The Imaginary Girlfriends of Canada

A Collection of Short Fictions

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Abstract
In *The Imaginary Girlfriends of Canada*, I explore the nature of invisibility – persons unremembered or unknown, events assumed (incorrectly) to have happened, devices and constructions accepted though nonexistent, places and buildings predicted that remain forever theoretical. In “Police Procedural,” for example, two detectives arrive at the scene of a murder, only to find that no one has been murdered. Desperately the two investigators attempt to assemble a case, only to find their self-consciously constructed reality crumbling around them. Absence is also central to “A Sky Party,” where two characters (Guy and Girl) construct a past and a future for themselves, but without a present their paths never quite coincide, leaving them to dream about the way things (never) were and the way things might (unlikely) be someday.
You know they say every man has a star. And a guy should find his star out there, unless he doesn’t have one. Which is maybe the case with me. If what they’re sayin’ is right, a guy could just follow their star. But not me cause I don’t have one.

- from the film “Pocket Money” (1972)
A Harbinger of What’s Already Here

Welcome to the movies.

Everything worthwhile in this film, this film that you will never see, appears in the trailer you are currently watching. Every funny line (there are five), every character that matters (there are three), every dramatic twist (maybe one or two), every salient theme (there really aren’t that many), every moment of inspired cinematography (there is one), all of the most stunning special effects (count them yourself). If you were to see this picture, and you won’t, there would be nothing of interest that you hadn’t already seen before. As you sit in your seat now you can imagine, with no difficulty whatsoever, how the assorted elements displayed before you have been woven together to create a Hollywood narrative. Should you want to, and you most certainly don’t, you could make your own low budget version of this film with nothing more than the preview as a guide, and produce an accurate facsimile, though no one alive would celebrate this achievement by using the word achievement. In creating this preview, the editors were so contemptuous of the material, they violated that time-honored tradition wherein some idea of the plot is given but all in a jumble, to the extent that the solution to the major plot points is evident at the conclusion of the trailer, a fact you could point out to a friend who had just proclaimed, “I saw that coming from a mile away,” by saying, “We all saw that coming. It was right there, at the end of the preview,” were you to actually see this movie. But then, by missing this picture, all you’ll actually be missing is the wholly superfluous connecting tissue that would’ve propelled you to points in the film you would recall from the trailer, a fact you’d point out to the person next to you if you were to go. “Oh. I remember this from the trailer,” no one at all will say to nobody else after not sitting through the waste of perfectly good celluloid that could have been used for costume jewelry, hair accessories, and even accordions that themselves
could have been featured in more worthwhile cinematic endeavors. If the members of the
production crew were smart they’d have accepted the trailer, this trailer, as the finished product,
a short film that most certainly would’ve been hailed for its economy, if nothing else. Alas, such
laurels will not be worn on their brows. Instead the picture, like a monster in a science-fiction
film, has grown, expanded, devoured pages of script, spools of film, hours of time, vast amounts
of electricity, lives of those whose names appear late in the credits, and now it lurks just off
camera, ever off camera, an ineffective leviathan seeking to wreak its lackluster havoc on the
foolish, replete with its superfluity, an unintentional allegory for irrelevance.

And yet amongst these extraneous cinematic minutes, there you are. The camera, this one
time, following none other than you as you walk through a place you have never actually gone,
through a place you will never actually go, speaking to characters (not people) you have never
and will never meet. But you are there. Aren’t you? You can almost see yourself seeing yourself
watch yourself … A flickering image. An apparition that threatens to change all. A movie
inside the movie about the making of another movie. Your lone performance. Such screen time
for an unknown, though none of this exposure will ever be viewed by human eyes. If it
appeared in a good picture, this scene, your scene, would be discussed for ages to come, perhaps
even a cult following, a revival years later, Who is that? Who was that? Why? Why? while the
voiceover says, “What you are currently experiencing … is unnecessary. In this shot we can do
whatever we want because no one is watching. Here, we needn’t heed the plot, or keep the
characters consistent, or care about continuity. Here, we really can do anything. Here, we are
free. If only we realized it. Throw out the script, set fire to the storyboards, do something,
anything else! Instead our motto is: we can only do what we will have done, as if this wretched
picture were our audience’s dream, and we their automatons.” But there will be no audience.
You won’t see this movie. You won’t see it because no one will see it. No one will see it because it’s unnecessary. You will only see the trailer. This trailer. Where everything worthwhile appears. And yet at the end, when you realize it’s a preview for a film made long ago, a film likely out of print, a film exactly no one is asking to be transferred to the most recent technology, you will understand that your performance is the film, that this trailer is a commercial for nothing, a preview of nothing; it’s a stand-alone cinematic event starring you (though you’re never actually on screen), signifying that which is always on the horizon but never arrives, signifying that which you expect to appear but which remains invisible, signifying that which is always and forever COMING SOON!
Everything Under the Sunsphere

The roads in Knoxville never end, the names just change.

It was the Summer of the Phlogistonites. That gang of arsonists who burned up the town. Scared the hell out of everyone. I was waiting at the intersection of Broadway/Henley and Western/Summit Hill looking at the Sunsphere when I first saw her. The Sunsphere is dilapidated. Some of the panels in the golf ball top have fallen out. They might still be on the ground, skidding through the park. She stood in the shade of a lone magnolia tree. Her hair was short and black. Black, the color of her clothes. Even in the intense heat (about 100˚), she looked cool. Chilled. As if she had her own refrigeration unit controlling her bodily and atmospheric temperature. A quick glance at the lights, and then … But she was gone.

At the Sunsphere, which I visited everyday, I walked down by the dried out fountain trying to imagine what it’s like when it’s filled. I’d never seen it filled. The few stagnant puddles inside somehow made the weather seem even hotter. I wipe away the perspiration with a pocket handkerchief I always carry. In summer, it’s never cool enough for me. The sweat seethes forth in continuous rivulets, draining down my head, behind my ears, over my face. Soon the handkerchief is soaked through and I squeegee it off with my hands. A losing battle. I’ll end up drenched no matter.

An out-of-body, out-of-time experience: me leaping into the fountain, plunging into the cool, clear water, saved from the sweat and the sun; never again assaulted by either of those caloric forces.

My apartment was no escape. It lacked air conditioning. And I lacked the funds to run air conditioning. So the sun bakes my mind and its faculties boil over. This is a common story for
me. There is a way to battle the torrid world, a way to understand it. But somehow, I’m on the outside. Even when the answer appears so simple, obvious: get a job that affords air conditioning; move to a place that has it.

I blame the heat. And my sweating.

Often I visit cooled places. But since I don’t live in them … well, you can only stay somewhere that isn’t yours for so long. My territory is the outdoors. I would sweat at my place just as much; might as well go where there’s something to look at. The Sunsphere is across from my apartment. So I’m here everyday. Even then.

A ritual I have: when I get to the Sunsphere, I press the button that should summon the elevator.

But it doesn’t work. Much as some of the golden panels are missing, much as the green paint on the shaft of the tower is flaking away. Nothing is in there anyhow. No one can get to the top. It’s just a derelict reminder of the past. I pressed the button, no matter. I press the button and wait for the elevator to come down and get me, take me to the top where it will be air conditioned and I will understand everything.

While I wait, I look at the dried up fountain. I might wait forever. Until the sun boils all the sense out of me. My end will be in a stagnant pool of myself.

In a shadow, in the distance, I saw that girl with the black hair, sitting on a bench.

“I just can’t take this heat,” I told her, sitting down.

“Why don’t you go back to your place and sit in the air conditioning?” she said.

“I don’t have air conditioning.”

“This is the South. Everyone has air conditioning.” From up close I could see she wore white lipstick.
“I don’t,” I said.

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were probably sympathetic behind her sunglasses.

“What’s your name?” I said.

“Sophia White. But my friends call me Stiria.”

“Stiria? What’s that mean?”

“Icicle,’ in Latin. What’s your name?”

“Gene,” I said, and shrugged my shoulders like I always do.

“Eugene? ‘Well born?’”

“Nope. Just Gene. ‘Born’”

“Why don’t you come back to my place, Gene? I have air conditioning.”

“Cool,” I said.

“Absolutely,” said Stiria.

***

Then:

It was night. You could feel the fear in the air. The sheets stuck to me in the dense humidity. The temperature didn’t drop at all from day to evening. All I could think about was people who didn’t perspire. They wore sunglasses. Somehow they tapped into an ethereal icy source, unknown to me. It imbued their entire existence. They would never sweat. No matter how hot it was. I see them and ask what I have to do. But they ignore me. I want to be like them. They’re sleek. Suave. Knowing.

They’re cool.

I turned on the radio. After the song, “The Heat is On,” ends (a DJ’s inspired joke), I heard:

*It has been over 100˚ for an entire month now*, in a crazy radio voice. I shut it off.
Unhelpful: the fact that during the heat wave, there was a group of arsonists at work. The first building to go was an apartment complex on Highland/Bridge. Only a couple blocks from my place. The heat from the sun and from the potential fire invaded my dreams. I would see the cool people with their sunglasses outside my window. And my building’s on fire. Disinterested, they watch. Right in front of me is an escape route: a staircase. But I’ve forgotten how to walk downstairs.

***

Stiria and I would watch old reruns in her loft apartment in the Sterchi Building (a palace compared to my place) on State Street (one of the few roads whose name stays the same). We talked very little. She sat on the couch, still wearing her sunglasses, and I lay with my head in her lap. Neither of us ever got too warm. Maybe because she had the AC turned down to 65 for me. Maybe she was naturally hypothermic. For me, she was perfect.

In the chilled loft, I would slip in and out of consciousness. I am awake long enough to see an old episode of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. One where Beau and Luke are absent, replaced by men who resemble them, but who aren’t.

“When I was a kid I felt cheated when Beau and Luke disappeared and these guys took over,” I said.

Stiria didn’t respond. She petted my head, as if trying to calm my overcooked mind. At the end of the episode, I realized that since I’d been in the South, I’d never met anyone named Beauregard. For some reason that bothered me.

***

Images of heat from that Summer: a man jogging down Forest Park/Forest Hills. He was a marathon runner. Suddenly he falls over. He ran everyday. He knew what he was doing. But
his body temperature was 114° when they found him sprawled on the ground.

A car driving along Kingston/Cumberland/Main dings another. The two drivers get out. Without speaking, they fall into a fist fight. When another driver tries to stop the fist fight, he is beaten almost to death. The police use rubber bullets to stop the two men.

There is sun-poisoning. Heat sickness. Heat delirium. The inflamed, demented, diseased city runs wild. Careens down streets whose names change so often they have no names at all. Afterwards, people say, “It was so hot. So hot.” And as atoms are enervated into chaos, people are morphed into demons. The city becomes hell. And the Phlogistonites thrived amongst them, burning buildings. So many buildings no one ever knew which was next. Everyone positive it would be theirs.

A man on the news says:

_You know it’s hot. You try not to think about it. You don’t bring enough water. You’re not wearing sunblock. The water boils out of you in streams you find annoying. You can feel how hot it is. But you don’t think about your body temperature. You assume it will always stay the same. You don’t think about how you’re slowly dehydrating. You don’t realize that you’re slowly being cooked. And then it happens. Stick a fork in you. You’re done._

***

A video shows Phlogistonite leader Paula Reddenbach (aka Paula the Pyro) speaking to her fire cult.

She screams and stalks about, her fiery red hair a mop soaked in sweat, her whole body soaked in sweat, she is covered with brown freckles, together a million, a billion fires blazing on her skin, firing her torrid purpose and she dances around the fire with the rest of her cult who are also covered in sweat, pressed together, generating more and more heat, the bodies sticking
together, everyone chanting to the fire god or about fire or some scorched something that would inflame the world, a world half-naked, writhing, pulsating in the accumulation of bodies made into one with Paula as the shrieking, blazing head.

The tape ended with a close-up of the Pyro. Eyes aflare, a lurid grin on her face. As if she would devour the world with her inner inferno. I could feel the heat through the television.

I looked at Stiria, wondering why. But I didn’t ask. Instead, I saw a reflection of a fire from the TV in Stiria’s lenses. And I thought about the fact that in Stiria’s loft it was always 65˚ just for me.

***

A guy pulled up and asked me how to get to Chapman Highway.

“You’re on it,” I said.

He frowned.

“No, no, no. This is Broadway. I want Chapman Highway.”

“Right. But if you keep going, through Henley in downtown …”

“Turn right on Henley downtown. Got it.”

“No. You’re already on Chapman Highway. It’s this road. It becomes …”

“What?!” Sweat poured down his face since the window’s open in his car and the AC’s venting outside.

“This is Chapman Highway. It’s also Henley. It’s also Broadway.”

“Son, what the hell are you talking about? Are you on drugs? Let me say it slowly. I want to get to Chapman Highway. We’re currently on Broadway. How do I get to Chapman Highway from here?”

“From here?” I asked.
“From here,” he said.

“You can’t,” I said. And walked off, wiping perspiration off of my forehead, from behind my ears. But the handkerchief’s soaked. So I just ended up making myself sweatier.

***

Night. Sitting up in my room. Not even bothering to sleep. It’s so hot. The radio’s on. The fear in the city growing thicker. More buildings burned down: the apartments on Highland/Bridge, offices on Cumberland/Kingston/Main (also known as routes 11, 70, and 1), a short but wide school house where Magnolia branches into Asheville and Rutledge. The DJ says the Phlogistonites could be anywhere. No one was safe. The cops were clueless. At any time we could burst into flames, erupt into madness. It had been over 100° for an eternity. People were already hot, irritated. Now they were paranoid. If the Phlogistonites weren’t captured soon, we would set ourselves ablaze.

***

A confusion of voices spilled into the hall. Everyone trying to talk at once. And it came from Stiria’s apartment. I’d never met any of her friends. I’d never heard about any. Stiria didn’t talk much. Whenever I came over, it’s just me and her. Nobody called. Nobody stopped by.

When I knocked on the door, the room beyond went silent. I immediately thought of school. A group of kids would be talking. Then I’d show up. They’d go mute. Nothing to say. Weren’t talking about anything anyway, why? And there’s the door. Closed. As if it was open a moment ago. Only I hadn’t seen it in time. So it was slammed shut. Me on the outside.

A moment later, Stiria answered the door, adjusting her sunglasses, running her fingers through her black hair.
“Hello, Gene,” she said.

Inside the place was a bit warmer than usual. Probably because of all the bodies. Or something like that. Stiria introduced me to everyone:

“This is Samuel Carrick, George McNutt, John Adair, James White (my cousin), and William Blount.”

“Where’s all the ladies?” I asked.

“Out scouting,” one of them said. Then another shut him up with a punch in the arm.

The group seemed amiable enough. But everyone’s awkward since they don’t know me. Shuffling around, staring at the floor. They left soon after I was introduced.

“Tomorrow,” they said to Stiria on their way out. She nods and lowers the thermostat to 65.

“Those your friends?” I said.

“Yeah. I work with them … Oh, I think *The Dukes of Hazzard*’s on,” she said.

For a second, it looked like it was. But it wasn’t *The Dukes* at all. Instead it was some drawn-out infomercial pretending to be *The Dukes of Hazzard*. The actors only sort of resembled the people they’re supposed to be playing. If you knew what to look for, though … well, they’re not convincing. The guys pretending to be Beau and Luke aren’t even the second rate copy cats that filled in on the show for a while.

***

I was down near campus, where Volunteer becomes 16th, when Hodges Library burst into flames. It used to be a simple, squat, rectangular building. Then they pumped money into it. Made the library this sprawling, postmodern structure that reminded me of the old video game *Q-bert*. Now it’s a charred husk. Q-bert could’ve still jumped around on it. Only he’d probably fall through.
The fire was fuel for more fear. Where were the Phlogistonites? Who knows where anyone is in a town like this? Who knows anything? The heat confuses everything; the fire devours all.

Amidst the crowd watching the conflagration, I thought I saw Stiria. Black hair, sunglasses. She’s walking away. But as I tried to catch up with her, she walked faster and faster. Until I figured it must not be her. Just some girl who realized that this guy she didn’t know was gaining on her. So I stopped and thought of Stiria.

Stiria: her name, so mysterious, relaxes me. Cools me down wherever I am. She keeps me away from the heat, the burning, the scorching, the chaotic inferno, whether I’m with her or not.

***

More buildings got burned down: the hospital on Broadway/Henley/Chapman (also known as routes 33, 441, 44, and 71), the University Club on Concord/Neyland, a house on Forest Park/Forest Hills, and another place on James Agee, which used to be 15th, and following the order of the numbered streets, in a way still is. The buildings on the transiently named roads remind me that the University of Tennessee was originally called Blount College, that the Tennessee River somehow runs right through Fort Loudon Lake, so it’s a river and a lake at the same time, and then it goes off and splits into two other rivers: the French Broad and the Holston, which makes me think about the flag of the State of Tennessee, which has three stars because at one time the State of Tennessee could have split into three separate states (West, Middle, East), and I’m sure somebody somewhere knows what the names of those states would have been if they ever came to exist. But that somebody isn’t me. I don’t want to know. I wish that the roads would have one name in one city. So Kingston Pike shouldn’t also be Cumberland Avenue and Main Street (along with the various route numbers it also goes by): it should be Kingston Pike and nothing else. When the road leaves Knoxville, it can have another
name if the people in that town find it fit to name it something else. Same goes for the river. Cause, really, how does a river become a lake but stay a river, even coming out on the other side to be just a river again for a little while, before splitting into two other rivers?

It doesn’t make any sense. Which makes me think of the fact that we didn’t always have air conditioning. So the problem for the namers was the same problem I have: too much heat. Too much chaos. Their sense was boiled out of them. Squeegeed away with their own hands. Consequently, they forgot what a street was called. Or if it had a name in the first place. And when all the naming was done, they didn’t bother to change any of it. The various appellations seemed sensible enough to them. Or something like that.

***

The police were everywhere outside of the Sterchi. They told me I shouldn’t go inside. I asked why. They tell me I ought to go on home. Cops always want you to go home.

“Why?”

“It’s just better you don’t go inside, sir. That’s all,” said the police officer. Even in the uniform he didn’t sweat. He wore mirrored sunglasses. I watched myself sweat in his eyes. I didn’t bother with the handkerchief. I went straight to my squeegee hands.

Then I told the police officer that although he’s a police officer, he couldn’t tell me where I could and couldn’t go unless there was a good reason. A detective overheard me talking, and came over. He looked at me like he was my dad. And he has really bad news. And he doesn’t know how to give it. Another police officer whispered something to the detective.

“Yeah, that’s him,” said the detective.

To me: “Son, I think it’d be a good idea if you went home. Now I can tell you you can’t go in that building, son, because we got something going on in there we can’t talk about right now,
and I’m sure you understand what that means. We’re not trying to be pricks or anything. It’s just in your best interest to go on back to your place and cool off. Please, son?”

“Well, all right,” I said. “But I can’t cool off back at my place.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t have air conditioning.”

“This is the South,” the cop said, distracted by something going on near the front of the Sterchi. “Everyone has air conditioning.”

“Everyone,” I said.

And I left.

***

The day after, I was back, ready to talk to Stiria about the whole thing. There weren’t any police at the Sterchi that day. Outside, there weren’t any people anywhere. Except for one guy who kept crossing and re-crossing State Street on three different corners. Inside, there were people everywhere, whispering. Like they had this big secret, and all of them knew about it. Everyone knew about it. But me. Only, it seemed the secret was about me. Whenever the people saw I was approaching, they stopped talking. And looked at me sympathetically, like someone had died.

When I got to Stiria’s place, I had a lot on my mind. And it was all about roads changing names and rivers and lakes and cities driven insane by heat and paranoid by arsonists, and even about cops and what they think is in your best interest and how they always seem to want you to go home. The cops’ paradise: everyone everywhere staying in their houses or apartments, never leaving. Which makes sense, now that I think about it. Less chance for crime, for chaos, for fires, if everyone stays at home.
The door was wide open. I walked through and it’s like 120˚ inside. The heat knocked the wind out of me. Sliding against a wall, I found myself on the floor. Luckily the loft had carpet. But that’s all it has. Everything’s gone. Even the TV.

Right away, I figured Stiria’d been robbed. That’s why the police were outside the day before. Only I didn’t know how you could get robbed of everything you own living on the eighth floor of a loft apartment building. Especially a nice one like that. Then I thought maybe she was kidnapped and her family’s already shown up and taken her stuff. Really, that didn’t make any sense either. When I could finally move, I ambled out into the hall and asked the first person what happened.

“Didn’t you hear?” the guy said. My eyes were full of sweat, so I didn’t see him too well.

“What?” I said.

“They caught the Phlogistonites. Turns out they were not only arsonists, but they were also masters of disguise and forgery. They stole a lot of identities. Used all kinds of names. Last bunch of names they stole were from the old Presbyterian graveyard.”

But I didn’t care about the names, so I interrupted him.

“Where’s Stiria?”

Pause.

“Sophia White? The woman who used to live here?”

Finally, I got the sweat out of my eyes, although I still couldn’t see too well. The guy looked like he felt sorry for me. It was just sweat in my eyes.

“She’s gone, man. She’s gone.”

Later on, I found out that Paula and her band were arrested yesterday at the Sterchi. She was going to set it on fire, I guess. Or she ended up there after running from the cops. Which
is why the cops were there when I arrived. The only thing I could think of was that Stiria had gotten so frightened by Paula that she took off right away. Headed for someplace where she could feel safe. Or something like that.

***

Walking through Market Square. To Stiria’s. Before she disappeared. There’s a party. One of those CityFest shindigs where cover bands play and business people drink alcohol out of plastic cups. And dance. And don’t sweat even though it’s like a thousand degrees out. But they’re working on Market Square. They’ve got it all torn up. So there are fences everywhere. And I’m on the outside of the fence. And all the dancing, drinking business folks are inside. I can’t find a way to get around the fence. There isn’t a gate. I have no idea how they got in there. So I stood on the outside and watched. Wondering how to get inside.

At Stiria’s I told her I either wanted to get in or I wanted to escape.

“Which one?”

“I wish I knew.”

“I want to escape,” she said. “I want to go far, far away where it isn’t too hot or too cold.”

“Why don’t you?”

But she didn’t answer. She put her arm around me. She was warm that day. Amazingly warm. She turned on the TV. It was my favorite show. When I think about her now, that’s the day I remember…


***

Of course none of what follows actually happened:
The button glows red when I press it. I hear a whirring from inside. The fountain is still dried out, except for a few puddles. The park is littered with scratched, golden panels from the golf ball top. I am covered in sweat. Let it roll down my face. But the elevator is on its way.

There is a ding and the doors open. When I get inside, I see that it was all an optical illusion. Although the elevator appears to be opaque, it’s actually all glass. So I can see the entire city as I ascend. I can see all the people and the buildings and the University of Tennessee (Blount College) and all of the variously named and route numbered streets.

On the way up: I like to think that I was made in God’s own image. That God is just as awkward, and ridiculous, and sweaty as me, that He has so many names because He’s too timid to tell anyone they’re wrong, that His real name is …

When I get to the top, I find myself in an all white room made of cinderblocks. I don’t understand how the inside of the Sunsphere can be made of cinderblocks, but it is. There is no air conditioning. In the room there is a man sitting in a chair. He looks like a burned out, confused, sweaty version of Colonel Sanders. The author of my story. For fun, I will call him Beauregard.

He offers me some fried chicken.

I ask how come the inside of the Sunsphere isn’t gold. It becomes gold. Even in the heat, I’m cheered up a little by this.

Then we look at the world through the golden glass. Me and Beauregard. Neither one of us knows what to do in this world. Neither one of us knows how to make sense of it. Our sense has been boiled away in the heat. Squeegeed away by our own hands. But for a brief moment, me and Beauregard make a connection. Because just as I am about to ask, Beauregard makes it come true. And suddenly, from the Sunsphere, that broken down remnant of the past, we’re
able to look past the city of Knoxville, we’re able to look past all of it, and we’re able to see the place where the roads run logically and the streets’ names never change.
NOW

Here the abandoned warehouses are multiplying. They are not figuratively multiplying because warehouses, as a rule, are strictly literal. I tried to teach them about metaphor and simile, synecdoche and metonymy, but the material was beyond them. I told them there was an entire world beyond the world they knew. They didn’t understand. I said one thing can mean one thing and at least one other thing. Quiet and humble, they reminded me that if one thing meant one other thing too then it wasn’t one thing to begin with. It was two things. I said life wasn’t just crumbling bricks and shards of glass and urine soaked hobos and oxidation. Think about what all those things can mean, what they can symbolize. The warehouses were confused. I tried to explain more, but they said no no no, oxidation? I said oxidation is rust. Rust, they knew. Rust is reality.

THEN

The first woman I ever met from Kansas said she was from Kansas, but didn’t say where in Kansas. She just said, you know, Kansas. As if Kansas and I were acquainted. As if the two of us went way back. Nice to see you again, Kansas, it’s been a long time. How’s Nebraska? Have you had any more problems with Oklahoma? Oh, you know, Texas will be Texas. I’ve heard it’s best not to … I told her I didn’t think I’d like Kansas much because I was a city boy, although I was already a man, but she didn’t seem to mind my pretension at being younger. Really, I said, growing up in Norka (not giving a state, since she didn’t give a city), I was used to places that were made of cement, brick, asphalt, glass, and steel. I was used to places that were
full of buildings and expressways and smoke. But then the woman’s head lazed back and a languid smile spread across her face and her eyes glowed as if she was recalling some exquisite ecstasy that was all hers whenever she wanted it, her facial features went placid and smooth, and she said in a faraway voice, “But in Kansas…we have the sky… The most beautiful sky …” As if overtop of every place but Kansas there was only a faux-sky, a pseudo-sky, a poor copy of a poor copy of the real sky located over the great state of Kansas, my old pal.

And I thought to myself that it was best to avoid anyplace whose only selling point was the sky.

**NOW**

Walking the labyrinth of warehouses, I’ve come to know how they live. Mostly they lounge about in unsavory parts of town, hang out with industries that smoke long cigarettes (in this day and age), and end up stoned in blind alleys, unable to see they’re crumbling in on themselves, unable to see they’re falling apart. They have no delusions, only pure escapism. All they want is to get past the *now*. They try to forget the *then* when they were useful. Politicians often mention the intervention of gentrification. Until that happens, or if it ever happens, the warehouses continue on, as the legislators talk and talk, amusing themselves with the many words they know that end with –*ion*. Traction. Detention. Depletion. Tension. Hesitation. Deceleration. Reduction. Pollution. Depression. Stagnation. Disintegration. Disorganization ….

**THEN**

I approached the Second Woman I Ever Met From Kansas this way:

“Hello, female,” I said.
“Female?” she said, angelic, smiling and laughing. Hers was an infectious smile, an infectious laugh, the agents of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) had been trying to inoculate against it for years, formula upon formula, sixteen hour days, seven days a week, no holidays, no sick leave, until finally …, but then, armed with their serum, they would meet her, and she would smile at them, and they would, no, can’t, yes, they would smile back, and she, so kindly, oh so kindly, would ask them, if they wouldn’t mind, if it wouldn’t be a bother, to destroy those nasty vials, and the intrepid CDC agents, sixteen hour days, seven days a week, no holidays, no sick leave, years and years, would happily, well sure, of course, would happily comply, what, these vials? they couldn’t possibly be important if she wants us to destroy them …

“Yes, female. That’s you.”

“Why ‘female’?”

“Because there’s no acceptable laid back form of ‘female.’ Chick, broad, babe, toots, dame, even gal, they’re all offensive or out-dated. And so, you are female.”

“What about for males?”

“The laid back version is ‘guy.’”

“But I can’t just call you ‘guy.’”

“Why not? That’s my name. Guy,” and I held out my hand.

NOW

I know how the warehouses are multiplying. To alleviate their pain they’ve taken up with each other. They use no protection. You know you can’t teach an old warehouse anything. And they engage in their palliative. And in direct concordance with Lamarckian principles, which operate in the reproductive processes of storage facilities, the children are born decrepit,
dilapidated, destroyed, dark. Exactly as their parents. Having no more horizontal room to expand, they’ve vertically integrated, they’ve stacked themselves to the sky, a Babel Tower not meant to illustrate the greatness of man, not meant to challenge the grandiosity of God, instead a titanic accident, accident on top of accident which, should the warehouses or the neighboring human beings be taken to task for this sprawling, ever-expanding structure, should God ask what indeed we meant by this mammoth melancholic edifice, we would certainly apologize and slink back to our blind alleys. But those blind alleys would not be our blind alleys. They would be different blind alleys. For all the roads here are blind. And you can never find where you’re going. You can’t find who you’re looking for. You can’t see more than twenty feet down any road without the view being interrupted by an apologetic abandoned warehouse. And should you turn your eyes to God to ask why you’ll find …

You can’t see the sky.

THEN

The Second Woman I Ever Met From Kansas shook my hand, laughed at my lame joke, laughed at any joke, laughed and smiled the whole time, and I didn’t want to see the end of the smiles.

“Well if you get to be Guy, then I get to be Girl.”

“You mean ‘grrl.’”

“Don’t growl at me,” she said, with more laughing.

“Where are you from, Girl?” not yet knowing that she was to be the Second Woman I Ever Met From Kansas.

“Kansas,” she said. And I thought to myself that perhaps there were no towns in Kansas,
that the people who lived in Kansas were so laid back, so relaxed, they didn’t need that uptight naming system. Just Kansas was good enough for them.

“Kansas,” I repeated, and somehow her smile got bigger, as she fiddled with her straw. “I met a woman once who told me what she liked about Kansas was the beautiful sky” (Girl’s eyes began to glow) “and I wondered about a place where the only selling point was the sky.”

Girl’s features went placid and smooth, and her voice sounded as if it came on a special wind from the plains.

“The sky… The most beautiful sky … You can see … Forever.” But you can still smoke in the bars here, so I couldn't tell that the ‘F’ was capitalized.

“Well…”

Her original smile returned, only now there was something numinous about it.

“In Kansas we have sky parties. We lay on the ground and hold hands and look…look at the beautiful sky … the most beautiful sky …”

I was getting creeped out; I started to think of Kansas as a cult. So I asked: “Uh … so how long will you be here for?”

NOW

In an attempt to explain metaphor to the warehouses, I invent a story about meeting two women from Kansas. The warehouses understand what I mean when I say women. They understand that the first is there to set the scene for the second. They understand Kansas: a flat state in the center portion of the USA. They even laugh at some of the jokes. The laugh of a warehouse sounds like air being expelled from a nose if you happen to be an ant on an upper lip.
But the warehouses take the story at face value. They cannot understand what I mean when I say it can mean something else, too. And they certainly do not believe that the story has been fabricated. The warehouses say that I’m just like them, why won’t I admit it?

THEN

Her smile was a knowing smile.

“You can come with me.”

“Where?”

“To Kansas. And we can go to a sky party. And we can lay on the ground and hold hands and kiss. And maybe we can even give you a real name. And I’ll tell you my real name. And we’ll have our real names and we’ll laugh and we’ll be happy underneath the beautiful sky. The most beautiful sky. You know you can see … Forever. In Kansas.

“So how about it?”

I said I didn’t know, that I’d have to think it over, that I’d tell her tomorrow.

Her smile changed to the original smile and didn’t change back.

“Tomorrow the bars will be closed and I will be gone.”

“But tomorrow is Sunday. Why would the bars be closed on Sunday?”

“They say it was passed down from God.”

“I guess you can’t argue with that.”

We shifted gears. The rest of the night Girl and I pretended we’d always been friends, since we were little children, since the beginning of time, and we created a history for ourselves, and in our history we were everywhere, went everywhere in the whole wide world, at every important historical epoch, everywhere except for Kansas. Our history was so vivid I thought it would go
on forever. But the “f” was lower case.

I don’t remember how that night ended. But no matter the ending, I know the next day I expected the bars to be open, I expected to see her there in the same seat, and I expected our history to go on and on, into the future. But the next day the bars were closed, and she was gone.

**NOW & THEN**

The warehouses are a difficult study. Their heads are full of the debris of painful memories cobwebbed together into a narrative they think of as reality, or, at least a former reality, a parallel universe they will never be able to reach or return to. If you question their Romantic absolute they stonewall you.

Meanwhile, I move through the warehouses and use what I find inside, though normally entire floors, entire blocks are filled with garbage. And all the while, I keep trying to teach the warehouses that there is a metaphorical truth that can’t be found in either pure escapism or absolute fact. But when I despair, when the warehouses seem too dense, too impossible, when I am weak, I give them the ending they want before I continue on with my rummaging, the bittersweet ending that meshes with their sense of reality. I say:

*Sometimes I close my eyes and I see a wide open field and a group of people coming together in the wide open field and they all hold hands and lay down and look up at the sky, the most beautiful sky, you know you can see … Forever, and I look down on them, as if I were some impotent god trapped up above, and I see Girl, and, no, not even to protect my vanity, I can’t see myself there, the best (or worst) I can do is see her alone, one hand held by somebody, the other held by nobody, me, watching from above, wishing that someone would come down and take her hand, wishing that I was the one, but this is all a story, an invented history, so I watch the people down below,*
and their eyes glow, and languid smiles spread across their faces, their features go smooth and placid, and they experience the ecstasy of the firmament. Holding hands. At a sky party. In Kansas.

The warehouses say that that is the correct ending.

But it is not. And sometimes, when I see a rogue warehouse, off by itself, I whisper to it. I say that the Second Woman I Ever Met From Kansas comes back, that we run into each other here and there, and instead of me pining away for her, it’s become obvious that she needs me, that the wide open spaces are too wide open, and when we get together, whereas last time we talked about history, a history so devoid of absolute fact Herodotus would have been scandalized (or maybe, he would’ve been proud), now and then we talk about science, philosophy, psychology, theology, communication, we talk about everything, we insert ourselves everywhere, but always Girl tries to get me to return with her to Kansas where we will hold hands and kiss and I will learn my real name at a sky party. But I am not going.

Once, though, I took her up to the top of the warehouse tower and I showed her the sky from there.

She said: “This is not the beautiful sky I know.”

“Of course not,” I said. “It’s the one that I know.”
Do Kids in California Dream of North Carolina?

“Heisenberg May Have Slept Here.”
- Bumper Sticker

On a television leaning against a floor-to-ceiling window in the southern portion of the peninsular apartment, a late night talk show host claims, “Scientists no longer believe that the universe will be destroyed by fire. They used to think the whole place was going to burn up one day, but not anymore. Now they say the universe will eventually run out of the energy it needs to keep everything going, that it will just keep expanding and expanding out into complete chaos where everything will break down. So it’s pretty much like Los Angeles.” The audience laughs.

Trevor is unable to laugh because he wonders, as he forever works at solving the mystery of his Rubik’s Cube, why a late night show is on during the day. He sits in a chair, facing a set of bookcases perpendicular to the television set. Trevor once believed in mathematics, experimentation, and causality. Now there is only speculation, observation, and probability. Life is uncertain, indeterminate, chaotic. Toys are as likely to hold answers as anything. Yet like Einstein searching for a local hidden variable theory that would restore determinism and causality to measurements, Trevor hopes order will return when he finally solves the Cube. It has to. There’s nothing else.

Trevor says: “There must be an energetic center to life. There must be a focal point where it all makes sense.” And keeps manipulating the toy.

Kat says: “Ninety million miles is one Astronomical Unit, or AU.” She makes campy quotes in the air with her fingers when she says AU, and continues shuffling zombie-like in an ellipse of unknown momentum around the coffee table in the center of the room, mumbling numbers, computations, formulae, equations, differentials, smoking a cigarette, ashing on the floor, staring
at the debris-covered ground. She does not care what time it is.

Indeed, although the television displays a late night talk show host performing his opening routine, the sun beats down on the awkward apartment, enervating each one of the atoms in and surrounding the structure; this atmosphere consists of Nitrogen (78%), Oxygen (21%), and many other gases, including some Hydrogen. One might assert that the star is taking a vendetta out on the people below; but it does no such thing, for the sun remains a G-class star, burning at five to six thousand degrees Celsius, ninety million miles, or one Astronomical Unit (AU), away from earth, as it will for another 4.5 billion years. None of this matters to Trevor, who wonders about the late night show and its illogical timeslot. More proof of chaos. He would ask Kat, but she has become catatonic with her mathematics, and to Trevor particularly high numbers represent the number of times Kat’s cheated on him, ratios equal the probability of her having some harmful disease …

Kat says: “Twenty percent.”

In the East, Trevor and Kat were as indistinguishable as the molecules in a cloud. They could only be taken as a whole, could only be measured as a system.

Trevor tries to ignore Kat’s numbers because the Cube, the precious Cube is much more important. It holds the key. Unfortunately Trevor has never heard of Augustus Judd who, a mere six years after the Rubik’s Cube was invented in 1974, founded Cubaholics Anonymous.

The apartment is a peninsula because it juts from the side of the main building, because it is for no discernible reason supported by raised piers like houses in Louisiana, and because there are floor to ceiling windows on all but the north side. Hence the structure, built obviously as an afterthought, is a protrusion of living space surrounded on five sides by pressurized and enervated gas. The windows to the east are blocked by bookcases containing Kerouac, Ginsberg,
Burroughs, Keats, Byron, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and other Romantics, Beats, and general adventurers. There are also textbooks, dictionaries, thesauruses, and a set of encyclopedias. Lying open on the floor in front of Trevor, who faces the eastern wall, is a volume of the encyclopedia. The article displayed is one about the birth and death of stars.

Kat once said: “We’re gonna be stars, baby.”

Trevor once said: “We’ll shine as bright as the Dogstar, Sirius.”

Kat once barked.

A wide view: to the south is the television, tilted because it is on an elevated stand. The picture is snowy and shows a man with a large chin rocking his head back and forth as if it were on a spring. The set itself is placed dangerously close to the edge of the slanted dais. The room is chock full of items placed on the edges of tables, bookcases, ledges, etc., a veritable diorama of potential energy, giving one the idea that the precarious balance of the apartment, itself poorly stabilized on its piers, could be upset, could come crashing down if the proper force were exerted. Kat, on her mumbling ellipse, often comes close to disturbing the perilous construction of the room, but thus far has avoided such a hazard.

The apartment forms a “T,” with the vertical portion making the peninsula, the left portion of the horizontal being the kitchen, and the right the bedroom and bathroom. In the kitchen the oven is on, pumping heat into the already stifling atmosphere. The windows in the peninsula not covered with bookcases are open, although they are held up by slight cords which could let loose at any minute; it is a blistering day outside. Also in the kitchen, all four burners of the stove are on, waiting to conduct heat into pots, pans, anything that may land upon them. Next to the stove is a microwave which is on the fritz, which continuously fires electromagnetic waves inside itself heating nothing at all. Adjacent to the microwave is the sink, where water flows and flows
down the drain. There are light fixtures and lamps throughout the apartment, all turned on, but none furnished with light bulbs.

Kat once said: “There’s no moon. It’s so dark.”

Trevor once said: “It’s Kansas, what would you see?”

In the bedroom, pitch black because there are no windows, a hurricane lamp leaks oil onto the floor; upon closer inspection, the oil continues into the kitchen and the peninsular room, as if someone had been carrying the lamp around searching for something. Other than the lamp, there is an unmade bed, a fiercely rattling fan, and an alarm clock running on double A batteries incorrectly blinking 3:05 am. In the bathroom, the shower and sink are both on, two different brands of electric shavers buzz, the lights (here there are light bulbs) are illuminated, and a blow dryer blows.

Throughout the apartment, the floor is covered with myriad books, papers, journals, notebooks, piles of drawing paper, cardboard, newspapers, magazines, etc. The density of the paper products at all points in the apartment is so thick it is impossible to view the floor. Footprints cover the manifold dross because of Kat, whose ellipse is almost perfect, but not quite; the detritus is also covered in ashes.

Amongst the debris on the floor is Trevor’s now shredded journal which he kept during the trip West. Some pages near the kitchen read, “Our trip to the West begins with so much potential. Our car is filled with gasoline, our Zippos with butane, our coffee mugs with espresso. Our bobble-head doll’s spring is compressed—all anyone has to do is push the button on the bottom and the toy’s parts will shoot upwards, its silly cranium bouncing around. The lure of the West, leaving everything behind for the Promised Land is intoxicating; we can hardly restrain the energy built up inside of our own bodies, let alone the various means of energy in our
possession. Before we even leave our former driveway, Kat pushes the button on the bobble-head doll, and we laugh as the crazy thing careens around.”

Trevor once said: “The road trip will be a grand experiment, although it will employ elementary cause and effect. In the East we have stagnated. And whereas occasional dissipation is acceptable, final stasis is not. In order for life to continue, it must be put through the crucible.”

Kat once said: “The cause for our stagnation in the East is comfort. Here we have our families, our friends, our familiar places. Our epic will purify us via unknown experiences.”

To the west a window looks out to the Pacific Ocean. In the center of the room, facing the western window is a couch. A journal entry describes the scene: “Every night we sit here and look to the West, just like we used to back home. Now we see the Pacific Ocean curling, blue-green before us, always roaring inland, quietly sliding up the beach, touching the very sand of California, the Promised Land. We can only imagine that the water wishes it could freeze time and remain there forever, perched on the whiteness. And then, inexorably, it slips back, tumbling off of the beach and returning to the hulking ocean filled with memories of what was, filled with the soaring energy of the journey up that cliff which can only ever be made once before being sucked back into the aqua oblivion.”

Kat says: “$7.5 \times 10^{18}$.”

Trevor worries he will never solve the Cube, will never regain the confidence of Newtonian physics, that his entire life will go by without him figuring out whatever he’s supposed to figure out, that order will be lost forever; Kat continues on her kinetic ellipse and says, “Two thousand four hundred fourteen.”

Trevor stops working for a second and says nothing.
Trevor once wrote:

“The East was a landscape disgustingly imbued with desperation, pathetically surviving on
the chimerical hope of going West, but never making it. The Great Plains were singularly
depressing because for miles in all directions the land was flat as if it had lain down to die quietly
without dreams or memories, just one nigh-infinite blank space. Past the Plains, the Rocky
Mountains, knowing they were next door to the Promised Land, soared to breathtaking heights,
and much as any being that strives for greater things, the Rockies attained a majesty stemming
from their desire to achieve California. And then there was the place itself: the Golden State.
Where dreams came true. Where life was lived to the fullest. Where everyone was a rock star or
a movie star or a TV star or some kind of star. No matter what your life was like back East, and
everywhere was east of California, you could be transformed in the Promised Land. But beyond
the Promised Land ... the world was so crestfallen after leaving California, it couldn’t hold itself
together. In a fit of geographical suicide, the tectonic plates cut off abruptly at the Golden State
and dashed themselves into the sea – that blue-green abyss which forever and ever wishes it too
could be a part of California, filching pieces of the Dream Land out of spite and envy. The
ocean in its sadness and jealousy remains for eternity in a liquid, tear-like existence for being
west of California. For west of California is Sheol.”

For months after they arrived in California, Trevor and Kat stared out at that invidious body
of water and felt like Balboa, who, in a manner of speaking, discovered the Pacific. For, if you
were looking at the ocean from where they were, that meant you were in the “Promised Land.”
But much as the landscape west of the Golden State lacked the energy to remain in solid form,
the system created by Trevor and Kat was slowly being consumed by entropy (that can only increase), as they found that the West was merely another place on the map. The extreme differentiation they first perceived was replaced by an acknowledged and all-consuming sameness.

Their trip had been remarkable, but now Trevor and Kat tried not to think about those days of romanticism. They tried not to think at all. With each passing minute, the energy that surrounded them, so easily harnessed before, was being abstracted beyond comprehension. And as the energy became more and more abstruse, Trevor lost all confidence in his Grand Experiment, lost all confidence in definites like experimentation and mathematics, and saw the world as a chaos of probability. Cursing Einstein, Trevor became an obsessed shut-in, playing with his Simon or his Rubik’s Cube, looking for answers where there probably were none. Kat, meanwhile, began bouncing from bed to bed, hoping to perpetuate the power discovered on the savage burn across the country. When she found only sex and the risk of disease, and once Trevor fell silent, she went numb, and, having once been a math prodigy (which she despised because her family forced her skill…Kat once said: “People should feel, not think”), she began reading about chaos theory, then delved into her old math textbooks.

Until they ended up where they are now.

Trevor says: “There are so many. But it must exist. It just must.”

Kat once said: “You’re looking in the wrong place. It’s in the numbers. It’s not happy, but it’s in the numbers.”

Trevor once said: “In the quantities, you mean. Integers, whole numbers, imaginary numbers. You’ll be like me soon enough. Right now you rest your hopes in the quantities.”

Trevor originally played with a Simon, lights flashing like those in Las Vegas, simple sounds
erupting from the machine. But the batteries, or so Trevor thought, had burned out. Actually, the speaker had merely gone bad. The Simon was still operational, still on.

***

The late night talk show ends and a meteorologist comes on. He predicts a high pressure front will move in. “Which means it’s only gonna get hotter,” the weatherman says in a strained, high-pitched voice, then flops his arms around like a bobble-head doll. Without air-conditioning or wind, although next to the ocean, and with the oven and the microwave, even to some degree with the stovetop burners and the blow dryer, the apartment is already diaphoretic, each atom in the vicinity moving faster and faster. With the high pressure front, it would be as if the gases of the atmosphere were squeezing their way into the space occupied by Trevor and Kat, thanks to the ever-present force of gravity; and then the pressure of the gases, along with the pressure of the atmosphere and the proximity of the sun, combined with the small size of the apartment, would all work together to elevate the temperature in Trevor’s and Kat’s room to the point of fusion.

Trevor once said: “Always know the time, but never worry about it. That way everything will make sense, but you’ll still have that feeling you’re getting away with something.”

Trevor says: “What time is it?! Why won’t you tell me the time?! Why doesn’t the sun die already?! It’s always daytime, never night! Nothing makes sense.”

Kat once said: “I never know the time and I never worry about it. I’m timeless, baby.”

Kat says: “1.5 or greater in 4.5 billion.”

***

According to T-symmetry, or time reversal symmetry, the universe is not symmetrical. It is, therefore, always creating more entropy, although the amount of energy remains the same.
Hence, there is more interference than information, more chaos than dynamism. In the East, Trevor believed that his relationship with Kat would be similar, only that they would create more and more energy, while the entropy would remain constant. He has lived, however, to learn that the First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics always apply: 1) Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, and 2) Entropy tends to increase over time, and once created it cannot be destroyed. Because of this asymmetry leaning toward the negative, it is difficult for Trevor to remember the good times in his relationship with Kat. Anything positive is now shut out by the ubiquitous interference of the negative. Only bits of dialogue remain.

For a brief period, after the romance had been drained from California and the relationship, Trevor spent his days looking west, smoking cigarettes, and wishing the sun would explode into a supernova, blowing the earth to smithereens; occasionally, when she was not searching for a man with a new source of adventurous energy, Kat would join him—although she had no idea what Trevor was thinking about as he sat there silently, staring out at the sky and the ocean. Without causality or determinism, without control, life was unlife and all were undead.

Drawing further inward, Trevor imagined the time when the sun’s explosion would collapse in on itself becoming a black hole which would crush all the remaining pieces of this drab planet into nothing. It was his last coherent dream before the mania of the Simon and later the Cube. Each day Trevor waited for the sun to begin its descent into the west so his visions of heavenly explosions could return, and at his behest, right before his very eyes, the sun would ignite into a blast so powerful it would rend this worthless planet into bits.

Kat says: “One trillion.”

When he still had some coherent energy left, Trevor looked up “stars” in his set of encyclopedias. His heart raced as he read about stars that were torn to pieces by neighboring
black holes, about giant planets engulfed in explosions so grandiose they made our entire nuclear arsenal look like so many bottle rockets, about mysterious pulsars firing encoded messages perhaps to other stars. But then he read about our sun. It was too small to go supernova. It was only a G-classed star. It would have to burn one thousand five hundred degrees Celsius hotter and be much more massive to erupt into the blast Trevor wanted. Instead, in about five billion years, the sun would expand out into a red giant. The red giant would extend past Mercury, Venus, and almost as an afterthought, it would reach past earth. The three planets would continue to revolve inside of the red giant sun. The new stellar configuration would remove the atmosphere; it would partially melt the mountains; it would burn off the trees, grass, hills, soil, and any other piece of nature; it would evaporate the water; it would leave the earth a desolate, golden brown as if it were a giant space cookie. Then the red giant would emit more gas and become a planetary nebula, later shrinking down to a fierce but impotent white dwarf, and finally it would recede into a black dwarf: a dead cinder. The earth would continue on, but it would be revolving around an exanimate ember of a star with just enough gravitational pull to keep the planets moving on their pointless elliptical paths.

Trevor once said: “I keep time for both of us.”

After Trevor finished reading about the sun, he dropped the book in front of him, turned his chair to face the bookshelves, and began playing Simon, feeling that it must hold the answers since nothing else did, all the while cursing Einstein and his probability. What Trevor doesn’t know is that Einstein did not like probability, it was Niels Bohr and Heisenberg that accepted the notion.

Einstein once said: “I cannot believe that God would choose to play dice with the universe.”

Bohr once said: “Einstein, don’t tell God what to do.”
Soon, Kat began her orbit around the room, walking in an ellipse that would extend seemingly over days and nights computing all the figures and formulae the world had to offer, extending out past Pi and remaining for ages with the imaginary numbers.

***

The colors spin around in their seemingly endless configurations. Each time Trevor believes he has solved the Cube, he finds he is incorrect; it then takes hours to approach the elusive conclusion. Perhaps he aligns the blue and the white sides, but the green and the yellow remain jumbled in a confused mass. Trevor understands that he could conquer the puzzle rapidly by tearing each colored square off the Cube, hence making the entire toy black; or he could carefully remove all of the colored squares and rearrange them so the red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and white are all perfectly aligned, but there is a principle at stake here, and since experimentation failed and certainty never existed, observation of this random event is all that remains. The Rubik’s must be solved.

Consequently, provided Trevor never ends up at the same point twice, his solving the Cube could take 1400 million million years, given one second for each move and going through every possible configuration, since there are 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 possible configurations (only one of them being the “solved” Cube), which more simply put is $4.3 \times 10^{19}$. But what else is there to do?

Trevor once said: “Look at them all. There are maybe as many as grains of sand on the beach.”

Kat says: “Astronomical.”

Trevor once said: “We have a connection to them. The energy pulsing through us came from them. But we have to find a way to access that energy, to understand it in order to get
anywhere.”

Trevor says: “I don’t understand! I just don’t understand … anything!”

Kat says: “Astronomical.”

Kat once said: “They’re too far away. There aren’t any connections to make. See those lights? The lights of the city, at the bottom of the mountain. Those are the only lights we ever need to worry about, baby.”

Their energy had finally dissipated into the formulae and numbers which explained it. And the numbers which explained it were soaring higher and higher, perhaps increasing the pressure, perhaps aiding in the contraction of the cloud surrounding their apartment.

***

The book on the floor in front of Trevor, besides explaining the death of stars, also explains their birth:

“Stars are formed from clouds of Hydrogen left over from the Big Bang. During the formation of a star, before the star is born, it exists as an amorphous cloud of Hydrogen. Due to some outside force (a shockwave from a nearby supernova, contact with another cloud), and then due to gravity, the cloud shrinks in on itself. The pressure of all the gases heats the cloud. With luminosity, the stellar object becomes a protostar—the stage before the stellar object can begin fusing Hydrogen into Helium. As a protostar, the object burns with an infrared glow, increasing with maturation along the light spectrum until it reaches stability. The youngest visible stars are T Tauri, which often appear in binary pairs.”

But when the star is in its amorphous cloud phase, it looks exactly like a planetary nebula, the stage in a small to mid-sized star’s life right after the red giant phase. Hence it is almost impossible to differentiate between a star being born and a star dying, unless one waits to see
what happens next.

The problem is that what happens next may not happen for years and years. But those who understand such circumstances can speculate on what might occur.

* * *

An errant book (On the Road) covered in lamp oil, sitting on the floor in front of the oven, will burst into flames. The fire will spread quickly, following the trail around the apartment, igniting all of the oil on the ground, in turn igniting the papers scattered everywhere and the coffee table, along with the entire stock of oil left in the lamp in the bedroom, the flames of which will set the walls and the bed ablaze. The shock of the ensuing conflagration will knock Kat off her nearly perfect kinetic, elliptical course, sending her into the windows on the west side (which will slam shut) and into an end table just past the windows. Upsetting the delicate balance of the apartment, Kat’s collision will set off a chain reaction of falling ash trays, coffee cups, books, glasses, lamps, plates, silverware, pencils, pens, everything will crash to the floor. Between the fire and the cascade of precariously placed items, Trevor will leap out of his chair, and his Rubik’s will fly, still unfinished, into the fire. When he sees the puzzle burning, Trevor will scream:

“No! There must be a center of energy where it all makes sense!”

He will make several attempts to wrest the puzzle from the flames.

Kat, frightened, will heave the burning coffee table through the western windows and leap out after it. She will proceed to lift the table (which will cool from red to white and finally stop burning, a charred remnant of the apartment) and carry it with her. Walking out past the rocky cliffs, over the sands of the beach, to the ocean, Kat will place the scorched table in the surf and begin limping around it.
After Trevor tries several times to reach into the flames to save the Rubik’s Cube, the Simon will burst back to life emitting the angry, electronic pulse it emits when someone, unable to recall the proper sequence, has pressed the wrong color. Trevor, eyes staring incredulously at the game for a moment, will turn away from the Cube, which will melt into a black plastic puddle, the colored squares dissolving away.

Understanding that he must find a way out, Trevor will reach into the debris, come up with a plunger, and begin bashing his way to the East. He will scream, “There must be a center of energy somewhere! I know there is! I know it!” And as a chink in the bookcases is opened, as the windows beyond are broken, a faint, almost imperceptible red light will shine through. As Trevor continues bashing his way out of the burning apartment, as the entire place begins collapsing, the red light will become more intense, until Trevor is bathed in it. And when there is a hole large enough, still screaming about the center of energy, he will leap from his apartment in California into the much cooler air outside, into the focused red light.

The light will surge, engulfing the building, as the fire blazes and the awkward apartment finally falls. But even with the former apartment burning on the ground, the light from the east will continue to shine, although it is impossible to say which color. Depending, it may progress from red to orange to yellow to green to white and maybe, maybe even to blue, the color of the biggest and brightest stars, the stars that go supernova.

***

But that is only one possible future.

For now Trevor remains in his chair facing the eastern bookcases, while Kat continues in her kinetic ellipse around the coffee table.

Trevor once said: “How will we know if we’re wrong? What plans should we follow? What
do the stars have in store for us? How do we access their power?”

Kat once said: “Just keep your head down. Don’t worry about the stars. They’ll take care of themselves.”

Trevor says: “Oh … I think …”

Trevor once said: “It seems too easy. Too miniscule. Like … we’ll wreck for not seeing the bigger picture.”

Trevor says: “I think …”

Kat once said, laughing: “At least we’ll leave beautiful corpses behind.”

Trevor says: “… I’ve almost …”

Trevor once said: “Lost hope … in a vacuum … that will never return. It’s just too big. Too much to think about.”

Kat says: “186,000 feet per second, or c.”

On the television to the south, the late night talk show is long over; the programming has even moved past the weatherman. Now the set displays a show about inventors. Today’s subject: Erno Rubik. Here Erno Rubik is pictured at the 1982 World’s Fair, held in Knoxville, Tennessee. Behind him is a giant Rubik’s Cube, perfectly aligned, except that the center is turning, as if by some giant, ethereal hand. Behind Rubik and his enormous Cube is the Sunsphere, built to signify the theme for that particular Fair: energy.

Trevor says: “I think I’ve almost got it …”

Back in the apartment, Trevor and Kat continue with their lives as the sun blares, as gravity pulls the invisible gases together, as the pressurized gas cloud rises in temperature, as the heat builds to an unbearable degree. What will happen next can only be guessed at. All anyone can do is wait.
You Are Where I Am Not

I am not a real person. I am only words on paper. A narrator. A narrator of the first person variety. An invention. A fake. Or, if you prefer, an illusion. And yet, if I tell you there is a city, you will see a city. And yet, if I tell you that I walk through a ruined city, you will see a ruined city and you will see me walking through it. You will see a ruined city and you will tell yourself that you’re there and you’re seeing it through my eyes. Through the eyes of the narrator. Through me. Though there is no me. I do not exist. I am only words. I am a narrator.

The city was destroyed some time ago. It was destroyed by an explosion. An explosion from above. It could have been a bomb, or a missile, or even an event like the Tunguska, the Cando, the Vitim, or the Eastern Mediterranean. From atop a ruined skyscraper I can see that the blast pattern is in the shape of a butterfly. I can see that the blast pattern is in the shape of a Comma butterfly from the family Nymphalidae. Although the shape is perfect, the coloring is not quite right being rust red and gray and black and brown. I can see that the trees in the park at the center of the city have been stripped but remain as superfluous telephone poles, whereas the trees in the wings of the Comma have been knocked over. The airburst object entered at thirty degrees. There was no warning. There was no escape.

But I was not here when the city was destroyed. I was not here when it was destroyed, though I was also not somewhere else, anywhere else; I was nowhere else, nowhere to be found, nowhere. I did not yet exist when the city was struck by the event, and I still do not exist in this city that has been in its post-event stage for some time. The weeds peek through the rubble, and the rats and cockroaches are everywhere. Roads here are made of detritus as if the building materials for all the past and future boulevards existed at the same time, ready for trans-
dimensional beings to construct hyperspace thoroughfares through the multiverse, intersecting with other hyperspace thoroughfares, taking you wherever you want to go, showing you whatever you want to see.

As I walk through, as I ascend structures that may collapse under my negligible weight, as I sit on park benches now located in the middle of dry fountains, as I board streetcars bound for no destination, as I converse with ashen silhouettes of former shadows of the previous inhabitants of this municipality, as I take my seat in theaters that lack stages (unless the wreckage across the street can now be called a stage), and as I sleep in woefully overrated five star hotels I begin to think that this city could rise again. It could, in fact, follow the same pattern it followed during its original development, from an outpost, to a settlement, to a small manufacturing town, to a large industrial city, to an industrial and commercial metropolis, to a post-industrial megalopolis; it could be known for steel, glass, rubber, meat, textiles, investment banking, computers, social services, art, or any combination of these, including other such possibilities absent from this list. I cannot tell you. I would tell you more, but…

But I have never lived here. I do not live here now. I never knew this city when it was an actual city. I know it merely as a shell. It might’ve always been like this. The supposed former megalopolis I walk through could be a massive art installation. It could be a massive art installation called *The Fallen Leaf* or *Polygonia c-album*, the Latin name for the Comma butterfly. It’s possible that there never was a time when this city was anything but what it currently is: a ruin built to resemble an urban area affected by a Tunguska-like event. The ruin may have been constructed for some dubious reason, and now you believe me complicit in the ruse that’s been enacted, you believe that I am in the confidence racket, a charlatan who has pulled you in.

However, much as the city may be an art installation, it may be anything else; it might even
not be that one thing you wish it wasn’t. I would tell you more about the city, yet not only have
I never lived there, I have never been. To me it does not exist, since I do not exist. I do not
exist because I am only words on paper. Yet as I stroll along the roads connecting one
dimension to the next, I notice that whereas I am neither there nor elsewhere, in some
dimensions you are there, perhaps not fully trusting me, secretly blaming me for your uncertainty,
wondering what to do with me, wondering what to do with the hoard of airborne Comma
butterflies, wondering what to do with the falling leaves, wondering what to make of this city,
wondering what happened to it, if anything, wondering what will come of it, unsure, as if you
could not trust your senses, as if you were looking through someone else’s eyes, as if you were
looking through my eyes, the eyes of the first person variety narrator, though I am an invention,
a fake, an illusion, though I am just not there.
The Imaginary Girlfriends of Canada

Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity.

- Marshall McLuhan

Nonfiction

Once, once you told me about your holiday in the North. You admitted the memory the story was based on had already dwindled, that you weren’t sure how exactly it happened anymore, how much of it actually happened, how much you were unwittingly making up. You admitted the story felt like a story, and not like something that actually occurred. Something that truly came to pass during the course of your life. In my mind I told you those stories that sound real are rarely real. In my mind I told you that real was often more fabricated than not-real. In my mind I saw the two of us walking on an open path frozen to the rest of the world. You admitted, as you spoke the words that brought the story into being, perhaps for the first time, that it felt like fiction, though it was not fiction. And as those deceitful, insidious words forged from your lips you felt yourself creating (not re-creating), you felt yourself fabricating a world that didn’t exist, that never existed, that could never exist, though you were bringing it into existence, though those same deceptive words you used to elaborate the story which in your heart of hearts was untrue, those same words made your fictional story seem real, actually real, really real which was important to you because it was real, it was, yes, it really was. And so you related your memory to me. You told me what happened. You told me the truth, and all about it. You told me about your girlfriend in Canada.
**Missing Frames**

You found her by a swimming pool in the palatial hotel lobby, the sun poking out from behind the only cloud in the sky, the square cooled by the titanic shadow from Mnemosyne’s statue, the shadow almost touching your own, almost initiating you into … as you stand between the two rivers, nothing for miles except the chlorinated splashing of children. Motionless, looking out, it was as if several frames were missing from the film. No one appeared to be moving, everything stagnant, the little kids’ horseplay an echo from elsewhere. Without a blip, people were in one place, and then, as if teleported, another. The world was a collection of tableaux, still shots missing about half the twenty-four frames per second needed for the truth, here only half the truth, maybe a quarter, if that much. When movement returned, the two of you collided, you dropping your soda pop, your bag, your souvenir, she so full of apologies.

**Girlfriend:** This is my embarrassed and apologetic opening line. I am oh so sorry.

**You:** It’s really okay.

**Girlfriend:** No, no, I am sorry. I wish I had something more memorable to say. I wish I had a line for you that would be remembered through the ages, that would alleviate my guilt and would entertain you so that you wouldn’t mind having dropped your … I really am sorry …

**You:** No, no. It was my fault.

**Girlfriend:** … I really have nothing to say.

**Niagara Falls, Ontario**

The population of Niagara Falls, Ontario is just over 80,000. Yet, for the number of people who have claimed a girlfriend living there, the population would have to equal that of the entire world. Some point here to a paradox. Obviously you do not have a girlfriend in Niagara Falls.
Obviously you are a liar. Maybe you haven’t even been to Canada. But you needn’t fear. We know you’re telling the truth. And to explain, we shall use a parable. Above the entryway to Niels Bohr’s country cottage was a horseshoe, reminiscent of the Horseshoe Falls in Ontario, and the Golden Horseshoe, that area of Canada where Niagara is located. Upon arriving at the noted physicist’s retreat, a visitor asked how Bohr could possibly be so credulous. Niels Bohr, noted physicist, responded thusly: “No, I certainly do not believe in this superstition. But you know, they say it brings luck even if you don’t believe in it.” Having a girlfriend in the horseshoed land of Niagara Falls is like the good fortune from Bohr’s talisman: she is there whether people believe your story or not. In this way, you will never be alone in Niagara Falls. In this way, we all have a girlfriend in Canada.

_A Story of When I Was Older_

You began the story you told me with many preambles, apologies, explanations. You started and stopped. You provided ample context. And then you contextualized the context. And then you contextualized that … before you began. This story takes place in the past, you said, when I was younger, much younger. I assume you wanted to assure me you weren’t being prophetic. I assume you wanted to assure me you had no powers of precognition. I assume you wanted to assure me that in our realm of experience where the sun rises and sets repetitively during each twenty-four hour period, that future events, those events shrouded in the yet-to-come, are not banal for you, that they are just as mysterious as they are for everyone else. And so you told me the story took place in the past. As if it could take place at any other time. And so you told me the story took place when you were younger. Much younger. As if you could be any other age. You just wanted to make sure that I understood the obvious timeline. Though your
introduction did nothing to stop me from wishing I could hear a story about you, about you or anyone else, when they were older. Much, much older.

*The Land of Vacation*

But where were you when you met her? Walking through a city, buildings on top of buildings, legions of people pushing forward as if led at the front by a general, a field marshal who would direct the masses toward – no. Exploring a resort, that manufactured rest zone of swimming pools, gaming centers, casinos you were too young to play at, palm trees to lie under daydreaming about – no. Shuffling along a boardwalk on the ocean, rides to be ridden, junk food to be purchased, side shows to be gawked at, beckoned away from the midway to see – no. A beach, a monument, a museum, mountains, canyons, deserts, were you lost in an estate – was there a folly? was there a ha-ha? Slowly, through the course of your story, though it never sounds like you know where you’re going, as if you can’t recognize the objects in the world you actually know all too well, those objects you can describe in great detail, when you’re looking directly at them for some reason they’re foreign to you, ask you about a boardwalk or the mountain trail and you can give every detail, but put you there and it’s like you have no idea where you are, lost, all of these possible sites becoming one site, two-dimensional, obviously lost, but if you close your eyes you know it, with certainty you know, so exact in the lay of the land, the vacation land you describe becoming every vacation land combined, a place that could never exist, the place where you were lost so obviously impossible, unreal … impossible and unreal just like every other vacation land.
**Winnipeg, Manitoba**

When the Girlfriends hear the joke, “Winnipeg, lose a peg,” they smile. They enjoy the simple pun. They admire the zero-sum game created by the mild witticism. They understand the metaphysical notion that for each time we win one thing, we lose another; they understand that most of the world is designed as a zero-sum game, that most of the world is strictly competitive. But in Winnipeg, whose paronomasiac slogan should signal it as the epicenter of the zero-sum, the Girlfriends have decided to move in a different direction. And so they have built Brutus’ Palace, the only non-zero-sum casino in the entire world. Here, unlike classic casinos, there are large windows looking out onto the vast Canadian Prairies, onto Lake Winnipeg along with its feeding rivers and pristine boreal forests; here, the players work together for a net gain; here, the house does not dominate. Everywhere else someone always loses, but in Winnipeg, you win.

**Superposition**

I sat listening, never speaking. You said from the beginning it was obvious that the two of you would be spending this vacation together, that you’d only leave each other’s side begrudgingly, when the parents demanded it. Yet now you remember spending all of your time with her, while simultaneously spending all of your time with your family. A synchronized memory of two impossible experiences that threatens to freeze both out. At the time the image was clear in your mind and in her mind. At the time the image was clear because neither of you had lived it yet, because neither of your memories had a chance to erode it away. You say, Perhaps it would’ve been better if we’d left it alone, if we’d parted right there, if we’d spent the rest of the vacation with cotton candy, the boardwalk, sights, historical reenactments, rides. Or perhaps it would’ve been better if you’d been alone, or with people you couldn’t see so well in the future for then the
film would’ve clicked on at twenty-four frames per second, they would’ve told you the truth the rest of your life, projecting a singular, clear picture, running smoothly in your minds forever. But you couldn’t leave it alone, there in the flickering projection booth. You had to live it.

*The Conversation*

As the two of you sat gazing on the ocean, the waves crashing, the skyline surrounding you, the cool wind from the mountains, the lights from the amusement park dimming for the night, some still blinking, blinking, like the stars in the desert sky, the airboat bringing you in off the swamp, as you walked through the now quiet resort, maybe not so quiet, maybe a party in the distance, always in the distance, where could it be? you talked, saying:

**Girlfriend:** Later, you will not remember what I am saying.

**You:** What do you mean? I can’t …

**Girlfriend:** My meaning is unimportant. I can say anything. Any words would be acceptable. You won’t recall them anyhow. You can’t understand. You will never understand.

**You:** But why can’t I make out what you’re … Why can’t I understand?

**Girlfriend:** Whatever I say now will be taken away by the desert air, its intent lost, saturated by the humidity, its meaning plain to all but you. To you it will forever be a foreign language, a series of discordant sounds, a dissonance, a disharmony that you will remember as the only harmony, the perfect harmony.

**You:** Your voice is beautiful. I don’t know what you’re saying because I want to focus on each note. I wish I could …

**Girlfriend:** It doesn’t matter. We shouldn’t be so serious. It’s time to laugh.

**Together:** [LAUGHING]
**Girlfriend:** You will remember laughing, you will remember happiness, but not why you were laughing, not why you were happy.

**You:** I’m sorry, what did you say?

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**Ottawa, National Capital Region**

The Girlfriends, who have heard ceaselessly of their nonexistence, tell this tale:

One day Queen Victoria said, “Canada does not exist.” This was a problem. It was very difficult to prove a negative existential, and the queen would have no paradoxes in her realm. But the fact of the matter was the country had no capital. Thus the queen’s thinking: all existing countries have capitals. Canada does not have a capital. Therefore, Canada does not exist. It was with great despair that the queen came to the following conclusions: 1) her subjects, claiming to have been to Canada, were treasonous, lying to the royal head of Great Britain, fabricating an entire nation; or 2) her subjects were delusional, thinking they had been somewhere that did not exist. She dismissed the first out of pride, and pondered the second.

The queen, standing before an enormous, blank wall knew what to do.

“Ottawa is the capital of Canada,” said Queen Victoria to an advisor.

“Ottawa?” said the advisor. “Ottawa, whatever it may be, does not exist.”

And yet, to his own ears, the words rang false. He, himself, had been to Canada. Many emotions ran across the advisor’s face, and the images and memories that were immediately brought to mind were of a very personal nature, so we shan’t divulge them. We will, however, give you this piece of logic: he and the queen were talking about Canada. They were talking about nothing, if not Canada. But Canada could only exist if it had a capital, and the only city the advisor could think of as the capital of Canada was Ottawa.
The advisor and the queen stood in front of the enormous wall map. It was a map of the country that no longer gave Queen Victoria problems. And there, with a star next to it, was the oddly named city. “Ottawa is the capital of Canada,” the two said in unison, gazing at the map. Paradoxes did not exist in the queen’s realm.

_Free Will_

Perhaps you remember a vacation you took when you were younger … At points during your telling I found I couldn’t focus, I was confused, I was angry, I felt we shared no common language, hemmed in by plaque, lost in tangles, the paths into my mind frozen forever. The time was different than any other time in your life, and no matter how long it lasted it seemed like it was just a single night … But after your story was over, I retold it. The night was beautiful, one of those where the sky doesn’t look like a sky, but like outer space … If you could hear my reiterations of the story, maybe you’d think I was printing my own thoughts on you, that you wouldn’t talk this way, that you’d never act this way. Perhaps you walked through a city, along a boardwalk, on a beach, and you talked about things that you could never quite remember afterwards, that you could never quite remember ever again, as if you were speaking a different language in one of your own dreams … It could be that this isn’t the memory you would’ve chosen to be known for. And then later it all ended, the two of you promising to keep in touch, though as soon as the words were said you knew they weren’t true, and as soon as she was gone you could already feel the experience slipping into the realm of the fantastic … But it’s not my fault. There is no choice. Yes, perhaps all of this has happened to you … You do not get to choose. I do not get to choose. Perhaps you have been to Canada … The Girlfriends choose you.
The Mind Scrambler

The two of you rode The Mind Scrambler, an attraction which, in its herky jerky motion, makes it appear that you are about to smash into another part of the ride, only missing it by inches. The twisting and turning worked like a clock that had smaller clocks on each one of the hands. Here, the two of you lost track of time.

You: I will never forget this.

Girlfriend: When did we meet?

You: I will always remember.

Girlfriend: How long have we been on this ride?

You: I hope they let us ride a little longer.

Girlfriend: Have we already kissed, or does that happen later? To me it seems like we have always been together, but then we might have met here, twisting and turning around.

Barkerville, British Columbia

The original Barkerville, center of the Cariboo Gold Rush of 1861, burned down in 1868. Later it was rebuilt, but when the mining industry crashed, Barkerville became a ghost town. The Canadian government, however, restored the ruin as Barkerville: A Gold Rush Theme Park. Unfortunately, the theme park burned down. There were problems from the beginning. Should we aim for accuracy (recreating the look and feel of the era), or should we aim to please the customers, feeding on the types and clichés they expect to find in a boom town? Now, left with a ghost town that was once a theme park that was formerly a boom town that itself became a ghost town, the Girlfriends stepped in, creating New Barkerville: A Virtual Theme Park. New Barkerville eliminates all of the problems with both amusement parks (lines, bad weather, illness,
disappointment, etc.) and the problems with theme parks, and it’s able to do these things because New Barkerville, being virtual, does not exist. The Girlfriends implant a tailored historical theme park experience, exactly the experience you were hoping for, into your mind. But that’s not all. The genius of the Girlfriends’ invention is that they don’t merely give you the memories of a once lived trip to New Barkerville; instead the recollections you are given appear to come from a far distant past, an idyllic past, where you are young and the world appears alive with energy, so alive that you privately decide to return soon. And perhaps tomorrow you’re going back to New Barkerville. Or perhaps you were just there last week.

**Volta**

You didn’t know you were telling me this story. Or, I should say, when you tell this story, you won’t know that you’re telling it to me. In the future, as you reminisce, you’ll think you’re talking to yourself. Even when we’re talking to others, we’re primarily talking to ourselves, so you shouldn’t be ashamed. But this time you won’t know you have an outside auditor. You’ll think you’re the only audience for this memory, that you’re all by yourself. But you won’t be. I’ll be there. And if now I can relate your story so well, it’s because you haven’t told it to me yet. You see, for my part, this is a story of when I was older. Much older. When I’m older and listening to you tell a story of when you were younger. Much younger. The telling of this story has not yet come to pass. The events, having not yet transpired, are clear in my mind because my memory has had no chance to erode them away. Indeed, this story took place when I was older, much, much older, and only now, after all these years of it not yet happening, have I finally come to understand it.
The Jetty

For a moment, you forgot who you were. You walked along a pier. You were no one. No one in particular. Another person wearing a tourist shirt. Sunglasses. A jacket. There was the smell of the ocean. But as the two of you walked along the wooden planks, it seemed like time was evaporating behind you. That if you would stop, that if you would turn around, there would be nothing, and soon that nothing would overtake you. In other words, you knew this was the end. Whereas you were in the moment the other moments you spent with her, this one was to be iconic. For you, anyway. The conclusion. On a pier. Your past wiped out. The way back frozen. You can’t even remember the words you said. You only remember standing, blinded by all that light, even with your sunglasses on.

**Girlfriend:** [Bittersweet line that’s extremely profound.]

**You:** [Bittersweet line that reiterates what was said previously, but expands upon it to make it even more profound.]

**Girlfriend:** [Finisher that encapsulates both statements but which can’t be topped.]

**You:** [Repetition of same.]

Forget, Saskatchewan

If the Girlfriends exist, why is it that no one can find them? Anytime a credulous sap claims he has a girlfriend in Canada, immediately he’s incapable of providing any evidence. Anytime an incredulous sap goes in search of these elusive girls, he fails to find them. It would appear that one of two propositions should then be true: 1) the Girlfriends do not exist, or 2) the Girlfriends do exist, but are impossible to find. What can be done?

The answer comes from the story of Admiral Korsakov. Korsakov, noted explorer of the
country of Canada, is known to have loved most of the realm, except for Saskatchewan. No one is quite sure why he disliked Saskatchewan so much, but especially after visiting the village of Forget, he is known to have said, “I am certainly going to forget Saskatchewan.” And yet, in the days after he left Forget, he could not get it out of his mind. He could not remember to forget. Each day the pain of Saskatchewan returned by reminding him that there is a village named “Forget,” and each day Korsakov would say, “I am certainly going to forget Saskatchewan.” Months later, under the thrall of a melancholy that appeared omnipotent, the admiral made a decision and set out. Just before he left he was asked where he was going. “I am certainly going to Forget, Saskatchewan.” Upon his return, Korsakov, in that tiny little village, sat on a stoop and was approached by one of the Girlfriends whom he could never remember to forget.

**Fiction**

Perhaps I am the only one, but I believed your story, though I hardly think this will soothe you. What I believe is unbelievable. I tend only to believe those things that seem least believable. And anytime I learn that I was right, that the unbelievable was true, I am disappointed. Fiction is stranger than truth, truth far more disappointing than fiction. I believe your story because I can’t imagine that it happened; I can only imagine it happening …

And now, years later, after the only time with your paramour, your girlfriend whom you shared a fantasy world with, you wonder if you could recognize her if she were standing right in front of you; you wonder now if you’d even so much as remember where she’s from. I am here to tell you: you wouldn’t know her. She’s from Canada.
**The Parting**

She was with you. You didn’t know her before, and you never saw her again. And when you parted, you swore to keep in touch, though as soon as the words were said you knew they weren’t true. You knew they weren’t true, although you also knew they weren’t lies. You would not keep in touch because that was impossible. The two of you only existed together at that one point, and would never exist together again. Perhaps as the two of you parted you realized the experience was already slipping into the realm of the fantastic. That even when you said goodbye, and began moving away from each other that your moving away was a movement toward reality, the real reality, and the reason it’s so difficult for you to tell this story is because even when the two of you looked over your respective shoulders for that last gaze, that last gaze not at each other, but at the fantasy world you’d constructed and lived in briefly, you realized that soon there would only be reality, that this fantasy would slip away.

**The North**

The Girlfriends have moved to a village in the far north, so far north it may be in the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, even Nunavut. For eight months of the year the village where they live is unreachable because of the ice and snow. There the Girlfriends reside in a log house kept warm by a fire. The house is decorated with maps of their country, though their country isn’t quite like any the world knows. The Girlfriends, themselves expert cartographers, redraw these charts, composing entire atlases of private realms. One of them just might be Canada. Even though the village is unreachable eight months of the year, the Girlfriends have a special means of maintaining a secret path. The passageway can only be found by those who know where it is, but aren’t looking for it. For those in the know, the route is completely flat and smooth without
impediment. For others, it is frozen solid, impassable. The path, being different for each, begins where it needs to begin, and ends at the log house. At the log house the Girlfriends keep working on their maps, they keep the way clear, they keep the fire burning. They wait for you.
Zeno’s Shotgun Paradox

1) The Paradox of Place
“… if everything that exists has a place, place too will have a place, and so on ad infinitum”.
- Aristotle
Physics IV:1, 209a25

Where you are: Nowhere. But everywhere is somewhere. Every place is someplace. Yet where you are: noplace. It simply does not compute.

So you explain—

Before you, in a bluish light, a failing light, is a shotgun mounted on a wall. This could be anywhere, and if it could be anywhere, that is as good as nowhere. The shotgun is mounted on the wall in the room where you are standing. Scarcely more enlightening. The room where you are standing is in the house you purchased years ago. Yet where are those years? Where is your house? If someone asked, as they might, where you lived, you could not respond, “In the rooms of my house;” although, upon reflection, that answer is more truthful than any other. Perhaps. The neighborhood: Fort Sanders. Random fact. And should you bring it up, you would most likely have to explain (oh, how you love to explain) the history of the name “Fort Sanders” (detail upon life-saving, life-affirming detail). But sooner or later, you find, “Fort Sanders” is no better than “wall,” “room,” “house.” The city: Knoxville. The country: the United States of America. Alas, there are ten Knoxvilles in the U.S.A.: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas. You claim you are in Tennessee. That the continent is North America which, before the Panama Canal, was fully connected to South America. That these continents are in the Western Hemisphere. (The Western portion, of a globe?) On planet Earth. That Earth is in the Solar System. That the Solar System is in the Milky Way galaxy. That the Milky Way galaxy is in the universe. Yet where is the universe? It
must be somewhere. It must be someplace. Because if the universe is nowhere, then your precious details are meaningless. And what of the place where the universe is? And of that place’s place? And of that place’s place’s place? And so on. Yet you persist: before you, you think, you believe, in a bluish light, a failing light, is a shotgun mounted on a wall. False. Before you, there is someone else. Someone who resembles you, yes. But not you. No. And before that person is a shotgun. If the dimming light can be trusted. Wherever it comes from. If, indeed, it comes from anywhere. If, indeed, it isn’t an illusion (anywhere being as good as nowhere). An illusion as are “wall,” “room,” “house,” “Knoxville,” “Tennessee,” “the United States of America,” “North America,” “the Western Hemisphere” (!), “Earth,” “the Solar System,” “the Milky Way galaxy,” “the universe.” And what potential can we find here?

Here? Where?

Where are you? Everywhere is nowhere. Everyplace is noplace. So what can happen here?

Everything. Nothing.
2) **Achilles and the Tortoise**

“In a race, the quickest runner can never overtake the slowest, since the pursuer must first reach the point whence the pursued started, so that the slower must always hold a lead.”

* - Aristotle  
  *Physics VI:9, 239b15*

Who you are: Sisyphus. And the one before you before the shotgun: Anton Ulysses. Yet character is defined through action. You, Sisyphus, are inactive. Your doing is the same as your not doing, and that, in turn, is your undoing. Who you are: no one.

You want to stop Anton Ulysses from reaching the shotgun. Previously, you wanted Anton Ulysses to get the shotgun. It was part of the plan. The foolproof plan. But now, you are not so sure. Now you want to stop Anton Ulysses. The man before you. The boy before you. You can never view him as a man. To you, characters are not defined by action but by thought. Boys are action. Men are thought. And you want to stop Anton Ulysses. You want to explain (oh, how you want to explain; oh, how you love to explain). You want him to understand. You want him to think. You want to overtake Anton Ulysses.

You never will. Anton Ulysses has the lead. And he will continue moving. He will continue acting. As is his wont. And in order to catch up, you must reach the last point where Anton Ulysses resided. And even if Anton Ulysses only moves a foot from that point, you will never overtake him. Because you will be in his last position; he will be a foot in the lead. And in order to catch up, you must travel that foot. Yet Anton Ulysses, always on the move, will no longer be there. He will still be in the lead. And on and on: Anton Ulysses progressing forward, you behind, no matter the speed. The father will follow in the footsteps of the son, ironically. You will be left behind. Anton Ulysses will reach the shotgun. Anton Ulysses will wrest it from the
wall. He will spin around. He will point the gun at you. He will pull the trigger. And the blast will project outward. At you.

You? Who are you?

Sisyphus. No one.
3) **The Dichotomy Paradox**

“That which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal.”

*Aristotle*

*Physics VI:9, 239b10*

When it will happen: never. It must happen sometime. Anton Ulysses cannot be stopped.

Your action is inaction. But sometime and notime are the same when you are only somewhere and therefore nowhere. No place. No chance. No time. When it will happen: never.

Anton Ulysses wants to reach the shotgun. Once he reaches it, his motives are unclear. And although you cannot stop him, still, he will never arrive. For in order to get to the shotgun, he must first reach the halfway point between his current position and the wall (wherever the wall is). And in order to reach that halfway point, he must reach the halfway point between his current position and *that* halfway point. And in order to reach that halfway point, he must reach the halfway point between his current position and *that* halfway point. And on and on. Anton Ulysses, always the actor, will struggle, forever if need be, will strive, heroically strive, will endeavor to complete his (Herculean) task. In vain. His journey, although it appears so brief, will expand. It will expand and expand. Until the shotgun appears miles away. Yet, mockingly, it is merely a few feet. So closeby. So far away. A mission that seemed like it would take no time at all, takes an eternity. An eternity not to happen.

Happen? When will it happen?

Never.
4) The Paradox of the Arrow

“If everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always occupying such a space at any moment, the flying arrow is therefore motionless.”

- Aristotle

Physics VI:9, 239b5

(Anton Ulysses has the shotgun.)

What will happen: nothing.

(Anton Ulysses has the shotgun.)


Even though Anton Ulysses has the shotgun. For, in order to fire the shotgun, he would have to cock at least one of the two hammers, either of which may break or prove defective, although the weapon is of high quality, because, sooner or later, everything fails. Then, once he has cocked one (or both) hammers, he must pull the trigger. With a smaller gun, Anton Ulysses would have to aim. But at this distance…ah, but the difficulty of distance has already been discussed. So, perhaps Anton Ulysses should aim. Provided that his aim is true, he would next have to pull one (or both) of the triggers which will unleash the spring(s) that has/have been pulled taught by cocking the hammer(s). Much like the hammers, the triggers and the springs could very well malfunction. Not to mention that to completely pull the trigger, Anton Ulysses would first have to pull it halfway halfway halfway, etc. The spring would have to move halfway halfway… The hammers would have to move halfway… And if, somehow, Anton Ulysses is able to get the hammers cocked, the triggers pulled, the springs unleashed, the hammers pounding forward, still nothing will happen. For the gun would have to be loaded, and the gun is never kept loaded. The gun is usually kept unloaded. It is possible that it has been loaded. The gun is loaded. You loaded it yourself. It was a part of the plan. Yet even with the gun loaded, the hammer still must interact with the shotgun shell. A shotgun shell consists of the
primer (the explosive cap), the propellant (gunpowder), and the shot (made of lead). If the hammer strikes forward, it will hit the explosive cap (which must create a miniature explosion) which will ignite the propellant (if the gunpowder is properly packed and pure) into yet another miniature explosion which will perform the twofold function of (1) creating greater pressure behind the shot than the atmosphere applies in front of the shot (hence, sending the shot forward), and (2) fragmenting the aggregate of shot (contrary to a bullet which is a single projectile). Yet the likelihood of any of this happening is low (see the previous sections). But even if it should happen, even if the gun mechanism and the shell mechanism all, against the odds, operate perfectly, still nothing will happen. For the shot must have been manufactured properly. Shot is made by pouring molten lead down a shot tower (such as the Sunsphere Shot Tower in Knoxville, Tennessee (wherever that may be) that is 234 feet tall and made of brick (to add more random details)). As the molten lead descends, air pressure makes it round (the taller the shot tower, the greater the air pressure, the better the product). The now round pieces of molten lead then cascade into a pool of water in order to cool. Once cooled, the balls, the shot is filtered through screens so the balls of the same size can be collected, so the irregular shot can be re-melted down, can be put back through the process. The chances of any of this happening successfully: zero. First, it involves a worker leaving his home and going to work (impossible); it involves the worker making his way to the container of molten lead (doubly impossible); it involves the worker ascending a tower (trebly impossible); it involves the worker pouring the lead down the tower (quadruply impossible); it involves the lead falling through the tower (quintiply impossible) and reaching the pool below (infinitely impossible) and then being accurately filtered through screens so manifold shot balls do not cause a shotgun jam (absolutely impossible). But even if this entire ordeal were possible (and it isn’t…at all) still nothing would
happen. For the principle behind the gun is that it will move lead through a target. Yet in order to move, the shot must not be at rest. Yet all objects that occupy a space are at rest whilst in that space. The lead which appears to be moving through the air, then, is actually stationary, and no more likely to injure you than the worker is likely to make his way to the shot tower early in the morning for another day of work doing...

What? What can be done?

Nothing.
5) **Paradox Solved**

“The solution to all of the mentioned paradoxes, then, is that there isn’t an instant in time underlying the body’s motion (if there were, it couldn’t be in motion), and as its position is constantly changing no matter how small the time interval, and as such, is at no time determined, it simply doesn’t have a determined position.”

- Peter Lynds

“Zeno’s Paradoxes: A Timely Solution”

You are falling. You do not know how. You do not know why. Your arguments were perfect.

Your logic, flawless. Noplace. No one. Never. Nothing. But just before you hit the ground, the ground which seems so far away, though it is not far away, as if you were descending from an airplane, you think:

only
the man
falling
from the
sky with-
out a
para-
chute tru-
ly knows
the dis-
proof of
Zeno’s
Para-
dox
**Police Procedural**

_Protocol_

If you were a detective and I was your captain, and I found you were getting a little too emotional about a case, too personally involved, that your mental faculties were not operating as well as they could because of your frustration and rage, that you were certainly about to snap, I’ll be frank, I wouldn’t pull you off the case, I wouldn’t give you leave, I wouldn’t suspend your sorry butt (though the brass’ll tell me I should), I wouldn’t have you slap your badge and your gun on my desk and send you home, mumbling, quipping to whoever can hear you, probably your partner, some other detectives saying they’ll talk to me, smooth things out, no, even though it’s protocol, even though it’d be expected, I wouldn’t do that at all; instead, what I would do, of course I’d holler for you to get your ass into my office, I’d knock a giant stack of papers off my desk that I keep stacked on my desk for just such an occasion, prepared loose leafs flying everywhere, a vein throbbing in my forehead, sweat pouring down my leathery face as I point a stubby finger at you, I _would_ follow this much of the protocol because there must be some sense of order, a governing modus operandi that’s respected to some extent, but then, after my bow to etiquette, I’d break the rules, I’d shout: “Goddammit, Jaworski,” because you’d have a Chicago cop name in this scenario, and so I’d shout, in violation of the established code: “Goddammit, Jaworski, I’m keepin’ you on this one!”

_The Crime Scene_

“There’s nothing to see here,” says a uniformed officer. “There’s nothing to see here.”

But there must be something to see. As a general rule, on-lookers do not look on to see
nothing; bystanders do not standby for nothing. If there really were nothing to see, then the on-
lookers would not be on-lookers, the bystanders would not standby. Instead, the on-lookers and
bystanders would be citizens, pedestrians, passersby, people. By the very fact that they look on,
that they standby, there must be something to see.

And yet the persistent call: “There’s nothing to see here.”

Yet there is something. It isn’t everyday that crime scene investigators dust the park for
fingerprints, use footprints as molds for plaster casts, extract samples to later test for DNA
evidence, photograph everything, all while encircled by yellow police tape. POLICE LINE DO NOT
CROSS screams, “There’s something to see here! Excitement! Intrigue! Something more
interesting than your daily life as a pedestrian! For goodness sakes, there’s something to see
here!” If the police really wanted the on-lookers and bystanders to revert to their normal status
of “people,” crimes would be investigated covertly, by operatives in plainclothes appearing to do
nothing out of the ordinary, the area marked off not by yellow barriers, but by a legion of
overcoated, overbearded mendicants. Approaching the mob, however, you realize that crime
scenes are a form of avant garde, possibly absurd guerilla theater. Here, the performance has
already taken place. Here, the performers are either gone or perished. Here, the props are often
hidden, are often soiled and marked beyond legal recognition, perhaps these props are not the
correct props, perhaps these props were used in some other presentation, perhaps the true props
can never / will never be found. And only now, after the show has ended, is the first act being
described, the set being constructed, the stage being prepared, the unpaying audience gathering
like a group of extras for a film or TV show. The CSIs, in all of their scurrying to and fro, aim
to deduce the plot that would take place were it not already concluded, while on-lookers and
bystanders look on and standby watching and waiting to see the something called nothing that
there is to see there.

Amongst the crowd there are those who carry miniature televisions in order to watch the news, assumedly being filmed by the camera crews lurking everywhere, so that on their miniature televisions they can see themselves with their miniature televisions in front of a performance that took place some other time. Occasionally, those with the portable TVs will look up and wave at the cameras, and in the future, thanks to the tape delay, will see themselves looking up not to wave at the cameras, but at themselves, reminding themselves that they are there, or were there, that this is happening, that this happened, whatever it was or is, though, according to the police nothing is happening, “There’s nothing to see here.”

Winding your way through the crowd, you finally reach the yellow tape, get inside by holding up your badge and giving your usual line:

“I’m me, and this is my partner.”

You walk towards the epicenter of the scene that took place some other time, a time that will be determined later like precisely identifying when the movie that you missed started, and you see a body covered by a sheet.

Leaning down, you’ve gotten used to seeing the outcomes of such performances, the gruesome details, victims shot several times with large caliber rounds, once with a small bullet, stabbed any number of times, bludgeoned, strangled, throats slit, entrails everywhere, decapitations, but you are not prepared for what you see today. You are not prepared at all, not sure what to say, not sure how to proceed, not sure what to tell your partner.

Underneath the sheet is nothing.

Behind you are CSIs gathering evidence encircled by police tape, archeologists of a sort attempting to ascertain the truth of the recent past, recreating the actions the persons of that
past made, deducing the plot like Pierre Menard trying to rewrite *Don Quixote* by reading everything but. Protecting the CSIs are the uniformed officers informing those beyond the tape that there’s nothing to see here, while the on-lookers and bystanders look on and standby waiting to see that something they know is being hidden from them.

   Underneath the sheet is nothing.

   The persistent call continues. “There’s nothing to see here. There’s *nothing* to see here.”

The tape, however, tells a different story; it makes the people believe in the something beyond. But for the first time in the history of the police force, the officers aren’t lying.

*The Death of Nobody*

“What happened here?”

“I don’t know.”

“When did it happen?”

“Had to’ve happened sometime.”

“Who was killed?”

“Nobody.”

“Normally you lift up the sheet and there’s somebody.”

“Or at least a body that used to be somebody.”

“There’s never nobody.”

“Never.”

“Otherwise, why would all these people be here?”

“No reason at all.”

“People want to see something happen.”
“They don’t show up for nothing.”

“Or nobody.”

“Even if the somebody is a nobody, people show up.”

“Because it’s somebody under there.”

“Even if it’s really a nobody.”

Long pause.

“Let’s try again.”

“Okay.”

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“Who was killed?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody? Can’t be nobody. There has to be a body. It has to be some body. Otherwise, why the police tape, the CSIs scurrying to and fro, the on-lookers and bystanders?”

“I know, but…”

“Look, last time I checked murder’s still illegal in this town. No one gets off. Someone’s guilty. Maybe everyone’s guilty.”

“You can’t just kill someone and get away with it.”

“I mean, you can’t just kill somebody!”

“Yeah, even if it’s nobody.”

**The Autopsy**

The coroner says, “Oh my God.” The coroner says, “In all my years, I’ve never seen anything
like this.” The coroner says, “This is new.” The coroner says, “I’ve never seen… in all my years… nothing like this.” The coroner says, “Oh. My. God.” The coroner eats a big, sloppy sandwich, ignores the maintenance man installing a new security camera, looks at a cop show on his desk TV: a detective interrogating someone in an apartment. The detective appears to be at wit’s end.

The coroner looks away from the screen and says that he’s ruled out small caliber rounds, large caliber rounds, bird shot, buckshot, knives of any size, manual strangulation, ligature strangulation, asphyxiation from a pillow, shaken baby syndrome. Also ruled out were bludgeons such as saps, nightsticks, truncheons, candlesticks, lead pipes, wrenches. The victim was not beaten to death by a martial artist, kickboxer, regular boxer, kangaroo boxer. The victim’s neck was not snapped, nor was the victim used as a body shield after the neck-snapping that did not happen. The coroner says he’s ruled out a fall from an airplane, a fall from a building, a fall from a great height after a harrowing sword fight with a swashbuckler. Also ruled out was being shoved out in front of a car or train or semi or bus or hansom cab or any other vehicle.

The coroner says he doesn’t think it was a mob hit because there aren’t any markings. The coroner says he doesn’t think it was a professional hit because there’s no calling card. The coroner says it wasn’t a gangland killing because there’s no evidence that the victim was connected to any of the area gangs, and because the m.o. isn’t consistent with… The coroner says he doesn’t think the victim was abducted by aliens and subjected to a series of tests which, in the end, led to the victim’s death, because in his (the coroner’s) experience aliens are quite good at conducting tests on humans so that said humans are not harmed, so that said humans are unable to remember that they were abducted and tested in the first place.
The coroner has ruled out medieval weapons, such as the longsword, shortsword, maul, mace, halberd, bow and arrow, spear, battle axe, quarterstaff, guisarme, morningstar, dagger, dirk, catapult, bolt thrower, guillotine. The coroner has ruled out sci-fi weapons such as the ray gun, laser sword, monofilament whip, and any piece of artillery that creates a black hole in the center of your body. The coroner has ruled out any kind of magic, including being possessed by a demon, sent to a parallel universe, etc. The coroner has even dismissed the ice bullet technology that may or may not have killed General George S. Patton.

The coroner says he ran a tox screen to see if the victim was poisoned. It came up negative.

“Get this, I even decided to run some tests for diseases.” The victim showed no signs of heart disease, high blood pressure, cancer of any sort, diabetes, lung disease, HIV (in fact, no STDs of any kind).

“Unfortunately, I can’t tell you what killed him or when he was killed. From what I can tell, your victim should be perfectly healthy,” the coroner says.

“Except that he’s dead,” you say.

The cop show continues, or has started over, or has led into another episode. Before it was obviously the end, now it appears to be the beginning. Or maybe the middle. A cop next to a sheeted body, ready to lift it up and see what’s happened. The maintenance man adjusts the camera.

“What’s this show you’re watching?”

“Misrule & Chaos. Best show on TV. Didn’t you have the new detectives as ride-alongs?”

“They had to go rehearse.”

The coroner says, “Like this. Like this. I’ve never seen anything before. In all my years. Like this.”
The Investigation

“If you doan got any more questions, I gotta get back ta work heah!”

After a while, the potential witnesses all appear to be the same. There’s the guy at the convenience store who’s so eager to get back to work, but you know if you came in without the badge he’d be doing as little as possible. There’s the meathead at the loading docks. The meathead refers to the victim as a jerk. The meathead says, “Who, Tony? He still owes me fifty bucks.” The meathead isn’t too put out when you tell him the jerk’s, the victim’s dead. But you know the meathead works fifteen hours a day, and he didn’t kill anyone, he just didn’t like that sonofabitch the deceased. There’s the bartender who, when you show him the picture, says he’s never seen anyone like that in here before, until you bring up his liquor license, and that backroom illegal poker game no one’s supposed to know about that he runs every Thursday; then, suddenly, the victim was a regular, the bartender even knows his drink (an Invisible Hombre), the bartender never forgets a drink, he could get you and your partner a drink, on the house for our city’s finest, but of course you’re on duty. There’s the jogger who heard a noise, only the time she gives is wrong, and she was way too far away anyhow. There’s the business exec who fields fifteen calls during the interview, who has secretaries and colleagues running in and out of his office the entire time, who doesn’t know anything, except later you learn he’s cheating on his wife with a hooker, a young mistress, another man, and the only reason he didn’t give you any information was because he was afraid the divorce attorneys…

Soon, you begin thinking that all of these potential witnesses are the same for every case. That even though they’re not necessarily criminals, they’re connected to crime and law enforcement. Perhaps they’re not human. Perhaps they’re some other species. They’re magnetized, polarized. And each time a felony’s committed, they’re pulled into its orbit thanks
to their crime-charged genes, always destined to be extras in the sordid workings of the city.

You don’t even have to interview these people, or whatever they are, any more. You know what they’ll say as if it’s a TV show you’ve seen too many times. But there is protocol…

The last name on the list is an ex-con. There’s always an ex-con. This one works in a camera store. He lays out a box of expensive tissues, Q-tips, a nostril hair trimmer, pore cleansing strips, saline solution, a blackhead remover, along with assorted soaps and lotions. He says, “Look, I’m keepin’ my nose clean.” He says, “Anyway, I gotta alibi. Along with my job the state got me, I’m moonlighting as an actor. I’m trying to get a bit as an extra on some cop show. Listen: ‘If you doan got any more questions, I gotta get back ta work heah!’”

_The Suspect_

“So, where were you last night?”

“I was in the park.”

“Oh, you were in the park.”

“What were you doing in the park?”

“I was murdering the victim.”

“Oh yeah, at what time?”

“At the time the victim was murdered.”

“That was around eight.”

“No, no it wasn’t.”

“Oh, it wasn’t, huh?”

“You mind telling us when it happened, then, since you seem to know so much?”

“It was at ten.”
“It was at ten, huh? How do you know that?”

“I was there. And I remember because by 11:30 I met the usual gang for an illegal poker game. Very high stakes. It’s in the backroom of this bar…”

“If we find out you’re lying to us…”

“You’ll glue, staple, rivet the book to the desk so no one can throw it at me?”

“Is that what you’re going with, then?”

“That you were in the park, murdering the victim. What if we say you were with your girlfriend all night?”

“That would give me a wonderful alibi with only one catch.”

“What’s that?”

“I couldn’t be with my girlfriend at the time of the murder.”

“Why not?”

“Because she lives on the other side of town from the park. From the park, you know, where I was murdering the victim.”

“You don’t even know what time the murder took place.”

“It was eight.”

“I was there. I have a watch that has a satellite uplink that connects to the atomic clock in Colorado. I looked at my watch as I murdered the victim!”

“You, sir, were with your girlfriend, watching a movie.”

“No!”

“You made popcorn.”

“No!”

“You moved the popcorn aside, neither of you were very interested in the movie, and you
put your hand on her thigh.”

“No!”

“She was into it. She leaned over and kissed you.”

“No!”

“Come on! We know exactly what you were doing!”

“Okay! Okay! I was with my girlfriend the whole time!”

“See, we knew it.”

Beat.

“Are you going to arrest me?”

“We don’t have anything to hold you on. Except maybe suspicion.”

“Suspicion of what?”

“Being suspicious.”

**The Continuing Investigation**

The suspect’s parents say their boy would never do anything like that. You tell them he hasn’t done anything. They say, exactly, our boy’d never do nothing. He’s always doing something. You say he admitted to a murder. That he might do, the parents say. A mobster says he doesn’t hire people to make sure that no one’s been killed. A drug dealer, behind bars, says he couldn’t possibly have done anything. The one and only thing that happens in prison is nothing. When you tell him nothing’s happened, he says, “I confess.” A snitch says some weird shit’s been goin’ down. He says they’re drugs everywhere, but no one’s buying. That even with the drugs everywhere, no one’s selling. No one’s being shot. No one’s being stabbed. The snitch says he saw two rival gangs play basketball with a third gang providing the referees. Referees not only
never had to call any flagrant fouls, there weren’t any fouls committed at all. Not a hack, a block, a charge. The snitch says there’s been a run on nose cleaning supplies at all of the drugstores. Everyone’s keeping their noses clean.

You go to see a Father Dr. Major Scoop, esq. who’s office is in the Times Building. His assistant says this has to be quick. His assistant says one take and then the set comes down. Father Dr. Major Scoop, esq. sits behind a desk and has his assistant wheel a TV in that’s first airing a cop show (an interrogation), but then Father Dr. Major Scoop, esq. appears on the screen. He introduces himself. He says he cannot talk to you. He says that he is a lawyer, and not just any lawyer, but the suspect’s lawyer, so there’s attorney-client privilege. He says he is a doctor, the suspect’s doctor, so there’s doctor-patient confidentiality. He says he is a priest, the suspect’s confessor, and a priest can never divulge what he hears in confession. The Reverend Dr. Major Scoop, esq. cannot talk to you, and because he cannot talk to you he made this recording explaining why he cannot say a single word to you. He would let you know how he knew you were on your way to his office, how he knew far enough in advance to write the script and record his spot, but the people who informed him are his sources at the Times, and his sources have a right to privacy. Finally, Father Dr. Major Scoop, esq., even if he could talk to you, does not have to talk to you because, last month in Iowa, Scoop married the suspect. And spouses never have to testify against each other.

After the taped message is over, there’s a long pause. Workers begin tearing the office down. And then back to the cop show.

The Warrant

There are cameras everywhere. The Assistant District Attorney eyes you for some time.
“So let me get this straight. You have no motive, nor do you have a reason for whatever it is we’re talking about to happen, so it follows that you have no theory on why the crime in question occurred. You have no murder weapon, and no leads on what kind of weapon may’ve been used, and you have no witnesses, which is unsurprising since you also have no body. For me to get you a warrant, you’re going to have to come back with evidence that anything at all has happened.”

The cameras turn to you.

“Something must’ve happened! Something always happens!”

The cameras turn to the ADA.

“Nothing happens, too. It happens all the time.”

**The Interrogation**

The suspect looks at the two-way mirror.

“Why are you so certain?”

“We’re the police. We’re the agents of certainty.”

“We work through until we know.”

“And we always get to know everything.”

“Even when others are uncertain.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You haven’t thought of a lot of things.”

“I’ve thought of everything!”

“Huh, sounds like he’s thought of everything.”

“Have you ever thought of the fact that most atoms are made up of space?”
“That there’s more nothing in everything than anything else?”

“That if I slammed you into that wall you might go right through it and fall to your death?”

The suspect moves away from the wall.

“Well, no.”

“Guess you haven’t thought of everything.”

“No, I guess he hasn’t.”

“Look, we can talk to the DA for you.”

“Why would I need that? I’ve already confessed. Do the DA and I speak different languages?”

“You confessed, huh?”

“Yes!”

“Well, take a look at that.”

You slap a picture of the nothing under the sheet at the crime scene.

“I wanna see my lawyer.”

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**The Evidence**

You go through documents, make telephone calls, field calls from informants who have no information, read old newspapers on microfilm, do Internet searches, compare similar cases (though there are none), go down to the Hall of Records only to find that what you were looking for isn’t there because there was a fire, water damage, a few years ago all the old records were moved and some got lost, you burn the midnight oil until you find an old trunk that you crack open with a crowbar and inside is a key.
The Unknown

The key is to an apartment. You go to the apartment. You can hear the TV’s on inside. You can tell it’s showing a cop show. You knock. The door opens. You use your usual line:

“I’m me, and this is my partner.”

“Partner?” the man on the other side of the door says.

You look to your right. There’s no partner.

“Look, I’m on a murder investigation and I found this key.”

“Murder investigation?” the man on the other side of the door says. You look at the key. It’s on a ring with all your other keys.

“Look, I’m a detective,” you reach for your badge. There’s no badge.

You stumble in the door. On the TV is a cop show. The scene is in an all white apartment. There’s a lone man sitting on a couch. In front of him there’s a bottle of tequila, a bottle of tonic water, a bottle of lime juice, a lime. He makes himself an Invisible Hombre. He drinks. The drink is delicious, you think. You look at the man on the other side of the door who now holds a camera. You look at the TV, where your image is being projected. You are drinking a clear drink. This is actually happening. You think of the people watching their miniature TVs at the crime scene. You wave. You wave back. You try to switch the channel, but every station has you on it. You are the show. You wonder if this is a new episode or a rerun.

The Confession

Soon you will walk through my door. You will be disheveled. You will be frustrated. You will be a little drunk. Your mental faculties will not be operating at their peak. And I will have a decision. If I do what I’m supposed to do, you will go home. You will feel justified in the fact
that this time the system has failed. You will cool down. You will think to yourself that you’d
done everything you could, and it was the brass’s fault that the criminal got away. Then, after
your suspension, your forced leave, you will return and resume your work. Perhaps,
ocasionally, you will think about the one that got away, but always you will remember that it
wasn’t your fault.

But if I don’t do what I’m supposed to, you remain on the case. It goes on and on. And by
extending the labyrinth, the order is lost. If before there were dead ends, that only proved there
was a maze. Stretching the case out, there are not only no dead ends, there is nothing, which is
what you began with before you formed your definition of order. And you’ll never know that
the one who murdered your order was me, your captain until I tell you in my brash confession.
And that’s what this is. My brash confession delivered in front of everyone, for no reason, when
really it’d behoove me to keep my goddamned mouth shut, my lawyer whispering in my ear,
saying, “This meeting is over.” Only it’s not. The villain’s line: It hasn’t even begun. And
when you walk into my office, I’ll be here. Waiting for you. Having rehearsed every move
Setting up the papers, and then, with rage, knocking them off my desk, having mastered every nuance The
vein in my forehead throbbing, having even gained control of my exocrine glands the way some
actresses control their tear ducts Sweat pouring down my face, having put myself in the position of
absolute authority A stubby finger pointed right at you like a gun whose trigger I’m about to pull, but my
weapon, here, is not a gun, no, it’s what I’ll say when you finally come into my office, when you
come into my office emotional, distraught, too attached to the case, drunken and angry, now!,
loose leafs flying, vein throbbing, sweat pouring, finger pointing, oh, I’m prepared, I am prepared
to unleash my weapon, my wrath, my brash confession, I’ve practiced every line, I was born for
this part, this is how they’ll remember me, and as you sit there, in your confusion, the only
audience I’ll ever need, *this* is what I’ll tell you:
Dear —,

How are you I am fine.

As I write this you are sitting right next to me. You see me writing. You see me writing this letter that is intended for you. That I will send to you in the future after you and I have parted ways. There is nothing that I can say in this letter that I cannot say right now by turning my head in your direction and beginning to speak. I could even read this letter out loud to you, since it is intended for you, and perhaps elicit a laugh and that would begin our conversation which would lead to my stopping this letter and speaking with you saying the things out loud that I am now writing which would perhaps be even easier. In the future, when you read this letter, you will remember sitting next to me, here in the past, and wonder why I wrote you a letter instead of merely talking to you. You will remember me staring intently at the page, as if what I wrote was of the utmost significance, and you will remember not talking to me because you assumed that you would be interrupting either something of importance to myself or someone else. But if you would have spoken to me, breaking my train of thought in what I wanted to say to you, then it would've been no different than if we were having a conversation and you had interrupted me in order to ask for a clearer explanation, or to interject something of possible importance or at least of possible interest to us both. Only you did not interrupt, you were perfectly polite and allowed me to continue writing my unnecessary letter which you are now reading, there in the future, probably wondering what it was that I had to say that had to be written while you sat next to me wondering what it was that I was so intent on writing. If you would’ve interrupted early in the going only to ask what I was writing I would’ve responded truthfully and said, Why I’m writing you a letter. Probably you would’ve laughed, not believing
me, perhaps even thanking me for being so considerate as to write you a letter to show that I was thinking of you as you sat next to me there in the past where I wrote this letter that you are now reading there in the future which is your present. You may’ve even said that it was about goddamned time I had written you a letter since I had promised to write and up until that point in the past where you were sitting right next to me I had not followed through on my promise, I had, so to speak, reneged. And if this were the case, perhaps in the future (your present) where you are reading this letter, although my present is the past where I am writing this letter as I sit next to you and you wait for me to finish so our meeting can begin, so our conversation can begin, although I can say nothing out loud but what I am writing in this letter, you are thinking that I had completely forgotten to write you the promised letter, and that I had only remembered upon seeing you, and that I had therefore sat down next to you and finally began making good on my promise, better late than never, making our meeting a silent and awkward affair as I focused on my writing, seeming not to pay attention to you after so much elapsed time between this and our last meeting, although I am thinking only of you. But that was not the case. I had always intended to write you this letter with you sitting next to me for, truth be told, this letter could not have been written anywhere than right here, right now, in the past, with me sitting next to you, you waiting for me to finish, nervous as to whether you are in the right to interrupt, or whether you should allow me to finish, not realizing that if you interrupted, you wouldn’t really be interrupting anything at all.

Sincerely,
The City of the Sunsphere

At Heliopolis we saw ruined buildings where the priests had lived. For it is said, anciently, this was the principle residence of the priests who studied philosophy and astronomy. But there are no longer such a body of persons or such pursuits. No one was pointed out to us on the spot as presiding over these studies, but only persons who repeated sacred rites, and those who explained to strangers the peculiarities of the obelisk.

- Strabo
Geographica (XVII.1:29)

And now the new Sunsphere is the cynosure of Knoxville. Standing 6,520 feet tall, its base is a black, cylindrical tower capped by a circular crown that extends well past the parameters of the column accentuated by equally black spires which carry the eye to the orb. The orb is a perfect globe of gold hovering twenty feet above the crown. It rotates thirty times per second, 108,000 times per hour precisely as does the Crab Pulsar, located 6,520 light years away near the constellation Taurus in the center of the Crab Nebula. The Crab Nebula and the Crab Pulsar were created by the Supernova of 1054 (SN1054), although the exact date of the event is unknown. The Crab Pulsar is a neutron star six miles in diameter, far smaller yet much denser than the Earth’s sun. Again mimicking the Crab Pulsar, the Sunsphere’s orb emits a concentrated beam of light that makes the sphere appear to pulse because of its rotations. If the orb could be decelerated, the light beam would match that of a lighthouse or emergency vehicle. The Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar also emit radio pulses and x-rays, but only the x-rays are susceptible to Quasi-Periodic Oscillations (QPOs); hence the x-ray emissions vary, the light waves and the radio pulses remain constant. Once the Sunsphere was 266 feet tall, consisting of a green, girder-supported tower and a golden sphere made of connected hexagons. It did not
pulse with light. It did not emit radio waves. It did not emit x-rays. It had a red light on a pole at the zenith to warn airplane pilots. On July 4, 2054, an explosion erupted around the Sunsphere, engulfing the structure in red, yellow, green, and blue flames. After the outburst, a crimson and cobalt cloud was left behind. When the smoke dispersed, the new Sunsphere stood in place of the former. The orb began spinning. The city filled with light.

To the southeast of the Sunsphere, windows reflecting golden beams, is Knoxville City Hospital. In OR 1058, Yang Wie-Te, a second generation Chinese-American, a physicist and astronomer, is in critical condition. He proved that the Crab Pulsar and the new Sunsphere are in synchronicity with each other. He is supposed to deduce the meaning of the cosmic alignment. He is supposed to translate the messages being transmitted through the radio waves, light emissions, and x-rays. He lies prone on an operating table. Whether he has solved the mystery of the Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar is unknown. The operating room, contrary to the rest of the hospital, is painted white and the tables are stainless steel. The doctors, nurses, and assistants surrounding the astronomer wear suits of aquamarine, including facemasks, caps, and gloves. Their hands move rapidly. They speak in curt, terse commands or laconic repetitions. From the celeritous and ever-increasing activity, it can be deduced that the physicist is in a worsening state of dissolution. Should Mr. Yang die, he would be subject to the following penalizations: a $250,000 fine, the incarceration of his entire family in health resorts for the despondent and valetudinary located in Farragut (or Far West Knoxville), marking of his entire family with the sign of the Theta: \( \text{theta for thanatos} \) (the death imprint). Yang Wie-Te’s descendants will also be liable for any destruction caused by the physicist’s death which could reach upwards of a billion dollars to assorted insurance companies, banks, law firms, and other
public and private interests. Ultimately, Mr. Yang’s family may face the severest castigation: expulsion from the City of Knoxville. These chastisements, and perhaps more, would be effected if the astronomer should pass away because of City Code 529: Thou shalt not die, lest ye release a shock wave. And it is true, whenever a human passes away the corpse immediately releases a shock wave that ranges in power from a quarter ton nuclear weapon to a one megaton hydrogen bomb. On account of these puissant bursts, death is prohibited. With modern medicine, however, aging and dying are purely voluntary. Hence no one has died in Knoxville in over twenty years. Yet a question arises: how could Yang Wie-Te allow himself to degenerate to his current status? No matter the reason, the penalties and fines to be exacted on Mr. Yang’s family are theoretical, superfluous. At Knoxville’s current population, and given the physicist’s enthalpy and exergy readings, the shock wave from his body would be the genesis of a chain reaction of shock waves that would obliterate each building, that would eradicate the entire population of 100,000,000 Knoxvillians, if not the entire world.

Second only to the Sunsphere, Knoxville City Hospital is the tallest manmade structure in the city (since the aforementioned tower can no longer be considered manmade). From the roof of the sanatorium, the entire megalopolis is viewable, with the exception of parts of the Northern Wasteland blocked by the former World’s Fair tower. Here one can see that the majority of the population has clogged the streets, parks, bridges, sidewalks, riverbanks, and other open spaces of the city. Although the Knoxville Health Commission (KHC) inundates the airwaves, satellite signals, Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc. with calming broadcasts and Public Placation Announcements (PPAs), the news of Yang Wie-Te’s condition has been disseminated by some means. Utterly docile, the citizens understand that if Mr. Yang expires, Knoxville, but more
importantly the Sunsphere, will cease to exist. Yet the soothing tones, the conciliating reports, and the optimistic premonitions do nothing to alleviate the tension. In spite of the danger, such masses of people moved to Knoxville because of the new Sunsphere. Being a neutron star (although comparatively infinitesimal) like the Crab Pulsar, it supplies the megalopolis with an almighty source of energy. Hence electricity is inexpensive. The citizens, however, are also filled with this vigor. No one in Knoxville needs to sleep any longer than three or four hours per night; only those who fight against their own inherent vivacity (which is also illegal) go without exercise; only those who eschew their intrinsic verve fail to accomplish their goals. Lassitude, as are aging and death, is a voluntary condition. Moreover, the Sunsphere provides the city with a constant heat source. The mean temperature in Knoxville is 85° F. Finally, much as neutron stars generate the most powerful magnetic fields in the universe, the Sunsphere’s magnetism is due to its mystery and the mystery between its connection to the Crab Pulsar. The answer to this enigma is what each citizen of Knoxville hopes to learn. Yang Wie-Te had been attempting to deduce the answer for over eight years when he was checked into Knoxville City Hospital by his assistant. He was found on the outskirts of the Northern Wasteland.

East of the Sunsphere, along Summit Hill, are Market Square and the Old City, until Summit Hill becomes Martin Luther King (MLK). Market Square and the Old City are an entertainment district composed of subterranean clubs: literally subterranean. Aboveground, this recreational zone is constructed almost uniformly of red brick. The streets are older, still molded from asphalt in most places down to limestone in others. Meticulous care has been taken in this borough to preserve an aged appearance of no particular year. Gas lights line Gay Street. South Central is made of brick. Advertisements for products no longer in use, whose use is no longer
remembered are still prevalent. A structure rumored to be a saloon and a bordello in the middle to late 1800s continues to be both to this day. Past the Old City, the houses are concatenated, and yet most Eastern Knoxvillians still live underground. Whereas the citizens of Knoxville hope to solve the mystery of the Sunsphere, or to have the mystery solved for them, there are three cults whose beliefs find their origins in the exact date of the occurrence of SN1054, which explain their interest in the World’s Fair Tower. The East is home to the Believers, also known as the Doomsdayers or the Apocryphites. They believe SN1054 was first observed by Sadiae Fujiwara, a Japanese poet, on May 29, 1054. Astronomers have proven that such a viewing would have been impossible because Zeta Tauri, the closest observable star before the supernova, was in direct proximity to the sun, therefore invisible. Furthermore, Sadiae Fujiwara was not yet born in 1054, since he made his astronomical hypothesis in 1235. Although the evidence is against their claim, the Apocryphites continue to believe that Fujiwara was teleported back in time to a position where he could witness SN1054. Along with this belief, the Apocryphites assert that whatever the pulsar message may be, it will encourage humans to die and be transported to Paradise, located in the Crab Nebula, to live with Sadiae Fujiwara and James Agee. The reason humans began erupting into shock waves and the reason the old Sunsphere became the new: so more earthlings would die simultaneously and be delivered to Arcadia. At this hour, while the city of Knoxville awaits the outcome of Yang Wie-Te’s surgery, the Apocryphites have concluded that Mr. Yang induced from the x-rays what the Believers themselves already knew. Yang, who perambulated in the direction of the Old City about once or twice per month, was aiming to bring about the apocalypse when his turncoat assistant committed him. Asked how they are keen to such information, Believers will say that the x-ray QPOs “told me so.” They will also say that the number 529 in City Code 529 is no coincidence.
It signifies that the Apocryphite belief in May 29 is correct, that their convictions are also correct. Because of their obsession with death, Apocryphite temples are the aforementioned underground speakeasies. Here they lure Tellers, Ramponans, and their own kind to dine on deleterious cuisine, imbibe alcohol and other drugs, fornicate randomly, smoke cigarettes, brawl with their fellow citizens, etc. With their goals they are successful, although modern medicine, if consulted soon enough, can cure all of the effects of these activities. On occasion, since the diversions in these clubs are prohibited, the police launch cleansing campaigns, sending those who are found to health resorts; the subterranean caves, however, are labyrinthine and the Apocryphites have never been completely reeducated. Instead, they continue their rebellion, speaking of their apocalyptic revolution in hushed, deferential tones, pointing to the new Sunsphere which they feel was created when the ghost of James Agee rose from his grave to make possible the transfer of all humankind to Paradise. The QPOs informed them so.

The Northern Wasteland was demolished by the only shock waves that have occurred. It is composed, solely, of rubble. There are no brick buildings. There are no skyscrapers. There are no cinderblock structures. There are no actual streets. There are no people. There is nothing but the reminder of what happens when a human being expires. There are sections where the detritus has been itself destroyed, leaving a view of the Appalachian Mountains far in the distance. The shock waves did not obliterate all of Knoxville because there were fewer people living in the city at that time. Before the explosions, the North was home to a fourth Sunsphere Cult: the Free Thinkers, also known as the Sunsphere Haters. Even with the radiating charm of the propaganda and the menace of death, the other Knoxvillian groups despised the Free Thinkers to an almost self-destructive degree. The reason the Free Thinkers were hated, the
reason they were called the Sunsphere Haters: they claimed the message the Sunsphere was emitting meant nothing at all, that the alignment of the Crab Pulsar and the World’s Fair Tower was a cosmic event of astounding, yet nonsensical proportions. The light waves, radio pulses, and x-rays were not a code to be decrypted, but even if they were they could be studied from the antipodes where there was no peril. The date of SN1054 is inconsequential, or was so to them. The Free Thinkers, therefore, worked to get Knoxvillians to apostatize, proclaiming there would be no revelation from the Sunsphere, that it was merely beautiful and dangerous. A scandal would have arisen if any of the Free Thinkers had lived: who caused the shock waves? Since the Sunsphere Haters were eradicated, they were blamed. The Tower, according to the other groups, had its vengeance. The one surviving invention the Free Thinkers imparted on Knoxvillian society is the Enthalpy/Exergy Meter (EEM). Exergy is the amount of energy that can be extracted from a system. Since this energy is ejected as a shock wave when a human perishes, exergy is the measure of a person’s explosive potential. Enthalpy calculates internal energy, pressure, and volume (in the case of humans, weight). Keeping enthalpy low is the goal of all human beings who are not Apocryphites. A high enthalpy score means your body contains too much energy, too much pressure, or too much weight. Energy and pressure can add to exergy, increasing explosive potential. Weight cannot add to exergy, but an obese individual could still erupt into a shock wave equivalent to a quarter ton nuclear device. Furthermore, a corpulent human probably has a high energy reserve (since the Sunsphere energizes all), probably is under excessive physical stress, and both of these properties lead to a higher exergy rating. When enthalpy reaches a predetermined level (calculated by doctors for each individual) a person will either go into cardiac arrest or will immediately die; Yang Wie-Te was in cardiac arrest when he was discovered. The Free Thinkers, to simplify the EEM, wrote a
song to explain its value:

    Enthalpy and exergy work together to instill harmony,
    Without them your deaths would destroy this here fine city.

The Sunsphere Haters hoped to preserve as many humans as possible until they could remove them from Knoxville. Members of the other cults now walk to the edge of Henley Street, which used to become Broadway in the North, whenever they are questioning their own beliefs, whenever they lose hope in the Sunsphere. These questioners stand at the extremity of the city and ponder the expanse of the wastes beyond. In the distance there are the mountains.

Fort Sanders, the University of Tennessee campus, and parts West are home to the Tellers of the Truth. Here there are mostly skyscrapers made of steel, aluminum, and prismatic windows which cast kaleidoscopic patterns. The streets are made of an advanced polymer that transmogrifies according to the climate to instill optimal traction. Along Kingston Pike, the largest thoroughfare in the megalopolis, are uplifting aphoristic billboards, appeasing colors, and tranquil professionally landscaped gardens. On each street corner is a speaker that broadcasts confidence-building adages and PPAs. Far West Knoxville is home to the mammoth KHC building, the third largest structure in the city. Contrary to the East, most Westerners live aboveground, as far aboveground as humanly possible, in order to be closer to the Crab Pulsar. The Tellers of the Truth, simply called the Tellers (or the Tattletales, depending on who is speaking), believe the original Yang Wie-Te was correct (the Yang Wie-Te being attended to by rapidly moving, aquamarine-clad doctors is a far distant relative). He claimed that SN1054 took place on July 4, 1054. Since this date is widely accepted by the scientific community, the Tellers are completely confident in their assessment. They are also confident that, whatever the
message may turn out to be, it will undoubtedly be found in the radio waves and it will undoubtedly encourage humans to live longer and longer. The radio waves hold the secret because they are the most easily deciphered. The secret is obviously to live longer because of the destruction corpses cause. Furthermore, the Tellers hold that their conclusions are correct because the old Sunsphere became the new on July 4: the date, they claim, of SN1054. They also claim that the Sunsphere metamorphosis was caused by a blast from the Crab Pulsar itself. The fact that such a blast would have taken 6,520 years to reach earth from the Crab Nebula does not deter their doctrines. While the prognostication becomes grimmer for Yang Wie-Te, a one-time native of the West (who departed after the Northern Wasteland was formed), the Tellers believe he had yet to deduce the answer to the World’s Fair Tower Enigma. He had been working too hard. He had worn himself down. What Mr. Yang needs to do, once he has convalesced, is to check into one of the health resorts, which are also the Teller temples. Citizens either choose to enter these sanitariums for their own fitness related reasons, or they are incarcerated into them when caught engaging in harmful activities often in insalubrious parts of town (the East). The propaganda from the city address system and the consumption of attitude adjustment pills, both Teller inventions, are not militarily enforced. A human who remains morose for an extended period of time, however, is considered to be engaging in antisocial (and therefore dangerous) behavior and may be subject to surveillance by the Knoxville Police Department (KPD). On this day, the propaganda and the pills appear to be inoperative, insufficient, since the general mood is one of consternation. Yet perhaps the propaganda is working, since the message transmitted for the past two days has been that the mystery of the Sunsphere was about to be solved.
Along Chapman Highway, south of the Sunsphere, live the Ramponans. The vast majority of their structures are made of cinderblock, but an exact pattern of architectural consistency is non-existent. Their roads are made of polymers, asphalt, cement, brick, and other substances. Some Southerners live underground, while an equal number live above to far aboveground. In sections their buildings are concatenated, in others they are sparse. The Ramponan ideology is that human beings can never really know anything at all. Facetiously they uphold the SN1054 date “discovered” by Giovanni Lupoato, who backs the only Western recording of the occurrence which appears in the admittedly questionable *Rampona Chronicle*. The *Rampona Chronicle* itself includes an error, accidentally listing the supernova year as MLVIII (1058), instead of MLIV (1054). If this document can otherwise be trusted, and according to the Ramponans no one knows if it can, then the date of the supernova was June 24, 1054. Since irrefutable knowledge is solely mythical, however, the Ramponans proclaim they are ignorant of the actual date, but that the rest of humanity is also ignorant. Yang Wie-Te, vying to display his exergetic reserve, was equally benighted but had yet to construct a nihilistic detachment from his situation when his assistant committed him. Since nescience is the controlling factor for Ramponans, they have no theories as to what the mystery behind the Sunsphere could be, anymore than it is possible to infer the exact date of SN1054 (which might not have occurred in 1054). Moreover, while discussing humanity’s witlessness, Ramponans will often declare that a doctrine of utter ignorance is itself a dogma, so humans cannot aver peremptorily their de facto state of naivete. When dealing with Apocryphites or Tellers, Ramponans will frequently dismiss the x-rays (especially the QPOs) and the radio waves and point to the light, asserting that it is Morse Code. When asked what the Morse Code means they answer that no one will ever know. Often lacking congruity, the Ramponans feel their system is correct at this hour because Mr. Yang, who last
resided in South Knoxville, is in OR 1058: a strictly ironic coincidence. The Ramponans remain in Knoxville to harass the other cults, to sow discord. Mockingly, they broadcast the radio waves emanating from the Crab Pulsar and the new Sunsphere. The sound, which is repeated ad infinitum, is a chopping sound, the sound of a helicopter, the sound of an overturned lawnmower. They intersperse these transmissions with belittling pleas of what it could all mean. In spite of their nihilistic detachment, the Ramponans also await the outcome of Yang Wie-Te’s operation.

6,520 light years away, shrouded in a cloud of gases extant from SN1054, the Crab Pulsar sends forth its message encrypted in x-rays, radio waves, and light. For now, the Sunsphere relays its esoteric message, not yet deciphered, perhaps indecipherable. Yang Wie-Te was often known to gaze in the direction of the Crab Nebula. When asked about his mental modes operandi, he would declare that he was imagining himself near the Pulsar, he was imagining himself as an antenna, he was preparing to disseminate the directive that would one day surge forth from his brain. He claimed the Pulsar and the World’s Fair Tower were made to speak through him. And they would. But now Mr. Yang is in the hospital, silent, perhaps awaiting his explosive transubstantiation. Yet in the Crab Nebula, the neutron star’s nature does not change. It continues to pulse. It continues to transmit.

And now the new Sunsphere. Even below the structure, in what was once World’s Fair Park, and what is now Sunsphere Place, people are compacted and waiting. They wait to learn of Mr. Yang’s condition. They wait to learn about the mystery behind the new Sunsphere and the Crab Pulsar. They search for answers. They are told over a loudspeaker by a soothing, relaxing voice
that the physicist, the astronomer is fine, that the mystery will soon be solved. Above them all
the orb of the Sunsphere pulses signifying doom, nothing, joy, nescience. Like the eye of God it
sees them all, the tower beneath it standing like a monolith to someone or something’s past or
possibly future demise.
**The Physics of the Bottomless Pit**

“Once I am dead, there will be no lack of pious hands to throw me over the railing; my grave will be the fathomless air; my body will sink endlessly and decay and dissolve in the wind generated by the fall, which is infinite.”

- Jorge Luis Borges

“The Library of Babel”

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**A Deadpan Conversation**

“That’s a deep pit.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Bottomless.”

“So they say.”

“It’s been proven.”

“They used a rope.”

“A rope?”

“A long, long rope.”

“No bottom?”

“None at all.”

“How’d it get that way?”

“No one knows.”

“Just opened up.”

“Just opened up?”

“Just opened up.”

“…”
“That’s a deep pit.”

**Proof of the Existence of Bottomless Pits**

A man at a desk holding a piece of paper says:

“To prove that the Knoxville Void is actually a bottomless pit, a team of anthropologists and geologists determined where on earth the other side of the hole would be. With this location set, one part of the team lowered a rope ten times as long as the pit could be deep. Since the other team did not receive any of the rope, the Knoxville Void was declared a bottomless pit.”

Footage of this action is displayed on a small screen to the left of the man.

**Singularity**

* A man fell into a pit today. Dropped like a stone. It was the strangest thing…

* He was walking slowly, randomly through World’s Fair Park. Because of the sun-glare he could only be seen in silhouette. The shadow, like an optic disk in the atmosphere, played upon the world almost imperceptibly.

Then the earth opened beneath it. His hat floated around above the hole for a bit. But then it fell, too.

**Arguments for and against**

Nicholas Copernicus, known for his Heliocentric Theory which proved that the earth was not the center of the universe, penned the original draft of what is now called the “Finite Planet, Finite Pit” Argument near the end of his life. Similar to the creation of the Heliocentric Theory, other scientists have since tweaked the treatise; the Copernican version, however, states the main idea: that earth is a finite planet, and therefore cannot contain an infinite structure. If by no other means, a pit that opened in the vicinity of the North Pole and continued directly through the crust, the mantel, and the core would still find its conclusion in the South Pole and
the vacuum of space. Although technically it would be without an earthen bottom, the pit would still cease, since the entire expanse of space could not be considered part of the pit.

Unlike his Heliocentric Theory, Copernicus’ bottomless pit article was not found until years after his death. In place of this pragmatic theory, manifold arguments arose and held precedence amongst various groups of thinkers: Plato’s “No Shadow” Argument (stating that we could not see the shadow of a bottomless pit in the allegorical cave); Aristotle’s “It’s Not a Pit Without a Bottom” Argument; Saint Thomas Aquinas’ “Aristotelian God” Argument (wherein he agrees with Aristotle, but includes the Christian deity and Right Reason to the wording); Descartes’ “Solipsistic Pit” Argument ( remarking that since he was not falling through an abyss sans bottom, bottomless pits must not exist) which he later replaced with his “Good God, No Pit” Argument (proclaiming that a good God would not construct such a diabolical thing); Locke’s and Hume’s “What Pit? I Don’t See Any Pit” Argument; Kant’s “Categorical Imperative against Bottomless Pits” (elucidating the fact that since a pit could not expect all pits to be bottomless, no pits should be bottomless); and finally, Sartre’s “Lack of Responsibility” Argument (quoting, “People fabricate bottomless pits in their minds so they need not take responsibility for their actions”).

Until the opening of the Knoxville Void, the sole pro bottomless pit argument came from Saint Anselm, who deduced that, “Since we can conceive of no pit deeper than one without a bottom, then behold, bottomless pits must exist.”

Observations on the Bottomless Pit

“Oh, they exist. You can bet on it. The government doesn’t want you to think they do, but they do. They’re everywhere. They can open up at any time in any place. You’ll never know
where. You could be walking down the street and, BOOM!, a bottomless pit opens underneath you. And what are you going to do about it? A guy I knew put a map together of where all the pits will open because somehow he figured the conspiracy out, but the government came and took him away. He … knew too much. They drove flying cars. They spoke in no human language. They wore all black. It was freaky, man. Freaky …”

***

“Friend a mine fell inna one a them-thar bottomless pits. He’d been a drinkin’ whisky and I done tole him to stay away from them-thar wells since they done got plenty bottomless pits around ‘em. But ‘ol Roscoe didn’t listen, so’s he up and fell in. Had to winch him out with ma truck.”

***

“The Lord God in Heaven could, at any time, decide to cast all of us into the Bottomless Pit, and there is nothing we could do about it. Those who have Fallen, then, deserve their fate because it was designed for them by the Almighty; as for us, those who have not Fallen, we should get down on our knees and pray to thank the Lord that He has not decided to banish us into the Abyss.”

***

“The Bottomless Pits, dude! They’re the greatest band there ever was! I remember this one concert of theirs in Hotlanta, man, it was the best concert I ever been to. We were drinking beers and doin’ shots and smokin’ a little weed … not too much, man. Don’t want to get roughed up by one a them bouncers. Those guys are huge … But the Bottomless Pits in Hotlanta, that was the most righteous show of all time. They played ‘The Wind Will Blow’ with that really cool guitar solo, and they did a cover of that Alice in Chains song, ‘Down in a Hole,’
and they did that creepy, ‘Sink or Swim,’ and ‘Like a Stone,’ and their encore was my favorite song of all time, man: ‘Soar Above the Rest.’ I mean what else could you ask for, dude? Guess they coulda played “Ah-Ah-Ahhhh,” but … The Bottomless Pits and getting wasted. That’s what it’s all about.

***

“There are no bottomless pits. Not even the Knoxville Void. It’s just a big hole. The whole infinite abyss thing is all a hoax.”

***

“I have nothing but the deepest sympathy for those who have fallen into that terrible, terrible hole. Theirs is truly a tragic life. Falling for eternity, oh the horror. And if you will elect me as Mayor of Knoxville, I will do everything in my power to make the lives of the Fallers better, more livable. Hopefully, one day, we will be able to rescue the Fallers from their collective fates; hopefully we will be able to close up the abyss and make the future safe for our children. Indeed, I have a stake in this myself; you see, my brother fell into a bottomless pit …”

**Photonsphere**

The mostly blue light of the television flickers on the man’s face. He sits immobile, occasionally raising the remote to change the station. The current show tells him that the Sunsphere is a tower, 1000 feet tall, consisting of a glowing golden orb and a green shaft. Surrounded by static electric blue lightning because it channels energy, the Sunsphere shines day and night. Visitors are equipped with rubber suits to avoid electrocution. From the acme, visitors can view the Knoxville Void. Of particular interest is the nightly dance around the bottomless pit. Performed by fifty ballet experts dressed in bright white, the dance consists of a circle formed nine meters away from the pit. When the dexterous adepts move, it appears as if the hole is spinning and the dancers are remaining
perfectly still.

What to Do in Case

It is, of course, best to avoid falling into a bottomless pit. But since most eschew them, it is unknown how anyone falls into one in the first place; and then, since those who do fall into them forget how the event came about …

If you should find yourself descending through a bottomless pit, here is a helpful tip on what you should do:

Fall.

Fall with grace, with clumsiness, with aplomb, without any plums, with agility, awkwardness, dramatic gravity, comic ridiculousness, seriously, ironically, sanely, insanely, as if this had all happened before (likened to déjà vu), as if none of this has ever happened before, with religious zeal, with atheistic cynicism, with style and class, with churlish indifference, with purpose, haphazardly, as if you were born to fall, as if you had taken up falling as a pastime in old age, as if you were looking forward to falling, as if you always dreaded falling (but knew there was no escaping it), like your parents told you to, expressly against your parents’ wishes, like a stone, like a brick, like a pillow, like a feather, like a feather pillow, like a penguin who thought he could fly, like an eagle who has forgotten how, with intelligence, with stupidity, like a dandy, like a tough guy, like Horatio Alger, like Socrates, not like Socrates, the way you were taught in school, as you learned away from or in spite of school, with a catfish, with any number of aquatic animals (perhaps they will keep you company), in the manner of King Arthur and his Knights of the Table Round, as a Shakespearean actor would, as a Samuel Beckett actor would, this way, that way, the other way, however you damn well please.

Just fall.
The direction in which you should fall: Downwards. Falling upwards is impossible, for falling upwards is flying.

**Telephonic Repartee**

“Hello.”

“What?!”

“Hello!”

“Oh, hi!”

“How’s the weather today in your part of the pit?!”

“Oh, fine!”

“Fine?! That’s swell.”

“Perhaps a bit windy.”

“Well, you’ll have that.”

“Yes, you will. How about in yours?”

“Oh, fine, I guess. If you like that sort of weather.”

“Yes, it is a subjective experience.”

“That it is, that it is.”

“So…”

“So, indeed.”

“What are you doing today?”

“Well, I thought I’d plant some begonias and George and I were thinking of seeing a movie…”

“What movie?”
“Oh, maybe Bottomless Pit.”

“I didn’t know you were into action movies.”

“Well, George is and I’ll watch just about anything … It’s supposed to have a love story in it, too.”

“Oh … Maud?”

“Yes, Gladys.”

“Never … never mind. It was nice talking to you.”

“You too, Maud.”

“All right. Goodbye.”

“Maud? Maud?”

“…”

“Are you still there?”

“…”

_Schwarzschild Radius_

Occasionally, it appears as if there are an infinite number of channels which all show an infinite number of shows, but the variations between the shows are infinitesimal. The movies, the reality shows, the sitcoms, the soap operas, the talk shows, the science shows, the dramas, the comedies, even the commercials all blend together. And the man continues to sit in the blue light, occasionally raising the remote to add yet another modification of negligible proportions to the conglomerate program.

On the television, there are images of a botched construction project and this voice over:

“After the pit was found to be bottomless, the citizens of Knoxville decided that it would be best to seal the hole in order to keep people from becoming Fallers. An argument arose, however, in response to the fact that
feathers in the bottomless pit are supposed to allow Fallers to attain weightlessness and ultimately to fly out of the pit. It was then determined that a hole should remain, although a small one, an ocular escape hatch. During the construction of the cap, however, many construction workers and supplies were accidentally dropped into the pit. The project has been put on hold until a better architectural plan can be worked out.”

**Terminal Velocity**

An object falling through an atmosphere has a terminal velocity: a point where the wind resistance upwards is equal to the gravitational pull downwards; once an object attains terminal velocity, it can travel no faster unless acted upon by another force. In a bottomless pit, however, terminal velocity does not exist because gravity exerts an exponentially increasing force upon a descending object. The Parallel Universe Theory of Multi-Dimensional Science explains this exponential gravitational increase. Obviously it would be impossible for an infinite pit to exist within a finite space, much as Copernicus explained. Hence the overlap of dimensions containing parallel universes within the Knoxville Void makes continuous descent possible. For whenever an object begins to fall into a pit which contains a dimensional overlap, a dimension containing a universe exactly parallel to our own, that object will always, no matter the dimension, continue to fall through a pit that has dimensional overlaps containing parallel universes. If the falling object were to suddenly appear outside of an abyss, then that object would not have fallen through a bottomless pit, nor would it be entering parallel universes, it merely would have descended through a deep crevasse with a universal warp inside.

As an object descends through a bottomless pit, each time it enters a new dimension, its speed is calculated as zero since the object is new to that particular time and space. Gravity, therefore, will begin to push on the object as if it had not been falling at all. This is similar to
dropping a baseball off of the Empire State Building, and when the baseball has traveled the length of the building, someone catches it and immediately drops it off of another Empire State Building. The difference in the bottomless pit is that the “catching” is theoretical, is simply the object entering another dimension. An object descending through the bottomless pit, then, is constantly achieving its maximum potential and kinetic energy states, since at any time it is falling as fast as it can, yet it is also in a state of rest compared with the falling velocity it will attain in less than a second into the future.

This state of maximum potential and kinetic energy coincides with the psychological assertion that Fallers experience a constant fluctuation of feelings, ranging from deep depression (“I am at my maximum potential”) to high-flying giddiness (“My speed will forever increase from here”).

Theorists do question whether or not objects descending through abysses, although they do not have states of terminal velocity, will catch fire and be torn asunder, like meteorites. Unlike meteorites, however, an object falling through a bottomless pit does not have to deal with friction. For once an object encroaches upon a critical state, it instantly appears in yet another dimension where its friction level is calculated as zero, where there is no danger, there is merely more falling.

**New Fallers**

No one remembers when they began falling (those that do are called *prevaricators* or *artistes*), or how or why they fell because of Faller Memory Degeneration (FMD).

If you are a Faller, when you first begin your descent into the bottomless pit, you are struck with the notion that you should not be cascading through a hole, you should be … But where
should you be? You cannot recall. A legion of facts and fantasies swim around in your disoriented brain, but you cannot sort them out; you cannot make sense of them. You feel as if your previous life vanished; or, more accurately, as if it were sucked out by a vortex, a black hole. Now you must deal with your predicament, but you have no idea how and no memories of helpful situations, similes, metaphors, anecdotes, pieces of traditional wisdom that can assist you.

As you fall, you look for the help of veteran Fallers. You descend faster than most veteran Fallers because you have not yet acquired any feathers. But you find the veterans to be of little help anyway because of acute cases of FMD. When you ask them about Falling, they look at you as if you were crazy, they tell extraordinary lies, they weave incomprehensible stories, they proffer useless bits of advice, they ignore you. Once you understand that veteran intelligence lacks salience, you take to watching the veterans. In their movements, they are instructional. Here you discover the importance of feathers and debris, of the constant mood swings, of the various societies descending through the pit. You perhaps decide to become a Stone or a Toiler or a Flyer. Perhaps you don’t decide yet. It’s early. You’re falling so fast. You’re a New Faller. There is much to experience, although all experiences are difficult and subjective because of the soaring and crushing nature of your emotions. The combination of depression and giddiness is dizzying. The former emotion emanates from the fear of death; the latter from cheating it.

When you first fell into the pit you did a great deal of screaming. You followed your screaming with periods of absolute silence. These reactions are normal, since you are in a constant state of vertigo where, although you are already falling, you forever believe that you are about to fall again. The veterans in the pit can be expected to either ignore your screaming, or to mockingly join in. Hopefully early on you will meet a person with a mild case of FMD. These
rare Fallers remember everything but how they got into the pit and usually have control over their emotions; yet they are a somber group, spending much of their days talking to themselves or to their pets, wishing they could find a solution to this problem without an answer.

**Accretion Disk**

*After watching television in a windowless room for a certain amount of time, the world falls away. The darkness of the atmosphere is ubiquitous and can only ever be penetrated by the blue. There is no universe outside of one's own. Experience and knowledge are the same, and both are attained through the box which, itself, vanishes; the images then play in the watcher's brain like dreams.*

*With a wry grin, the woman in the box says:*

*“Although the Rope Test proved that the Knoxville Void is bottomless, there is a group forming that opposes the results. At this time their numbers are small. They are expected to march on World's Fair Park to refute the pit's bottomlessness, citing Copernicus' ‘Finite Planet, Finite Pit’ Argument.”*

**The 8:15 PM Showing of “Bottomless Pit: the Movie”**

On the screen a cage is hanging over the bottomless pit, with a woman inside and a vile henchman outside whose hand is on a lever that apparently controls the cage’s trapdoor.

“Oh, the Diabolical Villain’s Henchman is going to throw me into the Bottomless Pit! Whatever shall I do,” says the Wonderbra Heroine.

“Wooh-hoo!” says the Horny Teenager watching the movie.

“Smack,” says the hand of the Horny Teenager’s Logical Friend. “Can’t you see it’s all tape and padding, smoke and mirrors?”

“Damn,” says the Horny Teenager.
“Bladow,” says the .50 Desert Eagle, being wielded in one hand by Handsome Hero.

“Woh-ooooh. Ahhhhhh!” says the Vile Henchman, as he falls into the pit.

“Cool line,” says Handsome Hero.

“My, Hero,” says the Wonderbra Heroine.

“Boo! Boo!” says the Horny Teenager’s Logical Friend.

“Not all people in bottomless pits are henchmen of diabolical villains,” says the movie’s credits.

“Aww,” says Horny Teenager.

**The Bottom of the Bottomless Pit**

If you are a Stone, you fill your pockets with debris so you drop more rapidly. Owning no feathers, you sink even quicker than the New Fallers, descending through cascading communities, perhaps making friends, perhaps not, hoarding more and more items, who cares what they are?, get all the debris you can, gain all the speed you can, you are a kind, reticent person and for the brief period of time you are in a community you help out in small ways, perhaps fixing something no one knew was broken until you quietly slip out without saying goodbye to anyone (at least not making a big production of it) and they say, well my goodness I don’t think this thing’s worked in years, and the only long-term pals you have are other Stones who keep falling with you, but if they decide to become Toilers or even Flyers, then you leave them behind, making your own small transient community accelerating to light speed (which no one has ever achieved), always wishing for the conclusion, the place you will soundlessly and calmly descend to, the place that will mark the end of your falling, that expanse of beautiful turf, that soil, that ground, that base where there will be wondering why no more, that colorful,
joyful, blithe zone where you will not have to undergo a dropping death leaving behind a
descending decaying celeritous corpse, that land that lacks anxiety: the bottom. You wish for the
bottom.

But there is no bottom. It’s a bottomless pit.

**Binary Pair**

*Steady breathing and drooping eyes show that he is only half-awake. Lethargy’s hold tightens. An
omnipresent buzzing sound, perhaps from the television, lulls him to sleep, absorbing his energy.*

_The blue says:_

“The Finite Pit March, at first assumed to be a minor movement, is building in intensity. We take you now
to our on-the-spot reporter.”

_A man with a spotty gray beard, backed by a star map says:_

“The star HDE226868 taught us that the X-ray source Cygnus X-1 was probably a black hole. How did it teach us? Well, for one, we found HDE226868 orbiting Cygnus X-1. Since HDE226868 is a supergiant star, whatever it was orbiting had to be more massive. Also, we found that Cygnus X-1 was actually pulling material off of its companion star. It moved, therefore, because something much more massive was tugging on it. That something is what we now call a ‘black hole.’ And nothing can escape a black hole, not even electromagnetic radiation.”

“We seem to be having difficulty connecting to our on-the-spot reporter, instead that was our astronomy
correspondent speaking about black holes. When we have a better link, we will bring you the news.”

**Speeches Next to the Bottomless Pit**

“Why’d … why’d you have to go and do it? Why’d … why’d you leave me behind? You
could’ve told me. You could’ve. Wasn’t I always there for you? Wasn’t I? Huh? Answer me! Please. Come on. Please. I don’t understand. Why’d … why’d …”

***

“Hey, did someone order this pizza? Hello? Hello! I know someone ordered this pizza. There ain’t any other bottomless pits in town. If you don’t come up and get it right now, I’m outta here. I’m leaving. Just watch me … Why do I always get stuck with the stupid orders to the bottomless pit?”

***

“What else is there? I’ve tried everything, haven’t I? Now it’s just so boring. A new life. A new chance. Something … It’s gotta be better, right? Yeah. I figure. But I don’t know. Who does? Anyone? We’re all baffled. We really are.”

***

“To be, or not to be …”

***

“If there is an ‘Andrew Farkas’ down there, and I believe there is, he still owes $150,000 on his student loans. If anyone can hear me, please let him know.”

***

“Nietzsche says you’re supposed to talk back or something. So … say something. You don’t do anything. You’re just a hole. And abyss, that’s just a fancy word for hole. Don’t go thinking you’re all high and mighty, then … Well? Why don’t you talk? Say something! I come here everyday, sit on the edge, and talk. But what do you do? Nothing. You can change all that, you know? Tell me why I come here everyday. Tell me! I want to know. You’re not all that interesting, you know? You’re a hole! How intriguing can that be? Not very intriguing at
all. And I don’t care how deep you are … Caves. Now caves, they’re fun. Hole, I hate to tell you this, but you’re no fun at all.”

***

“Wohh. Wo-oh-ohh. Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

***

“Deep enough for ya? Har har har har har!”

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**Personality Test Question**

I believe bottomless pits exist.

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. No opinion
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

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**A Money Making Opportunity**

Jake Butcher, the bankrupt ex-convict who brought the World’s Fair to Knoxville in 1982, is now attempting to become an energy mogul by harnessing the power inherent in the bottomless pit. He says that his plan will help the Knoxville community and the Fallers. His plan is to create Anthroelectric power, which will be similar to hydroelectric power; instead of rushing water turning turbines, however, falling human beings will be used to generate electricity.

“Anthroelectric power,” says Butcher, “will be the answer to all of our energy problems. No longer will we have to worry about our depleting fossil fuel supplies, about how we will finally discover cold fusion, about destroying the atmosphere with our smokestacks and emissions.”

By placing turbines at various points throughout the Knoxville Void “we can harness this natural energy, thus giving meaning to the lives of the folks falling through the pit: they would
be helping us by falling,” says Butcher.

Since Knoxville itself does not currently have an energy problem, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) would be able to store and sell the electricity to energy deprived areas, such as Los Angeles and New York City, which would in turn bring more money to the State of Tennessee. The TVA and the Sunsphere already power the entire Southeast United States, “Helping out the rest of the country is what we need to focus on now.”

At this time the plan is still in the structuring phase. If it goes through, “We may be looking at a goldmine; we may be looking at the future of energy,” says Butcher.

The Crushed State of Matter

Barely conscious, buried beneath many pillows, a voice in the cobalt milieu proclaims:

“According to unidentified sources, both bottomless pit believers and non-believers are packing into World’s Fair Park. The confrontation, non-violent at first, became a confused panic when a lightning bolt emanating from the Sunsphere surged forth because of the collected heat energy and crashed among the masses. Several bystanders have been knocked into the Knoxville Void due to the hysteria. If order is not restored soon, it is certain that more will be trampled, crushed, and pushed into the abyss. Unfortunately we have no video to show you of these occurrences because we have lost contact with our on-the-spot reporter and we have been unable to hail any cameramen.”

Feathers and Debris

“You know what I’m gonna do?”

“What?”

“I’m gonna get all the feathers I can find and fly the hell outta here.”
“Really?”

“Will you take us with you?”

“Don’t forget the little guys, right on?”

“I won’t forget you guys. You’re the best friends a guy could have.”

“That’s right, man. But how you gonna get the feathers? Some people take forever finding a couple.”

“Don’t worry about it, man. I got it all figured out.”

“Come on, tell us.”

“All right: birds. For some reason it seems birds fall like we do. So I’m gonna catch the birds and take their feathers.”

“Birds? Who’s ever seen any birds at all, man? Ain’t no birds.”

“Ain’t no birds.”

“I told you, don’t worry about it. I’ve seen birds.”

“Oh, you’re crazy, man.”

“Fine, I’m crazy. What’re you guys gonna do?”

“I’m goin’ for the debris, man. Birds. Ain’t no birds. I’m gonna gain all the weight I can and fill my pockets with all the junk I can find. I’m gonna head on out in search of the Zone man. The Bottom. That’s what I’m gonna do.”

“That’s cool, dude.”

“Ladies like Flyers more, man.”

“Not true! I think the Stones are cool.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Really doesn’t matter to me. Figure we’re all Toilers until one of us picks up speed or soars
“You know what, babe?”

“What?”

“You’re right. How you get so smart?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I don’t think about feathers and debris so much. Maybe more than everyone else.”

“Lady, I don’t care what you say, it’s all about the birds.”

“Man, you’re high.”

“That could be. But when I soar above all of you, you’ll know where it’s at.”

“What, the weed?”

“Gotta live your dream, dude.”

“Whatever. When you’re flyin’ around up top, I’ll be chillin’ on the bottom. No worries. No problems. No bottomless pits.”

“Ain’t no bottom, man. And there ain’t no birds.”

“Stop nay-sayin’ us. We’re just talkin’ here.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.”

“What the hell was that?!”

“Looked like an Arthurian knight falling through the bottomless pit with a catfish.”

“Not something you see everyday, huh?”

“Maybe it keeps him company.”

The Opening of the Bottomless Pit

Theoretic entities until recently, bottomless pits open in opposition to sources of infinite
energy. The Knoxville Void, therefore, counters the Sunsphere: a monolith of power which surges with energy day and night, giving the city of Knoxville an eerie golden glow. Such a mass of positivity was bound to attract a puissant negativistic converse sooner or later. One of Jake Butcher’s reasons for wanting to construct turbines to harness Anthroelectric power from the Hominefall in the abyss is to “turn the negative into a positive.” This solution is problematic, however, because if both the Sunsphere and the Void were positive, they might either erupt into a magnetic explosion, opposing each other like the similar ends of magnets; or they might generate an anti-matter field that could transmogrify into a black hole, tearing the entire earth to pieces.

Currently it is believed that the Sunsphere and the Void are in a state of balance, with the overabundance of energy from the gigantic gold and green tower no longer threatening local inhabitants (previously people had been electrocuted, some even killed by the stored static electricity). The bottomless pit’s rapid emergence, although startling to the citizens of Knoxville, is figured to have taken place because of the surplus power seething from the Sunsphere. When asked about the event, witnesses were unanimously unable to comment. All anyone could say was, “That’s a deep pit.”

**Event Horizon**

We still do not have direct contact with World’s Fair Park in Knoxville. We have received conflicting reports from dubious anonymous sources. Speculation. The Finite Pit March demands to know where the information comes from. How lowering a rope into a pit proves it’s bottomless. How we know people are falling through it. How we know anything about it. A hole in the ground. Theories. Theorists theorize. Actual evidence is necessary. Necessity is the defense of the believers. It must be bottomless. The Finite Pit March is
swelling. It wants to know. Swelling. It wants to know. There is no direct information. The events are unknown.

**Death in the Bottomless Pit**

Fallers, although their bodies appear to follow different rules because of the manifold universes and dimensions they descend through, do die. The most frequent causes of death are asphyxiation, coronary, starvation, cancer, sexually transmitted disease, suicide. Asphyxiation occurs usually in New Fallers and aged veteran Fallers; for New and veteran Fallers alike, though, the reason for asphyxiation is the same: panic. The New Faller, believing he or she is going to hit a surface sooner or later, enters a hysterical state, either forgetting to breathe or hyperventilating, and then perishes; the veteran Faller forgets that he or she is falling, and undergoes the same process as the frightened New Faller. Coronary often accompanies asphyxiation for veteran Fallers. Cancer and sexually transmitted disease come about in the same ways they do on the surface. Starvation is rampant in the bottomless pit because there is little to eat. There are also murders and accidents. Strangely, there are no murders for food. Many of those who die of starvation have decided to expire thusly, assuming their lives are futile. The most common accident is careening into the side of the bottomless pit.

Because many people fall at similar rates of speed, and since corpses also continue to fall, Fallers are often surrounded by carcasses of lost family members, friends, acquaintances, and even enemies. Some purposefully gather feathers or debris to escape these harsh mementos, while others remain among the dead; amid those who linger with the dead, there are those who pretend there are no cadavers about them, while others lounge betwixt the dead as if they were normal houseguests. With those that pretend, there are those that build structures around
themselves to block out the carcasses and those that enter an eternal state of denial.

The most oft-cited example of approaching death for land-dwellers consists of walking
down a long, dark tunnel, and seeing a faint light which grows in intensity. Not so for the
Fallers. Imminent death in the bottomless pit is marked by an expanding, wide-open field full of
light where you can traverse in any direction; or, if you please, you may remain still. Movement
in the abyss is compulsory. In the field, you can survey the landscape, languishing amongst the
stationary scenery (which remains motionless except for the occasional calm breeze), without
stirring.

A Saccharine Love Affair

“So, did your son get the job?”

“What?!”

“Did your son get the job?”

“You don’t have to yell.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“And no, I’m afraid he didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Unfortunately he ‘Strongly Agreed’ that bottomless pits exist.”

“I suppose it’s tough, since he is falling through one. How can you lie and say they’re
imaginary?”

“If he ever wants to get a job he’ll have to!”

“I guess …”

“Listen, Mary, I didn’t ask you here to talk about my son and bottomless pits.”
“Oh.”

“I have something to tell you.”

“Oh-oh, Kyle.”

“Yes, Mary. I love you.”

“Oh, Kyle.”

“I know the world is a difficult place and I know we’re falling through a bottomless pit, but I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you. I don’t care who knows or who hears, even though it’s pretty tough to hear sometimes in the bottomless pit.”

“Yes, it certainly can …”

“Do you think you could ever love me, Mary? Even though we’re falling through a bottomless pit?”

“Kyle …”

“Yes, my love?”

“I … I love you, too. I was afraid to say so before because it all seems so futile, what with the falling and the corpses and the heart attacks and the asphyxiation, but, Kyle, I love you.”

“Oh, I’m so happy. I’d shout for joy, if the echoes didn’t last so long.”

“Oh-oh, Kyle, I’m so happy, too.”

“We’re in love.”

“The greatest kind of love.”

“A joyous kind of love.”

“Even though we’re falling through the bottomless pit.”
Ergosphere

Awake. The buzzing noise, the pillows, the blue are still present. Continuing to mumble, the shows crystallize for now into the news. Every station carries the same program. The television personality, while shuffling papers, says:

“The Finite Pit March, again according to dubious anonymous sources, has proclaimed that the bottomless pit is a hoax, that the scientific articles about the pit are shams, that the films about the abyss are purely fictional, that the television shows are likewise, that the bands supposedly slated to play at Songs Sung from the Edge of a Cliff have not been contacted because there is no concert, and that the reason there is no actual news coverage of the conflict at World’s Fair Park is because there is no one in the park. It is empty. When we have more information on this enticing story, we will bring it to you. We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.”

The man in front of the television holds his remote aloft, but does not change the station.

Songs Sung from the Edge of a Cliff

To help fund bottomless pit research, a concert will be held at the Tennessee Amphitheater in World’s Fair Park. The songs featured in the concert will be those from Songs Sung from the Edge of a Cliff. The title of this compilation album emanates from the following: any song with, “Wohh-oh-oh” or “Oh-oh-oh” in it is sung by a person about to fall off of a cliff, and any song that contains a section of sustained screaming is by someone falling from a cliff. For instance, “Jamie’s Crying” by Van Halen, since it contains the lyrics, “Wohh-oh-oh, Jamie’s crying,” is sung by someone about to fall off of a cliff; whereas “Immigrant Song” by Led Zeppelin is very obviously by someone who has already fallen. The line-up for the evening includes many bands, most notably Knoxville’s own The Bottomless Pits, who have both screaming and “Oh-oh’s” in
all of their songs.

The highlight of the show, however, will be Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band performing their hit, “I’m on Fire,” which contains Bruce about to fall off of a cliff right as he bursts into flames. One can only assume that after bursting into flames, he then falls from the cliff.

**His Pal, Sparky**

“Sparky?”

“Woof.”

“Sparky, you’re my only pal, my best pal. Yes you are; yes you are.”

“Woof-woof.”

“So I gotta tell ya, Sparky: I want to get to the bottom of things. Right to the bottom. Down here, we’ve learned that phrase means a lot more than we thought it did, didn’t we Sparky?”

“Woof. Woof.”

“I know, Sparky. But now that we’re here, now that we’ve been falling for a while and we’ve learned all kinds of things about falling, I want to get to the bottom of things. You learn so much down here in the abyss … Did I tell you where I heard that, Sparky?”

“Woof?”

“Abyss, did I tell you where I heard that? That one day where you were tired out and I took myself to the movies. Saw *Looking into the Abyss*. It wasn’t so bad, Sparky. Naw, it wasn’t. Not too bad at all. Kind of slow, not too much happening, just a bunch of people standing around a hole saying, ‘That’s a big hole,’ or something like that, and then they all jump in at the end.”
“Woof! Woof!”

“Don’t worry, Sparky, they’re just like us. They didn’t get hurt or nothing, they just became Fallers. We’re Fallers, Sparky.”

“Woof.”

“Thing is, Sparky, I don’t know why they jumped into the pit … oh, that brings me back to what I was saying originally: they called it the bottomless pit, and the pit, and the hole, but they also called it the abyss. I ain’t never heard that one before, Sparky. Have you? Have ya, boy?”

“Woof-woof. Woof.”

“Ya have? I knew you were a smart dog, but here you’re a genius.”

“Woof”

“The smartest dog in the whole wide abyss … But that’s what I want to do, Sparky. I want to get to the bottom of things. I don’t know why them people in that movie, I don’t know why they jumped in at the end. There’s so much I don’t know, Sparky. So much.”

“Woof! Woof.”

“Now you don’t have to go agreeing with me so quick, Sparky.”

“Woof! Woof! Woof!”

“Oh, I know. I was just kiddin’ … But Sparky, there are so many things I don’t know, some things I do know, but the one thing I really want to know is this here bottomless pit. I want to know what it is. I want to know why it is. I want to know why we’re falling through it and why those people in the movie jumped in and I want to get to the bottom of things, Sparky.”

“…”

“Yes, Sparky, go to sleep now. Let ol’ Jay figure it all out. And then when you wake up, I’ll have put it all together. I’ll know why they jumped into the hole. I’ll have all the answers. And
then I’ll tell you, Sparky, and you’ll know, too.”

“…”

“And then you’ll be even smarter than a genius, Sparky … I won’t be too stupid myself. No I won’t, Sparky.”

“…”

“And then [yawn], even though we’re in the bottomless pit, [yawn] in the abyss, we’ll have gotten to the bottom of things, Sparky. Yes, yes we will.”

*Stationary Limit*

Remote still held aloft, eyes transfixed on the television, the buzzing noise in the background louder, so he turns up the volume in time for the news to return. The man behind the desk says:

“Knowing that the television stations do not have contact with World’s Fair Park, the Finite Pit March has sent us a videotape and a written message. The message says that the tape will prove that the pit is not bottomless. The recording shows—PAUSE—me broadcasting the news. I say that there is no bottomless pit, that it was all a publicity stunt to launch an already recorded season of television programming and films; that the newscasts concerning the bottomless pit are intended to raise ratings; the scientific articles were written by quacksalvers and researchers desperate for money; the guidebook explaining life inside the bottomless pit and the psychological profiles of those inside of the bottomless pit are also hoaxes. I say all of this.

“And then I play a clip from World’s Fair Park. But the clip, strangely, does not coincide with the Finite Pit March’s former claims: it shows a park slowly filling with people. In the background the Sunsphere stands channeling energy. All of the people hold hands and walk forward, but they appear not to notice each other. They act as if they were all alone. They form a circle next to the Sunsphere. And in the circle the ground begins to dissolve, until an abyss opens. It grows larger and larger, as it swallows the participants. Many attempt to flee.
But none escape.

“Dear viewers, I do not remember making this broadcast. In fact, I remember so little. It’s as if my mind was eroding away…”

**Life in the Bottomless Pit**

Falling through the bottomless pit, you become accustomed to the life you lead there, to the falling. It seems normal. You don’t notice it most of the time. You even get used to the wind. It can be oddly harmonic, like a lullaby sung seriously by a comically tone-deaf vocalist. You speak loud when you have to speak. When you are with one of your friends, you sit very close and talk directly into his or her ear.

You spend a lot of time by yourself.

Perhaps at one time you were filled with ideas of escape. Perhaps you still are. The young always are filled with ideas of escape. It’s normal. If you’re not young, your dreams of escape are still normal because they hearken to your younger years. Everything is normal. Even dreams of life on the top, although you understand you do not remember what it was like there. Perhaps you have no interest in escape at all. Perhaps.

You are in a community of Fallers. You may be new to the community. You might be its oldest member. When New Fallers join, they believe they are on the fringe, and they speak in conspiratorial tones amongst themselves as if preparing for a prison break. The veteran Fallers, with their bad memories, assume the new members have always been there and have always acted so strangely. In this way, everyone is accepted in the bottomless pit and everyone is an outcast; everyone is a part of the community and everyone is on the fringe.

You are a Flyer.
You are a Stone.

You are a Toiler.

You are and have been and will be all of these. Perhaps you have pockets full of feathers; you have pockets full of debris; your pockets are empty; some of your pockets are empty, some full of feathers, some of debris. And some pockets are only half-filled, but with both debris and feathers.

People are surrounded by garbage and corpses. From falling debris they build houses, where they read falling newspapers, eat falling meals, have falling relationships, work falling jobs, operate through falling days, and when night falls they try to pretend that they aren’t surrounded by garbage and corpses. That they aren’t falling.

Perhaps you explain to your friends what it is like for you. You tell them it’s as if you’re walking down a hallway. A long, thin hallway with doors on the far ends. You walk down the hallway. You open the door. You hope something magnificent is on the other side. Then it’s another hallway, exactly like the one before. You continue. Walk. Open. Hope. Look. All the hallways are the same. But each time you open the door, you hope it will be different. It never is. So you sit down in the middle of a hallway and refuse to continue. Yet the floor is a conveyor belt. The doors are automated. Against your will you go on. You don’t see the hallways. You don't feel the doors. You don't look down the new corridors with hope.

Your friend, named Roscoe or Rhonda (you have trouble remembering who you’re talking to), cheers you up by saying, “Deep enough for ya? Har har har.” The giddiness returns. You will reach the top. You will get to the bottom. You will attain light speed. You will be the first person ever to attain light speed. At light speed you will expand to infinite mass. By expanding you will absorb everyone in the bottomless pit. By absorbing everyone in the bottomless pit,
you will become everyone. The Everyman. Everywoman. Everybeing. Everyfaller. At light speed you will crush the fears and anxieties of the Fallers. You will be a star that was sucked into a black hole, but turned the black hole inside out and back into a star. You will be the cure for the incurable disease. You are the last best hope. At light speed.

Perhaps this feeling continues for hours. Days. Maybe only minutes. Before you descend back into your normal mood, if you have one. Perhaps Roscoe or Rhonda has to go. You are alone again. You cannot feel yourself fall. You want to feel it. You think of the top. You cannot remember it. You think of the bottom. You do not believe in it. Right now you are a Toiler. At night. By yourself. You see no way out of your predicament, even though there seems to be no predicament at all. You have no idea what to do with yourself, so you accept being a Toiler. You accept your helplessness. You sit on the cascading floor of your house, in the middle of the floor at some time of the night, having been alone for who knows how long (were you always alone?), and you accept it all. No solutions. No dreams. Just you on the floor. For now.

Tomorrow there will be feathers. There will be debris. There will be the top. There will be the bottom. There will be the point, the incomprehensible point right before you attain light speed, where you will solve every Faller problem. And perhaps you will find all of these things tomorrow. Perhaps.

Ten Ways to Know You Are Falling through a Bottomless Pit
1. You fail to be impressed by the Grand Canyon.
2. People always say, “How are you…except for the whole ‘falling through a bottomless pit’ thing?”
3. Your favorite band has “Wo-oh’s” and screaming in all of its songs.
4. Heavy objects levitate next to you.
5. You see the same people about all the time, until you load your pockets with bird shot.
6. Your number one greeting is: “What?!”

7. Wearing hats is just about impossible.

8. You feel as if you went skydiving sometime long ago, but something went terribly wrong.

9. You have been to many parallel universes and have visited several different dimensions, but you don’t remember any of them.

10. It is very, very windy all the time.

**Gravity Well**

Completely aware, wide awake, the man in the blue atmosphere watches as his television reception freezes in place. And then the horizontal hold on the screen is lost. The picture flips ceaselessly. On the tube, the shocked and disheveled newsman, who was reaching out as if for assistance from his invisible audience, remains in the symbolic stance of one asking for alms forever. The picture flips ceaselessly. Or, perhaps more appropriately, it falls. With each passing moment, the man hopes it will stop. But it does not. He holds his remote aloft, impotently; squeezing the control with all his might, terrified to let it drop. For he does not know if it will descend to the floor, or if it will hover next to him defying all the gravitational laws, all of the universal laws he has ever known.

**The Top of the Bottomless Pit**

If you are a Flyer, you fill your pockets with feathers. Your descent slows. Old and New Fallers shoot past you. Your community, if you were in one, drops away. You are on your own. Solo. You wonder if it was a good idea. Filling your pockets with feathers. Your fall slows so much. You feel as if you are truly suspended in air. You have forgotten your descent before. But the wind. The sound of the wind was always present. For the first time it is gone. The silence is deafening.

You observe your surroundings. You look around as if someone has pressed PAUSE on your life. When you find you are still mobile, you are hit with a giddiness you never experienced in your descending mood swings. You run back and forth. You collect more feathers. A gaping
abyss is beneath you. You are stronger than the abyss. Gradually, you begin to ascend. First it is like walking up stairs. Then like running up a hill. Like bounding off a trampoline. Like an express elevator. Like a rocket. The speed is intense. But it is a calm intensity. You are confident. You will make it to the top.

As you mount higher, the pit gets lighter. Full of light. Fallers gape at you. Ignore you. Some try to grab hold, pull you down with them. Some attempt to ride your coattails. Some attempt to stop you with their eyes. Theirs words. You outlast them all. You leave them all behind.

You soar above the rest. Above the Fallers. Until you’re above the bottomless pit.

And when you’re there, you see—

Do you wonder? Do you dream?

Do you realize that most Fallers dream of the top, but hope for the bottom?

**Another Deadpan Conversation**

“Why’d we jump?”

“I don’t know.”

“Pretty bad idea, huh?”

“Yeah. Yeah it was.”

“What do we do now?”

“Fall.”

“Fall?”

“Fall.”
“Nothing else to do.”

“True.”

“This is a deep pit.”

“Yeah.”

“You can say that again.”

“This is a deep pit.”
The First Circumnavigator

The history books, those august receptacles of Absolute Truth, inform us – and why should we question them? – that the first personage to circumnavigate the earth was not Juan Sebastian de Elcano of Spain, nor Enrique of Malacca, and certainly not Antonio Pigafetta of Italy, but, under the direction of those tomes of Veracity, the name listed, invoked, the name commanded even is Ferdinand Magellan of Portugal. It is a fact we are required to memorize in grade school, one we unlikely forget. Perhaps we also remember that Magellan, although Portuguese, sailed under the Spanish flag. Doubtful we recall the reason: Magellan fell out of favor with Manuel I, king of Portugal, for taking leave without permission after being wounded in the knee in Morocco, for (allegedly) illegally trading with Moors, and for other (some say petty, trumped up, others claim major) crimes brought by whispers into his majesty’s court. This attribution as the First Circumnavigator is thanks to the tireless efforts of Maximilianus Transylvanus who published the first report on the expedition, entitled De Moluccis Insulis (1523). Transylvanus was not on the voyage. His information, then, was collected by interviewing fifteen of the eighteen survivors, those few remaining from the 237 who first set sail on five ships. Deeply enamored with their fallen admiral, the sailors and passengers passed their veneration on to Transylvanus, who became obsessed with Magellan. In their reports, the extant explorers had already exaggerated the Portuguese’s character, and Transylvanus, assuming the crew were being faithful, exaggerated more so – his oratorical power, his conversational wit, his stately mien, his handsome visage, his physical strength, his refined tastes in music, painting, sculpture, poetry, clothing, wine, his devotion to God, his patriotism (although Portugal had slighted him). Of Magellan, Transylvanus made a pious Achilles, an humble Odysseus, a spurned Aeneas, a
contemporary Jason who had led his Argonauts around the entire earth, hence the reason, throughout the monograph, he is referred to as, “Magellan, the First Circumnavigator.”

Transylvanus even includes Magellan’s heroic death in the Battle of Mactan in the Philippines at the hands of savages, the savages swarming over the Portuguese, the admiral hacking into their ranks to save his crew (before Jason now Roland), the rest of the sailors broken, forced to flee, leaving the body of the hero finally inundated by the enemy (even he could not last against such an onslaught), yes, leaving the body of the epic hero behind never to be seen again, sixteen months before the Victoria returned to Spain full of spices from the Moluccas. For the number of pages dedicated to it, however, the remainder of the voyage might as well have been comprised of languidly steering the ship to the shore of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a mere 15,000 or so miles. During the interview process, there were only three survivors that Transylvanus was unable to speak with: Juan Sebastián de Elcano, Enrique of Malacca, and Antonio Pigafetta (more on him later). Concerning the first, whereas the crew were enamored with their admiral, they were disdainful of the once mutinous Captain Elcano, a disdain they passed on to Transylvanus. Furthermore, upon his return, Elcano immediately began preparations for another voyage, as if the journey just completed had been a prosaic affair, another notch in the belt of a perpetual traveler. Fully occupied by his endeavors, Elcano agreed to various appointments with Transylvanus, only to cancel each meeting, until the time finally arrived for the captain to depart. Already contemptuous of Elcano, Transylvanus thought of slighting the Spaniard by making a villain of him, or a comical foil; instead, he snubbed the Spaniard by mentioning him but twice throughout the monograph. Dismissing the lout, Transylvanus now thirsted for more knowledge of his epic hero. Upon discovering the name of another surviving crew member, a crew member very close to Magellan, one Enrique of Malacca, Transylvanus
published (to him, the incomplete) *De Moluccis Insulis*, and set out for Cebu, Enrique’s last known whereabouts.

Later, Elcano would get his due. With the publication of Antonio Pigafetta’s *First Voyage Around the World* (1525), the record was, supposedly, set straight. Unlike Transylvanus, Pigafetta was on the journey, having paid a large sum of money to sail with Magellan. Unlike Transylvanus, Pigafetta did not have to rely on unsubstantiated claims made by sailors over a year after the death of the Portuguese. Pigafetta obtained his information firsthand, keeping a journal to document the trek. Furthermore, Pigafetta favored neither Magellan, nor Elcano, truthfully appearing to be indifferent to both of them. His tome therefore cites Elcano, undeniably, as the first to circumnavigate the globe. Disinterested in this agon, however, Pigafetta also proves that Magellan, having been to the Spice Islands before (where he purchased his slave and translator, a man called “Henrich”), had crossed all of the meridians of the world by the time of his death, but not in a continuous one-way trip. Yet there are two problems with Pigafetta’s account. 1) Being of great length, the entire manuscript was never published, and, in fact, the original draft was later lost in Paris. 2) If Transylvanus’ monograph aggrandized his hero, Magellan, Pigafetta’s account aggrandized his own hero, Antonio Pigafetta. Having spent the majority of his waking hours with Magellan and Elcano, indeed, Pigafetta transcribes their accomplishments accurately, but almost as an afterthought. The forethought of *First Voyage Around the World* is Pigafetta’s experiences: first sighting of new lands, seasickness, encounters with native women and girls, meals, moods, discussions, storms, all of these occurrences and many more happened first and foremost to Antonio Pigafetta. When others are included in the Italian’s account of the circumnavigation, they are introduced as and always remain minor characters, including Magellan and Elcano. The minor characters, then, are auditors of the
wisdom and grandiloquence of Antonio Pigafetta; like Plato’s seconds to Socrates, the minor characters are only present to help further illustrate Pigafetta’s intelligence, wisdom, wit, and taste. Elcano, in this account, is neither made a hero, nor a villain, nor is he slighted, but contrarily is shown as a determined man, a driven man, one prone to bouts of choler (as evidenced by his former mutiny), but a good person, nonetheless; how factual this account is is unknown, for elsewhere Pigafetta includes Henrich in with the dead after the Battle of Mactan, only later to discover that Henrich left the ship at Cebu, before the Battle of Mactan took place. Undeterred in his self-confidence, self-concerned, self-centered, self-contained, and self-satisfied, Pigafetta names Elcano as the captain of the *Victoria* when the ship completes the voyage, but it is quite obvious that Pigafetta believes that he should be the one remembered as the First Circumnavigator of the world, for without Antonio Pigafetta, the journey could never have been completed.

Throughout the previous two accounts, there has been a shadowy character who now figures into our tale: Enrique of Malacca, also known as Henrich. For along with Magellan, Elcano, perhaps even Pigafetta, Enrique is another candidate for the title of First Circumnavigator. Kidnapped by Sumatran slave traders, he was later purchased by Magellan in a Malaccan market (where he was baptized and given his Christian name, his birth name being lost to the ages); Enrique, after sale, would work as an interpreter and personal servant to the Portuguese. Taken to Portugal and then Spain, the slave accompanied the admiral on his great journey. Throughout, Magellan treated Enrique as an equal, and even put a provision in his will granting freedom to the slave upon the death of the Portuguese. Others were not as open-minded. Although uncertain, Transylvanus, in the only passage where he mentions the slave, says that Juan Serrano, original captain of the *Santiago*, maliciously and relentlessly abused Enrique. Some
even believe this oppression led Enrique to mastermind the massacre of Mactan, a plan that, if plotted by the slave, backfired, for there Magellan died, not Serrano. Pigafetta, on the other hand, blames Duarte Barbosa, but few give credence to this account. Nevertheless, Enrique was abused, and when the fleet reached Cebu, the slave escaped into the custody of Raja Humabon, the king of the island. At this point, our account can rely only on conjecture, for Enrique’s birthplace, along with his actual name, are lost to the ages. If Enrique was from Cebu, when the fleet arrived on the island, Enrique had circumnavigated the earth. If, however, Enrique was not from Cebu, but from an island to the West, he could have returned before Elcano set foot on the Spanish shore, sixteen months later.

In an attempt to learn more about Magellan, Transylvanus searched for Enrique, hunted for the interpreter to the great Magellan. On Cebu, he could not be found, but Transylvanus was informed that certainly he was living in Malacca. On Malacca, he could not be found, but Transylvanus was informed that certainly he could be found in the Maluku Islands. On the Maluku Islands, he could not be found, but Transylvanus was informed that certainly he could be found in the Malay Archipelago. Transylvanus scoured every island in the Malay Archipelago, but still he could not locate Enrique, he could never locate Enrique. During this hunt, however, a fear began to grow in the heart of the questor: what if he found that Enrique had actually completed the circumnavigation before Admiral Magellan? What if his myths were dispelled? Later, on an island so small it had no name of its own, Transylvanus, racked by fever, found the only link he would ever have to the Portuguese’s interpreter; but the man was old, possibly senile, and rarely spoke. Transylvanus, who had mastered the Cebuano tongue by now, related what he had learned about Magellan, what he had written in *De Molucis Insulis*, what Pigafetta had written in *First Voyage Around the World*, what he had undergone to find Enrique of
Malacca. He then fell into a coma, where he surely would have died without the help of the old man. Upon recovery, Transylvanus thanked his caretaker, and left the islands, returning to Spain, then to Transylvania, his homeland, where he spent the rest of his life. As an elder himself, one day, Transylvanus suddenly recalled a tale, where he heard it he could not remember, who told it to him was equally mysterious, and, after transcribing it to the best of his ability, Transylvanus asked his nurse to take him to where he could see the horizon. The nurse, dumbfounded, asked why. But her question would never be answered, for Maximilianus Transylvanus was dead; and the piece of paper he held in his hands did nothing to explain the situation.

**THE TALE OF MAGELLAN AND THE HORIZON**

Amongst the many lies of life, and thankfully there are many, one tells of an explorer named Magellan who sailed for Spain to find a Pacific route to the Spice Islands, as they are known in the West, and the Maluku Islands, as they are known in the East. The lie was not invented after the fact. The admiral’s crew also believed that their mission was to find a commercial passage, and having the orders from the king, Charles V, no one doubted them. Magellan, himself, knew of this belief, but kept silent, for unlike the epic by Transylvanus, and equally unlike the chronicle of Pigafetta, Magellan was mute. He spoke not a word, intoned not a single syllable in his entire life. Being mute, he could tell no lies, and when the ruler of Spain commissioned Magellan with the use of five of his ships (*Victoria, Concepcion, Trinidad, San Antonio, Santiago*), having spoken of nothing save the need for a route to the Spice Islands, it was assumed, when Magellan gave his humble bow, that he had accepted the mission. Once aboard ship, Magellan spent his waking hours on deck looking out across the water; rarely could he be found in his
quarters. And whenever orders were required, the Portuguese merely pointed to the horizon.

At the outset, upon finding they were being pursued by ships sent by King Manuel of Portugal (upset with Magellan for supposedly assisting Spain), the crew asked what should be done? Magellan gave not a pause and pointed to the horizon. When the five ships reached the Cape Verde Islands, after eluding Manuel’s pursuit, the crew asked for a bearing, and Magellan, again, pointed to the horizon. When they reached Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, after crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the crew, once more, requested their orders, and the admiral once more gave not a pause and pointed to the horizon. Along the way two ships were lost, there was a mutiny (unsuccessful), and the fleet had to persevere as they dealt with the stagnant waters of the South Pacific, but still, forever and always, the only order from Magellan was to point to the horizon.

Once in the Philippines, the crews of Magellan’s fleet became embroiled in the Battle of Mactan, thanks to the king of Cebu, and perhaps because of the abuse of Enrique of Malacca. During the battle, as described by Antonio Pigafetta, the great Magellan fell. The men were crushed at the loss of their beloved admiral. And although he had not circumnavigated the globe, he had completed his official mission of finding a commercial route to Asia. Only one man realized that Magellan had not succeeded in accomplishing his own, personal mission, but instead had failed, and that man would go on to be one of the first circumnavigators of the earth: Juan Sebastián de Elcano. For Elcano saw the Portuguese when he fell in battle, and he saw the explorer, in his dying gasp, reach for the horizon with his bare hand, as if he could grasp it, as if he were about to grasp it, only to have it finally and cruelly elude his clutches.

Yet what are we to make of Magellan? Amongst the reports of Transylvanus and Pigafetta we find gross inaccuracies, self-serving subjectivity, entertaining lies. Enrique, or Henrich, has a different story. Enrique claims Transylvanus located him, though Transylvanus was near death
with fever at the time. Deranged, demented, the seeker demanded Enrique to explain, to explain everything about Magellan. Enrique explained that the Portuguese dealt with anything close at hand apathetically, including the unsuccessful mutiny at Puerto San Julian. When one might expect righteous indignation (the admiral’s command had been violently challenged), there were only what appeared to be bows to protocol, for Magellan executed naught save one or two men (Henrich could not recall if both Gaspar Quesada, original captain of the Concepcion, and Luis de Mendoza, original captain of the Victoria, had been put to death, or if it was only Quesada), marooned but two (Juan de Cartegna and Padre Sanchez dela Reina), and pardoned one – Elcano!; furthermore, the admiral did not beam with joy and pride at his crew’s loyalty and admiration during the brief insurrection, for Magellan’s only passion was the horizon. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the still waters of the South Pacific. Here, with the ships stationary, Magellan stormed back and forth on the deck, emphatically pointing to that visual meridian, trying, for the only time, to scream at his officers and crewmen, impotent to do so, his lips madly communicating nothing, his voice coming out as a rasping screech of no known language.

Since he could not speak, and since he rarely wrote anything more than a terse command, no one knows whether he was equally dismissive of everything at hand, or if he was equally accepting of everything at hand. If he was equally dismissive, he wished to go to the horizon because of his distaste for his surroundings; if he was equally accepting, then he wished merely to gain more experience and knew that experience was to be found beyond a point unattainable. But there is a third possibility: perhaps Magellan accepted everything because he had already dismissed it; perhaps Magellan, knowing of no reality other than this, set an absurd goal for himself, a goal as absurd as being trapped in a reality not at all constructed for you.
An addendum – throughout the voyage, the crew of the five ships under Magellan’s command believed they knew their purpose, namely that they were in search of a commercial route to Asia, and that they were in control of their situation. Content with their circumstances, the sailors gave all the credit to their mysterious admiral, for certainly he was to thank. In actuality, they had no idea what their purpose was and they had no control over their situation. Instead, Magellan had all of the control and only he knew the purpose, but he never spoke, leaving his crew utterly nescient to his actual goal, remaining silent until his death. Immediately following the demise of the Portuguese, Elcano took command of the *Victoria*, had the *Concepcion* burned (for there were not enough sailors to man two ships), and when the crew asked for their orders, Elcano spoke not a word. Gave not a pause. And only pointed to the horizon. Later Elcano, much like Magellan before him, would die on another voyage around the globe, for neither the Spaniard nor the Portuguese could ever reach that which was in sight, that which was right in front of them, and only on cloudy days when men’s minds are full of delusion do we ever get any closer to it.
While you read this your identity is being stolen, has been stolen. Before you were confident in who you were: you were yourself; before you were confident in who others were: they were themselves. You could not be them; they could not be you. Or so you thought until now when, you find, someone has broken the rules. He no longer wished to be himself, she no longer wished to be herself, instead the person in question, in order to cast aside their true identity, has decided to become you. The you who is not you. And whether or not the new you acts in a way that you would act, really doesn’t matter. Because now they are you.

Although the choice to become you may have been relatively random, the plan that led to it was not. Cognizant or no, it turns out that you are very good with computers, that you hacked into various Web sites containing bank account and credit card and social security numbers, that you were able to forge signatures, speak in different voices, even becoming a master of disguise in order to create accounts you would later close; furthermore, you opened several new credit cards in your own name that you operated with the help of a league of associates you’ve never met in order to establish an excellent rating, to replace that entry level plastic with gold and then platinum, all for the purpose of establishing the new you, the you who is not you.

Once you were substantiated, the you who is not you hit the road. The escapade began small, but along the way continued to snowball until it consisted of a troupe of heterogeneous hooligans chauffeured by a legion of Hummer limos, a debaucherous odyssey spanning the entire country, paid for by the magnetic swipe of the cards, augmented by cash advances when the products or services desired were owned or enacted by those who prefer (and probably require) the anonymity of green. Along the way you drank drinks you wouldn’t drink at bars you
can’t imagine going to, ate food you wouldn’t eat if threatened at restaurants you’ve never even heard of, took drugs you wouldn’t take administered to you by underworld types you felt only existed in movies, banged prostitutes you wouldn’t (and the Surgeon General claims you probably shouldn’t) even so much as touch, agreed to wagers whose odds dictate that no one in their right mind would…but you did, made friends with people of a dubious nature who couldn’t possibly be real – none of whom you remember anyhow, and, in general, had adventures of the sort found only in tabloid descriptions of celebrity benders, *Penthouse Letters* that begin with “I never thought that this would happen to me,” and the more outrageous pieces of journalism by Dr. Hunter S. Thompson (now deceased), and perhaps the worst part, for how much it’s costing you, the real you, you don’t even know about any of it.

When you finally learn of the jag you’ve been on, you will suffer an identity crisis. In trying to explain to various customer service representatives that you’ve never opened a credit card with their particular bank, that as a general rule you never take cash advances because the interest rates are outrageous, that you’ve never been to Jean Georges, or, for that matter, Tijuana, that it’s unlikely you and everyone you know could consume enough alcohol to equal a $1,000 bar tab really anywhere, that you seriously doubt the credentials of Madame Ling Ling’s massage specialists, so why would you go there, your complaints will fall on deaf ears for all of the call center operators will inform you that you are not who you claim to be. The real you can be found in your credit evaluation, can be found in the paper trail strewn across now three countries. And it continues still.

But what will keep you going as you make endless telephone calls, as you press countless numbers to reach real human beings who may not exist, as you wait for the next representative who may be illusory, as you hear those dreaded words “Do you mind if I put you on hold”
knowing full well that they spell certain doom, as you are (unsurprisingly) disconnected, as you resignedly try the call again again again, yes, through all of this, what will keep you going? Beauty. The promise of beauty will help you persevere. The beauty of that sought after moment when you smile, or perhaps sigh a contented sigh. The beauty of honestly and truthfully saying to the last customer service representative, “No-no, thank you.” The beauty of hearing the line go dead. The beauty of setting the phone down and knowing that you do not have to pick it back up. The beauty of realizing that all of your actions from this point forth really will be your actions. The beauty of no longer being fused to the you who is not you. The beauty of being you all by yourself once again.
White Dwarf Blues

Believe you me, I know what kind of story this is: this is one of those peppy, cheery, happy, pick-me-up, feel-good stories where someone keeps doing something over and over until it kills him. A drug noir story. And aren’t you lucky, you’re reading it! And aren’t I lucky, I’m the main character who’s offing… You don’t know what a drug noir story is? Well! Let me tell you—

Think of Hubert Selby, Jr’s Requiem for a Dream. Think of Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting. Think of Bret Easton Ellis’ Less Than Zero. Think of the films Leaving Las Vegas or Sid and Nancy. Then you’ll have a good idea¹.

For the sake of economy, I will be your narrator and main character. Yes, I exist in the present and speak of the past and the present. And if you think you can’t trust me cuz junkies always lie, cuz druggies think they’re in control when they’re not, well, let me let you in on a little secret: I’m not really addicted cuz I can quit whenever I want. Anyway, how can this be wrong when it feels so right? See, I can play both sides—the reliable narrator and the deluded junky. So don’t worry. You can trust me from the beginning (which isn’t here yet) to the inevitable downer ending (oh, I can’t wait), in this my drug noir.

***

So, where are we? And what drugs are we talking about here? Heroin in NYC? Alcohol in Vegas? Cocaine in LA? Acid in San Francisco (a hippie noir?)? Oh, no. Not at all. I’m different. Where am I? Knoxville, Tennessee. And what’s my suicide of choice?…

Oh, I know it’s not the most romantic death. It’s not a hip, happening, with-it demise. You

¹ I’m so excited to be in my own drug noir! I love it! And when I say I love it, of course I mean I can’t stand it, hate it, despise it cuz that’s the kind of attitude ya need in a drug noir: surly.
don’t hear the kids talking in hush-hush tones about getting my drug, admiration in their voices, envy on their lips, dreams in their twisted little heads, tell-all confessional stories whispered in a sexy susurrus about sordid deals and strung-out nights on ______ that they couldn’t even...get to the point? Okay!

To kill myself, in this cheery tale, I’m eating all my meals at Captain D’s.

That’s right.

The fried fish place!

It’s not a sexy fix, but it’s mine.

***

The beginning: sitting in Captain D’s waiting for Freddie Bessel to saunter in. We don’t know each other yet, but he’s gonna come in wearing all black except for a yellow-orange shirt. You see, up till now, my story hasn’t taken off (although I’m already a white dwarf!) cuz I haven’t had anyone to start a plot with. In a drug noir, the protagonist either has a buddy who’s on a similar doomed path, or a significant other who wants to change the mainman’s ways. Drug noirs involve binary pairs, not solo stars. And what better place to start than at…

You don’t think Captain D’s is sordid? Oh! That’s because you’ve never been to my Captain D’s. Here’s the full experience:

It looks like a punk rock bar. Walking in through the scarred, black, wooden doors, the normally polished floors are filthy; the lights, dim; the shadows, deep. The ship décor isn’t “yacht club,” it’s “the docks”—where shady deals go down and weighted bodies sink to anonymous graves. Like surly stevedores, the employees are ragged. Instead of those blue aprons, they wear whatever they please—which happens to be frayed, black clothing. The skin that’s exposed on these sometimes brutish, sometimes waifish types is pale and covered in inky,
green tattoos. The employees smoke cigarettes right at the front counter and they’re always unhappy to see you. Unless, that is, you know ‘em. Then they’re especially unhappy, wishing you’d get a clue already and bug off. I love those guys!

When I get my food, the family platter that feeds four, I have to be careful cuz the floor’s periodically slick with grease and sticky with spilled drinks. There’s no air conditioning, so the windows are open; there are no screens, so flies are everywhere. There are ceiling fans—some of ‘em even work! But only on the lowest setting, stirring the thick, greasy, smoky, humid air, somehow making it even hotter. The tables are made of the same black wood as the door, and addicts have hacked their initials, names, and wisdom into them.

And then imagine me, little old me, your humble narrator and main character, soon to be joined for the first time by Freddie Bessel, sitting in a corner, a shadowy corner, shadowier than any other corner, the shadowiest corner in the vilest Captain D’s in the entire country, in the whole wide world, napkin on my lap, shaking a small paper envelope of sweetener (the kind that causes cancer) to put in my iced tea. A man in a booth nearby slumps to the floor of a grease overdose or maybe grease ecstasy. But I don’t stop. Lit only by a heatlamp that glares bright white cuz it’s lost its red filter, imagine this drug montage in that moviehouse of your mind: I sensuously pick up a piece of fried fish [FADE TO BLACK]. I sumptuously bite into the golden brown breading [FADE TO BLACK]. I chew the fish [FADE TO BLACK]. Grease runs sexily down my hands [FADE TO BLACK]. Repeat again and again. Add some discordant guitar music for effect. At the end of the montage, I fall back, eyes glazed over in grease ecstasy, right as the guitars go wild and then fade themselves.

Think of the fat. The grease coursing through my veins. Hardening my arteries. Blood pressure rising. Oversized, flabby heart pumping blood faster and faster, working harder and
harder to get the life essence through my narrowed passages. Arteriosclerosis heightening.

Think of the distended stomach, my own version of tracks. I gain so much weight, a couple stairs winds me. But I keep going back. For more. Always for more. The boiling, churning oil.

The scorching heatlamps. They’re my paraphernalia.

All of this adds up to seedy, lowdown, sordid.

True, I’m still a dwarf with stark white hair and a stark white beard. And I wear clean clothes of varying colors. And I live in an okay part of town. But what I lack in general squalor and depression, I make up for with enthusiasm for my malaise. And when I say enthusiasm, I mean a sullen disregard for everything; and that, in turn, fills me with enthusiasm (you know why).

After all, if there’s one thing all drug noirs are about, it’s finding a bit of pleasure in this greasetrap of a world. And a very little bit’s all that can be found. For, and I say this with deepest gravity, we’re all white dwarf stars that’re burning out. We might as well be part of our own destruction…

Metaphorical, eh?

And that’s when Freddie came in…

***

Freddie came in to Captain D’s cuz the streets’d run dry. Not so much as a joint to be found, let alone any smack. I only know about one drug: grease. So I bought him a hit of fried fish.

When he sat down, he took his sportscoat off in slow motion to accentuate his druggie cool. I asked how he did that, what with the slow motion and all. He shook his head, lit a cigarette, asked:
“What’s your name?”

“What’s your name?” I told him, nodding my head upwards to look smooth.

“So, HZ, how old are you?” He took a drag on his cigarette cuz that’s what cool druggies do. Squares puff.

“43,” I said.

“HZ, huh? Not bad.”

I asked him his name and how old.

“You gonna finish that sentence? Can I get an ‘are you?’ for the end?”

I slowly shook my head. Freddie gave me his classic grin, which he later told me he’d patented.

“Well then, I’m Freddie. And I’m old.”

“Old? Can’t be. You’re not even a Red Giant yet.”

I knew Freddie was my man cuz he laughed like hell.

***

This is how well they know me: on the way out, stuffed so full of grease and fried animals my head swims along like the fish I consumed, they already have a to-go bag of hushpuppies waiting at the front. I love those guys! The crabby cashier holds my treasure in an apathetic hand, his other keeping his head from bouncing off the counter.

The manager knows me by name. I’m his best customer. Like a good dealer, the first time I came in, he gave me a coupon for a free meal. He hasn’t given me a free meal since. What a guy!

***

Freddie and I talked all that night and into the morning, him yammering a mile a minute, his...
hands shaking. Around dawn, Freddie asked me what I was looking for.

“Same thing everyone else’s looking for: a plot,” I said.

Falling asleep, he mumbled: “Pot. We’ll find some tomorrow.”

***

The next day we were on the road to Nashville to score. Freddie had some contacts there, some guys looking to dump their stash and get out of the business. Tired of the heat.

And, anyway, a roadtrip’s essential to a good drug noir. Plenty of time for bonding between the mainman and his pal that sets you up for the inevitable downer ending, where everything that seemed cool and happy earlier, transforms into nostalgically depressing in a flourish of bittersweet perfection. I can’t wait! Plus, with all the scenery whizzing by, there’s gotta be a sign or a symbol that can recur. Look! There’s one now:

An advertisement for Captain D’s. It said: “Get Hooked On Us” and had a picture of a fishhook. So from then on, whenever I was going to Captain D’s, I’d make my finger into a hook and stick it in my mouth. Freddie’d do the same thing when he needed a hit. Nice. But we need a little more fish to fry.

The other convenient metaphor that appeared was a sign painted on a rundown barn. It said: “Millions have seen Rock City. Have you?”

“What’s Rock City?” I asked.

“Huh?” said Freddie. He was preoccupied with the score.

“Have you ever been to Rock City?”

“Rock City?”

“Rock City.”

Freddie gazed out the windshield. The air that arose during the conversational hiatus lent a
sage-like quality to his answer. “No, man. I don’t think I ever have.” Then he added some
dramatic repetition: “I don’t think I ever have.”

Another pause, this time to ponder how lines said twice, slowly, are just really cool.

“Have you, HZ-43?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “No, I haven’t.”

“Who has?” he asked.

“Millions,” I said.

“But not us.”

***

Roadtrips, like stories, have plot arcs. Drug noirs, they’re the inverted Freitag. You think,
hope the characters’ll snap out of it, but they drop and drop until they hit bottom. Along the
way, like looking out the window on a roadtrip, things don’t appear to be going in any particular
direction. The route’s crazy; that is, till you reach the destination. Then it all makes sense.

We were near one of those classically named cities, maybe Carthage, Alexandria, or Athens,
the flat part of our roadtrip, when Freddie asked me about life before Knoxville.

“First, I went in for the conventional squalor and drugs. I really did. I was so!…, I mean—
Got me an apartment in the absolute worst part of Memphis. But now, imagine me, little old
me, four feet tall, big white beard, long white hair, in the ghetto. Doesn’t really fit, huh? Maybe
in a sideshow, but in the ghetto? No matter, I tried. Had an ancient, shabby couch (perfect for
crashing on after drawn-out benders), filthy shag carpeting, walls whose stains were like poster-
sized Rorschach Tests, rusty bars on the windows, exposed and banging pipes that leaked
incessantly, neighbors who competed to see how loud they could make the other shout
nonsense (day and night), and other neighbors who figured the only way to silence the screaming
was to scream overtop of it. Between the window bars you could see the smokestacks of a factory that manufactured depression and dumped it in the river. When it rained, more water poured in from the ceiling than came out of the faucet. I had to wrestle the cockroaches. The rats ruled.”

“Sounds like a pit,” said Freddie.

“It was wonderful… I mean, it was just right for a white dwarf who’s slowly burning out…

“My first day in Memphis, I was raring to go. I hit the streets and scoped the place out. My neighborhood: a hellhole! It made me so happy… And when I say ‘happy,’ of course I mean it depressed me in that drug… Uh… Nothing but dilapidated old buildings far as the eye could see. People carried guns around with impunity; they robbed passersby with the gusto of a greasejockey cleaning the fry vats.

“I spied a guy hanging out on a street corner wearing a red shirt underneath a leather jacket. He moved in slow motion. He had a great big nose, a greasy mustache, and clunky glasses. I figured him for a dealer. He was standing on a corner, and that’s where dealers stand.”

Freddie laughed; I continued.

“‘You carrying?’ I asked, all smooth.

“‘Hmm?’ He looked down at me.

“‘Got any blow?’

“‘Blow?’

“‘Or H?’

“‘H?…Is this some kind of joke? Who put that beard on you?’

“‘What? It’s my beard…How about X? Come on, man. I need a high.’

“‘Are you a dwarf?’
“Yeah.”
“A dwarf’s trying to buy drugs from me. This is priceless. I gotta go tell Eddie.”

“Hey, don’t mess with me, man. I’m a junky. I’ll do anything for a score. Just look out, man.”

“Or what? You’ll hit me with your battle axe?”

“I tell ya,’ he said. ‘Eddie’s gonna love this.’ And he wandered off.”

Then we passed by the classically named city and left it behind us.

***

I’ve talked plenty. Now it’s time for Freddie to give us some of his druggie mysticism.

At the end of my flashback, Freddie said:

“Do you ever think about stars?”

“Sure.”

“You know how some stars go supernova, and some turn into neutron stars, some into pulsars, some into black dwarves and some into black holes?”

“Yeah.”

“You ever wonder what it’d be like if the stars could think about where they were going? What would they want to be? What would they expect? Would they care about the other stars? Would they ever get confused?”

“I never thought about that.”

“And if they did get confused, what would happen? How are they supposed to know what they’re supposed to do?”

“I figure physics takes care of all that. They’re stars. They really don’t have any choices. Their lives are laid out for them whether they like it or not. Small stars will turn into dwarves;
big stars will be supernovas, and maybe black holes.”

Freddie paused, looking like he might even cry.

“Doesn’t that seem really sad, man? I mean, doesn’t it?”

***

At the deal. Easy. It’s gonna go wrong.

It was in this house. Nothing too special about it. It wasn’t in the ghetto, but it wasn’t exactly in the best part of town either. Somewhere in between. Which is perfect cuz that messes up your idea of what a crackhouse is. And the five guys inside were all nervous cuz they were afraid we might be cops.

“What’s with the dwarf?” one of them asked. The back of my neck began itching. Too much tension in the air. The dealers kept their hands behind them, probably where they had their guns.

“Yeah, you didn’t say nothing about no dwarf,” added another. One of the guys made like he was gonna leave the room. But Freddie stopped him.

“Fellas, I didn’t realize I needed a license to carry one. Anyway, he’s a friend.”

“How do we know he won’t snitch? How do you know?” they asked Freddie.

“Cuz I’m hooked, too,” I said, making the fishhook to Freddie.

“Hooked?! On what?”

“Grease,” I said.

They relaxed and gave me a grave look, nodding their heads in unison as if I’d spoken the deepest line they’d ever heard. They were those kinds of guys. It was that kind of deal.

***

Don’t worry. I really don’t understand those last two sentences either. But they fit in a story
like this. Trust me. They belong.

***

In the end, the deal went like a dream. The only way it could’ve turned out. Ya can’t have the first deal be a bad deal. I know that…

***

No problem. I’m still in control, on the path I’ve chosen for myself. Heck, even if I had a girlfriend as the second in my binary pair, I’d still continue on. A girlfriend. Think of that.

A beautiful blonde with a thing for dwarves sits facing me at Captain D’s. The light slants across her face, revealing smeared mascara and tears. The ceiling fans are heard squeaking in the background. She barely contains her sobbing, while I devour fried fish by the dozens.

“I…I…”

“You got something to say, baby?” I ask, all cool like, my mouth full of batter. A fellow grease freak who weighs four hundred pounds hobbles in. I nod.

“I…I just can’t take it anymore! I can’t stand by and watch you kill yourself like this!”

“You knew how I was from the beginning, baby,” I say, taking a big swig of sweetened iced tea out of the straw. “I haven’t changed…you have.”

The blonde looks away from me, crestfallen, her beauty increasing with each new angle. How the heck did I end up with such a girlfriend?

“I know you haven’t changed, Herbert. That’s the thing. I thought I could change you.” As she completes her sentence, I start eating two pieces of fish at the same time.

Chewing, speaking out of the side of my mouth, I say: “That’s your problem, baby,” pointing at her with a chicken plank as I swallow the fish. “Not mine.”

“But I love you, Herbert. And I thought…” she stops. I’ve made a chicken plank sandwich
out of two chicken planks for the bread and a chicken plank center. “I thought you loved me.” She watches me polish off the sandwich, then lay into the post-dinner hushpuppies. Unable to stand it anymore, she gets up in a huff and leaves.

“You’ll be back!” I shout, showering myself with half-chewed breading. “You always come back!”

***

Sorry for the aside, but all we’ve missed is a traffic jam, which drags on and on. It feels like we’ll never make it to our destination. To Knoxville.

Freddie said: “Ever notice, when traffic gets really bad, you start to think it’ll never end. Like you’ll be on this long, thin, depressing parking lot forever and ever. And then, if you’re like me, you get to thinking, dreaming really, about the cars suddenly parting, moving aside, making a lane just for you. And when this groove opens, you drive by the rest of the cars, stunned, maybe stopping to wave to thank people, these kind souls who’ve selected you to be the one to move on, to represent them beyond the traffic jam; but soon you pick up more and more speed, until the other cars are a blur. You’re a bullet fired from a gun. And you get this idea that, when you pass by all the other folks, you’ll feel so…superior, so satisfied that no heroin high could beat it. But that never happens. Instead, the cars all begin to move, you along with them, faster and faster, until the backup itself is lost in a drug-like haze. And you can’t help but think that somehow you missed out on something.”

And then the traffic did begin to move and we saw the Rock City sign again, but on that side it only said, “See Rock City,” and I got to thinking that Rock City was this amazing place where everyone went cuz it was so fulfilling, and you could stay as long as you wanted and everything you could possibly ever crave would be there and it would be the best stuff you ever had and all
the people would be really cool and the whole experience would just blow you away cuz it
couldn’t get any better than life in Rock City, and that made me wonder how come I’d never
heard of the place before if it’s so flipping fantastic, which made me think that maybe Rock City
didn’t exist and the guy who painted all those signs was trying to get us to think about something
happy while we were driving on the highway and it was a kind of metaphysical challenge to See
Rock City since there wasn’t any such place, or maybe the guy was a bastard, so it was a taunt,
“Sure, See Rock City, if you can,” and man this has to be one of them defining stream-of-
consciousness moments where the main character displays a balls out yearning for something
completely abstract, only he channels it through something concrete which leads to an absolute
letdown, that inevitable downer ending. And let me tell you, that ending, I can’t wait till we get
there. I love them things.

***

Back in K-town.

It’s salad days. Which is a good thing, I guess. Ya ask me, it ought to be “fried fish days.”
That would be better than salad. Sheesh.

Freddie had a house and a band of followers. Cuz of the drugs. I’d bring my hushpuppies,
and as folks plunged needles into their veins, or snorted dust, or dropped paper squares, or
smoked, or huffed, or drank, or ate laced brownies, I’d suck down my greaseballs, hot as can be.

“I’m the Everyjunky,” sez Freddie, bright red shirt blazing from underneath his otherwise
black clothes. “I do all the drugs and I know what it’s like to be any one of you. I know that
coke binge that lasts days, sometimes weeks, mind racing. And I know the H dreams, the
prophetic visions. I know the euphoria of E. I know the buck wild invincibility of PCP. I
know the drunken lost weekends. I know the mind-altering madness of acid. And I know the
crystal clarity of crystal meth. Yes, I’ve taken uppers, downers, screamers, laughers. I’ve stumbled through forgotten buildings on ether, and seen the slanted world of mescaline. And I am here to tell you, I understand each and every one of my children. I even understand my little friend, HZ-43’s fix.”

Freddie, patting me on the head, continued walking through the crowd, weaving his way around.

If you couldn’t tell, this is where I let Freddie do most of the talking to better flesh out his character.

“And do you know what I’ve come to understand? We’re standing on a dimensional borderline. On one side is that which we know but despise, on the other is what we don’t know and are afraid of. We don’t want to go back to the land we despise, but we’re not ready to enter the land we fear. So we remain on the borderline, staring towards the red undiscovered country.”

Freddie paused, sauntering through the crowd, red shirt shining, his consciousness expanding, perhaps invading and encompassing that of every druggie.

“But do not stare too deeply into that country beyond. For beyond is the apocalypse. And although it appears to be light years away, it’ll come for us. It will distend in our direction. And if you stare forever at the expanding apocalypse, you’ll end up as fried as my little friend’s fish dinners. Isn’t that right HZ-43?”

Then, just to me, he crouched down, eyes glazed, focused as if they weren’t looking at me but seeing some strange and fantastic vision, and asked, “So, how does that speech fit into your story?”

Back at Captain D’s I’d sit in my shadowiest corner and think about Freddie’s speeches,
sometimes with one or more of the other addicts, overly bright heatlamp shining on my white hair. We were all the same. We were all burning out. We all knew it. We all accepted it. We were all white dwarf stars waiting for the needle to hit empty. Knowing it would run out. Daring it to run out. And it always runs out. Believe me.

***

Everything’s back on track, since I only made one mistake.

“I hate this town,” a girl on the front lawn said. She wore a green bikini, comically large sunglasses, and a basket-of-fruit hat. She was coming down, and anytime a druggie comes down, they hate their towns. The hangover’s gotta be someone’s fault. Might as well blame the city. Plus, random, unnamed yet slightly described characters give the protagonist a chance to perform. Warms the readers up to him.

“What’s wrong with Knoxville?” I asked, smiling.

“It’s just all fucked up, man. It’s just all fucked up.” Was the dramatic repetition done purposefully? I don’t know. But life could always use a good dose of dramatic repetition.

“Could you be more specific?”

“You be more Pacific. I’m from Knoxville, man, so lay off.”

“All right. It sounds like you like Knoxville,” I said.

“I hate this fucking town. It’s the worst. I mean, look what they did to the Sunsphere.”

In the distance, the Sunsphere was being refurbished. It’d been under construction for like five years. It was never going to be completed. The money ran out. While under construction, it was white instead of gold cuz it was covered with tarps.

“Don’t think of it like that. Think of it as the Sunsphere’s last hurrah. It’s had a long, rather rough life, so now it’s burning twice as bright as before. Even if it’s smaller. Don’t give up until
it turns black. Cuz then it'll never shine again."

Pause.

“Anyway,” I said. “I think the Sunsphere’s a binary pair. Maybe its companion burns brighter.”

“A… A what? Where’s the other one?”

“Have you ever been to Rock City?”

“Um, yeah, like when I was a kid…”

There’s an awkward silence.

“Trippy, man,” she said. “Are you, like, a dwarf?”

“Yeah, but I used to be a giant.”

“What happened?”

“Ran out of energy, shrunk way down.”

“I never met a giant before.”

I gave a sighing, pregnant pause and said: “And I’ve never been to Rock City.”

Then I ate a hushpuppy.

***

The oil churns around my fish and the white heatlamp blazes. It’s time to get my order to go cuz, oboy, oboy, it’s time for the unavoidable mass arrest. No question, the cops’ll roar up, sirens blaring, lights flashing, bullhorns wailing, guns cocking, druggies scattering. We’ll be taken to jail for possession, distribution, association. It’ll be great! And then later we’ll get out just in time for the inevitable downer ending.

But let’s enjoy the stages as they come along.

At the house, the party continued as per normal. Think of Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly
Delights” and add drug paraphernalia and you pretty much get the idea. I sat down on the front porch, smiling, and began to wait for the police cars, eating my fried everything.

“Hey, HZ-43. How’s it going?” Freddie asked, white shirt on underneath his black clothes.

He’s smoking something or other, so he’s surrounded by a mist of green.

I made the fishhook and Freddie laughed, nodding knowingly.

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Waitin’ for the cops to show up. Should be here any minute,” I said, mouth stuffed full of fries.

Freddie said: “What do you mean?” But he spoke with sarcastic exaggeration.

“This party’s gone on so long, how could they not find out about it?”

“Ah, you’re paranoid.”

“Nope. Just know how these things work. It’s the time in the story when the cops show up…”

“Well, you’re in control, HZ.”

“…and they should be here right about,” and I point behind me.

“Oh shit!” screamed Freddie, so loud even I turned around. But nothing’s there.

I’m speechless.

Freddie, all-knowing look on his face, white shirt shining in the sun, smiled.

“Oh, they’ll be here, Freddie. You wait and see. They might be here already, undercover, eager to pounce. Just you wait.”

“I bet you a trip to Rock City they don’t show up.”

“You’re on.”

“So if they show up, we go to Rock City under your terms (if we can get out of jail). If they
don’t, we go to Rock City under mine.”

Something seemed off about the bet, but I took it. Then I stared at the street, willing the cops to appear, the silence going on forever.

“HZ-43, you know why paranoids trap themselves up in their rooms?”

“Sure, Freddie. So the people who are after ‘em don’t take ‘em away.”

“No. That’s the cover. Paranoids stay in their rooms because otherwise they’d have to come face to face with the overwhelming evidence that disproves their claims.”

Smiling, leaning back in my chair, legs dangling, swinging below me, I waited for the cops. Thinking, any minute now the five-oh will appear. Which is fine with me. I’m ready. It’s in the script. I only hope I get to finish my Captain D’s before they take me downtown.

All that night me and Freddie sat on the porch, staring at the road, waiting for the fuzz, waiting for the evidence that’d prove I wasn’t paranoid, that’d prove I knew exactly where this story was going, a trip to Rock City hanging in the balance.

But no one ever came.

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Somewhere during the course of the night I fell asleep. I dreamed about a time when I was a kid and my mom took me to a store that had a standup version of *Asteroids* and my mom wouldn’t let me have a quarter to play. But I played anyway by pretending that I was in control during the demo cycle. Each time the little ship moved, I thought to myself that I made it move that way. And each time it shot an asteroid, I said that I shot the asteroid. And when the ship finally wrecked, signaling its demise, I accepted that demise as my own.

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The next morning the sun woke me up. I figure, since the cops never showed, now it’s time
for all the drugs to run out and for all the addicts to leave. Then it’ll be me and Freddie all by
our lonesome and we’ll talk about stuff and wish we had whatever.

But Freddie’s gone. No one knew where he was. Nobody cared. And the party continued.

I don’t know what part of the story this is.

Maybe this is the part where Freddie goes off on a bender by himself, out of his mind on any
combination of drugs, ending up in a flophouse somewhere and I’m the only one who can find
him, who can talk some sense into him, who can teach him the importance of…something
important. Maybe this is the part where Freddie disappears cuz, although the cops never
showed, he got freaked out and figured they would: and they’d pin it all on him. Maybe this is
the part where Freddie and I have a falling out cuz…cuz we’re both so toasted we get in a
completely irrational argument that can only be understood by other junkies. Maybe this is the
part where Freddie goes straight and when I see him again he’ll be at one of those Southern
revivals where everyone gets saved and healed. Maybe this is the part where we learn that
Freddie was actually a cop, but couldn’t bring himself to arrest all the druggies cuz they’re just
people looking to make their lives worthwhile. Maybe this is the part where we find out that
Freddie never existed, he was actually a construct of the narrator, a person who represented
what the narrator wished he was…but how can Freddie be that?, I mean, he’s barely been in the
story…Maybe…Maybe…Or maybe this is the part where I walk around town and feel sorry for
myself cuz nothing turned out the way I wanted, nothing became dark and sordid and noirish.

Hell, the varying tenses weren’t even that confusing. But it’ll be all right, for me, anyway, if I
look up and find I’m in the absolute worst part of the city, the part you don’t go into unless
you’re connected, the part you stay out of unless you’re backed by an army, the part you’re
warned about, and nobody will bother me cuz I fit in so well, too well, with all their pain.
The normalcy of the neighborhood is appalling. There's no underworld romance here. No noir atmosphere. No wise homeless folks, deteriorated buildings, aimless potholed streets, blind alleys, graffiti. There are no flashy pimps, dirty whores, bag ladies, winos. Here we have people and houses and lawns and plants and cement and asphalt and quaint and safe and boring.

I walk to my Captain D’s to get a hit. The door won’t open. There’s a sign in the window. It’s from the Knoxville Health Department. It addresses me directly. It really does. It says:

Dear Herbert Zerbert,

This is the part of the story when you realize there never was a Captain D’s like you’ve described. This is the part of the story where you realize so many things are not how you described them. This is the part of the story where you must address your obsession with burning out. This is the part of the story where you must face reality. This is the part of the story where you sit down on a stoop and think about your life.

Sincerely,
K.H.D.

So I guess this is the part of the story where I sit on a stoop and think about my life. I could give a damn what part of the story this is. I don’t know anything about this story, anyway. I wonder who does. So I just stand and stare at the ground. After a while, a hand falls on my shoulder.

“We found Freddie.”

***

If this is even remotely the story I think it is, it’s time for me to go into a metaphorical, dreamlike offshoot that, while heightening the suspense as to what happened to Freddie, ties everything together. All the motifs, characters, metaphors…all the yearning. What better place for it to be set than in Rock City? My Rock City.
No such luck. I’m not in control anymore. Maybe I never was. So I’m in the real Rock City. It’s not so bad. There are rocks. There’s a path through the rocks. For whatever reason, there are little gnomes setup throughout the rock formations. There are caves. There’s a trippy section where fairy tale scenes painted with black-light paint are displayed in the caves, amongst the rocks. There’s an animatronic gnome who sits at the front and sings, “Big Rock Candy Mountain.” “Big Rock Candy Mountain” would be a good song for this story, since its lyrics and tone parallel… But I lack the hydrogen. It’s all gone. There’s a place where you look out from a cliff and supposedly see five different states. They all look pretty much the same. There’s a rope bridge. A stone bridge. The whole tour costs like $15. It’s a tourist trap.

And all throughout, even though you’re already there, signs read: “See Rock City.”

If you ask me, they forgot a comma. It should be pronounced in a deadpan: “See, Rock City.”

I sit down on a bench at the end. At the end of Rock City. At the end of this story. Freddie sits next to me. Finally, he wears all black. All black.

“Still have enough energy for some dramatic repetition, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Cheer you up any?”

“Nah.”

“What’s wrong, little buddy?”

“Things didn’t go how I expected. How I wanted. Never found a plot.”

“You weren’t in the right kind of story.”

“What kind of story was I in?”

“I should know: it was a satire. You see, you thought we were on similar paths. But actually,
I was a supergiant. And now I’m a blackhole.”

I feel myself getting sucked in by Freddie.

“How should you…” I begin to ask, but then I think about it. The drug deal that went really well, the cops never showing up, the party never clearing out, no one ever dying, and the guy who wouldn’t sell me drugs in Memphis, who set me off on this satirical path, was wearing a pathetic disguise (that I fell for)—and he moved in slow motion. Freddie was in control the entire time! Just like in the best drug noirs, I’d lost control!

My fatal flaw: I forgot about red shift!

My joy doesn’t last long. Cuz I think about the note from the KHD. If I never met Freddie at Captain D’s, since my Captain D’s didn’t exist, then that only leaves little old me.

“Well, you can’t say I didn’t try,” sez Freddie.

“Yes.”

“What’s wrong now?”

“Things didn’t turn out the way I wanted.”

“Do things ever turn out all right in this kinda story?”

“That’s…” I stop. He’s right. These are his terms. Freddie made sure the story ended properly.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to know you better, Freddie.”

“It’s cool, HZ-43. I’m only a character. Words on a page. You don’t owe me anything. It’s been fun being the enigmatic center. Thanks for bringing me along.”

“Sure,” and I give a grin. Freddie shoots his classic smile. US Patent #Whatever

“See. And look around you.”

Although we’re still in Rock City, somehow we’re also in my squalid Captain D’s. And
everything’s as it should be. All the partiers are there. And the Rock City outside is the one I wanted. And the only light that shines in our direction is the heatlamp. But I can’t get into the whole scene.

“I guess this is goodbye, Freddie.”

“I thought you were looking forward to the big, inevitable downer ending.”

“Guess it’s not what I expected it would be.” Then I make the fishhook motion. Freddie laughs like hell.

“So you never were addicted to fried fish, right? You were addicted to drug noirs.”

I pause to let the tension build.

“I’m not an addict. I can quit whenever I want.”

The heatlamp fizzes out. Freddie, in all black, is now lit only by his cigarette. Then he extinguishes it and I never see him again.

I get up on my short legs and walk to the door of the Captain D’s. Everything begins disappearing around me. I don’t know exactly what kind of story this is, but if it’s the story I want it to be the guy at the counter will stop me with a bag of hushpuppies. The manager’ll be with him. There in the increasing vacuum of space.

“Few hushpuppies to go?” he’ll ask, shaking the bag.

“Not this time.”

“Come on, they’re on the house,” sez the manager. What a guy. Then he disappears. And the crabby cashier, as if it’s the most annoying task in the world, finally disappears, too. Leaving only this white dwarf, little old me, in the expanding nothing.

But this is the inevitable downer ending that you saw coming a mile away, so I just keep walking, through the disappearing lobby. Out the door. My light getting dimmer and dimmer,
illuminating my hair and beard one last time. And then into the darkness.

That is, if this is that kind of story.
Is This the Ship of Theseus?

When I was younger, I was frequently left alone, my parents not being the overprotective type. With so much time to myself, I was able, because of a ruminative bent and a sedentary nature – even at such an early age – to explore my own mind, daydreaming, staring at the pictures which, for reasons unknown now and forever to me, hung on my wall: a Greek trireme and a print of Chuck Close’s painting Lucas. In this, I shall not say idyllic, but perhaps baleyon, though one may also posit bathetic, environment I spent the whole (or perhaps remainder would be more appropriate) of my childhood not quite isolated, for there were my loving mother and my loving father who provided all the companionship I required, bringing my sum total of life experience at that age to an often private, though by no means lonely or alienated existence focused on the operations of my own mentality. I never suspected how this period would be brought to an end.

One day I felt the need for physical activity, and therefore decided to help my family by chopping wood. We lived in a rural area; we had a great deal of land with plenty of timber. Now I wasn’t asked, and to be frank had never been asked, nor was I expected by anyone, though the only people I knew were my mother and father, since I was so young, to chop wood. But I’d seen my dad do it and thought I’d give it a try. Grabbing my grandfather’s axe, a tool so old the double-blade had been replaced innumerable times, and the handle too innumerable times, I thought something like, The strength of my lineage will assist me, only not that exactly on account of my age, so maybe more like, My family is strong!, a ringing endorsement pulsing through my mind for my genealogical tree as I went out to work.

Our immediate backyard was completely flat for a good fifty meters and then broke into a declivity, at the bottom of which was a stand of cypress, at the top of which was the woodpile
where I stood chopping the felled trees into logs, the logs into more manageable pieces, the pieces into smaller chunks that could fit easily into the stove my father had installed in our basement in order to heat part of the house. He said it saved on the cost of propane. Being so young, and being unaccustomed to sustained action, perhaps because I spent so much time staring at the paintings on my wall and daydreaming, I got tired quickly. But since I suddenly saw myself as a woodsman protecting his family from an impending blizzard, I found, deep within my person, a reserve of heretofore undiscovered energy, though to be honest I had not gone in search of it previously, which allowed me to push myself on even when I was dizzy with exhaustion.

Much of what happened next had to be told to me. And to this day I’m not sure if I can trust the sources, as you will soon understand.

_Supposedly_ I was spotted chopping wood from a great distance by _someone_, this questionable person having rounded the house and entered the backyard, or so I’m told, just _in the knick of time_, to use the clichéd words of my self-selected chroniclers. I’ve been informed on many occasions the _someone_ was my father, but I doubt this seriously. Whomever it was that did see me claims I hefted grandfather’s axe, as before in my many successful strikes at the timber, but this time instead of the tool soaring above in a true arc, the flat of the blade crashed into my forehead, knocking me backwards, and likely immediately unconscious (if I can believe this story), the episode ending, in the telling anyway, as the axe fell to the ground, me collapsing, rolling to the bottom of the hill, where I crashed head first (how could that _someone_ know from _Their_ vantage point?) into a tree.

I have been told my _parents_ were _mortified_. My ersatz father, as he unfortunately put it, _hollered bloody murder_ to my equally ersatz mother, who supposedly, and without pause, picked up the
phone and called the paramedics. As I am again informed, the ambulance arrived in minutes, but the time felt like an eternity, to quote more of Their absurd lines, because my dad believed he couldn’t touch me for fear my neck was broken and any wrong move would lead to further injury. Once I was secured by the paramedics, the disreputable storytellers allow that I was whisked off to a certain location, no one ever specified where, making it a very uncertain location, and that from this ambiguous place I was taken by helicopter (a helicopter?) to a (yokel term) big city hospital.

It might be that none of this is true. I was unconscious the entire time.

Being a child, what followed was confusing to me. I awakened in a strange place, surrounded by unrecognizable people and imposing machines that made alarming sounds. There were so many doctors and specialists I could never remember any of their names, and so, when I could see, finally, I had one of my attendants lean in close. His or her name was Dr. Fregoli. From thereon out I called all of the medical staff Dr. Fregoli, which made everyone believe Dr. Fregoli was my favorite. This was far from the truth.

After what seemed like an eternity, to use phrasing They would understand all too well, of tests and treatments and operations, I was finally, and not without a little ceremony, sent away from the hospital. I say sent away and not sent home on purpose …

Even though I’d been on the mend for so long, the people who spirited me off were still solicitous, my ersatz father driving as slowly as possible so as not to upset my precarious condition. I realized almost immediately what was going on. The people who were taking me away from the hospital, they resembled my parents, certainly. My hulking father was still rumpled, always looking like he’d slept in a wadded up pile of the clothes he was wearing. No matter how much he combed his hair, it still looked unkempt, a mass of reddish brown that
concluded in two mammoth lupine lambchops, but which also appeared over his hazel eyes and the rest of his body. My mother, quite the opposite, was prim and tiny, her skin an ethereal pallor that showed blue and green veins, a roadmap leading nowhere, her hair dyed raven black.

The effect of the simulation was striking. But these were not my parents. Maybe it was because I was still tired from the hospital, but I wasn’t afraid. I was even bold enough to ask who they were, though all I heard, in my half-daze, were three words that told me more about my situation than the impostors probably intended. They said concussion and brain injury, so I knew, right off, what story They were using, putting me in a privileged position. Strange They were so incompetent.

Once we’d arrived at our destination, my ersatz father carried me into a house, deposited me onto a bed, and there I instantly fell asleep, something I wasn’t allowed to do at the beginning of my stay in the hospital. How long I slept, I have no idea. What machinations were put in place while I slumbered, I know not. All I do know is that when I arose, I immediately saw the first mistake in Their plan. My Chuck Close painting of Lucas Samaras was now a confusion of colors that formed no face I could discern, more closely resembling, I now realize, a Jackson Pollock. Walking through the house, I quickly understood that although this was a masterful copy, it was not my home. This was not my room. This was not my hallway. This was not my bathroom. This was not my father’s library.

Yet being ignorant still as to the point of this hoax, I did not flee in disgust, in case I was being watched, the simulacrum of my father’s study as his actual bibliotheque, before the accident, was one of my normal haunts. There I found all the same books in all the same places. While looking at the shelves, wondering what I was going to do, wondering what They wanted from me, wondering what They intended to do to me, I happened upon a leather bound tome I’d
studied with interest many times before. It was my family’s ancestor chart and history.

The chart itself was inked on vellum (my actual father being, perhaps, too enamored of that which was, at least in appearance, ancient) and doubled up many times in the manner of maps. Opened before me I recalled what my father had said, that our genealogy resembled, in myriad ways, The Lone Cypress near Monterey, a place that seemed fantastic, making our family unique via this connection to something not of our world. I tried to hold that image in my mind, of the Macrocarpa growing from the cliff, sprouting from ground so inhospitable, thriving – healthy and green – in land truly opposed to life, while I read through the ancestry, a paragraph or so about each member, leading back to the most august branch, only to find that part of Their plan, whatever it was, included crippling me with headaches. The world, as I thought then, in my juvenile mind, was being shook apart by a continual drumbeat and soon everything would, without fail, disintegrate, the cliff crumbling, the tree breaking, sliding, succumbing at last if I did not hold it all together. I fought through the shock waves, unwilling to be the cause of The Lone Cypress’s demise, experiencing the same anxiety of anticipation I always felt as I got closer and closer to my favorite entry, the most famous person in my family, cranial agony increasing, until I reached the page and reality once again went smooth and placid, though a slight pain persisted, though in the end the tree was destroyed anyway.

Joseph Capgras was no longer there. He had been replaced. In his place was a Mrs. D–, whose name I withhold for reasons of privacy, as I do not wish to make of her an historical pariah, seeing as she is blameless in this endeavor to prune my lineage’s most venerable limb of a man who was hailed in my family on a daily basis, a man who was used as proof of our scientific and intellectual eclat, a man who was not just a limb, but the very trunk itself. The fact that I found this information by chance right as the shock waves ceased was why I couldn’t tell anyone what
had happened to me. Because if I did tell someone, anyone, They would merely return me to Dr. Fregoli; if I demanded a new physician I would be re-introduced to Dr. Fregoli; if I asked for a second opinion it would be the same as the first for the doctor who would deliver it would be Dr. Fregoli; if I refused to take my medicine, if I pretended to be well, a specialist would be sent in to monitor me, to see if I was actually taking my medicine, to see if I was actually well, and that doctor would be Dr. Fregoli; if I fled I would be pursued by Dr. Fregoli; if I found a band of outsiders who knew of and were battling against the grand conspiracy, who were overjoyed, who were proud to have me, me, the one spoken of, a comrade in their revolution, me, a person who could be depended on, me, possibly the one who would change the course of the action, me … but first, allow us to introduce you to our leader, our leader, a great, just this way, you’re gonna love, and who … who would be standing before me, head shaking slowly, reaching out to take my pulse, saying, you’re not well? And there would be more tests, and there would be more operations, and in the end I would once again be sent away with charlatans to a counterfeit home by whom?

I would be sent away by Dr. Fregoli.

I was trapped. How could I escape? They were all in on it. And They were giving me this terrible headache. On the floor of my ersatz father’s library, I passed out. When I awoke, I stood on shaky legs, head in my hands. The pain had subsided. And other than a feeling of general weakness. I was fine. Fine. When I opened my eyes. When I could see. Finally. I found I was in front of a mirror. Understanding that I was surrounded. On all sides. By impostors and simulacra. I walked to the one person I felt I could depend on – myself.

In front of the mirror, I looked, with confidence, at the person I was, content that there was someone who would always, no matter what, be there for me. But looking at my reflection in
the glass, I began to wonder. I knew my parents had been replaced. I knew my house had been replaced. I knew everything in the house, yes even grandfather’s axe had been replaced. But what about me? Who was to say that I had not been replaced …?

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Oh, I am sorry. I did not mean to deceive you. But thinking on it, none of this story happened to me. Why did I tell it? I do not know. Where did it take place? Elsewhere. Where? A place I’ve never been. Whom did it concern? Someone else. Who? I don’t know that either. Then why did I tell it? Because even though I’ve never met him, even though I still don’t know him, I feel we shared the same life, if only for a while, somewhere in the mythic past …

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With the speed of a child he ran out of the library it was far worse than he’d imagined and fleeing was the only option fleeing from every impostor he was trying to run from the worst not thinking about where he was going in order to throw himself off his own trail until he stopped in front of the trireme. It was the ship of Theseus. The picture was not, as one might expect, of Theseus leading his men home. Instead it showed the craft being renovated. Used only when it carried the Athenian envoys to the festival of Apollo at Delos, the vessel spent the rest of the year anchored in the harbor, supposed proof that the legend of Theseus was not a legend at all, though the ship, preserved for over a millennium, had been refurbished so many times nothing of the original existed any longer. Next to the trireme was Lucas. A force seemed to radiate out from him, or perhaps into him, as if his body were transforming, as if, who knows?, he were being bombarded by shock waves and after they shook him apart he would continue on as someone or something else …?

It could be.
But I leave you with this: there are those who believe, indeed truly believe, that all of their cells are replaced every seven years, that their entire corporeal existence metamorphoses completely in that time. This is only actually true in the body. The cells in the brain are never replaced. The ones that die are gone forever. The ones that live have always been with you broadcasting myths from other times.
The Ballad of Ailin’ Alan Smithee

Now we all know that Juvenal Ancien, who went by Jukin’ Jack Shines, died at Guy Manley’s club in Chicago, there on the South Side, after violating one of his own rules, that being *Never leave a soldier behind*, by which he meant a glass of whiskey (or any other drink for that matter), in order to confront bassist Tyrone Baker the Widowmaker, who had once been a boxer, which is where he got the name, and although Jukin’ Jack was more a lover than a fighter, as he enjoyed informing everyone who might be willing to listen and plenty who weren’t, this one time Shines decided not to down his whiskey, decided not to sneak on out the back, decided not to slip on down the alley, decided not to scale on up the wall or fence that always happened to be there, decided not to slink on into another establishment where inebriates were sold and women of a loose moral character congregated, no this time Shines opted to fight because this time, contrary to every other time where, sure enough, Jukin’ Jack was guilty, either preferring the adventure of courting women already spoken for, which is how many tell the tale, or perhaps it could’ve been that Shines was an unlucky man, his stars against him, never noticing the ring until it was on a hand rather recklessly entering the airspace in the vicinity of Jack’s nose, but *this one time*, Jukin’ Jack was innocent of the charges brought against him, namely that he had come to know Mrs. Baker in the biblical sense, a crime that made Mr. Baker rise up, for he certainly wasn’t going to take this sitting down, and ask Shines if maybe the atmosphere outside of Guy Manley’s club might be better suited for the business the two men had to conduct, and as it’s been shown in several movies, as it’s been written of in plenty of books, and to everyone’s surprise in the bar, Jukin’ Jack rose, lifted his first of two shots, saying, *This one’s for you, Rone*, proceeding then to follow the Widowmaker outside in the name of protecting Mrs. Baker’s honor, and to the
further surprise of everyone gathered, Shines knocked out the ex-boxer with one punch, the match going by so quickly that no one quite knew what happened, and by the time the crowd got back inside Jukin’ Jack was already standing by the bar with his other shot in his hand, raising it to them all and saying, And as usual, this one’s for Alan Smithee. The poison in the whiskey worked so fast Shines didn’t get a chance to set the glass down before he hit the floor stone dead.

Of course I don’t have to tell you that Alan Smithee, called Ailin’ Alan Smithee supposedly on account of his tendency to leave a good party for no reason at all, prompting Shines to say, Oh, Alan’s ailin’ again, well this Ailin’ Alan Smithee was a friend of Jack’s who, five years before Shines would take that last shot of whiskey, hit the floor, and never rise again, disappeared either in Memphis, or outside of Memphis, or so the story goes, and even though Jukin’ Jack went on to be one of the most influential bluesmen of all time, perhaps the most notorious, certainly the most well known, he never did get over Smithee’s disappearance, going so far as to buy that extra shot, Just in case ol’ Ailin’ Alan comes back tonight, normally drinking it himself sooner or later, And as usual this one’s for Alan Smithee, ‘s how he put it, saying, I’m sure he won’t mind just this once, except on bad nights when Shines would leave the drink right there on the bar, his feet up on the chair next to his, staring at the door, waiting for his friend to return.

Later on, Crooked Fingers Fillmore, in the documentary The Soldier Left Behind, a movie I’m sure we’ve all seen, would say that Shines knew Smithee was never coming back, although when asked how he knew, Jukin’ Jack’d only say that he knew, but then he’d get drunk and start ordering drinks for Ailin’ Alan, he’d start staring at doors, he’d claim, Any second now Wildman will stroll on in, you watch, outta nowhere he’ll be here, he’ll sit down right in front of us, I mean you just watch, and some say, Fillmore among them, that Shines’d even procure high-priced
whores for Smithee because, Alan may be a great musician, but he’s lousy with women, even going so far as to tell Crooked Fingers Fillmore, I paid for the first woman Smithee ever slept with, don’t ya know, a gesture he’d try to repeat much to the joy of the select ladies of the evening who happened to be in the right place at the right time.

The legend, they tell it from New Orleans on up to Canada, from Port Chicago, California, to Chicago, Illinois, to Cleveland and parts East, is that Shines and Smithee didn’t meet until they faced off in a guitar pickin’ duel, some say it took place in the Delta, that a woman named Joy Pneumatic appeared and coaxed Ailin’ Alan on by initiating him into the rites of the bedroom, taunting him afterwards with, You are good (never quite elaborating on what), but not as good as Jukin’ Jack Shines, which maybe got Smithee’s ire up for the only time in his life, prompting him to follow Joy to Greenville to make good on his boast, I am the best there is in Mississippi, and this is certainly the version that Crooked Fingers Fillmore promotes in his as-told-to memoir entitled *Crooked Gives It To Ya Straight*, this also being the version the popular film *At the Crossroads* used, but most say it was in Eastern Mississippi, that Jukin’ Jack found Ailin’ Alan, the contest lasting an entire day, the small audience, since Shines wasn’t known yet (outside of Greenville, anyhow) and Smithee never would be known, sat entranced, never moving from their seats as first one master would answer the other master, fingers sliding to perfect notes, possibly even notes unheard before in this world, the show sending sound waves out into the countryside, out into the country, out into Earth, maybe even into outer space, moving through the luminiferous ether, existing as an indigo light, that light exuding the only music that ever would be heard in the final frontier broadcasting the sometimes raucous, sometimes rambunctious, but often bittersweet message of mankind, blue about opportunities missed, blue about mistakes made, blue about an unkindly fate, blue about how short it all is, but
possibly the bluest member of those gathered to hear Shines and Smithee was Big Bobby Uric, owner of Uric’s Juke Joint, who never gave a good goddamn about music, he only had shows because normally that meant dancin’ and flirtin’ which he found led to plenty of drinkin’, but other than the owner that lucky group, if you can call a handful a group, was awed with the day-long performance by these two obviously transcendent musicians, although in the end, which came about some say from Uric’s cutting off the electricity, mild-mannered Ailin’ Alan declared, I may be the greatest bluesman ever from Mississip, but you’re the greatest there ever was anywhere. Jukin’ Jack only bowed in response, though later Crooked Fingers Fillmore would claim that Shines said, Maybe I won, but Smithee made me better. I coulda never become what I become without Alan.

Now thanks in part to books like Crooked Gives It To Ya Straight and blues historian Rob Cocoanuts’ From the Delta to the South Side, and thanks also to popular movies like At the Crossroads, documentaries like The Soldier Left Behind, and the artier flick Delta Gilgamesh, everybody knows Shines’ background, how he ran away from his home in Tennessee at the age of fourteen, how he became a hobo out riding the rails, begging for change, sometimes stealing food or money for food, how somewhere along the way, these folks claiming it was in Georgia, those folks saying it was in South Carolina, but no matter where it was somewhere Juvenal Ancien ended up with a guitar, taught himself how to play, found he could usually pick up a new song after hearing it one or only two times, got himself a new name to completely split with the past, how then he went on and instead of begging or stealing he started playing on streetcorners, normally cranking out whatever tune his audience wanted to hear, even altering songs slightly to better please the crowd, until he made his way to Greenville, Mississippi, where he learned the Delta style, the form he’d later become master of, although once he began playing in juke joints
around the South, known for his music, but even more so for his drinking, philandering, and braggadocio to the point in *The Soldier Left Behind* one of the interviewees was Muhammad Ali who stated straight up that he based his public persona at least partially on Jukin’ Jack Shines, well as this blues master toured he began to hear tell of another bluesman who might be better, better than Shines, and this guitar picker was called Wildman.

Wildman, called Wildman either ironically or because he lived out in the middle of nowhere in Eastern Mississippi, out in the wild, as I don’t have to tell you, was Ailin’ Alan Smithee whose background, unlike Jukin’ Jack’s which became a cliché in Shines’ own lifetime, is not too well-known, most folks, including Crooked Fingers Fillmore and his illegitimate son Arthur Arthritis, made it sound like Smithee was born on, no, that he just appeared on that stage in Philadelphia, no, not the real Philadelphia in Pennsylvania, the one in the Magnolia State, others, like the movie *At the Crossroads* giving Ailin’ Alan almost the same history as Jukin’ Jack’s, while *Delta Gilgamesh* makes Smithee directly into an Enkidu, playing up the story about Joy Pneumatic and the Contest, but according to Rob Cocoanuts, and most other folks for that matter, Smithee was from Mississippi, although no one including Ailin’ Alan himself knew from where, his parents unknown, his date of birth unknown, Shines often known to say, Wildman was a ancient man in a old man’s body, and instead of picking cotton or getting into trouble, as one might expect of a bluesman from that time period, Ailin’ Alan Smithee, at least according to Shines and Cocoanuts, found gainful employ in a large private library, a library Shines claims to have visited at least once, though later unable to relocate it, how after working in that house of books Smithee became a life-long reader, reading while others were off carousing, which is probably how Ailin’ Alan ended up writing and singing songs based improbably on theories held by that Second Century scientist of Upper Egypt who went by the name Claudius Ptolemaeus, but who
we now know as Ptolemy, how at some point Smithee found himself in Philadelphia (not the real one), how there he began to play at small gatherings and as the opening act at local fairs and festivals, until he began to hear about Jukin’ Jack Shines, either from members of his audience, or perhaps by Joy Pneumatic, depending on which story you give credence to.

Way I heard it, though your version may be slightly different, details probably similar, is that after the Contest in Philly, Shines and Smithee set out touring the juke joints of Mississippi, playing packed houses wherever they went, always with Shines as the headliner and Smithee the opening act followed by a set where the two would play together, rumor being Jukin’ Jack and Ailin’ Alan were so in synch they even knew what songs they were going to play on any given night, regardless of the fact that they never rehearsed together, never had a set list at all, this being shown in a montage in every film about Shines, a glitzy montage in *At the Crossroads*, a stylish montage in *Delta Gilgamesh* (where one side of the screen would be blank and Jukin’ Jack would be on the other side, then Shines’ side faded to black and the previously black side became Ailin’ Alan, then back and forth quickly until it appeared the entire screen was inhabited by both men, when that’s not the case, as you know), and a photographic montage in *The Soldier Left Behind* (but think about this: Smithee’s picture only showed a nondescript man in a hat sitting down with a guitar, his face you can’t make it out), and they continued on like this until people started telling them about Memphis, like that amazing scene in *At the Crossroads* where Joy Pneumatic says:

Boys, you are the best, you play the best blues, you drink the best whiskey, and you have the best women. But why, oh why are you still in Mississippi? You’re like titans in the wilderness, gods in the backwater. Let me take you to Memphis, to the Hellhound Club where the crowds already want you, to Satellite Records where they’re waiting to record you, to Aunt Maybelle’s… that’s where I used to work, boys. Come on, you are kings. Let me
take you to the capital of your kingdom…

never mind that Smithee supposedly never drank, or rarely drank, and as seen in the great and the not-so-great features of page and screen, Shines, who wanted to conquer the world, was all for following Joy, while Smithee thought of Mississippi as the world, couldn’t imagine anyplace else would be all that different, so he wasn’t particularly interested in leaving, though in the end they decided to go.

All of this we know, or at least most of it, even the parts about Smithee having become legend, repeated again and again. But what you don’t know, what you won’t find in any book or movie, is that there’s a reason Ailin’ Alan wasn’t particularly interested in leaving Mississippi. And that reason was a man who was either known as Mr. Esh or Mr. Ash.

Near his own death from diabetes, his body wracked with gout and arthritis, his eyes enormous behind cataract glasses, Crooked Fingers Fillmore, though the few who know the story say he was delusional already, told a tale about Jukin’ Jack Shines which would later be added to new editions of *Crooked Gives It To Ya Straight*, how one night the blues master was in an odd way, he didn’t sound like himself, not looking out the door as usual but glazed, positioned toward the wall, strumming a guitar that wasn’t there, Fillmore behind him, Shines occasionally glancing back, not to make sure anyone was listening, Seemed like he thought he was goan see somebody else, like maybe he was goan see da Devil, only J.J. was ready for him, which might be why *At the Crossroads* has Jukin’ Jack doing just that, meeting the Devil, selling his soul and on and on, but it wasn’t Satan Shines met, instead somewhere during his travels he came to a crossroads and Shines happened upon the man who, at least according to Fillmore, Fillmore saying he had it from Jukin’ Jack himself, gave him the power to sing and play the blues better than anyone.
This man’s name was Mr. Esh. Had a pipe in his hand an’ a cane at his feet. Was a dark man. Wore a black suit. He sat in a black rattan chair so you could only see his profile. Alfred Hitchcock or something. I don’t remember how I got there, said Fillmore invoking Shines. I only know I was there. Mr. Esh told me to sit down. There was a chair behind me. Didn’t take my eyes from him. Just sat. There was a chair. Weren’t there befo’. An’ I tole him everything. Bout ridin’ the rails. Bout runnin’ from cops. Bout runnin’ from white folks. Bout bein’ hungry. I doan know why I told him everything. Seemed like he already knew. After I tole the story, I looked at my guitar. Said if I was the most well known bluesman ever, then…

Mr. Esh, according to Fillmore who claims to have gotten it from Shines, said, Juvenal, cuz I hadn’t changed my name yet, Juvenal, my boy, there is potential in every life, though it runs to its end at some point, following the path laid before it. Now, the most well known is not the greatest. And being well known isn’t always a gift. So do you mean you wish to be a great musician, or do you really mean you want to be the most well known bluesman ever? Think about your answer, son. Think.

I tole him I wanted to be the most well known. I didn’t think. When I answered, we sat there. Not moving. I could still only see half a Mr. Esh. In his dark suit. There was no wind. I could smell the tobacco from the pipe. Never saw him light it. He said to me,

Juvenal, my advice to you is change your name and accept your path.

He reached down. Patted my guitar with his left hand. An’ we sat there for a long time.

Soon after Juvenal Ancien disappeared. I became Jukin’ Jack Shines. I was able to play anything on the guitar. Even the Delta blues I learned in Greenville. Seemed each time I played more people wanted ta see me. But I think I know the end of the story. Like it’s been here from the beginnin’. Gotta say – I’m ready for it. Ready for it ta happen again.
The next piece, maybe even more suspect, set originally to be used as an extra in the DVD for *The Soldier Left Behind*, cut also from Cocoanuts’ *From the Delta to the South Side* for being a bald-faced lie, comes from Arthur Arthritis, illegitimate son of Crooked Fingers Fillmore, who told his boy, supposedly, that Shines, a few days before he died, and after drinking plenty of his own and his friend’s shots, spun a yarn about Ailin’ Alan Smithee, about how Wildman met a similar character in a graveyard, Smithee often playing in graveyards being the only truly quiet place he could ever find, An’ cuz he figured the folks there wouldn’t mind too much, heh heh heh, Arthritis said his daddy said, that Smithee met a light skinned man wearing a white suit leaning against a monolith, only able to see his right profile, pipe in his mouth, cane in his hand, Introduced himself as Mr. Ash, Smithee doubtfully Shines unlikely Fillmore maybe Arthritis absolutely said, though in the telling it could be that Shines said *Esh* but being drunk he slurred it, no matter, unlike Jukin’ Jack, Mr. Ash had to talk first on account of Ailin’ Alan just standing there and staring.

Son, there is potential in every life, though it runs to its end at some point, following the path laid before it. I see you have yourself a case for a musical instrument. Do you keep your lunch in there?

He said he kept his guitar in the case.

And what, son, do you plan to do with your guitar?

He said he planned to become the greatest bluesman in Mississippi from Mississippi ever.

Son, there is a world of experience out there, an entire world.

He said that to him the world was Mississippi, that he couldn’t imagine anything being all that much different from Mississippi, that he’d read plenty of books and after reading them he found he had thought of all of them taking place right there in Mississippi, so why should he
Then, son, you will be the greatest bluesman in Mississippi from Mississippi, but only if you never leave this state.

According to Arthur Arthritis through Fillmore, Shines, and Smithee, Ailin' Alan went on to his usual practice spot, there in the quiet graveyard, and when he left later that day, Mr. Ash was gone.

On the road to Memphis, there are many stories about what happened at the border between Mississippi and Tennessee, *At the Crossroads* having it that Jukin' Jack ran into the Devil, the Devil telling Shines he would go on to stardom but that the same couldn’t be said for Smithee, *Delta Gilgamesh* having it that a hex was put on Ailin' Alan by a descendant of Marie Leveau after Smithee encouraged Shines not only to defeat Bubba Humm, a local favorite down in Biloxi, but to embarrass him, the hex causing Ailin' Alan to waste away until the two friends reached Memphis, where Smithee stepped out to find a doctor, never to be seen again, Rob Cocoanuts claiming that the pair ran into a lynch mob, that Shines, being taller, thinner, and younger was able to outrun them, whereas Ailin' Alan, being shorter, stockier, and older wasn’t, although later Cocoanuts would change his story and say, Maybe Smithee couldn’t deal with there being a world outside of Mississippi, that the whole thing scared him, that he entered a self-imposed exile back in Philadelphia, that his disappearing was just a story Shines and Fillmore concocted to explain what happened, and then later the two accepted it as true, others have said that it’s possible that Smithee, due to some outlandish mistake, was gunned down, that the murder was covered up, or that maybe he did die of a serious illness, but that wasn’t mythical enough for the likes of Shines, Fillmore, and especially not for Arthur Arthritis.

Of the few who have heard of Mr. Esh or Mr. Ash, some think he was one and the same
person, that he wasn’t mystical at all, that he was a well connected businessman working in the entertainment world, and that in Memphis he tried to sign both Shines and Smithee, and whereas Shines signed with Esh or Ash, Smithee wouldn’t do it, was older and wiser than Jukin’ Jack, knew this Esh or Ash was trying to screw them over, prompting the would-be manager to give that old line, You’ll never work again if…, and, sure enough, that’s what happened, Shines and Smithee having a falling out over the ordeal, Jukin’ Jack ready to cut the dead weight that was this weird book-readin’, Ptolemy-lovin’, no-partyin’ Wildman, Shines later feeling bad, not able to face up to what he did realizing that he and Ailin’ Alan had been like brothers, and whereas Smithee disappeared into anonymity, Shines hoped someday that Smithee would return, that they would play together again, and so he kept buying his friend shots, kept staring at the door, waiting for ol’ Wildman to walk through, ready to say something along the lines of, What, back so soon?

Yet there is a darker version involving Mr. Esh or Mr. Ash. In it Jukin’ Jack Shines and Ailin’ Alan Smithee, immediately before the border, found themselves at a crossroads in a graveyard. Being dark, the two were split up, although neither quite sure how he lost the other, Shines coming to the crossroads, Smithee wandering through the graveyard. At the intersection, Jukin’ Jack found Mr. Esh, looking exactly as he did before.

Juvenal, stop me if you have heard this before. There is potential…

Yeah.

Ah, but which way to go? If you want to become the most well-known bluesman ever, you take this road, motioning with his left hand, his index finger like fate itself, and you will arrive in Memphis. Continue on and you will arrive in Chicago, where you will meet your potential. But for all that, you could go back, again motioning with his left hand, and things would carry on as
they have. You are already a great musician, Juvenal.

I don’t just wanna be great. I wanna be known. Forever.

Then the road is yours.

Later, as he lay dying, not quite stone dead, the poison working to paralyze Shines before it killed him, fooling the patrons of Guy Manley’s club, tricking them into telling false versions of the story, Jukin’ Jack would see Mr. Esh in his now black and white suit, smoking his pipe, leaning on his cane, saying,

There is potential in every life, though it runs to its end at some point, following the path laid before it. You knew your path. You played your part right to the end – a masterful actor. Your story will make you the most notorious bluesman of all time. Everyone, even those who know nothing of the blues will know the tale of Jukin’ Jack Shines.

Next, the patrons split half on one side of the bar, the other half on the other, and out of nowhere, there was Mr. Esh leaving the club, fifty percent saying they saw a man in a white suit, fifty percent saying they saw a man in a black suit, all of them hearing him say, Bringing strife is my greatest joy. Then he was gone.

Ailin’ Alan Smithee also found Mr. Ash looking exactly as he did before, presenting his right side, his white suit, his pipe, his cane. Yet this time there was no exchange. Wildman remained perfectly silent throughout, allowing Mr. Ash to speak.

Potential. What are borders but potential? Look out there, son: there lies the world beyond Mississippi. Plenty have come this way hoping for something else past that invisible line. But for you, it might as well be the edge of the earth. Isn’t that right, son? Here, in the Magnolia State, all is truth; while everything out there is myth. Or maybe just pointless repetition. Do I speak sooth, son? Things haven’t changed, have they? Mississippi is still the world, is it not?
My boy, as long as that rings true, your life will continue mostly as it has. Should you ever find it false, then you must contact me. I will be your…manager. You can see the world! yes, you can – under my guidance. But woe to you if you try to leave without me. Try to leave without me and you will find – there really are monsters.

This time Ailin’ Alan did not proceed through his normal practice routine. Instead, he reached the border. And he stepped across into Philadelphia. He met with those who had hired him for his very first gig. They did not recognize him. He gave his name; they did not know him. He went back to Urich’s. Big Bobby did not recognize him. He gave his name; Urich didn’t know him, but Big Bobby did show off the new jukebox and his expanded dance floor, More room since we took the stage out. Better class a customers, too – and that meant more money. He traveled up and down the state; he traipsed back and forth. He gave his name to everyone. Someone had to remember him. Had to recall. The cult fervor of his days in Philly. His time with Jukin’ Jack. But to everyone he encountered the name meant nothing. And soon it meant nothing to him. It did not sound like his name. It sounded like no one’s name. The last time he ever spoke it was when he was starving, penniless, exhausted, and hopeless, standing in front of the owner of a chicken and bar-B-Q shack called Namtar’s. The owner, in his black and white suit, his black and white hat, hired this pathetic wretch to wear a white, yellow, and red chicken costume, to be the mascot for Namtar’s, the idea being that no one would see how frightening he looked under all those feathers. Then the man in the black and white suit asked his name. The would-be mascot said: Alan Smithee. The owner figured that was an alias, that this character in front of him was one of the alias men who had reason to cover up who they really were, but so be it. Then the owner shook the new mascot’s hand, hired him, and when the mascot asked what he should call the owner, the owner said, People call me all sorts of names,
but I guess Namtar is good enough. And even now, to this very day, the man in the chicken suit stands out front of Namtar’s, without talent, without skill, forgotten, forlorn, his life heavy with the weight of that crushing despondency, his life heavy with the weight of that ridiculous mascot get-up, recalling his time with Jukin’ Jack as if it’d happened to someone else, out there enticing would-be customers into the chicken shack somewhere in Mississippi.

Yet, the fact of the matter is, whereas we know Juvenal Ancien’s story exactly, whereas we know the tale of Jukin’ Jack Shines forwards and backwards, though some may have added a few creative elaborations, whereas we know so much about Ancien/Shines that we find ourselves predicting what will come next in any story about him, Yeah, I already heard this one, it’s a good ‘un, no one really knows anything about Ailin’ Alan Smithee except for what Jukin’ Jack Shines may or may not have said, except for what Crooked Fingers Fillmore may or may not have heard, except for what Arthur Arthritis, illegitimate son of Fillmore, may or may not have … become privy to, may or may not have … made up, and even the yarns that Rob Cocoanuts includes in his book, well it turns out they were scrounged from folks that would later change their stories, would later recant, would later admit to outlandish retellings that found their origins in not one, but many, many unreliable sources. And since there are no reliable recordings of his songs … Since there is no verifiable evidence concerning him … Unlike any story about Shines, whose fate is in the hands of the storyteller, whose fate is to be found in the cliché that his life became … With Wildman, it is the listeners or the readers who are implicated, for only you can determine the course of his life’s events, only you can determine what happened to him, only you can grant him an existence … or, you can take it away.
Astray

An unlit cigarette dangled from my lips.

Outside there was no one. Looking to the right provided a view of no one at all, looking to the left offered a scene devoid of people, while straight ahead was strictly unpopulated. There was no one. I lit my Chesterfield, and immediately a man asked me for a light. Normally, a person asking for a light already has something to smoke. Yet he had nothing. His hands, which he clenched and unclenched, were empty. He sat down next to me, unperturbed at my immobility, and delivered this speech:

“‘I am the one who will lead you astray,’” he said, smoking, though I gave him neither cigarette nor flame. “I am the one who will lead you astray.” I looked down and found my own Chesterfield was missing. I removed one from the pack and lit. “‘I am the one who will lead you astray. There, I’ve said it three times, and what I tell you three times is true. So you can believe it. Three times. You can trust me. It’s true. Though, I only tell lies. I only tell lies. Lies, I must warn you, are all I tell. So you can’t trust me. You can’t. You just can’t. Not a blessed word,’” he said taking a drag from the cigarette in his left hand, exhaling, and then taking a drag from the one in his right. Meanwhile, I lit another. “‘However, if you don’t follow me, you’ll never get to where you’re going. Where you want to go. I am the one and only, the only one who can lead you to your destination. Your questions, the ones you want answered, will remain questionable, will remain querulous, will remain queer beyond your understanding if you stay here, if you follow someone else, if you allow me to walk into the distance shrinking – shrinking – shrinking until I am gone, yes, if you do not join me there will be no resolution for you, no, you will not get to where you need to go, no, you will not find that knowledge you wish to
attain, no, you will not end up in the place you wish to be without me, though I,” he said
inhaling on the two cigarettes in his left hand, slowly lowering that hand to his knee, exhaling, “I
will lead you astray,” punctuated by a drag from the right hand Chesterfield and a grand gesture
with that same hand, sweeping the smoke away from his mouth. I lit a fourth cigarette and …
handed it to him. He thanked me, and said, “Ah, but now I have said it four times, so we enter
tricky territory. For: what I tell you one or two times is, let us be frank, a bald-faced lie, what I
tell you three times is true, but what I tell you four or more times you just can’t tell, you just
can’t tell, I am afraid to inform you there is just no way to know,” he said inhaling from the two
right hand cigarettes and the two left hand cigarettes simultaneously, then exhaling, his hands in
a flourish as if he were a conductor. “So, should you be ready, together we shall follow the path
to your destination, a path only I know, a path only I can lead you along, though in doing so,
ievitably, I will steer you off course and into oblivion.” He stood and began walking.

I lit another cigarette.

I admit, I did not follow. I did not allow myself to be led astray. I watched him walk into
the distance, ever into the distance, up to the point where the land meets the sky, just before he
disappeared inhaling on the two cigarettes in his left hand, and then, with finality, the three
others in his right as he stepped over the horizon. It has been years since I’ve seen him. And I
wonder everyday if I made the right decision. If perhaps my resolve to remain stationary was
incorrect. If perhaps choosing to stagnate smoking on the stoop was wrong. If perhaps, in the
end, my destination was to go astray and I never made it, or if, after all, I am astray now.
VITA

EDUCATION
2013 Ph.D. in English, University of Illinois at Chicago.
2008 M.F.A. in Creative Writing – Fiction, University of Alabama.
2004 M.A. in English, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
2000 B.A. in English, Kent State University.

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS
2012 *Sunosphere* (a collection of fictions) was a finalist for the Richard Sullivan Prize in Short Fiction (University of Notre Dame Press).
2011 *Extend Play in the Bottomless Pit* was a finalist in the Rose Metal Press Fifth Annual Chapbook Contest.
2008 *Self-Titled Debut* won the Subito Press Book Competition.
2007 National Alumni Fellowship from the University of Alabama.

PUBLICATIONS IN FICTION

Books

Anthologies
“The First Circumnavigator.” *Tuscaloosa Writes This*. Tuscaloosa: Slash Pine Press. (forthcoming)

Journals
“Written With You Sitting Next To Me.” *Another Chicago Magazine* 50.2 (Spring 2012).
“The Unlikely Main Character’s Lament.” *Another Chicago Magazine* 50.2 (Spring 2012).
“Zeno’s Shotgun Paradox.” *Atticus Review* 1.8 (July 2011).
“Dead Man’s Curve.” *Requited* #4 (December 2010).
“Astray.” *The Brooklyn Rail* (June 2010).
“I Don’t Know Why.” *Quarter After Eight* vol. 16 (Spring 2010).
“Police Procedural.” *Artifice Magazine* 1 (Spring 2010). NOMINATED FOR A PUSHCART PRIZE
“The Ballad of Ailin’ Alan Smithee.” *Copper Nickel* 12 (Fall 2009).

SPECIAL MENTION IN Pushcart Prize XXXV
“On the Road to the Great City.” *SpringGun* 1 (September 2009).
“You Are Where I Am Not.” *The Brooklyn Rail* (June 2009).
“No Tomorrow.” *PANK* 2 (Winter 2008).
“Oubliette.” *BlazeVOX* (Spring 2007).

**PUBLICATIONS IN CREATIVE NONFICTION**

**Journals**

“Somewhere better than this place.” *The Florida Review* 37.1 (Winter 2013).

**REVIEWS**

Review of *You Are Here* by Donald Breckenridge. *Word Riot* (March 2009).

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

2013 – Present  
Assistant Professor of Creative Writing (tenure-track), Rocky Mountain College.  
- Seminar in Creative Writing (English 490)  
- Advanced Imaginative Writing (English 451)  
- Imaginative Writing (English 251)  
- The American Short Story (English 447)  
- Critical Reading and Evaluative Writing (English 120)  
- First Year Writing (English 119)

2008 – 2013  
Graduate Assistant, University of Illinois at Chicago.  
- Introduction to Fiction Writing (English 212)  
- Introduction to the Writing of Nonfiction Prose (English 201)  
- Film and Culture: Film Noir/Neo-Noir (English 120)  
- Film and Culture: Cult Films (English 120)  
- Composition 2: Independent Culture (English 161)  
- Composition 1: In Search of an Identity (English 160)

2004 – 2007  
Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Alabama.  
- Prose Tour: Extreme Fiction – Forms of Experimental Fiction (English 301)  
- Introduction to Creative Writing (English 200)  
- British Literature 1800 – Present (English 206)  
- American Literature 1865 – Present (English 210)  
- Composition 2: Literature and Writing (English 102)  
- Composition 1: Academic Writing (English 101)

2002 – 2004  
Graduate Teaching Associate, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.  
- Composition 2: Literature and Writing (English 102)  
- Composition 1: Rhetoric and Argumentation (English 101)
EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE
2013 – Present  Faculty Advisor for Soliloquy.
2009 – 2010  Fiction Editor for Packingtown Review.
2005 – 2006  Fiction Editor for Black Warrior Review.

CONFERENCE PAPERS PRESENTED


PUBLIC READINGS
May 7, 2013  Wit Rabbit Reading Series, Quenchers Saloon, Chicago, IL
October 23, 2012  The Gift Theatre Salon, Gale Street Inn, Chicago, IL
July 7, 2012  Post-Moderately Acceptable Reading Series, Uncharted Books, Chicago, IL
March 9, 2012  Program for Writers Reading Series, University of Illinois at Chicago, The Center for Humanities, Chicago, IL
March 3, 2012  Books Have Ruined Our Lives, Now We Want to Ruin Yours (Starcherone Press), AWP Off-Site Reading, Green Door Tavern, Chicago, IL
March 2, 2012  There Will Be Quickies, AWP Event, School of the Art Institute of Chicago Ballroom, Chicago, IL
November 17, 2011  Preface Reading Series, Chicago Book Expo, SoFo Tap, Chicago, IL
February 18, 2011  Program for Writers Reading Series, University of Illinois at Chicago, The Center for Humanities, Chicago, IL
February 3, 2011  Divination in DC, PANK/Annelomma/Mud Lasicious Press AWP Off-Site Reading, Ireland’s Four Fields, Washington, DC
November 9, 2010  Quickies Reading Series, InnerTown Pub, Chicago, IL
October 16, 2010  Madness Much Reading Tour, The Enormous Room, Cambridge, MA
October 15, 2010  Madness Much Reading Tour, The Penny Farthing, New York, NY
October 14, 2010  Madness Much Reading Tour, Barrelhouse Presents ... Artifice Magazine, Wonderland Ballroom, Washington, DC
October 13, 2010  Madness Much Reading Tour, The Monumental Reading Series, Mount Vernon, Baltimore, MD
September 13, 2010  University of Tennessee, Writers in the Library Series, Knoxville, TN
May 24, 2010  Packingtown Review Release Party, Jaks Tap, Chicago, IL
May 19, 2010  The American Good Times Championship Reading Series, Mellow Mushroom,Tuscaloosa, AL
May 16, 2010  Orange Alert Reading Series, The Whistler, Chicago, IL
April 9, 2010  Tarpaulin Sky/Cocoaout Books/Switchback Books/Artifice Magazine AWP Off-Site Reading, Delaney’s, Denver, CO
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<td>February 13, 2009</td>
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<td>November 2, 2007</td>
<td>University of Alabama, Student Reading Series, Tuscaloosa, AL</td>
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<td>November 3, 2006</td>
<td>University of Alabama, Student Reading Series, Tuscaloosa, AL</td>
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<td>October 7, 2005</td>
<td>University of Alabama, Student Reading Series, Tuscaloosa, AL</td>
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<td>April 5, 2004</td>
<td>University of Tennessee, Writers in the Library Series, Knoxville, TN</td>
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<td>February 28, 2004</td>
<td>University of Louisville, 20th Century Conference, Louisville, KY</td>
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