

Time has been . . .

(in the desert . . . a moment ago)

First light, a gentle updraft is quickly desiccated, again. Its first and last whisper of hydration? Errant vapors, whispers of morning dew clinging only to scatter like exploded dandelion fluff. Holding steady as the dry lift increases, a vulture cranes its head, surveys the desert floor: nothing. No small rodents or larger creatures struggling—dying—no carrion—only wild flowers, cactus and the occasional, wind-induced, rose-shaped, eddy in the sand.

Descending, a pause, another updraft; floating higher, now. Its eyes ease up, relax and broaden to scope the entire horizon: rose to cream and finally azure. A thin patina of sunlight, restless and warming melds with the wind and light all supporting the flux and patter, up and down, out and back, that is the constant stasis under its wings.

A moment later, still less than that when seeded into the collected time of the universe's womb, and all of this will be compared to her hand and song and smile as she hums while seated at the spinning jenny or his impossible 9th composed in the silent quadrants of his voiceless brain, or the pixels hatched from a radio beam caught like the sizzling heat from Walter Johnson, The Big Train's hand: the Hubble Telescope giving us the backwash thrown forward . . . and the ever present, insistent mushroom cloud, yes, born, bred and refined—here.

Each eye amazed, stilled and flummoxed, wondering, 'How was I ever connected to . . . What was it the catcher said after spitting out his chaw? "Sheeit! That weren't nothin'! Just his little 'ol change-up." Then paring off another chaw, rolling it in his mouth, he replaces his mask, crouches down and flashes another signal. He drops down his index finger, slowly rotates it and says, as you nervously dig in, "Strap in good, Sparky, here comes his jumpin' *angry* heat."

Try as we may it just never seems to include . . . *us* . . . “So of course, cheri, we annihilate it . . . compris?”

No, *he*, the weak, observant one was not one of them, he was the first of *us*. New wiring, perhaps, or just a mutation that left its indelible mark, on walls, in caves, saw one thing in his head, another outside and decided to marry the two. Tolerated, left alone, not a female, but too frail to hunt. Not a child bearer, nor a hunter, a lone observer always perched up on a ledge, there up on the hill above the river and its valley to watch the fixed tableau that moved like his own chest, imperceptible, but moving, breathing, alive and animated if you had the time and patience, and were given the luxury to simply observe it all unfold. Creatures above and below, colors that moved with the wind and the light, all of it connected and peaceful, all of it seemingly orchestrated until he extended out his own hand. Reaching out . . . where did *it* fit into all of this magic?

So when the females were out with the small ones. The hunters? Gone. Alone by the fire, the shadows fanning out, licking the walls like the tall grass and water reeds blown by the wind. Closing his eyes, yes, there he was, perched once more above the verdant fields, the river silent, save for the distant wash of whitewater just past the sweep, the bend in the river, like a heron craning its neck, its head, suddenly, plunging into the water, out of view. Blinking, again, the erratic, bob and weave of the fire’s shadows jumped. Again, closing his eyes, he smiled. Being asleep, but not, inside of the cave and the interior of his own head seemed one in the same: grass and ibex, the wind combing the long green, its long, easy strokes threshing out prancing, leaping herds of creatures who appeared to move in and out of the land in the same manner he felt his own chest rise and fall.

He plunged his hand into the rough-hewn mixing bowl, mashing and matching, grinding and watering the paste gleaned from the soft, staining minerals. Rising up, he walked over and used the shadows as a living stencil to shape the form of the great beasts leaping and prancing. Wall and shadow giving *his* vision body. Pausing, looking up and around, for a moment he felt as though he were standing inside of his own head.

From a waking dream, the most fragile of them—the father of *us*—all—reached up to soothe the heart of each despairing descendant birthed from that moment. Awake and probing, painting and lamenting, this precursor of *us all* attempted to re-attach that which was discovered and lost all in the same instant it was observed. He was so unlike the graceful creatures who seemed but an extension of the water, air, forest and fields, so he attempted to paint them into his own waking dream in hope of restoring himself to the sanctuary that was home to them, yet so hard, cold and unforgiving to him.

Pausing for a moment, he smiled as he saw it appear, there, the connection, made possible from the extension of his own hand. There the awkward, perfect strokes fused the ibex and the antelope, the great bulls, the cows without hesitation onto and into and now leaping out of the walls. Yes, it was his and becoming more, perhaps a part of all of us until adding the simple outline of his hand. He wept.

Of all that was in and of those walls, flying, snorting, prancing, galloping, and soaring, all that was matched and made lovely from what he had seen and felt from his perch, all these images became the simultaneous expression of the serenity and perfection that was seen outside, also felt within him, and successfully a living part of these walls. Yes, here, as though it were out there, or from the shadows and from his dreams. It was, all of it, there, the cave as a cathedral, a

timeless, new dream. The two were one, here, but the only thing, completely out of place was . . . yes, one thing: his own hand, it alone, did not match.

A seed discovered, cracked and flowering all in the same instant and into petals of anguish, fear and alienation that grew stronger and enveloping as each of us continues to flourish and grieve. Grieve? Yes, because at arm's length there is the ceaseless and mocking realization that we are hostage while others soar and prance above, below and around—*us*.

Thirty thousand years, really not even a moment, earlier, it began, and still the isolation, the indifferent shrug reverberates and reinforces the waking revelation that he alone discovered and attempted to solve. By reaching up to re-install all of us he set down a marker, a moment for each to study and resolve, to ponder and forever exile us in the heart of the dilemma: How to extend an individual dream into and out of a place hostile to his very existence? For in each of us is a simple, completed dream to share. But how and where and with whom? In each there is the rage and the silence that petitions while suffocating the love wrestling in the womb desperate to push out, be touched and made whole, again. Here?

“Back again, back again, back in the warm waters of momma's belly,” goes the refrain of the song sung wrung from the cold, steel-clawed winds felt from riding under a boxcar, the parallel lines of the track and its wooden ties only inches away.

In becoming man, the damning dilemma was an unfortunate fix, a needle that never seemed to deliver enough of the drug to last long enough to survive, save for a moment in transition, a dream or perhaps making love. That dream? Yes, the one that has seven billion separate versions. How to share it? How indeed, the hot-wired monkey—man—asks each time the sun appears and he has not a clue, still, where the time stops . . . goes, or waits and for what? Always, still, the most pressing problem? Yes! What to order for breakfast . . . this morning.

This morning

He heard the major chord first; a sustained, full C, but the train was not in sight. Odd for the desert, he thought. Yes, strange, sound before the image, a complete reversal of the accepted, the ordinary, the reality of the desert's flatness. Everything so close, seemingly within arm's reach, when, in fact, the shrub, abandoned depot, or mountain are ten miles away. A desert constant, the unresolved *tompe-d'oeil* that the brain attempts to correct, but never succeeds. Still, he has never *heard* the train before seeing it approach at his particular point in the desert: his winter home, the abandoned line shack on the Salt Lake Line. A relic of another, slower place in space and time.

Again, the long, full blast from the engine's horn, but still no train in sight. He walked back into his cabin, looked at his sleeping palette, 'Yes, I *am* awake.' Returning to the rails, he scanned the parallel lines of steel that ran endlessly in both directions. Again, the visual slight-of-hand, as his eyes followed the rails out, slowly collapsing from two equidistant lines into a single, bold black stroke that disappeared in both directions. A third blast of the engine's horn, arrived, and still . . . no train.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag filled with pills and pot. 'No, I am *not* using now.'

He stepped closer to the rail, dropped to his knees then stretched out on his stomach, placing his right ear directly on the warming face of the rail.

"A baby sleeping in mama's belly," is how Shep described it to him eighteen months ago. Shep could calculate the distance and time from the whisper and the faint vibrations he heard and felt in the rails. 'A bottle-nosed porpoise out of water,' he thought.

“Don’t rush, none, you hear?” chuckling as he stood up and brushed himself clean.

“Seven miles, shade over eleven minutes ‘fore she gets here. Gives me time to tie up tight, have a smoke ‘fore I jump up on or under her. Damn I hope there’s an open boxcar. I hate sailin’ the blinds underneath, just getting’ too old to hang on up under there, have trouble stayin’ awake down there . . . up against her belly.”

Shep appeared, one night, a new constellation, discovered and fallen alongside his cabin. Walking out to urinate in the morning he saw the old man curled up asleep inside his Bronco. He fixed him breakfast, supplied a bed and books, liquor and conversation. ‘A week and a half of graduate school before that apparition disappeared,’ he mused.

‘Fifteen miles close, to forty miles an hour . . . so about twenty-three minutes, so why haven’t I seen it . . . yet?’

Standing up, straightening his back, his eyes followed the rails out until they were no longer steel, but simply a part of the distant desert. No sign of an engine, yet. A gentle breeze pushed sand and scrub brush swirling past his feet. Another stronger gust followed, and then another and another after that creating a series of eddies—roses in the dirt—everywhere.

‘Can the wind do that? Pick up a sound, like a hurricane and jump it? Sling it forward?’ He closed his eyes and took several deep, long breaths. Opening his eyes, he saw a vulture climb up and hang on an updraft. Scrub mesquite held fast against the gusts of wind. A slight hint of water filled his nostrils, and there, again, the full, melodic C.

‘Funny, no drugs, no food yet . . . no coffee. Just awake and I hear the approaching train before I see it. I know it’s there, I felt it in the rails. Like knowing a star is there before the light arrives . . . wonder if anyone else has ever *felt* or *heard* a star before they saw it?’