

Hipster Bricks

Hipster Bricks

A Philosophical Novel

Denver Day

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Literature is art, all dharma is fire,
this copy of *Hipster Bricks* is yours to
keep, but if you aren't me it's someone
else's intellectual property. Who are
you? *Hipster Bricks* is a work of
fiction cut from whole cloth, I made
the whole thing up. None of these
events ever happened as such, and I
invented the characters notwithstanding
the vigor of transcendental spirit,
career politicians, cold blooded
killas, y narcotraficantes.

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For Jules, who is both man and mouse.

one.

Great lengths. I go to great lengths to keep the peace. I would walk a mile, if I thought it would help me avoid dickering with any known malignant bullshitter. Whoever isn't with me is against me, that's a rule of thumb about proper cause for making certain snap judgments. Longer waiting times for passing judgment can be worth it, however, if the wait contributes to useful class action policy against recidivist assholes.

What is the name of the unfriendly game, when for one to speak at all, is to relinquish some strategic advantage? I see enough to know it's a hustle, and at first I was surprised to note the edge of prejudice embedded in such attitudes. Surely this mysterious antagonism is based on bad intelligence, but why would anyone go to the trouble to distribute disinformation about individuals? Speaking as an ex-member of the working press I can assure you, misinformation presents all sorts of civil difficulties.

Maybe there is some otherwise widely

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recognized point of conditioning which I have missed entirely. For starters, I really am a writer. That's no joke, it's not a cover. And I'm a talker. Words are a strong suit for me, talking is part of my duty. I have noticed a penalty assessment for deviation from small talk among certain factions, e.g. robots. I've noticed that many literary portrayals of childlike tyrants are allegorical of A.I. gone bananas. Apeshit robot is as fine an explanation as any for much of the world I had encountered up to a certain point in my life, down here in this fucking toilet. But lately I've been learning. These antique robots are mean and dumb. I don't give a shit about their legacy model, and their bad attitudes reflect poorly on their designers.

Sometimes I wonder about what, exactly, people think they want from me, and about how they've decided abuse is the best thing to exchange for my mysterious, yet-unnamed charity. Describing them as automatons or hungry ghosts as we may, they've still no cause for leaning into me so closely. I have nothing so intimate for them. In fact, these entities are the very

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currency of which they incorrectly believe themselves to be bankrupt. So they sure don't have any entitlement or proper use for my script, the likes of which many people sell their souls for.

Soul is generally a plurality. Whenever I have cause to relocate, I weigh the pending action in a universal context. This is a key for carrying adult responsibility. The body of humanity can be thought of as a collective, therefore to be truly, optimally healthy, one must negotiate honest integration, or at least some ethical standard of general reconciliation among the community at large. Otherwise a person isn't being honest with themselves, or maybe they've fallen into some trap of solipsism.

Regularly, I encounter people who abuse the benefit of doubt, or if you will, the "human shield" which derives from the necessary collectivity of life and humanity. For example, I observe that most if not all transgressions against me come by way of group-think in bad faith, whether it's blindly accidental such as through the marketing of alcoholism to human

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children, or through intentionally malign vectors such as the cottage industry of identity theft. Such is this society today. People are known also to apply the fallacy of infinite resources, or “ecological shield,” although it fares poorly as an excuse amid post-colonialism.

I must persevere in subtle teaching, and calm, peaceable personal conduct unless I want to relinquish my faith in humanity, which of course so many have given up on before me. For life in hell, is it honest, to attempt resembling whatever so many of these miserable, shitty people hate? Maybe such subterfuge is less than honest, but it would be for safety's sake. Honesty is physically dangerous because so many people hate the truth. Regardless of what I wear or where I walk, I'll keep my boots on, but tread lightly.

Typically no one says, “Hey I do not like you because of X Y Z.” Maybe if they knew why, they'd say it. Sometimes trouble is taken to send an envoy for providing some negative civil assessment. As to those who would be happy to assault me, by their own

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accord in the street, or stand up and tell my face to fuck off for no good reason, such an approach is honest action, therefore it's categorically apart from matters under scrutiny here.

Anyway, it is clear that people down here are tired, grouchy, mean, and misdirected. The behavior is no wonder, or daresay defensible, because the world often does nothing but mistreat and lie. But hell, it does to me too. My fundamental origins are no different than anyone else's and we all share the same rights of way, no? Then, here I encounter you, but this may not be a common right of way. I am your narrator here, the name's Rick. Hi there.

two.

Interaction with people occurs in the due course of conducting one's daily business. The line between tolerance, and alternatives to tolerance, is fine. A question arises of who, and who not, I am willing to suffer. For instance, hustlers. Many hustlers are mean and hateful, much the way other people might hate you based

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on some various other predisposition of theirs. A claim of neutrality is often a lie. There is good with the bad, though, since some people actually aren't operating in bad faith. Find them.

Let me think of an example. Ah, yes, of course, my new friend who I met here in Phoenix, at a bar-slash-coffee shop co-located in the back end of a bookstore. As she shuffled a deck of cards expertly, I noticed a piece of yarn tied around one of her fingers. She displayed her incidental dangerousness honestly. That I appreciated as a demonstration of the outward veracity required for survival and enjoyment of the world and, that most people don't possess.

Even in hostility, there is a stripe of honesty that I prefer to uncalculating or lukewarm human agency. Think of humanity as a social parameter, the human condition. If it isn't that, we ought not care if or who is hostile or jesting. Without cause for investigating some ostensible measure, we wouldn't care and we'd never know. In broad terms, people's going out of doors always serves some

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key social need. There are other reasons too, but most loners are made, not born. Maybe that is changing. I admit it's been a long way since I last left my dwelling for the sole and expressed purpose of retrieving the carcass of a caribou on behalf of the tribe.

Maybe part of the problem derives from some social compromise in response to the dangers of strangers. Just looking about willy-nilly for a crowd to hang out with can turn dangerous easily. Traditional social rules are often rooted in stone-aged politics that were designed to defend people from themselves. Such are the origins of concepts like "the other one" and "us and them."

Social compromise involves common pretexts of human interaction. Plainview determinations about who participates in such pretense is an interesting taxonomy. There is strong, unwritten, unspoken pressure to compromise ethical standards, and it leads many to sell their souls. Whole populations sell their entire volume of family stones, blindly so. A successful hustler in such a

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marketplace fails to retain ethical high ground, therefore, high society amounts to a dustbin of goons.

By rights, station-minding is appropriate within a community. Beyond that, people ought to apply labels only very cautiously if at all. I recommend against it. Labels on people are usually incorrect, antiquated, and problematic if not dangerous. They divide, antagonize, and prevent peaceable interaction. The situation is abused widely in politics. The group is not the individual, labels are a device of crowds, and crowds are cowards where individualists grow to be hated without due cause. For petty label related reasons, fascinating organic relationships fail to develop, and ciphers linger despite being out-of-place agents in bad faith. Labels allow others to define things that people must define for themselves.

When interacting with others, in order to make a point and set an example, persistently I work to clear the air of presumptions or unsanctioned labels about myself, to the best of my ability. Such honesty does have a certain collateral cost for me,

socially, although I would stop short of complaining. The practice helps me discover who is inclined to make prejudgment based on what can only be hearsay, forensically. Known unknowns of this approach include entropy among the marketplace of ideas, people's information sources, and their knowledge.

three.

I should report that I am an asshole. Caveat lector. But I really do give a shit about the welfare of total strangers, so I'm charitable. I could go on, you are probably beginning to realize. And I shall.

“I am a charitable asshole.” I told my new friend with the finger string.

“What do you do for a living with a credential like that?”

“Its applications depend on the circumstances. Circumstances such as yourself for example. How is it that you came to be so good at shuffling those cards?” She only answered with a smile.

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“Seriously, I kill people for a living.” I said.

“Who doesn't?”

“Oh not really. Not yet.”

“And I'm not a whore.”

“Who isn't. What's your name?”

“I'm called Jules. What'll it be today? Longnecks are fifty cents until five.”

“I will have five of those. Mexican or European lagers please.”

“All at once? That's a lot of carbohydrates.”

“Not really beer. But I would like some iced green tea.”

“You hungry?”

“Maybe.”

“I'll get your tea. Who are you?”

“Rick.”

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She didn't have to be there, but she was. That was my introduction to Jules, who had no real business doing that job. Who cares why she did, since her joie de vivre was admirable. When dependent origination sufficiently explains a jewel among the dharma like Jules, the question has been answered. Nor did I have any warrant for my station, which at the time, was that of an afternoon bar patron. And what's in a job?

The human condition compels me to wander the universe looking for incumbent comrades, hairless or not. Jules was both. Hairless lizards don't seem to giggle or fart as much as furry mammals, which is why lizards make good jailers or bankers. They're fully content to lay low for three hundred years while a kingdom crumbles, in order to vest themselves in the erstwhile currency. Nobody squats quite like a lizard. They have good jokes, however, which they cook up during their long periods of free time, so they make good bartenders. Jules came back with my tea.

“Care to join me in a cup?” I

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asked. She cared to.

There was one other body at the bar, to my right about six stools over, nearly at the other end, eating some or another short order delight from the kitchen. A cook was deployed back in the kitchen.

Jules returned with tea and sat down across the bar from me.

“So. Who might you kill? Are you going to kill me?”

“No. I don't want to. It's usually obvious to me when I meet a person, whether they might be number one.” I said.

“Most people are already dead anyway, as far as I can tell.” she said.

“Death in the quick is always conditional, but dead people can still be killed.” I said. “Death is a false idol but knows no limit in the house it abides.”

“How is your tea?”

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“Delicious, thank you. And, quid pro quo, why are you here?” I asked.

“I get bored, and this fixes that. It's not for the money. People who worship death are the same ones who worship money. You?”

“My human condition compels me to wander the universe looking for incumbent comrades, hairless or not. This is good tea and getting better.”

“Soup's on too. My recipe. You'll see, it's good shit.”

I considered how this person had, basically due to her boredom, prepared soup for random strangers like me. Two minutes later I was diving into a tomato bisque with help from a stack of flatbread crackers.

four.

The world effects people differently. In me it has invoked an individualism whereby no higher authority apart from one's own political will is acceptable.

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Oppositely, there's a common misconception that traditional authority is all that prevents certain, immediate universal doom. Together in any proportion these two perspectives are in conflict.

Authoritarian assemblage requires governance, incidental to which administrators often fail, catastrophically, to realize and accommodate for the logical contradiction inherent in staffing a position at the top of a system whose rules dictate that one isn't in charge of oneself. The best case scenario for any meaningful policy that reckons with the organizational anachronism is silly, and begins the day with profanity and arbitrary class structure.

Meanwhile, people who've gone to the trouble to cultivate their own individualism don't suffer the enforcement of bad logic. In a society where the mob is given any degree of sanctioned enfranchisement, people vested in rightful liberty will require institutional political quarter for protection from mob rule. There are various ways to respond to assaults by

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a class, as a class. Beware of those who enforce the tyranny of the majority, which is a known requisite for intellectual disenfranchisement. Individualism is not a free ride, freedom must be earned and updated regularly. When people, whether mulish or sheep-like, are led systematically to slaughter in vicious cycles, it's a natural dead-hand state of traditional society; it's a manifestation of what some ancient philosophies describe as "hungry ghosts."

If people can be helped out of such a cycle, then they should be. If not, they simply come of age believing everything they're told. That may sound like no big deal, perhaps coming only at the minimum cost of losing some would-be society of intellectuals. But in the end, it probably won't get the victim anywhere but finished, and that's subjectively devastating; it's a whole universe destroyed in the most broad application of a clinical abortion. One's determination of whether or not to help others is an important, imperative, personal decision in life. I wonder at what blind hell I would be crawling the floors of today, hadn't my instructors

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led me properly astray over the years.

It's also important to remember, regarding out-of-order organizational leadership, that leaders awry are not leaders actually. These contradictory agents, notwithstanding the philosophical zombie hypothesis, do manifest in bad faith and often some response is required. It can even be said that derelict agents are innocent victims of so-called original sin, assuming that all beings are OK at their very heart at least for beginnings. Admittedly, it is challenging to maintain that asymptotic perspective, so it's generally always left up to the professionals. Speaking from experience I say, good can be removed from a person entirely. Everybody starts out with goodness, but it can be lost completely, irrespective of how so. It's never too late to mend, given proper time.

A key to any black magic is its collusion with natural law, as is the case with traditional mob rule or other active bad faith agency among communities. Along these lines come questions of community management. If a person is beyond redemption in this

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life, and so is endangering the peace, then options include intervention and corrective action. Someone with a line on the situation and the capability to intervene is obligated by rights.

Beyond a certain crossroads of one's education as an individualist, no further instructions are taught for how exactly to move forward. There may be plenty of suggestions in the marketplace of ideas, but the guidelines are abstract, merit-based folkways.

It's my observation that all people, eventually, get exactly what they have coming to them. The sword cuts every way. These words describe, briefly, the contents of my mind as I told my new friend Jules that I kill people. The statement invites explanation, or it should, it's meant to. Philosophically, any malefactor can be repaired without actually being made physically dead. But even when apparently neutralized, they may continue to pose a real unforeseen threats to others, thus bringing to bear the ethics of helping ungrateful people.

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five.

These days, progressive or experimental social policy can involve personalized world building, with a tragic loophole giving leave for demagogues to rule as the tyrants they've ever evolved to be. That's fundamental biological reduction. Their constituencies, upon identifying the situation and finding out, can walk away from the bondage as a legitimate and well-advised post-modern choice. But a major ethical problem occurs where souls are caught in the gravity of the actual living hells created by fishtank despots. It also brings a more universal problem, represented by trolls under bridges in such fish tanks, which unsuspecting people may happen across in social commons.

Ideally, everyone with proper cause gets to wear a funny hat, because one does as one must ultimately. There's no encumbrance for action executed properly by rights, whether for one's own sake or others'. That's the nature of diligent due process. So, for me it should be an exercise strictly academic when I duck into some fish tank for

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purposes strictly business. It shouldn't surprise me. It shouldn't get under my skin.

Why is a particular individual being given a chance to mend? Time is the answer. Such operators are given what time they may have. It's a gift from those who abstain from responding to a personal transgression, in order to make way for karmic law, for better or for worse. It's an optimistic gesture because, truly, it's never too late to mend, as I say. Yet, foolishly, often such a gift is not taken sufficiently advantage of. It's also a bother when an offending fishtank despot remains at large; for example in this instance, you weren't there to fix it but I was. And I left that particular mogul in office, at the peril of the greater community and the cost of my own exposure to liability for failing to resolve the matter when I had the chance.

Loose ends. Forgotten land mines. In this instance, for the personal offense, I gave the gift of time. I pulled myself off the case and let it ride on faith in my own astrology, but I did so at the calculated cost of

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exposing all to my interim risk. Comeuppance is narrowly tailored *qui facit per alium facit per se* but the universe is a philosophical creature, and there can be fish tanks anywhere. Anywhere one goes, there's risk of being ciphered as chattel.

A fishtank braintrust ranges from complex to about one step removed from elemental motion. For example, the people who lived by the laundry room at my old apartments in Phoenix. Although they appeared to have been drunk and dying, they exercised squatter's rights to shake down the laundry coin boxes. They were like mean, little coin-operated laundry robots fueled by cheap whiskey handles and cigarettes.

My point is that this mutation away from peaceable coexistence belies the influence of something far from egalitarian. Laundry despots are just one of the problems encountered in such fish tanks, for which main drags include the demand for cheap handles of whiskey in my voting precinct and the hard sell that caste lodging in stairwells is a tractable lifestyle. Oh, me, I'm sounding like a politician. Maybe that was the correct answer for

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Jules, instead of “I kill people.” Or maybe I'd just rather kill people than be a politician.

The guy at the end of the bar left, but I didn't see him pay. He must have a tab, I thought.

“This is pretty good soup.” I had eaten it all, and all the crackers too. “I'll be back for more tomorrow, unless...uhh...when's your shift over?”

“Six.”

“Shall we take in a film? In addition to being a charitable asshole, I'm a privileged elitist.”

“You're probably a taxpayer too.” She reached below the bar, pulled out a newspaper, and handed it to me. “Cinema, yes. Suggest a title?”

I could hear the cook's radio through the kitchen door as I watched her at closing duties. I thought about taking a short walk to kill the time, then thought better, since it was already five-thirty.

Mine in those days was the standard

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lot of an individualist. The situation wasn't bad although it had taken time and effort to achieve. Time is of the essence, where nature accommodates infinite contemplation for anyone with a will to pause and think about what life is, or attempt broad assessments in order to do right by the universe.

We left at six-thirty. Two servers relieved Jules in anticipation of increased demand for floor staff on the evening shift. She threw her black book and apron into the back seat of my sedan, we got in, and I steered us toward the university district in Tempe for some art house cinema. About two hours later we emerged from the theater into the warm summer night air.

It was the middle of August.

six.

"Let's keep ourselves pleasantly occupied, if you're not in a hurry to get home." I said.

"Fine. Keep it clean and above the belt."

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It was nearing ten and I was grateful for the night's occlusion of the desert sun. I drove us to a north Phoenix bistro where I was inclined for tea and noodles. Jules had green tea soup.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"What's a good response to something like that? I'll answer, it's no problem. But let me think about it first." She smiled back. She didn't have crocodile eyes. At a glance she looked like, well, like every woman, in a good way, she was thinking seriously of the best way to answer my question.

In terms of looks, down here in this sideways world, so many people are covered with war paint regardless of their gender, and when it comes to individuals, the when of looking at them is frequently more relevant than the who. But female agency is of a kind, and important. In large part, I am the way I am because of women. It's nothing which I would assign blame for, although it did hurt like a motherfucker, and has taken four decades so far. But pain is a small price to pay for vision and autonomy,

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and time invested gives excellent kickbacks.

“Where am I from? Part of the answer is to say that you and I are related. Everyone is. It's part of the human condition. We're all related to trees too, and even rocks. And we're Americans, so we're essentially from the same town, Ricky. Just look at this joint we're in now, and does it seem familiar? Don't get me wrong, I ain't complaining. But I am your girl next door, from Texas, that's it. I'm D.I.Y., I came out of no fucking box, and here we are brother.”

“I feel lucky to have such a neighbor. Welcome home in Phoenix. ¿Y yo? I spent the past ten years on I-10 as a Florida-based logistician. I came back here last year to close on some family business.”

“Lo te siga.” she said. “As with most anyone, my ongoing presence can be described as a function of survival. I'm an accumulation of statistically successful efforts at stop-loss, dead reckoning, and long trains running. If one has one's shit orderly enough for effective evasive action, there's

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usually enough gray matter left intact to accommodate the psychology of living.”

“Talk to me about night and day, Tex. Do you believe all this bullshit about the sun rising and setting?”

“It's a pack of lies.” She pulled a deck of cards from her bag, and shuffled them. “And a farce not nearly as old as it would like to be. Anyway, it's horse latitudes for me now. Don't you be a prick or a fucking maniac, Trucker Rick. You just be real cool and patient, and kind, and helpful, and the like, and you will find me to be useful in your world.” She winked and farted. Horse latitudes indeed.

Nobody who's anybody smokes anymore, or drinks either. Not at my age. Like she said, it's a survival thing. Or a survivor thing. She dealt me a common hand while discreetly ogling two women who used the door, and came to some judgment about them before returning her attention to our table. Pro bono police work is easy to come by, and matches wilderness camping in its efficacy for killing time. I beat her with a hand of three threes.

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“I ought to check on my roommates. You're welcome to come and meet everyone. You may sleep on the couch if you'd like.”

I accepted. “Rolling stones gather no moss. Does your restaurant need a part timer?”

She laughed. “I know that's funny. I'll check. Otherwise, you can run personal errands for me and I'll tip you out.”

seven.

It wasn't a long drive to Jules' suburban residence in north Phoenix. The south side would've raised an eyebrow; South Mountain itself is a natural barrier at least for purposes of urban motoring, and to go around it is to leave Phoenix. One of the interesting things about urban management in the high desert, is that people could be regularly eating people at the next mountain over, and no alien would ever be the wiser. But historically that seems to have been the nature of criminal justice anyway.

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Over-educated restaurateur types like Jules don't live in places like South Phoenix. Maybe it isn't bad down there, but it could be interpreted as bad-looking in some ways. Such is the aesthetic where metro downtown districts abut the edges and seams of older civil infrastructure. Houston's Fifth Ward comes to mind, for example.

I ended up south of downtown last week when I missed a turn to the Maricopa County Recorder's Office. South of the Diamondbacks' stadium, there are still a few old houses with working porch lights but by and large, south of downtown by north of South Mountain looks like a dock setting that's been cleared to film a *Miami Vice* warehouse explosion. The area is a slippery concrete slope with little cover and no green and only the most obvious of places for a shooter to hide, unlike most of the post-industrial United States' llantera-covered sprawl that contains abundant nooks and crannies to provide cover for unelectable snipers. Talk about eating people.

Her neck of the woods was reasonably

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close to my own apartment off Highway 51. A difference between me and Jules was that I had, long ago during my drinking days, alienated all of my "friends." Down to zero. It follows that after a person loses the very last friend, there are no longer "two sticks" so to speak, for rubbing together to make new ones. It's funny how common human relations work that way, or at least they did for me. Anyway the point is that I didn't have a house full of roommates like Jules. Not anymore, and not again, yet.

I do have an incidental community of "friendly" or sympathetic people, ad hoc. My partisans, more or less. Cops, bondsmen, activists, artists, spooks, geeks, honest politicians, professors, and just general people I've met in the professional realm. They're other people with whom I happen to share vocational space. It's a good crowd, truth be told, although they're strictly business, inasmuch as life is work. A no-nonsense attitude is important as we ride the high seas of the universe; someone has to be the fucking straight guy, and there aren't many. The whole population cannot be on shore leave or the world gets

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scuttled. It happens to universes all of the time; everybody wakes up, and the chickens are in charge, and the rats across town are back-dooring you and yours.

This line of work is honest, anyway. Maybe I could be dwelling in a cube, plotting to screw the new dish at lunch hour, playing tennis with fish brains, wiping my ass with large bills, hadn't I burned those bridges with extreme prejudice. There has not been any nepotism left for me, not for many years, even before I figured out that the establishment is slavery. But there's no avarice either, and I'm thankful for being relatively free of it all.

Although I sure did get treated like shit before coming to my realizations about class and labor. I was not one of them, so I was the hated other one. There is no middle of the flock. I wonder, for how many generations my legacy will last, before or if someone in my family tree forgets, doesn't know, or doesn't care and pulls eighty years as a picture-perfect secular business person before turning to stone. Even at my final cube, the

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company man still had to fire me, and even then, I granted him the satisfaction of witnessing my earnest protest.

We parked and went walking up to her condo, which was bustling. The scene felt like an open-all-night office, not unlike my home workspace, though Jules' was more heavily staffed. Comfortable electricity wet the quiet air. I was seated on the couch, and someone brought me hummus and mineral water from the kitchen. A late edition of the local news was on the television set. Here and there, a roommate would give a nod, a wave, a walk-by.

eight.

“We're actual people. Not students in the corporate sense but we try to mind the store.” she said. “I should only cautiously self-identify as “people” since most probably can't be categorized as sentient. Beyond the mean intelligence of their venereal diseases, with chance and luck being what they are, most are probably philosophical zombies by your own estimation. Nevertheless, as a

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disguise, feigned stupidity is unoriginal and heavily overused.”

“And what about people like us?” I said. “For example, there is no more fucking for me, for years now. It is mostly intentional though it's not my first preference. Despite all of my clawing at my own fetters, I created this circumstance knowingly. I'm an ace, a post-modern monastic, walking a thin line for strangers who can't appreciate, or don't understand, altruism.”

“Ironically, sex is good for us.” she said.

“It's one of the few and simple keys to living.” I said. “Yet, some abstain in the present so others won't have to figure it out on their own. My situation is a kind of bondage, there's no doubt.

“Think of it as a dharma problem.” she said. “The past is a reflection and the future is conjecture, one's a thought and the other an idea, and both are philosophically contingent upon the existence of a present moment where the future and past literally and

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philosophically shall not exist. And since various minds define perfection differently, some avoid certain vanities for the sake of philosophical perfection. Asceticism, it's a form of austerity, a sacrifice where hegemony is sought at a depth beyond what most fathom to obtain. Such projects don't have to be mutually exclusive of sexuality or sex, but, sex as a distraction leads many people directly away from enlightenment. In that sense, sex can be as deadly as avarice."

"So I've erred on the side of caution." I said. "For the sake of some conjectural future aesthetic, at the risk of it's historical irrelevance. There is much that can go wrong. With lovers, I don't believe I ever did anything right, but experience teaches me that friendship is what's most important. I define "friend" differently than I used to, and differently than most seem to. As for people like us generally, or me and you specifically, yes it's a dance with perfection but not at the peril of amity. The romantic muse isn't spooky or shallow and we probably won't fuck this up. Not in a bad way."

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“It's no big deal, right? News of the world is news to many.” she said. “But since education is entropic, we could still end up on the nine o'clock news wearing only handcuffs and underwear regardless of our state of enlightenment. Wishing to retain all of its repertoire, corporate media propagandists are disinclined to relinquish any options. No plot of grand tragedy which could effectively invoke posse comitatus, force majeure, martial law, and 1984-ever comes off the table. Beware that there are too many people who are over-hedged on the eschaton, and that the fifth column's not here to help people with amnesia recovery and divorce counseling. The proletariat won't tell you when the last tree is gone, so it's nobody's job but ours to prevent the day when only sick birds, robots, and tire stores remain. If it does happen, it's nobody's fault but mine.”

“The fucking robots.” I said. “Wouldn't tell us because they wouldn't know. Have you been reading my mail?”

“Llantera bots.” declared Jules.

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“They're fuck bots too.” I said.
“Did you ever see *Bladerunner*? There's more to those Replicants than killing. Anyway, this world's already ended, at least the matter must be prosecuted as if it had. Notwithstanding men about horses, there is something very practical, honest, and quaint about lovemaking, but in light of the fact that successfully implemented self denial opens the gate to greener pastures of metaphysical being, I've learned to do without, begrudgingly, to date. I can also do without all the herpes, though. Just the other day, one of the hookers living in my apartment building fell down the outside stairs. For any number of reasons, I'm surprised the woman can even walk at all, when she can. It does shine a light regarding where a progressive lack of mindfulness might deposit you.”

“Do you have herpes?”

“No, not the penis kind.” I said.
“I never get cold sores either, but I don't do much making out anyway.”

“Maybe I'll let you kiss my ass sometime.”

Hipster Bricks

“Who is the president?” I asked.

“That depends on what and who you are. And on what you mean by the question. Are you talking about the President of the United States of America?”

“I don't know. Maybe. But who's the boss of you?”

“The U.S. Executive legally has the oversight of operations, prescribed or incidental, which describe any official executive function of the United States.” she said. “Which is most often encountered in our daily life by way of the American dollar. But no, nobody is in charge of me as such, though I do have some creeping existentialist malaise. Yourself?”

“By rights, nobody is qualified, except me.” I said. “But I do have ad hoc advisers, like you.”

“So you're qualified?” she said.

“Sure.” I said. “And may your beard grow ever longer.”

Denver Day

“Here's to it.” Jules raised her bottle of mineral water.

“Elsewise, do you like to fuck women?” I interrupted, at the risk of disturbing the peace. Evidently, she took no offense.

“As a full-blown adult, the end often turns out that way.” she said. “It's a natural option but love's born in the heart, not the crotch.”

“There is also safety in numbers, it is said.” I said. “It's not a silver bullet, but for example, polyamory might resolve certain problems of jealousy, codependency, and other unwanted byproducts of greedy coupling. Because philosophical truth is non-dualistic, unenlightened humanity suffers duality poorly, and the cosmology deals harshly with such failure.”

“So what are you telling me, brother? Are we Mack the fucking Knife?”

“I think that's probably part of what we are, if we're anything at all. Can you make mineral water come out of

your nose?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"Sending the right message is important in applied taxonomy, despite veracity's tendency for subjective drift. To understand the truth and to speak it, we're equally obligated." I said. "Truth is truth, it's simply put. But running afoul of organic complexities is unavoidable when truth is contested. My or your being Caveman the Brick might be an honest disposition, but it doesn't mean one gets, or even deserves, any action whatsoever."

"Every transaction has a sell side and a back side." she said. "Wedlock, for example. It's a practical civil institution, but by rights of common law, marriage can be interpreted as "people one has slept with" or "animal coupling," which is institutional polygamy in effect. One eats to live and people are fairly liberal when it comes to survival, yes. But, bonding is bonding, no matter how long ago it happened. Regardless of politics and talk, historical facts are what they are."

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nine.

Jules hopped up from the couch, walked into the hall, and returned a minute later with a pair of Bugs Bunny pajama pants and a matching t-shirt.

“Does he sleep with a rattle too?”
Yelled someone down the hall.

“Shut up back there, nigga. Our guest is a charitable asshole, privileged elitist, and blue testicled shaman.”

“Watch your fucking language.” Came the reply. “And you recall our wager about the N-word, you owe me five dollars.”

Such was the way of the gun at their house. I took a quick shower, slipped into the thoughtfully provided pajamas, and came to rest on a couch in the den.

“I've had it. I'm going to bed.” she said. It was homey in there, and though my dreams were weird, I slept like a rock.

Hipster Bricks

Next morning, the household resumed its action at a reasonable eight o'clock hour. For people with non-traditional schedules, eight in the morning is a wonderful first effort, I say. Get it correct in your head, just because people like us keep funny hours, doesn't mean we're layabouts. I walked into the kitchen and leaned against the counter.

"We're all vegan, would you care for a tofu scramble?" she asked.

"Yes. Did you dream well?"

"I always do with a stranger in the house." she said. "I'm due for a shift at twelve-thirty, we can chill at the coffee shop until then in the fellowship of other existentialist coogs."

"Got any brass knuckles?" I asked.

"Maybe, I dunno. I'll check after we eat."

After our high-protein morning meal we went to a coffee shop downtown that was thick with humanity. Shoaling bohemes. We were birds of a feather

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hidden in a flock of geeks.

“I like joints like this because I can blend in and feel normal.” I said.

“Well happy birthday then.” Jules said. “Personally, having statisti- cized the secular, it doesn't matter exactly where I go, as long as certain minimum standards are met. I've done all the time I'm willing to do as a dishwasher.”

“A classic description of the infinite chasm between labor and management.” I said. “You are an excellent cook, however.”

“Vegan only, I moved up in the kitchen, not out.”

Like it or not, say what you will, someone was burning hashish up at the coffee bar. It follows that everyone in the room, if they're like me, would be secondhand stoned for the next three days. I'm like an old retired hippie, walking a straightedged line in the modern era, but I'll always prefer ambient black chocolate to secondhand corporate tobacco smoke, regardless of the current decade.

Meanwhile, outside, a houseless person was being put into the back seat of a police car.

ten.

The individual in the back of the police cruiser wasn't any of the young, lurid, addiction-bedraggled stereotypes seen about certain highway junctions. He was an owl of a person who, regardless of any shortcomings, had made the less than minor effort of growing a beautifully kept beard, thick and long and marvelously flowing. The true urban bear whose presence is actionable political speech, a vote of no confidence in the society that's the subject of his rejection. The station they mind is no joke. Just ask someone who's been around for a while, their existence belies a personal philosophy of a deeper view, and a very widespread one, historically. Naturalism of this sort (whose signature is invariably accommodated by aestheticians) is firmly vested in the marketplace of ideas. Such are mountains, aesthetically and politically.

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When such standard bearers of natural law come to bad ends at the velvet hands, or dead hands, of automata, the convictions of their movement are merely compounded. This is a conversation about social construction and the nature of organic humanity. The philosophy, numbers, and political will of naturalists are strong, and the ad hoc constituency is known for its ability to sacrifice, for the sake of principle and long-term action, far beyond what most institutions compel from their adherents. Reasons being for such tenacity include the authenticity and the karma of deep ecology's political incumbency.

"I'll be right back." Jules said, standing, and walked outside to parlay with the uniformed officer. She returned to the table after a one-minute conversation.

"That's a date." she reported. "Those two parties are acquainted and the man is not under arrest or duress. That's a public transport courtesy of the taxpayers of Maricopa County, to deescalate a situation with some third party around here who we've apparently

missed. T'were a civil issue.”

“Politics.” I suggested.

“People have opinions.” she said.

“And the uniform?”

“A young man. Very young actually, probably in his early twenties, doing his part, riding a metal horse.”

The barista behind the bar, a woman with a shaved head, was overhearing our conversation. “That guy pisses on the porch out there. Regularly.” she said.

“During business hours?” Jules asked her.

“Sometimes. Typically only when it's dark, but no precipitation today. Paying customers can be just as bad though.” she said, with a faintly detectable air of condescension, and went back to her bar dishes.

“I don't know if that's a proper hipster attitude coming out of that barista or not.” Jules said. “Then again, what isn't.”

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“It's probably some things but not other things, and everyone's their own special case.” I said. “Whether they're baristas or urban owls or reasonably priced road hazards like us. Shall we make out in the bathroom?”

“*I Ching* so.” Jules replied. We ambled together back to the lavatory. In Phoenix, one often encounters gender non-specific public toilets which amount to an applied, peer-reviewed honor system that results in more mindful public toilet use. The honor system. My friend backed up against the sink and we enjoyed about five minutes worth of sloppy kissing, groping, and mild dry-humping. We got pretty worked up for thirty-somethings, then returned to the bar, hornily glowing.

eleven.

Back to our bar stools, Jules put a ten dollar bill on the bar and set an empty teacup on top of it, glanced at the front door, and gave me a funny look.

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“You can either watch or you can go wait in the car because in a few moments we're leaving in a hurry.” she said.

Instinctively, my brains went into unknown-risk-calculation mode, trying to solve the universal question of Jules' intent. I went and stood by the door, warily. It turned out that my hasty guess about what she was up to was correct.

The barista's somewhat inconsiderate words about “paying customers” were unoriginal but they were hers that morning. It was not clear to me, regarding the person's understanding of the phrase in its fundamental context, or its potential blowback, or what it said of the speaker's attitude about people, baristas, the marketplace at large, and our incidental part in it that morning.

So the first person I'd kissed, in I don't know how many years, mounted her bar stool and took to her knees in a low perch; The lady Jules of Texas looked like a cat about to attack with her narrow rear wanding back and forth capriciously. At first, for a brief

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moment, I thought she might piss on the bar.

When the ignorantly but unduly self righteous and soon-to-be-no-longer- uneducated barista passed by that area again, the top half of Jules' body swung back and her right leg made a roundhouse kick over the bar top. The kick connected with the head of the barista, who dropped onto the floor, knocked out cold. Jules moved toward me and the threshold. I reached the car moments before her and turned the engine over. And we were off.

There had been a thin crowd in the coffee shop, but despite its brutishness, her assault was quick and nearly discreet. People are so generally inattentive that I don't think anyone saw the deed but me. In the eyes of anyone who troubled themselves to look up, Jules could have been running for her life or rushing into the arms of a friend. Alternatively, any witnesses might also know there can be good cause for such an act, easily. I was slightly rattled but no one chased us.

“There are two sides to every story,

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Tex.” I said, in vague apologetica regarding my associate's behavior, meanwhile getting us the hell out of the area.

“We'll be fine as long as we don't go back.” she said. “Whether we're paying customers or not.”

“What put you over, the wink or the walk?”

“All of it, and coming from the wrong demographic, aggravated by an aversion to wasting the chi from our restroom interlude. Your thoughts?”

“You calculate risk well enough. Maybe the biggest gamble you made involved my reaction.”

“I don't think so dude, you're obvious.”

I changed the subject. “Who are those women you live with?”

“Near carbon copies of myself. They are trustworthy people and we get along well.”

“Cloning oneself politely, within a

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most intimate personal community, always presents an interesting challenge. How to discretely lay and hatch one's clutch among the roommates?" I mused.

"If all else fails, just do it in the butt." she said. "A great zen koan, yes."

My joint didn't offend Jules. Then again, it isn't an offensive place. I packed my gym bag. "Just a precaution Tex. You're a little unpredictable."

twelve.

"Unpredictability is the nature of things." she said. "There can be no fine control of the helm without a full course of entropy. One must grip it to steer it."

We looked at each other as I packed a few things. Jules sat on the couch, making herself at home. We might have screwed like alley cats in those tender moments, riding out the wake of the coffee shop brouhaha, but we didn't. Lest we be forever behind the eight ball, we were cautious not to rest on

our laurels.

In the toilet, that was different. For one, it was in the toilet, which is usually reason enough. Two, it precipitated a swift, violent citizen's adjudication. The former impulse act was fair enough to satisfy local rules, and a first kiss usually stirs up enough dust to light some sort of fire. Jules' subsequent election for natural justice definitely made a three-bagger of our morning, but there was still a risk of cashing in prematurely on the karma. Religion says it's superstition, necromancers say common sense, others see it as standard law of the sea; Regardless of our epistemological perspective, Jules and I couldn't afford to be coasting down the real highway of sex and justice without paying proper dues. No one's credit is good enough for a free ride, not for long, so before further transacting with the hegemony of sex and death, we would need to buffer our account.

Historically, it was a sensitive moment in my apartment actually, which if mishandled would have meant a terminal decline in our greenfield

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friendship. But we knew better, and entered a tacit agreement that gave us a metaphysical sustainability instead. As this story continues to unfold, it should become clearer to you just exactly what I mean by that.

“Nice little apartment. What's the management like?” she asked.

“When I renewed the lease, the rent went up twenty dollars.” I said. “That's what happens when one offers good faith political will and in-kind equity to a community that serves no ends except stupidity, vice, and death. I did ask why the price went up, and got a one-word quote for an answer: “Management.” Right out of the horse's mouth. But if I'm the only “paying tenant,” rent must be an unavoidable cost for me.”

“It could be that she feels shortchanged, you know, when she's the only one collecting rent, but you're the only one paying it.”

“In other news, someone, the fabled “management” perhaps, has stocked a new mysterious upstairs hooker, following the eviction of the previous.

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Meanwhile, the one in the building across the way keeps falling down the stairs over there. Two weeks ago, while two dudes were making an overly aggressive pickup, I thought I might have to conduct a shotgun wedding on that staircase. I telephoned the sheriff's office, but only reached an answering machine. Next time, if I really have a care, I'll know to run my own detail. These women are my neighbors and I do have various odd conversations with them, but I don't really offer the sort of input they're seeking, generally."

"I support you a hundred-and-ten percent." she said, and changed the subject. "Now, about what you'll wear to work. I suggest a nice pair of black or dark blue jeans, and something similar along those lines up top, maybe a golf shirt or a clean, pressed t-shirt. You're a generalist and I'll put you in my tip pool. You can expect anything from dish washing to bookkeeping, bar backing, or public speaking."

"That sounds fair."

"Anyway remember, your apartment

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manager is probably just following orders. Compartmentalization of power and all. You know, *respondeat superior.*”

“Bullshit.” said I. “But I count myself lucky by life station. Those who profit from inegalitarian access to shelter are insidiously criminal and meaner than piss-happy philosopher bums and spurned hookers. This planet is such a fucking zoo.”

thirteen.

We got to my new job at lunchtime and relieved two morning shifters. The pedigree of the clientèle set the bar for urban posh, American egalitarian suffrage that naturally regulated the crowd size. I washed my hands, scanned the kitchen, and tied on a black apron. Stuck to one of several fridges in the kitchen was a duty list naming local routines for back-of-the-house tasks. Chores for the current hour involved prep work like cutting vegetables to restock the make line, keeping up with the dishes, and attending short orders from the bar. Pinning down a stack of scribbled recipes upon one of several

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shelves, I found a little radio covered in a layer of finely accumulated food particles. I switched it on and started chopping onions.

“This domestic pastoral scene will carry on until about five or six, or seven, or whenever someone relieves us. If you ever must, when a shift change is due but nobody's relieved you, wait about half hour and then lock up if you need to, but let me know.” she said.

That early August afternoon, the patrons included a dude with big glasses and a shaved head who was hammering away at a portable manual typewriter; two young women each wearing large headphones jacked into the same portable audio device; a table full of relatively youthful skateboarders; and, seated at the bar, two black men whose second round of vegan huevos rancheros was my first order to fill.

“You need anything, Tex?” I asked, poking my head through the kitchen door into the bar area.

“Green tea.”

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The kitchen's back door led to a typical kitchen outback scene. There was a commercial sized garbage receptacle and a lockable storage shed featuring additional cold storage where I stowed some of my prep work before I left, to wit, five gallons of tomato bisque, five gallons of lentil soup, and five gallons of coconut ginger soup. Et cetera.

That afternoon, I and Jules went through four pots of green tea. Come six o'clock, relief arrived for the kitchen and the front end. She took a few minutes to chat them up, then we walked out to my car and leaned up against it for a few minutes before leaving. She handed me two hundred dollars in cash.

“Not bad for six hours.” she said.
“Power of the purse and all.”

“Let's take a jog and a shower, before we decide how to spend our dark hours.”

“That's one way to solve the looming exercise question.” she said. “Can you dance?”

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“I do alright. Where can we shower?”

“Which of ours is closest, I suppose that's mine.”

Since our introduction twenty-four hours before, Jules' roommates didn't seem to have moved or even changed tasks, much less had they changed clothes or work stations, but for some minor lateral movement I'd seen that morning.

“You two assholes don't have much to say.” greeted one of her roommates, not the woman named Queenie but the woman named Stevie. “What's your plan? Reason I ask being, you're part of the family now, apparently.”

“I am many things, like a writer for example, so I appreciate your household's operating like an office.”

“Poor work ethic occurs at the peril of all good people.” Stevie said, with a smile polite for my trouble.

fourteen.

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We took a leisurely forty-five minute run about five miles along a large, well known local canal frequented by cyclists and joggers at all hours. We returned to Jules' condo to shower off the day's collection of food service sediment, of which the complete removal isn't possible in just one wash. That we can know our peers and competitors by smell is an old secret among restaurateurs.

"I like to dance but the possibilities of our actually doing the world some good from a dance floor tonight are too random and unpredictable." she said, as she towed off her small, delicious knockers. "It's fun and great exercise but I think we're better appropriated elsewhere."

"It's an odd challenge to be hunting actively for a "paradigm shift" when they have a tendency to arrive in their own good time, and people trying to "immanentize the eschaton" are generally agents in bad faith. It comes down to a difference in philosophical perspective." I said. "I'm fairly unsuspecting by nature. Hell, I remember when someone had to

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explain to me the nuances of lying. I simply didn't recognize or understand it. The reason being for my befuddlement was that, if I know the person's lying and the person knows I know, the jig's up and no further argument is pressed. Yet the debate was forced beyond logic. I get it now, I was being hustled. I didn't think like a criminal, and historically, it made me an easier mark for hustlers. I have learned much, although still, I have difficulty reckoning with the rationales for bad faith agency, as my being strongly wired for veracity is connected to my drive for survival.”

“In lay-person's terms, we're straight shooters, not hustlers.”
Jules said.

“It's an important distinction yes.”
I said. “I even once put the question regarding this phenomenon to a colleague. Subterfuge and obfuscation are the fancy words for those kinds of lies in argument. These days, I try to be more guarded, and I try to deal with “other people” with a more case-by-case approach. Anyway, is there some place we can play cards, since we ain't going dancing?”

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“Besides right here at home, or at the collective, or the coffee shop, we could go to an actual casino.” she said. “Those dealers aren't bad cops. We can go north on 87 and be there within an hour, if you don't mind driving.”

So was formed our evening plan. We drove east for a stretch. Roadsigns marked our entry into reservation territory, about twenty minutes after the highway bent north whereof our destination awaited. The Salt River Casino.

“It may sound ironic to some, and many don't realize it, but these reservations preserve American ideals effectively.” she said. “Progressive encroachment upon natural liberties in the United States and a cottage industry of bureaucratic government have done things to our nation to make it unrecognizable in many terrible ways. The Native Americans, thankfully, take their citizenship very seriously. Such is constitutional law.”

fifteen.

“After more notable comeuppances of life, one of the tasks remaining in the quick is to preserve the good of what's left.” I said. “If there's anything left at all, meanwhile dispatching unchecked hazards. The proper tools for these challenges arrive with the accumulation of merit, in my experience.”

“Maybe that explains why things are different on this Native American nation. It's not because people here are doing things wrongly, if you follow me.” Jules said. “The common ground isn't all picture perfect. But compared to other American rights of way, there are remarkable contrasts and similarities.”

We arrived about nine, parked the car and walked into the casino. The floor wasn't crowded though the venue was active enough to buzz properly. Here and there on the porches we saw live music acts, and, well, it was nice. Casinos are kind of homey, you know. One might think they'd all reek of avarice, ruin, and desolation based on some dystopian perspective of

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economics and morality. But, when done correctly they're not, and I think here's the reason why:

Generally, people who understand the context of their life in the U.S.A. or as free individuals anywhere, understand that paper money is materially worthless, that it's value and usefulness is strictly a matter of its symbolizing guaranty. People come to casinos like this for the same kinds of reasons that Jules and I had. For example, to play cards because it's simply enjoyable to relax and associate with other various folks. There's an engineered timelessness at a casino whose microeconomics is a curiosity except to those for whom it's a traffic stop.

After a brief restroom break, we bought into a blackjack dealer for a negligible sum to enjoy the time, conversation, and experience. After twenty minutes, Jules asked for a poker table. The dealer pointed rearward and to the left. "But any table will do."

We rowed the suite river for ninety minutes before getting restless and closing our book at the poker table.

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We walked around the concourse and found a table near a jazz quintet on a low stage. A server enabled our natural cravings for salads, spicy fries, and iced green tea, and the musicians topped the artful bustle of the concourse with a warm, glittering breeze. At midnight we tipped the staff and settled the check.

The car was halfway through the second section of the lot. Jules walked around to her side as I keyed the driver door, and I heard some unseen third party speak unintelligible words. I glanced up in her direction to see Jules jump back quickly, so I went around the car to investigate. When I came around the trunk, I saw her reach into her boot, pulling a blade which flashed in the floodlight above us. She opened the throat of the person on the ground, set the bloody device onto the chest, and got in the car which I reversed slowly. We can discuss whether hers were logical thoughts and rational actions, but I'll testify that her mind was perfectly clear.

“He should've known better.” she said. “Let's go to a hotel for a

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while, then you can drop me off and catch up before work tomorrow.”

sixteen.

In its own right, sex and sexuality comprise a proper language, standalone with its own intrinsic currencies, so de facto economic relationships with the dollar come to exist. That would be fine if various organizations weren't recidivist transgressors, in the name of religion, against natural liberties. For example, sex trafficking is a crime, even when the perpetrator is a church. Religious organizational membership is not exempt from respecting civil liberty. Not even when the religion is a secular governing bureaucracy.

Jules was intent to cash in, if you will, on her latest killing. Her modus operandi was an effort at perfecting her personal agency in departure from the encumbrances of a hyper-sexualized marketplace of commercialized, commodified, and hyper-moralized sex and sexuality.

Sex is the most ubiquitous form of

Hipster Bricks

bondage. Other ways of relinquishing freedom are to govern oneself by hearsay, suffer arrogant slander from baristas, or allow undergarment encroachment by alleged assailants in the parking lots of casinos. Following our libidinous act of preservation and advancement of human intellectual and sexual hegemony, it became clear to me she meant well by her agency. But speaking of sex, right or wrong, the sex act about to happen situated me unequivocally to her killing, as a philosophical accessory after-the-fact. So I would need faith in Jules' self mastery, in her avoidance of the classical forensic snares of the aforementioned socio-historical trappings.

On our way back to the metro area, I pulled into a tidy roadside hotel and we checked into a downstairs room that faced the highway. There was no need to shuck all clothes and I didn't bother with front door parlay because we're on a budget and lily gilding takes the back seat in a bull market. Someone had left the t.v. set on and whither commenced the ass fucking one minute later, neither of us bothered to switch it off.

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“Sometimes, there's no time to beat around the bush with toe licking and pussy eating.” I said. “Sometimes just the bare facts will do for crucial fluid exchanges, because the universe is just a big asshole. That's one of the sorcerer's stones, you know.”

“Thank you Professor Quine. I like your rooster and appreciate your kind donation. Let's hit the road.” We left the key at the front desk, that was unoccupied except for a droning television.

“Same shift for both of us tomorrow?” I asked when I dropped her off.

“Yep, come over first thing in the morning. We'll go to breakfast and maybe look for a new girlfriend unless you'd rather a mule.”

The time was three in the morning, the flesh was peacefully exhausted, the mind was wide awake. Over the years, I've cultivated a practice that allows the body to sleep while the mind stays waking. It's sort of an applied lucid dreaming mode for overachievers. I

elected not to shower for preserving the insides of Jules' backside on my pipe, made a journal entry, then convalesced guilt free, until nine when I returned to Jules and company.

seventeen.

“What keeps us from traveling?” she said.

“Nothing important.” I answered. “It's late August. We'll save our money for a month and hit the road. Any ideas?”

“No. We'll figure something out.”

“Is three a crowd?” I asked.

“That depends on situations and personalities.” she said. “On our autumn road trip, probably so, at least for starters.”

I changed the subject. “Do you come here often?”

She laughed at me. “No, but I did last night. Thank you again, for shoving my asshole like a good daddy

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should.”

“How are your grits?” I stirred my grits.

“Going right through me.” she said. “Let's leave by October. Maybe we're back by the yule or maybe we're gone all winter.”

“Will work take us back?” I asked. She said it would.

Since we didn't have any particular reason to travel, we had some decisions to make as we planned the satiation of our continental wanderlust and at-large distribution of justice. No extraordinary reason is necessary because this North American continent is a big chunk of land that warrants exploring, and failure to do so is comparable to announcing oneself as a scholar of world religions for having studied none other than one's own.

So we spent the rest of the morning at that table in our diner, pencil sketching the faces of each other and our peers in the room. Drawing strangers is curious. Some people are immediately aware of their audience,

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some are aloof. Some are evasive or hostile and others pose knowingly or subconsciously. We returned to Jules' dwelling and spent ninety minutes preparing for our afternoon shift at the collective. The household displayed its trademark buzz of business office snap. Stevie, who was editing the memoir of some local hack, asked me if we had a nice time at the casino. I still had not engaged the other woman directly, Queenie, whose work station-slash-office was better hidden from the commons of the dwelling.

“Was good. In other news, we're taking a road trip of unknown duration. What about you? You're dedicated, but I wonder what else you do?”

“Maybe do you mean, 'can I fuck your asshole too, Stevie'?” she said.

Oh dear, I thought, I'm not sure what it is, but here it comes....

“I can tell you, the answer is “probably,” but you'll have to earn it.” she added.

I didn't know whether I'd won or

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lost. "That's all? What are you, some kind of capitalist?" I asked.

"No. Shit no. Brother, I'm giving it away although my asshole is inextricable from its actual value." she said. "My bottom's not a fiat currency."

"Hmmm. That sounds like more of a transaction than an agreement."

"Any agreement is a transaction, philosophically." she said. "And the marketplace of ideas is a real ontological thing whose constituency includes you and me and my asshole, and real interactions involving gravity and heat and such. It's the nature of things both strong and weak, Rick the Rooster. *Quid pro quo*. Meta economics is complex."

"Are you describing the karma or the dharma?" I asked.

"Both, but don't confuse one for the other."

"All dharma is fire." Jules watched me pour some tea for Stevie, and the rest in a cup to go, and off we went to

the collective.

Give or take a few deviants, the crowd was a facsimile of the lunch crowd from the day before. I made a big pot of actual green tea and, pondering our travel options, we began our afternoon of quaint Americana. I found some pie recipes, sharpened the knives and cut more vegetables to freshen the line, and knocked out the dishes from the previous shift.

eighteen.

September was relatively unremarkable as we saved our scratch and prepared for the road trip. Everyday is not Halloween, if only in a very limited number of ways, so we continued our daily duties diligently, letting vacation come to us.

We took our leave of Phoenix in the small hours of the first Monday in October. On the way out, I dropped off paperwork at the federal courthouse west of downtown. Then we drove to the nearby Maricopa County Recorder's Office and then the state house, at each of which Jules left a sealed

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envelope.

“Nothing beats some fuckin' nationwide sightseein', mama.” she said. “Northward, shall we?”

North? Why not. Without fateful choices, we're actually sightseeing not traveling. Yes, this is a continent full of space-aged roads, gasoline, and vehicles, but one's relationship with the scenery can vary. In the States, there is a huge and important transient demographic of whose ranks Jules and I just then joined, temporarily as far as we knew. The continent's honeycombed lattice of overland highways enhances and expedites the free assembly which, for so many people is more than enough for a permanent mission.

“Motorcycles are more ecological and natural.” I said. “What's your business at the recorder's office?”

“I'm trying to get a feel for the local taxation racket, what a scam. Sniffing around to discover the bridge trolls around here these days. Oh, and bikes are nice but we can't sleep in them if necessary.”

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“Oh. The fucking mob in government is a bigger problem in the U.S. than many people realize.” I said. “It's so bad, that people don't even know they don't have to listen to criminals. Just because sex workers have rights, and of course they do, doesn't mean they're definitively in charge of the Federal Reserve Bank. In the afterlife, tax protesters get merit honors and shiny badges. Maybe the only honest aspect of the cottage industry of usury exists among a slim portion of its honest bondsmen. Meanwhile ex-convicts may be the only honest politicians. Do you own any real property?”

“Mmhm a very little.” she said.

“What about the errand at the state house? Submitting legislation?” I asked.

“Yes, in fact. Basically, my abridged political manifesto. As far as I'm concerned, it's properly lodged when any paid civil servant reads it.” she continued. “Hey by the way, what's the capital of Utah?”

“It may be fortuitous that you

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brought your briefcase, as we are en route for Salt Lake City.” I said.

“I left my public affairs in Phoenix.” she said. “What about your business at the courthouse?”

“Providing some information about crimes.”

“Crimes such as?”

“Those usually stemming from standard human failings like fraud, misappropriation of public trust, theft by paper tools. Cockroaches and the like.” I said. “Offenders vary by name but rarely stand out in stripe.”

“And they rarely knock. It ain't nothing nice.” she said. Clear of conscience and trouble, we stayed our bearing northerly, enjoying the desert and mountains.

nineteen.

This new colonial city is an interesting confluence of dedicated civil infrastructure, exemplary rugged individualism, and the carpet baggers

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borne invariably of a relatively remote regional seat of government.

Salt Lake City is hidden in plain sight, geographically, stowed amid the ponent continental expanses of the Rockies, with its suburban pedigree portering impressive cargo, with all deliberate speed, of the mormon prophet's neo-apocalyptic twenty-first century legacy birthright. Market wise, it's an industrial banking hub, that will be a financial commendation probably retained even if the city becomes suddenly much closer to sea level. In addition to the aforementioned soccer moms, politicians, and industrialists, the city has some lovely artists, like punk bands and dramatists. And admirably odd dram shop laws.

“There's some shift work for us here, of much the same nature as our collective in Phoenix. It's probably worth staying for a few days to take advantage of that.” Jules said. We motored thereabout for some tea and company. There was no reason to watch the clock closely, but I think it was about nine or ten in the evening. Actual time is an astronomically

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approximated, organic relativity. Maritime geodesy notwithstanding, a calendar sourcing only a single stellar body moreover a towering local one is effective like a furled sail or a laundry line hanging from one pole. Or, a philosophically valid daily clock must start at a point and never end, kind of like military time. Time is fiat property. Albeit easily sworn, "all day" is an eternal commitment.

When we came to the local collective, Jules got into a long conversation with some stranger near the door. The main room was large and fairly well occupied with people playing chess, drinking espresso, burning incense and tobaccos, more crowded than our home base. Of several open tables I chose a well-worn wooden one. Despite the international criminal syndicate upon which stands much of the global coffee trade, I considered how the scene was so alive and valuable, compared to one based on alcohol. Jules rejoined me in due time with a chess board from a nearby binful of games.

"I'll set 'em up if you'll go to the bar and get us some dinner, eh." she

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said. Ten minutes later, I returned to our table with cups and a pot of hot green tea, with food order pending.

“What's the weather like? Any new warrants?” I asked.

“Touristry can be slightly vanilla sometimes. We'll accept that as easily as its cascading entropy.” she said. “Also, that woman invited us to stay at her house, so we don't have to worry about a hotel.”

“Did we get the afternoon shift?”

“Negative, we're on the graveyard.”

“I wouldn't dare complain.”

We played a series of chess, farmed a few nearby tables into our games, and drank several pots of tea. About one in the morning, eventually having a fill of caffeine and board games, we walked several doors over to a smaller venue with live music, it was a metal outfit.

“Wow. Every one of these people, from the rats down to the dishwasher tonight will keep their heads for being

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incidental to this ad hoc study in glorious satanism.” she said.

“You familiar with the metal scene?” I asked.

“Not intensively, but their dedication is admirable.”

twenty.

Nobody drinks anymore. We didn't anyway, but no one would have known it in that place other than the bartender or maybe the governor of Utah. If it were twice as big, it would have been a dark, loud, damn crowded small venue easily categorized as a hole-in-the-wall dive. The long, narrow room shared the red brick walls of its two neighbors front to back, on both sides. Hipster walls, thick with graffiti. There was a ceiling up there, too.

The metal band was running through a half stack of Marshall amplifiers. To be familiar with the technicalities of such things, is to understand that's a lot of decibels for a seven-hundred-square-foot room. The band was shredding, those amps were cranked, and

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the screamer was putting fuckin' spurs to the whole cartoon. I admit it was hot and much too loud for conversation even if the loudness were halved. Verbal communication required cupping the hand and shouting as loudly as possible, directly into the ear hole of the bartender or whomever. Casual chatting had to be taken into the toilet or outside.

Anyway, drinking's not good for one's neural net or firmware, and doctors recommend you should stop if you haven't already. There we were at an intersection of hot audio weaponry, solid state resistors, and organized goat-on-sheepshit heavy metal assembly. The crowd was a mash-up of hipster sociology. Metal crowd is similar to motorcycle crowd, for example the communities deploy rigorous gatekeeping measures, have a good foot forward as a general policy, and are self policing. The personnel overlap at times, of course. It probably wasn't a metal bar strictly, but that night was metal night forever, for sure. We squeezed in at a table of other overgrown up-all-night teenagers and Jules got involved in a screaming, cupped hand to mouth to ear hole conversation with the

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woman next to her. They carried on like that for five minutes.

The band was delightfully guitar heavy, and one of the axes was the type with sharp angles and pointy corners. Unlike hardcore punk rock, some branches of metal have lengthy songs with long bridges and multiple solos. The group's pieces weighed in about ten minutes each, and after about three numbers, I got a tap out from Jules. We stood and went out the front door with the woman she'd been ear-holing.

The air out front was still loud but at least conversationable. Stretching on the sidewalk, we adjusted our jaws, attempting to return the ears to proper function. Jules introduced me to her new acquaintance. The three of us walked to the vehicle and loaded ourselves three deep into the front seat. Man it was nice and quiet, though the ears still rang. The hour was late and I was exhausted, reason being all the day's driving. We had a healthy sort of tiredness, with Jules and I still getting our sea legs in those initial days of the road-trip adventure. I slept on our host's couch.

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We got up and went out for breakfast the next morning, where the room bustled with human traffic from Salt Lake City's highways, flyways, and downtowners. I took a silent canvassing of the people in the restaurant, an assortment of other people also eluding moribund wage-slave day jobs, the insurance racket, official state religion, murderous corporate whores, or any number of the other dirty bastardations that encroach on free individual will. My pursuit of the muse marshals honest cause for ongoing exploration and travel, that's one of the nice things about this lifestyle. Such a path only leads to growth, and even if it gets you killed, it's a timeless effort in good faith whose merit transcends the petty trappings of the profane realm.

If life's being lived correctly, though, death's not deadly. Dying only has everything to do with the incorrect perspective of others. The muse won't actually get yourself killed, nevertheless people of no faith will be so convinced. It takes a lifetime to live deliberately and truth brings out the worst in false people. The lifestyle

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doesn't have to be tough on one's mother but it's a full commitment, so living it can be challenging, especially if you're a hard case on a rough ride.

twenty-one.

In an effort to have more command over my own content, as a writer I carefully police my subjective experience or cognitive input. The practice is advisable regardless of one's station. There is no television at home, so my temporary lodging in hotels and motels or the domiciles of strangers is always a groundbreaking study in mass media.

Anyway, television eventually steals people's dope. I would say, you know, fuck the telly but I sang a different song before I knew the dangers of the medium for what they are. It's useful to me these days, but more so for non-standard or non-entertainment reasons generally, and notwithstanding the rarity of well-written programming of course. Pro tip: Years of self-imposed media blackouts make it much easier to critically assess

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solicitations and discern hustles; I'm not perfect but it has helped. And aesthetically, television programming is often dismally self-perpetuating and obtusely self-referencing. Done wrongly, it's an awfully disinteresting pastime that reminds me of hanging out with drunks, chain smokers, cokeheads, or other addicts.

So, we turned the set back off. Yada yada yada "the economy" blah blah blah "handguns" and "eating babies" and so on, but not a lick of critical thought. Most of that shallow business has been out of fashion for at least decades although a t.v. constituency has no idea. Nevertheless, it seems to be little more than a marketing problem. Worthwhile content does not *sell* well.

For lunch we went back to the local edition of the collective for smoothies. We hung around downtown that afternoon, then returned early evening to our host's address for additional media scholarship while we waited for our night shift to come around. We got to work at nine, and I squared up the kitchen while Jules dealt cards and counseled the diners

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who chose to sit at the bar. Business was brisk that night and we ended up walking with two hundred dollars apiece. Jules' girlfriend showed up about four.

“I'll meet you at her house in a couple of hours.” Jules said, and they split wearing all black but not a stitch of leather. Front-of-the-house staff relieved me at five thirty. They were late, but I saw no cause to complain because the scene was cool and the prep work was done. I shot the shit with one of Jules' friend's people I recognized from the night before, who spilled the beans regarding new aspects of my upcoming travel plan. Finally, after talking shop with my reliever for ten minutes, I hit the bricks. Dawn broke. They confirmed the rumor I'd heard about the next leg of our journey when they returned home at eight.

“We'll be taking her to Austin after fitting in a few more night shifts here, then we're driving a load of shit up to Baltimore.”

“I'd already heard about the Lone Star State part of it.” I said.
“Which all sounds fine to me. Are you

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looking forward to visiting your home state?"

As I've said, driving allover the continent for no clear reason had real value to me as a writer and a citizen, or from Jules' point of view, as a painter and a cold blooded killa. Once we got up there, some associate of an associate of an associate or so, down in Baltimore from points northerly, would be connecting with us for a contraband swap. That region's a logistical hub that's not entirely about friendly fuzzy bunnies. It was established and still is tightly held as an independent and extremely partisan city, at an international port. Like I don't know but I've been told it is a heroin trafficking hub, which is of interest to me as a former trucker, and because of my studies about the marketing and other logistical aspects of black markets.

We worked three more nights and left Salt Lake City at dark thirty cool with a purse fatter by eleven or twelve hundred dollars.

twenty-two.

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We drove through the night, made El Paso by late morning, checked into a motel, and walked next door to eat. After brunch we returned to our room, locked the door and closed the curtains, took a nice, long a.m. siesta, and were back on the road again by nine that evening. We made Austin by sunrise.

Like Phoenix, Austin is a capital city and a particularly political place. At the risk of declaring the obvious: I say for all the bad rap imputed to American domestic policy, the individual state governments avoid their fair share of impeachment frequently and probably unduly. By accommodating local circumspection, Article Four states' rights to a republican form of government can also enable local grift. The writ itself isn't at fault, rather it's the local guarantors' betrayal of public trust. It's all the same to me in the end, but I'm just saying, corruption in public office alters the constituency and geography of any racket.

Ancillary to usury, bondage, and financial coercion, the state agency

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derelict is usually the main troll under the bridge with hammers and velvet paws, although it has been argued that derelict manifestations of the I.R.S. are no slouches either. I'm not making an argument about which is a lesser evil, but mind you, regardless of who is stealing one's lunch money, theft and coercion are perfectly illegal, being unconstitutional and a violation of standard criminal statute. Anyway, seats of government always have a certain gilding about them.

Among other various statements, the political marketing landscape in Phoenix says fantastic things like "rugged individualism" and Austin's boasts of "intergalactic wealth," but they both have their share of urban social issues such as homelessness and sex trafficking, and where right attitude surfaces, class warfare often snuffs it. These state systems of government are imperfect and therefore aren't philosophically ready for wide-open capitalization. Ready or not, however, a devil may care attitude prevails among rats, and rats do persevere as a species.

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The world's ever-booming black markets may boom the hardest in big cities. Usually, any city of notable size truly has an actual standing army deployed with a full blown intelligence operation; a navy is often nice for providing moral backbone. I'll stop short of apologizing for turning a road trip into a study hall for political science, but this shit is important if you want to avoid trouble, such as criminals and crime whether internationally, domestically, or locally. It can be said that all politics are local anyway, or speaking more closely to the vest, all politics are the same. I realized, as soon as I learned why we were going to the East Coast, that the spirit of this lecture suddenly had everything to do with who needed to die in Baltimore never mind Annapolis and I'd never been to either place.

In dreary old south Austin we lodged with a friend of our temporary traveling companion from Salt Lake. After two days and a night we started another twenty-four hour leg of eastbound driving. If I felt there was no reason to get noticed by strangers or anyone else anymore than necessary,

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I thought right.

“We are selling dope.” she said.
“That's our cover story.”

“Oh. Is it good dope?”

“Well, it's Austin dope, if that means anything.” she said. “Two payloads. One of the nice opportunities about doing a burn in a drug deal is, that if it's properly organized, a bad faith politician, public official, or other malfeasant corporate agent gets the business end of the blunderbuss.”

“True.” I said. “And everyone's a politician but few realize it; some are better at the craft than others but being unaware of one's individual political incumbency is no excuse.”

twenty-three.

Twenty-four hours later, we stopped in Nashville to pick up some materials, at a bar called Elvis' Manbird, where the rain persisted as it had since we'd left Austin. Jules went inside and I waited in the car. Five minutes later

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she returned carrying a garbage bag over her shoulder.

“He also offered firearms and we should probably accept.” she said.

“We do have our own.”

“Yes and I'd like to keep mine out of the Chesapeake Bay on her vacation.” she said.

The instructions to pick up the heaters routed us to an unattended unlocked vehicle in front of a grocery store about a mile up the highway from Elvis' Manbird. In the back seat were ample ammunition and four heaters in hard shell cases; a short barreled police issue twelve gauge with a box of high velocity slugs; a tactical two-forty-three with a loaded jumbo-sized magazine; and two forty-five caliber pistols with a box of hollow points. We put it all in the trunk of my car and began our final approach to Baltimore.

“Looks like we're Baltimore County approved.” I said.

“Baltimore is self governing,

Rooster. An independent city.”

“What exactly are we peddling?”

“The dude back there said it was a brick of perfect cocaine and a bundle of diacetylmorphine.” she said. “It's supposed to be bait that's large enough to attract our marks but small enough to mitigate some of our risk exposure.”

“Those are highly subjective considerations.” I said.

“Suicide, after a fashion, is weird that way, yes. All people who set out to kill themselves on purpose with heroin usually take a relatively long time to do it, and there's all sorts of unavoidable yowling and suffering during the course of it.” she said. “The cocaine dance is different aesthetically, but involves similar beatings about the bush. In any case, once attached to its living host, death gets in its own way and taints the quality of life while slowly killing. It takes a lifetime to die. Such creep calls for zen and the art. Anyway it's Mexican Horse and Colombian Blow so who needs Asia.”

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“The commodity governs without a crown.” I said.

“In the morning, I'll initiate our detail with a phone call.” Jules said. “Meanwhile let's make a u-turn for an overnight roadside paradise on the westbound side of this vein.”

We found one and pulled in under the cover of a cold, dusky, and rainy Tennessee October evening. “We could be done with this deal by lunchtime.” I said.

“Right. My call will be a one-way conversation without any bullshit or waiting for a callback.” she said. “I'll make a second one after we're done and that's supposed to be it. From here on out, this will be our standard operating procedure for “citizens' arrests.”

twenty-four.

That night, despite some natural jitters and a little travel fatigue, we enjoyed a sense of steady peace and clear conscience experienced by those true, with pride in one's actions

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dedicated to supporting those principles, to their own hearts.

So far, Jules and my association had won us several travel adventures and new friends, and had gotten us laid in conformance with the political wills of the hegemony of sex and death. And our involvement continued to bring about opportunities for comparably low-risk domestic civil service, the execution of which would soon conclude all of the heavy lifting for the road trip. Next morning as planned, Jules dialed the contact number. She was on the line less than a minute.

“The deal is we have two separate jobs at different locations. With our political cover and diligent oversight for the usual risks, this should be a piece of cake.” she said. “Go-time is in an hour. I'm supposed to call again this evening for the second act.”

The cocaine was the first drop, among the quaint suburban sprawl. Our instructions were to bring the gear to the door, knock, be welcomed and enter the domicile, and be cool during the exchange. Then we'd burn down all the buyers, turn on our heels, and exit.

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I'll grant that the process doesn't sound subtle. I say, such things definitely require a certain artfulness.

“We don't know how many there will be.” I said. “The order begins with whoever actually is looking at us and those who are clearly armed. We'll have the element of surprise but we won't be out in the open, so anyone hiding in the back can either stay hidden, or stand up and take the census.”

“Be cool when we walk out and drive away, when we're most exposed to pot shots or being tailed. Let's try to keep the rear window.” she said.

“And our fucking heads.” I added.

“Mine's itchy anyway. Do you think it would grow back?”

A car was parked in the driveway, which was comforting since it provided some cover for the getaway. Jules put the coke brick into a paper grocery sack. Our affectation was that of matronly, non-dangerous visitors who weren't about to burn someone down in a

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drug deal for the purpose of making a tacit, gratuitous ethical statement that would likely be unappreciated or misunderstood. We each carried one of the complimentary forty-fives so appreciatively donated at or near Elvis' Manbird by some anonymous partisan of ours.

I looped around the block to check for escape obstacles like cul-de-sacs or dead ends. None were apparent. I parked at the curb across the street as to align the car in the driveway between mine and the door of the house. Jules grabbed the bag with the cocaine and we hopped out of the car, leaving the doors unlocked. On a heavy wooden front door I gave a shave-and-a-haircut rap and half a minute later, a man with short salt-and-pepper colored hair opened up. He gestured for us to enter, closed the door behind us, and engaged us with a smile.

“I'm Bob. Nice day for delivering groceries.”

“Hi Bob.” said Jules. “Nice place.”

She stalled a minute to see if

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anyone else might come out, but nobody did. Good and easy, I thought. There was a bit more small talk, and then “anyway, here you go.” she said, setting the bag down on a table in the foyer.

I reached back, slowly drew the pistol from its holster, raised the weapon smoothly and put five rounds into Bob. Jules added another three and we left him on the floor bleeding out. Shutting the front door behind us gently, we walked to the car and drove off.

twenty-five.

The shooting took place inside, the gunshots were muffled without, and we encountered no neighbors emerging to investigate. No one jumped out of any cupboards during the job (believe me, we were looking). As we left, there were no other vehicles on the road in the immediate area, and traffic was light all the way back to the hotel.

“I wonder who he was.” I said.

“More of a curiosity than a wonder I

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say. The song remains the same.” she said. “What's important is who he'll never be, or who he won't be anymore.”

“So the message is the message no matter who reads it.” I said. “I suppose a nice thing about it not mattering who actually receives the message, is we don't have to get everybody as long as we get somebody. That may seem obtuse but it suits me. Do you think there was anyone else in that house?”

“Oh absolutely shit yes. I can think it and do.” she said.

“Concurring. Some silent witness wasn't sold on our brown trouser special of the day.” I said. “If either of us paid enough attention to the press, maybe we could deduce from the political agate what organization just lost a bag man.”

“If, indeed.” she said. “That's someone else's job which is all the same to me.”

We were still holding the heroin bait and our day's work wasn't complete, of course. We brunchted. We

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late lunched. We skipped dinner with the intention of eating after the last job, after we were back on the road. Jules made the second call at dusk's consideration.

“They want us over at the East Channel where I-95 ends, to deal with some shitheads under the bridge near Seagirt Marine Terminal.” she explained.

“At the risk of wrongly overgeneralizing about cocaine dealers having finely manicured lawns and dispositions pacific.” I said. “Please keep in mind this is a heroin deal and heroin dealers are shitty people. In fact they're not people, by my standards. What I'm trying to say is these guys may not be as amicable as Bob.”

“Fuck 'em all.” she said. “So let's go. When we get to the drop, I'll get out and stand right next to the door.”

By the time we approached the East Channel, it was full blown nighttime. She directed me to an exit, a u-turn, and an idling stop in the turnaround

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lane. Two men, a black dude and a white dude, stood waiting on the median.

No others made themselves known in the dim artificial light beneath the highway. Jules stepped out with the dope. Jules positioned herself clear of my fire line. I put a forty-five round into each of the men's chests and they both dropped immediately. She drew, added lead to their heads, and got back in the car, still holding the heroin.

I placed the vehicle into gear and was completing the turnaround when we heard gunshots, which I could also hear connecting with the metal and glass of our vehicle. I hit the accelerator to get us around to the westbound feeder.

I could see bullet holes in the rear glass. She was slumped forward in the seat and didn't answer. The vehicle gathered speed as we cleared the scene.

twenty-six.

Fear is a primal thing which can bedazzle by its sheer surdity. But its

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causality can be known. Understanding the mechanistics of the emotion hinders its ability to stun, as a mind so enlightened recognizes irrational paralysis for what it is. Something as well as fear surfaces amid tragedy, however. I've observed a willingness to transact (with debatable efficacy) revolutionary, universe changing decisions when traumatic events are in the offing. Such desperate oaths sworn must be carefully chosen notwithstanding duress because they can influence one's existence.

I knew the death of Tex was a bellwether for major sea change. Jules' robust spirit was always evident, and her mind and political will were readily accessible to anyone she worked with. Likely due in part to the wearing of her soul on her sleeve, when she died I was encumbered by certain brand new facts. One, I had a new job to do regardless of how I handled the fiasco of the moment. Two, I wasn't alone in my new employment because death doesn't kill the spirit. Certainly not one of such a caliber as hers. *Habeas corpus shazaam.*

I had learned a previous such lesson

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in parting, for example, with the parting of a beloved household animal on New Year's Eve 2012, for example. Moses was an indoor/outdoor cat. Night was approaching and so was a thunderstorm. He slipped out of the kitchen door. I didn't mean to let him out, but the cat will come back when the rain starts soon, I thought. In short of five minutes, heavy rain arrived, and it was likely in those same minutes Mo was hit, attempting to return before a soaking. He didn't get right back and I formed a bad feeling about the situation. We found the body in the morning, in a pile of leaves next to the curb under a large oak tree and lamp post.

But the night before, when I'd gone to bed, I felt him jump in with me, as he did often. He came to say "well, daddy cat, I lost my body but I'm still here. I didn't know where else to go, so I came back home." He's still with me. Moses apologized like any good son for losing himself, and he offered his well-received transcendental companionship in consolation.

Jules had many partisans and confidantes and intimate associates

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because she was an open book and a heavily networked woman. But I believe she considered, at the time of her death, some ethical obligation to retain our vocational association if only because its trajectory remained conveniently intact. Alive or dead she understood, just as I did, that I still needed her political will for our thriving joint venture to continue.

To stay with me was no skin off her back. After all, I was the one still alive. Recall the dictum, we ought not speak ill of the dead for soon shall we join them or so it will seem, serves also at convenience and pleasure beyond the living agency. Jules didn't mind still riding it out with me. In my mind, her continuing patronage was a well-received act of partnership and dedication. It was concerning the quick decisions which I made right after the bridge shootings, in fact, that I first applied the counsel of her wisdom and presence. First I called Stevie, pulling no punches.

“Stevie this is Rick and I have bad news.” I said. She quietened.

“One minute ago, Jules was shot in

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the head by a sniper, and I'm fairly sure she's dead. So if you have any input for me now, go ahead with it. You're the first contact I've made. My next call will be to the shot-caller."

"Rick, she doesn't have really any family, not as such, but there are friends everywhere. And as you know, she's from Austin."

"We're in Baltimore. Austin's a twenty-four-hour drive from here but it's closer than Phoenix." I said. "After I call headquarters, unless they sell me instructions otherwise, I'll drive her to the nearest fire station and provide the bare facts. So I would appreciate it if you would take a quick poll, find out if mail needs to go to Austin or Phoenix, and get back to me real soon."

twenty-seven.

Any unscheduled incoming call from Jules' number was enough to alert our operators of something awry. There was little need for many words, few were spoken, I gave the necessary biological and geographic details without using

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any names.

“Yeah what.” came a voice over the line.

“It's bad news. We lost personnel while exiting the second detail, a bullet through the back glass, head shot. I'm en route to the nearest fire station. She'll go to Austin or Phoenix. By the time I drop her off, I should know which to tell them.” I said.

“Good luck.” The conversation ended. Stevie called back.

“It'll be Austin.” she said.
“Sending her back to Phoenix might blow her cover.”

“Thanks. But I'll be back to Phoenix in a few days, if I can get out of here timely and orderly. You mind?”

“See ya when I see ya.”

Minutes later, I pulled up to the front curb of a fire station, got out, and rang the front buzzer. In a half minute, an EMT/firefighter emerged to whom I gave bare facts.

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“My partner was shot under I-95 at the East Bay during a narcotics co-intel operation.” I pointed at the vehicle. “In the vehicle. I think she's dead.” The medic followed me to the car and searched for Jules' vitals. He looked at the back glass, then at me, and I nodded. “Possibly a bullseye on the pituitary.”

From one of several cargo pant pockets the medic pulled a two-way radio and called for a stretcher. I heard the tone-out over the air dispatching for a possible nine-zero-one gunshot victim at the station. Additional medics came outside in the next half minute. One of them, the on-duty brass, tapped my shoulder and pulled me aside. I gave actionable, minimum logistical info.

“At first, there was some confusion whether she goes to Austin or Phoenix.” I said. “Upon further review, Austin is her destination.”

“I just heard from some people and now they want to hear from you.” said the captain, handing me a wireless phone. The conversation was brief, the

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question was simple. What did I need to get out? In my mind, aside from potential local personality conflicts, the bullet-riddled back glass was the most glaring catch. The person at the other end of the line asked me to return the phone to the station chief.

I never saw my sedan again but I was given a similar vehicle. The extra firearms and contraband bait also stayed in Baltimore. The chief handed me a set of keys from the top drawer of a nearby desk and showed me through a back door to my new ride. I gave no further information about myself and/or Jules, no one asked for any, and I was back at the hotel collecting our few belongings by ten p.m. I left the room key and a nice cash tip on the dresser, loaded our shit into the car, and started west.

That was it. Do you expect me to say, "It wasn't supposed to go down like this?" Shouldn't I? The problem with saying that is it's probably not true. And what about saying, "This was meant to be?" Mustn't it have been fated since it's a historical fact now? Yet, given the same scrutiny, either assessment could be incorrect. Anyway,

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fresh facts of reality were availing themselves as I began a long, solitary haul on I-95.

She must have, forensically, realized something was wrong. At some point, the exact circumstance had become clear to her. It may not have been until after she was already unconscious, although it's likely that she had fairer warning than that. One can sense it coming, you know. It's usually not much lead time, but generally it's enough to reevaluate the local situation, and execute an attempt at correctional navigation. So, she had probably either ignored the warning signs, elected not to say anything, failed to properly correct the matter, or was truly taken by surprise. Maybe the phenomenon was obscured by our involvement in the other killings of the nearby moment; a lesson of instant karma for a teacher of instant karma. Maybe the importance of knowing one's own stink is a key lesson learned.

She's more effective this way. I think she realized it was going down, and let it happen, thereby invoking a terminal advantage for herself, and incidentally for our partnership, and

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even for me individually. She bonded a connection that I could elect to sever but I wouldn't. Human agency readily comprehends the incumbency of universal being, where petty death kills not the soul. Achieving blindness to such reality requires rigorous pedagogy in bad faith. Change is a biological constant eo ipso there is no actual death for the likes of us.

twenty-eight.

I didn't want to return to Phoenix and I didn't have to, but I had no particular place else to go and my stuff was still there. A change of venue wasn't necessarily a perfect magic bullet anyway, I thought, since I wasn't a short-timer in this game anymore. When commitments become convictions, people's karmic awareness grows and the realization weighs heavier that every sell-side has a back-side.

Self-delusion isn't part of a genuine solution for anything usually, so one should attempt to reconcile personal experience with assessments of a more universal nature. I felt lucky

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to have the opportunity to reflect upon the world and my situation, and the realizations proceeded as I drove. I began thinking of the earth as a sarcophagus. Jules had gotten herself killed, but I was the one buried alive. When trapped inside of a fucking grave, does it matter whether one is on the sunny side, the north end, or at whatever relative position? I propose to you that it does not. Hell, she was free, for which she'd get no negative citation from me, but the situation tilted my overall consideration of things toward the more vividly unforgiving.

I mulled over the wisdom of driving back to Austin first. Under the circumstances, I judged that what I did with my time henceforth would be more important than where I did it. But with that kind of outlook, one's relationship with geography becomes almost harshly utilitarian, notwithstanding that a location's philosophical practicality has much to do with its aesthetic.

“Well, Tex, what's your preference?”

Nighttime highways bring me peace

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where no glaring foreign sun overheats my brains. Also, it was nice to be moving because transience, regardless of direction, is inspiring for the writer in me. Buffalo. Buffalo we are. Coyotes. I rode along on my metal horse, talking to the ghosts of old Moses the Transcendental Cat and Tex the Bane of Barristas while that sonvabitch V.F.W. sun scorched some other section of the back forty.

“I hope it doesn't spoil your fun beyond the wall of sleep, but maybe someone should stand in for your actual mass per volume.”

I didn't want to go to Texas, or back to Florida either. I'd go to Phoenix but it wouldn't be practical to stay long. I continued to bear her standard, so, respectfully, I wasn't wanting to haunt the chapel. I knew my decision about where to go next would come soon. I'd work a little, save a little, gather my shit, and leave. Maybe the Rocky Mountains were the answer, I thought. How about Denver?

I set the dashboard radio to amplitude modulation and dialed in a proper all-night talk program, which

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always reminds me of the days, in-between college attempts, of my working as a graveyard-shift pizza driver. The topic of discussion for the hour was redheaded witches. Forty-eight hours later, I made the Phoenix city limits, by which time I was dead set on the Mile High City.

I considered locking myself in my apartment and sleeping for a week, but after a day and a night of downtime followed by a trip to the gym, I drove over to Jules', Stevie's, and Queenie's condo. Stevie knew it was me and had the door open before I finished knocking. She'd received a wire for a sum of money from Jules' probated estate, with instructions to distribute it evenly among the roommates and me. It was a large sum as far as I was concerned, amounting to about twenty-five-thousand dollars apiece.

“I'm moving to Denver.”

“OK. We have people in Denver.”

twenty-nine.

I prepared for new digs and gigs in

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with a little help from our network. It could've taken me two moons to get turned around and back out of town, but it didn't. It took about ten days instead. Time was of the essence.

On the back side of Jules' transaction with the reaper was a pressing matter, an upswing stemming from our absolution of cocaine Bob and the two horse dealers. Namely, I had a surplus credit with the hegemon of sex and death. Stevie took notice of the extra credits, so she felt it was important that I do it in her butt while standing in the bathroom with Queenie watching. Jules wouldn't have had it any other way, in fact her commencement had upped my overall credit ratings on such accounts among various hegemon. Though not necessarily in the sense of deadline restrictions, there is a timeliness factor for matters of sex and death, respecting general temporal awareness during key moments, in which failure to take timely action is catastrophic.

Also, Queenie swallowed the whole thing which I'd been careful not to defile with soap since beginning my relations with Jules. She was also

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driven to drink the rest of my decorations directly off Stevie's lieutenant. Then, the two fair women made sweet love to each other.

October lingered. Halloween greeted me in Denver. I set out towing the Ford I'd obtained in Baltimore behind a rented moving truck. Snow met me halfway, making a nail-biter out of the Wolf Creek Pass. I could have gone south of the mountains by way of New Mexico's section of the Continental Divide, but where's the logic in that, when there's a high mountain pass alternative? The Rockies speak to me from anywhere, but it's always nice to actually see the family in person. The flat lands are also talkative, I wouldn't sell them short. Although they lack the impressive reach demonstrated by the mountains, the lower lands of the desert southwest are shallow seas of future and ancient epochs with a strong local presence due to the metaphysical attributes of bodies of water.

I began settling into the Mile High City and my new apartment. Luckily, there was a diner-slash-coffeeshop and a politically British pub next door.

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My proximity to these tables was no accident; I credited Jules' very grace, Stevie's clerical support, and general serendipity. Jules' spirit kept me company with all due presence, but a new driver was in order. Of filling such positions vacant, the ethical considerations were imminent. Such reincarnations, when properly contracted, denote the beginnings of true greenfield friendships which reach beyond the scope of legacy heirdom because making a new friend is always a reunion.

For the first few days, I stayed in my apartment to write, read, think, study, and acquaint with the new personal quarters. It was blizzarding anyway. On day four, first I went to the pub, then over to the diner-slash-coffeeshop. I don't drink but the pub was large with a good kitchen and, food-wise, a public house is what it is regardless of who's poisoning whom with ethyl alcohol in any given season. I took a stool at a nook bar, and ordered French fries, tomato soup, and iced tea.

“Hey Rooster.” Came a voice, from a person two spots over. Sticking out of

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a bulky coat and low hat was a head and a mass of red hair. She moved to a seat next to mine.

“Well hey yourself.”

My food arrived. “Here you go, Ricky.” The barkeep said, placing my meal before me. The fries were good, fresh cut, and the soup was perfect for the weather.

thirty.

“Rooster, huh? But you're the red head.”

“Yeah well I don't go around mirrors.” Red said. She had on big clunky glasses, maybe she was farsighted too.

“Soup?”

“Oh yes.” she said. “Perfect for the weather. How does the snow suit you?”

“Like socks on a cock.”

The barkeep sat down across from us

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and sighed grandly, regarding me with what may have been a look of relief. Remembering something in the kitchen, he was off again.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“Poetry. Some oil on canvas. Looking for a new roommate. If I may regard what you're working on, I think this place is in need of part-timers.”

“Lucky.” I said. “Today is the first time I've left my apartment.”

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“Sort of, yes. I'm a writer, mainly prose. I'm a student of history and philosophy, and not a scientist but I do have a recently renewed interest in mathematics. I have been traveling and had no good cause to stop, so I came here. I don't know how long I'll stay. A rolling stone gathers no moss but I'm taking a windbreak.”

“Yes the muse requires forward motion. And travel.” she said. “It's good work to find, I'm grateful to be creative talent.”

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The bar displayed Red's soup.

“Anyway, we can put you on some shifts here starting tomorrow mid-morning.” he added. “Chelsea, your soup, love.”

“Thank you.” she said. “You'll like Denver. I hope you own plenty of plaid.”

“The same to you. I appreciate the hospitality.”

“Mi casa es su casa.”

After we finished the soup, we walked around the block, and off into the dharma. The past was a memory, the future was an idea, and I and Chelsea Red were more than the sum of our parts. Family's family and it's bigger than any individual agent. Importantly also, I and she and we in some newly formed political trinity had moved beyond the capricious grasp of the world's whimsy. Jules' careful treatment had raised me to this enlightened water, although I'd been forever in training for it. My soul was in a robust position. We happened upon a cinema and decided to take a

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treat of the science-fiction/western hybrid film genre.

“If one doesn't date one's friends, one loses them.”

She agreed. After sitting through end credits, we went to the diner/coffeeshop by the Britons' pub where we stayed until four in the morning, drawing on napkins and playing cards and chatting up other nocturnals. Before the sun returned, we walked over to hers and slept side by side in full pajamas head-to-toe, without even holding hands. Believe that.

thirty-one.

“What's my man's name?” I asked, departing for the Briton about ten the next morning and leaving her occupied industriously at one of my typewriters.

“Doesn't matter, they're all expecting you. But Marion, Jack, is who brought us our soup yesterday. I'll catch up with you about eight.”

The front door was the simplest aspect of the Briton's footprint.

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Somewhere in the middle of the house, I found an office where I asked, of a black-shirted dude whose name I didn't catch, after Mr. Marion.

Working at a bar can be an eye opening experience, even for jaded fatalists. It's difficult to forget how badly drunk a major percentage of the population is in the United States, but it never loses its shock value to me. Many but not all bar patrons are drunks, although alcohol by way of its associations carries unethical baggage, and its presence weakens risk pools and ethical baselines remarkably.

In addition to my jaunt as the pizza man during college, I worked in various other restaurant service positions which gave handy background for shift work at the Briton. A nice stream of people visited my nook bar during the lunch rush, overall an amicable crowd among which during that very lunch hour I knew friendships would be made and problems rooted out. The muse was there but I didn't see Jack Marion that day. My reliever arrived at six o'clock.

I reconciled my till and bagged up

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the black, counted my tips and went to the office to square up with the books. That afternoon I walked with two hundred fifty dollars in cash. Leaving, I stopped next door at the diner where I befriended a waitress and entered discussion about the merits of skin ink. Plans were made for us to shop together for new body art. After a little while, I went home to shower away the layer of restaurant film from my skin insofar as that's not impossible.

Surely two is better than one, if you will, or three's better than two but Jules' temperament was more of a kind with the inked waitress' than Red's. While I waited for Red to come poking around, I kept thinking about what exactly I had inherited from Jules. I'd been apprenticed as a sidekick to her enforcement of karmic law, and now I was the principal of the operation. Having a patron like Jules was changing my moxie. Ethical oversight is an obligation which, apparently, makes things less safe. But even if that's true, it should be philosophically irrelevant, beyond possibly improving one's definition of safety. By Jules' example, truth in

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right action is always safer than its absence. And where did it get her? Enlightenment. Transcendental existence. Lifetime dedicated staff, and permanent free room and board.

Red entered without knocking. "You may take a day shift again tomorrow, or you can close if you'd rather." We went back to the diner to draw on napkins and play gin. I watched my peers from a shifting vantage as a squall of justice percolated from a tiny, undefined itch in my mind.

thirty-two.

We counted cards and talked with the diner's many nocturnal creatures. About one in the morning out of the blue with style, grace, and all due respect, Red asked me a question.

"Would you prefer a drop off or pick up?"

"Drop." I said. Call me lazy maybe, but it seemed like a no-brainer to me.

She changed the subject, ostensibly.

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“How many cards do you need?”

One aspect of Jules' philosopher's stone related to preserving the integrity of one's community and among humanity in general. Regarding the implements of keeping the peace in one's world, whether by public inquiry or private investigation, maybe it's helpful to think of it as police work. If not, others may not either, and then the door's wide open for more than just political failure.

The simple truth is, justice is more lucrative than injustice. The buck must stop somewhere, long and tall. That we can obtain the shit in the first place in order to sell it, means that everyone upstream of the particular matter at hand, for one reason or another has passed the buck. Then there came Jules. Then us. Now me. In a bull market. The extent to which my or our reputations preceded me or us, or that specific news of our recent work had reached Chelsea Red and Jack Marion and company, seemed obvious to me based on their having rolled out the red carpet.

The foregoing perspective of justice

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as a community value seems to hold true at least for unpopular criminal activity and society's responses to it. Alternatively, popular criminal activity is a different story. For example, one reason why so-called white collar crime enjoys so many institutional loopholes is because of its relationship with the supply and demand of street crime. Criminal organizations understand this. The most effective lynch-pin for successful racketeering organizations is the occupation of public office. Nevertheless everything has a bottom, and while the intestines of beasts vary in length, what comes out of their ends is always shit.

The free markets respond with a natural luster to the strong supply and demand for cocaine. If the old money does not wish to deal with the logistics of dodgy street level operators then it can buy in bulk, directly from a wholesaler, e.g. through international trade agreements. This is an exception to assumptions that civil transgressions are always of less moral turpitude than statutorily codified felonies. It is a high crime when groups of people, even entire

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continents full of them, are subjugated in order for small rich communities to powder noses without getting hassled by, or syphilis from, the wrong kind of, or incorrectly jacketed, denizen from a lower social class.

Also remember, just because an action is violent doesn't mean it's unjustified. Here I am not, for example, talking about capital punishment where a poor motherfucker sits in solitary confinement for twenty years before an old cuckold finally comes in to shove the prisoner full of cyanide and strychnine as an ancient monster in a collar stares on while jerking off. Historically, capital punishment was considered an act of expedient mercy, but twenty years in prison followed by a publicly fetishized, ritualized execution is something entirely else. When death's due it's to be served promptly otherwise it festers and damages the dharma, with bad karma ensuing.

“I have a tattoo shopping appointment with a new friend during the regular business hours so maybe I'll try out the night shift tomorrow.” I said.

“Yeah, I heard. Her name's Sam Mary.” said Red. “She's on the early shift in the morning. You can catch her when she gets off if you stop by here about noon.”

thirty-three.

We gave up on poker at the decaf diner at four a.m., and there'd be plenty of time for more of that in our bright and gaping future. This time, Red went to her house and I went to mine. When I got home I found a note from her, under the type bar of the machine she'd been using that morning, that read,

“People come and people go but friendship's forever. Show up and work whenever you like. Yours, Red. P.S., Are you getting a dagger or a lady with your torture tattoo? Or both.”

Silly, I thought. That wasn't my card, no more than any other individual one. But for never say never, everyone needs a full deck and the fuller the better. I closed the curtains and worked at my desk until seven, then

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took a second night until eleven. I showered and went out to catch Sam Mary finishing the diner's first shift. She took off her waist apron when I showed up.

“What's up Sam.”

“What's up Ricky. Shall we?” We hit the Denver pavement, breathing Denver air. A ten minute walk later, we were inside a body art establishment of her choosing.

“Are these guys sober?” I asked.

“Yep.”

“Anything specific on your mind?”

“I have an appointment.”

She sat in one of the operating chairs. Off came Sam's pants as the staff made preparations. The doc began to ink a twisting red candy stripe on her right leg. About a third of an inch thick, it spiraled upward from behind the knee to the butt cheek. Another staffer, momentarily idle, offered me some unscheduled chair time. I pulled a notebook from the back

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pocket of my jeans, thumbed to a particular sketch, and handed it over.

“Can do. Where do you want her?”

I gestured, dropped my trousers, and on the back of my left thigh she began an octagonal trump. The priestess of wands.

“Who are you?” I asked Sam, afterward.

“Good question.”

“Answer me.”

“I am here, as are you. Anything more specific than that would be fiction, or pure conjecture bound to circumstantial restrictions. That's the best answer I have. The bonus answer is, now is now.” she said. “You. Who, or what, are you?”

“A thoughtful answer with which I disagree, I say we aren't here and it's not now, our bodies are a contrivance, and this scene is a hustle although the odds are favorable. At least they favor us. How's your credit?”

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“I am a cash-only operation.”

I walked with her, to her apartment where we chilled in her book-filled den and burned incense for the rest of the afternoon. At five I went home and prepared for another shift at the Briton, where I arrived at six-thirty. The evening crowd came and went. There were many food orders that night, and the late crowd reliably resumed its motion about town as the dinner rush settled. Red visited at eleven.

“Your drop is downtown-ish, not far from here, actually. Go tonight if you're ready.”

“Fine. I'll get to it after I'm finished here, about two-thirty.”

“I have a briefcase for you. It'll be in the middle office, locked, and here's the key. You can pick it up when you cash out.”

She pulled a stainless steel key from her blouse pocket, gave further instructions about the job and its location, and sat in my bar until one. I tidied up, when the Briton closed at two, cashed out, and retrieved the case

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from the middle office as instructed. Red's directions led me to the parking lot of a shopping center ten minute's drive from my apartment, so I walked home to get my car. While I was there, I also picked up my single-action forty-four magnum and holstered it under my coat. Those small hours were far colder than could've been expected of any late October morning in Phoenix, certainly, although Phoenix nights are pleasant.

All of its commercial tenants kept regular daytime business hours so the parking lot was empty at three in the morning. On the west end of the lot, halfway between the street and the store fronts, was a car fitting the description of my contact vehicle. I parked two spots away from it.

At my apartment, I'd checked the briefcase's contents. It contained three kilo bricks of cola. I sat for a minute in my vehicle, letting some calmness permeate me and my scenery before proceeding. As I walked up, a person waved at me from the driver seat of the contact vehicle. Down the window rolled and I handed over the briefcase. The individual set it on

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the passenger seat without opening it. There were no words. I drew the forty-four and shot the stranger in the middle of the skull, from the back of which brains splattered the passenger seat.

thirty-four.

I'd not been briefed regarding the identities or affiliations of the person who I just killed. Typically I wouldn't be and I did ponder briefly at mud's web of life up to the final cut. But someone had an actionable opinion about the late buyer or else I wouldn't have been there, and that level of certainty had to be good enough for me under the circumstances. I knew the Denver Police Department could make better sense of the situation if they came upon the briefcase filled with mister white, which I left on the seat, covered in brains.

Meanwhile, if this was not what Red and Jack Marion had in mind, then I don't know what to tell you. Of course it had to be, and as far as I was concerned, it was. In addition to my passing regard for the deceased buyer,

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I was curious after my unknown colleagues on the sell side of the job, like an ad hoc jury of my own peers, as it were. That's civics. It's how civil action works. Which means that public agency involves the girl next door, and grandma, and the little league coach, and farmer brown's wife as much as it was or is you and me and the mayor or anyone else. It's self government. American democracy.

I realized that I was out of order in not having Sam with me, though. Arguably. Working alone could be good for a higher profile assassination, but not necessarily for common street sweeping. Well, it's all street sweeping really, but part of my point is that not having a quorum at hand can even be thought of as a disservice to the citizen getting the bullet. I'm still new at this, I thought. Knowledge grows with experience.

That night's job was a new and different sort of transaction for me. Not so procedurally, but aesthetically and karmically. And not that it was bad karma, but it was different karma than if Jules had been with me, or even Sam. I knew there was probably some

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good reason for omitting Sam on the detail, because I make steady conscious and subconscious efforts at preventing undesirable philosophical accidents. But since I'd begun carrying surplus credit with the hegemony of sex and death, chances were it wasn't any discrepancy on those accounts. One remarkable difference between bringing and not bringing Sam along that night could've been that it wasn't necessary. It may have been redundant, for example. Or her company might have resulted in the occlusion of some key personal learning experience for me.

I decided not to go knocking at Red's or Sam's door in the hour following my service of death's process, hence a selfish sort of aspect to arguments favoring a quorum on the job. I went to the diner instead, for the warmth and regularity of the night crowd's card playing, chess, drawing, writing, eating, and drinking espresso. I was grateful to bump into Sam, of course.

"I didn't want to bug you while you were trying to close, so I waited here." she said. "How was your first night shift?"

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“Well it's wasn't my first night shift ever, but it was fine thank you. Although there is high ambient exposure to barroom trivia and I'm unsure if that's a good thing.”

An old-fashioned analog snow was coming down outside. Through the double-paned windows we watched the falling flakes, large as muffins.

“And your new candy stripe?”

“Feels bloody good. Speaking of cards, let's.” She winked and shuffled out a tarot set. Red used standard *Bicycles* but Sam was an historical purist. “Such talents fade without use.”

“I've always wanted to draw a deck of my own, however the writer's muse can be selfish.” I said. “Although I make no formal complaint on that measure, and it's no excuse for lack of diversity in one's creative output.”

“Maybe you should make a set of runes. That wouldn't take as long.”

As we conversed, my awareness of

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time's passing heightened. Time of a certain kind. How long would I be in Denver before the wanderlust struck again? Such preoccupations come with the territory, I thought. Since a diversity in setting is important to the living muse, domestic impermanence is an occupational hazard for writers.

For example, I may define the amount of time worth spending in any given area as, the minimum period it takes me to develop an authoritative prosaic perspective of it. Some locations give more than others, of course. I'm learning not to overspecialize, keeping in mind that location is a variable factor. The time it takes for a given writer to make a place varies. For example, one could probably spend a lifetime in Baltimore without exhausting the full exploration of its myriad nooks, crannies, and jewels but that city gave me a life's work in a few hours.

"I usually walk but tonight I drove." I said.

"Yeah I heard. You ready?"

thirty-five.

As I've related up to now, our self appointment as karma police evolved into efforts at intercession and right action among the narcotics black market. Then Jules was killed and I took up her mantle, among other old habits.

However.

The hatcheting of dealer-managers might send a strong message to administrators, but a greater complexity was looming larger after my first detail in Denver.

Access to capital gives political protection to marketplace operators. For example, if they lose an agent, a new person can be put into the breach to resume the dirty work. This is an injustice that's occluded amid complicated scenarios. A complication of bureaucracies, but not individuals working alone as in Jules' barista incident for example.

I was thinking maybe I could circumvent such an inefficacy in our methodology, by taking a harder look up

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a command chain. In doing so, I could expect to be on my own, research-wise and logistically. But there would be tacit support from my current associates and from the transcendent and sublimely watchful Jules. I really wished she were there to consult in the flesh, nevertheless, good faith is one of the keys for transmigration of the soul.

Apathy is an excellent painkiller. Usury and other such crimes in the offing don't drive anyone crazy if nobody gives a shit. I can pay a tax and remain objective, assuming taxes assessed in good faith are the appropriate way to pass the buck. With such a perspective among the greater marketplace of ideas, beyond the trappings of petty theft, doors begin to open for truth and adventure of a higher order. It's a bull market where opportunity knocks when one's brain is not clouded by rat poison and money.

Despite my argument that leadership presents more economical targets, I still entertain the notion that different fruits of the same poison tree are easily interchangeable. But, with all due caveats about fact

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checking, the corporate media and popular electoral politics may serve no better purpose than to finger outstanding greaseballs overdue for fine tuning.

Prior to statehood, the only people brave enough to self-identify as agents of the early Arizona territorial government seem to have been train robbers, and it somehow led to today's Arizona prostitutes who wear actual price tags on themselves. Imagine my dismay, as a square, when I discovered that. Such is the nature of running a railroad. Alternatively, the earliest administrators of the state of Colorado were squatting mountaineers, who perhaps set a precedent for contemporary Denver's apparently more discrete prostitutes. Or maybe, in large measure, I am totally incorrect in these assessments because key information has been lost in translation. I'm just telling you what I think I saw. Anyway, for various reasons, I had a notion that if someone were to choose a city in which to start a business for the purpose of greasing shitball politicians, Denver could be a tenable market.

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Incidentally, in Denver the sex workers were in place, or, well, the ones supporting the business class were, but they were more discrete than the ones in Phoenix, in my view. In Phoenix, the freelancers at least, seemed to have done a terrible job, as a class, at researching their client demographic. Or maybe not and I was just in the wrong place. I have trouble with price tags on anything, because economics is such a politically charged issue for me.

Meanwhile, in the pre-dawn hours of our infinite youthful adulthood, Sam and I drove home from the diner. I looped by the shopping center lot where I had eliminated someone's underling earlier that morning, and thought again about how the message might be interpreted by the target organization, if it was understood by anyone.

“Do you have any political aspirations.” I asked.

“That depends. Theoretically yes. But practical speaking, I'd be asking how a given campaign is worth the trouble in a technical sense.” she said. “Because remember, a certain

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kind of peace can be found in the cold logic of apoliticality, be it right or wrong. Nevertheless, politics is important and family is forever, and vice versa, therefore you and I are like an old married couple in real ways. In the most positive sense, of course. We're all professionals here, and it happens that our political disposition is partially owing to your reputation's preceding you. You're in full comeuppance and I'm here for you just as you are for me. That's how it's been throughout the history of the universe. Park over here on the street under that tree and come on upstairs with me. We'll take a nap. I'm on afternoon shift today.”

“Me too, I suppose.”

I parked and we went up. Unlike Jules, Stevie, and Queenie, she lived alone, like Red.

“Are today's tattoos enough to accommodate *quid pro quo* activity for us right now?” she asked.

It was a question worth examining. Tattoos do involve blood.

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“Probably.” I said. “Even if it weren't, I should have sufficient credit to cover any odd fart.”

thirty-six.

It is one thing to fix assholes in dark parking lots and under bridges. That's simple, more or less. Identifying some public figure or official worth fixing presents a more nuanced (if potentially more entertaining) operation. Underneath a bridge, the asshole is easy to find and less prevaricating. But in a political arena or public eye occurs far less straight-shooting than in sewers, and these realms' overlapping doesn't improve their standards. Nevertheless, inexact fuzzy data are how come tea leaves are readable.

“Politics.” Sam echoed me. “Why? Are you going international?”

“It could come to that, keep it in mind. Although, because all politics are local, I should probably start at home.”

“Nobody ever said we couldn't be

polyvocational.” she said.

“I don't want to spoil any existing relationships.” I said. “Anyway, I suppose the local news is as good a place as any to start. Otherwise, I'm open to any inside info you can dig up.”

“Actionable intelligence is actionable intelligence, work's work, and I don't mind helping you under one condition.”

“What?”

“Sexual favors.” she said. “Right now.”

“I do feel like I've earned it today. Do I remind you of anyone?” I said.

“Yeah you do. Otherwise I wouldn't have signed on for this gig.” she said.

We spent the rest of the morning on her giant couch. Later at the Briton, commencing my afternoon shift, I actually turned on and paid attention to the television, which is a rare

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occurrence. I am so sorry but I did, because I was wondering what the hegemony of the slobbering mass media dog, in all of its worm-covered glory, might deliver to me.

Some guy came in and sat at the bar. "What are you watching?" he asked.

"Good question. I'm trying to figure out who should get the axe. So to speak."

The topic interested him, judging by the look on his face. He ordered soup. I watched the screen with a newfound interest. The program was a daytime talk show out of Los Angeles, featuring guests chatting around a table on the subject of climate change. The panel included an I.T. entrepreneur, a U.C.L.A. professor emeritus, and a representative from a non-governmental organization.

thirty-seven.

Viewing that conversation about climate change, among the electric glory hole intelligentsia, sent me down my old faithfully well-traveled path of

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questioning why there are so many people on this third rock from the sun, and why I'm not the only one here. Professor McKenna put it simply that "rocks people," as apple trees apple. In all its brevity, the statement is true enough. But before I slip into some perfunctory apology for having solipsistic fantasies, it's worth pointing out that, in light of the insect- and plant-like (and rock-like) nature of the hybrid that's the human diaspora, such philosophical questions aren't fanciful.

There are civil ways to resolve large scale people problems like planetary overcrowding. I'm not talking about genocide, whether or not by its common and popular modes of the weak nuclear force or poisonous gas. There are subtler and pleasanter ways to apply metaphysics. I'm not saying that I do or don't have all the answers, but I am saying that right answers can exist. The perspective of an endlessly optimistic engineer is the only tractable collective attitude for a society who wishes to thrive, persevere, and solve complex problems. And it's never too late to mend.

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As a consolation prize for not clearing the cull, the accommodating of egomaniacs to bear heraldry and titles which license their lordship over crime and filth, isn't part of any thoughtful, real solution. Neither is any meat market for intergalactic whore mongers. Where there's a flesh market, there's cocaine and that's where I may forego the weak force and advocate application of the strong nuclear force, you know, gravity. Local Newton. Bosons. An object in motion has a tendency to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. High velocity. In the end, cocaine seems to have that effect on people. When regularly under the influence, it seems too good not to kill for.

Planet Earth Sol Charlie is getting way too crowded with humans (again), and the very intergalactic nature of the human genome is a key aspect of the challenge. At such a small-scale local level, one hand doesn't know what the other's doing. Local cohesion is needed for dealing with problems like overcrowding and resource conservation on any given terrestrial platform. Demography, for example, is important in this matter for the purpose of

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determining who's who, and where, for a functional ward system that protects the progeny regardless of the faults of its ancestors.

Someone should invent hats, and then everyone could simply stack the generations on top of one another *per aspera ad astra*. My keenness on this issue has developed partly as a result of my working "undercover" or "embedded" for too long as an investigative reporter, which has led me to conduct too much people-watching.

As horrible as it is, racial or gender coercion or discrimination in bad faith, is fairly obvious to behold, forensically. But the thickness of general improvidence can be even more snowblinding. "Creeping malaise" usually and appropriately is a phrase turned in a context of economic dialog, as economics is applied social politics. It's a nice way to say that the world's full of ignoramuses, mostly, who deserve to die as quickly as possible before wasting any more air. But as an ethicist, the stupidity of others can become one's own problem, easily. Unfortunately.

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Responsible action regarding people (or political) problems on our (or my) rock obligates us (or me) to conduct a witch hunt for which it can be said there are two main rights of way: the front door and the back door. For me to elaborate on this point sufficiently could take forever, so for now I'll just remark, that everyone has a set of applicable skills and I request that you please use them for the sake of us all. Moving forward, as events occur, I will try hard to give color analysis and credit where it's due, about skills and techniques for life's doors.

“Pretty good fookin' soup.” said the guy at the bar.

“It's on the house.”

thirty-eight.

The front door involves the world of first sight. Qualia. You know, ontological stuff. Appearances, labels, words, colors. Outward nature. The butler with the broomstick in the bedroom, and long division. But the back door (these are my terms, and

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they must mean something different at some other ladies' bridge club), ain't linear. The back way is an animal hunt, and it may involve cute furry kittens but that's typically not what people hire me for. The tools of back door investigations include instinct. Back is the path by which, using the sense of smell, one differentiates between two business executives who are identical, except that one's crooked and the other isn't. It's not necessarily harder than front-of-the-house work, just different.

The back door is how one finds unadvertised or unknown loopholes. It's witch hunting not in the sense of targeting bloodsucking nature, but by the more general interdiction of derelictions that manifest about the living. People aren't patently evil, but may have a definite hand in becoming that way. Over time, they can become evil although then they aren't really people anymore, rather only part of a nature that's set for culling. Such essence is dispatched as a point of order.

The promising child they once were can be revisited, but whatever darkened

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future lines happen to be involved are finished. The tree-like nature of connections among space, time, and living allows for this remedy. The job is to seal the terminal end of a path into nowhere and darkness, and pipe the original individual spirit back to some historical restore point. Regardless of specific procedure, flushing out sleepy evil from daily life requires a certain illumination.

The reason I bring all of this up, is that hunting for dirty politicians involves investigative nuances popularly thought to be occult. Interlopers aren't well received by politically deft creatures because of the real threat that strangers and the unknown pose to the efficacy of conspiracy. Hence no timely front-door inquiry can be relied upon entirely, because operators as bureaucrats in advantageous positions of leverage, are sheltered within a partisan cottage industry. But they're predictable. Real live politicians must move about to go to the toilet, or to dinner.

When it's swimming nearby, one can feel its draft. Leviathan is squeezable but it's not easy and makes *Jaws*

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look like a pussy. Angling efforts often leave its pursuers holding no more than a handful of fur and feathers; like a wrecked politician in the quail bag, for example, while the actual source persists. It must be a part of human nature, that we combat such agency for our own sake. Recognizing humanity's weaknesses is key to their reconciliation. Because the work requires some minimum distance, it can be done from nearly anywhere or when, hence the game-like nature of the task becomes obvious.

Red visited me at the Briton about two that afternoon, the first time I'd seen her since the parking lot detail. Still trolling about, I switched the t.v. over to C-SPAN. She gave me a quizzical glance.

"Just canvassing the public sphere for personnel issues." I said. "Civic duty, you know."

"You are quite the public advocate, Rick." she said.

"How's your side of the high life, Red?"

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“Pretty quiet. Are we on for cards at the diner tonight?”

“Yeah buddy. If you don't mind, stop by my apartment first. Could you hand me that newspaper, please?”

A true quid pro quo economy can be most egalitarian. Profiteering is a kind of racketeering. Avarice is a chain to hell. I was increasingly determined to find the right someone screwing about on the public coin in bad faith so I could sew them up in a snare of their own making. Then, maybe we could take our show to the high seas. The third shift arrived at seven and I walked, carrying my newspaper, with a tip total as robust as the first day's.

thirty-nine.

A half hour after I got home, Red arrived.

“So what's on your mind?” she asked. I beckoned her over to my kitchen table.

“Frankly, there is much work to be

done.” I suggested, showing her a photo in the newspaper. “But for this detail, maybe Sam's too green to come along by herself.”

“I'm listening.” she said, looking at the photo. “Who are these assholes?”

“They're candidates for state and federal office, all campaigning for the election next month. They're meeting downtown tonight at the Sheraton for a swanky partisan fund raising dinner.” I said, pointing at one of the faces. “This particular guy is director of a corporation with a multi-billion-dollar market share of global coffee, and incidentally, therefore, international cocaine too. He also has oil and gas assets in the Piceance Basin and he happens to be running for governor. The man isn't predicted to win the popular vote but there are many uses for political campaigning, beyond popularity.

“How do you feel about the futures market of the South American cocaine crop influencing policy in colorful Colorado?” she asked.

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“For what it's worth, I'm against it in every way. His incumbency is hereby remanded to yesterday's committee.” I said. “And we're working late tonight. If we're staking out that hotel, we should leave right now.”

“Let's go by the pub and stock up on sandwiches.” Red said. “And then to the diner to pick up Sam.”

I had gotten into the action with Sam and Red, in part, as an effort to invoke Jules, or honor her, or sate her hungry wandering spirit, or grow onward, or something. For the moment, I was still in violation of one of my governing ethical modes, but the matter was easily corrected; If I expected to retain my incumbency for Jules' favorable preternatural wardship, and to reconcile equanimity among the marketplace of the universe, then I needed to update my vesting guaranty with the hegemony of sex and death. Even dead people don't work for free.

We gathered our coats (and I gathered a rifle), loaded ourselves into my car, stopped at the pub for provisions, then picked up Sam from the diner. It was eight-thirty when we

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pulled into the hotel parking lot, and the fundraising wing-ding inside was already begun. In a more perfect world, we would've been there in time to see our man enter the building. Red said she knew the kitchen staff and went inside to do reconnaissance.

She returned with actionable information a half hour later. "They all came in by that big main front door, and they'll leave by it afterward, at ten o'clock. None of them have rooms booked here, at least not under their real names."

I appreciated that. I wouldn't even have to get out of the car. The three of us sat there about ninety minutes, eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on jalapeño sourdough bread, drinking San Pellegrinos, and watching the hotel's front door. The parking lot was reasonably lit, though it was nookish and shadowy and the weather was gray and wintry. We were about twenty yards from the main front entrance and situated to allow ourselves a clean exit from the lot without u-turns or other potentially calamitous bullshit. Next to me in the seat, the barrel of my loaded thirty-aught-six poked down

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into the floorboard. Patiently we waited, watching.

Eventually, Red called it coming down: "Here comes the party." And so it did. A group was trickling out at a lazy after-dinner pace.

"There." she said. "Right there he is, putting on a red scarf."

Quietly and quickly I put that barrel out the window and braced it against the side mirror and set the cross-hairs on the head of the strolling cocapolitico.

forty.

I squeezed gently. The oily coffee trader hit the pavement like water dumped from a five gallon bucket. I slid the rifle back into the floorboard, and put the vehicle in gear. The shot turned heads but triaging the casualty took immediate precedence and no one properly spotted us, evidently. As we drove away, a crowd had gathered around the fallen man. We entered traffic and re-entered the thoroughfare.

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“Well, doobie-doobie-doo.” I said, after several moments of silence from my passengers.

“Take the car home and let's walk to the diner.” Red said.

“Who was that?” Sam asked.

Instead of making a beeline for the diner first thing, the three of us went inside my apartment to cover our action with the relevant hegemony. Nobody was coming after us for that job, nevertheless the time was now for housekeeping, and the diner could wait twenty minutes until rocks off. At that, I and Red gave special attention to Sam's holiest of holies. In fact, we even added a little green tea. There is no cause to get all mushy and long winded after a good sniping. Maybe during a camping trip it's fine to drag out the process for a lunar cycle. But there's never good cause for a full-length production when veggie smoothies and a nice game of gin are waiting.

It was snowing a few flakes. En route by foot to the diner for cards,

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drawing, and discussion of truth and beauty among friends and strangers, the time was eleven-forty-five. We sat. Sirens, passing by, were heard every so often. Sam's arcane deck replaced Red's moderns at two in the morning, and we made use of its holistic assessments.

A key aspect of scrying anything, is keeping in mind that things are what they are, not what they aren't. Auspicious and optimistic spreads that morning tracked our party of three, happily continuing along current trajectories of truth and justice, avoiding the harmful trappings of the profane world. For us and the likes of us, the general indication was of useful and successful sailing, even if it wouldn't always be perfectly smooth. Another useful thing to remember about many arcane decks is, because the card faces often are so "busy," one can leave a table spread for a long while and new associations will keep manifesting.

The hour of six o'clock beset us and our fellow patrons. On our way out, I picked up a freshly delivered edition of the *Post*. We went to Sam's and

slumbered.

forty-one.

An unmarried write-in candidate runs for precinct committee, and before the general election arrives, accusations of spousal abuse are a real possibility. But, whack a handful of narcotics traffickers and a politically active neo-capitalist, and even the fucking mailman forgets your name.

That autumn in the Mile High City, it was obvious that the hegemons of sex and death weren't the only ones active about the cosmogony. That many people are in the service of the wrong demigods was also increasingly apparent. Such widely misappropriated allegiance and support-in-kind can generate undesirable prevailing winds.

Many people are so intoxicated and confused, they don't realize the dystopian world around them can be fixed. Granted, this little world is cosmologically rural and the nature of backwater colonies is what it is; and the issue of class is often unavoidable, daresay even in the United

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States where antiquated social contracts grant quarter to ne'er-do-wells. With sufficient political support, sure, one may go comfortably and unmolested for a night on earth. But if not, then your miserable forgotten death in a slag heap mud pit probably pleases whoever happens to live upstairs from you, as long as they also get their pound of flesh. Such are houses and so goes civility in the context of striving and desperation, regardless of the specifics of a governing writ or ideology.

But anyway, the man who died in front of the hotel, well, his politics and business among the economic and cultural strata are commonplace against the backdrop of a terrestrial backwater. His own people didn't seem to give a shit, and his death even compared with Jules' with its general lack of impact upon the subject's continuation of daily business and keeping up appearances. Death can be a good career move. Both the agent and the entourage may continue operating, with enhanced second sight.

Anyway, it is taught that the removal of such politicians, like so many

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rotten teeth, is a high crime. But crimes against entire planets full of people, resource rape, caste lodging and subjugation, and systematic plowing-under of populations fully intellectually capable of governing themselves properly, that's supposed to be alright. I say, it's worth the effort to find out exactly who is teaching such a contradictory, unamerican lesson and at the end of that research rainbow I guarantee criminals. Point out that taxation without representation is illegal, and an attorney will respond from the District of Columbia to say otherwise, regardless of the litigant's location or local crop. Shoot a politician good or bad and nobody cares, but threaten a bureaucrat's usury-based salary in hell and you'll be bent to will under a gun.

Autumn turned to winter and we never heard anything personal about the gubernatorial candidate's demise. The elections came and went. The snow was nice. I watched the flakes fall during my afternoon shifts at the pub, and at night through the big front windows of the diner.

I reflected upon the various

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hegemons represented in the faces of
Sam's tarots. Avarice. Vice.
Gluttony. Licentiousness. Beauty.
Peace. Love. Knowledge. War. Hate.
Confusion. Death. Fate. Doom.

The events in Baltimore grew ever more distant in my rearview mirror. Jules was relatively quiet that winter from beyond the grave. I mean, she was still present, but there'd been sufficient time for her personality to integrate organically with Sam's and Red's. The situation gave an interesting reductionist perspective of the human spirit, reinforcing the understanding that we are all one, in the broader context, over time. The D.N.A. code says the same thing in a different way. Historically, of course, Jules the woman was still with me, or us, and she was as institutionally willing and capable of helping as ever. By most people she channeled easily.

Our general operations were underwritten by her spiritual equity and in conformance with her political will. In my world, Jules was at peace insofar as it was possible for her to be, which can be thought of as one of

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several accurate ways to define death, among so many of its poorer definitions. For posterity, lives are on the record, and the living are put upon with the temporary task of carrying on with the infinite conversation by which those who are at peace can be poured like so much ambrosia.

forty-two.

At some point, if proceeding correctly, a philosophical higher ground prevails that's tantamount to ego death. At such an end, I was experiencing the unexpected thrill of being concurrently dead and alive, because 1) death had proven to be a transcendental experience, in my view, and 2) I'd walked into a career that involved killing, whereby within just a few weeks I went from unwitting accomplice in a random assault on a barista, to an over-the-edge pro bono vice cop.

I was amazed that the day-to-day implications of my very serious new career, that was blossoming after years of suffocating existentialism and

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ethical preponderance, were so surprisingly placid and bracing. Yes, among the infinite flux, this freshly undiscovered country was simply another sea change in the due course of infinite change, but the increasing ubiquity of such moments was my zen. Living a life of actual heroic first-person live action drama while wearing the shoes of the heroes of truth, love, and justice doesn't seem to impress people. But that should be read as an indictment of society, not against truth and love.

Encountering such a comeuppance, one realizes the privileged work of greasing shitballs occasionally in good faith could go on forever. But that potential perpetuity or timelessness begs philosophical questions about the efficacy of the effort. In other words, could I really go on forever weeding out bad apples, yet never witness any correlated improvement of civilization? Talk to some retired first responders or maybe some ex-monastics about it because those groups bear a certain level of hard-earned nihilism.

The quandary of “running to stand

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still" delineates fate and free will, therefore it gives some description of fundamental aesthetic or metaphysics. Quantum theory and Brownian motion notwithstanding, digital physics and cellular automata are facts of life. When a totality of life's circumstances are considered over a long period, breakthrough deductions can be made. For example, it's clear to me now that life is a game. Or maybe it's better to say that it always can be, often is, and rarely isn't so why not.

I don't intend cynicism. Change can be directed, people can be made comfortable, darkness can be dispelled and should be. The point is, universal change is subtle if not slow, so under the circumstances it follows there's always more work to be done despite the continuation of nonsense. Local benefit can be achieved as a result of one's efforts, though local implementations can be dramatic enough to distort any firsthand account. These circumstances brought about a certain elective aspect to my new work content. Again, the world is very game-like, which belies its construction and nature.

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Such a confluence of earned wisdom, while it is enlightening enough to cause deep change and movement, is not a surprising turn of events. Change is said to be the only constant, after all. An important reason such judgment is so becoming is, these realizations are intuitive and cogent answers to questions long studied by all thinkers. Findings like these are the whole point of such searching, and they are part of what makes lifelong quests for knowledge worthwhile.

What to do now? How to avoid the onset of complacency? What of ethical questions about killing people who need to die in the local sense, but the job is arbitrary, capricious, or irrelevant in a more universal context? Such variant contingency requires an intermediary; dear Jules. That's approximately the narrow line we were walking, to operate without imperiling ourselves with the hegemony of relevance.

"We could leave the states, yeah?"
Red said.

"Without the home field advantage, would we be able to function with the

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necessary impunity?" I wondered.

"Maybe. It depends on where we go." Sam said. "But a rolling stone gathers no moss."

"A move gives me more places to call home, and more places about which to write plausible nonsense regarding what I am and where I've been." I said. "Just as painters need a change of scenery, eh Red?"

Sam, as a poet and esotericist, gave no straight answer about her muse pursuant to local geography or cartography. "But I tell you one thing. We aren't going to fucking Mexico." she said.

"Well, maybe we are." I said. "Never say never. You're the reader of tea leaves, if they say go to Ciudad Juárez, you know, then we're going to Juárez."

"I think Mexico's too close." she said.

"Well, this is a democracy and with the C.I.A. as our travel adviser, we'll go where we're welcome." I said.

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forty-three.

The solstice came. Allover me. By the New Year, Red and Sam and I were jointly lodged, sharing the household duties. The dynamic in our home reminded me of the focused bustle of Jules', Stevie's, and Queenie's place back in Phoenix. Sam was an evergreen of warm vibrations, everything in her draft and field was brilliantly alive and thriving. She maintained a large reef aquarium, nineteen ferns, and wild-eyed, wise vegan cats as big as baby bears with colorful bushy coats, who requested in plain English to be fed thrice daily. She was alive, an excellent specimen of life. Nor were Red and I any slouches around the garden but living with a gem like Sam was a windfall. She also wrote constantly, either scribbling or typing away, and she painted with oil to prevent writer's burnout.

I kept a pulse on the weather, meanwhile keeping up with my writing and studies. All three of us were at peace, healthy, and in flux, thriving alive. One can always revisit such

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times in the heart but the straightaways of life are just another part of a never ending journey. Paths easily traveled allow for making good time, we make hay while the sun shines.

We worked our respective shifts at the diner or the pub, spending much of our time counseling drunks and bankers, praying for bums, and playing gin. I felt half-retired, frankly. After the hotel job, there wasn't more "work" for the remainder of that year. Mid-January, Red came up with a heroin deal that Sam took the lead on, and the gig went off just fine, she basically burned down some dude from the Midwest with a sawed-off shotgun in the back office of a filling station near the airport. We left a duffel bag full of product sitting on the dead man's chest, who by rights had ventured too far from his tri-state area. The duffel bag probably ended up in an a proper evidence locker somewhere. Again we received no argument ensuing the matter from the proletariat.

Regarding our inclination or willingness to go international with our highly pastoral and aesthetic American shit show, we waited in the

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wings for some embassy to pick us up on waivers. Such is maritime law, we weren't complaining, and the speeds of slow boats vary. There is truly no time, of which we had plenty.

Eventually, I think Red got bored, and off she went to the police academy in Fort Collins. She wouldn't be gone long, only six weeks. Meantime, we'd be taking all if any necessary side work from Jack Marion at the Briton. The muse tugged at me, but I argued that the quiet of the season warranted momentary stillness to better hear inspiration. The great American novel can be elusive and skittish in the bush and I was looking for a flock of them so patience was due.

However, patience and quiet was just as likely to bring about nets full of nothing but shitball politicians and other high-dollar bilge. That's alright though, because there's room for everybody in my back pages. One of many open secrets about writing novels is that writing them is more important than reading them. Nobody is supposed to give a shit if anyone reads it (and most won't). Especially not the author. An author works at the

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pleasure of his friends, anyway, not for statistical strangers. Statisticizing people can be dangerous even if it's not done in bad faith. The more the merrier, but for a writer the number one is how success is measured in terms of readership. Two is nice but it's a surplus.

Anyway, while Red farmed herself out to serve and protect, Sam and I closed the gap. The weather was still cold enough to hibernate and skiing was still an option for burning off some of the cash surplus we were recognizing as honest bartenders and waiters. With a little luck along the way, we'd find some coke dealers to shutdown. You people who are still doing blow really ought to stop, particularly those of you who know better. And if you don't know any better, this is process service: Quit while you're ahead.

Sam and I loaded up the car and made for Crested Butte, where we arrived one hour ahead of a three-day blizzard. We lodged at a reasonable chateau and began acquainting ourselves with locals and tourists while fresh powder accumulated without.

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forty-four.

We and our comrades at the lodge were giddy to get up the lift, as the little resort village dug out of the spring storm. We'd spent the past two days chumming it up with an entertaining and valuable assortment of personalities about the lodge, playing cards, sketching, scribbling, and pulling all-nighters to yak with strangers about drama and the profane. But the baby sunshine was beautiful and the powder was lovely and all of the camp were through being cooped up inside.

When visiting a new city, or maybe rehashing my current backdrop, I always ask myself, "where's the mayor?" It's a fair question for weather-related conversation, with fewer possible answers than one might think. Responses can include "the mayor is right here," and "funny you should ask, I'm the mayor, hello," and "I don't know," and "there isn't one," or "it doesn't matter." Anyway, the lodge's owners weren't there. The management was limited to some revolving plurality of lifers and part-

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timers working the bar, where some semblance of leadership should exist, if only of purely symbolic eminence.

Communal lodging in Crested Butte, Colorado, was reasonably peaceable. The wet bar of the main lodge, where we'd weathered much of the blizzard, was running at any hour. For the moment, I and Sam wore the only hat of narcotics interdiction, apparently, and about the common spaces there was but one dealer of any note. The game was teeners and eight balls, small transactions. People were snowed in, after all, and vacationers wishing to drink straight through the bad weather needed something to stand them up.

Despite what our nature, over or under, might have seemed to third parties in the context of the egalitarian marketplace of a jewel among the Rockies, we had no immediate cause for fixing that dealer's wagon with extreme prejudice. Not technically. Not yet. Dull as our ethical axe was. But our vacation was still young and sure enough, after the weather cleared, some college kids arrived and changed our laissez-faire perspective. They were binge drinking

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at the bar in the lounge on their first night, and candyman was on the job. At length, Sam and I talked about process. Just shutting down the obvious guy would make a statement about the social hazards of candy striping the college kids. Or, a more complex approach was to angle further upstream.

"We're in no hurry." I said. "So let's do both."

"It could spook the horses, but we might ask for a larger amount than what's usually available at the bar." she said.

"We should let animal instinct work for us, not against us." I said. "And whether they're nervous or not, a burn's a burn. Our operational bar's lower than a dealer's since our values differ. Don't overdo it, just ask for a bit more than is appropriate out of hand for one bar sitting."

"Our values differ, yes." Sam said. "But it may still be enough for handcuffs, therefore, the man might think that's what we want."

"Do we look like cops to you?" I

asked.

“Well, I don't think so. But, what does that even mean?” she said. “As far as I'm concerned, people either are or aren't junkies. So, I think the question is whether or not we look like jonesers.”

“Dangerous, sure, but not cops. We come across as too close to the edit for paid state agents.” I said. “We think like them, it's true. We are citizens. But we're far beyond our fair share of eccentricities for uniformed work.”

“It's possible he's a freelancer, supplying himself.” she said. “Which would mean he's political, and we get a big bird with a small stone.”

“The bartender hates him.” I said. “He's not working alone though. The burly guy who sits by the door and never talks is a spotter.”

“Either he's for us or against us, so they say.” she said. “Maybe I shouldn't exceed the daily special on the deal, you know, and we could still just grease everybody who fits the

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profile on our way out, and call it even.”

“Alright. Let's ski a few more days and see what happens.”

forty-five.

In an approach outside of our typical moxy, Sam befriended the candyman. But this was a vacation and there was plenty of time to experiment with new methodologies. In her waxing, healthy zeal to be a peacemaker of the cosmos, she pulled off an act that was one-in-a-million, chumming it up with the denizens of the bar, and actually drinking. Her explanation of me was, we were friends and business partners not involved romantically; I was a writer type, she was my editor, and we'd come to ski.

I understood why she did it, but her barfly character made the situation more precarious than I preferred. She was really hamming it up. At any rate, the ruse was ensnaring both the silent wingman and the point-of-sales man with an offer that many people, particularly cokeheads, can't refuse. She acted

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with great zeal, comporting herself as generally above the fray yet plausibly dirty, an intellectual type, straight-laced but letting loose on a vacation where no one knew her name. Rather close to the truth, in fact.

So she made friends with the guy, and they were over there drinking high balls and doing fingernail bumps. After twenty-four hours of it, she put out the bait: "Fuck me. Take me back to your room. Bring your friend."

First walked the rover, then out Sam, then the silent partner. Fifteen minutes later she returned to the lounge, alone. I could tell by the look in her eyes, our vacation was concluded.

"All done. Come see!" she said. The bartender flashed us a grin as we made our way toward the door. Time can get real nonlinear in the presence of death and/or justice, and declarations like "thank you" or "come back anytime" are better made with the eyes.

We walked the short distance to candyman's room. She'd opened their

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throats with a kitchen knife, then put the two of them bloody naked and entangled into the bed and covered them with a floral print comforter. Proud of her editorial flourish, she smiled at me widely.

“So how are ya?” I asked.

“Intoxicated. Blech. High as a kite!” she said, swaying. “Quietude and green tea, please.”

Thus I began triaging her side effects from the liquor and cocaine use, and briefly we went back to our room. Sam's account covered all of our five minute cash-in with the hegemony of sex and death that day, for sure. After the brief but much welcome ass sex, she was more clear-headed. Gently we got the hell out of town.

“They may only want to pin an award on us, I'm pretty sure that's the local consensus, but we aren't from here and don't know the sheriff. I don't want to be caught flatfooted if someone came looking for who snuffed the wolfman's brother.” she said. “Let's go.”

Our citizenship prize from the

bartender would have to be awarded in absentia. "I bet they'll love the arrangement though." I said.

We loaded the luggage, left the room key on the nightstand, and began an all-night drive back to Denver. I had the sudden notion that Jules would avoid unnecessary, ex post facto artistic statements with corpses. It wasn't a censure, just her opinion.

forty-six.

As you might imagine, that drive back to Denver is narrow often and winding. Not unpleasant but dark at night. Sam was juiced enough to keep us both wide awake, and I drove the whole way. I could understand why, in light of her blood chemistry at the time, she wore sunglasses despite the hour.

"Rather indulgent of you, these past two days, yes?" I remarked.

"It was the only way I knew to get them both." said Sam. "Measures short of otherwise would've left that operation functionally intact."

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“Your dedication's admirable. I can't immerse that “deeply” in the game. Has to do with my past, it would kill me. Hence, perhaps, my compensation for it with hardware.” I said. “Are you coming down?”

“The blow makes me feel like a zombie whore.” she said. “And the alcohol makes me feel retarded. That stuff's not indulgence, it's rat poison.”

“Your choreography at the end was indulgent.” I said. “In my opinion.”

“Your opinion's important and it's a fair assessment. It certainly made me feel better.” she said. Both ready for a long winter's nap, we got home at dawn and slept the clock around.

Back to our daily business, we'd not heard from Red since her leaving for the police academy in Fort Collins. After work on our first night back, discussing the hegemony of marketplace economies with other early-morning diner types and self-made intellectuals, Sam and I speculated about Red's consideration of an actual

badge.

“I don't see how it will help.” I said.

“Yeah but I've known her for years. She just got bored and decided to add a useful credential.” Sam said. “Chelsea Red knows a lot of cops but don't expect her to join the city force. She's worked as a private investigator for decades and focuses on private clients.”

“Irish police work.” I said.

“Is often thankless but somebody must, or someone else will. You're one to talk, anyway.”

“As for my own labels, I'm only a journalist anymore insofar as I'm irretrievably embedded, and a P. I. only by sheer necessity.” I said. “So what that actually makes me is an anonymous politician and a gonzo, who writes a lot of stories about my long-winded tenure as an interstate dishwasher. I don't mean to sound hypocritical regarding Red's labels; I'm just thinking about the implications for us as a company

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because it's important that I, or we, remain philosophically relevant.”

“Regardless of how come, what for, whither, and whence I trust it will be a good thing.” said Sam. “A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

Maybe Red's wayfaring would illuminate the path, and Sam was definitely right about rolling stones. The moral obligations of self-righteous, embedded dishwashers beget wanderlust. There was an undertow in Denver just like anywhere else, and sooner or later it would have to be put behind.

We made the best of our time that spring. Our little precinct stayed generally quiet and clean. The nightly card playing at the diner persisted. In the back of my mind was a interrogative upthrust, among the layers of thought where Jules had encountered the same question, which by her dying she'd firmly answered. As a point of order, her prescription for us carried some subjective bias since her cards had already been called. But Jules' was a clear model worth careful consideration.

forty-seven.

Apropos of Red's ongoing educational activities, one ought never discount the value of networking. When she returned in March, she was even more blue-eyed and full of piss, and jumped right back into her routine at the Briton and with us. I and Sam selected a need-to-know policy about certain information, and didn't tell her about the ski trip. We might've omitted that story even if she hadn't just come from the police academy. I'm sure she appreciated being spared, since possession is nine-tenths of the law. In certain respects, I knew it would be a little weirder to live and work with her, but she was still a roommate and a full partner in the venture.

Jules liked both Sam and Red but she was stumped seemingly, or perhaps indifferent regarding what my next move could be. As she became more accustomed to her death credential, my ground-floor patron was less hellbent anymore to the karma-police campaign. I still appreciated Jules' hanging around when she didn't have to, and,

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that she had a kind of love for me that had made a way for us to keep working together. But, again, even though I wasn't dead yet, the individual battles, at least the way we were fighting them, were of less philosophical consequence than one might prefer.

Jules never entertained macro-cosmic delusions about why she did what she did. Her motivation was self respect, not grand and gratuitous ideals about saving the world. In her mind, the former relies strictly on the latter. Any altruism in the philosophy of Tex derived mainly from her justifiable solipsism where enforcement of her own dignity made good organic karma. After all, it was I who'd turned the whole operation into a community service campaign, right? Nevertheless, regardless of events unfolding, we'd met the Baltimore trip on her terms, and Jules continued to have a strong hand in the organizational policy.

I wasn't, and still I am not, out to change the world at the expense of all other meritorious objectives. For one thing, I'd made new observations, as already described, about the apparent

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net-zero improvement in the state of humanity, despite our theoretically infinite efforts at weeding out problematic characters. Also, because I know the world around us is the very definition of change, I realize going overly bananas against a natural flux, for any purpose beyond actual physical exercise, is a standard misappropriation of effort.

Right action can drastically change both the world and the agent of record. That's a funny thing about concentrated effort. Right effort, applied effectively, alters the ontology of, and for, the people involved. Therefore it's a key aspect of true growth. It's part of the recipe for effective success, and a practical example of dependent origination. It is entertaining that non-dualism results in a situation where one's efforts are concurrently both successful and unsuccessful.

Learning the consequences of right action is important for anyone and was a big deal to me. New growth in my world perspective began with Jules and was still occurring, and my affairs had become truly adventurous.

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Philosophical mastery has also sociological bearing but in America the liberty that accompanies enlightened thought can outshine common public policy, and occlude itself, which hinders the marketing of applied philosophy at the institutional level. Light seems to cast shadows.

On the subject of marketing, if the waters were already properly chummed up through elimination of cocaine and heroin dealers (and one politician / businessman, so far), then what new and interesting options naturally might follow? As a historical woman, friend of mine, and quick spirit, Jules' patronage was making me more effective, for sure. Red's and Sam's contributions weren't anything to sneeze at, either. So, whatever the new plan turned out to be, I knew the team would be formidable. But it's fair to say, as is typical of relationships with truth, the answer to the question of "what's really next" changed with the weather.

forty-eight.

Some weeks after Red's return from

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Fort Collins she visited me on a night shift at the Briton about a job over in Boulder. It was a short road trip, relatively local. The object was shutting down some nightclub supplier. Incidental to the ambient cottage industry of vice that shadows university campuses, an operation was getting local college kids dirty, and had gotten itself made by Boulder County authorities who were out of patience.

With a little creativity, the immense demand for cocaine can be incorporated into the safety protocols of these jobs, but that sword cuts both ways as burns are always a possibility, despite common ground. Boulder was scripted to end like all our other details, but the presentation would be different. We weren't in the buyer's or seller's shoes, that was the deviation. We'd just be road agents, outright highwaymen, and some of the element of surprise would be lacking because we wouldn't be a principal party to the drug deal. Alternatively, it could be said the approach relied entirely on surprise, with our busting in like the Kool-Aid Man.

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Outside of police operations and the rank of hazards due to general unpredictability of drug traffickers, I personally think people are less likely to expect a burn from sellers, generally. Then again, Jules was killed as a seller, right after burning the buyers, but maybe I was overthinking the matter. After all, the politician job had gone smoothly with its new approach, right? That night at the diner, in the absence of Red who was gathering up sleep for the next day's first shift, Sam who was generally optimistic but cautiously skeptical, voiced her concern.

“How do we know everybody on the wrong end of the gun deserves to be there?” she asked. “When we're involved with the deal, we know in our minds that we're not really there for the stated purpose of buying or selling dope. On those jobs we're there to witness the other party's explicit involvement, then shut 'em down. And we're never there to burn ourselves. These situations always weigh heavily in our risk management.”

“Anything can be second-guessed, you know.” I said. “We could be used to

burn an undercover agent. Or the set-up could be on us. Theoretically.”

“Anything can be soft-pedaled too, but there's always risk, yes.” Sam said. “I suppose we think of it like any other job on such terms: You might get shot, but probably not, so good luck. Full stop.”

She was right about that. Otherwise, I considered the relationship between right action and changes in methodology. Though it was a far cry from Tex versus the barista, by that point I could make a strong argument for a standing army and an executive seal. Theoretically.

forty-nine.

Working alone is useful for standing personal ground and clear political speech. Advocates of solo work will tell you it's cleaner forensically, that less complexity means less entropy. Alternatively, the incorporation of civil infrastructure is the very definition of plurality, and therefore, of partisanry. So, if an institution means to preserve the

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rigor and purity of its standards at the individual level among its membership, then organizational constituency must be exclusively and uniformly of one mind pursuant to the group's actionable philosophy.

Eventually, adding people to a situation leads to a state of entropy beyond hope of exact, subtle control. Some stop-gap entropy management methods exist such as, for example, a working internal census. The only census I was keeping could be tallied on one hand. But it was the job of some ad hoc committee of which I was now a de facto member, among the greater logistical network to which we were subscribed, to run the organizational census. I was increasingly concerned, that responsibility for the operations and maintenance of the organizational machinery of politics, is a job inherited by people who have stayed in one place for too long.

In light of foregoing assessments about the body politic, maybe Red's new credential and affiliation with the state of Colorado's law enforcement community was just the sort of partisan

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exercise our organization needed. Repeatedly, Sam had professed certainty that it wouldn't change Red's nature as an operator, but I didn't buy that story for one hot minute.

Back to the Boulder job, I'd expected some sort of open-air scenario where we'd be picking off marked buyers and sellers with rifles. Instead, the instructions detailed a risky ambush in the back office of a night club at peak operating hours. Barging in during a transaction in progress is dangerous, but if properly arranged the plan would confine our chances of being set up to almost nil. Mr. Marion supplied us with three clean nine-millimeter semiautomatic pistols with tactical clips.

The arrangement was for eleven o'clock on a mid-April Friday night. The day of the job, we loaded ourselves and our gear into my car and drove out to Boulder. Red directed us to a booth by a window at a café diner in the university's merchant district.

“We'll go in and mow down every last asshole in the room.” said Red. “No words, no winks, no nothing but hot

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lead. There should be about a half dozen of them. Even if they're armed, it should still be a piece of cake."

"They might have a watch posted, like, with a weapon trained on the door." I said.

"That's a risk yeah." she said. "Any lookout like that is number one, obviously."

We spent the afternoon engaging local co-eds and other vegetarian delicacies. Around dinnertime we checked into a hotel, rested, and showered ourselves into readiness for our night out.

When we came on location about ten, the wet bar was already about a brisk business. We ordered chemical tools, occupied an open nook, and after ten minutes of scenery, Sam to a spin on the dance floor.

"Doesn't it take you back?" I said. "It has been thousands of years since I was inside one of these joints."

"Look, there. One of our buddies." said Red, nodding toward the bar. A

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white male of medium build with short dark hair gelled slick back, wearing a gray shirt and black trousers, was talking to the bartender.

fifty.

As that night's moment of truth approached, despite the many unknowns, we were feeling pretty good about the job. Seeing the poor caliber of people in the club made the effort seem pettier. Slick hardware in the belt is always reassuring too. The first guy finished his convo with the bartender, and took his drink through a door painted the same color as the wall.

That was our door too, Red said. "We'll walk back there at exactly eleven by my watch. There's another door in the room, we'll use that one to get out of the building. The deal won't take longer than three minutes, hence our operational window. But I expect it will take us half that long, at most.

Ten thirty came. Sam returned from the dance floor. Patiently we ticked like clocks. Our seller in the gray

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shirt returned to the bar for another exchange with the barkeep, and this time he was with another dude in turquoise parachute pants and a turban.

“What a way to go.” said Red, after the couple went back through the blue door.

“Color's important.” said Sam. I tried to remember when I'd last worn parachute pants.

Twenty minutes later, three characters walked up and talked with the same bar man. They were the real thing too, evidently. One was a wiry looking black man with long slick braids. Another was heavy set, a brown-skinned male with slick shaved head. The third was a darkly tanned female wearing all black no-bullshit leather. These three were far more dangerous-looking than the two who'd preceded them. The head count of people stopped at five who we would, within ten short minutes, bring to a halt. The trio had a quick conversation with the bartender, ordered neat scotches, and lingered for five minutes. By my watch, it was fifty-seven when they went through our

blue door.

“There's a restroom back there. I'll go that way now.” Red said. “Come on in two minutes. It's a public toilet, but the bartender might have an eye on that door, so act cool.”

I looked at my watch, then leaned over to give Sam's epiglottis a squeeze with my tongue. Along with shooting people, hooking up, or dancing, making out is one of the most logical things to do in night clubs. We kept that up for a half minute. The bar was increasingly crowded and before entering the blue door, we went and leaned on it a few moments, as if we'd momentarily opted for a quick piss before making our next drink purchase. We slithered through the egress with a giggle, playing the part of giddy casual lovers hand-in-hand, without looking back. Within moments, we'd be finished and through the back door. For sure it'd be noisy, and we didn't have silencers, but odd gunshots mixed with loud house music is a popular motif.

The hall turned right, back in the direction of the bar. We saw the

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restroom door, from which Red then emerged. The corridor was empty but for us. Above a closed door on the left wall a blue neon sign hung, halfway between the toilet door and the turn in the corridor behind us. The prevailing ambiance was dimness, but the neon blue subtly heightened visibility.

Eleven o'clock struck. I readied my heater and the partners did the same, bidding farewell to the luxuries of hesitation and do-overs. Gently, Red tried the door knob, which was locked. Rather than shooting the lock, we'd kick in the flimsy door which would cost us a few precious moments of suspended disbelief. Red was reading my mind.

"Kick it open on three. Once it's cleared, come on with the hot lead." she whispered. "One two three."

After one solid kick to the right of the handle the door came right open and we started cooking.

fifty-one.

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As the door kicker my gun play was delayed. By the time I opened fire, several of our targets had already taken lead from Sam and Red and were down. That's dangerous of course, because they're low and it's uncertain if they're still hot. So, since we were prevailing handily, I rained bullets on the wild cards for insurance. The guy in the gray shirt and the heavysset bald dude were the first to hit the ground. The female in leather took a knee, though she didn't appear to have taken a hit during the initial strafing, so I hosed her down before re-ventilating the two first fallen. Her neutralization was reassuring since because she was probably their most significant combat asset.

The crazy-eyed guy with the weave also might have been capable of presenting somewhat of a bother. He and the guy in the parachute pants got the business from us simultaneously; they were the last to go down. Following that, quickly, everyone received a final dealbreaker to the cranium. And that was all she wrote. From the first bullet to the last the assault had taken about ten seconds,

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tops. None of them fired a shot.

As part of our standard signature we left the mess perfectly intact (notwithstanding the facts of life as we knew it in Crested Butte), and we didn't stick around to accommodate further philosophical inquiry or extra credit. Red pointed at our back door and out of it we walked. Upright but wary, we encountered not so much as an alley cat in the back lot. In a half minute we were at the car, and began our return commute to Denver.

"I was having funny feelings about this one." confessed Sam. "But it was alright."

Traffic was light at that hour. Once back in Denver, we returned to our diner. Before getting out of the car in the diner parking lot, we executed a quick, spicy, three-way fluid exchange in the backseat, at the pleasure of the hegemony of sex and death.

Like Sam, I'd also felt some foreboding about the Boulder detail, but of course we'd talked about it and done our best to secularize any foreboding premonitions. Test pilots

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experience such butterflies before some flights, but it never means certain doom. I'd been concerned someone of us might take a hit during the deal, due to the wild west nature of the operation. But maybe it wasn't a false positive. Driving back I wondered, what if we were sensing legitimate warnings but had misidentified the context?

Red's new badge was still a shiny object of fixation in my mind, because of the political gamble it presented to our operation. Before, our oversight had stopped with the hegemony of sex and death, and gone no further than our own logistical draft. However, beyond my recent personal advances in politics and applied altruism, as I've discussed at some length, now one of us had added an additional guild standard whose institutional face explicitly denotes obligations to the public.

That isn't necessarily a bad thing, I mean, theoretically it could be helpful. In fact, the obligation to fellow citizens is encompassed, daresay enshrined, in our political will. That's post-modern political science. However, because of the phenomenon

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which we call epistemic feedback, whether it's the Dark Ages or tomorrow, it matters who's involved, even if they're aloof.

fifty-two.

By that point in the business day, subconsciously I'd expected to be dealing with either my own death or one of my partner's. I've always felt the *déjà vu* sensation psychologically pleasant, like being awarded extra time after a successful ordeal. I was feeling that way after Boulder.

One tractable interpretation of the abundant second-guessing and funny feelings was, we'd defied fated failure on the Boulder job. Beating the odds in a group effort and doing so alone are widely different tasks. Either way, historically, consequent change in the universe must be accounted for, to keep true victories from being rewarded with bondage or death. Countless accountabilities come to mind, in fact, but proper documentation is an important one.

Regarding the subjectivity of our

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world, the conversation here shines on a certain set of facts about human nature and the law of the sea. I may come off as a nihilist, but again we find evidence that a certain many things necessarily don't matter as much as one might have believed. It might be more accurate to say things don't matter as much as they once did, but it's a subjective assessment. Maybe it's an observation of one's own agency making the world less heavy, rather than a discovery of the world's meaninglessness.

For example, it might matter differently for the people we mowed down at the night club. Like, did they enjoy the same type of return to forever as Jules? I suspect that when people die without proper preparation, they're just dead fucks, full stop, forever. The terms of hegemony vary where universal principles may not. If we had been burned down in Boulder, it wouldn't really matter because we'd live on anyway. For the likes of Sam, Red, me, and Jules, among the infinite manifestation of our souls, that's only a new birth of sorts.

The people we killed that night were

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either unenlightened dead or they aren't. Maybe they did outshoot us, but we outshined their whole universe, short-lived though it was about to be, altering fate to our favor. Such efficacy in agency illustrates the importance of merit among oneself, one's contemporaries, and all who have ever lived and ever will, which describes a crowded house. Time out of mind, there's no acceptance without merit. Houses lacking merit aren't homes. If encountering a scenario where oneself appears to be the only agent of a free will, perhaps one ought nevertheless operate as if all deeds were under review by meritorious progenitors and progeny, regardless of whether one is indulged with contemporaries.

Anyway, we thought we'd averted a bad situation with our collective agency. We thought wrong. The state agents entered the diner in the same moment that I noticed a man in plain clothes fingering us through the front window. Any other day, I might not have realized the ones entering the diner were special, but under the circumstances I knew. And the person on the sidewalk had called down hell on

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us, I understood. I also knew if I didn't settle the matter right then, he'd skate and I wouldn't get another chance to do the job right. Someone else might make him pay, another place, some other time, in a different context. But for the two of us, that was the moment.

I don't know who he was, but he was fucked. Despite what was about to happen, and even if I lost my freedom, I still held the moral high ground. The finger man remained on the sidewalk, sticking around to watch the collar, and the agents closed on our table, hands on their weapons. If you know anything about felony arrests, then you know those detectives weren't in a tea-and-cookies frame of mind.

From my belt holster I pulled the forty-five, and quickly put two hollow-point slugs through the diner window into the guy on the porch. Down he went. The last thing I remember was hearing more shots, but they weren't coming from me. Then I was either dead or unconscious, although I suspected that I was unconscious and alive, based on the lack of clarity I was experiencing, and the absence of all

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enlightened beings.

fifty-three.

Instances of the incommunicado detention, virtual or otherwise, of American journalists notwithstanding: For decades, I've kept a mindfulness practice respecting incarceration, to cultivate peace of mind by attempting to prevent removal of my serenity and free will through kidnapping or imprisonment. The practice could be compared keeping a valid passport at the ready despite having no immediate plans for international travel.

Such a practice also leads to heightened sensitivity about the predicaments of incarcerated people. One interesting observation I've made is, a class of people imprisoned and without basic civil liberties is part of the fundamental foundation maintaining certain aspects of traditional "civilization," and that most people aren't consciously, or objectively, aware of the fact. For example, the "establishment" society depends on the subjugation of an expendable class in order to keep up

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its “superiority.” Point being, it's a sad state of affairs and a devastating impeachment of its champions, and enough to warrant a legal name change for one who comes to learn the folly and complicity of their predecessors.

I don't mean to say that actual dangerous criminals shouldn't be locked up until they're successfully rehabilitated, but for every individual evil asshole who avoids incarceration, there's a thousand people in American prisons with bad social economics not criminal justice as their predicament's first principle. Don't like the theory from a social science perspective? Then I challenge you to research relationships between modern humanity's evolutionary teleology and incarceration, and you may be shocked at what you find. Biological science renders the same verdict.

A common currency exists among imprisoned or otherwise oppressed populations, and even among those who only study the institutions or advocate for their constituencies. That's part of the “religion” of the judiciary. Remaining mindful constantly regarding

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any and all beings imprisoned, lost, enslaved, or otherwise bonded in separation from their home at heart, means always carrying a little extra baggage. When such baggage is recognized, and sometimes reacted to negatively in contexts thought to be apart from institutions of bondage, one can see aspects of society which rely on the existence of abjection or its implementation without due cause. Classist arguments may make citation of some cause or another, but the sociological phenomenon of arbitrary entitlement to classes underfoot, for which there is clearly no good cause, is easily observable nevertheless.

With just a little caution, carrying some extra baggage on behalf of strangers at all times, is a winning idea in the sense that eventually, every being becomes liberated whenever there is a "last cop out" situation somewhere in the universe. Also, if one happens to become imprisoned or a contemplative monastic, or manages to get compromised or restrained somehow otherwise, then the psychological groundwork is already in place for accomplishing certain aspects of the ordeal. It may not be pretty, but in

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my mind, it's good insurance in this fallen, odd, haunted, robot graveyard full of prisons, hungry ghosts, body thieves, and bondsmen. Such a practice has been a maritime custom for time-out-of-mind, because of the practical and generally predictive accountability of altruism and self-awareness among mariners.

So when I woke up in a hospital bed, I had the sudden notion that my mindfulness practice for incarcerated people was about to get a rigorous field trial. *Jamais vu* before beginning to recollect recent events and realize where I was, I was mystified regarding my status. First, I remembered shooting the guy at the diner. Next, the Boulder nightclub came back. Then I recalled that I'd probably been shot hence the noteworthiness of my being alive. Following that thought was recollection of sex with Red and Sam in the diner parking lot. And now, there I was in some hospital bed.

Because I've been criticized as being overly philosophical, I made a concerted effort to take the situation seriously, if not for my own sake then

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for the analytical reasons. I was definitely in the belly of a beast, there were slippery slopes at every turn. A moment later, a nurse came in with a few grouchy answers for me, but first a question:

“Do you know why you're here?”

“Yes, it seems that I have been shot. Is that correct?”

“Yes. You have suffered two bullet wounds, one in the back of your left hand and one in the upper left thigh. Nine millimeter rounds. You will make a full physical recovery. Additionally, you are in the custody of the Colorado State Police, who say an arraignment and bond hearing will be docketed now that you're out of surgery, lucid, and recovering.”

Changing the subject, I was asked if I was hungry, thirsty, or needed to use the restroom. All three, yes, I answered. The nurse nodded and left the room for a minute, returning with a pair of crutches. I walked to a toilet down the hall, where I relieved myself, gratefully.

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Because of the security implications for both the nurse and myself, I didn't ask where exactly I was, address-wise. For similar reasons, I didn't query under which statute I'd be charged. But I knew I probably wasn't far from my own condo and I had a fair idea which of my actions were of material interest to the law. There were also concerns of Red's and Sam's current civil status, and of disclosing certain historical facts unnecessarily. I wanted to be careful of digging myself, or them, any deeper.

The nurse returned with my food and asked me if I wished to speak with a state police investigator that evening or if I preferred to wait until morning.

“I'll wait.”

I checked out my food, and explained that I am a vegan, so the tray was removed. Ten minutes later, a tray of fresh fruit arrived.

I wondered if my partners were also shot, but I doubted it since I was the only active shooter in the diner. Judging by the non-lethal locations of

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my own wounds, my shooters were well-suited to their peaceable vocation. I was fairly confident that my target never got up again, of course, and Sam and Red probably didn't break leather. They probably weren't injured and possibly weren't charged, but they could have been picked up for the Boulder detail, which I suspected was the origin of the demised plainclothes informant.

fifty-four.

First thing come morning when I opened my eyes, there was a slick dick in the room, the perfect lizard with electric black eyes, giving me an eyeballing as stand-out as any. Impressively inert. A gaping maw. The detective was all dicks, elbows, thumbs, knuckles, and broomsticks. I definitely sensed reasonability but no tolerance for bullshit. This character was a windfall, so I didn't open. Willingly enough, the detective did.

“We have a body, Rick. And a roomful of people including three state police investigators who saw you do it. Colorado Revised Statue says you're to

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answer for it, as a matter of criminal procedure.”

I just played it straight. “That guy was part of a cocaine syndicate that's been tabling at nightclubs in Boulder. His leading you to me was an effort at causing your agency to work in the best interest of that criminal organization and against the people of the state of Colorado. That's the truth, tell me if I'm wrong.”

The detective glanced at the floor then swept me with a drafting gaze. “Is that exactly what you would say to a judge?”

“Let's have the governor swear me in.”

“We don't need the governor for that. Pending the full facts, this discussion might be ex post facto. Let me say this to you, Mr. Thompson. I am your best friend because we share some common ground. I am the principal investigator of this homicide. And if your information is true and legal, there will be no grand jury.”

Rarely does anyone use or even know

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my last name. I rarely give it out. But he had it.

“Think on it. I'll be back tonight.” The detective walked out sideways.

Nobody had mentioned Red's or Sam's name out loud but the subject was pressed tacitly. I'd sit there all day while that brown-shirted ectotherm checked out my story. Which was a true story, in both its spoken and unspoken ways. Such is the nature of ethical work, I'd committed no felony.

Depending on the results of that day's intensive background check on me, the detective could either have me prosecuted for murder and even as a serial killer, or let me go outright. Relying on blind faith in other individuals is dicey, and this was a textbook example of having to do just exactly that, but I'd given the ugly truth readily and affirmation of my story could be located easily and quickly by my investigator. I thought of Red's new credential again, and about the law enforcement community generally. I wondered if they were sitting in the clink, if they'd been

arraigned, or if they'd even been picked up at all.

I'd mentioned the nightclub but didn't go any further because it was off topic, deeper into foul territory. Of all people, my detective would hopefully respect the occupational necessity for me to draw the line there. It can all go without saying, that by rights, for me and people who think like me, the traffic stop in Boulder stood on its own merit and legitimized my actions in the diner. The diner mess simply was what it was, regardless whether or not the matter ultimately downshifted me and my muse into the Colorado Department of Corrections. Another option of the moment, of course, was for me to disappear myself from that hospital.

fifty-five.

I didn't want to accidentally close any bad deals or slam any doors by talking out of school to the medical corps. Because for the moment all options were on the table, so I and that nurse continued our minimalist conversation. I did sweet-talk my way

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into a vegan breakfast delivered from off campus, but there was no talk of firearms, police, narcotics interdiction, nightclubs, court, ethics, the future, the past, the dead, or the weather much.

During supper, slick the dick returned, and again I let the conversation come to me, since I wasn't holding all proper cards. Unless the game is something like solitaire, nobody ever has all the cards. But I knew damn well the obvious. Some contingencies are stronger than others but we both knew it would be real easy to throw the book at me. The agent paused, either thinking or feigning contemplation.

Mine were real bullets during the event of so much late interest to the Colorado State Police. So were the ones in the sidearm of the detective, who didn't come right out and say it, but I was gonna skate. The identity of the guy I shot mattered. Another key in my favor was that the detective understood the law, and for that I was lucky. *Eo ipso* justice contrived describes some lack of justice; Karma is blind and duplicitous insofar as

it's real *ipso facto*.

“The guy you shot at the diner is dirty. Was. Very. The homicide was justifiable under the circumstances. A panel hearing of the law enforcement standards regulatory body of the state of Colorado will be convened after the fact. Regarding this matter you will be asked to give a brief verbal statement to the panel, and that will be all. I'll be in touch.”

Before any more words were spoken, about five minutes passed. Of course neither my forty-five nor Marion's nine-millimeter were with me any longer, and I was wondering if my car was still parked at the diner where Red and Sam and I had left it with fogged-up windows. Red and Sam.

“Was anyone else brought in?”

“No.” He walked out. I never caught his name.

Fifteen minutes later, a different nurse came in with a cardboard box of my personal effects (minus the handguns). She explained to me the technical aspects of my two wounds and

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their maintenance, and told me I was free to go whenever I felt like it. One hour later, I got up, dressed, took the crutches, walked past the restrooms to the elevator, and rode down to the lobby. Outside I was met with snowfall and hailed a cab to our condo. I never saw my forty-five again.

No one was home. I showered off the strata of weird shit collecting on me from road trip to co-ed café to nightclub job to car sex to diner shootings to hospital plume to cab ride. It was eight in the evening and I felt a strange fatigue, where my head was tired and my body was drowsy but I wasn't sleepy as such. I pondered the irony of my present return to the diner and how jarring it might be, for patrons who witnessed the shooting to see me returned. They'd just have to suck it up. First things first, I put on my fluffy plaid pajamas and boiled some tea. I'd wait and deal with the world whenever anyone came home from wherever they were, which was probably work. No big rush.

I thought of Jules again. Might she be critical of my recent lack of subtlety? That crazy Old West bullshit

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at the nightclub, which led the footman to the diner, was of Red's hatching, not mine, after all. As an old friend of mine used to say whenever very bad things befell other people, "it was probably just a big misunderstanding."

fifty-six.

My roommates woke me at four a.m., having washed the scent of diner and pub from their own selves, donned favorite pajamas, and joined me. Like fairly well-behaved adults, we rested gratefully and quietly.

It was an optimistic thing for us to have been returned, intact, to one another in such short order and minor hassle. It was hopeful in the sense that sometimes life's dramas unfold as they ought to, artfully; that protagonists don't always lose in real life, ending up in prison while rats rule the world and enjoy its finer aspects. When the applied rule of law accommodates natural justice, spirit, liberty, and friendship, it's a victory.

That my present state of freedom

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resulted from enlightened right action by a state agent of justice was not a bad thing, though I felt a naïve guilt for being surprised things had worked out correctly. Sam and Red also felt the same, not-unpleasant shock to the conscience. It was a sea change. The implications were vast. I pondered the extent to which I was obligated to the good detective, not in his state agency (I knew the answer to that), but as an individual. The answer soon set upon me, as obligations to any jewel of the dharma are equal.

Sprung, the next day I was back at the Briton, second shift, with my wounded hand in a wrap. I used a cane for about a week. To have hidden would've been to assert liability for something that, even by official accounting was simply a legitimate unfolding of the law of the sea.

Unlike actions of intellectual dependency, acts of free will are executed on ethically stable but politically unpopular grounds of merit, and they usually violate reasonable thresholds of safety by standards of the general public. It follows that the notion of safety is widely

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misunderstood, and crowds are cowards,
so goes mob rule.

Beyond my vantages and those of public eyes, old friends, or the hegemony', my position at the time created a political historical drag. Twenty years from now, someone could decide to bring action against me, far and away from the facts and people involved with the homicide as it was duly and justly executed and disposed. This loose end and ones like it can color the context of people's existence.

Loose ends have ongoing teleological presence in a person's life, begging questions of privacy and natural rights. All rights are a right to privacy *habeas corpus*. Within affairs of state or without, the epistemic feedback that accompanies surveillance makes drastic influences. In fact, active surveillance, clandestine or otherwise easily amounts to total ownership and psychological control. Bondage, a high crime of the realm. My mind felt like a vessel boarded by potentially friendly but incredibly dangerous pirates.

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fifty-seven.

On the second day after my release, the three of us worked night shift and met at the diner afterward for our usual playing gin, sketching, scheming onto paper napkins, and holding court with other night hawks. We always offered to Sam that we could go to the Briton instead, for the sake of her getting a change in scenery, and she always refused. Too many drunks there, she said.

Let me tell you, that night we had perplexed looks belying tip-of-the-tongue questions, like, why wasn't I in jail? and, can I also get away with cold-blooded murder in a crowded public area? and, may I see your bullet holes? among other farcical interrogative shits. The wound on my thigh was interesting to behold and the one on my hand was no slouch either. Of course, I didn't know the name of, or even meet, the surgeon who'd patched me up.

We enjoyed the green tea and mushroom tomato soup, and through the new front glass of the diner we watched

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a late snow. No further shitbirds darkened the door for having misled bondsmen to us.

The atmosphere in the diner had a certain subtly cautious air about it, as one might expect after a calculated political victory or prejudiced termination. I say, all-night diner people share more positive common ground than all-night saloon people, and it was a sympathetic room. Still, despite all of the many quizzical glances, no one asked flat-out exactly how I'd come to be sitting in a state of wide-open-beaver freedom in the same room where three days past I'd presented a heat-of-the-moment killing so facile and boldfaced as to inspire deep personal change in numerous eyewitnesses. It probably would have been fine to whistle past the graveyard, had anyone explicitly pressed the issue, but no one did. It would've been gratuitous anyway.

Our company's operation still derived from, although it was now orders of measure different than, that pattern of thought and operation to which Jules had originally hipped me. Any political victory beyond a personal

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level, again, was not the original purpose of our pursuits. But the running series of events had aligned our interests with those of others, in spite of the facts of life about spirit, liberty, intellectual dependency, free will, and organizational politics in their juxtapositions with natural law and social code.

Regardless, our actions were of an incidental benefit to the commonwealth, but the initial public offerings remained a curiosity to me and that night we discussed it at length. By some roundabout means we'd become politicians, and I've said that before. The reality of political agency never is as one might have imagined before, which for me could be because I'd never seriously considered a political career before. And then I was into it without real premeditation.

An alternate theory was the hegemons of sex and death had gotten bored with the game and upped our auntie. By definition, the hegemons that I recognize don't do foolish, ill-conceived things, so maybe other, interloping hegemons had caused a

disturbance in the eschatology. Maybe Jules was the token interloper. Since nothing truly matters anyway, was she running a battery of digital philosophy tests on us? Had she made some observation from her enlightened vantage that drove her to engineer these events? Questions. I was full of them.

It was probably time for us to get new tattoos again, we decided. I took on another face card, The Hanged Man this time, who wore some really nice trousers of motley. Sam added more candy striping. Officer Red achieved a little chattel ring circumscribing her ass hole, possibly the absolute most attractive thing I'd ever seen. Red's her own woman to be sure but horny does as horny is.

fifty-eight.

The morbidity (or non-dualistic not-morbidity) of our situation rarefied under my political lens. Humankind are a self-reflective flora manifesting about plasmatic celestial bodies, thriving best when able to purge or excrete our withered mass with

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ease. Biologically, humanity is more plantlike than many understand. We are a seasonal plurality, a viral, hoary, shiny creature whose object can suffer badly but hasn't died because the tree is too robust. The incessant death confronting people on an "individual" basis simply isn't death. Rather, philosophical death is only change. Human civilization's subtle and fresh incumbency, reminiscent of having fought the law and won, is timely in its coloration of "not-death" or "death as a common misnomer."

Case in point being Tex, who managed to find the door to not-death without political incorporation. Hadn't she? She had in fact, if our present disposition was that of her constituent agency, which is what I believed. Such was the brightline test. In a room with one door and no windows, the door's the only way? Another option is never leaving, that's possible at an institutional level. Arguably and notwithstanding flexible definitions of quantitative bounds, staying in an empty room for a duration of some infinite measure denotes actual death, however. The concept of forever is either a philosophical contradiction or

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simply another brightline test about the exclusivity of aliveness and political agency.

Our haggling and wagering with the hegemony of sex and death forced these issues in my head. I'm lucky to realize the odd combination of emptiness and contingency among it all. Since people fill their minds up with shit that occludes nature, many "individuals" are explicitly unaware of the starkly vapid truth of the world's naked gallows. Since being shot in the head, Jules had been farming-out knowledge in conflict with the predominance of implements and rumors of death in the world. There's no hurry for the likes of she and us, coming or going. Time must be viewed as strictly a tool, for the politics of people and ontological hegemony.

All of this negation and meaninglessness really lubricated the motors on my mothership and brought to mind entertaining questions about what to do next. The efficacy of the will sustains unlimited questionability; yet, someone on the prowl for aesthetic experience can have it in abundance, even in something as inconsequential as

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a duplicitous quale or as baseless as unethical first principle.

Consider the altruism of Jules enforcing the karma of her individual mind and free will. Universally irrelevant? Yes, in multiple and good ways. But a novel aspect of the individually thriving beauty of her mind? Yes, aesthetics in cognition is a key for individual and collective existence, it prescribes living. In the local sense, regarding my little existential crisis after being shot, I might again editorialize about the river of life as the medium of constant change, of which understanding I consider to be part of the philosopher's stone. This time the veil was being pulled back further than before. I was catching a fire in Colorado.

Aesthetic justification mitigates the nihilism that haunts the empty rooms which forever contain nothing but a soul and a door. That's why Red, Sam, Jules, I, and people like us, are off the secular grid. We have to be, from the get-go. Writing is a kind of cognitive art, literature that is. As a writer I realized long years ago,

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that creativity and beauty were one of the fundamental meanings of life. Of course, there are reasons for existence besides lovemaking, gaming, eating, and laughter.

More soup was ordered and slurped. The conversation returned to partisanship, where organizing the faculties of one's present community is key for more nuanced, elaborate, profound aesthetics and more effective implementations of hegemony. So having accomplished a census, after what fashion might we situate the jewels of the dharma? We discussed.

Short minutes after declaring there's no true death, and by the same measure, not-death is also strictly academic, and insisting none of it matters anyway because dualism is a basic logical fallacy: I've caught myself endorsing a strategy of deliberately and rigorously mapping and distributing individual essence and wherewithal, to prevent wasting a drop of our precious, incoherent void.

fifty-nine.

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Late spring caught me still in a protracted, easy convalescence. The Centennial State winter is nothing to sneeze at but the temperate season is magical. Despite our cool jobs and the heavenly weather, eventually we hit the road like a bolt of lightning. In case of retirement, disembodiment, or nostalgia, we thought coming back to the diner and the Briton was a last-ditch option we could always rely on.

Besides tending to us, Jules spent much of her afterlife in Austin. Such is the haunt. There are lots of dead people in Austin. She also abides among the rocky, flaming, fundamental beauty of the infinite cosmological garden. In fact, hiding in weathered river stones for example, is how lost or wandering spirits get reborn inadvertently, like moths to flame becoming incorporated into some arbitrary life cycle. It happens.

We were discussing international romping, patiently waiting for some quorum of the muses to make known its preference. Mexico's spaciousness, proximity, and geopolitical relevance to our agenda, made it a good bet. Probably, neither Mexican nor American

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officials would take issue with efforts to disrupt mega methamphetamine labs and heroin trafficking.

Hedging on stealth isn't a fool-proof approach. Like our delicate egress into this line of work in the states, the use of caution when putting into the action would be important south of the border tambien. But the narcotics cottage industry of capos, dependents, and sister-wives is a global concern. Such is political corruption.

Distrito Federal was worth a trip for teeth cleaning pro forma, and Red was fishing around for opportunities at fixing derelict paisanos in the Sierra Madres. Such jobs were in the offing.

"We can't take our art across so we'll need fresh hardware on the south side." Red said.

"Gunpowder isn't the only game in town." I said. "Piano string is quieter than firearms, for example."

"I think we can stick with what we know, like automobiles and firearms." she said.

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We were free to go be cool, according to absolutely no one who'd actually fess up to green-lighting us. For starters, our plan would put us in Ciudad de México to polish our idioms, improve our tans, and get proper sand in our underwear before confronting the chupacabra.

sixty.

The currency's a tool, not an end unto itself. Profiteering's a kind of racketeering and a crime. But one might say even the buck stops short of the big game, regarding the previously mentioned game-like nature of the universe. Strictly business, the dollar's no joke. Because it doesn't have to be. People gathering up as much of it as they can in a game to see who can gather the most, is comparable to plumbers hoarding wrenches. Is hoarding wrenches practical for plumbers or plumbing? No, but wrench hoarding is a game that can be played. Capitalism is a game that's not inherently bad, but it's bad if the people freezing up the capital are bad. For argument's sake, one might divide

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the citizens of the world into two groups: people who restrict access to resources in bad faith, and those who do not.

To this turpitudinous characteristic of the universe's more ethically adrift denizens, add something like a lucrative international narcotics black market and the result is a shit show of cosmic scope. Legal tender for debts public and private, the dollar serves as a public account ledger for trading both legally sanctioned coffee and black market cocaine. Oh yes, gram per gram, one's a paradigm shift stronger than the other but the weaker, more enduring addiction is important too. At any rate, duplicitous institutional policy, equivocating between two different stimulant-producing crops, makes a two-headed monster of the dollar. American market presence follows suit as the dollar represents citizens' executive vesting. We must take back the night, so to speak, when it comes to our own political institutions. Or I must, and I'm referring to more than "War on Drugs" policy.

A given region can have more

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disparate socioeconomic situations than others, and local definitions of upper class or middle class are culturally relative and various. Problems persist with poverty in all urban areas, while there remains much simple pastoral rural living on all continents. But the ruling class throughout the Americas comprises a tiny fraction of the general human population, pursuant to the strata of global caste. Such is the case in South American countries, just as it is in the United States.

At the cost of the working class, to include the working middle class, a bourgeois oligarchy fights to retain a monopoly on the means of production, or the means of finance where there's no production, or the military when there's nothing to leverage except the political will of a minority (which is why history repeats itself mercilessly for the unethical and small-minded). For example, the means of cocaine production is so universally influential that it can, and often has, served as a trump to mitigate or reverse political defeats suffered by such oligarchy. Abjection, prostitutes, cocaine, and old money, wow. Who's really who, or which is

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which? Got political troubles? Go
hide in a coca tree.

Demand's hot everywhere, led by the global West and a great supply is produced on the southerly continent. Unlike cocaine, capitally or exclusively the dollar's not necessarily a commodity. In financial markets its tenderability is hedged upon and marketed, yes, but notwithstanding the importance of philosophical guaranty, it's only paper money. Ironically the dollar is the main symbol of the South American cocaine crop. What's worse, the dollar's fundamental hedging on cocaine isn't accidental at the U.S. foreign (and domestic) policy level. It's legally prescriptive of, however not representative of, my or my compatriots political will. Hence, U.S. foreign policy's primarily serving the political interests of the galactic cocaine market is a principal conflict of interest.

I don't wish to proselytize on moral grounds against drug use or the natural libertarian right for honest, law abiding people to go unmolested by narcotics officers. But one of the

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main reasons my drug use became so terribly out of hand as a teenager is because I was a teenager. Point being, constant roaring black market solicitation of young people, and at-risk youth particularly, is backed by the dollar. If my foreign policy props it up, how can domestic policy be effective to the contrary? In light of foreign policy supporting the cocaine crop de facto, the U.S. War on Drugs public relations campaign is a farce as big as the two-party politics or corporate-owned news media. These farces have colossal body counts, ever accumulating in the name of all citizens. That's what happens when people commit crimes in your name. Well no shit, everybody in the universe enjoys coke, especially babies.

The wrong kind of foreign interests are vested in the dollar, and they're all taking a whiff on Rick the Rooster. Toward that end, why should the people of the United States have to suffer a debauched currency, among other very bad things? It's an obvious problem and nobody seems to give a shit, which is why I, Sam, and Red went south. Our challenges would include staying on task and avoiding defection, and I

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didn't think we were much of a risk for going over to the dark side. Well, maybe Red, since she had the best credential for it.

The whole geopolitical narcotics industry could be made-up reality television, and I'm sure that's correct to some limited extent. But insofar as it's truly mismanaged as described, then it's a real problem, and I know there's a sufficient amount of stupid unfortunate truth to the story. And wherever the storyline may only be artifice, it's still marketing. Catch a college kid, not too young but just right, and the market gains a lifetime user and petty dealer whose individual market action justifies every failed effort to date.

Old money says "that's how it is. That's how it's always been. Anyway, what do we care?" New money says "let's do some blow." The devil hiding in the details says "money talks."

Well bullshit. We booked a direct flight from Denver to Mexico City, traveling light with a purpose doing our part as citizens of the universe, preserving the peace as best we knew

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how. It might appear to have been also for cheap thrills. I don't really know what to say about that, maybe the world needs horses' asses too. For ethical high ground, motives simply are what they are.

The mid-May trip was financed by dollars of course, and don't think for a minute that I wasn't keeping track of them. Ultimately, they're all philosophical dollars, and they're mine politically.

“Do you think we'll end up in a mass grave?” pondered Sam, as our flight boarded.

“Would it matter?” said Red.

sixty-one.

Mexico City would be a relatively subtle location to enter the fray, we thought. Everyone's español was reliable. Beyond that, to avoid being tagged as low-hanging fruit by average bears in the land of Montezuma, the more general sufficiency of our wisdom regarding the hegemony of geography and culture was a calculated gamble.

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Sam and I found work at a café diner in Coyoacán while Red spent most of her days at the Biblioteca Central U.N.A.M. The university provided an excellent intellectual backdrop for networking and research. And also recruiting, frankly. Hey, nobody in their right mind turns down honest, competent help. When encountered, the Buddha's a no-brainer hire to make.

It was possible that we'd end up in the more northerly latitudes, e.g. Tamaulipas or Coahuila. There was and is plenty of ape-shit happening in northern Mexico's land-based black market shipping lanes, such as the area known regionally as The Golden Triangle which angles into Tejas. I was always instructed those export routes were, historically, less dangerous along the international border regions to the west of the Lone Star State. Without helicopters, we had no reason to anticipate any jobs south of Mexico. Narcotics cartels, understandably disregarding confused international policy, continue their diversification in the global market to strengthen economic footholds; so maybe we'd end up somewhere on the coast, where

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grassroots and international policy come together in spite of N.A.F.T.A., C.A.F.T.A., P.N.T.R., or the T.P.P.

We were just as willing to send a hatful of bipeds down to davey jones in the Gulf of California as we'd been to plant a half-dozen at a dive bar in Boulder although it was unclear how the three of us might commandeer an ocean-class freight vessel using just elbow grease and a baseball bat or whatever. But stranger things have happened.

Strong boners come easily to me for illicit or pirated mining oil production and export. I, you, the hegemon of hegemon and hegemony, and the hegemon of galactic ecological normality which is a high court of the cosmos, all have legitimate interests regarding resources derived from the essence of terrestrial mount. Any taking of precious things from our living platform must be auditable, orderly, and sustainable; not endless, blind nighthauls by the fuckload to inland China for the purpose of dumping it all into the Yangtze River from the Three Gorges Dam until everyone's irradiated, suffocating on burnt lead, and fried to a crisp. What we on earth

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know as oceans can disappear overnight, according to my green dreams. Mars indeed. You think the moon's a harsh mistress? Try doing without.

Consider this local North American example: each car with which one shares the road has a little Vehicle Identification Number stamped on a little metal strip on its dash. The tin for that V.I.N. strip and the rest of the car doesn't grow on trees. Materially, the automobile is a very special thing, whether it's appropriated from a llantera up the road or the dealership on Main Street, or whether it has (aluminum) license plates, or paper ones which the owner fabricates to avoid the bitch from Illinois at the D.M.V. who runs warrant checks. And the like. These people are cannibals.

Anyway a legitimate, auditable operation should be answerable for the production of any such vehicle in conformance with the overarching marketplace parameters as well as the physical realities of vehicles in motion. But that's not possible if cocaine-mustachioed South American mariners are conspiring with

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chainsmoking reds in Land's End jackets amid negotiations by which blow jobs and greenbacks are the key determining factors regarding who will own and regulate of the means of terrestrial resource production. W.T.F., right? If they were shipping out solar cells or something else with actual merit, I'd lighten up remarkably. Maybe that's happening too, but they're still in too deep with the mail-order brides and nose candy.

Mexico is a beautiful country with a rich and vast culture and I take issue with idiots and morons down there turning it into a death wound. It must stop. Then again, so should all the dipshit nonsense which is just as bad in the States. Let's, but one day at a time, people.

Having deployed ourselves successfully, we watched, waited, worked, and studied in Tenochtitlan. Any timing was perfect timing. Our first call was in September.

sixty-two.

We were cautious with our ad hoc

Hipster Bricks

foreign service pro bono. Yes, we were successfully integrating, yes we were operating a merit-based joint venture in good faith, yes we were pacifico, but we also knew anyone wanting to be friends with the fishy Americanos without due cause could be a troll or naive or worse. Down in Mexico City we couldn't talk out of school all night long at the local diner while playing cards and sketching on napkins. Not necessarily. But we did.

All politics are local, vuelta y vuelta. The bottom dollar, how the end turns out, the last detail, the way of the gun, or standing judgment relies on frank, intellectual communication whether in Mexico City or Denver or Naabeehó Bináhásdzo, and if you have something worthwhile to contribute to the dialog it doesn't matter where you're from or where you're going. So went our regular nightline café diner conversations in Coyoacán with odd assortments of locals, shop owners, baristas, U.N.A.M. faculty, etc. Business is business, and travels bring like-minded thought. We made some cool friends, but we weren't sleeping with them.

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Provided with proper quarter, we had no reason to consider ourselves any less capable or ready than we'd been in Phoenix, Baltimore, or Denver. It was the same kind of work and the technical risk exposure was also close. The style of local law enforcement and government were similar, and the soft double-blind nature of our command chain was intact. The work had the same philosophical foundations and involved the same core personnel, and so on. And if any assignment was too hairy, we could decline.

In university towns, if a market provides the blow, the kids will blow it. I mean to say, one should have no problem moving a kilo or whatever in a college town whether it's Ohio or Caracas. The first few details were local, and exceptionally softball jobs. Hedge work like process service and fencing. It's not flashy, but readily available for the cautious and competent. Homeowners Association footwork which we did graciously, enjoying the scenery.

We survived the first relatively dicey situation of our Mexican tenure on what would've been Thanksgiving in

the U.S.A.

sixty-three.

We took a job out in Veracruz, testing the limits of our comfort zone and pushing beyond the D.F. In some ways, it compared to the Boulder affair. It would be a short round trip, just one night. In retrospect, it was fitting that we nearly bought it on Thanksgiving.

A longer expedition to the north would've been problematic in at least three ways. First, the northern reaches of Mexico are the farthest away from the seat of the federal government, closer to U.S.A. It's a geopolitical thing. There's also the rugged and arid terrain to consider; Mexico's not all temperate meadows and beaches. The past rarely finds exception to mountains being more effective borders than any lines on a map drawn by warlords. And regarding the north, once they're so far up into the hinterlands, the attitudes of smugglers can change for the darker worse since they're closer to the fence of the land of the free and further

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from the implied trappings of urbane business practices.

Our instructions were to make a burn of a beach deal, exchanging hot lead for heroin. It went down like that too, pretty much, but for our being shot at while leaving. We were on foot when that happened, which was quite different than being shot at in a car. But we got through it. Here's how it went down:

Having rented a car we drove out from the capital city and made the departing trip in one leg, carrying the nine-millimeter Lugers delivered to our rental address earlier that year. We even packed beachwear although we never used it.

Heaters are clean, effective, and fast, and one doesn't have to touch anyone. We'd been provided with Bowie knives too, nice ones with sheathes, whetstones, and oil. Blades are quiet, and as foreigners with a compelling interest to maintain a low profile, we'd learned to use them whenever possible. If the overall operation in Veracruz went correctly, it wouldn't matter how much fucking noise we made.

Hipster Bricks

Maybe the civil corps hadn't gotten the memo about three gringos visiting for the purpose of mowing down a few narcotraficantes a la playa. Or maybe they did, and that's why they overshot us instead of picking us off, which they could have done easily. Anyway, someone fired shots over our head, as we returned to the car.

It was a morning deal, so we stayed the night in Tampico, woke early, and made our way to Pueblo Viejo via Puente Tampico bridge, under which we put down three dudes in a heroin deal. That morning our role was that of buyers near a jetty at a waterfront rendezvous. We were shown a sample of product and eagerly advised that boatloads more of it were readily available. En español, Sam told them our briefcase for payment was in the car. A scant moment later she broke leather and dropped one of them as Red and I took down the other two dudes.

Pro tip: If you have strange liaisons ever "going to the car" under the pretense of retrieving something during an illicit transaction, always become alert.

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That's free advice. The heroin, packaged up in an Igloo-brand cooler, remained there where its purveyors had set it in the sand. Our job was done, and the three of us had just started back to the car when we heard automatic weapons fire. Rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, you know, like a woodpecker. At first it sounded like the shots might have been too far away, but lead's lead so without more info, sounding far doesn't mean jack.

We ran like hell. It wasn't far to the car. I never spotted the origin of the shots, but I could hear the rifle rounds swishing through the air above us. We made it because someone let us. Saying hello. Friendly communications. Maybe even a little in-kind cover.

"They could have had us with that assault rifle." Red said. "Easy."

"Tacit support isn't bad news. But it could change with the weather." I said.

The warning shot was but a friendly audit, and the six-hour trip home went well enough.

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Whether here or back in the States, or anywhere else, the longer we continued with this sort of work, the more statistically likely we were to be zeroed. Such inevitabilities aren't binding among the hegemonies, however. I tried to estimate whether we might retire down there, wind up just cooling it in Old Mexico for thirty to fifty years. The word "retire" means different things to different people, though; I'm not talking the deep philosophy of fate, I'm just talking a decades-long siesta in the horse latitudes.

The duplicitous philosophical nature of life kept turning the mind. To keep death at arm's length is to be quite intimate with it, like at the courtship level; hence the aforementioned solution of dealing with it as "not-death." I considered, that if one's activities truly don't matter except for aesthetic value, which is probably true to some extent or another, then serving the aesthetic form is a key aspect for maintaining a right, meaningful lifestyle. The implication was that the three of us, like Jules, had to be aware of the time in order to work the clock effectively. Death's

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only change; understanding that fact increases one's attention to timing. There's free agency available and things don't have to go down any particular way.

Nevertheless, time and life can be squandered, so make hay while the sun shines. The world spins like a roulette wheel and life's an open market. There's a difference between playing with an agenda and playing with intent, as the former approach betrays a mis-understanding about the marketplace. One easy way to up the auntie for the sake of the game, and at the pleasure of the hegemon of sex and death, was for us to recruit local wildlife, of which the local taxonomy was richly diverse.

Sixty-four.

Life's all about opportunities. To meet or seek no further opportunities is another viable definition for actual death. As a journo (well, a former journalist turned anti-narcotics anti-hero), I still had an itch for political effect. Hence, location was a key factor of whether or not we

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stayed in Mexico. I was mindful of where we'd been, where we were going, what was accomplished, and what required further effort. Such a searching attitude colors one's daily business. Opportunities for transcendental cash-in of one's own self must be weighed seriously and implemented without hesitation if required. Mine is just one school of thought regarding such matters, but pursuant to analytical optimization, by my standard it's always a part of the equation, part of the definition of "dedication" and "guaranty."

One interesting aspect to metaphysical accountability in operating policy is that such terminal factors aren't belabored in hegemonic venues. Any high court of sex and death is a terminal state in its own right, for example. By the time any issue is pressed into an end-run of ultimate consequence, the census of the living or dead is already settled. Death is subordinate to justice and poses no obstacle for summoning witnesses or any other service, it's a parlor game for those awaiting dockets.

Operationally, proper planning and

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style of approach usually accommodate serendipity and other tractable alternatives to net-negative results. This perspective fits in with the previously described imprisonment mindfulness practice. Notwithstanding streetlight effect, it's unlikely that one's own actual subjective death will happen in any given situation. Objective death is a separate subject and seems to happen constantly since it denotes nothing more than mastery of a particular local objective. However, maybe not for everyone but in my experience, there's always real risk of imprisonment.

Even amid cataclysm also keep in mind, the dharma preserves its preferred agents. Fate or the numbered fates won't serve up prejudiced trumps without due cause and proper compensation. In hindsight, I see key events and unique occurrences as contingent upon the ascendance of Tex. Still even now, all I need to do is catch a fire for an audience with her. I don't know what other various pots she still has on the stove, but I know for sure she hooked my ass up. Someone, probably some iteration of herself, offered her a deal she

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couldn't refuse, and she tendered it in my passenger seat under I-95.

When one's life is a neverending fishing expedition like mine, it's difficult to blend in with the common trout. But who cares, really? Life's not a fucking soap opera. Not a shitty one, anyway. One challenge of hedging on futures is to retain the widest range of forward-looking opportunities to avoid restrictive labeling of oneself that can lockout certain paths or goals. Some creatures frown upon my lack of what I consider to be undue commitment, but my habitual problem with commitment is rooted in the avoidance of such pigeonholing. Believe me, I'm committed, but not to some confused pilgrim's half acre in hell, whose condescending frowns are a warning about their nearsighted designs on the my future.

How to configure such policy most effectively, efficiently, and desirably? On the way home from Veracruz, these items rattled around in my head like seeds in a dried gourd. To the degree that one can know the answers, I pondered our best options pursuant to them, and regarding what

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might be done to freshen up the outlook if nothing seemed enticing. I had a feeling one of our new buddies from the U.N.A.M. could help with our political fine tuning. There'd be some risk in that, but worth it.

I was sold on the idea by the time we returned to Coyoacán. Of our bringing on new staff, one catch could be a deviation from narcotics interdiction, since we were less likely to find people specialized exactly as we were.

sixty-five.

Our plurality was part of our in-plain-view M.O. and an exception to the general rule that people in this line of work operate alone.

We were obvious white hats, functionally, which is still effectively a black hat in the blind eyes of most people. Let's just say gray suit. In any case, we'd already made individual contacts within the local talent pool and were parsing a known quantity for our farm-in.

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Family's forever and business is for life, so adding staff is an elective process because it's never absolutely necessary to add anyone at all. One must choose carefully. There's risk to growth, in fact it's pure risk but if it suits, one adds while minimizing borrowed trouble with care. We wouldn't add people without our own feather and we sure as hell weren't adding people we didn't enjoy.

Risk of conceding the moral high ground was of more concern to me than potential deviation from our narcotics specialty. Being on foreign soil complicated the ethical measure of the matter, but not so far as to prevent fundamental justifications. I, we, were still making a universal implementation of our belief system. Regardless of the current geography, ethics remained a key factor of our operating budget and we needed to retain a pristine philosophical mooring, hence the necessity of knowing and liking one's committed partners.

Conversely, for the ethical incorporation of natural rights, legalistic exclusivity of locality and geography can be vacated. Foreigners

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are often not thought of as neighbors but they are people. Because we're all people, ethical omission can be a grave offense. Failure to stop and render aid has been viewed as a crime for long ages, even by the Romulans albeit cynically.

We'd made some friends from the art department, and some from the philosophy faculty, and some journalism people also. I, Red, and Sam talked over the merits of our various new friends and eliminated all preferred candidates except the philosophy guy. The Mexican patriotism of our journalism faculty liaison and his colleagues limited their usefulness or accessibility to us because their position carried too much proclivity for exchanging an ethical point for sheer nationalism, but we could still be friends. Again, it was specialization of focus we were willing to concede, not ethical lines, regardless of nation states.

The art faculty was useful for its ontological proximity to black market logistics and aesthetic truth. For the same reasons, however, its interests were too easily conflated with those of

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narcotics operators and adversarial black market intelligence operatives.

Julian Santana was our philosophy guy, an associate professor at U.N.A.M., whose family was from Veracruz and involved in the offshore oil and gas business segment. We hung out with Julian at a local café in Coyoacán where Sam was working. He liked us because we could communicate with him on a philosophical level, and because he could use us to brush-up on his Shakespeare. His English was at least as good as Sam's, Red's, and my Spanish. Sam and he also talked to each other en français, and so on. His Russian was horrible. Red and he tested their Mandarin on each other in conversations indistinguishable from questionable art. Aesthetics in semantics is critical for avoidance of epistemological hells. It's not a silver bullet but it's a part of the solution.

We didn't really have a plan for him and didn't require him for any of our local work, but he was available and practical. Shall I define fate as knowing one's self and one's work well enough to enable the proper selection

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of mates, where doing so in the context of persistent right effort avails true paths? I perceive paths of truth are themselves living therefore they're responsive and intelligent. Rivers are alive and so is the ground and they offer real wisdom.

sixty-six.

Near the solstice, the rising sun illuminated a new partnership after six hours of playing gin, with Julian and his teaching assistant who was a khaki-skinned woman with obsidian eyes named Marla. About two weeks later, he pitched a deal at us.

Julian's work was focused on linguistics, the nuances of which may have been beyond our necessary suite of blunt objects but we welcomed any addition of witcraft and he was a true paisano. One knows one's own and our disposition isn't unique. I expected he'd enlighten us about some novel aspect of the Mexican political will, and he didn't disappoint.

Basically, his people out in el Golfo de México were, ahh, ummm,

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“decommissioning” certain offshore rigs on short notice (whenever he said the word, he always gesticulated quotation marks with his fingers). A key concern pursuant to Mexico's governing interest was regarding how best to perform such rapid decomm operations with ecological mindfulness. The President of the Republic, Mexican Navy, Pemex, and the gulf's at-large marine life, et al, didn't want any unnecessary burning hell disaster coming down in the G.O.M.

In case you didn't know, industrial decommissioning is a key and complex aspect of the engineering life cycle, and there are right and wrong ways to do it. An example of the wrongest way is to blowout the well and scuttle the platform, as in the econightmare hackjob of Deepwater Horizon offshore Macondo 2010.

Generally fucking local seas and global oceans is a high crime and heinous act of war, as a matter of fact, representing one of the ways interplanetary corporate warfare is prosecuted. Where no individual agent is consequential enough to qualify as a target, as is the case frequently, the

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ecosystems themselves take the hit. Which also incidentally clears the platform of local agency. Believe that. Anyway, there are orderly ways to pull and cap those wells without spilling a drop.

“I can get behind this deal for sure.” Red said.

“Did they teach you about this kind of thing at the police academy?” Sam asked her.

“Not as such. But some aspects of the training might come in handy.”

That was that. We'd graduated to new moral high ground on the high seas, being tasked with actionable maritime intelligence alongside the philosophy professor's Veracruz-based familia. There was no foreseeable reason to stop at the Gulf of Mexico since most wells are wildcat wells, it's a big world, and nobody shucks our corn but us. The appropriate perspective regarding wildcatters is, they're big assholes who want to put a rod right into your mom. I am very broadly defining wildcatter to mean every well including Spindletop. Somebody get me a map.

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Your earth is alive and has the same civil rights as you.

We sat up that night amid the the lovely ancient not-winter of the Aztecs, eyeballing our fresh crossroads with glad smiles.

sixty-seven.

The Santana contract was maritime business as usual for organizations with such interests. Among the guilds of resource administration, cohesion is necessary for establishing and maintaining global hegemony in technology, security, economy, egalitarianism, and conservation. These considerations are the named price for hegemony of local order, terrestrial and otherwise.

We know all politics are local. Mines, hydrocarbons, libraries, museums, and other civil infrastructure must be undefiled. Be overly cautious of out-of-town investors. Only insofar as they want your ass do they just want your money, because carpetbaggers are hip to the fact that script currency lacks actual value beyond their

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inclination for it, that is increased market leverage for interlopers. If they're bad-faith operators, they don't belong and you don't want them in your sphere of influence, whether it's a geopolitical state or a state of being and probably both. They want to drink your blood.

Anyway, our new gig with Julian sounded fancy and was a new kind of adventure for us, but from what I gathered, it was typical maritime support and there would be none of our standard murder-in-the-dark action. Then again, the work we'd grown accustomed to was gory only in the literal sense.

Our not being actual mariners wasn't an issue, they needed technicians. Data crunchers and general staff. Competent, discrete, international partisans to cover sensitive administrative or logistical details of offshore operations. We were put to those efforts immediately and learned much about offshore Mexico's Golden Lane fields such as the ownership details of the infrastructure. It's worth noting, paper money does contribute affirmatively to the

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important cause of keeping various morons out of the copper mines despite my usual bellyaching about currency. It's a challenge for me not to view a stack of dollars as a stack of warrants (or as someone else's unresolved and unorganized casework).

Julian's father intimated to me that he didn't like the "cacahuates down in Rio," citing business reasons. The Brazilian real has built enormous energy infrastructure offshore Brazil, and created an international investment and production boom. At this very time, there's a totally unnecessary international clusterfuck of corporate jackals pillaging those waters and making a mess. Offshore Africa's an even bigger disaster. The problem is worldwide.

Of course the same can be said for Mexico's Golden Lane, and in the U.S. regions of the Gulf of Mexico to be sure, and among the various partisan claims to the North Sea, and throughout the waters of the Asian Pacific, and on and on. Santana and associates' efforts would have been like a search for a needle in a needle stack, except that it was a fairly well-mapped stack

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so the needles they wanted were easily located.

For any paramilitary operation, to get the job done entirely by way of intelligence is the most ideal, least risky, cleanest, and easiest approach. A peaceable strategic approach is ever the secondary option. Shutting down an offshore production operation takes a standard mothballing and decommissioning protocol, properly planned and peopled. The green army, for lack of a better institutional catch-all term, might offer advice and historical perspective for such efforts. If there isn't a peaceful change in command on location, the next best option can be quantified in terms of minimum tactical personnel eliminations. If not zero, then one would be the preferred tally for such efforts. And so on.

Not only is the wildcat offshore drilling at a riotous pitch today but the seas are also crowded with leaky F.P.S.O. projects that are over-ripe for fair and proper decommissioning. Anyway, because there is so much work to be done, there's a certain ubiquity to it. Final determinations on a

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platform about the last cop out during a peaceable civil change of national operating standard is practically indistinguishable from the casual social or dramatic blocking that's par for cocktail parties. Otherwise, it's someone taking a long walk off a short pier. Not very fancy, huh?

Alas, we were never asked to join a boarding party or even leave dry land. It was an office job, literally. The technical nature of the job was an interesting, redeemable aspect of the content that kept us from getting bored and walking off in search of more stimulating ways to liaison with the hegemony of ecology.

That story summarizes our organization's comings and goings around that New Year. Julian still scribbled relentlessly into notebooks about metaphysics and linguistics, and we all continued our late night cards and tea at our favorite local café diner, enjoying our compatriots, confederates, comrades, and colleagues. Again, the not-winter of Coyoacán is a dream.

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sixty-eight.

Maybe it's not ironic that we never left our cubes working for the Santanas, but we could write on our resumes "support services for a privately owned Distrito Federal-based naval operation." It is an interesting notch in the belt and there must be plenty of foreign service personnel who only dream of landing such a sweet gig. Our own accidental D.I.Y. moxy, ever evolving from its original deviation, is what had put us where we were. In fact, I was concerned that if the ride upward with a bullet continued, one of us might end up in public office.

Answerable to no one and nothing but grand ideologies we were accidental public servants, where earlier in the journey the only things to worry about had been death and jail. Since we'd become part of the commonweal inadvertently, life was more complicated and death and jail were part of a slippery slope somehow upwards. We meant well yet had become bureaucrats, and bureaucracies are dangerous. There's been a bureaucracy at the root of every horrible thing that's ever happened. The more people

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inside an organization, the greater is its perceived need to control outside individuals or groups.

There is an undeniable fishy feeling when one's path has gone through hell, high water, bullet wounds, transcendental enlightenment, and general international romping only to wind up in some office pushing pencils. Sort of comfortable yet odd generally. That's what it had come to. A far cry from working alone. But form follows function, and it didn't matter anyway because a sea change was dependably overdue.

It's never any problem to locate some hazardous, poorly lit snake pit to dive into, no matter how far up the soft-ass air-conditioned loop-de-loop one has shimmied. Actually seeking out trouble to jump in isn't necessary because nature will ambush when given leave to do so (and trying to fend off nature only postpones the inevitable.) There is an art to rolling with such organic attacks for the purpose of surviving them.

My argument to the partners was, we couldn't stay in Mexico City forever,

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cushy job or not. I must sound like a broken record, I know. They said so but they also knew I was right. I stayed on with Julian through the rest of the dry season, then pulled out for some "me" time. Sam and Red continued on with the cubicle farm, and our living and playing together continued. I worked a few jobs through Red, as I'd been doing since the day we met in Colorado. I was working alone again, and it was quiet work.

I did a lot of writing, no surprise there. My activities had long since become too sensitive or potentially incriminating for verbatim record keeping but there's always a green light for decent fiction. And, things did soon enough change again, after a fashion which you may perceive as drastic, although such apprehension is to misunderstand the nature of change, as I always say.

It turned out that in June, one particular job would be my last one of the sort. I still work out, if you will, but my relationship with the world and its hegemony is changed. Like Jules', my work has taken on a more administrative nature. Basically

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I was shot and killed but not buried. I know that sounds like bullshit. It surprised me too, but hear me out. This final tale explains much about Jules' civil status, foregoing and otherwise, and belies odd esoterics about the little organization some refer to as the world. The story may also render the faces of the hegemons more clearly.

The last detail was thus: I was supposed to meet some dude in a fairly sketchy section of the city and conduct incidental reconnaissance. A fishing expedition combined with a burn. It was a scenario where the best calculations required a lone casualty, having been whittled down in good faith, to just one person on the business end. I went to the meeting point and waited outside some laundry joint. The person arrived on time and things were going as planned.

We went to the back office. There were a few people in the building who were supposed to be there, for the sole purpose of providing me with general cover, which meant they were expecting a body and prepared to deal with it. Instead, there would be at least two

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gippers, however I stopped my fretting about carcass logistics after someone put me down like an old mule, with a high velocity slug in the back of the head. It happens. Such is the nature of things, do not be alarmed.

Anyway, I'm in the laundromat with this coke dealer. We went to the back office which was empty except for several kilo bricks of product sitting on a card table. I made a little small talk before shooting him several times in the chest. I stood over him and put two more rounds into the head, then felt a cold barrel at the base of my own skull. There was thunder, then I was offline.

sixty-nine.

Biological parameters can be compromised at any moment, so it's important to develop the mind while physical opportunities and tools are accessible. We make hay while the sun shines.

Being shot, point blank in the base of the skull, scratched an itch that had been slightly beyond reach for

forty-one years. It is also very jarring. My normal graphical user interface was interrupted immediately, as I already mentioned. Yet, a definite awareness remains, and that's only the beginning.

Immediately I knew what had happened. For a short while, I still received and processed bio-net signal feed through what was left of the brain core, whose processing dropped fast to zero after the direct physical trauma to the core and the halt of vascular function. There was no pain, but the ears rang at all frequencies and colors, as one expects at such proximity to a firearms discharge. The ringing faded with the progressive loss of local neural function, of course much faster than it would've otherwise. So each cognizable reduction in noise signal overload was like main switches going off, terminating nerve channels. Soon the body was only a discarded meat jacket and decomposition began.

The contents of the mind, however, remain faithfully intact afterward, outside of the physical incorporation. Live well because those contents will carry on. In fact, they're more easily

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accessible without the communications and memory limitations of an individually-fixed integrated module. Time is now of a wholly different essence and perspective is changed drastically.

One of the many keys for surviving death is proper severance of attachment or reliance on an erstwhile biomechanoid, the clinging to which is like powering a fried motherboard or re-shelling an egg. Yes either can be done, theoretically, but it's a last resort.

Zen scholars describe enlightenment as seeing one's own face before one's parents were born. The point is, it's still you. But what of it? Although death isn't necessary for enlightenment, it's a crucial part of education. Do you find it comforting to know that consciousness remains? If one's existence is a nightmare, maybe it isn't comforting.

I keep saying that change is the only constant and it's certainly true of life. That's true of death also but one reason life and living is in constant flux is, the dead have a

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capacity for yet slower, relatively still momentum around which quicker currents flow. Having learned to change in the quick, one may also swim effectively beyond it. Otherwise, stop-motion of failed mechanicals begets a creep of festering transcendental rot. Such are the benchmarks of biology and forward progress. Differences in levels of philosophical preparedness among generations, civilizations, or entire epochs shed light upon law and jurisprudence and is exactly why karmic or constitutional law is binding beyond the living and profane.

Remarkably, along with the auditory overload, I experienced a brief physical vision of infinitely brilliant colors with the last blast. It was a helluva rainbow, such is violent head trauma. As the signal faded, I discovered my consciousness was already reorganized enough for me to recount the sequence of events. Being so rapidly re-coalescing after those colorful moments, soon I was able to settle into what I've found to be my new standard state of being, perception, and awareness. So far.

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Since there's no individual objective, physical vision is one of many things that are completely different on the other side. This aspect, like the philosophical preparedness aforementioned, is also forensically teachable and universally relevant because the biases incidental to a fixed vantage are overcome with practice and preparation. Unincorporated vision isn't an objective vantage at all, but instead like a web of foci. Without the trappings of the body, one may shine in and out of times and locations as needed. Elective presence. The freedom is nice.

I knew my soul would live and the affirmation was welcome, a permanent disposition and well worth the wait. Don't rush out, regardless of variable terrestrial longevity, as painful and challenging as it can be. Take the time for living to interact, meet, and connect with others. Moment for moment enjoy, because I tell you that's the sort of useful existence which is physically accessible to shiners like me and Jules. Among the cosmology, or in any other transcendental sense, peaceable, empathetic, real people

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leading genuine lives are the coin of the realm.

The elementals, cosmic oceans, celestial neighborhoods, and aesthetic matrices are exquisite but all turn to sand in time. Edifice provides grounds for polyphonic assembly but brighter than any artful shadows are the entities casting them. That's a fact. We're it, so live your life accordingly.

Since I'd left the body that served me so well over the decades, I wanted to sing it home so I stuck around to see what they'd do with it. The guy who shot me left through the entrance we'd both used, then through a different door entered some other dude who seemed to be expecting bodies. He put me and the man I'd just killed in the same bag, carried it outside, placed it in the trunk of an old beat-up Mazda, drove to a nearby junkyard, and flung the bag into the back of a junked pickup truck which contained several other dubious black parcels.

Would I have preferred a more proper treatment like what Tex got at that fire station in Baltimore? The matter

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isn't without value or consequence. What happens to meat jackets is relevant, but not a deal breaker compared to an overarching failure to recognize that soul survives.

The collective consciousness is infinitely full of enlightened souls time out of mind, though there is no overcrowding where such light prevails. Of course there are realms crowded with unenlightened beings too, such is darkness. A remarkable aspect of anthropogeny is that everyone is philosophically present, excepting a few notable demographics like hungry ghosts, secularly excommunicated untouchables, and the living lost. Practically, these terms all translate the same way, which belies a dubious teleology.

Besides bad faith agency, one of the few actual dangers in the universe is accidental by way of simply forgetting one's soul is safe and will carry on happily, forever. In misunderstanding death as easily survivable, or forgetting, people are vulnerable to the hustle that simple faith in oneself ensures against.

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Excepting preference and personal affairs, whether I attended to Red's and Sam's souls didn't matter to them whatsoever. But in light of my new role in the organization, as I had when faced with Jules' sudden change in civil status, Sam and Red had some recognitions of their own to reflect on. There were also various policy considerations for me to make, to include a decision about my level of involvement in the affairs of the living business partners. Of course I would commit, as needed, one reason being that I had all the time in the world.

My failing to watch my own back enabled a screwup that wasn't supposed to happen. The dude at the laundromat had been looking for a body but he got an extra, which was no problem as far as he cared. So, Mr. Clean reported no major problems at the scene and news of my liberated status was delayed in getting to Red. By the time it became obvious I was missing, I'd returned to them in essence. I and Jules sleep with the fishes.