The Great Work!

Authorized Version

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

- Hericlitus

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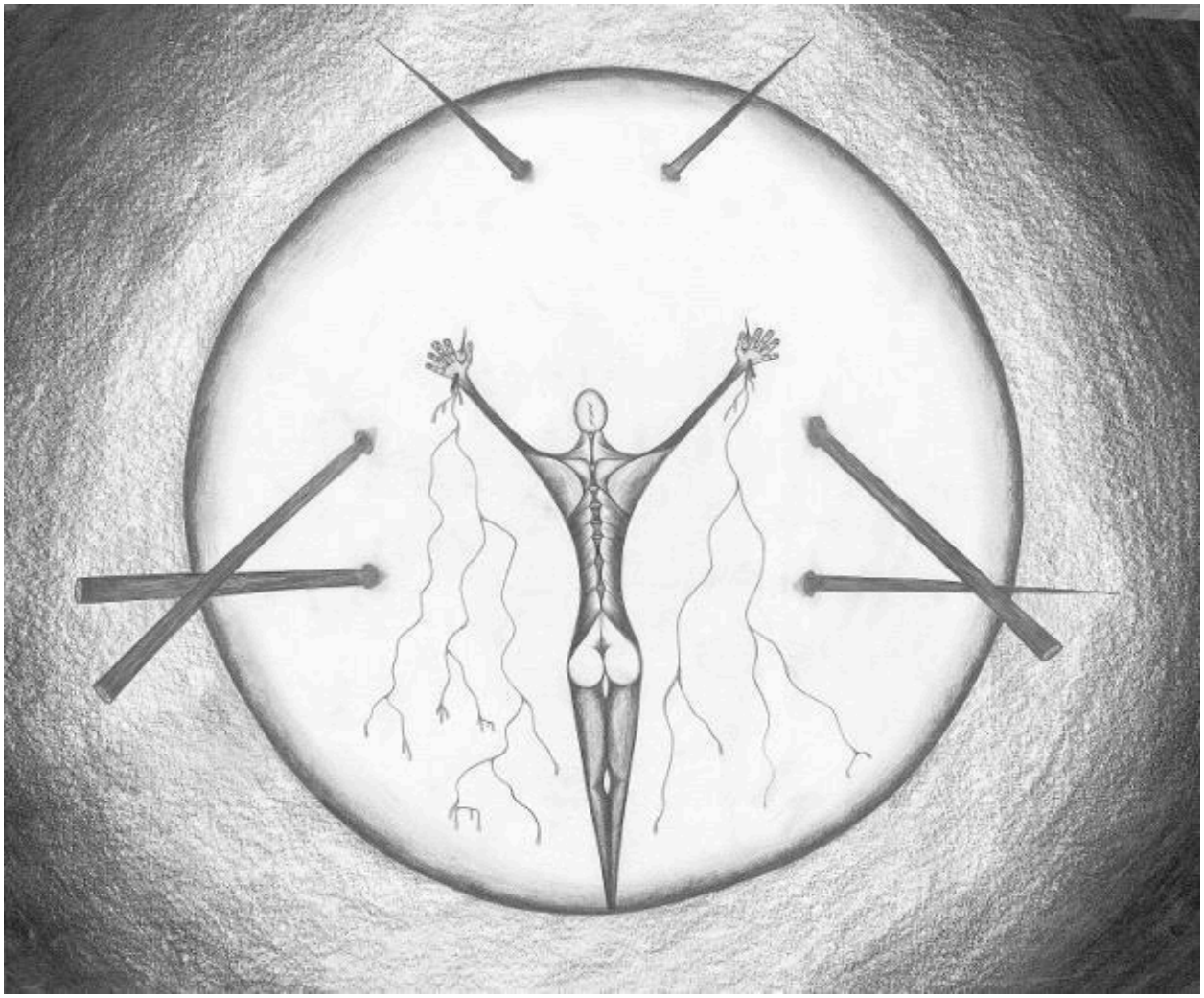


Pestilent Orb (a flat earth)

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 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 a 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 if all things must be first be perceived as false, as 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 dangerous depths for absolute wisdom, for the truth can elude the deep thinker in his relentless and ever questioning and unmerciful attack on what is false.

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.

Part One:

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.

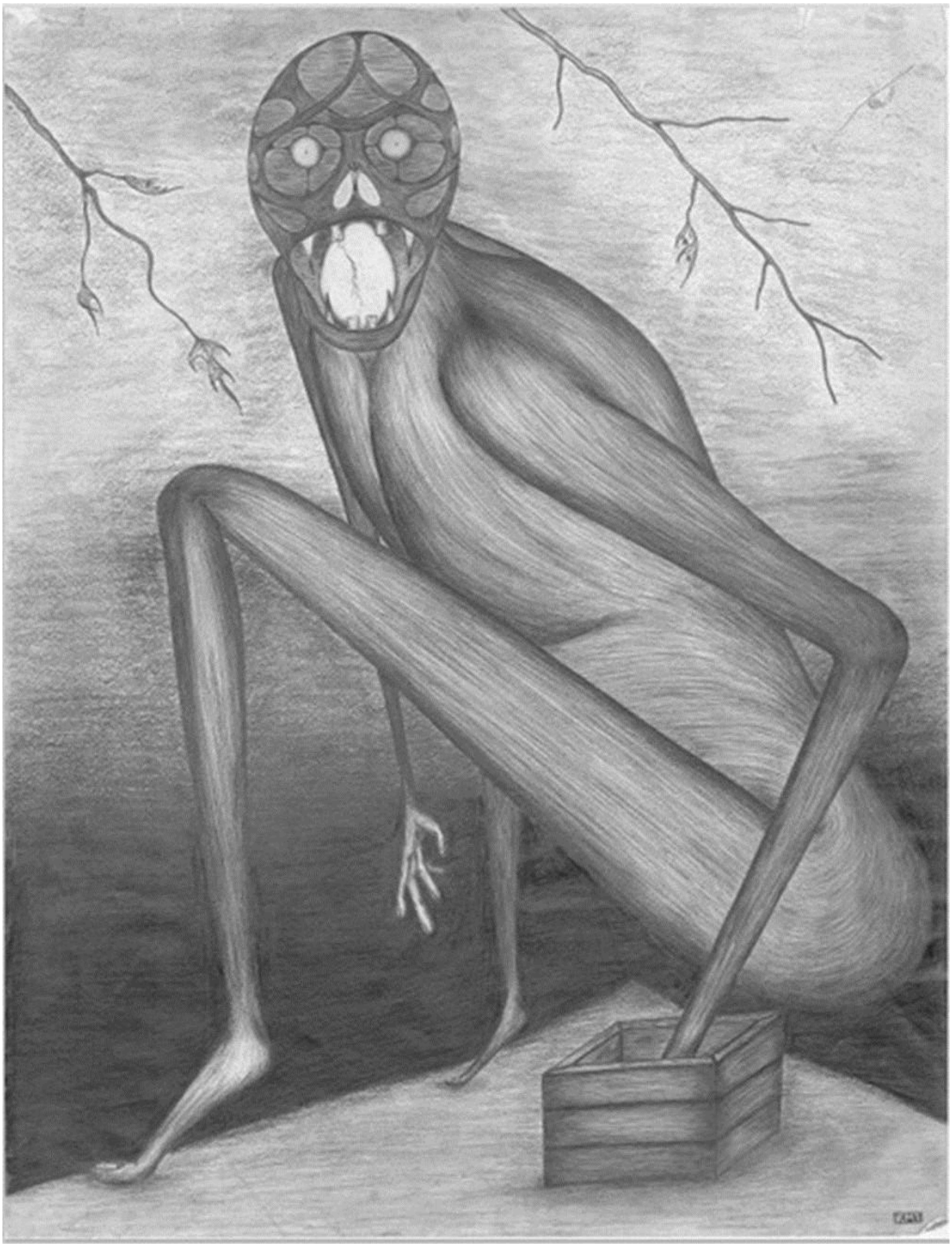
There was one thing I was concerned with and shall come to in a moment. I was in touch with these parallel worlds that exist below and above us. All the apparitions of my past swarmed beneath me, which could reach up and drag me down; the visions of my future multiplied above me, and all the present 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

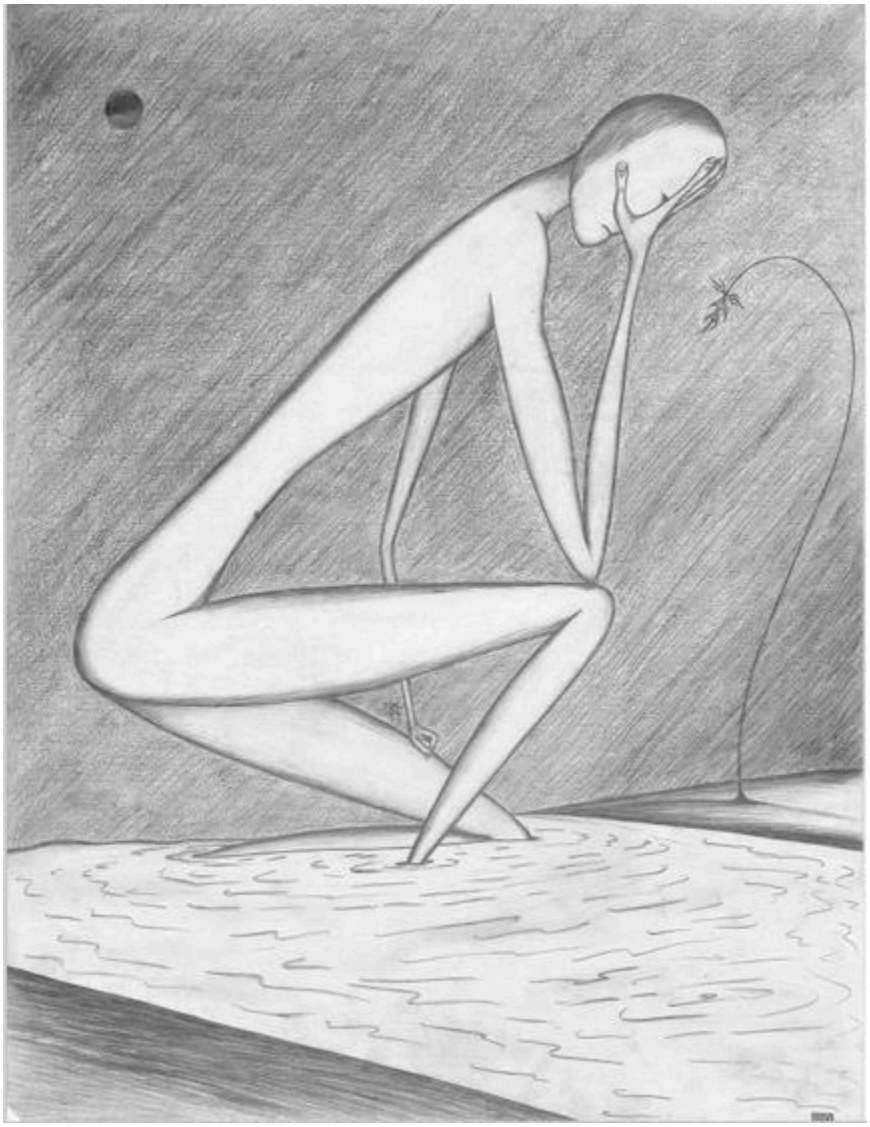
just being her usual self, telling a little innocent lie to see his reaction first before she broke any taboo in the town of Shithole.
Two years have passed now in the town of Shithole. Bible had just recently gotten out of a minimum-security prison that was more of a mental institution than anything. 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.

Legion

"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?"

"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 Mammon will help us with the monetary elements of our work in the Land of Nod. Mammon is a friend of the Articulate One and a friend of 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."

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.

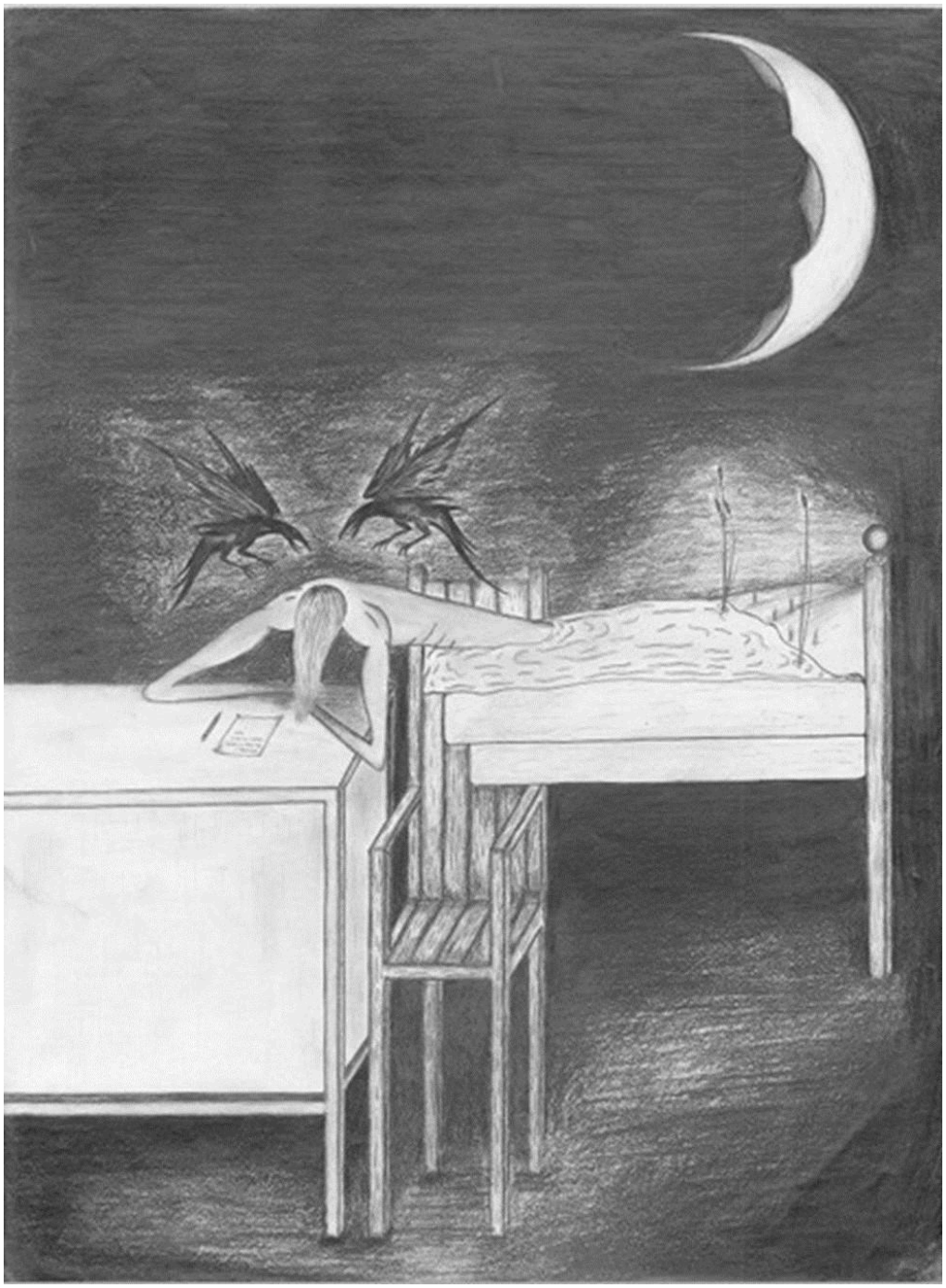
I was sentenced and barred from the institution. I was excommunicated. Violence begets violence. In a rage, I burned every memento of my dead youth: writings, drawings, and music, all a log of deadwood. I sought to destroy the memory of my survival. In the beginning, the institution was home, but now 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.

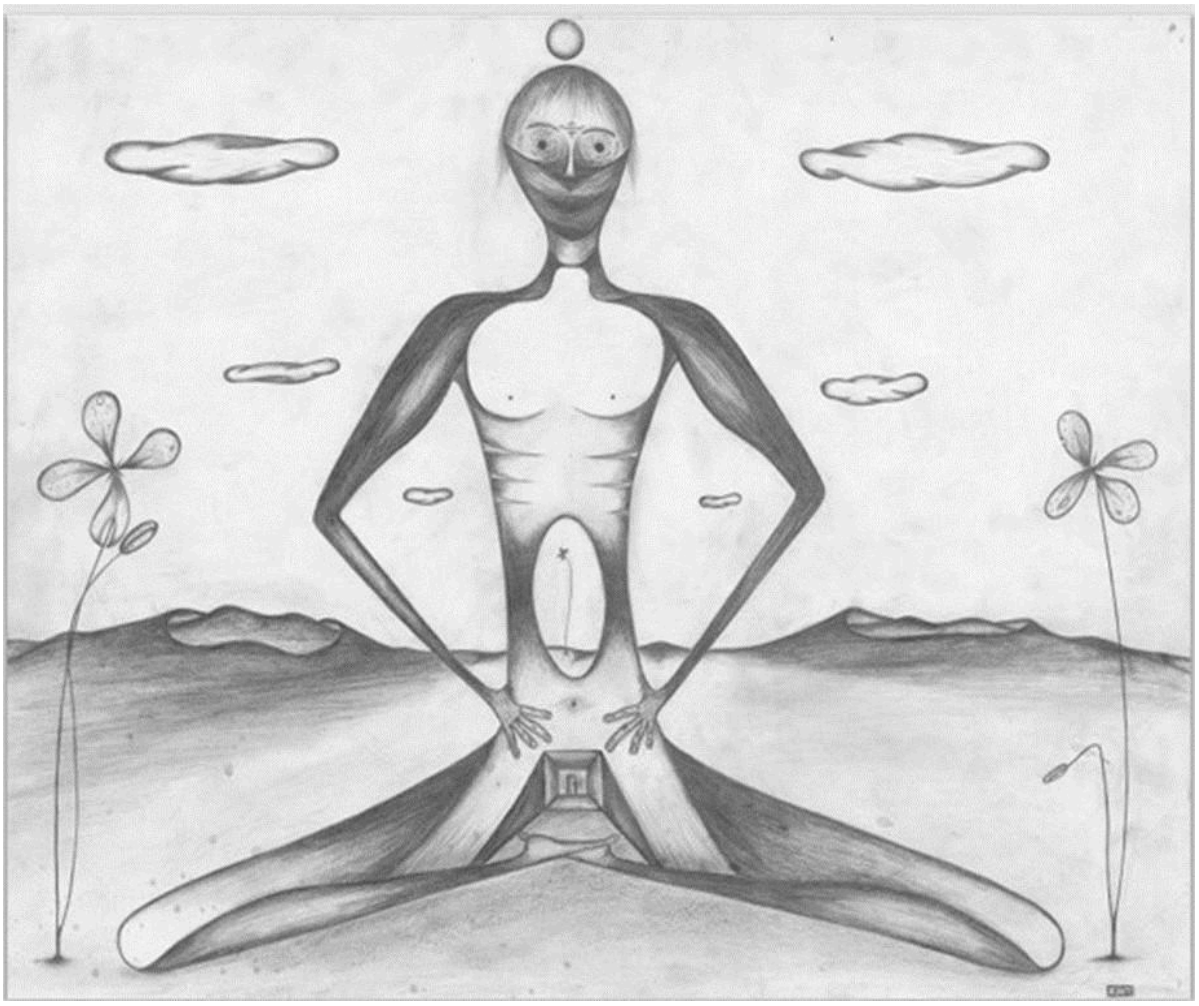
"Right or left?" She asked.
"I don't know?" Paranoia pulsed through my mind.
Air turned right, though I anticipated she'd turn left. I looked for an exit. We pulled off on a leaf covered road and hid. The car chasing us sped ahead out of sight.
People down the road came walking out of the woods to see 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 them.



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*)

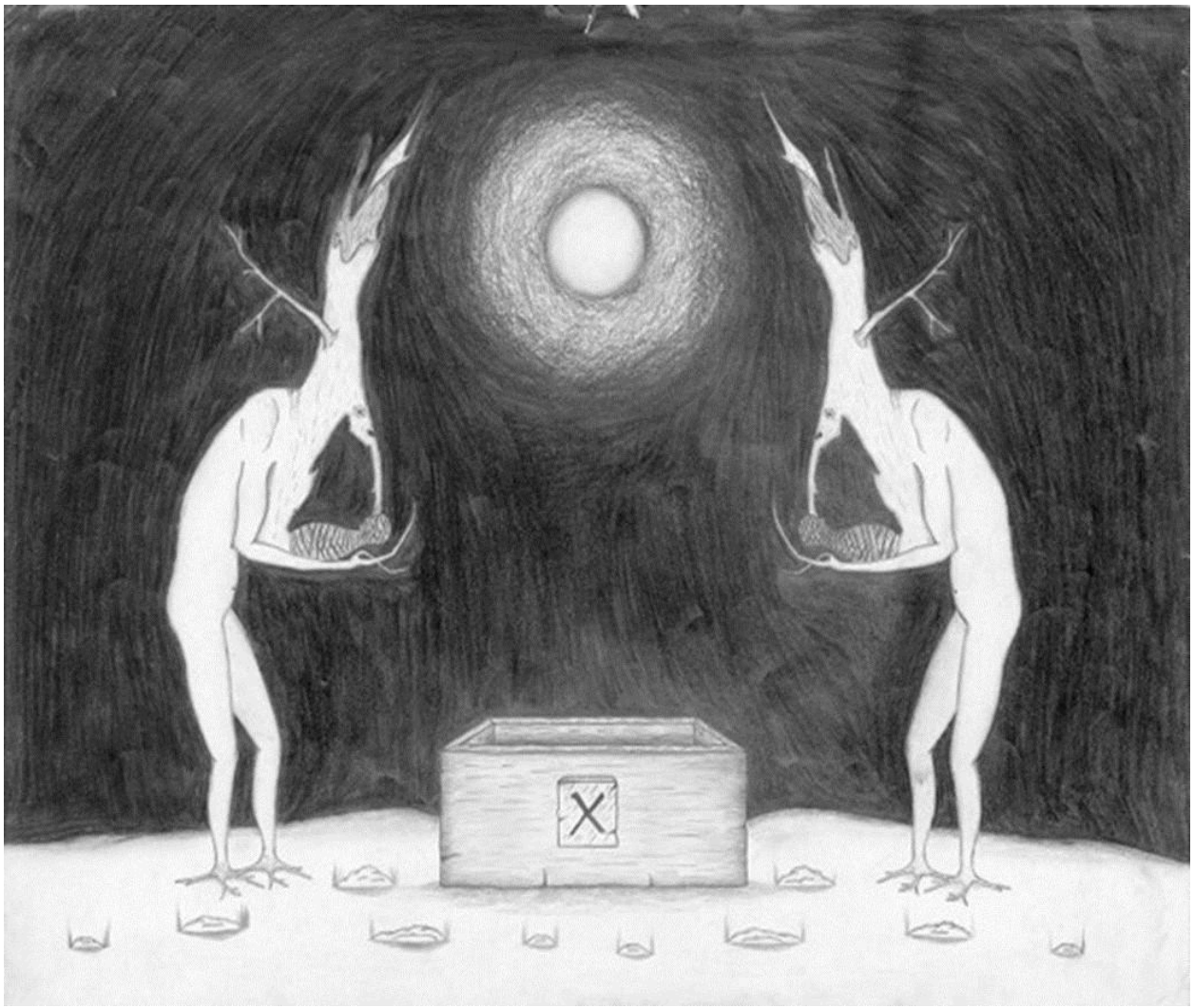
The Patient

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 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. And what was a corporation but evil bureaucratic machinations of sinister and insidious and arcane proportions: it was the *Great Machine*.

Gestalt

It was the Freethought Watchmen of Cabal, whose vigil was a paranoiac and critical method, and which made up the Gestalt: an organization whose motto was: the sum of an individual's worth is greater than the sum of the group's whole but only it is in relation to him…
R. was blacklisted as a Freethinker, and the more R. pushed back on the Gestalt, the stronger the Gestalt became. It was said that Freethought was considered a "figment of a false reality" and any one engaged in Freethought would be rounded up and shot by a firing squad. Although R. was marched before the executioners, and he would be soon after reprieved. But, instead, R. learned that harbingers of Freethought were considered guilty by Freethought itself, and would be given a dose of Enditall and put to sleep, if not for the fact that the Gestalt feared them insomuch as they were only freethinkers, and slaves to nothing but this fleeting thought itself: *sapere aude*!

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.

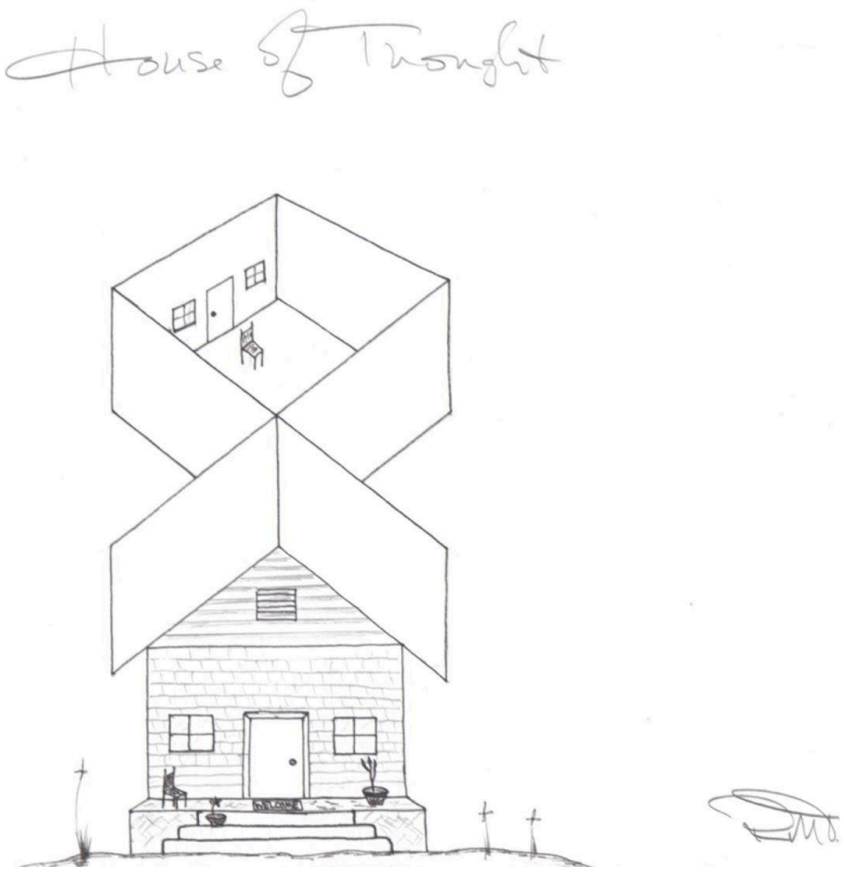
I paced the room endlessly. I picked up my blue ball, but it was different. I opened my hand, and it fell to the floor, where it bounced into the corner. There it would remain. I could not stand to look at it. It was no friend of mine. It only brought me pain, gave me Hope, and then stole it away again.

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…

Part Two:

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.

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.

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 the place's existence all along: It was just a dock with a rope strung out across the water into the fog. Rip approached the dock with an elevator that went nowhere in particular… and the gatekeeper appeared out of the fog. He introduced himself as Ward. He told him 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 to the Underground… I have a friend I need to fetch from God," Rip said.

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

And they 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.

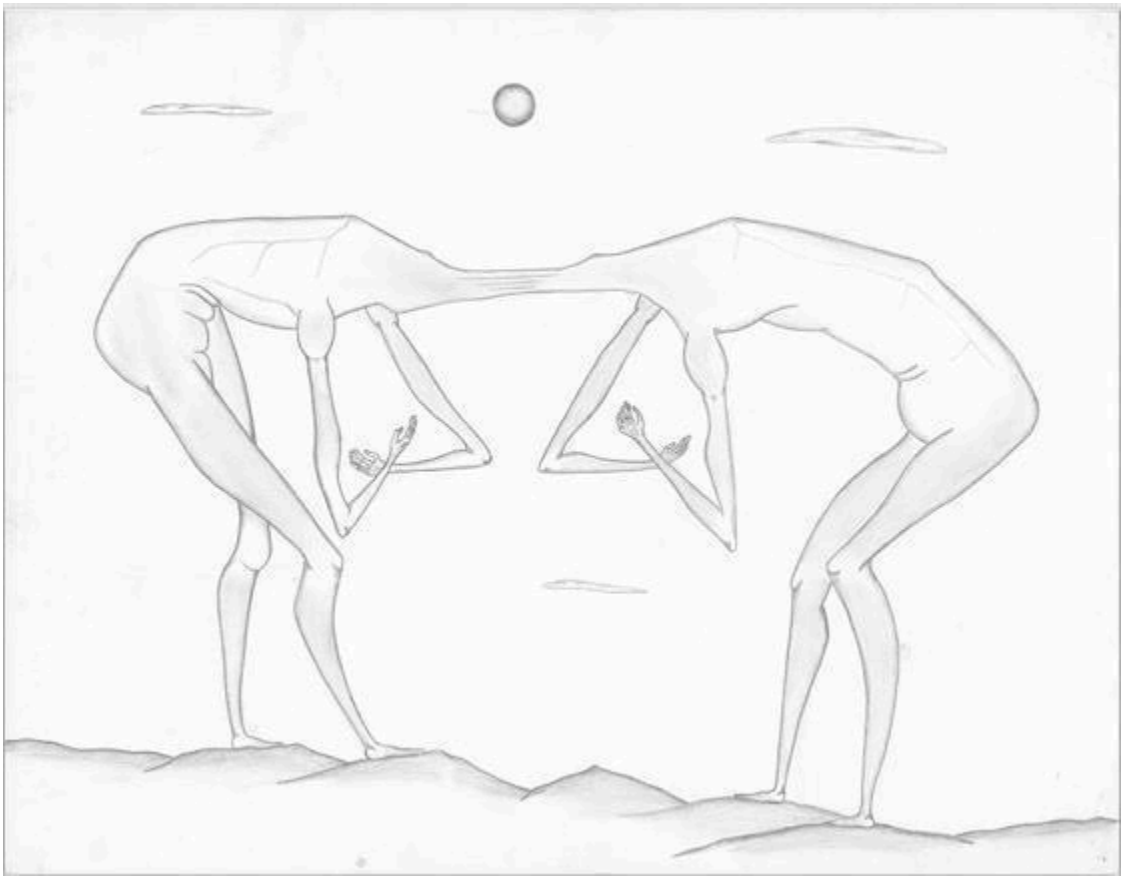
Either way, they were in a dangerous situation, and Rip shut down from fear. Rip had given Elder his AK-47 rifle to defend them when they first left the open field. Elder had a .44

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 Natives 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 native 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.

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.

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.*

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 Gus, Rob, and I, and even old Wit 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, Wade, it becomes in the subliming of the Stone a way of thinking, just like you learned a way of thinking at the University." Gus went on.
"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 Wit 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 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 Stone's 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 have been here alive and all the rest besides you and I and Rob are dust: what then is left but suffering?" I asked Gus.
"Well, don't worry, brother! That's why I included the Elixir, 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 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. Wordsmith… we know that there is a Stone, and we have drunk from its Waters. 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."
"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 'tweaking' 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 him convinced to trade it to me for the recipe for the Blood Stone residue from the Runestone, as he thinks it true just like the Cabalists. Hell, if I'd him I would find Sasquatch shit and put it in it for longevity, Log 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!"
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.

Einsiedler

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.

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 End-it-all, a dose of Euthanol to end one's misery was a concept of the future, the euthanasia of the invalids and wretched was a fantasy of societies from the beginning of time, 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 as a mere animal, a dog."

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.

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.

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:

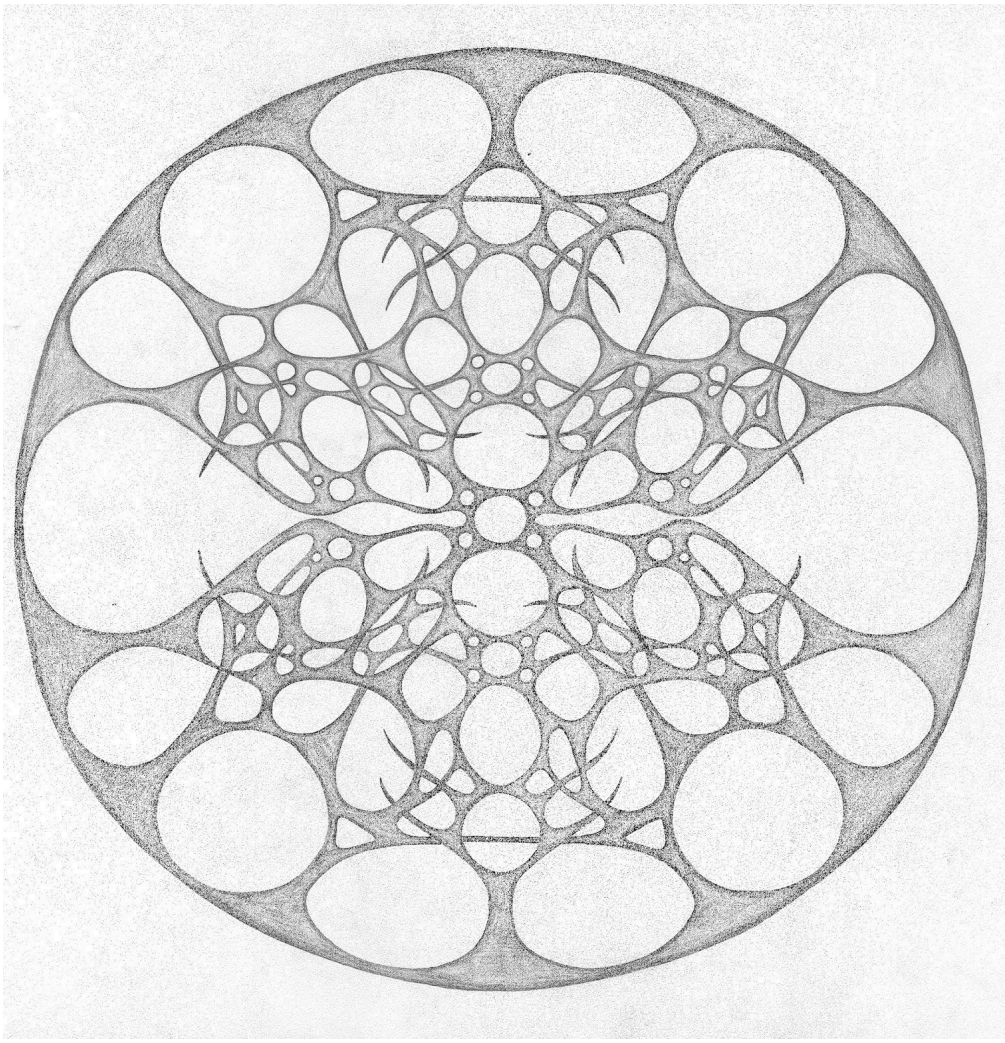
"I punished Mr. Stricter for his own good."

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 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 these elixirs! The morning of birth from a night of terror, and with my wife in a delusional upheaval; these are the remnants of psychosis; all the madness and mood from a single substance. I wondered what I would miss most about the inebriation, and without my vice what would I be. I cannot imagine that I would be wholly emancipated. But what freedom is it that it is given then taken away, only to be given it again, not ever fully recovered of the toxins. Now what to do? It seems easier to abstain to begin with, with intermittent temptations over the course of a month, which I had given in to, only to abstain again. It's not over until it's over, but when is it over. I say it's over after a month, then somewhat over after 2 months, and again after three and six months and then finally to an end after nine and then twelve months. But it is simpler on the inside, knowing that it's over after the paranoid critical moment of my last purchase of the dxm. What I have discovered is that I am the God of my own understanding. And what I gather from this is that I am the will and I am the power; I can recover myself from this state, and I am not powerless.



Catharsis (full circle)