

GATHERING THE SILENCE

Gathering the Silence

Loyd L. Fueston, Jr.

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It is then right to say that what we do depends on what we are; but it is necessary to add also that we are, to a certain extent, what we do, and that we are creating ourselves continually. This creation of self by self is the more complete, the more one reasons on what one does.

Henri Bergson, *Creative
Evolution* [3]

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Acknowledgments

Aunt Minnie, I hope you're looking down from Heaven and smiling on me. Thank you for teaching me to read when I was only three. You might remember I was reading first-grade books on my own by the next year. I wasn't much of a prodigy compared to the likes of John Stuart Mill but I think that early exposure to books helped to condemn me to life as a man struggling to be a true citizen of Christian Civilization rather than easing my way into the barbaric childhood which seems the chosen or at least fated role of human beings and entire peoples once promising better.

Thank you, Aunt Minnie, for helping to bring about my suffering and—more so—for helping me to recognize how to redeem my mind. I'm not being at all sarcastic. I would like a more complete and personally fulfilling life but not as a weak-minded barbarian, child or adult.

Preface to the Second Edition

This Second Edition has only a handful of small changes as a result of rereading this novel in 2017 as preparation for writing the second novel in this series, tentatively titled: *A Stranger in a Land of Strangers*.

Preface to the First Edition

This book is a work of my imagination but grounded in some of my own experiences. The protagonist, Johnny Waters, has some of my characteristics but his experiences and even the way in which he develops is more than a little different. He isn't me and his life is similar to mine but isn't mine.

A few of the characters draw on some people I've known but they also aren't them. They aren't even the same as they were in the original version of this story nearly 25 years ago nor are they the same as they were in any of the versions I started and never finished in the years between then and now. Rebel, the Golden Retriever, was really my dog and he behaved just as he behaves in this book.

And I feel I should mention one oddity about this novel. . .

It must be very rare indeed for a novel to have a bibliography, but I make reference to some of the books which were important to me during the period when I entered into what might be called communion with the Creator. I didn't necessarily agree with those books but they asked important questions in such a way as to lead me further in my own questioning. In fact, those books are mostly provocative, including even *City of God* [8] by St Augustine of Hippo, a book in which Augustine discusses the possibility of sinlessness by way of human effort partly by telling of a friend who could fart musical tunes. My personal experience is that pious, or perhaps pietistic, Christians glide right over that story and will deny any story about farting was in that holy book written by such a holy man. Augustine was a better Christian thinker than any such men and women.

I didn't provide references to works of fiction such as *Moby Dick*, none of them—to my knowledge—having titles which are ambiguous in any way, some of them such as *Moby Dick* being available in a number of printings which differ mostly in any literary or historical discussion provided above and beyond the work itself. Even when one of those works was translated from another language, it was not the case that translation differences would affect their place in this novel, as it might with the story of the farting man in the theological work, *City of God* [8].

Prologue

It was like a dream, though it were a memory out of focus.
I was alone in the midst of many, many in the midst of one.
Being lost, all that mattered was me, but...
I was obscured from myself...

I was not to recover myself unless I found the story.
But there was no one to be recovered.
So ill-formed...
So cowardly...

So terrified of moving away from the herd,
Yet, not feeling I could ever be part of...
Could I learn to ignore the inconvenient?
Could I learn to cheer at stab or thrust?

No one...

Shadows and fogs make not a man...
Does clay make a man?
Or is it only when clay is shaped properly?
Or both?

But the story...
The effort to recover what's not...
I shape my self to what is.
I shudder at what might result.

Part I

Where's the Path?

1 The Stone-walls of New England

The dreamer ignored the concerns of those around him. His mind, his mind, his very spirit, his spirit, his restless hands and legs, the very flesh of his body, crawled forward in reluctant unity in response to *The Most Banal of Facts*:

What sorts of madmen were those who built
thousands and thousands and thousands
of miles of stone-walls meandering
and arcing and straightening through New England?

Who would have built those walls
traveling through untamed fields,
through forests of oak and beech,
through forests even of larch and birch?

Who would have built walls which cut asunder
backyards of 5-bedroom legal houses
from 6-bedroom neurosurgical houses
from 8-bedroom burger houses?

How many the stone-walls does it take
to safely separate the 10-bedroom houses
of the true American aristocrats:
traders of hedges and allocators of capital?

Is the purpose of those walls
to prevent innocent youth
from entering the woods so full
of deer and foxes and bears?

Is it but an act of superstition,
a descent into theories so occult,
so fragrant of conspiracies,
as to speak of eastern mountain lions?

We'll pass over wolves
so that we pass over
those in suit and tie,
who might well be fathers.

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

Who, pray tell, would have been so insane?
These neoneolithic walls traverse lands bereft of cows
and then move through ponds, ponds so inappropriate
but so sludgy and fertile of blue-green algae.

Does it best to protect the arm-coated students
of inbred prep-schools from single-celled pond-scum
if they are to mingle on byways and playing-fields
with American public-school students?

Yet, I must ask you, Mother of Nature, Mother of mine,
“Why did some other ponds, so seemingly similar,
exist for centuries of slurping cows
before turning into slime-pools?”

Gravity works to smooth the earth’s surface
but when it doesn’t, and then we have
the Appalachians and the Rockies and even,
have mercy on us!, the Himalayas.

The Himalayas!! Were they plowed up
as teenaged titans and adolescent gods
showed their strength to the liking of
large-breasted chthonic maidens?

Mr Darwin, oh so smart, tell us:
“What dwells inside this mystery?
The earthy smells of virginal goddesses?
The vaginal smells of chthonic goddesses?”

Sir Isaac, Dr Einstein, “Can I ask:
Is there not some true law of gravity,
more than a suggestion that flows be down
rather than up toward the sky?”

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

Is Mother Nature a playful tease?
Is she answering different questions
from those more modern and simple,
lighthearted, concise, and to some point?

Mother Nature is surely a cheat.
She won't obey the law of gravity.
Many a misdemeanor bump, but
the Himalayas are felonious.

Does God Himself understand this?
Why has He unleashed nature upon us
when we deserve His best efforts.
A well-lubricated island resort, please.

Ah, but we were talking about walls,
stone-walls making their ways through New England,
sometimes doing something useful,
even to increasing the value of a house.

Sometimes, those walls do nothing
but protect God-begging souls
from those dark spirits lurking yet
in the dwindling virgin woods of New England.

We all know that dark spirits are no more,
banished by an age so scientific,
no more delusions of superstitious minds.
Demons live no more in the well-managed, modern woods.

Dark-viewed men, faces set like flint, built these walls.
We men of the truly modern age march forward into the world,
sure that all will work out, so cheerful and open of face are we.
We know that dark spirits live no more not in our minds and souls.

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

We all know those virgin woods are no more,
banished by an age so prosperous,
no more delusions of Medieval minds.
Creator live no more in the well-managed, modern world.

Cheerful men, faces set in smilies, took down these woods.
We men living past the truly modern age march forward into the
world,
sure that disaster impends, so dark-viewed and flinty of face are
we.
We know that dark spirits are not needed in a world with us.

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

We tried our very best
and resurrected dark spirits
and found them
in our minds and souls.

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

A few acres of virgin woods yet remain.
We need a few good men wielding chainsaws,
for we wish only dark spirits of our own.
We wish only to serve our own desires.

Through it all, nature herself remains
and remains mysterious though not silent.
With the desperate tones of a man who would think,
I ask for silence to hear non-sense in return.

2 Dreams Come to be Dreamed

Ever came the dreams and more dreams, leaving the wakening sleeper confused by lack of clear memories as much as by the darkish images and ghostly events. More dreams came through the days, remembered the better and even somewhat under the control of the dreamer, but it all left a great confusion that cast doubt upon the reality of even the most concrete of objects. Some dreams were clearly reshaped memories of events which had happened though without any particular significance at the time. Other dreams presented themselves as memories of events which Johnny Waters had never witnessed, let alone participated in.

And so it was that Johnny Waters remembered and re-remembered and imagined only to eternally return, though but a few times. And then there were the times he returned not even once and not did he re-member though it had remained possible that he remembered. But usually not.

Johnny fell often into a badly composed story in which he was called to prophesy, to the telling of that tale of a prophet which was part of...

Part of something greater.

But... what?

Could a prophet's own tale be the bearer of his message? Could it point to something greater while not naming it? Or even Him?

And how could he be sure he wasn't just making it all up? He had sometimes fallen into a state of feverish spirituality since he'd been fighting against...

Had he really fought against entering the Catholic Church?

Was it God who had called him into the Catholic Church?

Ringling bells at the witching hour?

Satan?

Seemed implausible. God Himself seemed terrible enough to account for all the hardships rumored to be visited upon the sons of Adam by demons and fallen angels.

Courage was needed, sometimes the courage no more than faith acting as a lubricant on cowardly human beings.

Faith in what?

The God of the creeds he'd read about. . .

Such magnificent disinterest seemed to lie behind the theological captions his Congregationalist ancestors had spit out not long after the War Between the States. . .

No longer was it the Civil War of his high school years. . .

In some circles. . .

Other circles were completed so that we ended up safely where we had truthfully and factually begun.

Mattered that not to his current spiritual struggles? Or did it not?

And why had anyone ever mounted theological systems which so often seemed to protect the initiated from God?

Johnny traveled planes not like any plains he'd ever seen. Or not. Not the smallish plains of the Connecticut River Valley where he'd grown up. Not the endless plains of the heartland he'd flown over. He couldn't even imagine how to calculate the areas of these planes, nor could he even take a single step that proved to be on a straight path.

What was the meaning of 'straight' on this topsy-turvy region? It was plain he didn't even know the meaning of plane unless he learned how to shrink-wrap reality. Plain it was to him. . .

If he learned something new about the land to his right, the land ahead of him would buckle, rising ahead of his footsteps. He traveled over a road that turned from him toward regions it would have been better not to travel. . .

3 An Early Year

An ordinary American home it was, though a bit small by later standards. However short a time those grander standards were to be. The dreamer remembered both times so ephemeral as the prologue and the short paragraph which might prove to be the main chapter of a world-striding people.

The timespace of the 1960s. Or was it a spacetime? For sure was it. . .

A time when so much implicit became explicit. A space within grasp of a likable people condemned to the affectation of self-esteem.

A space accessible to rocket-ships and a space much surfaced by asphalt. A time which seemed so new, so better shaped to the needs and desires of a people who wanted much but not nearly all.

Was it still more than that? Or a bit less?

Surely were the odds a billion to one against equality.

And maybe infinity had a role in the discourse only partially verbalized, only partially subject to verbalization.

If space and time, so different to human sight and touch and smell and hearing, were so intertwined as to be something different from all of that, then what could be said of dreams? Were they but efforts of an overstressed brain to clean out what was not needed as it strove to set itself in the context of a never-ending, never-cohering story? But that seemed too simple a view for understanding even dreams about searching through attics and cellars and through the submerged ruins of great buildings.

It is enough to say the dreamer had been born into, had grown into, a people heading into the grandest of futures that any futures had yet been

known to be.

Why then did the dreamer remember mostly such things as a home and a neighborhood, even a town of schools and stores, all so modest, so unlike what would soon be coming?

For truly, an ordinary American home it was, short in closet space but compensatingly short in clothes per occupant, else there would have been no room for adults or children to sit or to lie down to sleep.

As it was, all could sit in their own spot, not upon laps and couch-arms, only so long as the youngsters were humble enough to sit on the floor. As it was, with but four adults sitting on the couch and recliner, the floor area in the living-room was crowded when all six children were part of the viewing audience.

They had no choice but to crowd into the living-room because this house had but one television, black-and-white with a screen of perhaps 19 inches on the diagonal. Maybe only 17 inches. It can be hard to recover memories from such primitive times.

It was a time of economic but's and financial only's and even political just's if not political justice. Reality had been reduced to inane schemes. Often criminal as well. Or at least sinful if Isaiah and Jeremiah had been right. John the Baptist?

For some reason, Johnny Waters, who was 12 that snowy evening of December 23, was upstairs lying on his bed struggling with a book about physics and its history by Einstein. He was there because he preferred books to television. After a few afternoon hours of active playtime, he preferred books to sports and cards and conversations with friends and families. The conversations usually covered matters of interest to those who preferred television and spectator sports to books. He was trying, and failing, to train himself to walk away from conversations about *The Monkees* and other television shows. Though he did listen to some of that kind of music on the radio and kind of liked it. Sometimes that worried his remembering self.

In truth, Johnny didn't like now and didn't like a life so tightly scheduled

that it took away his time for daydreaming and contemplation. If asked when he would have preferred to live, Johnny would have said, "A lot of different times. Maybe in Boston in 1773 this morning and Montana in 1855 tomorrow. It would have been interesting to have set off for Asia with Alexander the Great and frightening to be with Alfred the Great when he was on the run from the Vikings and trying to throw them out of his kingdom. I think I could have been close friends with Thomas Jefferson and maybe with Albert Einstein."

But it was now, a highly particular now, one so close to Christmas, it was a date easy to remember, but it took a few seconds to realize it was 1967 if he was 12.

Johnny had walked downstairs and found himself staring at a black-and-white television screen displaying a smiling family riding down a dirt road on a wooden wagon. There were a couple of men on horses riding alongside. Cowboy hats, bandannas, leather vests and the women and girls wore long, bulky dresses and sun-bonnets. Johnny thought he might have liked to be there for real but didn't feel like watching a cowboy show that was really *Lost in Space* without robots or spaceships and with a few cows and horses which had only four legs each. For some reason, an image came to mind: Gilligan and a gorilla. He didn't think he really would have wanted to be friends with Gilligan. Or the gorilla either. Not even a gorilla come down from the sky.

Having decided that, he returned to a different now and, wishing he were in Colonial Massachusetts with winter settling in, it took only a few more seconds to walk out of the living room in which three younger siblings were sitting in front of the television set. Taking his coat out of the hall closet, he heard footsteps coming down the stairs and then his mother's voice, "Where are you going, Johnny? It's after dark."

As Johnny made a ritual protest that it was only six o'clock in the early, early evening, his mother listened as if in sympathy and then she told him, "Stay in the yard. Suzie and Alice are almost through with the dishes and you'll have to do your chores." A few seconds later, Johnny passed through the kitchen where his sisters were washing the dishes. They shot him a resentful

look as he went outside, perhaps because they were working though they knew he'd have to come in and take the trash to the basement and the garbage to the can set into the ground outside when they were finished with their chores and settled in front of the TV. Perhaps they were resentful because the girls weren't allowed to go out even into the yard after dark unless a trusted adult was with them.

It was snowing. Johnny hadn't heard about a storm so he figured it was just some flakes to add to the 2 or 3 inches on the ground in Jenkesville. His aunt's house down in Connecticut was doing better. There was a lot of snow on the ground because of a storm that hadn't quite reached the Massachusetts border. Maybe a good foot or more down there. If only she had a good sledding hill on her ten acres of retired farmland.

The flakes were large and were floating downward in a lazy manner. He caught one on his tongue and, having looked up, saw the steeple of the Union Church. For just a second, it seemed to be a searchlight...

Just like the ones he'd seen on that show with Walter Cronkite on a roof in London as German bombs were exploding.

And there was a searchlight though it wasn't panning the sky. It was set on the roof of the portico of the church. "Portico," he said in wonder, thinking of the first time that the Reverend MacIntyre had used the term with a twinkle in his eye. Johnny had the impression that he was the only one the minister joked with. Truth to tell, most people thought the Reverend MacIntyre was a bit weird. And they said he didn't take baths or change his clothes often enough.

"It does look like a searchlight trying to find Heaven, doesn't it?"

Without even turning, Johnny told his friend Charlie LaFontaine, "No wonder your sister thinks you're going to become a priest."

"Yeah," came back in that Midwestern drawl Tom Ryan was nurturing in imitation of his Dad who'd come from Iowa. "I told my minister that one of my friends was going to become a priest and he's been worried about me ever since."

Johnny was annoyed. As much as he liked being with Charlie and Tom, he didn't want them to be there to interrupt his thoughts. And before those thoughts had quite come to him. Johnny wanted to just look up into that sky. Not to find Heaven... Just to...

"I don't know why I need a reason to look up into the sky. If you set out to find something, you'll either find that thing or nothing. Maybe there's something else to find." A few seconds later, he weakly added, "Or maybe you'll find something somewhere else."

Charlie grinned and said, "If you set out to find something, then you'll find something or else something else."

"Maybe," suggested Tom, "It would be hard not to find something even if you don't want to. There are a lot of things around."

Johnny couldn't respond as *Vague Thoughts and Images* flooded his mind.

Johnny wandered.

Johnny felt lightheaded.

Johnny wondered.

Was effort worth lost TV time?

Tom was laughing.

Good-hearted fellow.

Charlie remained silent.

Pondered Johnny's silence.

Or perhaps not.

Light beamed.

Empty the space.

Not an angel.

Not a demon.

What of God?

Einstein knew something.
Darwin knew something.
Ministers give away their suits.
Homeless men are human too, but
Buttered butts butt in Butte.

After he felt the silence wrap back around him a drop and a climb and then a return, Johnny turned to see the look of puzzlement on Charlie's face and a pondering sort of expression on Tom's face. He didn't know why Charlie was so puzzled. The two of them, sometimes with Tom or Charlie's sister Sarah, would go behind the Union Church, all the way down to the banks of the Chicopee River. If the ground was dry, they might sit and silently watch the waters flow.

Just before school had started, Johnny and his sister Suzie and Sarah had sat on a log a little farther along the bank, up the slope and near the top of the ridge facing Indian Leap on the Indian Orchard side of the Chicopee River. They'd looked down on the river and Sarah had told them about her hike with her girl scout troop up in Ware. They'd walked along the Swift River for a while, a few miles before it came together with two other small rivers to form the Chicopee.

That had been all right. Sarah wasn't one to go into a great detail about boring stuff. And she hadn't.

"Is this a wake or something?"

Johnny, not sure what a wake was, looked briefly at Tom and then cast a quick glance at the steeple of the Union Church before walking over to his two friends. He'd decided he didn't really care what a wake was and he asked, "You guys headed home?"

Tom told them, "My parents are in Boston this week and my brother's taking care of me."

"Wish I could get away with staying out late." Then Charlie added, "I just got some paregoric at Dodge's Drug Store. Albert is teething and he's making

it hard to watch TV or to sleep at night.”

Tom suggested, “The little guy is really in pain.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s most important. And I do really like playing with my little brother a lot.”

“And you disappear when his diapers are dirty or he needs to be fed.”

Charlie grinned at Tom and confessed, “I’ll help feed him when he’s ready to throw food around.”

“Then you’ll have to help clean up.”

“Not really. I just do outdoor chores.” A shrug told of his lack of concern that he could be called upon to do girl’s work.

Johnny turned his attention back to the beam of light being sent into the heavens from the porch roof of the Union Church. The snowflakes were dwindling and then they stopped as the air grew warm. When Johnny turned around, Sarah was sitting on the grass, shorts and a t-shirt tight against her budding breasts. Johnny found himself staring at her but Sarah just stared back with an air of pleased defiance.

“Does Suzie know you’re here?”

Sarah shook her head and then leaned it to her right, looking at him for a few seconds before asking, “Why do you think I’m here to see Suzie?”

The air was more pleasant now but the eerie mood was gone and that didn’t please Johnny. As much as he liked being with Sarah and as much as the eruptions in her t-shirt pleased him, there was something he’d lost in the now which had fluttered away. He’d already discovered that nows of certain types were recoverable at least as strong and interesting memories but some of the most important of nows proved to be of ephemeral interest, not because of the content of the nows but because they simply weren’t recoverable in a way that brought the entirety of his being into play. Any attempts of re-membering brought little but shadows.

There was little to be sure of in memories constantly changing in light of now; most certainly was there little certainty in the now which becomes

something different according to the memories which were present in Johnny's mind at the moment of his re-remembering.

There was a merry-go-round which Johnny couldn't escape but to the regions of one form or another of insanity. His memories were shaping his mind but his mind was telling his memories how to move along as if they were an orderly succession of events, though not so orderly as a half-hour television show with an obvious plot-line and a clean ending. His memories often hinted of a story, but not a story he always wanted to be part of, certainly not often a story he could understand at all until long after he'd made so many mistakes.

All Johnny could grasp was now, but now was not to be grasped, only experienced, only lived through actively or passively, but lived through in any case. The past could maybe be understood, the future anticipated, but little the thought which could be applied to the now which passed before a thought could form, leaving only now which was ever-present and yet unreachable. Could this situation be leveraged to shape the nows of the future, however little we could shape now when it arrived? Johnny was bereft of clues, though not clueless.

Nor did he really like to complain. All the time. After all, before all, now was sometimes pretty good but not always. Even the toughest now was less painful when lived in the context of other times, when set in the flow of a true history set forth in books or a partial or developing history which was no more than a series of daydreams and contemplations. Johnny didn't much like fantastic daydreams nor did he welcome fantastic dreams during his nighttime sleep. As exciting as it was when he occasionally dreamed of flying—no plane, it was more an annoyance when he woke, an annoyance to remember such dreams when he couldn't hold onto other dreams which seemed so much more tightly related to his life though they were trips through regions he'd never visited and sometimes efforts to search some underground regions or dark attics. If only he could grasp what he was searching for. . .

A question remained in Johnny's mind: "Why do you think I'm here to see Suzie?"

4 Remembering

Johnny thought he could have answered that question if he were only sure whose mind had really produced the thought-question, “Why do you think I’m here to see Suzie?” His mind or the mind of that 12 year-old boy. Or was it the mind of an other, a mind which had overlapped his own mind and had penetrated his own mind if only for a short time years before?

But the traces of a 12 year-old boy, the traces even of Sarah’s mind, were still to be found in Johnny’s memories and his ways of thought...

Were they? Were they not?

The very fact that he could, if only in a very limited way, fit those earlier minds inside his mind become different by his journey through time and space... Spacetime? Timespace?

Where did the mind of that 12 year-old boy fit inside of his current mind?

Where did the mind of that 12 year-old girl fit inside of his current mind?

Sarah...

How often even into his adult years had the dreamer spun in his bed for a lonely night, almost feeling her body pressed against his...

How often had he shifted to be atop her well-toned, strongly responsive body?

He’d longed to talk to her, to babble love-poems of a sort so unique as had been those of Danté in his day.

He’d longed to caress her breasts and to put himself under her guidance in areas of life where she’d been so hardheadedly superior to him.

He'd almost felt the entry and the beginning of new life, his and more hers, of his small seed and her massive ovum. Her belly had swelled against his and then under his hand in a spacetime-lapse dream.

Johnny's knowledge of God's universe was shallow, but it was dynamically interacting with his memories, with all that he knew or unknowingly misknew about science and history and literature and politics. His public school knowledge of the American Revolution, so lacking in the flesh-and-blood details of the Colonial-era novels and biographies he'd once read avidly, told him. . .

His earlier mind had made a lot of observations, had formed memories which Johnny re-membered, had formed paths of thought in Johnny's brain. And the fact that his mind also included, in some way he couldn't describe, pieces of the mind of a girl he'd once had a crush on and hadn't. . .

What had that to do with Einstein? Had Sarah somehow reshaped the very spacetime in which Johnny existed? How about: had she reshaped some sort of abstract space, mindspace or soulspace, in which much of Johnny existed? Was that space made largely of memories? Maybe active memories, re-membered actions, mental and physical, of Johnny? How about those actions he'd never performed and hadn't even dreamed of at a time when they might have driven him to moral action? If only action in the backseat of a car?

After feeling a tingle pass up his arms and a shudder pass over his upper back, Johnny asked himself, "Memories?" He had a lot of them but they didn't really come together to make a life's story, at least not that of a life worth living.

Were these fragmentary bits and pieces, rags and string-ends, the stuff of a life? Whose life? Johnny marveled at the very thought that his life was entangled with Sarah's life. He hadn't seen her for a decade and then he had gone home and Sarah was married to that policeman and she had a daughter and another child on the way. How. . .

Was a human being made into a collage by his allegedly higher faculties? Was it better to be a creature always living now rather than living yesterday for the sake of tomorrow? Was there any way to turn that collage into an

orderly stream? If so, would that be merely a way of constructing a fable to justify what he wished to believe about himself and the world he'd been thrown into?

And that collage held prominent empty spaces where Johnny had failed to act. No dream could fill in those empty spaces. For long. Nature nurtured vacuums, though they were different from what the ancients had thought vacuums to be.

5 Skating Rapidly Over So Many Opportunities

And Johnny had made his way through college, struggling for a couple of years and then making lackluster A's and B's in his last two years. He'd refused all chances to even apply to one graduate school or another though a physics professor had offered good recommendations, telling Johnny, "A number of serious physicists had even greater troubles in college than you had and went on to success once they were in environments that better suited them," and "A recommendation from a well-regarded physicist such as me can get you into a very good graduate school." Johnny had learned that physicists had enough power in universities to override the conventional requirements of the academic bureaucrats. He'd already learned that physicists, at least up to the early 1970s, could bring in large amounts of grant money and could also forge strong relationships with a variety of governmental and corporate research labs. Later he would learn that this was because of the importance of even the most esoteric branches of physics to the military-industrial complex, though there were also a variety of profitable non-military activities which needed physicists and their students. Did the military involvement dirty the field? Why was it that so many exploring the universe were being funded by those wishing to learn how to kill other human beings in ever greater numbers with ever greater brutality?

In any case, Johnny had dropped out of the academic life—if he had ever truly been part of it. Johnny knew quite well that the major reason for his

failure in college was his lack of discipline but he wasn't quite ready to deal with that. While he had softened and grown apathetic and lazy in the environment of a comfort-zone school system up through high school, he knew others had overcome such a situation.

The question occurred to him too often during some periods of blackness: "Am I simply a man of weak moral character?"

Confused to the point of numbness, Johnny found himself suffering a few frustrating months at his parents' house before leaving to take a job as an actuarial trainee at an insurance company in Boston. He perhaps made a mistake in accepting his parents' help in finding an apartment in Boston and soon found himself in an apartment in a building managed by a nice, elderly lady.

A mistake. A big one. The front door had no bell for his apartment. There was but one bell and it rang in the first-floor apartment of the landlady. He might as well have been living in his grandmother's house.

On the whole, there was a sense of isolation to Johnny's life in Boston.

On the part, there was a sense of freedom to Johnny's life in Boston.

So it was that Johnny jumped at a chance to move to San Francisco.

Part II

Off the Beaten Path

6 An Explanation

Years of effort led the dreamer past banalities and toward some realm of *Meaningless Insights*:

It was the least of times, it was the most of times,
it was a time when time came unwound more tightly
than could time have ever been conceived.
And so it was that men left the times behind,
knowing they could better entime the world,
itself also subject to what men desired.

The world thought it could curve,
but men cut straight through
to the most pleasant and most comfortable
of tropical regions, right to Caribbean bars.
Civilization thought it could demand brains
and men centralized and mechanized thought.

The markets thought to demand skills,
but clever were men to put their skills
into machines that only the few understood.
Intelligence had been centralized,
the better and easier to control
by those who knew best what was to be done.

If intelligence had been centralized, intellect had been banished to its traditional refuge, a handful of monasteries which hadn't yet adopted television hours in the evening, a scattering of well-maintained but slightly shabby living-rooms in which balding men and silver-haired matrons read the books their students and grandchildren no longer cared about. What were those books? They were the books of Moses and the prophets as well as the commentaries of the Jewish sages over the centuries. They were the Christian *Bible* and the writings of the Christian Fathers produced over 2,000 years of prosperity and poverty, persecuting and being persecuted. They were the writings of ancient Greek philosophers and ancient Roman poets and law-givers. They were Newton's writings on science and on the *Bible* and on alchemy. They were the writings of Lagrange and Abel and Galois. They were countless novels and sort-of novels, from St Augustine's *Confessions* through Cervantes' *Don Quixote* through Jane Austen's paeans to a local but quite good moral order and on to the modern magical realists from South America. They were a multitude of histories worth reading, some competent surveys and some insightful narratives. They were modern science books, some serious but accessible to the literate reader of solid general knowledge. They were works of political theory and sociology and psychology and technology. What was needed was at least *A Preliminary Theory of Human Communities*:

Armies marched, burned, killed
in a world 13 billion years young.

Powerful technologies broadcast dirty words
from the mouths of despicable entertainers
while politicians upchucked what was self-serving
and wig-stands explained the world.

Knowledge was being centralized so that even engineers typically could use, but not fully understand those devices developed by elite engineers in research

facilities. Even physicists, mathematicians, and chemists working on the frontiers of empirical knowledge were taking on a dangerous and self-limiting form of specialization as they assembled into greater and greater armies carrying out projects costing sometimes billions and taking years just to plan.

7 Too Many Words for Far Too Many Concepts

“Do I speak prose,” Johnny asked himself, “without knowing that it’s prose?”

“Do I dream poetry when prose threatens to enslave the truth?” Johnny asked from a spot where his original position could not be seen.

“Yet, that can’t be so since I know enough to ask if I know what I know enough to ask. Or not.”

As he set out on a four-mile run through Golden Gate Park and down the side of the Pacific for a ways, only to face the pleasant but more tiring four-mile return, Johnny thought, “Maybe the problem is in the word-count. Poetry generally uses fewer words. That doesn’t put so much wear and tear on the human ears and eyes, though far more wear and tear on the human mind and spirit.”

It was while he was watching the gentle waves of Alaska-cooled waters that Johnny told himself, “I’ve been told that I speak and write rhythmically. Maybe I should learn how to rhyme as well and maybe to deliberately and playfully miss the target. Then, as a poet, I can use one-tenth of the words and convey multiple meanings, each as complicated as the one I myself would advocate.”

But he feared even in his mid-20s that life was not so simple as to allow the quick implementation of meaningful resolutions. It might be years before he could write poetry about quantum theory, at least any poetry which could be recited to a family of gorillas without bringing about an upset and even an

upcry to the constellations.

Johnny also feared his own mind. It seemed to find things in reality which were beyond his understanding and sometimes seemed undetectable to his conscious self.

8 Approaching Higher Regions

It had been a sunny day, warmish but not hot. So pleasingly dry in the way possible only with westerlies coming off the Pacific Ocean.

Johnny lived in the Sunset District on Judah St a little more than three miles from the Pacific Ocean. It was a beautiful region for physical activity, especially since he was but a two-block walk from the Golden Gate Park, an earthly paradise made decades prior by a titanic effort of men, a region of trees and walking paths and a stadium overlooking a polo field. The horse stables were at one end of the field and there was pretty steady activity, at least on Saturdays. To think, once had this chunk of real estate been no more than sand-dunes with some scrubby bushes and patches of tough, skin-slicing grasses. Truly had men done much to improve what God had given them.

Children on horseback, mostly girls so far as Johnny could tell, were heading out in a column led by a woman on horseback. Was this really the site of some of the be-ins of hippy days? *The Jefferson Airplane* had gotten stoned and played for hours. *The Grateful Dead* had gotten stoned and played for longer hours. Was the point of it all to keep girls from spreading their legs around large mammals or was it all merely a demonstration that *Poetry is Disgusting?*:

Famous poets had gotten stoned.
Famously had they buggered,
buggered away at willing
and at young men for hours.

Hippy days were there and gone.

Famous stones had been bug-ridden
and rhymed but not at all
like nothing else in Tennessee,
though like something else there.

Hippy days were there.

Poets famously died gratefully
on flying founding fathers,
yet did not give a runaway
like unburied ashes high in Tennessee.

Hippy days were gone.

Oh, my mind, my mind,
for a thought succinct,
however expressed,
however little.

Hippy days were there but gone.

Clear expression would be
if only too much to ask for,
in Tennessee large
though not in Tennessee Lytle.

Kilroy is here but used to be Katie.

“Katie?” Johnny hadn’t thought of Katie Kilroy for a few years. She’d

been a friend in high school who'd always turned him down when he tried to date her. Buxom and smart and friendly in a reserved way, she'd been what his grandmother had labeled a "handsome woman" rather than a pretty woman. Certainly sexy in a low-key but kind of smoldering way.

"Has a rock-and-roller, even a rockabilly, ever written a song about a handsome woman more sexy than a plastic-mate?"

Pretty woman, walkin down the street
Pretty woman, the kind I'd like to meet
Pretty woman, I don't believe you. . .

"Nah. Katie would've belted me if I'd called her a liar."

9 Distorted Memories

Johnny did more than run past the polo fields on his way to the Pacific, though the journey was easier than that of Balboa, not to mention Magellan. He did still more than eat a single time a single patty between only two halves of a bun. He even did more than consume a small order of fries in a fast-food joint just before entering the dangerous region of Haight Ashbury—in those later years in which his mind was more better formed by digesting what he had taken in over many years, he couldn't remember if he'd had a cola or perhaps a coffee.

More importantly, he'd gone on to walk a block or more into once-dangerous regions to view the oh-so safe-looking stores of witchcraft supplies and the well-maintained offices of palm-readers and tea-leaf smokers. He'd not seen a red-haired woman breastfeeding her baby as she sat on the curb, and that was well for he'd not hear that song for another ten years or more in the future which had to be bracketed to protect an unrolling story. Still, he wondered what tales it was she had to tell that he wouldn't have wanted to hear.

Weirder still were the gatherings he'd not seen until his memories had gone to work on loam nutritious but too fresh out of some sterilization process. Years later, he remembered what had not occurred yet had meant so much to him. When Johnny had gone to San Francisco, the 60s counter-culture had been long gone, the People's Temple had been recently emptied though the kool-aid had not yet been mixed, northern California rock-and-roll was big business, and hot-tubs were reproducing faster than hangers and paper-clips.

There was no more than a scent of that earlier weirdness in the air. What

remained were comfort zones, good but healthy food, loose clothing which moved with the lean bodies within, body-painting kits, airy and well-lit homes built on the sides of steep hills.

Was that all there was? Was that all there was? Was that...
Could it be said that *San Francisco is as Banal as New England?*:

Sunny, hot day on a grassy plain
somewhere a park gated by gold.

Golden the gate secured against naught to the north.
Golden the arches open to massed food to the east.

Miles or less from regions abandoned by kool-aid sippers,
Occupied yet by cults of sex and phones, sax and phones.

Were the dead truly grateful and did the nicked man fly?
And how many home-fleeing boys and girls went under the bushes?

Were minced dead cows proper for regions of freed spirits?
once the gathering place for incoming hordes of drugged spirits?

And isn't it nice that palm-readers, tea-readers, palm-teas
had storefronts so pastelly-nicely-painted? ly?

Eating a single-patty, small fries on the side,
stables come to mind as eyes drop to blue shirt of polo.

Little girls, teenaged girls, well-curved instructors
heading out, Pacific-ward, as if seeking the Orient.

Occident gone stale.
 Electro-bureaucracy and not a culture.

Palm-readers soon to be Mind Reading Instruments
 with tarots Decker Not Appropriately.

Be not it not obvious
 the obvious be not the point?

As much as that was, there had been far less, but more had come to be over the years. Descent, ascent, movement into and out of and around, had led into barren regions which would have frightened even Plato at his most contemplative.

Man was not a stranger in a strange land. He was not an exile who found himself in alien regions. He was a character in a narrative set in a complex world and each step forward revealed much that needed to be dealt with, the dealing of which often forced a re-understanding of the entirety of Creation. . .

Man was alienated only so long as he was courageous enough, only so long as he had enough faith in his Creator, to move forward and explore this complex world, trying to understand. If man were successful at encasing himself, at building the most complete of all ghettos, man would then feel at peace; he would be in the world where he belonged.

But there is no such creature as man, only men and God wished men to belong to a *City of Men* located in the concrete world rather than a *City of Man*, a human-constructed ghetto located in the dreams of those thinkers who were so ready to correct God's mistakes rather than to play their role in completing Creation.

But were these thoughts Johnny could have had at the time? Perhaps in some embryonic form?

10 Nice Men, Nice Women

It was sunny. It was hot by the standards of the City by the Bay. And yet those carrying chairs and speakers and wires and microphones and staging from vans and car trunks were dressed for going to a Sunday meeting. The matronly women were mostly in dresses. The younger women and girls in skirts and ruffled blouses. Those in between, perhaps some were not yet married, were some of one and some of another.

The men tended to good quality blazers and dress slacks, no khakis from the jeans aisles. Some of the men wore summer suits of decent quality, white linen and pale-blue linen. A few men stood and watched that all was done well. These distinguished men, some graying and all of military bearing, wore suits not likely to have been bought off the rack, however good the tailors in many a clothing store. No, these were genial men of somber mien. These were men who appreciated the everlasting standards of a well-cut, single-breasted suit coat, a nice cotton shirt, and a tie of a muted pattern in darkish blue and a maroon perhaps tinted toward black. Quality of a sort to be worn into the casket and beyond.

And Johnny watched, hands idle, free of sensation, and bereft of thought. But not for long.

A girl of perhaps 17, no—a young woman of perhaps 17 and a mature 17 at that, came up to him and smiled nicely even if her eyes were so translucently blue as to be the glass of an empty bottle. Was she or was she but a pretense? Was Johnny really there or was he also pretending to dreamily be as she smiled delicately with modestly full lips, so delicately struck with pink.

Then she invited him, "Come and join us as we celebrate and worship." She lifted her hands as if to emphasize the beauties and glories of all Creation and most certainly Creation showed some of its best effect on this sunny day in California. Earthquakes, volcanoes, and eons of erosion had done their work and all was complete for the enjoyment and use of good Americans, though it couldn't be denied that bad Americans and even non-Americans gained some enjoyment and use. It was for the children but even the dogs waiting under the table could have their own plates. And, often, seconds.

A platform had been setup with a dais in a prominent spot, a table in the background holding a modest cross of a fine wood finish, somber but not too, too dark. Chairs were set up and then two men came out of a panel truck near the platform. They carried objects rolled up in canvas and solemnly marched up the two steps and arrived at the top of the stage. Three other men came with those two. An honor guard? Johnny thought so. The first of the men carrying the canvas bundles walked to the table and pushed the cross back gently before setting the bundle down. He unrolled it and lifted the American flag out, freely and gently waving in the slightest and most respectful of breezes. He turned in a series of jerks much as Gomer Pyle might have done on his best day. Walking to stage-left, he placed the flag upright in a stand. By then, the second man had done his part, placing a flag of California in a stand at stage-right.

All the well-dressed men in the area were standing at attention, as were some of the passers-by including a man in red-plaid shorts who had the stuff of three soldiers. The young women near the stage had been joined by some middle-aged women and one elderly women, all wearing dresses that would have proudly decorated the moderately maternal bodies of many a television Mom. Pink and blue and pastel-green and even some polka-dots of various combinations of colors. All those women stood proudly, hands over the breast which itself was over their warm and beating hearts. Well, maybe not anatomically speaking, but in a manner of speaking and, in any case, within inches.

As the gathered citizens proudly recited *The Pledge of Allegiance*, Johnny

felt suddenly sad he'd washed out of Navy ROTC summer camp and somewhat ashamed he'd not taken the offer of the Marine gunnery sergeant for a recommendation to a Marine ROTC officer at his school. "Forget those fat-assed Navy officers. They're just like the Marine officers in Vietnam who stayed back and pushed good Marines to their death to win themselves promotions and medals."

And Johnny felt still more ashamed. Dirtied. He felt to be a traitor. A man without a country. How could anyone, especially a Marine sergeant, have thought a man who shied away from most forms of physical danger would be an appropriate leader of men in combat?

And then he felt far sadder that he was here in California and not in New England. A wonderful region was California and great to visit but he'd wandered from his true land, a region of snowy winters and heavy forests which had moved back in after environmentally correct New Englanders had learned it was cheaper to buy grain and vegetables from California and Florida and the states of the great plains which stretched farther than the eye could see. Even when the eye was far above the ground.

11 A Clearer View

Johnny awoke to hear the pilot announce that he was going a little lower than planned because the day was clear, the air was also clear, that is, clear of other planes. “Look ahead of us, folks. That bluish area is the Great Salt Lake. I’ll be heading directly over it so that you’ll be able to see it on either side of the plane.”

Returning to California from the wedding of a friend back home in Massachusetts, Johnny felt sad and couldn’t figure out why. He’d been reminded of all the reasons he’d left Massachusetts, mostly frustration from causes he couldn’t quite identify. But his youthful desires to become a mathematical physicist had gone unfulfilled and he had yet to decide if he was to blame or his bad early schooling or his parents for not doing something about a school system that had no appreciation for human excellence outside of sports, no higher standards for students enthusiastic about learning. . .

Johnny recalled a math teacher telling him in his senior year that he’d been better prepared to go to college as a high school freshman; his years of high school had not even been useless but actually had harmed him, dulled him and bored him into laziness. He’d not expected this. He’d remembered being intensely bored but had been only slightly suspicious that he’d done very well in high school without studying, daydreaming a lot in class, getting frustrated occasionally when he did work—once staying up late to solve a very difficult problem in trigonometry only to hear the teacher say they were going to skip that problem because it was too hard and he’d assigned it by mistake. After hearing of that, a college professor had asked, “What’s the use of pretending to

teach serious mathematics without the mental effort of tackling hard problems? You might as well do your weightlifting with two-pound dumbbells and five-pound barbells.”

His college career had been a disaster though he'd returned to A's and B's in his junior and senior year. He'd learned to hate the classroom and almost all other aspects of academic life.

Though he'd returned to a real liking for libraries. Browsing and reading at random. He'd not learned to pursue his own course of studies in any sort of steady way.

Johnny wondered when he would grow up and feel to be truly a man rather than a perpetual adolescent not comfortable labeling himself 'man' in his innermost thoughts.

12 The Emptiness that Kills

Faith had failed but maybe there was to be solace, if not an answer, in some sort of faith in skepticism. If we could not stand on solid ground, we could find something akin to a menu of tasks, if not quite a mission, in treading water and maybe occasionally swimming a few yards.

And so it was that Johnny knew he had to enter the limousine that pulled up in front of his apartment building to take him into the desert hills above Oakland. There had been a vague meeting at a dockside bar in Marin County. Johnny had sipped on a decent Mexican lager while a middle-aged woman spoke breathlessly of the Temple, the place where the Teacher taught and he taught much of what many needed to learn. The woman had taken upon her very own self the name of some flower Johnny had never heard of and had since forgotten, some innocent species which had perhaps deserved a better tribute.

As the limousine moved over the Oakland bridge, Johnny shivered at the thought of knowing something better. There were so many somethings to know. Knowing any one of those somethings better might just throw his life off-balance.

Soon enough, Johnny stood near the flattened top of a well-kept grassy hill. To stand on the top, he'd have to climb the last flight of stone stair-treads to the portico of a temple resembling someone's idea of the Pantheon in its original pristine white state. Portico? Or was it a patio or simply an entranceway? Johnny still didn't know something better and already he was reminded of the many things that needed the knowing...

By who? (By whom?)? By what? By when? By which? Bewitch?

It was all a dream though there was something to the dream far more solid than the stuff of the world of mere dirt and rocks, rabbits and rattlesnakes, matter and black-holes. And something far more ghostly, though not ethereal or higher.

Confusion was confusing when there was a need to find out...

To find out if there were enough knowers for all the knowing.

Who knew?

“Young man, you look to be lost in deep thoughts. Would you like to come up and speak of what needs to be put aside?”

Johnny looked up to see Peter O’Toole dressed in white tropicals of elegant looseness. A hint of a smile played about the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and then it reached his lips, or at least the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth. Thoughts came of scientists looking through microscopes, hoping to find God in the smallest of details while others looked through telescopes, hoping to find God in still smaller details found only by looking at the entire Universe.

“You seem still lost in deep thoughts. Have you ever found any answers worthy of such an effort, worthy of a searcher who struggles with all his might?” When Johnny stood facing him in silence for a good ten seconds, the man continued, “Are you rewinding hours of adventures from the American frontiers? Are you remembering the answers of the Father who knows best, the Beaver who is Tom Sawyer without an imagination and, thus, without insides? Are you learning the proper lessons from wars fought on 19-inch screens with some of the blood but none of the crap in the pants and no diseased whores, some of the pain but no piss in the pants and no coke snorted through drinking straws? Do you not realize that *Dreams Honor No Boundaries of Time or Space?*?”

The pause was but short,
refreshing not a bit,
confusing more than a bit,
as the dreaméd one faded.

He'd not known at all
of jungle warrior treats
for many a year after
having been dreamed.

The man who resembled Peter O'Toole a bit less was watching and waiting. At some signal the dreamer himself didn't detect, he came to life and asked, "Are you back with us?" When no answer came, he shook his head sadly and asked, "You must have spent your all-too American youth in front of that horror which sucks souls into the Hell in which plastics are both the present and the ever-promising future."

Johnny nodded to the nearby temple, white marble shining so brightly in the California Sun. "The Greeks painted their buildings and their statues in garish colors rather than leaving them in classically elegant white."

The man smiled and pointed out, "You don't know that though you will one day learn it by way of technology still more dangerous than television. By then, you will have forgotten more of what you will not have experienced."

"What's inside?"

"Your future. Perhaps."

"Perhaps?" At a nod, Johnny added, "It hardly matters since I seem to be having trouble keeping the periods of my life separate."

"To be sure, an autobiography from you might be a bit misleading."

"Maybe it's best not to leave clear tracks."

"Yet, you are inclined to believe that all who are saved will share in all knowledge about Creation as your three Persons share all knowledge as one God."

"That's years in the future."

"Why not practice sharing openly even your most private thoughts? The future will come sooner than you might fear."

"The future lies far ahead of me."

"And it lies a physicist's fraction of a second ahead of you."

“We’ll leave Planck out of this.”

“Him also, you don’t know about. Maybe you know his name as you would know a rumor about a terrorist in a longfar agoway country.”

“For now, there is little terror in my world. Many dangers but I’ve not yet been taught to fear so that I can be more easily controlled.”

“Come inside the temple and see what has made you more fearful and more pliable than you might think.”

“I can only fear what I know and my enemies might bring more than I can fear.”

“You are headed toward Christ. How can you consider any to be enemies?”

“What do you mean? The only sign I’m Christian is the King James *Bible* sitting on my bookcase. I got that when I entered fourth grade in Sunday School and I’ve only opened it to fill in some information about my family in the mostly blank pages at the front.”

The man smiled and said in a the voice of a man of sorrows, despised and rejected, “You are infected.”

“It’s not a disease. Maybe it’s some sort of journey.”

“Then come in to the *Temple of the One* and we’ll see if you wish to continue your journey or whether you’d prefer to stay where you are and remain who you are.”

And so it was that they entered with Johnny suddenly afraid of meeting the One, whatever God or god or false spirit he might be, if only He might be.

13 An Oasis on a Spiritual Journey

Johnny rose and looked at the clock. It read 2:30 with no tiny PM indicator light. Still a half-hour to go before the witching hour and he did feel as if his metabolism was near a low point. Half an hour before the witching hour but a good half-decade past his adventures on the West coast, such as they were and washed out by his self-story which more and more consisted of events which had never occurred.

He rose and stopped by the lavatory on his way downstairs to grab a quick snack. On the way down, he told himself, “Salty will do it, not sweet.”

14 The Temple of the One

14.1 First: the Room

The doors were massive and as they opened, Johnny could see the walls were two sections of stone, each two feet thick, with some sort of padding between. As soon as you passed through the doorway, there was deep silence, profound silence, but only shallow silliness.

And all was dark but for a glare over to the right where a large image was projected upon the wall.

Johnny walked toward the image of a man looking at an image of a man looking at the image of a man looking at...

At first, it seemed almost a piece of pop-art but then Johnny realized the man looking at his recursive selves was off-center...

He moved to be a little more directly in front of the man who was looking at the next man who was looking at the next man who was looking at...

All the men moved as Johnny moved and he was afraid he was the man trapped in the recursion. Or maybe not yet trapped. In desperation, he stared more intensely at the screen.

A figure came into focus, a man with chin cupped in right hand, right elbow cupped in left hand. He looked into the longfar, agoway audience and smirked though not in an unfriendly or condescending manner. He seemed unable to smile in a straightforward way, though he looked a bit like a Johnny who had no problems he knew about. It was fitting that he try to smile and

he somewhat succeeded. He announced, “We have a really big shoo for you tonight,” though Johnny thought it possible he had said he had a really big shoe, not a really big shoo.

The friendly smirking Johnny on the screen gestured grandly to his right and announced, “*The Johnnies*”. And Johnny saw himself, shaggy-headed and bobble-headed bouncing about as he sang, “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” and got no further as if he’d forgotten the words, but there was screaming of some sort as if the audience didn’t care. They hated the Johnnies and would have hated them if the lyrics to the song had been a bit better. And the shaggy-headed Johnny slinked off stage, reddening the cheeks of the watching Johnny.

He’d not had time to turn from the screen, wanting to move on to see if the next room would be any better, not had time had he, not was the time to be had, before the next show started with a splash screen announcing, *Leave it to Johnny*. And Johnny watched, but felt his legs moving, as he ran past his mother and headed off to another school-day where he’d get in trouble for no more than being enthusiastic. . .

But, no. Johnny’s school days had been different. . .

14.2 Second: the Room

It was in such a contemplative mood that Johnny, realizing he was tired, walked in the direction indicated by the man in white clothes become glowing gray. He passed through a doorway into a second room. When he had nearly run into the bed in the middle of the room, he sat upon the edge and took off his shoes before lying down for a good nap.

But sleep came not. Instead came a stream of impressions that was narrated by a voice like unto that of the grandfather who had died when Johnny was but three years old and, of a sudden, he knew *There are No Good Writers, Only Self-serving Rewriters*:

It was the least of times,
it was the most of times,
it was a time when time sprang
and unwound all of space as well.

It was a time when men left time behind
because nature's time didn't properly obey
the equations and concepts men knew to be true.
And so it was that men left the times behind.

Men knew they could better entime the world,
itself also subject to what men desired.
Yet was time but one of four
and the other three were more true to men.

The world thought it could curve
and take men roundabout
when there are better ways:
bulldozers tell us how to better move.

The world thought it could demand men be smart
and men centralized and mechanized thought.
The multitudes returned to snoozing
and the experts took charge.

Could that be better said? Or only differently said? It hardly seemed to matter in an age which rewarded self-satisfaction, an age when everyone thought the important issues were settled. Or maybe they just hoped for a comfortable path heading to the grave before they were forced to confront. . .

Vaguely did a dreamer think he'd written such a ghost-poem before and maybe had re-written it to better shape. . .

Johnny found himself staring upward into darkness though there was a glowing grayness at the edges of his vision. He wondered if the glow was grayed or if the gray was somehow glowed. Then again there might have been other possibilities coming from the spectrum of colors smearing into gray or perhaps coming from valid and invalid ways that his visual system might process signals.

And he wondered to himself about this business of the world curving. It wasn't unreasonable. Despite the best of modern systems, the world sometimes did curve so much it wouldn't let anything escape, not even living creatures. No, not even the most playful of puppies or the sweetest of little girls could escape if the earth beneath their feet were to sink in on itself. Black, black the hole. Deep, deep the hole. How deep? Maybe so deep that only a set-theorist could describe it.

Why would any theorist be set? An explorer, a creative thinker, can't be set in his ways. He must be a theorist, if only implicitly, of the open. Not that he must be a golfer, but some amount of exercise will keep the mind healthy for greater intellectual exertions on the morrow.

Then again was Johnny confused because he'd not had much in the way of gravity when he was on the West Coast.

A man dressed in white but probably not a doctor came up alongside Johnny and said in comforting tones, "You're in too deep to get out easily. You must return to a deeper sleep that you can come out and out and out and return to the now which you would recognize."

The man coughed in a way which might have been sinister before going on in Johnny's own voice, "It perhaps be inadequate sublimation which would cause such problems, whatever they are. Dreamer am I and I'll lead you on with a bit of *DeconStrUcted IUST*:"

No more than what it felt to feel
and felt it was ungrammar bound.
As much there was of empty sky,
that much could it never die,
release, or fly away from steel
as time itself in time unwound,
and one lone speck mattered while
she stood apart, beloved and vile.

“How could that be?” thinks the dreamer, no longer sure if he be the main actor or the main passiver. “Yet, I might still be Johnny even if I’m smeared all over the place and peeking out of others.”

No comfort that as the dreamer, believing himself to be an observer to his own thoughts, reminded himself, “Why, I’m not even sure I’m the same person I’d once been before seeing the world differently, before thinking the world differently. Now that I see differently, I’m forced to think differently, to move differently. And so, I can’t be who I was. Rather must I pass through what is on my way to some futurely intense state which stuns me into silence when I would speak, when I would do what I would. So it is that I speak what I would not speak and do what I would not do. But can I lose control over my feelings and thoughts in such a manner?”

“Never did I think a beloved woman to be vile. Not be I a person of such interested self. Buxom or slender, yes, but not vile. Quiet or lively, yes, but not vile. Pretty or beautiful, yes, but not vile.

“Where from came the ‘vile’? Did it from come some sort of vileness? On whose part? I... He... It...”

It was time to be humble. Was it better to move toward a state of humility? In either case, it was better to take the lowest seat at the banquet, the one near the restroom doors or the waiter’s entrance to the kitchen. There was a lot of annoying traffic by the seats near the bar as well, but certain advantages that partially compensated for that humbling position.

The first should last at last, unless it were a poor cobbler's last. Still...

The dreamer wondered yet if he were such or perhaps different. Am I the sort to dream obscurities? Do I really believe *The First Shall be Last?*:

The bonds held sway as if were they
the evening's spider web stretched
across the busy morning trail.
That was way no longer main
for only way it was,
the other ways overcome by fire-weeds
and grasses vigorously seeding where no one
longer no desired not to go.
And when and if that never again to occur?
Few pondered such possibilities
that never in any case came to mind
however large and open might have been that mind,
however much space was left by a brain
subject to gravity's call in the best of times.
But lost's not all, for empty skulls are just the thing
for hidey-holes for the next evening's spider.

Something inside Johnny's skull trembled. Something seeming to become truly different as the world outside proved to be different. There was something immense and powerful and yet nimble and that something would move with Johnny's very thoughts, would move his thoughts with its graceful power, but the young man was frightened that he might become no more than an it to this forceful being which would move along with him.

"Is there no way to protect me unless I manage to make the world what I think it to be? No matter what it wishes to be, I could be what I should in response to what I will the world to be."

But a thought came from the traditions of the virtuous pagans. Surely, a great thinker not soaked with any God Johnny would wish to worship should be able to tell a young American man how to escape the trap he felt to be closing upon him though he was drawn on to commemorate *The Death of Plato*:

The town was on edge that fateful day
when stepped from the train a frightening sight.
Qualities had arrived without a man
for they were traveling fast and light.

Intelligent and diligent, steadfast and loyal,
successful and true, honest and brave,
they were every good how but not quite a who.
A form without substance, a clear-eyed knave.

14.3 Third: the Room

Johnny cast his eyes back as he opened the door. He held back his legs which threatened to panic more strongly than the rest of him. And his eyes met those of his strange companion who sometimes seemed to be Johnny himself. Sort of. But not. And he knew that something different was true when he saw that the eyes of the priest had turned to look inside and there was naught to be seen but white. There was nothing to look outside, nothing to see things or the clash and mating of things. All that was left to that man was his own good feelings about himself.

Suddenly did Johnny know the truth. . .

15 Embarrassed to be Grown Up

Johnny woke up and looked around the bedroom of his house in Stamford, Connecticut and wondered, “Why indeed?” He felt anger and embarrassment as he conceived a collage of memories of times he’d bored others with historical or scientific details when they didn’t want them. Had it been as bad as he remembered? Or did he exaggerate some of his shortcomings? Hadn’t he learned long ago that most people just wanted to discuss the problems with the relief staff of the Red Sox or repeat the jokes Norm had made about drinking beer.

He lay there for some time pondering the problem before he looked over at the night-glowing face of his clock. It was 3:00AM. The witching hour, said to be such even by certain rationalists because that was a time when the typical human being had hit a metabolic low for the day. The body was weak and prone to death.

The non-rationalists had other reasons for considering it to be the hour of witches. At that hour, the soul was susceptible to temptation and the witches and other demonic entities came to tempt and maybe take those souls. At such an hour, one could even be tempted to the *Misuse of Holy Scripture*:

There is a time for regrets,
a time for useless sorrows.

There is a time for muddling forward,
a time to stand in confusion.

There is a time for failure,
a time for doubtful success.

And a bell chimed. Again. And a third time.

Johnny lay there and puzzled the matter. He seemed wide awake, not in a dream-like state, neither asleep nor in between sleep and awakeness. He was awake but was he fully aware?

The bell had chimed three times and it reminded him of the bell at Mass, though the alter-servers rang small chimes continuously for about 5 seconds or less, rather than ringing a bell three distinct times.

Still, he was under instruction to prepare him for confirmation in the Catholic Church. Was this some sort of confirmation from God that he, merely Johnny, was doing the right thing? Or were those two entirely different sorts of confirmations?

Johnny looked at his bedside clock to see it was still but 3:10 in the early morning. Hours till daybreak and a couple more hours beyond that before he had to dress and head to the office. And Johnny rolled over. . .

And, once more. . .

Was it the next night?

It happened once more not long after. Three times the bell chimed, but Johnny had figured out which bell it was. At his front door, nearly below the window of his bedroom, there was an old-fashioned bell to be used in place of an electrical door-bell. That second time he'd heard the chimes, Johnny jumped out of bed quickly enough that the bell was struck the third time as he reached the window and looked down to see nothing but grass and the front-edge of the concrete stoop before the door. He saw no squirrels nor children running away. Nor did he see a ghost or angel or demon hovering about.

Part III

Mugged on the Beaten Path

16 Masses and Masses and Not An Altar to be Seen

Was there to be no end to these streams of bipedal creatures? Black and white, yellow and brown, dressed in jeans and Brooks Brothers suits for men or similar suits, sometimes beskirted, for women. And the feet, the feet of it all. Some were encased in basketball shoes, some in running shoes, some in slip-on dress shoes, and some even in wing-tips.

Wing-tips? What was that about? Were they to fly away as soon as they'd made their boodle? But life was about making a boodle and then a bigger boodle with just enough breaks at Aspen or Grand Cayman Island to keep the mind and body refreshed and the juices flowing. No longer did most even care about founding a dynasty. Children were such a bother unless you hired others to raise them and who wanted to hand over a financial empire to illiterate children more comfortable with a peasant dialect of Spanish?

Life was to be lived during the lifetime of an organism optimized for self-enrichment and entertainment of a variety not imaginable to the richest of 16th century kings or 19th century robber barons.

Not that there was much sense to looking back to those criminals of past centuries when there were new paths to be traveled. And many were the small minority who curved with hardly a break in stride to enter coffee-shop or bookstore or generic office building or street level garage or giant department store or...

Where were the machine-shops and the injection molding shops to stir

the heart and comfort the job-seeking instincts of a lad from a smalltown in New England? Johnny knew them to be around but apparently not in lower Manhattan or even in Midtown. Were they all in Queens and Brooklyn, even in the foreign lands of Staten Island and New Jersey? Maybe there were yet workers cutting and sewing cloth, making suits and socks, as did many of his great-aunt's associates in the labor union wars of the 1920s and 1930s, though she worked mostly in New England after some early years in the coal-mine towns of West Virginia and the textile-plant towns of the Carolinas. In Johnny's boyhood, he'd not appreciated what he could have learned if he'd paid more attention to the gray-haired lady with the attractively strong brogue from the lowland regions surrounding Arbroath, Scotland.

But he'd grown up to disagree with so much of her radicalism which had developed in the labor union wars before World War I and then further developed during the Great Depression. He'd also been told that Great-aunt Mary and other young women had stood in river-water, even in winter, to carry out some phase of the processing of flax into linen.

Why did mere details, however nasty, have such a strong effect on one's understanding of reality in its living and non-living aspects? Why indeed? Johnny felt himself more of an old-fashioned conservative but he did have a populist tinge to his political and social thought—was that a result of facing those nasty facts so squarely after he'd begun to understand his aunt and her concerns?

Did he understand her? He'd been told that some of her friends would make sure she didn't carry much money during those years when she worked and lived in Boston because she was a sucker for every bum on the streets who said he needed a meal or a cup of coffee or bus-fare. Johnny had never had that problem. He'd grown up in a town where there were no beggars on the street though sometimes a friend might have hit him up for a quarter or even a dollar to buy some comic-books. "I'll pay you back when I get the money from my paper-route," and they always had.

As for these masses of human beings with turbans and Mets baseball caps

and other headgear so alien to the residents of small towns in the Chicopee River Valley, themselves inclined to peculiarities so shallow and so rooted in the adrenal glands and gonads. . .

Can any of these pitiful creatures be more than a failed attempt to paint or sculpt an image of God? And what are they when aggregated into a lynch-mob or a blood-crazed unit of soldiers exacting payment for their own fears and for the lost lives or lost body-parts of their comrades?

And on they came, streams of creatures only a demagogue away from being collective criminals.

17 Back to a More Rational Then

Johnny shook his head to clear his mind of thoughts which seemed not good as he looked around at crowds as dense as any he'd seen entering or leaving Fenway Park or Oakland-Alameda Stadium. But these crowds stretched away from West 35th Street and went down 5th Avenue as far as he could see. He feared he could see a population equal to that of his home-town. Good men and good women, good boys and good girls. At least it was likely they were as good as those he knew as a boy.

But the sheer number. Where was God to put them in Heaven? It would seem many would be far from Jesus, but wasn't that the purpose of Heaven—to live with Jesus, to share His goodness and His holiness? How could you share with Him when you only caught occasional sight of Him? That from a distance and over the heads of millions of others closer to Jesus than you were.

The vast herd of human creatures continued to stream up Fifth Avenue, passing the Empire State Building with no outward recognition that they were so near a structure once considered a wonder of modern technology. No matter how ordinary it would seem in 1985 if set down in any of dozens of cities worldwide. Yet, it had remained associated with a gorilla larger than in the earliest scenes; in some of the later scenes, King Kong was larger than any 19th century building and Faye Wray was a couple of stories tall. Was it so easy to scale up and down in a world where Euclid had been long memorialized as a teller of absolute truths?

How could we know if King Kong were near or far? How tall the Empire State Building? Which fork leads to Heaven or to Hell? How far the journey?

This streaming herd needed better guidance...

After all, it was made up of a population far greater than he'd ever seen in the vicinity of the Central Library in Copley Square. How could so many small minds come together in one mind? How could that herd act properly and intelligently, as a civilized mob should? And that reminded him to go up and visit the great lions keeping watch over the sidewalks in front of the great public library of New York City.

Yet, he didn't anticipate an easy journey. No matter which direction he moved on the sidewalks of Manhattan, he swam against a stream of thousands and thousands of men and women, boys and girls, on their determined way to some place, but not the same place. A stream which dragged all human perceptions and feelings and thoughts with it, forcing the loner to heroic efforts to stay his own course. Was that loner to be no more than an individual head of cattle weaving its way in and out of the herd as a collective way was made to the slaughter-house?

But was that sort of image true? Johnny didn't want to wander about with the herd but that mattered little. He didn't feel he had the strength to make his own way but he had no choice. He was simply made differently from those around him, but maybe that was true of many others who'd been captured.

He hadn't even really liked *Laugh-in* or *The Monkees* when he was young. As he had gone out on his own, he'd even taken too easily to folk music and then classical music and then jazz. He was struggling to upgrade his tastes and sensibilities by listening to mostly classical music. Moreover, now that he wasn't being annoyed by his memories of imprisonment in educationalist institutions, he found himself preferring the old novels and found it fun to stretch his mind learning how to read works of philosophy and science. He wondered if that was how the public schools propagandized and brainwashed so effectively, not so much by telling a strange and implausible tale of a purer nation than had ever been imagined, but rather by teaching the children their individual traditions were negligible and the mainstream of Western tradition was one and it could be detected by simply paying attention to the events of

an ordinary American life. All the great works of Shakespeare and Beethoven and Einstein, or more likely—simplistic descriptions of those works, were just barriers to climb over to escape into the real world, the world of enjoyable mysteries and good rock-and-roll and *Star Trek* movies.

Johnny didn't feel like an elitist. He was struggling to read difficult novels and demanding history books of the sort devoured by some of his relatives in his grandparents' generation. Those relatives had typically had very little formal education, generally having gone to work after the sixth grade though that was sixth grade in school systems in Scotland or in New England. Both still under the influence of Calvinists who wanted everyone to be able to read the King James *Bible* and Shakespeare. Some could even read Milton and maybe even the pagan classics in Latin and Greek. What had amazed Johnny the most was the discovery that Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather had deep understandings of the best science of their days. In the days which had come, Jonathan Edwards was a folk-singer, Cotton Mather a witch-burning and ignorant lunatic, and Sir Isaac Newton was a question on television quiz shows. How many viewers were surprised he had not been a baker of cookies but rather a man who dedicated the prime years of his young adult life to alchemy?

And Johnny realized he lived amid human beings become too incoherent in thought to hold a consistent body of superstitions in mind. Vampires seemed to have staying power as did witches and zombies but they had been joined by the hyper-rationalistic Vulcans and manichaeistic morality plays pitting Luke the Light against Darth the Dark.

Even in groups of more conventional Christians. . .

Adam and Eve Doe seemed as flimsy as most modern folk but the Gaelic and Germanic spirits and lesser gods were robustly immanent as saints foreseeing the future of a free-willed folk. . .

18 Making Nonsense of It All

The day was bright, the mood dark. Johnny took a seat on the bench and looked back out toward Central Park West.

A thin line of trees protected him from the swarming, bustling, heaving masses of human animals. No more protected him from the towers of steel and glass, the massive blocks of brick and brownstone.

Over a few seconds, Johnny became aware of a presence on the far end of the park-bench and it took only a few seconds more for the presence to condense into the form of a man with unkempt hair and beard, both brown tinged with gray. The man was looking at Johnny. Had he been studying him for long? But it wasn't an unfriendly stare. And the man wasn't a physical wreck though his hair and clothes were those of a homeless man. But clean. No animal odor surrounded this man as it did some who occupied wall-space along the streets of Manhattan. His teeth were clean though lightly yellow; they were pretty much intact. His eyes were clear. His skin was well-tanned and not spotted by dirt or pock-marks or other blemishes.

So it was that Johnny felt he could reveal a thought he'd been working upon for a week or so: "James Joyce was right. We have no myths noble enough to guide us in leading worthwhile lives."

"Joyce was a good man. Didn't know his name was James. I just knew him as 'Buddy'. He could toss them boilermakers down with the best of 'em."

"But we're Christians nowadays and myths aren't good enough. We have the life of Christ and we know something about what He did when He made this universe. We should be dealing with truth more directly. We have the

Bible and we have science. Why should we be afraid to say we're cousins to the apes?"

"Ain't that the truth. Joyce's cousin was a big ape who was a setup for every wannabe world champion passing through town. The big ape got shellacked by every palooka that came through Cleveland. But Joyce always grinned proudly and called him Cousin Dexter like he was world champ. Every time the ape got his clock rung, Joyce was back there to help the trainer sew up the gashes and wipe off the blood. Good man, that Joyce."

19 The Horrible Weight of It All!

Manhattan had once carried so easily the weight of a scattered population of native peoples and their one-floor huts of wood and bark. The native Americans had traveled for generations across paths which had been curved or straight and remained so. Space and time seemed distinct, space being a uniform and homogeneous box and time being that straight line upon which that box moved.

Pythagoras and Euclid were right. Surely, we shouldn't be bothered by the hints that absolute truths were little more than brain connections formed in response to the environmental conditions of our ancestors.

Surely, surely, surely, they were yet absolute truths.

Maybe not.

Manhattan was being reshaped into a complex topography. Valleys and hills defined by the works of men, by the movements of huge numbers of men. How could this have happened? Could it be that men were changing spacetime by merely moving faster and in ever greater masses? Had weird spaces appeared that were not so well-behaved, not so well-described by the rules of Euclid and the theology of Pythagoras? There were curved paths of objects near black-holes and there were discontinuous paths near the nucleus of otherwise ordinary atoms. Still other spaces there were, though considered by some to be abstract in the sense of imaginary.

If this were so, were men also changing other forms of created being, other than spacetime?

Johnny wandered the great canyons of Manhattan and wondered...

Little sense could he make of his thoughts but the man in white, the man in a strange temple, had been insightful indeed. It was the lack of coherent time-flows in the memories of a would-be author which convinced him that he, a modern man, a member of a vast and teeming collection of tribes and clans and clubs, businesses and churches and universities, nationalities. . .

Maybe these other spaces, social spaces and political spaces and economic spaces, were as fundamental as spacetime?

Johnny thought not but they had some sort of claim on more basic reality than the complex entities which inhabited those while most of the entities were unaware of much beyond that which impinged upon physical sensory organs. Maybe some extended their recognition of reality to that which stimulated the circuits of their radios and computers.

How was an author to make sense of a feeling coalescing into a thought that reality was what it was, that men had shaped reality into such a form that some of what lay underneath mundane reality was somehow emerging to offer men new opportunities or to exact revenge?

Johnny returned from time-travel to a state of time-indifference and wondered if he would ever make sense of *The Stuff Which Isn't Stuff*:

Heavy-burdened the isle of Manhattan
however much the granite slabbened.
Why didn't the earth sink?
Why didn't the plates shift away,
fleeing to lighter regions?

The weight, the sheer weight
of steel and concrete.
Antennas scraping the sky.
Bridges forcing spacetime to arc.
Garages hardening toward Rome.

Why didn't the human race sink,
sink, I tell you,
under the weight of Gotham's steely men?
Did not the richest of artists, novelists,
playwrights, and composers live here?

Was being unbearably light?
Had a bear heavily been?
If being be heavy,
could it levitate?
Even concrete and steel?

But there be creative efforts,
only some of stone and metal.
Some quite light, not much massy.
Poetic being, melodic being.
Tomato cans so empty and light.

What was being?
Inert play-thing of ghosts?
Clay molded to vague shapes?
Was New York City so light?
Was the modern world but a lucent hall?

But the money. The money.
The sheer money of it all.
Fordless but mightily Morganized.
The welfare-warfare state
was bonded here.

The New England blue-collar boy
wondered yet...

“Where the factories and the mills?”

Were they yet ashore in Carolina North and South?

Had they set sail on bonded carriers?

Cart-makers had lived on Manson’s ranch.

Science was done in salt-mines
and holes drilled in Greenland ice.

Literature was studied north of Oakland
and history written in Texan cow-towns.

But the money. The money.

The big money. Even bars of gold.

Rested below a tower of a world
conquered by banker’s trade.

“Oh, Mr Morgan, have you truly won?”

And what was moral character? How could large human communities be morally well-ordered if their most powerful and most extensive relationships were the labels on their clothes, their make and model of car, their banks and credit cards, their favorite sports teams, the rock-and-roll concerts they had attended, and the television shows they watched?

“Perhaps the problem is not a conflict between individuals and communities but rather our lack of skills and knowledge for being true individuals and true communities? Yet, it seems harsh and nasty to claim *The Cattle Seek the Branded Irons and Not Generic Putters*.”

The designer jeans named Oscar went left,
Those named Felix went right.

Purple-hairs traveled to the Village,
 Mohawks to regions more south.

Three-piece suits went often to Midtown,
 Though ancient suits went yet to the Wall.

Beers poured for giant and patriotic fans,
 Next-door jazzy clients quaffed white wine.

The tribes were on the move,
 To gathering lodges east and west.

All bleached fresh and sparkling,
 Blood no longer staining.

Speaking in the accents of answering machine ghosts,
 Clear in all that isn't there to understand.

Happy days are here again,
 Happy herds travel the avenues.

Eden will be regained,
 On-route stores are in the black.

Tribes? Ostrogoths or Chirachua Apaches?

Wall Street which began at the grave of Alexander Hamilton, passed by the plaque for *Brown Brothers & Harriman*, and then ended with a short walk off a pier and into the East River?

The dreamer diddled in his confusion about non-stuff that wasn't stuff but was really the same as stuff and also non-stuff which wasn't even and was only illusions.

“What else could be said about non-stuff which is only *Fiat Stuff?*?”

How heavy,
how real,
was, is, and will be...
money?

How desirable,
how acidic,
was, is, and will be...
money?

Flows of cash
wash away
all in their paths.

20 Who Am I When I'm Not Me?

Modern rationality, the thoughts of automated manufacturing and remotely flown airplanes, inspired Johnny to think he could begin to regain control over his thoughts and dreams. And then, any control he had over his thoughts and dreams would break down and his increasingly dangerous imagination would unleash chaotic streams of words and not-quite concepts. If he had not been so depressed about his life as to have little energy, Johnny would have come to doubt his own sanity. And sometimes had come to so doubt when he felt the occasional burst of energy and optimism.

He wondered *If I Become Me Today, Can I Change My Mind Tomorrow?*:

Is. Over...

Condensing heavily to flowing fog of molten concrete.

What.

A god of thick mud
from which arise and fall
man-like shapes.

Wings. Horns.

Primeval ignorance masquerading
as grace and innocence.

And rising again, gods and goddesses,
goddesses and gods, in a world
upon which the wholly spirit
had descended, free of concrete, free
to shape it to me who are my
own desires.

Johnny felt his muscles locking as he fell asleep but a new lifetime later, he was soaring and swooning and sweeping through the sky of a far better planet. After all, he could fly. On his back. Membranes stretching from arms to legs as if he were Rocky J Squirrel.

And then he landed and found himself hand-in-hand with Anna, the girl he'd once fallen for only to have her sit him down and reveal she was a lesbian. Her friend Jennie, somewhat big-boned but a pretty-featured sweetheart, was her true love. At least for that now. They'd been at Johnny's house several times and he'd not seen anything unusual in their girlish kidding around but he was clearly not so knowledgeable of the world as he'd once thought.

So it was that Johnny wasn't much prepared to meet Karen, a more girlishly attractive young man than he'd imagined could be. He'd seen several creatures, one with large breasts, who seemed to be men going through, or men who'd already gone through, those male-to-female hormone and surgery procedures. None that he knew to be in that category had looked all that convincing to him, though he remembered pictures of Christine Jorgenson and thought that famous woman by way of artificial hormones and surgical procedure to have been convincing. Authentic? She thought herself a woman and looked the part and thus she was a woman though having the DNA of a man? A young man growing into a woman with the help of surgeon and chemist?

Had those beautiful women in that Castro Street restaurant years before been merely tourists in the world of men not interested in their readily exhibited cleavages and their well-formed, baby-making hips? Or had they been

just very convincing modifications of their own selves as genetically shaped or poorly shaped or misshaped?

Johnny had once gone to a coffee shop near Washington Square which was next-door to a shop displaying some strange objects which were said to be sexual toys and devices. Some looked to be pain-inflecting but maybe not flesh-breaking devices. Stylized implements for the sadists and masochists sneaking out of their middle-class houses for a night of pleasure or pain? Don't return home with open wounds or scars. Even in those districts, Johnny had never noticed many boys passing badly or tastelessly as New York girls, though there were plenty of slender young men, as loose-jointed as some NBA stars and wearing Judy Garland t-shirts.

How unobservant had he been? Perhaps human eyes and ears weren't well-adapted to sorting out with absolute reliability human beings into male and female? If so, did that mean that human beings were truly ill-adapted? Did it mean that such was not so valuable a skill in survival? Did it mean that there was some fuzziness in the categories of male and female? Was there a spectrum of two large populations shading into one another rather than two fully distinct populations?

Was his imagination going to expand that strange dream of melting identity and speak of "Muscles melting to firm breasts, skin softening to silk"? How deep, how deep could the transformations be? If the poor creature really felt to be a woman trapped in a man's body, would the transformations work their way in until they met the woman? But what if the outside and the inside were two different women?

Karen seemed truly and artlessly girlish even in the way he held his cigarette and occasionally flicked at it with a slender and pretty pointing finger decorated by a slender-banded emerald ring. Silver and seemingly of high quality though Johnny was no expert in jewelry. The ring. The light make-up which only emphasized the soft-brown eyes with gold flecks. The light and oh-so slightly glossy pink lips. The creamy skin and the slender face. The hair, reddish tints in brown, and braided before being draped over his left shoulder.

Her left shoulder? Her fingers?

Was this a creature who had turned from a path of manly development because of willful decisions? Was this a creature whose XY genes were overcome by immorality? Had something else gone wrong? Would Karen have necessarily thought of it in those terms, that he or she was the result of something going wrong?

Oh so languidly did the womanish young man place a cigarette between those soft lips before slowly releasing a cloud of smoke. It was the sort of image to be found in movies from the 1960s and earlier, when women were being freed to take on the same habits as men. And now was Karen a man taking on the same habits as women? Or was Karen truly a woman stuck inside a man's body? Was there someone inside a human being's body or was the body the same as that human being?

And Johnny found himself able to focus better on a matter of uncertainty as he looked at Karen's pretty finger and the ring it bore. He saw the emerald and wondered, "Birthstone?" Johnny had looked up birthstones when he'd fallen for Anna who'd been born in May. Emerald was listed as representing happiness and fertility. Anna certainly wasn't happy though she might someday bear children. Karen... He, she?, didn't look to be happy and was not likely to ever be fertile as a man and certainly not as a woman, unless still more radical surgical procedures were developed.

What was that science fiction novel? Delaney? A man was transformed into a woman even down to the genes in all his cells. Her cells? XY to XX? Testicles to ovaries? Penis to vagina was kind of possible and testicles could always be removed but...

Who was it that then lived in a body so altered as to be an other? Was it the unhappy creature of the other sex or was it simply an other? Had an entity describable as a person existed? If so, did the altered body provide a home for the same person or for an other?

21 Does an Honest Dreamer Become an Author?

The dreamer awoke and remembered the images and thoughts, part of a story, which came during the night when he'd been a little gassed up and not able to get back to sleep.

Strange.

Johnny had known Anna and had a crush on her but he'd never met Karen. He'd never even heard more than vague mention by Anna of a crowd of friends she'd made as if at once. She'd met one and then been invited to a party.

She had told Johnny the party-goers had been several of each from a variety of sexual types, physical types and psychological and sexual orientations. Apparently, there'd even been straight cross-dressers, mostly men dressed and padded as highly curved women though they had no interest in pretending to be women in sexual relationships with women or men and had no sexual interest in men. Some had even seemingly been entirely conventional, even consistent in genes and bodily organs and sexual dress and sexual behavior and sexual desires, so far as anyone could tell. Anna had even spoken of one particularly strange fellow, being much as a 12 year-old boy about to hit puberty but in his late 20s. He had openly told her that he had but one testicle and that was so small as to be largely non-functioning. He didn't expect to ever shave or to ever be able to have normal sex with a woman and wasn't much upset about the situation. He had taken the name Randolph John and Anna said he had gloried in holding and aggressively advocating conservative

views in the midst of those who weren't exactly open to such views.

So how had Karen become so concrete in Johnny's memories? He thought maybe he or she had come out of a book but he'd not been reading anything strange recently. He barely remembered that science fiction novel about a transformation of a man to a woman right down to the genes. He thought he'd read it in college more about 15 years prior. And he didn't remember that novel as being so competently written as to truly present that man-to-woman in so sympathetic a way. It had been more or less a whim driven by something akin to a strong sexual attraction to one particular man.

No. Johnny's recent readings had included some writings on statistical techniques and probability theory loosely related to his work and a few classic novels, a couple of Melville's more minor novels and a few Russian novels. Nothing that could have presented a man as a strangely pretty creature, more feminine than Anna, a soft and gentle tom-boy but one who was sexually attracted to girls.

Part IV

Back to the Land of Dark-viewed Men

22 Silence and the Shadow of Returning

A silent returning can be so sad.
A silent sadness can return us to our roots.
If not rooted, we are but a fragment of human being.
A fragment of a human being must return.
That be so sad.

Or maybe not.

Johnny set down pen and wondered what the hell the lines meant. He'd written them. Surely, there was some meaning in there. Something. Or were they nothing more than misfires such as occurred sometimes with his memory? He wondered if he could even pull a title from such nonsense.

Was a writer's life nothing more than excursions into the irrational regions of human perceptions and human thought, all mixed up in their chronological sequence. Followed by days spent agonizing over the placement of commas in an age when the semi-literate were barely semi when it came to rhythm of words, let alone the more complex rhythms which were in the development and interplay of concepts. Those rhythms didn't even appear from any direct parsing of the words, though there would necessarily be some hints in the words. . .

"Writer?" A writer had risen and poured a double-shot of Bourbon into a glass before settling his confusion enough to ask, "Am I a writer or an author?"

Was it an author or merely a writer who scurried over to the dictionary to find that it didn't tie author to authority.

"Who cares? Nietzsche could probably make the connection. He went to better schools than we have in the United States. I'll go with it."

But...

Nietzsche walked the tightrope as a creative writer...

Or was he an author?

Some of Nietzsche's books developed philosophical arguments based upon rigorous etymological analyses. Some of his books developed plausible philosophical arguments. How much the overlap?

Was an author more likely than a writer to have a plausible answer? And how did plausibility tie into truth?

"What am I? I haven't even written a single page which pleases me. All I have is ideas and all the writer's guides tell me that it's a bad idea to write in order to communicate ideas. You're supposed to write for the sake of..." Johnny paused before telling himself, "You're supposed to write for the sake of writing and apparently ideas get in the way."

Johnny feared the publishing industry in the United States had been taken over by the likes of those who had dressed in black in high school, carrying around copies of the writings of Nietzsche and the poems of Ginsburg.

"Writing is to communicate the angst in a soul which has nothing else to offer the world. Which means it has nothing to offer the world."

But a voice asked, "Are you falling into self-righteousness? Certainly, there is much to criticize, but you haven't shown you can do better."

Still...

Johnny suspected Nietzsche would have been disgusted by Ginsburg.

More sensibility than brains, and not a healthy sensibility at that. Was that true as well of those high schoolers in black?

Johnny was pretty sure Nietzsche would have been simply puzzled by those high schoolers in black.

Johnny was certain Nietzsche would have thought Ginsburg and those high schoolers in black were confirmation that the West was a rotten apple, though that wasn't the term used by Nietzsche so far as Johnny could remember.

“Maybe Nietzsche considered ‘Christian’ to carry enough of the connotations of ‘rotten’ and ‘unmanly’?”

23 A Half a Mind is Hardly Worth the Having

Johnny rose and looked over to a pile of books sitting on top of the bookcase in his bedroom. He'd filled the two bookcases he had in his den and a new shipment of books had arrived from a mail-order operation specializing in high-quality overstocked books. He was beginning to think it didn't take large publication runs for a demanding book to be overstocked in this year of 1989. Once or twice during Christmas season, Johnny had taken his mother to an overstock bookstore which would be open only a couple of months at the holiday season and he'd noticed the quality of books, at least for content if not always the paper and printing, was higher than what was to be found in some of the year-round bookstores in the Springfield area. His mother had been mostly interested in books for her grandchildren but Johnny had taken the opportunity in those days of ready cash to pile up novels and science books and history books and a few books of poetry.

And he'd had to admit that he'd been taught in the public schools, and by television and the movies and so much more, to consider serious reading to be a chore rather than a pleasure. Though not a good athlete, he'd picked up enough skills to play basketball and other team sports with others who were good athletes. It had taken some effort though it had been an effort easily started. On many days from May through September, he had gone to one of the nearby parks with the other boys in the neighborhood to play baseball soon after they got home from school; during winter, they'd taken shovels and

ice-skates and hockey-sticks and headed off to a pond. By early struggles with ankles not able to hold him upright on skates, by hours spent learning how to arc the basketball over the rim, Johnny had learned that disciplined practice was necessary to acquire the skills for enjoying sports even at a casual level.

The mind was thought by most to be pre-formed, something different from the body in not needing to be developed. The world and all of its knowledge was transparent to the mind; if not transparent, it was simply beyond the capacity of that mind. So had he been taught. So did most modern men believe so far as he could tell. It was no better than believing that you could just walk out on a sportsfield and throw a football accurately or hit a fastball without some knowledge and practice and maybe disciplined formation by an intelligent coach.

Johnny had never had the opportunity to learn through friendships with anyone who'd shared his interest in history, especially the 1700s and early 1800s in the United States. There had been no such friends just as there had been none who considered it fun to read good novels or any books except sometimes a biography of Mickey Mantle or Babe Ruth or, a little later, John Lennon. Science was simply weird stuff even to the other smart students at school.

There hadn't even been a teacher, let alone a friend, who appreciated the occasions early in his high school career when he'd spent hours at the kitchen table solving a math problem only to see it dismissed the next day because none of the other students had made any sense of it, probably after 10 seconds of effort. Actually, he'd never told anyone about those frustrating episodes, now that he thought about it, though he knew at least one of his teachers had detected his frustration.

There was nothing left but to speak out as was Johnny's right as an American. True it was that he didn't understand much and seemed to be on a path where he understood less as he advanced, but he couldn't wait to speak until he had deeper, more exact, more accurate understandings of...

Whatever.

He had to start speaking in the hope that that very act would help him to

advance more deeply into. . .

Wherever.

But he felt a need to advance and a vague hope that he would someday reach a point where he understood. . .

Something.

Or at least could ask coherent questions of the world.

A moment had arrived, though perhaps a different moment than the one he hoped for, different from the one he expected, different from any moment he could understand. . .

It all came down to that understanding. Rather than suspecting the world to be chaotic as did so many published authors and pundits of all sorts, Johnny suspected there was grand order out there and it was his mind which was not properly formed, not strong enough, to take in the most fundamental of truths.

24 A Man Lost in Dreams

Johnny feared for his sanity.

He was lost in dreams more than in the hard-edged world of actuarial consulting.

Were his dreams more real than that world? More real in an objective or subjective sense?

Were his dreams a sign of a journey he was taking? Maybe it was his soul which was on a journey? Like those strange books about that American Indian mystic? Was his name Don Juan? Johnny thought he had one of those books on a shelf in his bedroom but he didn't want to bother to go look for it.

Was he being reshaped by...

Spirits? Angels or demons? Maybe some of each were battling it out for his mind?

Maybe God Himself?

Maybe it was Johnny who was reshaping himself by...

He felt near to something, some thought or feeling which would bring much together.

And yet he felt far away.

Could he go the distance to solve this problem?

Could he discover the right angle to attack the problem?

25 Habits Breed Thoughts Which Breed Habits

Johnny had entered a hell of sorts though he still lived in a nice town along the coast of Connecticut.

Every day, he went to work in a career which was deeply unsatisfying and in which he knew he was failing for a few reasons he tried not to think about. He remembered often the words of a boss and friend out in San Francisco, “You’re the most talented underachiever I’ve ever worked with.”

Every night, he replayed all that had gone wrong in his early years, fighting against the temptation to blame everyone else. It wasn’t that he had any desire to whitewash those who’d made all sorts of mistakes in raising a young man with talents outside of the capabilities of the local school systems and outside of the interests and understanding of the community.

He’d try to follow a better line of thought and would find Sarah, the friend of his youthful days, would appear in her younger or more mature form, pre- and post-marriage in Johnny’s way of remembering her. The story-line would start as a meeting of friends and lead to a failed. . .

Johnny wanted children who’d be like him but he’d so hated his own life that he didn’t want to bring such children into a world which demanded a conformism and a deadening of the mind. He’d fallen in with those alien ways for a while after he’d realized near the end of elementary school that he had to watch popular TV shows and follow professional sports if he wished to be part of conversations at school. He’d cut back on jigsaw puzzles and had stopped

reading so many biographies about Benjamin Franklin and Albert Einstein. This had more or less continued through high school and then for a while in college. There had been too many hours in front of the television watching the Patriots and the Celtics and the Bruins and—Johnny felt a wave of shame—those shows popular in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. He'd watched medical crews in the Korean War, television news crews in snowy Minneapolis, and a crew of Chicago policemen.

By the time that Johnny had begun to put pen clumsily and ineffectively to paper, he'd seen the first of the modern space opera movies though he'd lost interest in men sailing through the universe to bring civilization to less advanced races. Or to obtain it from more advanced races, though it was unclear what we could learn from silicon based creatures tunneling through rock. In any case, he had also lost interest in seemingly billions and billions of popular documentaries about space and technology though picking up a liking for documentaries about hurricanes and earthquakes.

In general, he thought his life to be this though something else perhaps more promising. Perhaps his life should have been much different...? That line of thought was too painful and so he avoided thinking consciously about the problem for a while even as he began to take a few baby steps to reach that goal.

And through the 1980s, he was making an effort to bring his mind and his desire for a connection to the future back to life, succeeding at least to the extent of reading some demanding novels of past centuries and ever more good-quality popular books on science and mathematics, and those readings had the effect of still further lessening his interests in most televised documentaries of science and history and human culture in general. Yet, he thought video technology to be of some good in showing volcanoes and earthquakes and ocean storms in action.

Of seemingly more immediate importance, he was approaching 12 years of corporate nomadic life and had lost interest even in the more attractive aspects of that life. Or perhaps those aspects were disappearing as his contemporaries

were getting married and settling down.

But he still had a lot of trouble reading some books, *Moby Dick* in particular, and also most books of the *Bible*. There was something in those books which threatened him, promised a look into...

An abyss?

He still had trouble reading poetry even as he struggled to put a few lines down on paper, but that was different—he simply didn't have the skills to read verse of any substantial sort.

There was something about other sorts of books and he looked over at a pile of mathematics and physics books not of the popular sort and remembered the words of a college professor who said he should be able to gobble up the basic books, those at a level for undergraduates. He couldn't read those books more effectively than difficult novels or the *Bible*.

A shiver went through Johnny as he thought of the possibility he'd been trained into a state of being an ineffective learner.

"Have I been conditioned to fail?"

He thought back to some of his fellow-students in college, less intelligent than he was but they had been taught, trained?, to learn well and they had gotten good grades but they didn't really seem to be much interested in the subjects. Were they empty inside?

They were effective in dealing with the world of academics but empty inside; Johnny was alive inside but ineffective in learning difficult material?

A feeling came upon Johnny, one he knew too well but now understood...

And his thoughts turned to Sarah when she was 17 or so, the age she was the last time he'd seen her before she married, but Johnny himself was oddly enough his present age of 32...

It didn't seem right but Johnny didn't feel much like an adult...

On the other hand, his Oklahoma grandfather was in his early 40s when he married his second wife, Johnny's grandmother who was 16 or so.

But that was farm country and Johnny grew up in New England.

26 What's So Important About Sanity?

It was during that last year or so of his faltering career that Johnny began to obsessively sit down at the nice writing table in his office, most Saturdays and nearly every weekday evening he wasn't meeting the priest instructing him for entering the Catholic Church. He'd pick up his good quality fountain pen and...

Little came and usually it was stuff that hit the wastebasket before the ink dried. Johnny mostly tried to write a fictionalized biography of his own life but found little of importance or interest to write about.

But sometimes bits and pieces came of a man driven crazy in his desire to seek revenge, of a fellow who was sane in the spacey way of geniuses, of scientists whose sanity was questionable because they internalized some of the strange facts or theories of modern physics or biology.

Johnny felt under a great deal of stress and sanity seemed to be on his mind. He was sure he was making the right decision, however little the promise he showed as a writer.

But he remained true to his feeling that he had something to offer...

And the day came when Johnny sat down at his desk and wrote a tiny bit after realizing he must *Tread This Path and Not Any Other*:

What is said cannot be said again,
to little matter all of that.
What is reflects the greater truth
though humbly caked in mud.

But glaring sun brick-bakes the mud
which zigs or bables out
as the gardener hangs and waits the day
when prince submits to sage.

Suggest ten sunny days you might,
propose another golden week.
Cold steel rules yet
and coal-dust clouds the sky.

It was a fragment of something. Perhaps a meaningful poem? Perhaps it was no more than practice? Warm-up for a mind returning to a greater and more comfortable level of activity?

27 She Who Must Be Dreamt

Johnny was beginning to fear the path he was treading and wondered if he should leave it untrod.

Was he becoming an author? Or something similar?

As he set his thoughts down into his loosely kept diary, Johnny grew suspicious and pulled out his dictionary to discover that tread could refer to copulation on the part of male birds.

A minor problem to be left to the exegetes.

Anyway, what had that to do with his only strategy for blackish lines of thought: bring Sarah or one of the other women in his past to life in stories in his imagination.

Stories?

So, he was in great danger. His response to problems was to try to tell stories? The next thing he knew, he'd be solving theological problems by writing poetry.

But it was his dreams...

There were dreams at night, in the half-awake and half-asleep state.

They were of one sort...

There were dreams of another sort during the day, elaborate and complex and extremely absorbing. They hinted of novels including some he'd not want to write or to read. They sometimes came in stumbling meters but meters none the less.

28 Imaginations Also Bring Temptations to Sin

For months of weather fair and foul, Johnny ended each evening as he began each Saturday morn—with a couple hours of exhilarating labor upon one of his novels.

Exhilarating and painful. Especially in the beginning when it was such a struggle to even put a paragraph down which didn't end up in the wastebasket seconds after being finished.

Johnny as yet had not scalpels nor any surgeon's skills and so it was that he was opening his veins with a chainsaw and letting the blood drench the paper. And the desk. And the floor.

The results were not pretty, nor even much readable.

Exhausted after work followed by hours of struggle with narratives. . .

Johnny's active imagination brought worlds to life, including worlds in which Sarah or others coyly presented themselves for his pleasure.

If he'd not chosen his current path in life, to become an author speaking authoritatively—that is, truthfully—about the world as he could best know it, he'd have been able to maim himself by suppressing his own imagination; then would he have been a better American for the end of the 20th century.

Suddenly came a frightening question, "Is our ability to live as civilized Christians tied to our moral imaginations?"

29 The Other Conversion Advances to Anticlimax

Johnny's instruction by Father McCreary reached a point where the young priest told him, "You know far more than enough to enter the Catholic Church, but..." He had stopped at that point and had merely said he'd talk to the pastor of the parish Johnny belonged to and also to the bishop.

A week later, he'd been received into the Catholic Church at Father McCreary's new parish, a church Johnny had never been in before and likely would never be in again. He'd started his visit to that church with a very bad confession, that is, a confession which was short and bland and made it seem as if he'd lived a boring but sinless life. In fact, he'd lived a life more than a bit boring but far from sinless, though he was having trouble getting the hang on this business of sin, examination of conscience, and a confession which—as described by a few conservative Catholics he knew—seemed an apology for being alive and for being the sort of creature man was, a creature of an all-powerful and all-knowing God who was well aware what He was doing when he made men from knuckle-dragging creatures who ate hunks of raw mastodon with side-dishes of wild-onions and acorns. Or whatever. Johnny thought to himself he should be careful even thinking much about factual matters unless he'd bothered to discover the facts, but...

Sometimes his mouth moved before he'd have time to go do some research and he wasn't so good as he'd once thought at keeping his mouth shut.

Johnny was suddenly afraid, guessing he knew what Father McCreary had

hinted at. Was he more aware of the thoughts of Newton and Einstein and Heisenberg than he was of the Catholic teachings on the nature of Creation, of space and time and matter? Was he more aware of the thoughts of Darwin and Watson and Sperry and Nisbet than he was of the Catholic teachings on the nature of man? In many cases, he had only superficial knowledge of those empirical researchers and speculators, though he had only marginally better knowledge of ancient and Medieval Catholic thinkers, but he strongly thought these modern empirical researchers to be the true heirs of Augustine and Anselm and Albert and Aquinas and—certainly—Pascal and Newman.

“I wonder who are the 20th century heirs to Newman the historian of Christian thought?”

“But maybe other things are more important than either the world or Catholic teachings? Am I too much mind and not enough heart? How about those people I sometimes see at Catholic churches outside of Mass? Their prayers are as ritualized as the Mass itself. Maybe I should pray the Rosary or look into some of those other prayers? What was that stuff about Divine Mercy? Or maybe I should visit Fatima or Lourdes and see if that could bring alive my spirit?”

Johnny felt a tingling in his arms and legs, akin to that he sometimes felt as part of a paralyzing seizure of sorts as he was falling asleep. Paralysis didn't come and neither did any sort of difficulty in willing to move on in bringing thoughts or memories forward to his consciousness. He felt as if he were afloat in a field of sorts. . .

So it was that Johnny entered the Catholic Church the same week he lost his job. In the next few weeks, he found that the effects of the stock market crash of 1987 had not been fully reflected in prices when he'd bought his house. His bank wouldn't make arrangements for a private loan so he could make plans to cover the \$80,000 shortfall and on the advice of a lawyer, he moved his goods out of state, mostly to his parents' house. He was sick to his stomach at the very thought of returning to Jenkesville to live, but he prepared to return to his grave.

He was numb inside the day he locked the house in Stamford for the last time and drove by the lawyer's office where he handed the receptionist the package with the house keys.

Without saying goodbye to Father McCreary or his other friends, he drove off, heading to Jenkesville and fearing all possible paths he saw in the fogs stretching ahead of him.

Part V

Far Off the Beaten Path

30 The Thoughts of a Solitary Man on the Road

Johnny had not been living more than a few days at his parents' house, usually crowded and noisy with visiting siblings and their children, when he went off to spend a few days at the Benedictine house of St Mary's Monastery for men which was on the same piece of property as the Priory of St Scholastica for women. Those brother-sister houses were in Rockshire, a farm community in the hills of central Massachusetts. It was a strange setting for monasteries. Rockshire was an Olde Yankee town of pure lineage, founded in the years following the French and Indian War and still populated by nice folks who couldn't understand this business of a life devoted to prayer. Rockshire had been home to the motherhouse of a Catholic order of teaching sisters for decades before the Benedictines had moved there but the Yankee farmers could understand women who were teachers and prayed a lot rather than marrying. Though being generally helpful in neighborly ways as well as being pleasant, they couldn't understand the Benedictines nor the men in the Maronite Rite Catholic monastery and hermitage which had been set up recently by Latin Rite Catholics in the hope of attracting Arabic Catholics or others from Middle Eastern ancestry.

At the cost of nearly an additional half-hour, Johnny drove from Jenkesville to Rockshire by a leisurely way through a long stretch of forest rather than traveling the more efficient way on the highway which cut up through a couple of rapidly growing towns with the usual small shopping centers with nearby or em-

bedded nationally franchised fast-food joints as well as some local restaurants, and—it was near the Quabbin Reservoir and other wooded areas—sporting goods stores stocking live bait as well as ammunition.

As he passed through this landscape once New England farmland, Johnny found it easy to vaguely imagine a satirical work set in a country filled with those who set out to be individuals and failed so spectacularly that purple hair became a surrogate for the individualized insides not to be found. . . . When little more came, he quickly realized it wasn't his story to write even if it was part of the greater story he was living along with most residents of the modern West.

"But it is good," he told himself, "to drive down the road observing lightly while passing rapidly through regions light on culture but heavy on prosperity."

But that seemed self-righteous and only superficially insightful, though it seemed to hold some idea or multiple ideas which described some part of Johnny's recent experiences, experiences which passed through heart and through mind and came together. . . .

No, tried to come together.

In any case, during in those lonely trips someone could be alone with himself and all the thoughts which came bubbling up. And it was more than thoughts. . . .

It was thoughts but they couldn't come together no matter how Johnny strained and no matter how much torment it had taken to produce. . . . No, to try to produce an insight. Were those thoughts simply foggy images of a reality he didn't understand by way of mind or heart? An image came to mind of a chart with lines connecting many nodes. A complex network which was hard to describe because sub-networks and clouds of thoughts met and moved around each other in ways not possible to visualize. . . .

"What?! Let me try again. Those sub-networks and clouds of thoughts had connections too confusing to be articulated in human language as I know it."

Not all that much better, but Johnny felt he had to move on and not confuse himself too much at one spot while he was trying to get a feel for the greater landscape.

Were there greater thoughts made up in some way of lesser thoughts and yet... Could those greater thoughts have their own existence and properties independent in some way of the lesser thoughts of which they were composed?

Johnny's mind was racing, trying to delve into this mystery with the various small and superficial stock of knowledge he had of physical cosmology where, as he sort of understood matters, the universe could be an object of study separate from its components and having properties not coming from some mere aggregation of those components.

The marker for the town of Rockshire interrupted Johnny's thoughts. In fact, he thought he was on his way to some sort of an insight but it was gone. If only he'd followed his plans to keep a pad in the front seat, he'd have been able to pull over and...

It wouldn't have mattered. The idea had disappeared immediately upon his reading *You are now entering the town of Rockshire. Pedestrian crossing laws are strictly enforced.*

He struggled to recover that idea...

Or was it part of a story?

An interesting character, seen so briefly? Would he have been a main character in a novel or merely one passing through that tale as he did so briefly in Johnny's awareness? Johnny vaguely remembered Melville spending a small chapter in *Moby Dick* analyzing a man who never again appeared in that wonderful and disturbing tale...

Tale? No, it was a mish-mash of tales interwoven with philosophical discussions, a chapter which could have been an entry from an encyclopedia of natural sciences, and other things he couldn't remember at the time.

There was something about that book that disturbed Johnny and it wasn't the book itself but rather his difficulties in reading it along with the claims of others that it was no different from any other book. He'd had that problem with another book, one written by a modern economist about the nature of knowledge. When he came to understand what the fellow had meant, Johnny had partially agreed and partially disagreed with him, but that economist had

been a serious thinker producing substantial thought which wasn't something to be understood by a casual reader. At least Johnny had thought so, but he'd gone on a business trip and sat beside an attractive and intelligent woman ten or so years older than him. When she saw the book he was reading, she'd told him she'd read it a year or so before. When Johnny spoke about the difficulty in understanding what the author was getting at, she'd looked puzzled and had responded that she'd found it easy to understand.

As he was turning into the grounds of the brother-sister Benedictine communities, Johnny wondered if he were not as smart as indicated by various tests and by psychologists who'd personally interviewed him or...

Maybe others who were seemingly intelligent had shallow minds that didn't even realize when the material in front of them rested upon deep foundations?

As Johnny parked near the main entrance of the guest house, he noticed a figure coming over to greet him. It was Brother Andrew.

31 Haven in a Godless World?

Brother Andrew was a sturdy fellow with a great beard both salted and peppered. He was wearing a work habit which showed wear and even some signs of dirt—he was a physical worker who took care of much of the grounds for the monastery and priory, but Johnny had found he was also well-read in some fields, such as Christian belief and the history of the Catholic Church.

Johnny hadn't yet gotten over his American habit of making up facts to fill in a line of thought or to justify a belief. Usually, he did the first, on the fly and unconsciously, and often—though not always—he was filling in a story which was quite plausible. Johnny had been telling Brother Andrew a story he'd read about the way in which King St Louis had been treated very well when captured by the Moslems during a Crusade and he'd given the king a number which Brother Andrew caught as clearly wrong. Johnny had said Louis I and Brother Andrew had said, "No, he was much later than that. Louis I was an early king." It had turned out that Louis I was one of the sons of Charlemagne and had lived in the eighth century or so. St Louis was Louis IX and had lived in the 13th century, living in nearly the same years as Aquinas.

As he made only weak and inconsistent efforts to correct his bad habits of thought and feeling and behavior, Johnny pondered how he'd gotten into such a state and why he had so much trouble generating the proper remorse to energize a trip to another state. He'd not thought long about his concrete self before asking, "Are Americans a people looking for ways to feel good about themselves as Graham Greene had said in *The Quiet American*?" Johnny remembered others, including Tocqueville and Melville and Hawthorne, who

had also claimed Americans had a great talent for deceiving themselves and a greater desire to look good in the eyes of others than they had for finding the truth.

In any case, Johnny had just become more seriously interested in that contemporary of St Louis, Thomas Aquinas, though his first try at the *Summa Contra Gentiles* had left no more than confusion at all the mystical gibberish which overlay any more serious philosophical thought in that book.

Who needed angels in a world much better described by Darwin and Einstein than by Pseudo-Dionysius?

And where did all the angel-mongers and demon-mongers go when they were sick? To a hospital to be diagnosed by machines designed by the successors of Einstein and treated according to knowledge gathered by the successors of Darwin.

Where did they go for new ways of making new goods and raising their living standards? Not to mystical seers in contact with angels or witches in contact with demons but rather to the successors of Einstein and Planck and Heisenberg, the successors of Ford and Edison and Eckert.

“A penny for your thoughts, Johnny. . .”

It was Sister Mary Thomas who had asked the question. Her roundish face was grinning along with the bearded face of Brother Andrew, but the pretty face was 9 inches below the bearded face. The pretty face was also framed in white wimple and black veil.

“I was thinking about. . . my faith, Sister Mary Thomas.”

A moment of silence followed which gave Johnny spacetime to follow up but he just ended up letting his eyes drift to the impatiens and petunias recently planted near the entrances to the nearby building, shared by guests on one side and the monks on the other. The refectory and kitchen split the two areas with signs giving guests advice on restricted areas and proper behavior in shared areas.

“Are you making any progress on raising the money for a new building for the monks?”

Sister Mary Thomas sighed and said, “Some, but it’s slow.”

The talk moved on to freshly planted tomatoes and cucumbers and newly sowed corn and bean seeds and was moving to composting techniques when the sound came of approaching horses. Johnny looked up to see a man on a palomino quarter-horse and a woman on a smallish chestnut horse which she was having fun controlling—he was a good-natured brat to all appearances. They were coming down the private road leading from the state highway into the monastic grounds.

As they drew close, Johnny could see the man’s gray hair and the attractive signs of character and aging on both faces. He was guessing they were at the end of their so-called middle-years, though they seemed in quite good physical shape.

32 Finding a Residence if Not a Home

That was Johnny's first meeting with Sean and Linda Evans, retired school-teachers and "parents in hiding" as they described themselves in their Rockshire life. No, they were lives in the plural for they were a married couple with a good and solid relationship but they retained quite a bit of individuality. Did that mean they had three lives, three entities—man, wife, and couple? Johnny let the speculation sink to the bottom of his mind and turned to Sean and Linda as they dismounted and advanced, reins for both horses in the left hand of Sean. After they'd shaken hands with Johnny, they began to tell their story, starting with their purchase four years back of a sprawling colonial farmhouse. The center-front section of this 13-room house had been built shortly after the farmland was cleared, around 1770 or so. Sean was speaking with excitement about what they'd done to fix up the house which had been modernized in the 1950s and not updated again in the previous 30 years. Up to that point, Linda had been listening to a spiel she likely had heard often but then she spoke up, in a well-rehearsed interruption?, to say, "Isn't it interesting how some peoples in the world can keep styles for generations while we Americans associate progress with a need to always have this season's dishwasher and electrical system?"

Sean smiled without turning to his wife and asked Johnny, "How would you like to join us for a late lunch this afternoon?" When Johnny had nodded his head in a manner he hoped was quite friendly, Sean added, "Then we can give you a tour of a house which is now out-of-date since it is wired and plumbed and furnished to the standards of four years past."

Linda laughed and said, "It can be hard to separate invitations and threats when Sean's hobbies are involved."

A few hours later, Johnny was walking slowly through a colonial farmhouse, built circa 1800, paying little attention to most rooms though he gathered the remodeled house was now both elegant and quaint. He paid a bit more attention when they'd reached the section which was built in the 1770s or so to house the original occupants. The center of that section was a huge chimney with hearths on three sides. They made a side-trip into the basement to view the massive base of stone and brick which supported those fireplaces and the huge chimney and, indeed, that entire section of the house.

Retracing their path through the kitchen which was nice and... a kitchen, they passed through the family room and entered a room which was perhaps 15 feet wide and better than 30 feet long. It had once been the stable for some cattle or other farm animals and had been built as an attachment to the house. Sean said that such an arrangement allowed the farmhouse to be warmed by those bulky animals and kept them safe from wolves and eastern mountain lions as well as probably allowing easy care of dairy cows during winter.

The stable was now a music room with both a grand piano and an electronic keyboard. Several guitars and both a fiddle and a violin hung from the long wall at the far end from the one entrance. Both of them played the piano and guitar and Linda also played both fiddle and violin. She had come from a family which included a great-aunt who had played piano solos in front of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and had been a member of various music groups, some quite prestigious so far as Johnny could gather. Aunt Rose and several other members of the family had been music teachers at the high school and college level. After Linda had told her story, Sean laughed and said, "I come from more vulgar music roots. I made spending money through high school and college playing in rock bands that specialized in that loud three-chord music. Started with the bass guitar, which I never play now, and moved on to guitar and keyboard and sometimes drums. I'd taught myself to play the guitar and then the other instruments. Didn't play well when I met Linda in

college but I took lessons from other students looking to earn very small pay indeed. Linda and one of her cousins also gave me informal lessons.” Then he sighed as if those days had been quite pleasant before motioning toward the door and saying, “Follow me and we’ll show you the apartment upstairs. We’d fixed it up for a friend with MS but he only lived there for a year or so before he had to go into a nursing home.”

Johnny moved in three days later after he fetched a first load of clothes and kitchen gear. The apartment was already furnished with bed and a couch as well as several chairs. It even had a small table for eating, two chairs only. After looking around, he stared a few seconds at a very small pile of books and a box of office supplies on the floor and at the boxes containing his computer. After a quick look at the small dining table, he decided he needed a place to eat in a somewhat civilized manner. The computer needed its own table.

“I’ll have to go down to Jenkesville tomorrow and fetch my computer table and a chair more suited to it. These chairs are too low. And I’ll start bringing up some of those boxes of books and a couple of Japanese prints.” As if agreeing with the assessment, Johnny’s year-old Golden Retriever leaned against him and looked up with an expression of trusting confusion. He’d been left in Jenkesville when Johnny came up for his visit at the monastery. In the two weeks since Johnny had returned to his parents’ house, Rebel had accustomed himself to the crowded conditions at the Waters’ house in Jenkesville, especially with the regular visits of several of Johnny’s young nephews and nieces.

33 A Breath of Fresh Air

Johnny wandered often through the forests belonging to Mather University's school of forestry and sometimes through downtown Rockshire. He preferred the woods because he could walk with his dog, Rebel, and it was there that he could also have the peace and quiet to think through matters before he sat down to the painful struggle to write something intelligent. By browsing a few books in the town library and also by walking several times through the small museum maintained by the forestry school, he was able to learn a bit about Rockshire; the library also had a couple of general, background histories on the Colonial era.

Rockshire had been first settled by veterans of the last of the French and Indian wars; large lots of farmland had been given to them in lieu of cash pay. Johnny figured it was a cheap way for the colonial and Royal governments to make payment, the land was originally occupied by native American tribes pushed west. Recently, he'd been horrified to learn that the European colonists had rounded up native Americans after King Phillip's War and had shipped them down to the Caribbean to be sold as slaves. He wasn't sure if something like that had happened to the natives after that final war against the French and their native American allies; he did know most of the natives of New England were pushed west, followed without a doubt by some white men who also preferred a semi-nomadic life. And those native Americans and half-wild white men were followed by the farmers and storekeepers and iron-miners who would push all those with red skins or nomadic habits farther west.

Rockshire was a comfortable 45 minute drive away from the town where

Johnny had grown up, Jenkesville in the Chicopee River Valley of western Massachusetts. He found himself making that journey more often than he'd planned when he realized his father was growing weak in his early 60s and trying to work as many hours as possible to get money for Mrs Waters. Without admitting it to himself at the time, Johnny began acting as if consciously knowing his father's cancer had returned after 15 years of remission. He visited more frequently than he had wished to after having discovered, near the end of his college years, that something about Jenkesville bothered him deeply, not to the point of disgust but rather to the point of some narcotic state. Though it was seeming almost sinful and certainly wasteful of emotional energy, he'd still not come to terms about the mishandling of his early years, the decision to hold him in place rather than letting his intellectual talents develop, the decision to treat school as a socializing institution and then...

He also found himself uncomfortable around most Jenkesville people, even those he loved and liked. He had little to say to them and he didn't like so much chatter about the Red Sox and the Patriots or about the latest stuff on television. It wasn't a matter of elitism because Johnny knew little about the music, only sometimes liked the music, which he aspired to enjoy. He didn't know how to read poetry and, despite being a mathematics major in college, he'd not learned how to read and enjoy serious works on mathematics and physics. He only aspired to enjoy serious music and poetry and mathematics and physics and...

The list could go on. It was the list of learning for an intelligent man who wished to recover his mind as he tried to live in a great civilization in which knowledge had been reduced to so many hurdles to be leaped in college before returning to interesting things like the World Series or golf or cruising beautiful lakes in noisy boats. He saw some good in all of these—though he preferred kayaks and canoes to noisy boats, but they were bad when used to anesthetize a people as they sank into a barbarian childhood.

As he saw it, western civilization had risen to greatness when men of genius became obsessed with serious music or demanding mathematics or detailed

botanical classification or thought-bending sculpture or soul-enlarging poetry. He'd read enough history and even a few biographies which told of earlier centuries when men sought education even if no more than what they could get by studying the Bible or reading great works of literature on their own. Some, including some great men in American history, Cotton Mather and other Puritans and Benjamin Franklin and Jonathon Edwards and many a minister in the 1800s, had even studied serious physics and mathematics as if for fun.

Having recently read *The Revolt of the Masses* [6] by José Ortega Y Gasset, Johnny knew that insightful author had classified modern men of the West as barbarian children.

"I'm no better than a barbarian child myself, but I aspire to adulthood, the adulthood of a true man of Western Civilization."

He advised himself, "One step at a time," knowing he had years of work ahead of himself and already had a little bit less flexibility of mind than he'd had when he wasted the years of his youth. As if a flash in the night, he was inspired by the thought that his mind had not been so horribly misshaped. No, it was partially dormant and weak, flabby, fragmented though not so bad as the minds of most modern men.

Johnny had been paying a little bit more attention to history and had been stripping himself of false knowledge and jingoistic attitudes which came from public school fairy tales. Actually, he liked the idea of teaching a whitewashed but substantial body of historical knowledge to youngsters but the nastier sides of even noble men and the great events of history should gradually make their way into the narratives as students entered their teen years. He realized there was a big problem with that, at least with the recent generations of Western men—by the time, a boy or girl had matured into man or woman and were capable of understanding the nasty sides of things without taking it too hard, he or she would have stopped reading anything substantial. At best, they might watch some of the better documentaries or historical movies.

"The first responsibility of a Christian is to acknowledge God as his Creator and to pay attention to Creation, to be honest about God's world."

The quiet was punctuated by a bark. Johnny looked with some concern to see that Rebel had only seen his landlord and landlady coming down the path on their horses. Bears and wolves and maybe some Eastern mountain lions were to be found in these woods belonging to Mather University and separated by only a rural highway from a larger body of woods belonging to a water company. So far as horses go, he wasn't much worried. He'd seen even gentle-tempered horses try to stomp dogs they didn't trust; a horse could be hurt bad if he tripped over a smaller animal; Rebel had enough sense to stay out of their way and the horses had picked up on that quickly and trusted the Golden to be near them, even on the run.

As Sean and Linda Evans drew near, Johnny could hear them singing *Give Peace a Chance*. Sean wasn't too much of a peacenik, the ordinary sort in that regard, but he was a great John Lennon fan. Both of them had taught mathematics at a small college near Boston for several decades and were doing a damned good job of enjoying their retirement. They often invited Johnny to their gatherings but he often wished to be alone though he greatly enjoyed their company when he did join them, by their twosome or with a small crowd of men and women often interesting, sometimes neighbors and sometimes other retired college professors or men and women they'd met on trips.

Once when Johnny didn't accept their offer of company, he felt a calm joy when he walked down to their kitchen to return a stew-pot. He could hear the Evans and their friends laughing and singing while sitting in their music room. He'd even spent a few evenings with them and a variety of friends from the academic worlds and also the world of scientific research in private industry. Johnny found them interesting though he admitted he had never an intellectual discussion with them beyond their involvement in the research into radar and computers during World War II and the subsequent development of the high tech industry in the Boston region. History. Important history. But they never discussed the underlying ideas behind that technology. He wondered if they were still bound by oaths of secrecy...

Sean dismounted and started playing with Rebel. Linda pulled her Ara-

bian around his big quarter-horse and, as she drew near Johnny, asked, “You enjoying the fresh air after that long winter?”

Johnny merely nodded and listened to the gentle breeze sing of the pleasures to be found here in these wooded areas when the summer heat rested heavily upon even the hilly regions of central Massachusetts.

34 A Writer's Nest

Johnny was settled into his writer's nest. Or was it his author's retreat? Retreat seemed the preferred term for an apartment only a five minute walk from the entrance to the brother-sister Benedictine monasteries. But Johnny wasn't really retreating from his efforts to . . .

Dare he claim to be providing a way out of the ongoing decay of Western Civilization? Had he been called to help save and refound Christian Civilization? It sort of seemed like it but God didn't seem to speak too clearly, certainly not in the way imagined by so many pious Christians. It was more that something like a call was coming to shape in Johnny's own mind as he so tentatively, even cowardly, explored his world, the world created by God.

"Did God somehow embed these thoughts in this world when He created it? Have these thoughts been developing so they would meet me at this time so long after. . . The Big Bang?"

Where to start?

At the time, Johnny couldn't even phrase that question, simple as it was. He just looked at a pile of popular science books of the better kind—many even written by serious scientists and mathematicians. He also still had most of the textbooks from his college courses in physics and mathematics, those he'd enjoyed and those he'd shied away from or simply had not engaged respectfully. There were the textbooks for the basic four-semester sequence in physics though he'd only gone through three of those semesters. There was a book on differential equations and linear algebra and another on partial differential equations. There was a standard textbook on calculus as well as a

more abstract introductory work—that was from the first course Johnny had bombed out of though he couldn't remember struggling, just failing. There were textbooks on complex analysis and two on probability theory and one on stochastic processes. There were other books he'd bought in fits of enthusiasm and had never read. Relativity theory, special and general. Thermodynamics. Physical cosmology. Particle physics.

His eyes moved over to take in a small pile of novels he'd piled up over the years. There were a few novels by George Gilder he'd never opened, the Library of American collections of works by James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain. There were novels by Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli and George Eliot and V S Naipaul and Jean-Paul Sartre. There was even a collection of all the novels of Dashiell Hammett. On an impulse, Johnny walked over and put the book of Hammett on top of the pile.

He also looked at a pile of unread books on Christian thought—he'd made good progress on what had once been the largest pile of all. He'd read Pieper's *Leisure: the Basis of Culture* [9] and then put it with the unread books because it was just one of those books which had to be reread. He'd made little progress on Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles* [1] because of the alien feel of the reasoning and also the alien feel of a world infiltrated by hosts of spiritual creatures.

Johnny halted for a moment to ponder a question which he had raised briefly before only to dismiss it: "Can I really be a Christian if I disbelieve in angels and demons because they don't seem to be necessary or even desirable given the way in which God's world is now understood?"

The question hung in Johnny's mind with no answer, but he decided to feel proud that he was at least keeping up with current events. . .

Though he vaguely remembered advice from Nietzsche and others to ignore newspapers and read serious histories of events of past centuries. After a long enough time, historians and political scientists and economists seem to get a lot right. . .

"How it is that the understanding of major events changes so much over

time? Can a little more knowledge gained from newly discovered diaries or financial records lead us to a radically different understanding of the founding of the United States or the fall of Rome?"

Still, he was keeping up with his magazines, mostly conservative monthlies of a distinct Catholic or high Protestant tone. There was *National Review* and *The American Spectator* and *Crisis* and *The Modern Age* and *The University Bookman*. The articles on culture, including reviews of historical and imaginative literature, were particularly attractive to Johnny. The political articles weren't so interesting, often slipping into what Johnny thought to be 'policy-wonk' stuff. Those articles dealing with political thinkers were a bit better, leading Johnny to make plans to reread some of Plato's works and to penetrate Aristotle and Aquinas and Hobbes and Locke and Burke as well as a few more modern thinkers such as John Courtney Murray and Michael Oakeshott and Kenneth Minogue.

There was so much to read and contemplate and write about. He looked over to see Rebel staring expectantly back, tongue hanging from the side of his mouth.

"Yes, Rebel, we have to get going on all this and we'll start with another trip to Jenkesville to fetch my bookcases and some more books."

35 Rumors of a Criminal War

Before the invasion of Kuwait already invaded by Iraq, there had been rumors from European diplomats and intelligence personnel that the American government had given permission for that first invasion by Iraq led by its brutal dictator Saddam Hussein, said by reliable commentators to have been a thug loyal to his American masters who proved more treacherous than he. If those rumors were true, then—as Johnny reasoned—Saddam Hussein’s American masters apparently had some sort of scheme in mind and wanted to destroy a country increasingly prosperous and oriented toward modern systems of social order however abusive the ruler and his sons were on a personal basis. There had been solid testimony from reliable sources, American and European and Asian, that the stories were false about Iraqi soldiers raping freely and often, also the stories were false of those soldiers tearing babies from incubators and throwing them to the floor. It turned out they had been cooked up by a Washington, DC publicity firm apparently filled with men and women who possessed the normal Washingtonian level of moral integrity.

Johnny shivered and grew momentarily so angry he couldn’t go on with his efforts to make sense of matters. “How is it that the name of such a noble man is now associated with such mean and stupid characters?” But he couldn’t think of a better way of grouping together these gangsters than the name of the site where so many congregated. “Maybe we ended up dishonoring George Washington by naming our capitol city after him and then letting our country sink into such moral degradation.”

A sip of Bourbon calmed him down and he laid his head back against the

cushion of the recliner and tried to speak with God for a couple of minutes. The Almighty failed to respond but Johnny found he calmed down enough to let the flow of thoughts pass through his mind. . .

“Are these thoughts passing through my mind or am I generating them from my small but growing stock of facts about a rather harsh and bloody world in this year of 1991?”

Once again, he surrendered to his fate, realizing he’d chosen to travel a path which could only be followed through good thoughts and bad, good times and bad.

But many were ready for war. Americans had an impression Saddam Hussein was a monster who needed to be destroyed and they were willing to kill a lot of Iraqis and to destroy many schools, hospitals, and water systems to teach that bad man a lesson. Johnny didn’t really disagree with the idea that Saddam Hussein was a monster so much as he feared that Americans were using monstrous ways to fight him. And he sometimes thought that Americans maybe had no moral right to run the world.

After the war, Congress decided not to investigate claims made by some American senior officers in Desert Storm that some units had gone out of control and murdered a large number of essentially unarmed Iraqi soldiers on their way through a guarded corridor of retreat guaranteed only by the word of a President of the United States and his most senior military commanders. The results had certainly cast doubt upon the honor of that President and the other men standing with him and their lack of concern that their promises had not been upheld by the armies they commanded pretty much settled the doubts about their honor—so far as Johnny could tell.

By the time that Americans were downing beers and slapping each other on the back, generally celebrating the moral superiority of the American nation and its ways of doing things, Johnny was quite deflated. He wondered if Daniel Boorstin had been right that the American expansion across the continent was, in significant part, a triumph of hucksterism and sometimes outright fraud. In one of his books, Boorstin had even treated American public life after World

War II as a triumph of marketing illusions.

“Is there any reality to our pretensions to being a good people, let alone a morally superior people?”

After pouring himself a double-shot of Bourbon, Johnny sipped no more than enough to burn his lips and raised his eyes to stare at the ceiling fixture as he asked the Good Lord, “Does the process of becoming, the ambition to become, an author force a certain honesty... Painful and brutal honesty...”

“Or do You somehow choose ordinary dishonest men to be authors, knowing you can force them to be honest, though often wrong in many ways.

“Baudelaire, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Hawthorne, Melville...”

“A couple of more or less unrepentant sinners or defiant non-believers...”

“An unbalanced Christian who thought to gain salvation by treating his wife as if she were sent by Satan to corrupt him...”

“A Protestant who never completed his journey into the Catholic Church though his daughter did it for him, in a sense...”

“A ferocious seeker...”

There was naught to do but go on...

“If only I could complete a thought...”

After a painful period of inner and outer silence, Johnny added, “If only I could be sure what the truth is. Maybe I’m just being self-righteous about a people just behaving as they have to behave to deal with nasty brutes or with countries gone wrong because of their corrupt politics?”

36 Gentle Sounds

For a time that Johnny feared to be near an end, he'd had silence aplenty in Rockshire. There were woods and abandoned orchards and a number of hay or corn fields to walk alongside. There was a chance for horseback riding—which he'd never done before. His dog, Rebel, had a grand time with all the farm animals and the farmwives so comfortable with big, friendly dogs; the nuns, many retired, from the nearby New England motherhouse of a teaching order were also mostly farm girls and quite unafraid of large friendly dogs.

37 Communal in Life But More Truly Individuals

Johnny found himself strengthening in two seemingly conflicting opinions. He was thinking man's primary duty was to respond to the real world, to shape himself to it and to learn from it how to play his role in God's story. He was also beginning to appreciate those who devoted their lives to prayer and worship. So it was that he carefully observed women who had left the world to make *Better Contact With Reality*:

Black of robes and radiant of face.
Middle Aged but young through old.
Pretty of feature framed in black and white.
Plain of feature framed in black and white.

Modern man spoke in Johnny's head:
"They seem alive with love of God,
But they are washed of brain
as they are of skin."

Modern man spoke again in harsher terms:
"They lie to others
but know the truth themselves
and the truth has shackled them."

Man doomed to past tense about the future
believed hardly a word of modern man
though knowing there was truth
but no wisdom in skepticism dead and rotted.

They processed and chanted words
known not to future man
who knew only to beware the seller
of harshness conformed to system.

Some women in white processed last
seeming to know not the words
as if they belonged to the future
of harshness conformed to truth.

A modern man of ancient dress asked:
“What is truth?”
as he faced the harshness of love.
Did he howl the answer over the waters?

An author a little bit more asked:
“St Scholastica, have you failed women
by not seizing what your brother claimed?
But yet you gave up what most women have?”

He knew he should channel his thoughts
but his mind was never well-behaved
and he had known without words for years
that truths were harshly dynamic.

As he shaped his mind
to move fast and dangerously,
these women shaped their minds
to rest in peace even as they worked.

They were Plato
to his Heraclitus,
but perhaps that was
beside the point.

Johnny's mind returned to the Mass he barely knew at the beginning of the *Gloria* sung in the Latin he knew not. He felt to be buried under layers of ignorance as he realized his acceptance into the Catholic Church was the merest of beginnings.

But what path was he treading? "Am I truly an 'author a little bit more' or simply a worldly man less and less and nothing more?"

38 A Manifest of a Man Desiring Manifestation as an Author

Johnny didn't just want to write, he wanted to produce images of truth—however incomplete and imperfect. 'Images' wasn't quite the right word, but he knew no better and felt he'd have to write reams of dense and complex prose to better define what he meant. For he himself knew only that there was a meaning, but he knew not what that meaning was. And so he had set out to learn the science he should have learned as a teenager, hoping to move on to learn the science he should have learned in college and in the graduate school he never attended. He set out to read the historical works and the novels and the poems of the sort he'd been reading at age 12 and then not again until he was in his 30s.

39 Making the Best of a Mess of a Life

As a first step to understanding much, Johnny poured much energy into the novel about a man similar to himself in a few ways but more similar in having had a powerful but hard-to-describe conversion experience. What meant that conversion experience? What was it really? What was converted? From what into what?

Though not even understanding his own experiences which founded that novel, Johnny brought it to some state he considered to be ‘completed’ and submitted it to a Catholic publishing company. At first, the founder was enthusiastic about it but withdrew his offer to publish a few weeks later, saying that his outside literary consultant had told him the book was serious literature and there was no market for such works among American Catholics. Later, through a friend, Johnny had one exchange of correspondence with that consultant who offered to read his novel and to see if—very unlikely—he could make useful contacts for him in the commercial publishing industry. Johnny didn’t follow up, having been overwhelmed by despair over the state of the minds of modern men. Somewhat had he been afraid of the obvious question: It may be serious literature, but is it good literature?

So it was that he had begun his descent into despair by uselessly asking, “What am I to do?” This was a question more appropriate for a man who aspired to political power than to the state of being an author. That latter sort of man could only write, hopelessly and lonely during some periods of history and merely lonely in other periods.

He remembered his last attempt to get a job in the insurance industry.

He had been tested and interviewed at a consulting firm by a psychologist specializing in managerial placement; that psychologist had told him that he showed very obvious signs of a living and active mind. Johnny was happy until the good-natured fellow grimaced and added, “That makes you unsuited for life in the American corporate world. They don’t value creative, energetic thinking the way they should.”

Johnny wasn’t going back to that horrible feeling of inner numbness to get a job in the American economy, but his chances of making a living as a writer were probably not good because it was the same country, inside of corporations and inside of bookstores and libraries and the living-rooms of American readers. Most of all, inside the minds and souls of Americans.

“What am I to do?”

Should he instead be worrying about his relationship to God. Suppose his occasional ecstasies turned to fear were right: suppose he was actually called to play a role in the revival of Christian civilization?

Part VI

Is the Path Beaten or Is It the Pilgrim?

40 Returning Where He Should Not Go

Johnny had been three years living peacefully in Rockshire when he began to feel it was time to move on, but he had no place to move to which he would consider to be a better setting for his efforts to become an author.

“Dad hasn’t admitted it yet, but his cancer is back and it’s not likely he’ll survive this time. He had 15 years of remission from his lymphoma and continued to smoke. Now he seems to have emphysema and is losing weight fast though he seems to be eating. Or at least trying to. Or maybe pretending to. And he’s not even interested in going places with his grandchildren.”

Johnny didn’t know quite how to respond, though he knew he had to move back to Jenkesville and to his parents’ house. But his dwindling savings gave him the same advice as his wiser self: he had to move back to Jenkesville and to his parents’ house. He’d feel a lot better about himself if he were going back willingly and with complete freedom to help his father. As it was, he knew was being driven largely by fears of impoverishment and homelessness.

Was he right in thinking he’d lost control not just by messing up his life but, perhaps more so, by turning his life over to God? Was it slightly blasphemous to think the Almighty was messing up his life for him?

Was there a purpose behind this? Was it a purpose he would see some time before facing God for his final exam? Was it a purpose consistent with a more complete life? A life with a wife and children, perhaps? At 36, he knew he’d better start thinking of such matters.

Johnny wasn’t comfortable with the distinct possibility he was doing God’s will but only because the Lord was sometimes pushing him toward disaster and

holding him back from the edge of the cliff at other times. At that, he wondered if God were at all concerned about Johnny's dad or only about getting Johnny and others thinking clearly and in God-centered ways.

If that was really what God wanted him to be doing.

"What is it that God really wants me to do? Does he want me to write a novel about a spiritual conversion? But there was no such thing, not a spiritual conversion as the pietistic Christians imagine. Is that it? Does the Almighty want me to teach them not to think in simple and literalistic terms which don't work well in Creation?"

Johnny looked heavenward and saw only an old-fashioned ceiling light fixture. Yet, he dared to ask, "Couldn't I do your work and be prosperous at the same time, Lord?"

And he knew it could get worse because he might be impoverished before all this was over, before he found his voice and...

"Will I ever find an audience? I've already been warned by literary agents that my books are too hard for modern readers, most certainly including anyone currently working in the mainstream publishing companies."

It was still worse than that. Johnny looked down to see the letter from the head of the Catholic publishing company who had initially accepted his spiritual conversion novel for publication and then withdrew it after his literary advisor told him there was no market for serious literature in the American Catholic community. He wasn't quite sure why. He'd recently run a couple of his completed novels and some other writings through language and grammar analysis programs which said he wrote with a vocabulary at the level of only 11th grade in high school and his sentence structures tended to be straightforward, not complex. What was it about his writings that made them so hard to modern readers? Was it the ideas? Was it simply the fact that those ideas were more or less direct responses to God's Creation not filtered through outmoded schemes of thought?

"Can it be the case that I can write with basic vocabularies and simple grammatical structures and yet be linking up sentences in such a way that I'm

communicating very complex ideas without fully conscious of it myself?”

Johnny’s eyes looked over to the most recent manuscript of that spiritual conversion novel, which wasn’t really that sort of thing at all. Realizing a little better what was going on, he’d reworked it dramatically after that rejection. Now it was on its way to being a conversion novel with spiritual aspects. But far yet from that goal.

Picking up the rejection letter from the Catholic publisher, he walked over to file it with the dozens of rejection letters he’d gotten for that novel when he presented it to mainstream publishers—the letter and synopsis probably hadn’t made it by the most junior of editors. He was also already accumulating rejection letters for another novel about an engineer with the soul of an ornery poet, said engineer having been deserted by his wife and most of his children and neighbors as they moved south after a climate change similar to the Little Ice Age of the 17th through 19th century or so.

“But, why is Horace convinced that the mastodons are coming back? They went extinct thousands of years ago along with most of their distant cousins, the mammoths.”

With a sigh, Johnny returned to his writing desk where he picked up that latest revision of his not-quite spiritual conversion novel. Slowly he walked over to the trash basket and neatly placed it inside. Then he returned to start the packing of manuscripts for the other two novels and notes for still other novels. He looked around and realized he needed to get a lot more boxes for all his books, that is the published books by other authors.

And slowly did a strange movement pass through his brain. He continued packing and, after a couple of hours, he had filled up all the boxes he yet had. The movement had taken shape as words, though Johnny wasn’t so sure *What It All Means*:

I would gather the silence
between the bustle and the noise,
preserve what speaks not,

growls not, and stays awake.

I would rather the silence
not disturb the noise.
Let me speak freely,
grumble in my sleep.

Once again, the would-be author looked upward toward the light fixture on the ceiling. This time, he had a smile on his face as he protested, “Isn’t it bad enough you’re trying to turn me into an author of novels? Now you have me writing poetic gibberish? What next? Philosophy and theology?”

41 The Way of the World

It was February 26, 1993 when a would-be author watched the televised scenes around the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Hundreds had been injured though there was serious reason to hope only a small number had been killed. Someone had parked a van which was packed with explosives in the underground lot.

Johnny remembered passing through the levels lower than those garage lots several times, impressed by the city beneath the streets of Manhattan. Restaurants and stores and a huge Post Office—was it the biggest the US Postal Service had?

He'd never really gone there with friends to eat and drink. It had only been short visits and he had traveled the subway system a roundabout way to get to downtown Brooklyn where he lived—just to visit that underground region of so much commerce, largely involving commuters headed out on the trains to New Jersey or heading to the subways.

That monotonous image of passing through the underground of the World Trade Center played again and again until Johnny forgot how many shots of Bourbon he'd taken. He was just hoping he'd taken enough to banish dreams for the night.

42 Mind-darkened Evil

The air was damp though not quite fetid. Dark punctuated by masses of greater darkness which seemed to be columns supporting an unseen roof of darkness or perhaps the columns fought against the effort of the light from above to penetrate. Below this level of darkness was subterranean life, frenetic activity involving digestion of substances mostly drawn from creatures once alive. Chthonic regions where life seemed to exploit what came from above however much it had been drawn from the earth. Animal fluids sometimes hardened to a half-rotted, fermented state. Plant life covered with oils and other liquids. Greens and fruits. Barleys and yeasts. . .

The yeasts were but returning to one of their realms.

John Barleycorn had died but would rise again to life. . .

Or would he?

And the masses of nearly rock-hard substances held back the soil and the water. How convenient the chambers were that held places where creatures could gather to ingest and digest once-living substances brought down from the surface by and for those who passed through these regions without making them home. How convenient the chambers sized to hold the many objects of metal and plastic and glass and rubber. . .

Johnny flinched a fraction of a section before the fireball exploded from behind several columns now better seen as they protected him. He half-spun and put his hands, too late, over the ears to protect himself from the roar which never came.

And he woke up with his head filled with images of powerful explosions

ripping apart cars and human bodies on a parking floor of a skyscraper. And the damage was great to the floor just above. It began to collapse and that led to a weakening and then collapse of the floor above. The catastrophic collapse of a building more than a hundred floors high had begun. . .

Though only in Johnny's imagination.

In the realm of reality, the columns and walls of concrete had held though a large blast had thrown cars and small trucks at them.

And Johnny felt queasily confident that the massive works of a free people could stand up to the worst that evil and hateful attackers could throw at them.

And Johnny felt proud to be one of a people who could build so well as to stand up to even the unanticipated event of a massive bomb in the underground parking garage. What would the enemies of this people try next? Why were there still some to think such a proud and strong and courageous people could be easily frightened or otherwise driven into any sort of servitude?

43 Who is Me?

All of the banal dreams and plans Johnny had once thought to be his future had disappeared and that disturbed him the more he realized that they had been the most vain of vanities. And he still thought God wanted him to write even if his writings were somehow too serious for Catholics or other Christians or modern men in general. It was almost as if his goal should be to write works surpassing the literacy and thinking skills of the reading public and also the skills of editors and publishers in the book industry.

Did the seriousness or even the depth and the intelligence of his writings indicate literary quality?

No, though they opened the possibility.

In any case, they did indicate seriousness and depth and intelligence and those were important to a civilization and to a thinking man.

That made him wonder? What was a civilization? It was certainly habits of the sort indicating moral order of a specific type, specific to the peoples of that civilization. It was certainly customs of the sort which made it easy for even strangers to interact in such a way as to allow a certain trust, such as the simple trust which allows the buying and selling of goods and services without a whole lot of fuss.

If a civilized man was a different man than a barbarian, what did that say about freedom? Did a man need to be civilized to have the sorts of freedom glorified by modern political and economic thinkers? Or was freedom something more truly akin to the deterministic freedom of movements, degrees of freedom?, in physics and chemistry?

Johnny's head was filled with some recent readings from Tocqueville, Lecky, Acton and other classical liberals; from Kirk, Nisbet, Oakeshott, and other conservatives. He'd also been trying to catch up on history by renewing his adolescent knowledge on the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers. So it was that he was ready to engage in a *A Discourse on Freedom*:

To be free from cannot compare
to being free despite what I bear.

A quick review indicated it was too Christian an idea of freedom, though the pagan Epictetus bore much with something akin to the charity of a Christian martyr.

The entire line of thought was a bit chilling to Johnny.

The sufferings? Of whom? Where is he? Or it? Or she? Or of all the world?

How could a man suffer redemptively if he dreamed hubristic absurdities? Maybe his role was not to suffer redemptively but rather to write with authority? To author. . .

Something, though he was still practicing his craft and somehow developing a sense that told him when to toss away, when to rewrite, when to set aside as good enough—at least until he was prepared to rewrite and perhaps to expand his view of matters. On his own, Johnny had entered his ten-year apprenticeship, not knowing if his time would be wasted or if he would write with authority, author. . .

But, those dreams. And the others where he took non-human shape to fly like an upside-down bat? He was confused and beginning to wonder *Where is Me?*:

All around about me, not me.
All around inside me, not quite me.

Behind me, a stranger.
Ahead of me, a hero.
Ahead of me, a fool.
Ahead of me, a scoundrel.

Twitches a finger, not me.
Beats a heart, not me.

I move into fog, maybe me.
I leave behind bleen skies, grue meadows.
I move toward a clouded, electric mount.
Does it threaten to become me?

Where is me?
Who is me?

But not just that.
My foot molds itself to the road.
My eyes shape themselves to sky and tree,
to car and video screen.

My mind becomes what thinks,
becomes what I choose to see and hear.

Is me the road and how I walk it?
Is me the love I give and get?
Is me how the world treats me.
Is me how I respond to all?

All around and inside me is God.
I respond and me is like unto God.

Johnny felt like trash. Ill-disciplined in his reading and studying and writing. Monolingual. Had never learned to play an instrument. He could read music, though too slowly to sing along if he didn't already have some acquaintance with the tune.

"British Isles trash. I'm barely more civilized than my Gaelic and Celtic and Germanic ancestors from centuries ago."

A pause. . .

"I wonder if it's true I have some American Indian blood in me. It's not as if that would be unusual since my grandmother with an English name came from the Great Lakes region."

Did it really matter? "God promised me that I had only to turn to Him, though I might fall again and again into sin, and I would share the life of Jesus Christ in Heaven. Am I no more than *A Grain of Sand, A Member of the Body of Christ*:

What means it to be the image of God?

The Body of Christ be the truest image of God.

As we see a world in a grain of sand,
We see the Body of Christ in a single member.

As the world is to be found in a grain of sand,
The entirety of the Body is to be found in a member.

And yet remains that member my self.
Or perhaps an other who's just as self.

Thus stated, Johnny had to wonder if he could be less than that, so long as he truly accepted God's friendship. The very thought brought on fevers and chills.

44 Practice Makes a Man Desire Perfection

Johnny was making a fourth try at the novel which seemed at times to be about a conversion gone wrong. More and more it was about converting his mind and soul to that of an author and that conversion, on the whole, hadn't gone very well.

But his efforts to rewrite the novel seemed to be going pretty well. The only other time he'd really made it very far was the first time when he wrote the version that was first accepted and then rejected. That was a version where Charlie and Tom had played a more prominent role. He'd been fascinated by that at one time because he'd had a couple of very close friends when he was young but neither was much like Charlie or Tom.

Johnny had thrown that version away as soon as he had unpacked his writing materials at his parents' house in Jenkesville though several readers had liked it and one had some true insights about the relationships between the characters and between the main character and Christianity. Somehow, the relationship between Johnny and God had floated above all and had not been well described. At least not in the author's opinion.

One of the readers, an occasional visitor to the monastery and to the Evans' house was a hefty monk who worked with troubled adolescent boys and young men. One night, as he worked away at preparing a gourmet meal for the Evans' and some guests, he talked to Johnny and told him the three characters were three parts of Johnny's own person trying to get back together.

“What does it mean that the other two characters, Charlie and Tom, have nearly disappeared from the latest version of the tale? Have I somehow folded the parts they represented back into my own self? Have those other parts disappeared? Am I richer or more impoverished in my self than I was three years ago when I began writing that version?”

Johnny rose from his chair and looked around at his makeshift office in a basement storage room at his parents’ house. With no more than a sigh, he reached over to turn his radio on before tuning in a station which played mostly rock-and-roll and some other popular music from about Elvis Presley through 1980 or so. He listened to Linda Ronstadt sing *Different Drum* with the *Stone Poneys* and wondered how long it would take to purge his bad habits of thought. When he’d realized how he tended to make up facts to keep a conversation going and to make himself seem so knowledgeable, he’d started paying attention to others and found it was a pretty common habit among Americans; some, including some of his relatives, would defend one of those made-up facts if someone called them on it—sometimes the other person had merely presented other made-up facts. And those conversations could deteriorate into screaming matches.

So he wasn’t unusual when he’d made St Louis the first when he was really the ninth King Louis. But it didn’t make Johnny feel better to know he was a member of a herd of creatures who would bluster their way through a screaming match rather than go to the library to check a fact.

Could he ever become an author without overcoming this character defect?

Could he ever become a successful thinker if he were so inclined to judge serious thinkers on the superficial aspects of their writings? Aquinas. . . Said to be so good and so straightforward—he used an amazing small Latin vocabulary to express his ideas—but Johnny didn’t get what Aquinas was really up to.

The main problem was the one which had prevented Johnny from making good at college—he simply didn’t have the guts to settle down to hard work, the hard work of spiritual self-examination and the hard work of learning about human thought and how to write about it.

“No, not just human thought, but the entirety of human nature.”

Johnny was beginning to think that he wouldn't be able to understand human nature unless he were to come to understand so much about this world that it couldn't be held in a human mind, or even a human mind and heart.

45 Respecting What God Has Done

“We aren’t slaves to our biology!”

Johnny’s words had exploded from his mouth and he had shot up from his chair, spinning to find himself looking at Rebel standing with an expression of fear on his gentle Golden Retriever face.

“Why are you afraid, Rebel?”

Had he merely responded to Johnny’s violent movement or had he detected the actual anger Johnny had felt upon reading no more than the introductory chapter of *Neuronal Man: The Biology of Man* [4]?

When he saw that Rebel had raised his tail from a position of abject submission and was wagging it, Johnny turned his eyes back to his desk to see a copy of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [10] on top of a pile which also included *The Human Blueprint: The Race to Unlock the Secrets of Our Genetic Code* [11], *Brain, Mind and Computers* [7], *Body, Soul, Spirit: A Survey of the Body-Mind Problem* [12], *The Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* [2], and *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* [5]. The shelves Johnny had set up in this small room in the basement included still more books of varying viewpoints on the nature of man and of truth and all else. The pious books which had seemed so interesting when he’d first entered the Catholic Church had lost their glow when he’d started to read them. Serious Catholic books such as Augustine’s *Confessions* and *City of God* and some books by Joseph Ratzinger remained on the shelves and had not been put back in boxes. There were also books about the Protestant Reformation and a biography of Luther—he was more interested in Luther as

an historical actor than as a Christian thinker.

He asked someone and maybe some One, "What is man?"

He heard the response, "What is truth?" without being sure if the voice were his own.

46 Where Did All the Neutrinos Go?

Bleary-eyed, Johnny threw the newsletter back on the top of the unread magazines and newsletters. Only some dealt with volcanoes and particle physics and ice-age human beings. Others dealt with the moral decay since the 1960s. Still others dealt with the moral decay since World War I. The stalest news came from those which dealt with the moral decay since the peasants were freed from their traditional rights and duties.

But science newsletters were so full of recent gossip from all regions of the galaxy and beyond and there were so many juicy tidbits about recently discovered entities which sometimes raised the question in Johnny's mind, "Why in the world would such a thing exist?"

Neutrinos?

Where did all the Neutrinos go?

Long time passing.

Johnny poured himself a double-shot of Bourbon and sat down, pen in hand and a painfully blank notepad in front of him.

47 Making More Pure Sense of It All

Professor Plynck looked further past the empty air in front of him in response to my question, but I persisted and asked, “So, you’ve got a problem in leading-edge physics. Why did you come to me? I’m a psychotherapist. If you brought me one of those neutrinos, maybe I could speak with him and lead him to say why he is so shy.”

As I paused and waited for at least a forced smile, and not even so little a sign was given, I stroked my blonde Van Dyke and decided it was time for a clean shave. Madeline had made that one of the conditions for remaining with me, but that had been so petty as to be beyond consideration.

The session with Professor Plynck continued for a while without deeper contact between therapist and patient, but Professor Plynck insisted on making an appointment for the next month and still didn’t crack a smile when I asked him how many trillions of trillions of neutrinos would have passed through him by then. It only came to me later, when I was reading again from the letters of Jung, that there was great uncertainty in that joke. Scientists didn’t know for sure and that apparently left them unwilling to joke about it.

As for me, Dr Saltonstall, I . . .

“Well, not me. I just have to remember the poet’s advice: Send not to find out through whom the neutrinos pass, they pass through thee. Or something like that.”

But . . . So what if there were billions of gadzillions of solar neutrinos passing through our bodies every minute when there should have been trillions of gadzillions . . .

Wasn't that science? Finding an interesting problem and trying to solve it? Why would a mere technical problem drive a seemingly healthy and otherwise happy astrophysicist to ask the help of a psychotherapist?

"What can I do to find out why these neutrinos are so reclusive, so unso-cialable? Are they sociopathic or merely neurotically shy? Having myself been a chemistry major as an undergraduate. . . Yes, at a liberal arts college, but one of the most highly regarded and the chemistry professors were in the classroom to teach and not to support their research assistants as teaching assistants."

I found my mind drifting toward a line of critique of the American education system and had to fight to pull my mind back and then found myself calculating the costs and benefits of one or another line of thought, even as my hand was linking together a chain of paperclips. Most annoyingly, those hands were working themselves over that chain in a systematic way and. . .

For an instant, I imagined my grandmother's wrinkled hands praying the rosary beads even when she was talking to us about growing up in a small village not far from Quebec City.

And then I realized I was once again thinking and perceiving as if I was deeply fragmented, though a way different from Freud's writings would suggest.

So it was that I chose to put aside nostalgic thoughts in the interests of my work and went down to the Bahcall Library at Davis College to read up on this neutrino stuff. The problem became more clear and it was a different problem than I'd first thought. According to the theoreticians, the sun produced so many neutrinos that 100 billion of the little buggers passed through a man's thumbnail, even that of a lady, every second, but the best of experiments using the best tanks of chemically pure chlorine indicated that only about 30 billion actually did so.

At about that point, it had become hard to take notes. Everytime my right thumb felt itself free of my attention, it would stick itself inside the pocket of my sportcoat as if it were seeking to hide from those neutrinos.

After deciding it was time to restart my own therapy with Dr Young, I willed my right hand to write a note that there were 70 billion neutrinos

missing every second, 70 billion that should have been passing through my thumbnail. It was hard to write with my right hand shaking so and I felt a strange tingling in that male organ which demands protection before all other body parts. My good friend seemed to be asking me, “500 billion per second maybe? With 420 billion missing.”

So it was that I could empathize with Mrs McGillicuddy when she came in the next day all afluster and begging for an emergency session. Her neighbor, Esmeralda Ricardo, had been over for an early morning cup of tea and had told her about the alien invasion. The Vegans were already softening us up by shooting trillions and quadrillions of bosons at us. I tried to reassure her that neutrinos were leptons and not bosons and it was the sun shooting them at us, but I couldn't get through to her. She was beyond the reach of even the best of modern reason. She had absorbed as much scientific knowledge as she wanted, a bit fractured but kind of recognizable.

I spent a long evening at the Bahcall Library only to find the situation still worse than I'd thought.

Bosons were the particles that hold other particles together to form matter, but—still worse—the problem with neutrinos increased. They wouldn't have much to do with matter. Out of a 100 billion neutrinos passing through, only one or so would interact with matter. And it got worse when I discovered that the missing 70 billion neutrinos were likely due to shape-shifting on the part of neutrinos. I shuddered at the unknown reaction of Mrs Ricardo and Mrs McGillicuddy to that news. The poor, superstitious women would be hiding in their basements, afraid that quintillions of neutrinos would reshape them into lizard-like creatures. Vegans!

I sighed as I thought of the problems of ape-men learning how to live in a rational world and then ordered my thumb to unhook itself from the breast-pocket of my sports-coat. Some undergraduates at nearby tables had raised their eyes from their textbooks to stare at me and my thumb as if we were crazy.

The world went its own way. Mrs McGillicuddy came in the next day but

she wasn't at all concerned with shape-shifting. In fact, she didn't look much concerned with anything as my receptionist opened the door and passed me a warning glance before letting the gentle woman in.

I stepped forward and reached out to take her hand in greeting but I think I missed though I had the weird impression our hands passed right through each other. She looked at me as if to say, "I told you so," and then she lay down upon the floor.

I sat down in my easy chair and asked her, "How can I help you?"

"I'm finding it nearly impossible to interact with hadrons, even the most common of nucleons. They're all around me. Billions and billions and billions of them and yet it seems that we have nothing to say to one another. Mrs Collier, the assistant cook at the Senior Center, suggested I'm a bigot, not willing to get close enough for them to hear me. I was shocked."

I heard my very own mouth suggest, "Most entities are surrounded by a variety of particles most ephemeral and almost imaginary and sometimes the very opposite of what that entity would be. Perhaps you are repelled by those clouds of virtual criminals which emerge so fitfully from the most saintly of men and women of all races and ethnic groups, the best-behaved of boys and girls, only to collapse back into that central entity."

Stunned was I though Mrs McGillicuddy remained impassive as if oblivious to the possibility raised by modern science that my Presbyterian grandmother might have been a pioneer of science when she scolded my brother for lying that time he'd denied taking the bottle of soda: "Children who lie are bound for Hell." And he'd not even shared the birch beer with me. Birch beer! My favorite. Not that I'd been biased when Granny had asked me, "Did you take a bottle of soda from the pantry?" and I'd replied, simply and honestly, "No. It was Mike and his friends." Now I knew it was likely a virtual Mike with devilish inclinations and his impish virtual friends.

As through a thick fog, I became aware of a bipedal creatures rising as if out of the floor. She moved away from me, passing through the door without touching the doorknob.

Had that receiving woman opened the door for Mrs McGillicuddy? Had the troubled woman passed through the door? Are women truly social creatures or the self-serving individuals of the free-market? Are they potentially mothers bound inherently to their children or individual moral agents fully free to take on or reject the roles of childbearer and of mother?

I wondered where Mike had moved to. The last time I'd called, some years back, the number had been disconnected and there was no new number on the message. And our Xmas card had been returned as undeliverable. "Ours? Were Madeline and I still living together two years ago?" I couldn't remember. Maybe Madeline had gone back to where she had come from. I think she'd been born in Kathmandu and raised in Shanghai. Or was it Philadelphia and Newark?

48 The Horror of It All

Something bothered Johnny about Dr Saltonstall's apparent division of the human being into will and mind and hands. "Where," he wondered, "are feelings or memory?" He struggled and failed to remember what the three pieces of the mind were to Augustine. And then he reread the story, his first short story ever, to discover memory was acknowledged.

"Dr Saltonstall believes in a quad-partite human being? Or is he confused between memory and will, sometimes speculating on one and sometimes on the other?"

Mostly, Johnny wondered if the story made its point strong enough. Whatever that point was. Perhaps he could add another patient, a Southern lady, or maybe a holdover from the Victorian Age, upset about all these particles passing through her private parts.

Johnny rose and walked over to the television blaring out the crowd noise and commentator gibberish associated with a college football game. "When did I turn on the television? And why did I leave it on, even in the background, especially for a football game between two southern colleges which mean nothing to me?"

Johnny tried to remember the Georgia Tech fight song, which one of his friends had sung regularly when he had a few beers. All that came to mind was, "Here we come walkin' down the street. Hey, hey, we're the Americans. We're trampling out the vintage where the righteous grapes of self are stored. Yeah, yeah, yeah!"

And Johnny wondered if he were getting a bit too cynical about what his

fellow-citizens were doing. . .

“Doing? Or was it being done to them and their children? Are we simply too passive so that we become mere pawns for those who are more energetic and who care more for **their** children’s futures? Maybe most human beings simply don’t have enough energy to be self-governing. Maybe most human beings also don’t have what it takes to ever be happy sharing God’s life.”

He wasn’t pursuing those pessimistic thoughts. At least not for now. As something like a matter of principle. He was trying to encourage a kind of optimism about the entire American project or dream or destiny or whatever. His optimism had revived when he had returned to his boyhood hobby of reading about the period of the American Revolution and the generations immediately preceding and immediately following. He found he wasn’t all that much interested in the early years of the North American colonies and he had lost interest in American history whenever he reached the Civil War and—most certainly—the stuff about wars against the Indians west of the Mississippi. And the baloney about railroads and the robber barons. . . Going near that stuff returned him to dark feelings.

“Maybe I’m allergic to stories about men who glory in their own sinfulness and inspire movies about great crimes become. . .”

An image came to mind of Custer the Great and his soldiers preparing their weapons for a direct attack upon a village of Sioux, women and children and elderly as well as young warriors.

Was Vietnam prefigured in the Army’s decision to keep alive the 7th Cavalry and to glorify Custer and the men he planned to lead into a battle which would have included the mass-murder of civilians punctuated by the killing of tough warriors caught by surprise, on foot and perhaps unarmed? Didn’t work out the way Custer had planned, but some of Custer’s successors did better in Vietnam. Didn’t win but killed a lot of innocent folk as well as some nasty Communist guerrillas who were, after all, fighting in their own country against the soldiers of a country thousands of miles away. And most of those faraway soldiers looked an awful lot like the European colonists who had exploited the

various peoples in Asia, even some peoples with their own histories of imperial conquests.

Johnny didn't like the feeling of being cynical. It made him feel kind of dirty. . .

"No! It makes me feel gritty inside. With all that I'd heard from the fellows a few years older than me, I was going to go if they drafted me and I was in that last draft year, though they only took a couple dozen birth-dates and I was something like 275. When my father was sent to Korea as a Navy hospital corpsman to serve with a Marine mobile hospital, he was horrified by what he saw, including the drugging of Marines by officers seeking their own glory. Of course, it was doctors who sold those officers the large jars of amphetamines. Anyway, Dad never dropped back an inch from his love and support of the United States. I won't either, but. . ."

The fear remained that the political leaders and some of the military leaders of the United States had put the country on such a course that there would be conflicts between his Christian faith and his public patriotism. If so, he would continue to love his country while trying to reform it and return it to the path that the Founding Fathers had laid out. . .

But that was so long ago and they'd not been more adept at seeing into the future than any other similar group of intelligent and morally noble men. . .

"Maybe I'm overrating their moral nobility? And maybe I don't know so much about their ideas? Mostly, I know a little about the external events of the age, especially leading up to the rebellion against the British government and the war which came about."

A cry of despair came from Johnny's lips and his Golden Retriever jumped up and looked at him as if wondering what could have caused such misery.

"There is so much I need to know, Rebel. So much before I can understand the world well enough to write anything worth crap." After sweeping the three partial manuscripts from the top of his desk, Johnny passed on, paying no attention to Rebel's own moan of despair. "I'm so lazy and so ill-disciplined. How can I ever write anything at all when I spend so much time staring into

space, sometimes not even aware of any thoughts in my own head. I need to get on to a good, tough schedule. Write a couple hours every morning before dawn like Hemingway...

Somehow the image of a still drunken macho man sitting down to write modern classics led to a lifting of Johnny's mood. He even laughed as he announced, "Let's go for a good walk around this old town, Rebel. We'll see houses where my great-grandparents lived and stores still run by families in town. It'll put me in a good mood and I'll make a cheeseburger for each of us when we get back."

49 A Lost Woman

The dreamer was but faintly Johnny and, in any case, spread over a small stretch of the bank of the rapidly running river and even spread into the nearby woods. The river itself was faintly the Chicopee from his youth and perhaps from the youth of a Nipmuk of several centuries before Johnny had sat in the shade with Sarah.

There was befogged perception, sight and smell and sound covering nearly five acres ending at a half-mile or so of flowing water.

There was sharpness sitting upon a log near the center of that half-mile.

As the dreamer focused upon that sharpness, the entirety of his world came also into sharper focus. But the world narrowed to a woman standing on the banks of the Chicopee River. She was too young or so he thought, as if she were a figment of his memory rather than a figment of his imagination.

The dreamer himself seemed to focus into Johnny and he moved forward, trembling inside himself but mannishly confident, lacking in youthful hesitation. As he came to her right side, she merely glanced at him but then she reached out to caress his forearm lightly before letting her hand come to a gentle rest, barely pressing down the hairs of his arm.

With a deep, deep feeling of satisfaction, he let his focus relax so that he was able to expand his visual field to include her reddish-brown hair blowing gently in the convenient breeze, a gentle smile upon her lips so succulently feminine though somewhat thin. He could have almost believed she could have accepted *The Likes of Those Like Us*:

She was all I could have had
and never could accept.
Young and likely fertile
as perhaps was I.

I could not bear the thought
of bringing yet another alien
into a world good but not for
the likes of those like us.

Desperately, Johnny reached out to grab the last image of his dream: he stood hand in hand with Sarah, contented and quiet and watching the Chicopee River flow by. Then he closed his hand more tightly upon emptiness, but he imagined all the harder and the ghost returned.

As soon as even an image of Sarah came into focus, Johnny felt himself grow calm in the innermost part of his being, but he longed to see her or to see some good woman he could adore and care for even as she would accept the adoration out of some need and take the care in a good-natured way though she might well be better able to take care of herself than he was.

Ever more was it clear from his writings, novels and some very crude tries at philosophy and theology, that he was feeling a call to turn the eyes of men toward God's Creation and to acknowledge it as a Creation. Yet, he himself looked into a future without any woman to share his life and without a companion of any sort to journey with him as he struggled to develop as an author and to explore reality in some way...

Without much of a guide?

Surely, he had God as a companion and guide but...

God Himself had made men to desire human companionship and to form human communities which met the human need for...

Human communities?

Was that the fate of someone who explored the world as God made it—to travel always in circles and to never find some magical foundation of principles which would explain life, the universe, and everything.

50 The Prognosis

Johnny looked on as Dr Fernandez pointed to the blurred image. “I think there are four kinds of cancer in your lungs, Mr Waters.”

It was Johnny the oncologist looked at as he shifted his eyes from the picture of impending death, but it didn't look so much like death. It looked like a very bad sketch of a human chest though the ribs didn't really show as firm objects and there were just splotches here and there.

Which were the cancer cells? Which were the evil things invading his father's body?

Dr Fernandez shifting slightly as if trying to speak more directly to Johnny without leaving Mr Waters, the patient himself, to the side. “I don't think this is treatable. I would have to use multiple strong chemotherapies for the different types of cancer and then I might have to follow up with radiation. I don't think your father. . .” After clearing his throat, Dr Fernandez shifted his gaze a little more directly upon Mr Waters for just a second before turning to Johnny to tell him, “I'd warned your father, so I'll now tell you. I don't think he's strong enough to tolerate even one form of strong chemotherapy right now. He's been fighting this for years and he's not as young as when he won a temporary victory.”

Johnny remembered his mother telling him a few days before that she was sure that his father's cancer had started to return a couple years before or so and he was fighting just to go to work each day and put in some overtime. He wanted to pile up money for her sake.

Feeling himself to be the helpless man in the middle, Johnny watched his

silent father and listened as Dr Fernandez said they would at least make an initial try at chemotherapy. He gave Mr Waters a prescription for 50 pills of what he said was a strong medicine, even by chemotherapy standards.

As Johnny and his father were leaving the examination room, Dr Fernandez pulled Johnny aside and whispered, "He has to take those pills within a short time to give them a chance to work. They won't go down easily. Get a liquid antacid of some flavor he prefers. If his stomach gets too upset, have him use the antacid to wash them down."

On the way home, Johnny dropped off the prescription at the drug-store and the pharmacist whistled and said, "I can fill this before closing if you wish, but it's pretty strong stuff."

Feeling hopeless in his ignorance, Johnny shrugged and told Phil, "And he's supposed to take them within a few hours tomorrow afternoon, after he tries to get a good night's rest and then a good breakfast or early lunch."

Phil looked a little disturbed, which bothered Johnny. Mrs Waters was a retired nurse, one of the first nurse-anesthetists and very respected from what Johnny had gathered, and she had always trusted Phil's opinion on medicines more than the opinions of most doctors. If he was worried. . .

As it turned out, every pill Mr Waters swallowed, from the first to halfway through the bottle, had gone down the toilet. He had made it that far into the bottle only by an stoic resignation which impressed Johnny, though he'd already known his father to be tough in handling pain and discomfort. When Johnny was young, his father had his arm trapped in a machine when the safety lock had failed. A rod had penetrated. Fortunately, it had missed bone but the arm had been broken by just the pressure and the webbing between thumb and hand had been sliced. Not wanting to upset his wife who was home with the young children, he had driven home one-handed after he was treated at an emergency room.

Johnny had known that his father was only about five when his father had died, but years later he learned more of the story. The elder Mr Waters had been a lead-miner and, like many, had died of the 'rattles', lung failure of

one sort or another which had led to his gradual suffocation. He'd apparently known that would happen, as many of those lead-miners and miners of other minerals had known. They'd faced such a future to provide for their wives and children. And he'd remembered his father staring at the television screen with a blank expression while they showed the hospital personnel on M*A*S*H. During a commercial break, his father had said in a low voice, "It was even worse for us in the mobile hospitals than they're showing, but I'd start feeling sorry for myself and I'd remember the young men coming in from the battles with legs or arms blown off or holes in their skulls or... I'd stop feeling sorry for myself real fast."

Johnny wondered how few were the incidents needed to describe a man's moral character.

51 Naked I Shall Return

Mr Waters was speaking Job's prophecy more frequently: Naked I came into this world and naked I shall return. Johnny couldn't find those exact words in the only version of the Bible which he had on his bookshelf—the *Revised Standard Version*, but it was clearly Job1:21 and not too far from the RSV wording.

What was worse was the likely truth in the words. Mr Waters was wasting away and he could barely keep his clothes on. His waist and hips seemed to have little flesh upon them and even his well-muscled shoulders and arms were as slender as they must have been at 12 years old. A man who once could lift 200 pound blocks of steel to his work-table at the shop could now barely muster the strength to raise himself out of his chair.

52 A Death in the Family

Johnny woke up as he was gently shaken by the nurse taking his father's blood pressure. As he watched her, he could see his brother, Al, sound asleep on the other side of the bed and holding their father's right hand. The nurse, an LPN his mother had known and had thought to be worth more than the younger nurses with fancier degrees and training, unwrapped the cuff and then she tried again and Johnny grew more alert as he remembered her telling him the night before, "A couple of you can stay but you should have the others take your mother home. Your father might be holding on longer because he doesn't want to die in front of her."

Later, after Johnny told his mother, she said, "Nancy's been through a lot of deathbed watches before. She probably has a good feel for the timing, especially since your father needs morphine for the pain but his lungs are weak and the morphine will help him to stop struggling as he dies. But, right to the end, he was stronger than he should have been. I know she expected him to die shortly after I left and he held on for another six or seven hours and another shot of morphine."

This was all going through Johnny's head as he walked out to a phone outside the room as the nurse prepared his father's...corpse for his mother's last viewing. Johnny had told the nurse his family, and their Congregationalist church, had no tradition of a wake—though he'd been to a couple for church-members and another couple for the parents of Catholic friends. As he picked up the phone, Johnny thought to himself, "From dust he came, to ashes he shall return."

A short while later, Johnny stood at the door to the hospital room and watched as his mother sat beside her husband of 40 years less a few months. His siblings and a couple of in-laws were gathered around the bed.

Nancy, the floor-nurse, walked by Johnny, patting his arm sympathetically as she passed. She went to Mrs Waters and told her, “A doctor is coming up from the emergency room to check your husband and sign the death-certificate. He won’t be up for a half-hour or more and then you’ll have to leave but you can go back in when he finishes his exam and signs the certificate.”

53 Good-bye for Now

As Mr Waters had wished, his family had a quiet service at the funeral home. The minister of the church attended by Mrs Waters—Mr Waters hadn't so much as been inside the building for a couple of decades—gave a short talk and coordinated some Bible readings by some members of the Waters family.

After the service, the Waters gathered with a small group of friends at Alice's pondside house where they'd already brought some munching food, beer, wine, and a bottle of Bourbon for the Waters' sons and Alice's husband, Rhett Armstrong. The interment would be the next morning at nine, but no one objected when the brothers and their brother-in-law settled down for some beers and a fifth of Bourbon. It wasn't light drinking but didn't seem too much for four men.

Johnny drank more than his share of that bottle of Bourbon whiskey. By six the next morning, he was purging his insides as painfully as if he had a nasty stomach virus. As he lay back down after a third purging of his insides, he heard his mother give a part of the explanation to his siblings, "He's been working himself to the point of exhaustion, taking care of his father, taking me to the hospital to visit Dad, and trying to keep up his writing. . ." She didn't mention the whiskey that they already knew about.

A few hours later, he was rising and feeling a bit better as his mother and some of his siblings were returning from the cemetery and a visit to her sister's house in Somers, Connecticut.

54 Setting Aside Childish Pursuits

The time had come for serious work. “Not that I wasn’t serious in those first novels which didn’t find publication, but...”

Johnny didn’t know where that “but...” might lead.

“This computer is so primitive.”

Where to take that idea. Was a computer with word-processing software the right tool for a modern author? Certainly writers, the robotic producers of canned romance or mystery novels and most so-called journalists, would benefit from such technology though this technology didn’t seem to Johnny to be so much superior for most purposes to the free-standing and limited purpose word-processors such as the one he had before heading to Radio Shack to get this computer seemingly held captive by Microsoft.

On the whole, Johnny thought that technology opened up new possibilities for a people both energetic and creative, but he wasn’t so sure there was much creativity to be found in the American people or any of the peoples of the West.

Surely, a wealthy and prosperous people facing the possibilities of greatness were ready for a revival of the creativity which would be necessary for the United States to take the leadership of Western Civilization and not just Western banking and war-making. Surely, Americans would welcome a truly American and truly substantial literature. Surely, Johnny just had to get to work and would get his books in front of the right agent or the right editor and something would start. It might take a little while before he had a large readership but that would happen. After all, there were such high rates of

literacy in the United States and other Western countries. Could all those literate graduates of high schools and colleges be satisfied reading the junk on the bestseller lists? Maybe some of them read some of the good old books, but he'd already been told by one of the librarians at Jenkesville's public library that the classic novels he was taking out had sat undisturbed on the shelves for years.

That didn't matter. Jenkesville was just one small town with a middling school system. Surely...

Johnny sat down at his desk, a smile on his face. He looked up at the casement window out of this small half-finished storage room in his mother's basement. It was a bright and cheerful day in October of 1993. His eyes dropped to the desktop. He had a box of fresh pens, a small pile of spiral-bound notebooks of 70 sheets each, and a pile of books on the human brain and human genes.

The phrase came to mind: the world is my oyster. He'd never quite understood it, but what the heck. It seemed appropriate. He had only to jump in and start writing about the two characters who had come to life in his mind over the past year or so and were pretty well-defined now.

One was a scientific genius of sorts, Parnell Lopez—sane and functional but with character traits hinting at something like autism. He had a cousin, half-Nigerian and half-Welsh, who was a poet who'd died young... How and why was currently as mysterious to Johnny as it would be to those who never heard at all of the young man who'd read so many prologues and introductory chapters of great works of science even while he flew around to visit the great warehouses of the world and to find... Johnny thought a moment and then pulled a notebook from the top of the green pile and quickly made a note about high-class courtesans in Hong Kong. Then he returned that green notebook to its pile and pulled a blue notebook from the top of its pile and began to make notes about a philosopher who'd been driven into a schizoid state by... Johnny thought hard before remembering what he'd read about those poor people in Marburg, Germany who'd been moving some sort of primates flown in from

Africa and had caught a horrible disease; the survivors had suffered so much pain that they fell into a state more than just a little schizoid. He made a note about reading more about the disease, to find out the name and a little more about the symptoms. Johnny decided to go out for a run and returned the blue notebook to the top of its pile.

With a smile on his face, an author full of hope rose to his feet and turned to leave his basement office.

Appendix

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Colophon

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