

Wuramon

1.

On the scale of ancient communities, it's a line of rubble, layers deep in the earth, that—from a distance, as we look at the fresh cross-sectioned side of the archeological shaft—seems over millennia to have been compacted down to an even thinness, a horizontal quarter-mile of pencil line. A few feet above it runs another one. A few feet lower, another.

These are a calendar—of hundreds of years. Each represents the absolute demolition of a Neolithic village: all of its buildings—stone, mud-brick—staved in, and leveled, and then used as a base on which the village would be rebuilt. (At Çatalhöyük, we've discovered eighteen levels of successive habitation.) For them, this was easier than *repairing* the homes, the garrison, the temple; simply, they started over. And simply, we can use these wafery demarcations as metric devices sequencing the ends and reascensions of a single location of human living, over generations.

Yes, and on the scale of *one* life...? That would come to what the bioarcheologists call "Beau's lines," fine striations that develop when a fingernail stops growing (say, due to disease) and then begins again...ends and reascensions. On the only fingernail left attached to that body the Ötzal Alpine glaciers had preserved from about 5,300 years ago—"the Iceman," as we've nicknamed that astonishingly intact cadaver, no more out of its true shape than the freeze-dried plum in an astronaut's pouch—are the telltale signs that he had confronted serious illness three times in the months before he dragged himself to die (from an arrow injury) into a shallow, rocky mountain pass. They look like tiny stress-lines on a sherd of scrimshaw ivory.

And on the scale of meteorology, it's wind—it's globally ambient crosscurrents of wind; it's stands of olive boughs that act as voice-box for the lengthy, haunting *kyrie* of the wind, with full laryngeal and pulmonary force; it's the airborne continent's-worth of soil that circles the planet as grit in the grip of the wind; it's the pollenologist's study of how far wind disburses the sexual seeking of plant

for plant, of fluctuation in cereal resources and in climate. Yes, and on the scale of one life, it's the pollen from a small tree called "hop hornbeam," lodged in the food residue of an Iron Age colon: somebody abrim with love-itch and despairs as complaining as yours or mine... has died, we can determine now, in the late spring or the early summer, the time of hop hornbeam's flowering.

"Economics," we say—abstract and gassy. Of course it's also a woman, actual, heavy—with hunger; hair unrooted and drifting away from her scalp—with hunger, here in a daub-wattle hut on an otherwise clement day in 1828 in an uplands valley. If we were there, we could smell the sourness flimmering off her skin.

Or "musicology" we say, which is an admirable field of theory. We can't forget, however, that it blends without caesura into the body of someone so long-term devoted to her cello, that the two become a symbiotic unit. Her body is mainly the space in which a cello comes alive, singing inside of her spraddle.

On the scale of ho-hum homilie, it's "Be careful of what you wish for: you might get it." On the scale of an individual life, it's molten gold a concentrating Aztec warrior pours, a cupful, down the throat of a captive—one of Cortez's men.

It's always that way, as in the word "interface": its first two general syllables, and then the specific body part.

The intellectualized, no matter how airily indeterminate, is never completely severed from its correlative in flesh and bone. "Intellectualized"—and where does *that* happen, if not in the gnarled, link-marbled meat of the brain? The strife of the *Iliad* is measurable in anybody's chest, in cardiovascular heaves. The high declamations of *Romeo and Juliet* are repeated every day, by salt, by protein, in the miles of whispering gallery in the groin.

And the "soul"? Is there a physical counterpart to the soul? I don't know. But you can see, at least, the physical vessel of its journeying, on display here in a hall at my university, part of "one of the largest and most important collections of Asmat art in existence... over 950 works." The Asmat—from "an inhospitable environment" says the placard, in western New Guinea. There are shields, house poles, ancestor figures, and as I've said, this "soul ship" far removed now from its original travel, and overlooking the various pale, underpaid scholars and sleepy, distracted undergraduate students of Wichita

State . . . this ship that was fashioned to voyage into the realm of the spirits.

And we can't hold a thought in our hands the way we can a pear, a breast; but we can knock against the skull in which the thought once bloomed, at least. Ask Hamlet.

We can't weigh the leap of love we ascribe to the heart; but we could search for Yorick's sternum in the dirt. There are symbols—residences, even—of the invisible, things with obvious poundage and nap.

The "soul" . . . at least we can see the grain of its wooden shell, here, on this wall now, as the side of the ship is revealed in the late Kansas afternoon light.

2.

Who *was* it?—that's right: Jim, who else helped organize (or anyway, helped organize with such panache and unfrayed affability) the trip of all of the members of the American Museum of Asmat Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota to Wichita State, in Kansas, for the opening night ("the gala," as the p.r. said) of the Holmes Museum of Anthropology's "Spirit Journeys" exhibit of Asmat cult goods? Oh it was Jim alright, Jim Czarniecki (say ZÄHR-nicki), the go-to guy, the unflappable, the generosity engine. Jim the radiant. Jim with the face of a full-force lighthouse lens that alchemized whatever was the object of its gaze, to a golden occasion.

Jim the connoisseur: of art: of wine: of the very bricks in a gallery's walls or a restaurant's gate, and what amazing fin-de-siecle harbor-front cathedral they originally constructed in the days before their un- (and then re-)doing here, in this very place we were visiting, yes right now, with him and Anne, because he knew of it and he knew that we'd enjoy it, whatever gallery-or-restaurant-of-the-moment it was, and we needed, we *needed*, to be swept up in his dynamo whooshes and brought here for an evening's epic anecdotes, for badinage as intricately strategized as championship chess and yet as weightlessly spun as floss. *That* Jim.

It certainly wasn't required that I like him. He was only the baggage that came along with his wife, my editor, Anne, when Skyler and I flew out to an awards ceremony in L.A. But I liked him. Skyler liked him. He was solemn when appropriate—he listened, with the rumpled-forehead semiotic of "strict attention." He was

the raconteur when it was time to have a raconteur. He doted on Anne. (How often does anybody “dote” these days? The world is sore in need of doteship.) Of that long, chaotic blah-blah night of fake-grin-handshake crowded rooms and too, too many new names to remember, and dead end streets, he made a tame and manageable thing—the way the good mahout on the elephant does, so you hardly notice: only a subtle pressure of the knees. He told his story about the opening of the Pollack show, when a dog trots in, and . . . rrrring, “Excuse me a minute,” his cell phone, back in Minneapolis somebody needs a circus tent the next day for a charity raffle—a *circus tent*. “Just give me a moment.” He leaves, he’s back. “So a dog trots in, with paint all over its paws . . .”—he’s got them their circus tent. Jim Czarniecki, a new energy source, a runaway sun, a maverick sizzle escaped from the heart of an element of roiling potential. Jimonium. The man was inexhaustible.

A miscellany: The photo of Anne and Jim and the kids on vacation with his relatives in Montana: spurts of rapids water, eggy white and sunshot, clamor around the raft as thickly as a covey of doves. The photo of monumental ice sculptures, some of them Babylonian in authority and elegance. The story of when the mayor’s errant golf ball brained a browsing cow: and so now there’s a charity golf day (always a charity, always a two-fisted large-hearted cause) with a culminating contest: teeing off and knocking over a plywood cow. Jim thaumaturgically simmering with inventive goodwill. The photos from Spain. The photo of Anne and Jim below a soul ship on the musem wall in Wichita.

I revisited it, the week after the gala. And now, alone with it in that hall, I found its otherworldly presence even more . . . *something*; magisterial? spooky? “Otherworldly,” I said, and yet the soul ship—*wuramon*, in the Asmat—can be up to 40 feet long; and a 40-foot-length of wood is hardly spectral. A dugout canoe capacious enough for twenty carved occupants, plus decoration of feathers, seeds and leaves, is hardly phantasmal: in one photograph, it requires fourteen men for its lifting.

These are the various occupants of a *wuramon*: *etsjo* (or *eco*), human-like figurines, always crouched face-down, and always with penises that, as Tobias Schneebaum’s *Asmat Images* puts it, are “horizontal, anti-gravity”; the *ambirak*, a being that lives at the bottom of rivers and streams; *okom*, a spirit “shaped like a Z,” that crawls

along the same watery silt-floors as the *ambirak*; *mbu*, the turtle, symbol of fertility (by virtue of its copious eggs); *jenitsjowotsz*, a female spirit, always facing forward; and “usually included, as well, are the hornbill head, *jirmbi*; the black king cockatoo head, *ufirmbi*; a decapitated head, *kawe*; and a *was* design, representing either a cuscus tail or an open space in the jungle.” Every figure has a different carver, all of them under the expert supervision of a “maestro carver.” An object like that can’t help but have a weighty, declarative character, it can’t help but remind us it was once the trunk of the *os eyok* tree, rooted firmly, greedily into the earth.

But I said *other-worldly*, and otherworldly it surely is—this vessel with its wooden reenactments of life-forms almost like—and yet not like—our own. In part, the wonder-evoking, supernatural aspect of the *wuramon* is because it’s never created with a bottom to it. That’s right, it has no bottom to it: “the spirits have no need of one.” As if they’re flaunting their supra-skills. As if they’re beyond such a mundane consideration as navigability.

Completely open to water, it still doesn’t sink; in fact, if anything, it appears to arrow assuredly through water and air on its mysterious business with a mastery no earthly ship could ever hope to achieve. As if an invisible layer of spirit-world one micron thick entirely and durably coats this ship and its inhabitants. And where they originate?—I don’t know. And where they’re bound for?—I couldn’t say. Ancestral *and* far-future simultaneously, they seem to be some unacknowledged part of us—the ghost part, maybe, the part where our clairvoyance and our eternal selves reside—and they’re here in our daily domain as a strange reminder/encouragement of what awaits us, one day, when we waver on out of our bodies and join the spirits completely.

Interesting. And then, of course, I returned to the “daily domain”—returned to raking the razor tines of that year’s income tax over the softening clay of my brain, returned to papers to grade, and votes to cast, and the trellis of marriage that always needs to be repaired and sometimes merely asks to have its overscribble of vines and flowers appreciated.

One day the car gives up; I hear the clash of its tectonic plates, the shrill of its electron bondings separating. One day I hear a colleague sob behind her office door, like a captive people behind an iron wall. One day: *achoo!* One day: oh boy! One day the high hilar-

ity is a student paper that says, quote, *This is a poet who copulates words and meaning together*. One day I buy a new car, or really it's a month of many days, because the experience is so slimy, I can only do it in tiny, tentative units. One day the war. One day the celebrity news. One day: stampeding sasquatches of emotion. One day: a total snooze. One day a phone call: he only had cramps; but it wouldn't stop; they had to remove a blockage from his colon, and it was malignant; it had metastasized, they found out, to his liver, and maybe a lymph node, maybe it rode around like a satellite in his circulatory system now; they didn't know yet how bad it was, but in any case "it doesn't look good." Jim. No. Oh yes: Jim Czarniecki.

3.

It begins with the men going into the jungle, and then to a special encampment there, drumming and singing all night. In the morning, the tree—a huge *os eyok*—is uprooted. The tree is carefully chosen: the tree will become a *wuramon*. Its branches are removed; the trunk is painted, red, white, black; fresh fruit from along the river is hung upon it; and then, with sober purpose and yet much merriment, it's carried back to the village, and planted upside-down in front of the men's cult house: and there it waits for the *emak tsjem*, the "bone house"—the male initiates' house—to be built.

The bone house must be completed in one day—this is tradition with the force of law. And once it's done, the initiates of that season (their faces painted with soot now) enter it and remain inside it until the *wuramon* is ready.

Weeks pass. Everybody waits until the sago worms are mature, and distributed. These are the fat tree worms of the area—the larvae of the capricorn snout beetle—that, whether roasted or alive, are such an important delicacy at Asmat feasts. Sometimes they can be studiously chewed, in sacred ritual; at others, fisted up casually like popcorn. In their living state, they look like giant, writhing thumbs, they look like glistening nuggets of elephant tusk come damply to life. And when the sago worms are distributed, then—and only then—does the carving begin.

When the soul ship is finished, it's painted (the same red, white, black colors) and decorated. Women are admitted into the men's cult house (the only occasion on which this happens) and they uncover the newly completed *wuramon*. After a ritual food exchange

(the *emak cen pakmu*, the “bone house feast”), the *wuramon* is lifted onto the shoulders of its carvers and, to a background of drumming, chanting and bamboo horns, it’s carried over to the bone house and placed on the front porch, under a carved-wood crocodile head, *ee karoan*, a spirit who fills the initiates with bravery.

In fact the whole of the bone house is constructed to imbue the sequestered initiates with the qualities of ideal manhood: *wukai* gives them wisdom, as does the *sawar* fish (to whom they touch their foreheads), the *tem as* figure imparts fertility, the *jirai* fish instills in them “the light of goodness,” etc. Over all of the weeks of waiting there, these qualities have entered them, patiently, unceasingly, seeping in a little a day, smelting them, refocusing them—and now, at last, they enter the world: a second birth: into manhood.

As a final ritual gesture, they slide, one at a time, across the soul ship’s *mbu* (or sometimes *okom*) figure—and then each one “is scarified across his chest with a mussel shell.” The next day, the chests of initiate girls are similarly scarified. “And after all have been scarified, they return to their own homes, and sleep.”

This isn’t a summer afternoon in Columbus, Ohio or Jackson, Mississippi or Springfield, Illinois. A weirdly exotic beauty (for us), a potent repulsion (for us), a vigorously primal spirituality (for us)—these braid their way through the Asmat ceremony, these assault our sense of the everyday. It isn’t washing your car in the driveway. It isn’t screaming for the hometown Fighting Cobras to clobber the visiting Wild Bulls.

And yet “During ‘rest days,’ following ‘labor days,’ they will often cleanse—in a manner that can only be thought of as ‘ritualized’—their travel-machines. A bucket is used, inside of which a certain proportion of ‘cleanser-liquid’ is added to the water” Or: “The ceremonial rivalry of ‘teams’ on the field is matched in the articulation of socially-sanctioned frenzy by the clamorous rites of those in attendance (‘in the stands’) and by the nubile muses of this event, who posture gymnastically in between its ongoing phases” It’s all one, I suspect, to the anthropologists spying upon our species from their extragalactic observatories. (For us; for them, they aren’t “extra-” anything, they’re comfy in the one and only galaxy that matters.)

If it’s “odd” to us, this picture of an Asmat man who sleeps on the skull of an ancestor for a pillow . . . that unnerving almost-sym-

metry... well, I've met Charlie, who once earned his living in one of New York's tonier artiste-and-lovenest districts by fashioning glitzorama custom-designed armoires and fainting couches for a hip upscale clientele (Yoko Ono was one of his clients), the hook of his product being that every inch was upholstered in vibrant snakeskin. (I don't know his business's name—if it ever had one—but *Up-Scale* would have been clever.) It's all the same, I suspect, to the scanner eyes of the scholars from Galaxy X.

Oh? Even (and here I quote from photograph captions in Schneebaum's account of his time among the Asmat) the man seen "cutting out a small window in a felled sago tree, into which this owner will put moss that has first been rubbed around his anus and armpits"? Even "the adoption ceremony, when newly adopted individuals crawl through a tunnel representing the birth canal, the ceiling of which is a row of the widespread legs of the new adoptive mothers"? Even "the bride being carried into the house of the groom by the mother's brother"?—this, with the injunction "Note the bride price (one stone axe) on her shoulder, and also the three pairs of boar tusks at her uncle's elbow that indicate he has taken three heads in battle."

Yes: even then; even these. On the scale of deltas being accreted grain-of-silt by grain-of-silt, on the scale of meteor showers and of zephyrs, and on the Carl-Sagan-scale of those scientific students of the skies that I've ascribed to Planet Ooga-Booga up there somewhere... none of this is any more implausible than a day at the NASCAR track; or than the Mayday Gay Day Float Parade in the Village; or than the windbag garrulosity olympics as the tenure committee pisses its many contrarian opinions into its multicontrarian winds. I mean—have you *seen* the tumult of parrotheads at a Jimmy Buffet concert?—or sat in slackjawed gogglement at the weasel words slinking out of the jaws in a session of Congress lately? It must all even-out, must equal something designated "human," on the Ooga-Boogans' version of an institute's statistical charts.

This leveling of difference is the outer space translation of the compass we find in Robert Boyle's observation, responding to some inequities of Parliament's in the seventeenth century: "It is strange that men should rather be quarrelling for a few trifling opinions, wherein they dissent, than to embrace one another for those many fundamental truths wherein they agree."

So if the Asmat appear to us to exist in two (or more) parallel concepts of “time”; if simultaneously they live in the land of work and of feast, of holding the infant up to a breast, of felling the tree, of filling the bamboo tubes with drinking water, *and* in the land of walking under, over, and through the “middle world,” *ndami ow*, that space between the living and the infinity-realm of the spirits...we lead equally time-muddled lives, yes? Here in Atlanta, Schenectady, San Antonio, Fire Island, Astoria, Aspen, Philadelphia, Missoula, Santa Fe, Moline.

For example: at the Asmat exhibit, in maestro mode and leading us from shield to headband to ancestor pole, and greeting old friends with his great atomic reactor beams of enthusiasm, Jim Czarniecki was already—although we couldn’t have known it—a host to the initial thickened cells that would betray him, that would start to bear him into an alternate future. At the champagne toasts in the restaurant in Saint Paul, as we joked about the South Beach diet, and dissected the Democrats’ strategy in that city: already, inside him, the cancer was starting to gauge its speed, its rampancy. We couldn’t tell time by already-o’-clock, but its hands moved duly anyway. “Already”: I’ve come to despise that word, and its breeding of secret tomorrows in the lining of our flesh.

And in Naperville, in Sarasota, in Taos, in Peoria—do we possess a correlative to the complicated mazes of Asmat spirits? “Daily life is filled with spirits of the forest, spirits of the seas and rivers, spirits of the day and spirits of the night, as well as the spirits of ancestors of the distant past and those of the most recently dead.” The most demanding spirits?—“those who had been decapitated, their anger eventually forcing the men of their village to avenge their deaths.”

When a person sleeps, his or her *ndamup* is able to flow from the body—a “shadow” or “image”—and roam around; it can metamorphose into other forms of life, like a crocodile. In addition to that, every villager is endowed with a *ndet* (and given a *ndet* name) several months, or even more than a year, after birth (for the *ndet* is too powerful a force to be housed in the very young: it completes that person’s individual character). All living things have their *ndet*, even a tree or a tuft of grass, and so do certain inanimate objects: statues, prowheads, ceremonial poles. There is also *yuwus*. There is also *samu*. “Spirit children enter human bodies and animate embryos.”

Some spirits are courted and honored. The apotheosis of this must be the twenty-foot-tall ancestor pole, so phallic in its upthrust shape. Schneebaum says, "Human figures and birds, painted red and white and black, are carved on it one above the other. It is a powerful affirmation of virility and fertility, as if all the male spirits of the carving have combined and are about to explode and ejaculate their life force onto all below." Other, evil spirits must be guarded against, and Schneebaum witnesses women who come across a corpse and immediately fling off their skirts, and then throw themselves naked into the mud, to roll around—to hide the smells of their bodies from any predator spirits skulking about. One comes to believe that if they acquire vocabulary like "molecule," "neutrino," "synapse," "megahertz"...the Asmat will quickly invent a set of spirits to surround these, too—to plague them, or exalt them.

Here in Tucson, and Topeka, and Eugene...the collateral branches of this family of thought are going strong, and always have been. Here, as evidence: John Aubrey, in his forthright seventeenth century prose: "When Dr Powell preacht, a Smoake would issue out of his head; so great agitation of Spirit he had." Or sudden table-rap and trumpet-blat at a nineteenth century séance, with an ectoplasmic coil as thick as hawser rope at the side of the medium's head where it rests in her crossed arms, and a hollow voice of imprecation and sweet, platitudinous comfort from the Other Side. The Ooga-Booga dissertation candidates say *what* about the wine the priest transmogrifies to holy blood, about the little buzzsaw-whirl of dybbuks that tormented the Prophet's followers in the desert wastes, about the rabbi's absolute assurance that an access lane exists between his kasha-scented murmurs and the all-receptive Ear of the Creator? Here in Phoenix, here in Akron, here in Laramie.

"If personality exists after what we call death, it is reasonable to conclude that those who leave this Earth would like to communicate with those they have left here." BIG "if," *I* say; but who am I to argue against the Asmat—or, in this case, Thomas Edison, who went on to write, "I am inclined to believe that our personality hereafter will be able to affect matter. If this reasoning be correct, then, if we can evolve an instrument so delicate as to be affected or moved or manipulated by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an instrument, when made available, ought to record something."

Working the same assumptions, a group that called itself The Spirit Electronic Communication Society, of Manchester, England, was formed in 1949. Their founder—a Dutchman, a Mr. N. Zwaan—the year before at a meeting of the International Spiritualism Federation, had demonstrated “an electronic device which produced a field of energy capable of stimulating the psychic senses into activity”—the “Super-ray,” he called it, then the “Zwaan ray,” and this developed into the “Teledyne,” then the “Telewave.” The claim for these?—“a form of direct communication, by voice, with the dead.”

To this day, there remains a small but serious and dedicated circle of electro-perceptual researchers who are sure that they can manifest—through everything from enormous sparkling coil-and-pylon-studded machines, to the everyday background static of a cellphone—the otherwise unheard (although ubiquitous) speech of Those Beyond: the discarnate.

“They have,” says Tina Laurent, “their own peculiar rhythm and pitch. However, I do, on playback, always listen with the speed slowed down, [and this way] high-pitched noises or sounds will be turned into intelligible speech.” These utterances, it would seem, abound as bountifully, as astonishingly, in the air as do (when our eyes are attuned) the wingéd green-faced goats and friendly, levitating cows and anenome-colored angels of Marc Chagall.

One photograph in a book I own: a Hassid Jew at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, in his centuries-old style of black religious wear, is holding a mobile phone against the stone . . . and the voice of a relative hundreds of miles away intones the ancient prayers.

4.
The woman becomes increasingly lovely as she becomes increasingly clear—the line of her, below the fussing dust brush of an archeology lab assistant working on those limestone flakes that served as scrap for personal jottings and doodles among the artisans who labored on tombs in the Valley of the Kings around 1300 B.C. (These small and quotidian glimpses into their lives—love poems, sly caricatures of overseers, etc.—have managed to triumph over the forces of time’s erasure with a success that’s often *not* matched by the sanctioned, careful inscriptions on the tomb walls, which the pharaohs of ancient Egypt assumed would last as

long as the sand itself, and would guarantee their own resplendent welcome into the afterlife.)

There's a necessarily sexual component to her profile. After all, she's naked, crouched low with a corresponding uplift to her haunches and ass, and the text to the left explains that we find her "blowing into the oven": her lips are pursed around a tube about a forefinger long. She's young and ripe. To not see the eroticism here would be, I think, to need to admit to one's own incompleteness. Even so, the casual domesticity of the scene is, at the same time, miles away from the erotic. It might say "drudgery" to a contemporary of hers, or "familial nourishment." It could be that this aspect of the sketch—the kitchen ambience—serves partially as a pretext for erotic display, the way it appears to do so in the guileless poses of dewy, toiling laundresses and dancers in Degas' work. On the other hand, the demands of baking as pictured here—again, for a contemporary of hers—might well have folded the erotic almost unrecognizably into the bulk of a larger concern, like a yolk folded into dough.

What's clear in any case is the eloquence of this simple line of brown ink: as it rounds her thighs and butt cheeks, and then arches about to become the vigorous hunch of her back—as it makes shaped space from nothingness—it becomes as fully articulate as the architect's svelte line that creates the dome of a mosque or the rounded roof over a stadium. So delicate!—and so authorial in expression. On the scale of professional fulfillment, it must be extraordinary, watching as the scrupulous application of wash and the finicky swish of the dust brush bring this figure slowly out of the concealing darks of 1500 years, one thin gradation of further lucidity at a time.

But on the scale of me, this idea comes down to watching my wife asleep, as night begins to thin from an obdurate black opacity to a slightly more permissive shade of char . . . and there she is, like the shape of a fossil just starting to show itself from the hold of a nugget of coal.

It always works that way: a spectrum with the Big Stuff at its one end—Evolution; Ethics; Art—and at its other end, the hard and spot-on details of an "I." No matter how far apart, they partake of a shared continuum.

On the level of theories of temperament, it's the ancient world's conception of phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile, which gets passed along to the Middle Ages and Renaissance as "the four humors"—each of those liquid substances, responsible for one of four aspects of mental and bodily being. "Health is dependent on a final equilibrium of these elements, while an excess of any one produces disease." Too much black bile produces melancholy. Saturn is the melancholic's planet ("sinister, brooding, secluded Saturn"), and it works, along a complicated scientifico-mystical grid of connections, in conspiracy with the rise of that tarry fluid in the body's own deep wells.

That's as compelling as our own late-twentieth-century grids of connective systems: "Scientists have repeatedly found brain pathology when conducting imaging studies (pictures taken of the brain, such as positron-emission tomography scans) of the anatomy and functioning of the brains of patients with depression, schizophrenia, or manic-depression—showing, for example, in bipolar patients that there is an enlargement of the amygdala; an increase in white-matter lesions, known as hyperintensities, which are associated with the water content of brain tissue; and severe depletions in the number of glial cells." To every era, its own selected avenues of linguistic approach to the blues.

But all of this notwithstanding, on the level of my friend Dana, it's a sexual spate of mania one night in 1989 of such extreme proportion, it involved—by the time the sun first lit the various grimes of a squadhouse on the near north side of Chicago—a visiting rugby team, ten magnums of a cheap champagne, the contents of the broken-into costume trunk at a school for circus clowns, a three-car pile-up, four cop cars, and (not least of these ingredients) Dana's mother on her knees in front of a potbellied chief of detectives, with those tears on her face of the kind that encourage the gods of ancient Greek tragedy—the gods of cannibalism and human sacrifice and incest—to consider coming out of their long retirement for the screams of this moment.

That's how it is. On the level of the biosphere, it's "interaction among ecological niches." On a crazy day in November, however, somewhere in a creek near Baton Rouge, Louisiana, it's a \$70,000 haul from the Lucky Dollar Casino the thieves had dumped out in the wilderness and an enterprising band of beavers had woven

into the sticks and brush of their dam. Or the day in St. Cloud, Minnesota, in April 1985, when “several dozen starfish” rained inexplicably down “on the roofs and the yards of that city”: starfish: *Minnesota*.

On the level of meteorology, it’s a tsunami. On the level of desperation and of perfect-for-the-media secular miracle, it’s Rizal Shahputra, swept off into what should have been the fatal waters—this, while holding on to the nine-year-old twins a neighbor had handed her—but she and the girls first “rested on a snake...as long as a telephone pole” (so says the *Jakarta Post*; the *Melbourne Herald Sun* reports, with less pizzazz, that instead they “followed in its wake”) and survived on the makeshift raft the waters made a gift to her, in the form of an uprooted palm tree.

Here’s another one. I step back, and it’s centuries of book design: a dazzlingly curated show on the inventive engineering of pop-up (and similar “paper animation”) books at the downtown Los Angeles Public Library gallery. Especially bright and impressive are those eighteenth century books that telescope outward—colorful paper accordions—and when you look through one end’s offered peephole, it’s like staring down the mega-length of a garden’s flowery corridor, or the successive rooms of Santa Claus’s workshop, or the receding coral’d grottoes of an underwater city.

Skyler and I are there with Anne and Jim. It’s one of the last of the trips on which we’ll see him in his effusive glory, imbibing the life of every showcase, “Here! Look at this!”—his florid face at a pane of glass like a child’s at a confectioner’s window. Learned. Insouciant. Now of course it’s all about the chemo, all about such words as “expectancy” and “colorectal.” He said on the phone, “If it turns out for the best, I’ll have a chronic disease that’s still manageable,” and the tone of his voice—this is Jim, after all—could have led you to think that he was predicting chorus girls, a tickertape parade, a shower of gummi bears.

The alloys of his body are breaking the contract that they sign at birth, the microscopic benedict arnold cells of him are welcoming the opportunist enemy into their heartland, every part of him is open to physiological identity theft...and here he was, preparing for the flooding acid burn that we call medical containment, speaking genuinely to me of hope. Is any novel’s hero more quixotic?

I look through a peephole in my side of that afternoon's telephone call, down the hallway of rooms in the time that I've known him, and somewhere in there is the pop-up show: "Check this one out! A mermaid and a waterfall!" Those centuries of book design arrive at that five-minute phone conversation: just the way an überword—"nobility," "injustice," "fortitude," "lust," "sangfroid," whatever—is finally only a temperature we understand by the way our skin responds.

To comprehend the American Revolution, we need to know the history of "natural rights philosophy," and the principles of British constitutionalism, as well as the abstract ideas of Rousseau, of Locke, and other continental progressive thinkers. Then again, Thomas Jefferson said that to know the truest state of society's enlightenment, one "must ferret the people out of their hovels... look into their kettle, eat their bread, loll on their beds." And surely both approaches have their place (and share their deepest substance) in a circling totality-calculus. Surely when we drill down to the marrow of "bed," the hemoglobin of "bed," and to the bottomrock of "kettle," and out the other side...we enter a salon where the philosophers are arguing political theory all night long, in vast and cloudy expatiating.

The Tweedledumesque of a general law is linked—although it may be over centuries of us, and over continents—to its twin, the Tweedledeetude of one life's immediate urgencies. The arrow travels in both directions: T.S. Eliot, writing in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," says that new art must be judged inside the standards set by the art of the past—as the art of the past must be rethought in terms of the art of the moment. For some given example, it may look like a tenuous connection—but it's as certain as the mixoplasm marriage of human and animal in the creatures on the island of Dr. Moreau as they shamble, shoat-and-woman, ox-and-man, about the leafy, shade-and-sunlight hills of their insular hideaway.

I remember once seeing a Sunday painter at work. He had set up his easel just outside of a grove of oak, with his back to that shadowiness, and instead was squinting across a meadow, into the sunset, to capture its color (about the brandied-orange of a Monarch's wings) in paint. His concentration was enormous. A little less rouge... a little more umber.... At the same time, however, his artist's smock—his face, in fact, and the two small incandescent

pools of his glasses—were a ready, susceptible canvas on which the sunset painted itself. A line from Randall Jarrell’s poem “Field and Forest”: “The trees can’t tell the two of them apart.”

On the level of the “literary essay,” that’s what I’m writing about—that two-way permeability. Every one of us: a thriving hive of –ology and –ism. But it won’t mean a thing if it isn’t manifested in our dreams and in our metabolic rumble.

We can talk all day about the sigmoidoscopy, about the heat of the IV drip and its resultant weakness, we can think of the length of intestine they—the masked and grandly remunerated “they”—clipped out, and we can bandy the clinicalesse of that world with a frightening ease: “remission possibility,” “squamous carcinoma,” “Nigro radiation,” “oncology protocol.” It can’t be avoided. It’s “real.” It’s a part of instructional CD-ROMs and pamphlets.

Yes, but what I also think is this: the *wuramon* in Jim has slipped its moorings and entered the river of its voyaging a little in advance of the soul ships the rest of us have. He was always an adventurer.

It’s bottomless, as they all are. It will either sink or float, will either be part of one world or another. In New Guinea, they gather at night on the dark woods-heavy shores, and they look at the wrinkled moonlight on the water’s surface, and tell their ancient (and never outdated) tales of spirit pilgrimage.

On the scale of Jim Czarniecki, we’re grouped along his circulatory current. The *wuramon* enters that flow. We love him, and we’re waving.