always said to be inferior to the parasite's other connection, yet this parasite must be made to admit each time that he has no connection to this better product, a fact that he will deny by saying he has no connection to this or that at the time, that at one time he could get this or that and it was better then. And if the parasite has no connection at all, he will insist that the host introduce him to this other connection, which cannot be done. And the parasite knows this but insists anyway. This is the cause of the parasite's envy in both situations.
It must be evident that the true nature of friendship is parasitic, one of economy and materialism. But what is the difference, one might ask, between a connection and a host? And is the host simply a parasite to the connection? The host is not a parasite in two ways: first, the host only maintains his connections as connections and not as friends; the host and connection know that it is a matter of economy and materialism, and in this aspect are in actuality more friends through this honesty than the parasite and host: secondly, which is inexplicably inseparable from the first reason, the host only maintains the majority of his connections to satisfy the parasites that are leeching off of him. But it is as if the host has a reciprocal relationship with his connections, and a symbiotic relationship with the friend. Yet there are three types of symbiotic relationships, and to this the host is unaware. There is parasitism where the parasite benefits and the host is harmed. There is commensalism where the parasite benefits, and the host neither benefits nor is harmed from the relationship. And last there is mutualism where both host and parasite benefit from one another (which is the most "common" connotation of the word "symbiotic").

Now I have emphatically inferred but not yet specified that there are actually three types of relationships, each symbiotic, and each a different form of symbiosis. Therefore, the relationship the host has with his connection is one of mutualism, that of the student with his professor both mutualism and commensalism, but more often just of commensalism. And the friend, misconceived, a symbiotic parasitism. Thus any reciprocal connection is a misleading terminology. For if a host considers a friend symbiotic and a connection reciprocal, the host has a false connotation of symbiosis, thinking it symbiotic mutualism in friendship when it is actually symbiotic parasitism. Thus a reciprocal connection is actually a form of symbiotic mutualism. Furthermore, the host must consider his connections parasites, but not consider the relationship symbiotic parasitism, -even though the host may be the parasite or vice versa- for it is symbiotic mutualism even if reciprocal; and though this may seem a form of self-deception, it is a necessary step of suspicion to always see others as the parasite. As to what type of parasite is one host to is the question. And by practicing this self-deception on the student/professor relationship, where the student is always in fact the parasite, the student can understand how a parasite thinks while at the same time exercising his parasitic right to hypocrisy, a right which only exists in delusional, parasitic manufactured realities.

Sincerely,
Your Student,
Alter Ego

Zero Corporation

The purpose of this letter is to assert Zero, Inc. policy to parties interested in its services. Zero, Inc. is not a legal entity, in fact it is not an entity at all, it is just simply Nothing. The guiding principles of Zero, Inc. are the Black Box Law (a theorem) and Black Box Law (deconstruction). Zero, Inc. is not affiliated with any subsidiary companies and reserves the right to terminate any partnership with its clients at any moment for any reason. Zero, Inc. offers a variety of services including, but not limited to, counting cathartics, meaning modification, freethought sustainability, and feeling facilitation. The guiding principle of Zero, Inc. is that the problem is the solution. We know it is self-evident that reason is more powerful than superstition. And we know that these superstitions are without measurable value by science. Therefore, number meanings consist of nothing but fallacy as far as our agency is concerned. Zero, Inc. specifically provides help with those who have found, find, or will find: "meaning in numbers." Zero, Inc., though, explicitly states that *numbers mean nothing*, and this protocol goes for any such belief in the mystical meaning of numbers and/or numerical sequence. Furthermore, Zero, Inc. is here to reassure the illusive and obsessive-compulsive client that he or she may invariably be both irrational and delusional in their habitual number counting patterns. In addition to a lack of significant meaning in any number, or number sequence, Zero, Inc. holds that no number is a sign of anything in everyday occurrence. And our motto here at Zero, Inc. is that we always offer, and provide, "Zero-Value, Zero-Fun". Thus, we leave you with absolutely nothing to feel absolutely nothing about: for we know that when you die you become absolutely nothing, and there is absolutely nothing. Furthermore, you can feel confident that when you are nothing, there will be nothing; and, basically, when you die you just exist as nothing, for you are non-existent… It is essential to understand nothing, to feel nothing, and to become nothing, as nothing is becoming the "new normal." So, join us here at Zero, Inc. and become the inevitable: become Nothing.

And don't thank us, you've earned it…

Contra nigh!

Automata

The Automata are behind and run Academia. And each Automaton that Academia programs, the more useless the machinations it exhibits. Make no mistake, this is an attack on Academic-Authority, esp. the inner workings of what we call here, the Automata: individuals who act in a mechanical way, and a group of people who are programmed by the Automata, and in turn, the Automata program the next generations of educated idiots.

Autonomy

The Freethinker has his autonomy; but to be autonomous, the Freethinker must gain his moral independence; yet, all things and people are not autonomous, at least not fully autonomous -people are all interdependent, as the sun sets in one place, in its place, the moon rises… or the darkness, alone.

Absolute

The Great Work! Its nomenclature resonates narcissism and ego, which are fitting only in cynicism and sarcasm, which was intended by this title. Now that the reader is present, let him or her investigate further: this is the Exit, so let go, and I hope you enjoyed your experience. And by *nomenclatura* I mean the root word of nomenclature: "to call by name and summon it." *Mytikos* "to conceal" or "to shut one's eyes and mouth" to something, from the Greek, is an example of another practice of *nomenclatura* in which the mystic bound to the Absolute, binds the truth to a singular concept: but the true naïf is the fool is the one who knows all the answers! The Absolute, then, is a whatchamacallit or conglomerate of ideas, eclectic in thought, but singular in purpose.

Anarchist

I was once told that I'm a "rebel without a cause," as if I'm a rebel without a clue! But furthermore, I am not un-American, either, for not voting, for being a Liberal-Conservative, for being a devout agnostic-atheist. And what I'm certainly not, what I know now: I'm not a member of the Anarchists.

Foundation (unknown)

Foundation is the permanent substratum of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the dilemma of the individual who must assume ultimate accountability for acts of free will without any certain knowledge of what grounds are right or wrong. The Foundation of existence is "the Unknown." Therefore, the manifest destiny of the individual is death, and therefore to deal with death the individual must use the intellect. Thus, life is a spiritual realm, and spiritual means effective to the intellect, thereby the origin of Foundation is centered within the conscious mind. Thus, if the root of sentient existence is left to rest upon the individual, then the social values and beliefs are unfounded, and all existence is left without any objective ground of truth and specifically of moral truths. Thus it is a law that there is nothing in the manner of existence beyond our visible observable universe, which is what is meant by supernatural, thereby there is nothing that departs from what is normal that would go beyond the laws of nature and nothing has any supernatural significance, as any specific principle to which all applicable cases must conform to the maxim that our laws of nature are adequate to account for all phenomena. Furthermore, there are no grounds for morals in that the intellectual is not without the knowledge of right or wrong but that through the use of reason the individual develops logic and it is logic that Foundation centered in the conscious mind, cannot accept the knowledge of a moral existence as the social values and beliefs cannot be grounds for knowledge of right or wrong for these beliefs they are built upon are false.

Labor of the Idea

Writing is the labor of the idea; with writing, we can work the idea out. Thus, if one has an idea or opinion they should write it out. Just as in an opinion column of a newspaper, we can communicate our thoughts to others, and they can speak back through their writing. Even if we simply share our ideas with friends, the idea spreads through the social network as we pass around our thoughts. A more probable way of a thought network being carried out is that when we have a disagreement, then write your thoughts down. What steps, then, should you take to transcribe your idea? Begin with a notebook and pen to jot down your initial ideas and thoughts on the matter, and then I would recommend typing up an outline on a word processor on a computer. Your local library should have computers you can use if you do not own one. But the important thing here is that one starts in some fashion or another to journal one's ideas and thoughts down and find some way to share these with others.

The labor of the idea involves some degree of logic, too. But the extent that you are able to reason need not deter you from formulating your thoughts on your ideas or opinions. What follows in this essay is my example of the labor of the idea, and reading someone else's work on different subjects are further examples; whether these subjects are more general or specific will help you to understand how to approach thinking on paper.

It should be understood that writing is an extension of one's mind. Writing enables you to transcribe your thoughts into more concrete ideas and/or opinions on paper. The rudiments of writing are less important than a basic understanding that you are having a conversation through it. This concept is more easily understood in the 21st century with the advent of the cell phone and texting. It is not the electronic devices that allow one to communicate as much as it is the writing that is done through them. It should be pointed out that it seems people are much more likely to "say" things through texts and social media than they would in person. Such a thing may be undesirable with such communications as social media and texting, but with writing essays and opinions it may be the courage needed to pass on ideas and opinions; though, it may take more energy and courage to share your writings than just simply pushing "send".

Regardless, the key component here is to voice your thoughts through writing. The important thing to remember is that you put your thoughts into writing, and your writing into a digital form so it can be archived and retrieved when needed and shared with other people. That we have progressed as far as we have in modern times is due to the fact that ideas could be recorded and considered for further elaboration and use. With the tool of writing our society has grown ever more productive and awakened to the realities of our world here on Earth and our understanding of the universe.

The inexplicable nature of the absolute truth that I exist raises two questions: How and why? How do I exist, and why do I exist? Humankind is in a perpetual state of flux, as we wander about through steady change; but we age without our own notice and this forms an inkling that the way we exist now will never end; for even though we see death among other things in nature as time passes, it seems as if death merely shadows us continuously, though we will never reach our end. But let us look at just life on earth and the existence of the cosmos as a whole, which is known in our age to be so vast and interconnected that it cannot be comprehended. Hence, we might consider one of the essential laws of science discovered to us through physics that states that "neither matter nor energy can be created or destroyed." Consequently, this scientific and practical law leads to a deeper understanding of all that exists in the universe; though, the absolute point of the universe's origin will perhaps forever remain unknown. Whereas, the cosmos is the sum of all that subsists in the infinitude of existence that is within an eternal flux of that in which there is neither a birth nor a death of the universe; rather, it is that the universe is a timeless and everlasting paradox: it is without a beginning and without an end, as it simply morphs through time, and nothing more: terminus a quo, terminus ad quem.

Pertaining to significance, people say that things happen for a reason. If we think that "things happen for a reason," it must then also be the case that "all things happen for a reason." And if we act on these things, -even if we simply take action on the basis that this or that thing occurred for a particular reason, and that reason being the particular time and place of the particular event, experience, thought, etc. (these "things"), - everything happens at a particular time and place in our life, which gives each thing its significant meaning (signs); but it's coincidence that gives meaning to a pair of incidents that occur or happen at a certain and same time in our lives. As a result, every specific thing that happens is coincidental, for it is interrelated and dependent upon a chain of incidences that link all things together in our lives; therefore, we should act upon all of these things in the same manner for all these things are of equal significance.

It is our acting upon what we see as significant that makes other things seem insignificant; but there is no meaning in these things that seem to happen for a reason unless all things happen for a reason. We cannot see significance in two things, yet not act on both of them equally, and still think one thing is a sign of something and the other is without meaning; for it is the case that if one flame is hot then all flames are hot as a result of their essential nature. As a result of the essential nature of coincidence with things, each particular thing we encounter has the same significance as all other things. There is only one way that things happen for a reason: through personal desire, which seeks out meaning in a thing as a sign to relate it to oneself, but one does this after the happening itself.

Renounce. In this sense of the word, I mean to give up a belief with a formal public statement. Now there are pros and cons to everything, but in the case of religion the con of bigotry far outweighs the pro of spiritual refinement of thoughts and feelings; yet, if it's not enough that one believe that bigotry outweigh spiritual growth in Christianity, the superstitious aspect of religion should be enough for any rational human being to reject the popular idea of a supernatural entity with its anthropomorphic mind watching over us and guiding us with a metaphorical hand on our shoulder. And while the fantasy of a supernatural all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful being may comfort us, the belief that God guided the writing of the Bible as a justification for holding to established belief then becomes not only untrue and false, but also harmful. Now I believed as much as to the extent of being a mere superstitious fellow that God and Jesus could save me from my addictions and wayward habits, but now I have seen the error in my judgment. To put it simply, I was led through fear to believe that Jesus could save me from the fear of being alone, the addiction I had to drugs and alcohol, and my other impulsive decision making when it came to money. I tried to turn to religion to solve my problems I had in these areas, but it wasn't until then that I knew I had to summon the will power within myself to overcome these bad habits that I refrained from them. I was baptized once and I summoned the courage to do so in front of a church full of people by getting intoxicated. I quit that particular drug and was baptized a second time at a different church sometime later out of fear of damnation from the first baptism. But soon after the second church I was attending part time did a sermon over "gematria" and it was then that I realized I didn't need to attend a place that taught such superstition. Gematria is the belief that numbers and their occurrence have some significant meaning, and that such a thing is the manifestation of God and proof he exists. I saw that a belief in a supernatural being (God) who controls things in our natural world to be superstition as well. Thus, I renounce religion now on the grounds that it is untrue and harmful. I do feel religion helps heal the thoughts and feelings of its believers; but as for me and what I believe, I am an "unbeliever."

Who would want to subscribe to such a thing? Well, I know good people who are religious, and I know bad people who are religious; though; as with my habits, it is a matter of good and bad, rather than good and evil. Evil is a misnomer. Things that are bad in this world are not the result of a malevolent entity; and things that are good in this world are not the result of a benevolent entity. Things are the way they are in this world because of the choices each individual makes combined with random coincidence and the general predictable probability of everyday occurrence. And just because there is a general tendency of the universe to be in chaos doesn't mean we need to ascribe to a philosophy of "gloom and doom" as it is referred to. If we cannot question what we believe, we are slaves to our prejudices and superstitions.

Zeitgeist, the "time spirit" or spirit of the age, changes rapidly and is quite subjective to the place and people who define it. But we can look at those historical landmarks that have occurred in our lifetimes to give us some idea of what was and is significant to each generation. Though, there is no agreed upon length of time that makes up a generation, but we will say here 40 years. And within the framework of 40 years a lot happens that shapes the feeling of that generation. What has happened in the 40 years I have been alive that shapes the zeitgeist of my age? Well, politically the Cold War supposedly ended, though Amerika and Russia are still at odds. In science, the theory of evolution is seen now by the scientific community to be as evident as the theory of gravity, and this has created friction between science and religion, which is really nothing new. Also, the idea of pluralism (where smaller groups within our society maintain their own identities), as well as multiculturalism (where multiple cultural traditions exist and are accepted and promoted within our single society), -both of these ideas also conflict with conservative Christians here in Amerika. Though, the trend toward cultural pluralism and multiculturalism here in our society should be seen as a sign of hope; a trend toward cultural equality in a world divided by a strict adherence to its nostalgic attachment to a negative past. But we cannot cling to a negative past in the hope of a positive tomorrow; instead, we must renounce our old ways and learn from the mistakes of our past masters.

A program I happened to hear on the radio spoke on how that the behavioral sciences had "invented" the idea of a disorder; in general the Amerika Faith Radio (AFR) guest claimed that the mental disorder was just an excuse for individuals with mental health disease to be irresponsible. This kind of denial among conservative Christians has marked four decades of ignorance in my own lifetime, and again this is nothing new; but there is hope that these sort of shallow beliefs will die sooner than later in the world. Though, the key to alleviating the world of such ignorance and superstition is to speak up and disagree, even if it is just saying: "I disagree." Now the train of illogic and irrational beliefs that follow such a verbal dissent are far more difficult to contend with, seeing how these beliefs are the result of centuries of prejudices; the important thing is to first disagree, even if we must only "agree to disagree" for now.

Another view that conservative Christians hold is that climate change is a myth, and humankind hasn't done anything to harm the environment or affect something as drastic as "global warming." I feel that it is a sense of guilt that leads people such as those who "don't believe" in things like climate change to hold these views within their beliefs. Look at the amount of garbage that we go through in a week's time and it is easier to see how an island of garbage, or even an entire state full of garbage, is not only possible but a reality. So how is it so difficult to believe in billions of tons of carbon dioxide polluting our atmosphere, just as garbage does our ground? It's now in our age to hold to the idea of what I shall term "human exceptionalism." Human exceptionalism is the belief that mankind is beyond reproach when it comes to its exploitation of Earth's resources.

There is the belief that climate change is a result of the "end times," and this belief further fuels the apathy of not changing our habits to promote a cleaner and more sustainable Earth. When I hear this attitude reflected in the voice of "believers," I think of the Thomas Theorem, which states: "what is perceived as real, is real in its consequences." The consequences in this case are the loss of nature.

The trend toward a secular society is one of the positive things to occur in the last 40 years. Secularism in America began with founders who were for separation of church and state, which is America's attempt to be free of religious rule. We see other nonspecific attempts to separate ourselves from religion in America with the move to abolish the Ten Commandments images from state property. Now these tactics seem to strengthen conservatives temporarily, but in the long run secularism will, as a matter of historical trends, rise above religion and superstition. But if people want to be thankful for something: Thank God for Science. After all, science is why we live in such comfort and have so many electronic gadgets, while making the inventions of artisans better such as the progression of rocket science from early airplanes. The Internet is a global trend, and yet another product of science. So too do we have science to be thankful for the cell phone.

Another trend in America is the liberation of gay and lesbian individuals and couples from the conservative masses, especially conservative Christians. Everyone has the right to make a choice who they want to love and be with; and it's not the right of Christians to say those who are gay and lesbian shouldn't have the freedom to be homosexual and that their lifestyle is a sin. I've heard Christians on AFR say that they are not being bigots because they are basing their judgments on a two-thousand year text, but a bigot is just that: "a person who holds blindly and intolerantly to a belief; a narrow-minded, prejudiced person." These same people say that to discern is the same as discriminate, and that there is nothing wrong with discerning because "that's what the Bible says to do." Well, if that's the case the Bible is guilty of discrimination. Now it's important for these bigots to know that what they are doing is the same as was done to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Thus, we end up with conservative religious people who use their power toward intolerance and the subjugation of smaller groups of people who hold different views… This is also nothing new.

There are several Christian organizations who help the poor, homeless, etc. but it seems we need more volunteers and government organizations that can help these destitute individuals. The American government has set up programs, such as food stamps, to help the poor, yet conservatives and conservative Christians oppose the idea of government funded programs to help Amerika's poor. There is free thought, and there is slave thought… Is there a middle ground? I would like to think that I'm a freethinker, and to a certain extent I am. But everyone is influenced by social pressures, and the degree to which one resists or is compliant when it comes to a "forming ideas and opinions about religion, politics, morals, etc." is the degree to which one is a freethinker. And the freethinker forms these ideas and opinions "independent of tradition, authority, or established belief." When we deviate from convention, we will always face some resistance, as history teaches us; and we can also learn from history that good things come from standing up for our ideas when they are not in fashion. But to hold on to something that has proven itself in the past to be detrimental to humankind is to be a slave-thinker. And that is what those who hold to religion and established belief, while they criticize, censure, and condemn…

This is just what the believer becomes, a slave-thinker, with his or her thoughts subjugated by the need for approval rather than feeling right by way of logic.

But even logic must be true, as slave-thought is reinforced by a false logic.

Multiple Levels of Thought

By "multiple levels of thought," I am seeking a method of unlearning. I find the hardest thing to do is to break old habits. The context of the problem is that of unlearning as an advantage. What would this "old level" and "new level of thought" be considered?

So, these "multiple levels" are not in a sense "higher or lower." One could view this phrase "higher and lower" symbolically in that higher is in a sense relative to a foundation of an edifice in which the goal of the individual is ascension, to reach the apex, to reach one's highest potential, to climax and exhaust all false mirrors, which are one's incorrect reflections (views or opinions) and incorrect patterns of thinking (reflecting) so that all that is left is a true mirror of the self; thus forming a true image of the world. But one could also think of multiple levels as being lower; they descend in the sense that they contain more depth. The deeper one delves into thought, the more weight one carries upon oneself, and by weight, I mean quantity of thought. Yet not only must one have the quantity of thought, but the quality of thought. And as I say that one thinks deeper it is symbolic in the sense that it is analogous to a, say, a lake.

But mapping back for a moment, let us say that ascension is frightening; as one would be "afraid of heights," fear stands in the way of unlearning; for, one is comfortable in one's ignorance in two ways: First, one's whole perspective is based on multiple perspectives: one's "common knowledge" is all interconnected in as that to change one view or opinion, the individual must change some or all other views or opinions based on this false knowledge; secondly, whereas instead of viewing the argument, the new knowledge, as a form of "constructive criticism," the individual considers an argument to be a game of "prove you wrong," though it is not; it is a matter of what is true and what is false.

Thereby, one's ego, one's "comfort zone," gets in the way of unlearning in that one has confidence and satisfaction (comfort) in oneself. So by learning not to be "afraid of heights," –to be able to listen rather than waiting on one's turn to speak, interrupting, and not even hearing the full extent of the new knowledge- one must gain confidence in ascending.

But there is a danger of what might lie deeper in thought, meddling in the depths of madness. It is a point where both advantages and disadvantages are in a state of neutrality and the time and effort and even the lines of what is true and false are ambiguous. Thereby leaving the actual path to the individual submerged in a world of half-truths or partial knowledge in that he seeks either an end goal or a point of reflection that allows him to put aside this battleground that is founded in the deepest recesses of this ocean of knowledge, that by its very nature weighs down on the individual; it is and has become by its infinite growth, if not balanced by the individual's outward exertion of his very strength of wisdom, will overwhelm the individual by not having attained the techniques of his logic that are cable of taking into himself through his eye and seeing that what appears through perception to be infinite possibilities that are many things that are one illusory difference and so few similarities that the infinite becomes definite.

That is to say, what is perceived as true illusion becomes seen as what is truly false; therefore the eye of the individual sees, even though it may be blinded by a mirage of darkness and inhospitable cold

depth, his eye sees what is true is ubiquitous and pervades even the dark and cold; and though it may not be seen as a light in the darkness, the truth that is capable of being grasped becomes an advantage not because it is greater than what is false, but instead, the truth is the advantage, if it is in these depths at all, for it is not infinite; it can be found because the false vanishes before the wise when it is seen as false.

Yet the subjective individual fails even in attaining the zenith of his thought through a descent into the dangerous depths of the truest wisdom, which can elude; for fear itself can blind even the wisest. It is a fear that must not only be questioned, but recognized as fear and not false confidence, and in doing so erasing even wisdom in reducing the individual from a level of thought that is his zenith by way of a confidence that is seen as strength; and by channeling this strength into what this wise individual sees as questioning the infinite deep, he is blinded by merciless attack on what is false.

But in truth, the individual's ascent and descent can never be attained even by those who may appear wise, for no proof of this feat can be proved or even known, for the bottom of the deep can never be reached in the simple fact that its depth is first only posited to exist. And even if this be true, it is beyond the individual's physical and mental ability; for as he may be able to think deeper than any individual has been able to descend, he cannot comprehend the inexplicable waters that grow darker as much as they grow deeper; for the depth is unknown and it is this depth that exceeds the individual, who is in fact, all alone; the individual sees that he is bound through these discoveries to those whom he shares them with, yet not only do they not actually have the same perception of his world; for his thoughts make up his world, also the individual is all alone, and will face his ultimate end alone, -the individuals in truth only coincide with each other by a perception in that the two see themselves in the same world, yet are in their world that makes up their thoughts.

The Nature of Evil

Dr. Proofreader says that the Nature of Evil is bureaucratic, and so be it! And religion is its Quelle, it is its "source". But as Nietzsche pointed out, there is no good and evil, but, rather, good and bad… The notion of evil suggests a sinister intent, but this is not so. Thus, bureaucratic and corporate institutions are bad for society, and there are bad people in the World. Nevertheless, evil is religious jargon, such as was, too the idea of me suffering from "spiritual confusion." This is an untruth allusion to my personal identity of being agnostic atheist. As too evil is bad, not sinister. Religion is where the Nature of Evil survives: *religio* is the root word of religion and simply means "to come together," according to my past master, my elder, Dr. Wit. We can conclude that fellowship is what religion presents itself as, and fellowship might seem good, except for those who are dismissed and/or exiled into the woodwork of humanity.

On the Nature of Superstition

A superstition, in what follows, is a false belief based on fear or ignorance (or both), that contradicts the known laws of science or what is considered by society, in general, to be true and rational; it is in particular, such a credulous belief in signs, omens, and jinxes within the natural world. What, then, is the "nature" of superstition? These three beliefs above are correlated in a sense that they all are part of a complex of peculiar attitudes and feelings surrounding the activity of superstition. A sign is something that is believed to indicate a fact; an omen is the occurrence of such a sign, or signs, believed to predict a future event, either good or bad; and a jinx is a person or thing believed to bring about bad luck. Thus, what all three of the above share in common is that they all are believed; therefore, what is believed to be real is a result of what is perceived to be real.

Superstitious belief, though, comes about through normal behaviors that evolve into abnormal beliefs; for, each person follows certain patterns: routine becomes habit, and habit becomes ritual; and it is the necessity of a person to perform routine, habit, and ritual out of a fear of misfortune that spawns superstition. It is apparent, then, that fear causes superstition; and it is evident that this fear is a result of ignorance; that is, this fear comes from a lack of knowledge, and it is this lack of awareness that leads to a person's misperception of reality that which, in the end, becomes only a false belief. That a well-informed and knowledgeable person can be superstitious, though, is a paradox. Dostoevsky's anonymous hero in his Notes from Underground is aware of this contradiction: "I am extremely superstitious… (I am well-educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am superstitious)." I, too, am in a sense such an absurd and existential character in everyday life. Thus, I will use my personal experience as a practical account of the irrational thoughts and actions that lead to, and perpetuate superstition.

It seems that even though I am clearly aware there is no such thing as a sign, jinx, or omen –even in light of this evident awareness, I still perform routines, habits, and rituals for reasons I know are the result of a superstition; and for this reason, I consider my beliefs to be a result of superstitious agnosticism: I feel that although there is no evidence to substantiate my superstitions(as the evidence is unsound), there is still no need to risk taking a chance that my superstitious beliefs might well be true.

Superstition is a precautionary step toward dealing with uncertainty. I feel that I am thus taking proactive steps through the use of superstition, but this is not the case. As an example of precautionary vs. proactive measures, let us look at the ritual of the washing of hands. I wash my hands –as I feel all people should –I wash my hands after I go to the bathroom, before and after I handle food, etc. People develop the routine of washing their hands and then, later on, they wash them out of habit because they learned to do so for fear of getting ill from germs. The fact that germs cannot be seen, though, helps to perpetuate a false belief in children of contracting cuddies; for, children learn from other children that, like germs, one can be infected with cuddies even if cuddies can't be seen (nor is it ever known that one in fact has cuddies); and so a pattern of

avoidance of this danger arises. And even though, later, as adults we become aware of the truth that there is no such thing as cuddies, we still have a problem with invisible dangers.
Routine, habit, and ritual are in fact a proactive approach to dealing with many uncertain outcomes of various situations in life. An example of this can be found in the washing of hands. I am in the routine of washing my hands after the handling of chicken so as not to contract salmonella; and this is a rational fear. The result of washing my hands then is, in this case, a proactive way of dealing with a real and true danger. Therefore, I develop a habit as a result of this fear and also then wash my hands after being in public places and touching such things as door knobs, which I reason have germs spread by other people in the same way that salmonella spreads from chicken. Further, I also have the habit of washing my hands at home after touching things similar to the door knobs above, even though it is not possible for these things to have the germs of strangers on them, as my wife and I are the only ones in the home. But this is an irrational fear; although it seems to be a proactive approach to avoid illness, it is in fact a precaution taken as a result of a false belief and thereby a superstition.
Signs, jinxes, and omens are a precautionary approach to dealing with the uncertain outcomes of situations in life, too. Signs grow to become superstitious beliefs in a synonymous way the washing of hands described above evolves from a proactive prevention to a superstitious precaution. A sign is something reasoned to indicate a fact: for example, darks clouds and high winds are a sign of a thunderstorm; and this is sound reasoning. Though one's reasoning is unsound in the case of superstition. For example, a superstitious person believes a lunar eclipse is a sign of the end of the earth.

But this is a specious logic; for, although the earth will certainly end someday (as do all things in this world) –It is true that the earth will end eventually, but lunar eclipses are only a sign of the continued cycling of the earth and the moon around the sun. Therefore, a lunar eclipse doesn't in fact cause anything bad to happen on earth: a lunar eclipse is simply the result of a shadow cast on the moon by the earth. Thus, the interpretation of events such as a lunar eclipse being a sign of the end of the earth is an example of an omen, as it is founded on the belief that something bad will happen as a result of this occurrence. On the other hand, a penny found heads up is believed to be a good omen; whereas, a black cat crossing one's path is believed to be a bad omen. The black cat also is thought to be a jinx, as it is believed to be a sign of bad luck to come. Though, the belief in the good luck of the penny, is as much a false logic as in that the belief of the bad luck of a black cat; for, a penny found lying heads up is just a result of chance, and an encounter of a black cat crossing one's path is just a common coincidence. The point is that there are countless reasons why people believe in particular superstitions, as the actual truth of the matter is that all superstitions are merely false beliefs.

Superstition is one of the most common ailments of society: fear and ignorance fuel it, and like prejudice, it feeds on ignorance and is quite contagious. It is not a psychical contagion but rather a disease of the individual mind. Unrestrained, it can spread by word of mouth to other individuals, from one person to the next fear of the unknown is passed along as well as "a false conception of causality; an irrational and abject attitude of mind toward the supernatural" as a result of this superstition; and last, it is "a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary." And this is the definition of superstition in our examination here.

Superstition is in the simple state of its nature an idea that is believed to be true, but is in reality false. Another way to say it is that superstition is an idea that is believed to be true, but is in truth, false. And yet another way to say it is that superstition is an idea that is believed to be true, but is in fact, false. Therefore, it would appear that the things we are looking at are reality, truth, and facts, but it is actuality that we are looking at: superstition is something that is believed to be true, but is in actuality false. But superstition is more than this, also. It is the idea in our culture, namely, that numbers mean something. Is it true that numbers have a meaning? Do things happen a certain number of times, such as how many times you encounter a stoplight that is red on the way home from the grocery store? And if so, do these things happen for a reason, which would give them meaning?

Happenstance is oftentimes interpreted as fact, truth, and reality, when it is in actuality just random chance encounters with things caused by the forces of nature in the universe. An example of this is: a penny found tails side up is considered bad luck, when in actuality it is that a person dropped it by chance, and the penny fell and landed as it did according to mathematics of gravity, and no 'luck' is involved. One can gain no fortune by the chance of a penny heads side up, yet this idea is so ingrained into our culture that it is 'believed' to be true.

Anthropology, specifically the Thomas Theorem, states that what is believed to be real is real in its consequences. This means that if one believes strongly enough that one is possessed by a demon, it will show in its, the belief, effect and affect; it will show in its effect by causing the person to act 'demon possessed,' and it will show in the person's mental effect on their physical appearance. But the belief in the luck of the penny merely affords one to attribute good fortune to its being head side up, and to attribute bad fortune to its being heads side down. For instance, if I find a penny 'on heads,' and I pick it up and I get a phone call from a friend saying that they are coming into town and are going to pay me a visit after a long period of absence, this might seem as if, with the belief in the good penny, -it might seem to the superstitious person that a.) The good penny was an omen of fortune, and b.) the visit from the friend was, if not a result of finding the good penny, -it was at least somehow at least associated with the two co-occurring events. But in actuality, the two events are unrelated, and finding the penny means nothing except that somehow someone either discarded, misplaced, or lost the penny; and, too, the only fortune that might be said of this event is that a.) one is a penny richer (good), or b.) one is a penny poorer (bad) (because one thought the bad penny was bad luck and didn't pick it up).

Free Fate

"If 'things happen for a reason', divine intervention aside, then 'everything happens for a reason.' If we act on these things that happen for a reason, even if we simply take action for the reason that this or that occurred for a particular reason, and that reason being self-evident in that the reason we say that things happen for a reason is the particular time and place of the event, occurrence, thought, etc. (i.e. these 'things'), then everything happens for a reason; for everything happens at a particular time and place in our life that makes them significant; but simultaneous occurrence or coincidence – coincidental occurrence of things of significant meaning (signs) are these things that happen for a reason, yet they are not dependent to this or that thing, yet subordinate our life.
Thereby every individual thing that happens is interrelated and dependent upon every and all other things in our lives and we should act upon all these things in the same way. It is our action upon what we see as significant that makes all else seem insignificant. Life becomes insignificant in that there is no meaning in these 'things that happen for a reason' in that we see significance or signs in them and act on them. To avoid life becoming meaningless, one should consider another way of perception, that things will work themselves out. But whether things work out the way one would want to or not can be changed; for this way of thinking accounts for things in the future that may be unaccounted for by looking at everything that has happened for a reason in the past; and yet, this is the only way things can happen for a reason: through desire, which seeks out meaning in signs after the occurrence itself."

Free Will

The philosopher says that free-will is but an illusion. If it is, then we have our disillusion to thank for it. And if free-will dictates anything it is this: to do nothing, for nothingness is the way of our Geist, it is the Quelle, "the Source." In essence, we are bound to nothing, free as our will, which is bound to boredom, free-will is a diversion. To the philosopher who believes that free-will is an illusion… I say he is a killjoy, a spiritual hatchet man, and I a weary traveler too wise to surrender to foolishness and folly. The philosopher I speak of is indeed just an educated idiot and should take a dose of End-It-All and euthanize himself for the betterment of humanity: Scientism & Scientology are both just asinine pursuits. Religion & Revivalism, the same. Atheism & Spiritualism, both are a disease. Freethinkers reject these common opinions, these common colds, in favor of "free-fate", free-will's doppelganger.

Sapere Aude

The deep thinker, submerged in his deep waters of thought, seeks out a precise level, a depth that is neither above nor below imminent peril, which would cause him to go off the deep end; for these are the shadows in the dark waters of curious obsession that spawn a madman, though to the shallow thinker, the liberal deep thinker is not seen as an orthodox individual, but as a menace, a nuisance who knows too much for his own good, lost in waters of understanding.

The shallow thinker is ignorant in the common insignificant shoals of the lakes knowledge, but there is a risk of what might lie deeper in thought, meddling in the depths of madness, even if there is knowledge to be found; for, it is a level of depth where what is true and false are ambiguous and thus leaves the deep thinker without his insight and his understanding, a point of meditation that does not allow him to see in the dark and deep water that is in the deepest recesses of this abyss of knowledge, which by its very nature weighs down on the individual and has become an infinite deep that is limited only by the intellectual will of his mind.

Thus, the deep thinker cannot see as his mind is blind in a mirage of truth and falsehoods in the dark depth, yet the deep thinker has learned that all is false, for all things must first be perceived as false, then one learns through probing into the matter if there is any truth to be found and learns the truth capable of being grasped as it becomes wisdom as the false vanishes to the clever man; yet even the deep thinker can fail even in attaining the intellectual end of his thought through a descent into the dark and dangerous depths for absolute wisdom; for, even the truth can elude the deep thinker in his relentless and ever questioning and unmerciful attack on what is false.

Freethought

Freethought, as in opposition to "slave thought," is maintained by the deep thinker, who is also a freethinker. The importance of freethought should not be underestimated in the World nowadays: it is a pattern of thinking that liberates an individual from the constraints of religion, this is its primary objective. All the while, it is helpful in forming and implementing better judgment and opinions, and it is most useful as a tool to question authority, think independently, and attack religious dogma, all of which hold no authority to the freethinker and her freethought.

Freethought is a species of thought that is the driving force behind modern humankind's quest for nonreligious freedom of thought, not secular thought, but truth of thought. And thought that is unbound except that is bound by reason and not by superstition or spiritualism. It is the light, the truth, and the wayward path. It is the path of opposition to orthodox opinion. And it is, in the end, the path of liberation from life and death. Question everything!

Mysticism

If there is one important fact or observation, it is that Truth cannot be deduced with superstition: the unjustified mystic does not necessarily hold the truth; he or she merely strangles absolute truth, and chokes it by the throat.

Spiritualism, too, is no different: it is to suffice to say that it is the pot that calls the kettle black; and in doing so, religion, as well, follows the course of a denial of reality to such a degree, with such fanatical vitriol, that it replaces understanding with a hatred for truth so intense as to appear loving; but it is not: religion is the ultimate stain on humanity, and it is, in the end, a lie.

Existential

The inexplicable nature of the absolute truth that I exist raises but two questions: How and why? How do I exist and why do I exist? Humankind is in a perpetual state of flux, as we wander about through steady change; but we age without our own notice and this forms this inkling that the way we exist now will never end; for even though we see death among other things in nature as time passes, it seems as if death merely shadows us continuously, though we will never reach our end. But let us look not at just life on earth and the existence of the cosmos as a whole, which is known in our age to be so vast and interconnected that it cannot be comprehended. Hence, might we consider one of the essential laws of science discovered to us through physics that states that "neither matter nor energy can be created or destroyed." Consequently, this scientific and practical law leads to a deeper understanding of all that exists in the universe; though, the absolute point of its origin will perhaps forever remain unknown. Whereas, the cosmos is the sum of all that subsists in the infinitude of existence that is within an eternal flux of that in which there is neither a birth nor a death of the universe; rather, it is that the universe is a timeless and everlasting paradox: it is without a beginning and without an end, as it simply morphs through time, and nothing more

The Rudiments of Writing

Reminiscence is essence: the act of remembering experience is the fundamental characteristic a writer must have control, as the writer must have reigned over his mind, for the writer dictates and formulates words to his end; he is a wordsmith.
Reminiscence is essence: the writer draws from the waters of knowledge that his thoughts use to attain insight: the ability to see and understand the essential nature of this, and this develops into the basic expression of a writer, and this writing is an extension of the writer's mind; also, it is the writer's interpretation of existence, to translate an idea into action, and this action is the physical writing process itself that is in truth a labor of the idea.
Reminiscence is essence: a writer draws on a well of experience he dips his pen into the words on a page are a mirror that functions as a reflection of the writer's mind and his work must reflect the ethos of life, not just give it meaning, but more meaning.
Oblivion is immaterial: the act of forgetting experience is the fundamental characteristic a writer must let go of now, as the writer must let his mind be unbound, for the writer follows and finds words to his end; he is a wordsmith.
Writing is not just an act of expression: it works as an extension of the writer's mind. It is a writer's interpretation of a transient world, a translated perception of existence.
The writer must be aware the writing process is chaos: the writer must be in control. He must attend to every element and every word of a composition as he works. On the other hand, the audience seeks an end, some point of closure in the work, but an absence of closure is the specific element that enables a writer's work to grow. It gives multiple levels of meaning to a work each time the work is read again, meaning that can be obscure, yet a writer must express truths of human nature.
The creative process is a simple ethical dilemma: it forces the writer to write the truth, and the reason one writes will determine if it is worthy of being read.
A writer's work is good or bad in its intent more than its meaning being understood.
The difference between the matter of truth and falsehood lies within the writer's intention.
One who writes what his audience wants to read is a bad writer, what he writes is immoral.
One who writes from the insight of experience is a good writer, what he writes is moral.
It is a difference between wrong and right, a matter of literary ethics, of conscience.
A writer must be aware of this conscience as it affects the conscience of the audience. Literature has the power to influence culture, which means a writer has a moral obligation.
Last, it is thought the one who writes for monetary gain needs to be judged according to his work, the same as one who writes for free; but a writer who writes for bread, is a writer who gets fed, so it is said; but this is only superficial gibberish, propounded by idiots and the unwise. I am a servant to the truth, nothing more.

Black Box Law (a theorem?)

The problem is the solution: to find a solution to a problem, one must first propose that a problem exists, and with this insight into the paradoxical problem, one can better understand the need for a problem analysis as it concerns the nature of our initial idea: The problem is the solution. The problem is the solution: this is not necessarily meant for complex situations that have already arisen due to a problem and are too difficult to resolve. The Black Box Law is preemptive and proactive. It is this way that a person becomes aware of the truth that in every human endeavor, there is an unknown problem, and this is the crux of the matter: that it is a perpetual problem. A "black box" is a term for anything that has a complex and intricate function that can be observed, but whose inner workings are inexplicable or unknown. The inner workings are our human endeavors: and under the knowledge that there is always a problem, we must constantly probe. Doing so makes it much easier to discover a problem: and in this awareness, there is a solution. As an example of the Black Box Law, I must face the dilemma that there is a problem within this proof itself that is unknown. Thus, the Black Box Law works in a way that it does not work; for there is a problem that I cannot account for in it, yet this is the specific principle that is established. I will say that for every rule there is an exception. For within this proof of the Black Box Law, we find within it all the problems soluble. But this is not to let our guard down. As for the individual who assumes he has found the solution to all his problems: no problem has a final solution, for every solution to a problem leads to another problem and is a perpetual problem.

Black Box Law (pro): The problem is the solution.

Black Box Law (contra): The problem is not the solution.

Black Box Law (deconstruction)

Black Box Law (is problematic), and for now; let's just refer to it as a three-dimensional object for several reasons, but if it is possible, that in many separate and a few nuances, there are few specific, yet discreet places in-itself that would be what I am looking for is illusive. But therein lies what I see as three core fundamental structural problems of the theory:
Defined a black box is something in that its inner workings are mysterious or unknown, and these seem invisible in it, as problems arise:
Does a black box necessarily have to be: 1.) "black," and 2.) a " box" if what we are dealing with is not spatial, yet dimensional; therefore "black" and "box" connote certain things etymologically that need not only to be considered, but clearly defined in the theory itself by using the definitive Black Box Law Theory as the center of its problematics (i.e. through the Labor of the Idea to solve the Problems of Communication of The Black Box Law Theory we will explicate the Problematics of Thought Transmission –and thought transmission is what I have found that is a more encompassing, yet a more "concise synonymous connotation" of the Problem of Communication). Therefore, what is meant by "thought" in the theorem of Thought Transmission will have to be considered and clearly defined just as the definitive Black Box Theory, which can only be formed after working through the Thought Transmission Theorem.
The Black Box Law Theory is not seeking to solve a problem (i.e. find a solution to the Problems of Communication through the Labor of the Idea). I therefore see it simply as the Black Box Law Theory of Perception with its foundation principle being the Thought Transmission Theorem.
As a matter of absurd speculation, I posit: the collapse of a black box? Surely it is as if it was thought that the splitting of an atom would cause a chain reaction that incinerated the entire planet Earth…
Considering this formulation above, visually, using a visual illustration of a "black box" works visually in that it does not work (i.e. by first presenting it as a Representational Model of the Black Box Law Theory of Thought Transmission (a theory underlying a sphere of activity or thought), we can construct our theory around it and then deconstruct it by showing the problematics of the process); thus we come to the problem that has no solution, The Unknown, the unaccounted for, just as in a problem analysis: The problem is that when one is looking for a solution to a problem that one does know, how does one know how and what to look for; that is: by what method does the individual use as a solution to become aware of the problem that individual is in need of a solution to: this problem the individual is unaware?
The six dimensions of the Visual Black Box connote and are: a.) The Labor of the Idea (, b.) Aesthetics c.) Ethics d.) Metaphysics e.) Epistemology and f.) The Problems of Communication
The 8th step is thereby a forced conclusion by pattern….

The problem is the solution: Thus, for one to find a solution to a problem, one must first postulate that a problem exists, and from this recognition of the problematic one proceeds with a problem analysis: A problem is (1) a question proposed for consideration, or simply (2) a question to probe and then be solved. The solution is (1) the method used to solve a problem, (2) the answer to a problem. Thus the problem is the solution is a maxim? that is the foundation of the Black Box Law, which is named thus for three reasons: (1) a black box is a term for anything that has a complex and intricate function that one can observe but whose inner workings are inexplicable or unknown; (2) therefore these inner workings of any human endeavor is what are inexplicable and one can thus posit that in which form the problematic unknown that is in need of a solution; (3) and this is the method used to explicate the inexplicable and it is to probe: to investigate with great thoroughness. Thus the problem becomes the solution when one can account for it (the problem); therefore, the Black Box Law establishes that there will always be a problem that is unknown to one in any situation; and even if the problem is self-evident one may posit that other problems exist as the absolute ground of existence is the unknown: Thus to explicate the Black Box Law, one must face the predicament that there is a problem that exists within this theory itself that is inexplicable or that is unknown; thus, the Black Box Law works in a way that it does not work, for there is a problem that one cannot account for in it, yet this is the specific principle that is established; therefore, the intrinsic contradictory nature that there is a problem that exists within the Black Box Law itself that is inexplicable or unknown and causes it to work in a way that it does not work is not to assume that it has an implicit nature that is to be understood though not clearly expressed, but that for every rule there is an exception.

This proof of the Black Box Law has a paradoxical imperative: it is an appeal to gain the initiative in human endeavor, yet this preemption, an action to check other action prior to a problem, this action characteristic of the Black Box Law demands insight: a competence to observe and understand the inner nature of things, but this insight is contradictory to our term black box whose inner nature is unknown. The maxim above that for every rule there is an exception infers that the finished written proof of the Black Box Law, which in and every human endeavor there is a unknown problem (or any number of problems) and that one cannot account for it, shows the problem is the consequence of an unknown crux rather than the cause of the problem; therefore, the Black Box Law is a perpetual problem, and the individual who assumes that one has found the solution to every and all problems, to be specific, the author in this exposition; even when the individual feels that one has accounted for all this, one cannot use the proposition: for every rule there is an exception; the author in this case, has neither found a solution to every problem nor ever will in the Black Box Law, for the above proof of the Black Box Law, we find within it all the problems soluble; therefore, the questions probed in its contents are solved through the sound methods used to solve the problematics in it, but no problem has a final solution, for every solution to a problem leads to another problem and is in itself a perpetual problem.

Square the Circle

Attempting the impossible, or "squaring the circle" might seem like nonsense, and that's because it is indeed, nonsense! The square-circle is a product of mysticism, alchemical-symbolism, and just downright superstitious juju¡¿ It seems as much a contradiction as the 3-in-1 God, which is: God, the Son, and the Holy Geist. If you are looking for superfluous confusion, welcome to what the Evangelicals term "spiritual confusion:"a method resolved to unveil a blasphemous absolute truth, a quest of questioning everything in which I double-doubt, an endless quest that might end in doubting skepticism itself…

Richard Michael Thomas