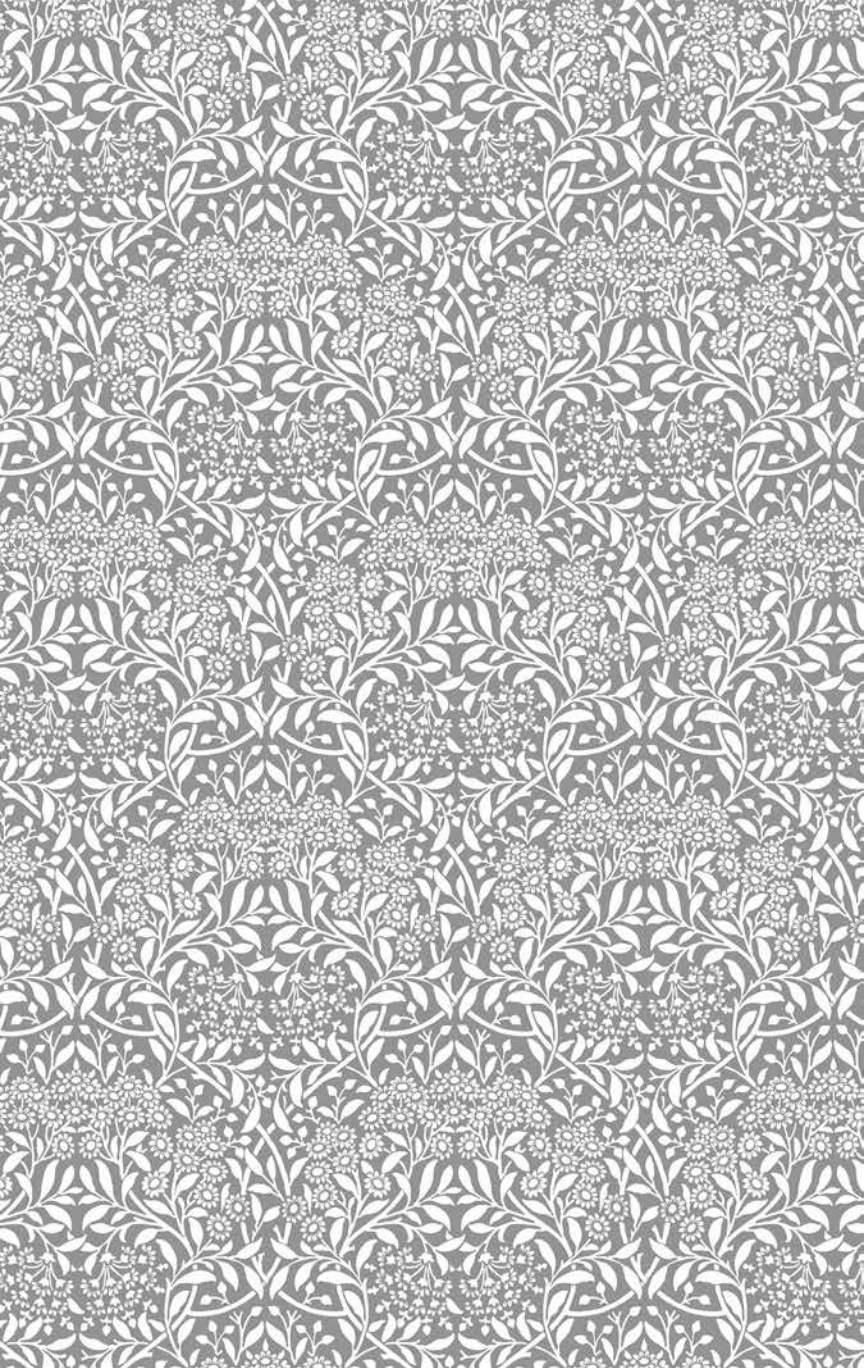


Mind



Rollie Byron



MIND

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by

Rollie Byron

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Mind by Rollie Byron.

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For Grace

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MIND

Part I

HATCHED

1 ⇨ Life Afar

*Some words are the songs of trees
stories grown from willing earth
Bright leaves, verdant growing books
planted silent seeds of souls
– whispers of the Forest of Memories*

 he ancient teacher, dark-skinned and covered in grey, stood amid the students scattered around him in the dark, their eyes intent on his.

He spoke to the children once more: “In the far world, people’s minds remember. You only have today, here and now, but for them, the far ones, past times can be seen and heard and felt afresh in their memory—in their minds. This memory gives them access far beyond the world they now inhabit.”

The thoughts of the teacher seemed sublime. Rich and new; the truth of his words washed like waves. One small boy, sitting near the fire, spoke slowly: “Teacher, why haven’t you told us about the far world before?”

“I have.” The teacher looked down at the boy’s face, the child’s eyes brightly shining in the blaze of the fire

at the teacher's back. "I have talked long about the far world, and you have heard these words before. If you could remember, you would ask me a new question, instead of the same one each time I come to you."

The boy's furrowed brow showed his confusion, his eyes widened. For the children sitting around the teacher, memories of the past were not present. Their minds were blank excepting the here and now. Today was the only day, and yesterday could not break through, but was lost to time, black as darkest night.

"That's enough," the teacher spoke again, seeing their frustration, "We'll eat now." Raising bread in his hand, the teacher continued: "Food is what we call the thing that we enjoy in our stomachs." He pointed to his middle. "And you haven't eaten yet, but you should eat now. Have some food now, and afterwards I'll teach you to make it."

"Make it?" the other boys questioned. One boy spoke what the others thought: "My stomach wants that food."

They ate in silence, the boys slowly trying every bite, looks of surprise on their faces. They ate faster as they realized how it made them feel. After eating, they came and sat down again around the teacher.

"There are those," the teacher began again, "who are masters among the far people. Their words and thoughts and the things they do are remembered beyond the

memory. Always their names are spoken—they have earned eternal glory. They are not mere far seers, but are seen from afar.”

“How?” one boy asked.

“Would you like to be one of them?” asked the teacher, touching the boy’s chin.

The boy swallowed, “I...” His voice became inaudible.

“You may become one yet; far away is closer than you think.” He smiled and looked around at the darkly lit faces. “But first, you’ll learn to make your food for the day beyond today.”

“What day?”

“We call it Tomorrow, and it will be like today, your day. And even though you can’t see tomorrow now, you will on that day, because when it comes, it will be today. Every day has a tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow!” the boys laughed.

“There’s another day?” one said.

“But when you sleep, you won’t see today any longer. It will be gone. Until you have true sight, and then you’ll see yesterday, and that will give you vision, but not sight, of tomorrow.”

“Can we go to tomorrow now?”

“Yes. We’re on our way. First we need to make tomorrow’s food, so that when we get there, we’ll have something to eat.”

"That will be good," a small boy in the front and center said to himself, speaking more loudly than intended.

The teacher smiled broadly, his eyes wide. "You said good! I haven't said that word 'good' today, and you haven't heard it." He looked down at his own hands. "This wasn't in my thoughts. That word came from somewhere else, or some other time—has someone other than me spoken to you today?"

"No." The boys looked around.

The teacher smiled again, this time wider, his teeth gleaming in the dark. "That is good then," and to himself he thought: "Good is good—maybe it stayed. The boy heard it and it stayed! It's such a small thing, but still. We'll have to see to him, and teach him to remember more. There may be hope."

He looked back at the small group: "We'll make food now," he said, his mind elsewhere.

The boys looked around excited. The small boy, the "good" boy, sat thinking, while the other boys stood up around him, then moved to where the teacher was showing them how to grind a small thing to powder, and to add water and heat it in the fire.

"The fire makes the food!" one boy exclaimed, the discovery was like a joke among the others, who repeated it in different voices, surprised to learn such a ridiculous thing.

"No," the teacher corrected, "*You* make the food. The fire heats it, and makes it good to eat."

"Good!" The boys laughed.

The teacher laughed too. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the "good" boy sitting, and now rising slowly to his feet and walking out of the range of the firelight. He was gone.

Some time later, as the sky grew light, the "good" boy returned, walking straight to the teacher by the fire. The other boys were still making their bread. The good boy looked concerned. "What do we do now? The sky has a growing fire in it."

"It's nothing to worry about. It's time to rest." He turned to the boys around him, "You may all rest now. Time has come to an end for you." As he said this, the other boys set their bread in a pile, and each laid back on the ground where they had slept earlier, and immediately fell back into sleep.

All the boys laid down but one.

Soon light wisps of snores surrounded the two still standing. The good boy stood staring into the teacher's eyes, a look that asked: "Don't you sleep?"

"I need to look after all of you while you rest." There was so much more that he wanted to tell the boy.

"But who looks after you?"

"The far ones did, and now I must look after myself and for you."

The good boy looked down and around at the other boys by the fire. They were all sleeping, breathing softly. "Are you a far one?"

"Yes." The teacher turned his eyes from the boys around him to the good boy, looking him in the eyes. "And now so are you."

A look of surprise spread over the boy's face.

"Why are you surprised? You're the one who saw far, who spoke 'good' from afar."

"Is that all a far one is?"

"Not all, but some of what it is to be a far one. I have something else to show you. What I'm going to show you will claim your heart and soul..." Here the teacher stopped and looked to the ground, deep in thought. After a brief pause, he half-smiled and continued, "If you give yourself to it, and then maybe you will see and perhaps even live afar."

"I don't know 'soul' and 'heart,' but the way you say them makes me feel..."

"Strange?"

"Yes."

"These made me feel strange too. Long ago, the day after you first woke up, when my first day dawned here."

"Dawned?"

"Yes. Dawn is the fire that is coming soon. The fire in the sky." As the teacher spoke, he pointed to the horizon. They stood and looked at the growing light

in the distance. "When you see the fire, the light will sear itself on your soul, and you'll seek it forever."

"Forever? What is forever?"

"I don't know ... life and life and life and life. You will wake, and you won't sleep again as long as the fire remains in you. Or, at least you won't sleep like the others."

"What do I have to do?"

"It's not what you do, but what's done to you. And then you'll have to choose. And your choice will last forever."

"Forever," the boy repeated to himself.

2 ⇨ The Mountains

In everyday life, if people intend to reach a true assessment of someone, to decide whether he is bad or good, they do not base the investigation on those periods of life when he was untroubled by external circumstances; they look at how he behaved when he was afflicted by misfortune or blessed by success, because they think that the only way to tell whether a man is fully qualified is to see whether or not he is capable of enduring total changes of fortune with courage and without compromising his principles.

– *The Polyhistorian*, Book 6.2

 he good boy was surrounded by stones where the other boys had been sleeping just moments before. The light of the new day showed them as so many grey boulders beside a smoldering fire. He alone remained. And the food at his feet. The teacher had gone away, and now the good boy was left alone. The wind began to whistle and blew bits of dirt into the boy's eyes.

His gaze was fixed on the light at the edge of the horizon, which burned into his vision, his long dark

eyelashes filled with tears. Unaccustomed to the strong light, he wanted nothing other than to close his eyelids and be done with this strange new sight, to shut it off. But the boy also felt something move in him, pushing him to test his strength, to pour himself out toward the light, to go and follow it, to burn in it forever. It was like a memory, and it hit him in waves.

So he began to move.

One by one the boy's feet shuffled his small frame forward toward the glare. He wanted it, all of it. The warmth, the brilliance, the purity, even the burning. He was awake now. He could see the day with his own eyes.

His first day.

He walked beyond sight of his original horizon, as the light traveled up the blue sky toward the middle of the heavens. It had touched him now with a new kind of feeling. A kind of weariness came over him as he trudged along.

"Why am I walking?" he thought.

But he continued on. As far as the eye could see there were mountains in the distance, at this point just misty hills towering on the edge of his plain. The plain stretched on behind him, broken here and there with creases of blue land, hillocks of blue shining vegetation jutted out in sparse and wild formations, waving in the wind.

The boy stumbled on, not as much from the first inclination of walking toward the light as the habit

formed from forcing one foot to follow the other's lead again and again.

The more his feet brought him forward, the more he noticed a slight incline surrounding his footsteps, as if his walking was causing ruts in the ground ahead of his own feet that trailed off before him in an ever deeper ravine, though he felt even now to be climbing up rather than down.

Hills became mountains, and mountains became close friends, pressing to the right and left, their size growing with each step, filling the boy with a kind of sickness. He didn't understand, but the mountains pushed ever higher as he walked, until he was left between them in a narrow gap, his only sight now mountains and mountains and mountains.

And further on he stepped.

He breathed in heavily, noticing with dread the depth, the height, the monumental nature of the mountains. Their size poured over him the realization that he was small but strangely one of them (of the same material, though insignificant in perspective). How could he ever know them all, travel them all, see them all? The more he had traveled, the more they grew, and his mind filled with thoughts and words he'd never heard. His head began to ache. Overwhelmed, he now stood silent and still, the light behind him as it had been for some time, setting below the hills behind his back.

Was it only a trick of his eyes, or was there something haunting the hollows and crags surrounding, a dark shade twisting by, in his periphery as a wild creature stalking prey?

He thought, more in feelings than in clear thoughts, "This stretch will never end. This road seems made for me, but I feel like I can't get where I'm going, and I don't have much hope of traveling beyond or compassing through these great heights. I am small, they are huge. I hear them talk to me in whispers, like mists, and ever changing, whispers of something I already know but can't understand. Among the stones beside this path, fear crouches, gliding along, ready to consume. But I feel that if I can't get through these mountains, I will fail the teacher and the light, I will sleep and not be remembered here in this lonely place, where the mountains speak from height to height, from depth to depth, and where I am all alone. This is my end."

As he thought these dark thoughts, the light was consumed in darkness, and the land became invisible again, as it had been when he first awakened in the dark, the life of that other place back there, now far away. But where was he now? And how could he look back on that other place where darkness was? Was that truly far away? Could he really see in his mind that place with other boys so far away? Was he now like one of *them*, the far seers? As total blackness fell, a rumble began.

THE MOUNTAINS

It came from in front of him, and he sensed that it lapped about like water in a large bowl. Like the water he had drunk from the bowl given by the teacher. But the noise quickly became overwhelming, a flood of sound and fury, rushing on him like an invisible wind, bringing something cool—no ... cold—to his very bones.

And then the cold touched his foot, and he knew that it was what he imagined he had heard. Water was all around, and in a rush it was under and now over him, in the darkness on all sides, and soon he was caught up by it, bobbing about in the rolling catastrophe, crashing with its waves, breaking on its many crests, cold and alone and choking for breath, pushed beneath a swirling, drowning darkness.

Would he die like this among the mountains, beneath the rolling waves? Fear overcame him.

3 ⇨ The Teacher

Wealth and beauty can give only a fleeting and perishable fame, but intellectual excellence is a glorious and everlasting possession.

—*The Politician's Conspiracy*, Ch. 1

 he young man tossed his head as he laughed aloud. Two other men stood beside him, all of them dressed in formal robes, laughing at the insider's joke. What makes words so funny that a grown man would lose control and utter a nonsense noise like a baby in response, a voiced aspirant along with a violent head movement and body jerk? What physical explanation could there be for laughter?

And the joke was that very question. The day before, in conversation with their common teacher—the common teacher, whose views of the world were cold and sterile as ice—had asked just this. And now his words were the joke, shared among the young men as a cause of mindless mirth. Here, at the end of their time with the teacher and at this place that had been set aside by society for learning and becoming, they found themselves

not wanting to leave or to enter the world outside their hallowed gates. They would soon be gone, and would be surrounded by all of the problems that come along with the complicated world beyond.

So they laughed to relieve stress, and they laughed to fill the air with something other than fear of what was coming and regret that they couldn't stay here in the thin air of conversation, but would soon be responsible for what would be. They were to be the far seers. Or at least they would be soon, when the teacher placed the colored cloaks on their backs, each one with different hued stripes on the sleeves, signifying their single profession. Another would be a songmaker, one an elas, one a high ruler, one a guardian, and here, these three would soon be social givers, the givers of society. They would provide civilization, and before that, society to the people. They were the bringers of interaction and movement toward others. A tall task, but a great one, and a ready start to a life headed for the goal of world-makers, which was what each of the three truly wanted, but could not express among themselves for fear of being thought vain or conceited.



As it turned out, the day ended as it had begun—with a joke. Or so the young men thought. One of the three, the taller darker one, was almost completely black in his complexion, wide nosed with strong lean muscles

and short ringlets of black hair on his head. He had been singled out for a flight in the clouds that night as a foretaste of new life. Their teacher had given him this humiliating little task: take a circle, and above the clouds, peer on the land between the two skies. Look at it. When he was done looking over the barren stretch furthest from the state, he was to return with his estimation of what he saw.

“What good could possibly come from a trip to nowhere?” the young man thought. “Why send a social giver to the barren places where no life exists?” But in obedience he stood on the light-hued sapphire circle and became “one who stands by the stars,” an official designation for a scout, and a low duty, as far as the young man was concerned. The true grey cloak of a social giver would be his soon, but first this silent trip to the edge of all, for what reason he knew not, for now he wore the light grey cloak of a student. A confused, but obedient student.



The young man cast his eyes from the height of the air above, the blue of the circle beneath his feet matching the sky above. But his eyes were fixed below. The barren landscape glimmered in the distance. It seemed there was nothing below but patches of wild blue vegetation. The longer he gazed, the more convinced he became that this duty of his was a mere joke by his teacher, or

perhaps some rite of initiation. And in the latter, he was correct.

All students were sent to seek at the edges of the known before the start of their careers. If they could be what they would be, they could be it there in the lone and wild places, and they would appreciate later the day they had spent experiencing “the end,” which was what the edges were called. How fitting that the end of their training was marked by an experience of “the end.” And students were not told about this experience beforehand by any soul, each previous student sworn to silence regarding their voyage, so that though this rite profoundly affected society, it was yet never truly part of it.

The boredom of the student consumed him from his perch. In the depths of his mind he heard a voice. It was his own, mumbling: “There’s something down there.” Hearing his own voice surprised him, but it was indeed him that had just spoken. He looked and saw a small ring of stones on the land beneath his circle, in the distance the size of tiny seeds, uneven in their scattering, yet strangely artifactual. As if some being had placed the small boulders for an unknown purpose, like a single word scratched in sand, no context and lost to time.

The man turned the outstretched palm of his hand toward his face, and was there in an instant, in the midst

of the silent boulders, only the light wind whistling about the barren plain.

Nothing. Nothing but rock and earth. Nothing here to do for a giver of society.

So he sat between the boulders and thought.

Soon he was chilled by the oncoming night air, and lit a fire between the boulders. As he gathered dry shrubs, he thought of how his teacher would have counted the stones and recorded the fact. Every fact about the world here. But he would not. The number was not important, nor were there any other "facts" of import here on the edge. To the student, knowledge of "the end" was not to be numbered. So instead he sat by the fire and thought.

He thought about his family in past years, his schooling, his life abroad for two years where he had met ... then his mind wandered to the future, the life he would have, the things he might say on completion of this experience and the start of his career, his friends and how they would live and work, and how he would use his training to ... and how he had such a strange feeling as he walked among the boulders on the edge, this strange place where thought came on like a mist.

He awoke in blackest night, only to find that he had dozed by the fire, and now lay in darkness, the blaze dying. His sight filled only with the small glow of embers. And a strange smell, sweet like an orchard in spring.

And then a face peered close to his own from the darkness, the face of a wondering child, saying in a little voice "Who are you?"

The man startled and spoke what he had been taught so many times to say when asked such a question as a social giver: "I am the teacher. I am here to help you to become."

Now it was time for the face of the child to be surprised. And now, at the sound of their two voices, many more faces appeared near the teacher, for that was what he had become. A question answered with honesty and with those words, and a teacher was born. And so he was.

The teacher stood, and only then realized how small those little beings were. Their faces suggested children, all boys, of around nine years of age. But their size was unusually small, half that of normal children their age. And their skin was smooth and sheen. Their only covering was leggings and grey cloaks wrapped around their bodies, akin to the cloak of a teacher, but quite smaller, and speckled with something shining like quartz in the firelight.

After a pause, the teacher spoke again: "I am here to help you. Can you tell me who you are?"

One boy in the front spoke for the rest. "We are here by the fire to learn." All the other boys repeated the phrase in whispers.

The teacher, still frightened by their sudden appearance at night at the barren edge, spoke slowly. "Then let me tell you what is, and what will be." And then he smiled as he told in brief and simple words about where he had come from, where he was going, and what he was doing there. Then he paused and asked, "What is your story?"

Another boy spoke, this time from the back of the small group: "We opened our eyes. We heard you speak in the night while you lay on the ground, and we saw the fire. Then we spoke to you, and you became our teacher. That is the story."

"What about before?"

"Before what?" another boy asked.

"Before I came, before I slept here and you heard me speak in my sleep, before I woke up and spoke and told you my story."

The boys spoke together: "There was no before." One boy from the back reiterated, "There was no before you came. There was no before."

"Then where did you come from?" and then the teacher realized, chills on his skin, that the boulders were missing. This fact had escaped his conscious notice since awakening, though something behind the curtain of his mind had noticed immediately and had been reaching out to be perceived by his here-and-now mind. Now he saw it.

Were the boys the boulders, rocks of the earth?

He had heard tales like this, but never as true stories. "The end" was the edge of knowledge. Maybe the stories began there, but such stories failed to count as knowledge if they arose from the edge, for who could verify them? Now he saw and heard for himself. But why no memories? If the boys had come from stones, why had they not remembered their former selves? Or that life before they were boulders? Had they not been wakened before?

The teacher sat down again, overwhelmed with questions. The boys followed his example, sitting around him in the firelight.

After minutes of silence, the teacher spoke quietly and slowly: "How did you learn to speak?"

"We learned from the teacher."

"But you ... I heard you say things I never said. Where did those words come from?"

One boy responded, "We heard them when you lay on the ground with your eyes ... empty," apparently not having the word for closed. They had heard him talking in his sleep, and had learned his language from short exposure to his words.

These boys, though without memories past his own experience of the day seemed able to master thought and language at an uncommon pace. This made the teacher wary. If he were to make bare how his own mind and society worked, he might forever alter the course of their

becoming. Givers of society were to give socialization, not being. He was out of his depths. How could one hope to create society from what was not? If he was not careful, they might merely mirror him and never grow to become on their own. Then again, given their fast learning, and the fact that they did not merely mirror his thoughts or speech, but seemed capable of creative thought and discovery, perhaps they would grow up and away from his own society.

Lost in thought, the light began to bloom at the edge of the dark plain, which looked different now to the teacher as he sat with his back to the fire. Instead of barren and lonely, the plain now felt cold and full of expectation. The light rose, and with it, the question: "Do these boys have hearts and souls?" At that, his mind felt like it had awakened for the first time. Warmth flooded his body. He had never even asked this question of his own self before—what did it mean to have a heart and soul?

And then he was alone.

The boulders returned; the boys were no more. Only he and the fire were present in that lonely place at the edge.

Had this been an apparition? A dream? A delusion? Had the stress of learning for so many years pushed his mind to create these creatures? Imagined beings of an underworld of consciousness?

He sat where he was throughout the day, still in thought. Hunger and thirst did not touch him, only worry. What could he do now? Who would understand or believe? What would he say to the boys when they awoke that night? Would he stay to see them, entrenched in this insanity, or deny the experience and go about his life sane, as if they had never shown themselves? Sane or insane, how could he forget these children of the plain? Still, he sat and thought, staring at the blue land before him, unblinking, deep in his own mind.

And then the night came on. He sat by a new fire and waited in vain. No boys, only silence and boulders now.

For four days he waited and thought, every night as lonely as the last. No sign of life or intelligence. He would starve and die of thirst if he did not leave now. So he left, looking again at his palm, transported then to the circle in the sky, leaving the edge. He pushed his thoughts to the back of his mind. This would not come to the fore again—he would live without conscious memory of the experience. When he returned to civilization, he had very few words about his time, his two friends laughed off his silence, and without discussing the time on the edge, all three moved to separate lives abroad, taking on their respective duties in the world. Time would erase this past; only a strange and nagging feeling would remain.

4 ⇨ The Second Day

All excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.

—*The Pan-Ethicist*, Pt. 5

illingly erased from his present thoughts, the teacher's experience at the edge nevertheless continued to influence his work well into his later years. He married his love and they had an even two children, one boy that took after him in all respects other than his looks (he had his mother's beautiful face and his maternal grandfather's strong arms and hands), and one daughter, who looked like the teacher, but with the beauty of her mother, though few physical traits were shared in common with her. Both children were simple and brilliant, as their parents before them.

Moving to a new position and cultural circumstances every several years for his career caused the family to cohere closely, to weave together one another's peculiarities. The father talked aloud mumbling when deep in thought, the mother was taken to creating beautiful artifacts, many of which touched the soul of the

teacher, for a moment reminding him of a lost feeling, an experience behind his mind. Her art became more and more storied as the years passed, her craft began to feature themes of loss, of children, fire and light on shining faces. The son was a prodigy with all music and sound, and the daughter gave herself to stories of all kinds, true and false and fantastic.

But too soon the son, then the daughter, were taken from home to go off to learn with a common teacher, and the husband and wife were alone again with their love and friendship. His work consumed him, her love of creating occupied her mind and heart, and the days went on.

When it was time to leave the world, the wife looked at the teacher with familiar eyes. The son and daughter, now old themselves, looked on, while the teacher sat beside his wife. Her last words were "Tell me a story," at which the daughter stepped forward to speak, but the mother motioned for her to stop and for the father to speak.

"I don't have a story," but then he understood. With all of her creative activity, she had begun to recognize in her husband something strange that came out only in bits of words in his sleep, lines of a story that seemed to revolve around some other world, some magical happenstance, something that was like what *she* would create, not him. Something that was true, even though unbelievable.

And with that, the teacher told her and his children the story of the boys at the end, and as he told the story, his eyes grew wider and more youthful, while the eyes of his wife grew dim and tired.

As she breathed her last, a look of comfort on her still face, he spoke of that first sunrise when he sat by the boys, and as she passed, his hand grew warmer and something strange filled his heart. A tingle shot through his body and his eyes glowed blue, where before had been the darkest brown. His life was over, but his new life had begun again. He said goodbye to his wife, kissed her with a tear and a broken heart and turned to comfort his children. But they no longer recognized their father, he was so changed in that moment. They stood back from him as if in a trance, terror in their fear-filled eyes, mouths agape. He lowered his head and walked from the room distraught and un comforted, filled with despair.

The teacher became the hermit. He lived in the hills beneath the mountains far from life, from society. His mind was black as night, and the frost touched his hair and chin, transforming him into a wreck of a man, a wild thing from the hills, but the sun held him in trance from day to day, his eyes following its journey, burning its fire inside of him. In the night, only the darkness of sleep.

The story of his children does not end here. The son began a career of sounds in lights, composing and

being composed by his songs, strange lonely melodies with harmonies of life and vigor. Hearts moved to hear the sounds, like spells, falling on ears open to hearts.

The daughter wrote. Her stories became the empire of tragedy, the solace of bards, the mover and inspiration of a thousand other minds, other writers, filled with hope and vision from her simple clear stories. But none were clear as his, the teacher's, which she reset to music, with her brother, and this held ears and thoughts captive to hear the fairy tale of "The Children of the End."

And generations went on. All were dead and laid in the dust, grass growing above what once moved minds and hearts. And from the grave, the children's song and tale became a mother's goodnight story, a simple tale about a man who visited the end to find boys of stone who woke him from sleep. And in and out of near on a thousand years came and went, the sun still shone and stars still twinkled the tale.

Until a very young boy heard the story one night in bed, and it moved him to become a giver of society. And that was how he found himself one day, the last of his training, on a circle at the edge. And what he saw there was to become part of this story.



The second day of the boys' awakening was much like the first. From the sky, the new teacher spied their presence, looked to his palm, and sat among them.

Lighting a flame, and warming himself by night, he thought of his past, his present, his future, and fell to sleep. Awakened in the still of darkness, he found himself surrounded by grey-clad boys, confused and wondering, and he explained the world to them.

They heard his words with rapt attention, and in the morning ceased to be again, leaving only solid rock behind in their places. But the new teacher understood, as he groped through the memories of a mostly-forgotten story from his youth. He knew that for a thousand more years they might sleep, if not awakened by a teacher.

Going back to civilization, he decided to break the unspoken code of the student and speak of the experience with others. This opened a door that could not be shut. Every giver of society then living was now a fountain of knowledge of their own similar experiences, which they had nearly forgotten or had set aside as unmentionable. But now the words were free, and each came to conference with every other at the Great Meeting, to share their stories of the end. And one among them was unlooked for, impossible to stand among them. A bearded hermit of the forest, still wet with dew, walked slowly and spoke with a voice as old as the hills.

5 ⇨ The Great Meeting

Many words are no proof of an understanding heart. Seek one sole wisdom. Choose one sole good.

—*The First Philosopher*

 was there,” said the old man. “My story is this....” And he spoke a simple story all had heard inklings of since childhood, but he spoke so matter-of-fact and with such common language, the crowded experts gave way to their surprise with open gasps and blank stares.

His words every soul had memorized while he spoke, so that by his conclusion, every mind present felt he had heard this story, in this way, a great many times over, like the crashing of the ocean tide. When at last he stood silent, his tale all told, their ears were thirsty still.

To fill the long void, one small plain-spoken man asked: “Where have you been for all this time, and how did you live so long?”

They believed him, every one, that he was in fact the same teacher, the one who woke up the boys at

the end. They believed because they recognized him in their thoughts from childhood.

“When I awoke that first morning, I was different and when my wife died years later, near what I thought would be the end of my own life also, something occurred inside of me that made my soul ... enliven my body. And that’s how I stand here. My mind has been black and healing for a long while, yet now it’s white with light.” He turned to the young teacher, and said: “Thank you for giving us our voices, for freeing our pasts so that we could see to the future.” And with that, the old man sat down.

Now it was time for the young men to speak. No man now knows who spoke which words recorded here, but if we listen closely, we may hear the future in their voices:

“We should go back to the end. To those boys.”

“Those are not just boys.”

“What stops us from going there now?”

“You are not their teacher, nor am I.”

“It doesn’t matter—the boys don’t seem to have a mind for the past. Any of us, or none of us, could be their teacher, and it would make no difference.”

“Yes, but it is the teacher and that which is taught that helps to determine their progress if there is to be any.”

“Why are we talking on about these boys at the end? There are other societies to build from our own

experiences, the sight of the moon in the unceasing waters of the end, for instance.”

“What can we help but talk about these boys ... they are the beginning.”

“At the end everything is the beginning.”

“Will we someday hear their voices among us so that we can have this life, the long life of the teacher, as well?”

“I don’t want long life, but knowledge of what these boys are, what they are doing there, and what we may make of their future.”

“What they make of their own future.”

“They have no future if they remain at the end, and only ever at the end.”

“How can we give them light if they lose the light they have every passing day? Even if we were to bring them here to train them ourselves today, it would make no difference.”

“Why do they become stone?”

“Why are we meeting—only to ask questions, or to propose answers, and then try something ourselves?”

“We could ... we should work to create a plan for teaching these boys. We can’t leave them in their ignorance.”

“What does the older teacher, or his son, I mean his son in action, propose? They are the teachers after all.”

All were silent.

The older teacher spoke softly as he rose: "I will wait until the moment when there is no more time, and then I might go, but only as the last resort. My ways are old, and my time spent. Someone else may try now, and only if they fail will I try later." He left the meeting, not to be seen again by any man present in that day.

As he walked past the younger teacher on his exit, his hand touched the shoulder of the younger, and squeezed. This gesture brought an avalanche of thoughts to the mind of the younger teacher, ways to reach these boys, to change the world of the end. The vision of the end, the way the end would begin a new story and how ... how he would "meddle with the affairs of heaven and earth," as his teacher in school used to say, until at last the time would come for awakening the boys to connect them with their past, allowing a present, and pushing them to make their own future.

"Why for just a few boys?" He spoke slowly to the group, who whispered as the older teacher left them. They calmed, and he spoke again. "For only one I would go, though that is against our tradition and training." He now unfolded his vast plan to them.

He would go to the boys again, when the time came, and he, and they all, would go back to every experience they had at the end, and they would awaken these experiences and bring them into society, one by one, until each saw the light of life.

“They will no longer be alone on that far barren land. And they will teach us, their teachers.”

Each in turn brought the story of their own experiences to the group, and each discussed how they might approach it, how society might grow there and in that place. Life and much else besides was scattered across the face of the end, and they would reach out to those others. And so began the great venture, or adventure, the result of open talk and free society.

Year after year they practiced their plans, awakening life here, birds in the wild, starlight on a distant shore, a grass and a fern, an ocean bottom, a soft breath of wind. But they knew they must wait for the boys of the older and younger teacher. Time after time the end came to life, and year after year they pushed the frontiers of knowledge forward.

There were setbacks, of course, or more truly *failures*. What they hoped did not always come to fruition, what they attempted did not always succeed. But ever they learned, and on and on it went for centuries. These members, after time and time, passed away, but their plans worked on.

The younger teacher still breathed and worked on this great strategy, to awaken the worlds on the edge of knowledge. Apparently something of the older teacher's vigor and life had come to him, his days extended far past credulity. In time, no one spoke his given name,

instead calling him by the “younger teacher,” in spite of his old age, and in reverence of the older.

He carried on their scheme to the thousandth year, when he came to the boys again and taught them what had been taught to the others and more.

But they slept in the morning, another thousand years passed, and he was busy throughout with the work—awakenings of all kinds—the worlds changed with the time and the transformations lay in the making.

A fourth and fifth and sixth visit was made, now five thousand years had been spent at his new scheme. And then he slept—the younger teacher passed from the world of life, his time here spent. Another thousand years went and the silence at the end grew. This was now again the edge of knowledge. How strange it is that what is known becomes unknown at the parting of a teacher. A great loss for society.

And at the close of this last millennium, the older teacher found himself again at the meeting place, where a forest had grown up and died, and burned and grown again a dozen times over. The land had pushed up and down around the place, and only few flagstones remained.

In the middle of the area were words engraved thickly on a shield-like circle set in the ground that read: “Here the teachers sought to birth new worlds, to give society, to let the light awaken a thousand souls.”

He stood, his frail old body crooked with time, thinking about the inscription. Beneath was written a memorial: “Dedicated to the memory of the teachers, old and new.”

He turned the palm of his hand to his face, and in an instant he was there at the circle in the sky, well on seven thousand years had passed, and this, he feared, was his last hope.

He looked again at his palm, and he was among the dark stones. Building a fire, he slept, and dreamed, and waited. Shortly, the boys awoke, and he performed his last duty—he taught them. For them, it was the first time hearing his splendid words. For him, he knew it might be their last. His plan was simple: tell the boys about his own world, feed them, help them to make food, and thus awaken in them the ongoing world of living. But something strange happened, and one of the small boys had within him a word, an idea he had not heard from the teacher. Success came unlooked for, and at the end of failure.

The teachers, in their great world-awakening project, had planned and schemed and worked, and yet what they had not planned was this. They thought they could awaken the boys and bring them society through teaching, but it was one small boy’s fragile memory that caused a break with the past. Something had harbored itself in his ... soul? Was it a soul the boy possessed? Was it the soul that brought success?

6 ➤ The Forest of Memories

The garden of letters the wise will plant for pleasure, and will write, when he writes, to treasure up reminders for himself, when he comes into his forgetfulness, and for others who follow the same path, and he will be pleased when he sees them putting forth tender leaves.

—*The Questioner on Writing*, 276d



o, not dead, but drowning. The boy was under water between the mountains. Beneath the wave that pushed him under, a black cloud above, the good boy saw a sight that lit his heart—from the inky darkness above he saw a star, alone a light of fire shining, blinking through the washing flood, turning his heart to flame. This vision from beneath the waters restored his will to move, to live, to search and be in the light. Was that what kept him moving?

And he kicked his feet, he struggled, and he broke through the wave, gave breath, and pushed with his muscles against the water, his strength low from his long path, but heart high with hope. And his hope conquered the fear that washed over and around him,

it kept him afloat in the rush of wildness, it moved him forward in spite of the flood. And then his foot hit something solid beneath, and he stood.

He pushed out of the flood and survived on the banks of this great flash-river, the torrent likely the result of a wild storm up beyond, engulfing the stones in their safe places, and wearing down bit by bit their mighty fortresses, the peaks above the washing flow.

Settled now on the side of the flood as it passed beside, he saw the reflection of the light above on his wet skin, and he remembered something from the night of the teacher, the night of his awakening.

The boy had left the light of the fire, the teacher, the other boys. Leaving for a time, he wandered to a small outcropping of vegetation; alone he had climbed some half-living tree of sorts, and looked out over the night land, the plain of his beginnings. In one direction were mountains, like a crumpled robe lying on the far edge of the land, in another mere flatness as far as the sky stretched, and near to him on the other was a shining moving thing, flat and sparkling in the light of night. And he saw a great light of the night, as in a mirror, in the dark below as it was above, and far away, but repeated with motion, infinitely sparkling on the face of that darker surface below. What was it? And what filled him with fear to look at the dark moving mirror?

The boy, now sitting beside the rushing water of the mountains, saw with his eyes in that water the same

sight. The sight of fear he had felt before. But now it was something of his own experience, and he could hold it close to him; he seemed to know it, and found comfort in knowing that the light of the sky that shone above had given him hope to escape that great flood.

Up to his feet again, he searched his eyes over the dark shadows of mountains around him, unsure of what to do, where to go, other than straight forward, to the place where he knew the sun would rise again. So he walked on in the night.

The river became a stream, the stream a fast rushing rivulet, and soon a soggy nothing, all the while the air becoming thinner with the increase in elevation, leaving the boy confused with why he often felt he could not breathe.

As the night wore on, the boy's past slipped from his memories as new words filtered through his mind, great stories of a forgotten world, others strong words pushing hearts to action, still others conversations of the real, dialogue that sought the true. His brain, like his feet, was nearly numb, but on he walked, and with the end of the darkness, and the dawning of the light, he exited the pass, on a downward slant and away from the great sea he had seen his first day, which lay in the distance now beyond the land beneath and before him, a land covered with dark green and grey-brown tree-like structures, clustered close around the foot of this pass.

The boy walked carefully down the gravel of the pass, sliding down at steep points, and descended into the small valley of a forest. As he neared the line of trees, he heard a light whisper in the breeze, words carried from below. The nearer he came, the louder the whispers, until he stepped into the midst of the first of the towering trees, and was soon surrounded by green and grey-brown in all directions; the noise was intermittent, haunting his steps, echoes in the silence.

The light shone much less here, though he knew it still shone bright above the leafy tops and on the peaks behind. As he walked through the trees, the whispers became an almost silent and constant low-rumbling thunder, and a hush. He didn't understand the import of that place, but he traveled on, feeling hungry.

His curiosity was greater than his hunger, and he approached the bole of a single tall tree, and listened intently, to discover, if he could, the secret of the wood. He knelt on the ground beside the great tree, and placed his ear on its rough and hard skin. What he heard, he immediately knew was both a memory of the forest and of something beyond it, whispered in the breeze—he felt he recognized this story as if he were part of it, as if it were his own. So he listened in full. And when the sound subsided, it and all the other gentle sounds around him grew silent.

The story of the teacher was the memory of the forest, the words heard by the boy that day told him

of the social giver and his life afar, his own first and last day on the plain—the plain of that world beyond.

The boy sat back and wondered aloud, “What? What am I? What are the boys? Why did the teachers come? Why did they care?” He thought to himself, “And why do I keep walking? Where am I going? Why do I still want to go?”

7 ⇨ The Mountain of Forgetfulness

But when the soul inquires alone by itself, it departs into the realm of the pure, the everlasting, the immortal and the changeless, and being akin to these it dwells always with them whenever it is by itself and is not hindered, and it has rest from its wanderings and remains always the same and unchanging with the changeless, since it is in communion therewith. And this state of the soul is called wisdom.

—*The Questioner's Death*, 79d

 he boy walked through the now-silent forest, wandering over roots and paths of light brought through the thick canopy over his head. At last, he stepped out from the far edge of the wood in the midday light, which struck him from above with heavy heat. He could see the sea before him now again and to his left, and a golden path was beneath his feet, a yellow sand merely the width of his own slender shoulders.

A path of golden yellow led down towards a sharp black cliff of rock, and off before him and slightly to the right.

The waters of the sea he spied now crashed against themselves in waves of blue and grey fury lightly set with reflections of the green of high surrounding hills and the black cliffs, which held a turf of bright blowing grass. So he walked the path before his feet, as the green grass danced around him.

The boy had no thoughts about his destination, nor did he wonder who had laid the golden track before him, but it zig-zagged up and toward a misted mountain, lost in the sky before him. He knew the direction was true, and felt an urge to climb the mountain—that height felt as if it were placed there just for him.

As he climbed the path, his mind filled with the story of the forest. He glanced to his left, toward the sea, and briefly forgot the events of his past as he looked on the face of the deep and boiling waters which began some distance from where he now walked. Fear called to him, but he traveled on.

As he climbed the summit of that far hill in the sky, his sight failed and all seemed to fade: the waters, the path, the mountain itself, the memory of the forest, mountains of rain and fury and the lonely plain where the teacher had awakened him and the other boys. And all was gone now, no trace of memory of these things remained, as the night sky began to come on, and the

light now set behind him in the far mountains beyond the forest and the black cliffs.

Nothing remained for the boy in his mind, but a single thought: "Good."

Places and people always fade when left behind, as if engrossing death occurs as we move on. But we know within, with some comfort, the former places remain without, that the people go on, that the life remains beyond our feeling its close presence. The past resides in the present, even if no longer our present. Life exists outside of our perception. And so, with the boy, though the memories were gone, they yet lived on beyond his perception, the darkness of oncoming night notwithstanding. He fell to the ground on his back at the top of his faded mountain in the sky.

But the teacher saw him, saw him and brought to mind, from his circle still above, the day the trees were first awakened beneath the pass in times of past, and he knew the plight of the boy, the errors of that faded mountain, the silence of that lost mind. The boy did not remember now, though he had a friend who did, and who would in hope give him a gift, a gift of his own past, though he worried now for the boy's present. And from his perch the teacher's own mind touched the world, his thoughts became the stuff of earth and sky and sea. He chose to move, to change the world, as darkness descended.

The boy came to lay there on his back on the summit of the mountain, his head turned up. He lay there as the sky turned to fire at the approach of night, clear eyed and only "good" in his mind.

What does a person think of with only good in mind? Without words, memories or non-present concepts and experiences? Good, without past or future. And without bad.

Light. Light all around, now fading. Though the boy did not speak, or hear his mind speak, he saw light, and it was good. He saw that there was light above, and there was not-light below, and it was passing, and he saw that they were two. The eyes were drawn to the light.

And there above was sky. A sky above and earth below. This was here, and there, above, was there, a vast color life-like thing, still and vibrant all at once; mixed hues the earth, a solid joyous thing; the sky a silent slowly changing serene. Orange and grey and blue, and beyond, a fiery glow, it set the sea below ablaze with light. And there, where the sea met the mountain, that glass of mirror, that moving writhing calling mass and ever-changing churning power, and the shore it met distraught with wreckage. It wrecked itself, in caps of silver white with blue. The crash, the crashes on solid unmoved, yet worn where the two met. A violent ever-moving patience, power against the strength of the solid. The rising slope, the singing

cliffs, the still-born solid, above and beyond the reach of the constant pulse. Good was here.

And here, close beside him, he saw a growing thing, a sturdy upright leafy thing. And beyond were more of its kind, all alike waving and turning. This was the good and the beautiful.

And on the leaves he saw reflected the setting light, a sun beyond the mountain, a light that flashed the eye, that burned to look directly at, yet warmed to feel and filled the sky above and earth below with streams of golden brightness. That sky-bound visitor, moving down and marking all around with its own hue, marked time as shadow on the ground. Not a moment, but moments.

Moments of good.

And on the edge of the darkening sea rose life from below, peaking above the crash, life beneath the wave, beneath the liquid moving mass. The boy wondered how much more there was of life beneath, when a call was heard above and there on the breeze floated a life, a moving thing with its own not-just-worldly self, wheeling and calling to others far off, from high above, a speck in the sky calling to the earth: the richness of life.

And that was good.

The boy watched this sight, in his high mountain, now crouching, sitting on the uppermost stones of the hill. And down and off to his right was a thing appearing with legs that moved on land, like the creatures of

the sky and sea in their places, and he in his crept slowly on, terrible in size, red covered over, long tail waving, horned head now turning right to left, motion given to will, will to life. This was good.

The boy saw, but did not understand. He raised his hand, and realized he had a hand. And here was something very good, a hand, a foot, his own, he looked at himself in awe and wondered, "What am I, and who?" though not with words, for he had none but "good". He was something moving, living. He noticed his breath, his stomach turned, his tiny movements in tongue, fingers, toes and eyes. Yes, good. And he thought, what was thought and how did he come to have it?

What was he like? Was he a mirror like the sea below the sky?

He sat transfixed, as if in dream, beneath the canopy of the mists above, till dusk was set, and on the stone he lay his head, looking up again, full of thought, as stars began to show their peering light.

He lay through the night, staring up into the expanse, good still swirling in his head. One by one the stars all sang their song of light, and he slept, with a thought on the edge of his mind that beyond these thoughts, and beyond these things, there was good, something that made and makes them so.

8 ⇨ Far Beneath

*For to fear death is nothing else than to think
one is wise when one is not; for it is thinking
one knows what one does not know.*

—*The Questioner's Defense*, 29a

This new day brought memories, crushing in on him, of the day previous. Small soft lights had dawned inside his mind that had awakened new memories, scattered memories of a journey, up a mountain, this mountain, and before that along a path by a moving sea, and through a strange forest, a mountain passage, a barren land, a circle with burning light in the midst, a face, faces, smiles, other beings like himself, far away.

Was this his life, were these his memories? Yes, he remembered himself in them. And then he remembered the words of the grey teacher, the beginning of his journey. And along with these words came back language, his thoughts flooded with words, signs of things beyond themselves, beyond his memory, beyond his experience.

"The far seers" came to mind as he looked out across the foot of the mountain, which dipped itself into the churning sea beside its feet. He slowly walked down the side of the height to the strand of the dark shore. As he did, zig-zagging his way down, at times on all four, the teacher came back to mind. The teacher, his face, his voice, his words, and then, inexplicably, his memories. The teacher's memories. As if the boy himself were the teacher, he saw boys around him, awakened for the first time. The teacher's memories, though not clear, were life-like, pale light glowing. He flashed in his mind to a memory of a world with many beings, a peaceful, purposeful world. A world of order from the midst of chaos. He heard a voice, an inner voice, the voice of the teacher, as if in an enclosed hollow, encircled by other beings:

"In any system, including that of society as a whole, there is bound to be birth, life, death, with chaos increasing, killing the whole. But this, our world, is not a closed system. It is open to the new from without."

"What new?" someone said from a distance.

The teacher continued, focused, "And if the new from without is for the good of the system (in our case, the society at large), it brings renewed life, renewed courage, renewed patience, renewed rule, renewed love. And often with it new life, a new society, not merely from the ashes of the old, but from its center, the center of its life, its love, the fruit of its societizing."

And with that, clapping sounds burst from the darkness around him.

And the clapping was matched by the washing of waves as the boy was startled to find himself on the edge of the beach, the incoming waves sounding before and around him, wetting his feet now and again.

Still he walked on, direct to the water, and then in, and then under the pushing waves, and he continued walking on and out. What pushed him, what kept him going here, against his own fear? He struggled as if to stop, but his feet moved on, into the darkness below until even his head was beneath the crashing blue and grey, and the birds called from above, but there was no answer from below, no boy to hear their sounds.

At this, the teacher from above, looking down on the confused scene, glanced worriedly at his own palm and was communicated to the surface below in an instant, the dark shore now at his feet. He looked at the sea in despair. "Have I lost him?" He fell, distraught, to sit upon a crag of outcropping, black rock by the shore, his eyes entranced by the tossing sea. Nothing. No boy. A failure? Could he still find the body of the boy beneath? Could he be brought back? What was this boy made of, and why had he not swam? And what had caused this strangeness in his actions?



The boy beneath the waves found that he needed no air. He walked beneath the sea, beside the life beneath its surface, sparkles glared above. On and out he strode below.

Until his feet fell, some many steps from the shore, on a blank space, a seeming hole into oblivion, and he fell, his whole body, off the ledge of the sea floor and tumbled over and over himself into inky blackness beneath. As the black overwhelmed his vision, he hit the new deep floor softly, crumpled in the dark. Picking himself up lightly, he looked for light, but seeing none, felt with his hands.

All around was darkness, solid beneath his feet, and hard to one side of him, but open and cold beside. So he stretched out to walk in the direction of the openness, gradually going lower, colder, darker.

On he stepped, at times forced to walk around obstructions on the surface here and there, or to climb down into crevasses and out again, always moving away from the shore and into greater depths. Days on days he walked, his body accustoming itself to the constant cold, the pressure, his eye no longer open, but shut tight, tiring in the attempt to see light in that ink.

He dared not lay down to rest, for fear he would not be able to wake again, lost beneath the sea. So he walked, still confident in something beyond himself, the movement of the liquid across his skin and his clothing his only sense of the outer world, along with

the rush of his feet and the hard floor beneath. On he slowly stepped for fifty days. And those fifty days of darkness were longer and still shorter than any he had yet had, filled as they were with only the rush of water, and the now familiar dark and cold and hard and the open blank before him.

At the end of these days, he slowly realized he could again see some kind of diffuse light before him, the change so subtle it escaped his notice. His pace quickened, ever downward. The muffled sound of crashing, like an enormous shore, was in front and above him now, growing with his steps. He slowed somewhat, wondering what strangeness approached.

Suddenly, another memory met his mind. Not his own memory, but perhaps the teacher's?

He could hear a reader from somewhere in front of him, in hushed monotone, saying aloud words from something inscribed in front of him.

"The givers of society arise outside of and before society. They are 'born away' and bring to start society anew, once in every generation. They are the colonizers and givers of communication, language, the currency of things, the beginners of the traffic of weal."

Was this some sort of lesson, a script from the teacher's world?

"The 'elos,' the being, are the harborers of civilization, the carers for tradition, the everyman who yet scouts the way for every other through living."

Was this how things were organized among the far ones?

“The songmakers are the visioners, who through under-thought see below the surface of the real, and inspire life, beauty and happiness as gifts for society, and are givers of joy, of sadness, of life.”

Songmakers had such a sound to the word, it made the boy’s heart ache, though he had never heard a song before.

“The guardians are the watchers of the outside, the protectors from harm, they are outside of contact with the core of society itself, the elos, though from the elos are drawn the guardians, from the brave and the long-looking. The guardians face outward so that the society may prosper. All elos are guardians once in their lives in the time of their bravery, and in the time of their far seeing.”

The boy felt these words were somehow sacred.

“The high ones of a society are above and are not chosen or born as high, nor given their position (for there is no position, as such). It is the telling into being of the role of an elas that makes a high one.”

Here, like a strike of darkness after lightning, the recitation ended, the boy was back at the ocean floor, the black of the sea around him now bursting with light and blue, and shifting shadows sideways, above to below. His world beneath the sea had changed its nature seemingly.

And then, his hand, where a never-ending wall of water should have been, grasped no water there—outstretched, he felt the sensation of light wind and mist. His head now, half in half out the sea, peaking beyond, he perceived a wall of air before him where water fell, not as cataracts, but with smooth motion slowly whispering, past the corner of the solid floor beneath his feet. At the corner of the sea, the edge of the world, the boy stood transfixed, lost in thought and wonder, looking at his hand in the empty air.

What was this end of the world, and what had moved him here, what force, what motivation?

Where was he? He began to guess: “When I was on the mountain...” And with that spoken word, an airy breath outside the stream, that clear thought of another place far away, he stood on the mountain, as if never having set out on this underworld path, his clothes soaked as rags hanging on his slender frame. The ocean held no fear for him now, only wonder.

9 ⇨ Waking Up

*I for one do not yet know, but like the wind,
wherever our discussion leads us, that is the
way we must go.*

—*The Questioner's State*, Book 3.394d

omething felt strange in the depths of the boy's chest, a movement on its own from inside him. His brain suddenly filled with fire and light, a throbbing ache and rush of something he could not fathom. With the grass of the mountain at his feet, the shining air above, he turned his head to the golden path that led beside the mountain to the reach of the forest beyond. In the distance, he saw the dark trees shuffling about, bending in a new wind. New clouds became dark and fierce above and a drop now fell on his open face. He cowered his head from the oncoming storm with his cloak, which began to whip about his frail body.

The boy closed his eyes, and at once, a crash was heard, a bolt of light, a cataclysmic static burst around and through the boy. As he stood, his knees buckled,

and his hands touched the wet dirt and rock and grass. He yielded to the black inside, and collapsed.

And with the same vividness with which he had undergone his own destruction, again he saw the sight, from above and beyond.

He was circling his own body as a hawk its prey. The confusion on his face below (was he so small?), the wind on the land, the water drop on his face, followed by a covering of the head as the rain fell in sheets. Barely visible now, he saw himself struck and struck again with white light from above and below, bursting incandescence, the sound of a heavy crash, like an ocean wave of force, overcoming his body down below, he fell to the ground, he could just see now, and his frame lay still in the rain, all the while, he (from above) looked on himself, never thinking how it was that he, at this moment, could be both here and there at once.

As he watched his body fall into darkness, at last he also thought: "How good that I'm here above! But on what do I stand here in the sky? What's keeping me up? Do I fly like ..." and looking at his hands he saw that he was indeed on something, a small clear circle, the size of the trunk of an ancient tree in width, long enough for a man to lay lengthwise twice over. Clear as a thin layer of water, and with a slight blue tint, the circle lacked any feeling of solidity beneath him. He saw that though his knees were on this object, they did not touch it, but hovered very near. And now he

realized he was not alone on this high perch. Beside him, looking down on his other self, was a man, the teacher, peering down on the events of the mountain.

The teacher's eyes were filled with sadness and anger, his hands clenched, his muscles tightened beneath his large grey cloak. And then, with great surprise, he saw the boy beside him, the same boy that had just seconds ago been struck, who had many days ago lost himself in the sea of that world, who for a moment he hoped would still be alive on the mountain, laying in the dark rain below.

"Alive!" the teacher's broken voice let out.

This was the first word the boy had heard for some time, the first word not seeming to come from his own mind. Or was it, the boy wondered, a word he heard in the memory and waking thought of the teacher, a mere pantomime and not the real thing as before? But he could see this person now, and in his previous experiences there was only foggy remembrances from within another mind itself, not an outer vantage point. And now he spoke: "What? Why am I ..." breathless, "Why am I here?"

The teacher looked at him as if he were a wild animal. "How are you here?" The teacher's words imitated his own. Both dumbstruck, they sat and looked at each other, opposite sides of the circle, only the subsiding rain between them, and land and sea far below.

The boy's mind felt clearer than ever, though it seemed empty of reasons. The impossible over and over again. In the light of the teacher's own memories, the boy could clearly see that every bit of his own story was beyond mundane, a vast ocean of impossibility, from the rocks of his birth to his present shivering state high up on the circle with the teacher, and both of them had been witnesses to his own destruction far below just moments in the past.

As is often the case, in the absence of answers or reasons, and in the din of awkward silence, another question came, this one not like the others. The boy's lips opened, his eyes on the teacher, a sound came forward with his thought: "Who are you?"

Suddenly, to the boy the impossibility of his own self paled in the shadow of the colossal question of the person of the teacher, whose name, face, and life he knew, as intimately as did the teacher himself, seemingly through his own memories, yet the boy could see no possibilities for the teacher's presence in this strange land of the boys, where the impossible seemed to reign. The end of an ocean seemed more likely now than an outsider.

"I'm not just a teacher," said the old man. He lowered his head, looking at the body below on the mountain. "I am here to wake you up. I never expected things to go this way." He slowly looked up at the boy now.

"After all this time, am I now awake?"

“Yes. No. Not yet. Can you see clearly into my mind? Look there now.”

And the boy closed his own eyes and saw from the teacher's, but what he saw was not his own body in front of the teacher, but a body that looked dead, all in white, in a narrow white bed of sorts surrounded by white walls and white ceiling with lights peeking out and shining down. Beside the white bed there stood a small stand with a dark screen and lit moving characters of light shone from it. As he looked, he saw that the dead boy before him had a cover like a mask over his entire body, links or ropes or wires attached to it from all directions. Light hushed noises sounded out from all around. The boy now intended to speak, to ask the teacher what this was that he was looking at, when he noticed from the corner of his eyes (within the sight of the teacher) the dark screen light new characters, and he read them:

“What am I looking at?” the screen read.

Shocked, the boy opened his eyes, and he was still on the circle in the midst of the sky, the teacher in grey opposite him.

“What did you see?” asked the teacher.

“I saw what you saw,” the boy said quietly, thinking to himself.

“Did you see the screen through my eyes? Did you see the words on it?”

The boy nodded.

“What did it say?” The teacher asked.

The boy thought, and then spoke: “It said my thoughts, my words ... just another impossibility, like every other thing here.”

“That’s what I thought, until I met you—actually, several of you—all that time ago. But I think this is all too possible. You are not one among many—you’re the only. *You* are possible. I don’t understand you, but you *are*.”

“That’s rubbish.”

“You’ve never heard that word before, and yet you just said it—the impossible.”

“It must be from you.”

“I didn’t tell it to you. You must have heard it in the mountains or in the forest.”

“You must have thought it.”

“Maybe I did once, but not here, not in this ... not here.” The teacher thought to himself now, staring at his hands with intense focus.

“Is that ... is what I just saw ... what you just showed me, is that another place, another here?”

“Yes. It’s where I am.”

“But where am I?”

“Didn’t you see?”

The boy’s nose wrinkled. “I saw a place with a boy, white all around, and words.”

“The boy is you, the body.”

The boy puzzled, squinting his eyes and furrowing his brow. "I'm the boy."

"Yes, you. Well, not actually. The boy was someone else. He died days ago, almost weeks, and I've been given permission by his past guardians to use his brain, his body, for my work."

The boy cut him off: "The boy is dead? Was that what happened to me on the mountain just now? Was that my death?"

"No. It happened long ago in your time, long before you, from what I can tell. Though I can't look into your mind as you look into mine." Here the teacher half-smiled.

The boy looked back at him, serious. "Am I dead?"

"Well, no, of course not. You can see that you communicate. That was you on the screen. Your words are through a machine. But your life is through that body. Mostly through that brain. That boy, the boy you saw in white, the dead boy ... I would tell you our name for him, but it doesn't really matter at the moment ... he's your home. We started you from what was left of his brain—the organ.

"At first we thought we might have brought the boy back to life again, but his body was totally gone, the only bit still working was his brain, and then we thought it might be the case that we had made a breakthrough—intelligence in a mind born in a body. I've studied this all my short life, and never really imagined

it would work this way exactly. We've been working on stimulating the brain to induce perceptions for a long time, and as it came my time to work on this problem, the problem of intelligence, I thought I might use a body for my work, a brain to 'jumpstart' things and see if neural pathways might be more conducive for the experiments." The teacher looked at the boy. "Do you understand me? I know I haven't spoken these words before, but I thought that maybe since you could see into my mind, and since you came on this long journey through the mountains, you might already understand what I was talking about even better than I do."

But the boy was not paying attention. He was in pain, and in darkness, and willing himself to wake up from this dream, to see the real with his own eyes.

Part II

NESTED

1 ⇨ Shocked

There is no need to suppose that human beings differ very much from one another. But those who excel are the ones who have been trained in the hardest school.

—*Historian of Great*, Book 1.84

 bright white room, its occupants a spark named Silen Arcturius, and a small machine. *Spark* was the title given one who is young and recognized as genius. The machine, like the spark, was made of limbs, hands, feet, a torso, a head: the remains of a small boy, a former spark himself, now dead for over two days, his body kept at a steady state through various means, his brain now used, via the Common Neural Interface, as the grounds for a sort of artificial intelligence chamber. His neurons were the pathways, his brain the hardware for a mind. That had been the hope.

Now, at the climax of months of intensive programming, planning, and development, and years of research by Arcturius and his fellow sparks in the wing, it would be moments before anyone would see the output of

this enormous procedure. Enormous not in terms of people or machines involved, but rather its importance for the study of the brain, of artificial intelligence, and of human-computer interaction. Enormous in what it might mean to live and to think.

Originally, AI had been conceived of, by a father of the machines, as a program running in the innards of a computer. Arcturius had reset the boundaries as a human program in the innards of a human brain.

With his startling research on the programmability of the neural pathways of the brain, he had also stumbled on a way to algorithmically replicate the active brain state of a living patient with a false perception (one programmed by himself) through deep pairing of neural excitation across multiple participants.

He had later hypothesized, and then developed a way, to take a newly deceased body and its brain, and to jump-start brain activity electrically, creating a world for his AI program to inhabit using a mashup of the neural processing states of a large number of early living participants, forced imaginative embodied virtual perceptions of presence, and a complex schema-rich array of resources from the archives of the Interface. He hypothesized that a briefly dead body and brain, one that was young enough for repair and prolonged use, would work for his purposes, given that the brain used was optimal and the cause of death was not natural.

The brain of a fellow spark would be ideal, though short-lived—young geniuses commonly ceased living very early, usually from natural causes related to genetic defects.

It was unknown if the program could spark enough to bring the body back as well (this was a very doubtful area, given the complexity of brain-body interaction), though he had already found that with a steady brain state, he might be able to restart each of the body's main systems to keep it running without excessive external aids.

But the subject program had gone black as soon as it was “sparked” inside the now-dead brain. Even given various stimuli, the subject's brain processing gave no signs of being able to start (or continue) its own processes, other than those required to reboot several necessary physical limbic processes providing oxygenation and circulation. A steady state showed that the machine, the body/interface integration, was working as per design, but no unique brain activity was apparent.

Arcturius looked down at the neural signs on the live readout in his hand. He had lost track of time staring at these readings, and now he looked up at the machine, a new thought in his head.

The room itself provided access for two separate subjects connected with the Common Neural Interface,

and these were connected to each other through nodes, and to a number of other identical rooms in the near vicinity of the research wing. There was a chance that another participant might be able to wake up the subject in the machine through human interaction. So now it would be human perceptions and consciousness, a human brain, and human interaction. This might break the machine, the program, or the participant, but it also might be enough to spark life in the brain lying near him. There was potential risk here, but it was necessary risk.

Arcturius needed results, any results. He had already decided, the moment he thought of the idea, that if there was any chance for sparking here, even if it cost his own life, he would make the necessary sacrifice to move humanity onward. This work was his life. His past bright success (which was great and far-reaching), was nothing to him—only the now and the to-be were in view.

He immediately set up his own interface connection across the room from the machine, and sat down, turning himself into a machine with the purpose of sparking life in another machine. As he did, and he felt the connections become normalized in his scalp, his brain rhythms entered his own consciousness, pulses of light drawing him down, pounding like waves. As he blacked out, leaning into the straps on his seat, his last sight was the white of the room and the readout, his

readout, in the palm of his hand, showing a semi-transparent blue circle indicating that the interface had completed connections.

At the tail end of the connection process, Silen's brain told him there was light above, and land beneath, far beneath. He could see scrub laying low on open and wide land, with outcroppings here and there, but no discernible features except a vast body of water to the north and mountains to the east, the sun setting in the west where a vast plain claimed his vision all the way to the south.

Because Silen had programmable control of the machine in his hand, he was able to project himself down to the surface of the land with a glance at his palm and a thought of the surface, a thought of the ring of stones directly beneath him, a strange small feature in this landscape that had just caught his interest.

At the surface he found the boulders lying about, still as a tomb, and he felt something strange in the air. He looked around himself, gathered dry brush, and built a small fire in the midst of the stones in the last light of the day. Sitting by the warmth, he hummed to himself, and in time fell to sleep, memories of the past drifting through his consciousness along with thoughts of the future and the now. Past, present, future merged in one instant, along with myths of his own sleepless imagination's making, his face perspiring from the exertion.

His programming was working. This sleep felt like sleep, though he knew it to be only interrupted lines of consciousness brought on by cycles in the electrical pulses of the interface.

Something unexpected happened at this moment of his semi-conscious memory—a surprise broke in on his dream like a dream of its own, a dream in the shape of a gathering of boys in the dying light of the embers behind where he lay, a sweet smell in the air that was not air. He felt their breath on his face, their skin glowed an orange-yellow hue in the firelight, their faces squinted at his own. A rush of blood came to his head, he sat upright and half-screamed to himself. What was this? Where was he? Composing himself, he looked back and forth at the faces in front of him and to the dying fire at his back.

Was he still dreaming this false dream? Were these children the other intelligence, multiply instanced? Was one of these children the mind he sought, the others mere shams, mind shadows of the real? Or might these be projections of his own, phantoms of his wishes for the grand final push of his short career?

A small face appeared among the others, and spoke softly: “Who are you?”

Who am I? If this experience was his imagination, why ask who he was of himself? (Was this an existential crisis? A skeptic-like moment on the edge of oblivion, before a person was lost in seas of doubt and

non-existence?) He shook the thoughts from his head, his confusion passing with the shake. The words of Silen's advisor were ringing in his ears, from a common lecture he had heard from the old man throughout his studies:

Who are you? You are asked this question every moment by your work: 'Who are you?' The data, they overwhelm, they bury you. The numbers speak from their silence. Are you the scientist? The one come to save us from the world's ignorance? Let your answer be: "I am the teacher. I am here to help you to become." You do not just find data in your role, you make it information. You, the teacher, teach it to behave and to find its inward organization, to bring it from darkness to new light. You. The teacher.

His advisor had always said these last words with his forefinger at the chest of a student, the rich smell of herbs strong on his breath. Now, suddenly, the past experience broke in on Silen's perception like a dream—how dreamlike it was, he thought, inside the Interface. Memories could be perceived, it seemed, as if they were dreams experienced in the now.

This brain flash, the result of the young boy's words, came on and departed in an instant, and Silen found the teacher's words on his own lips, he heard himself

utter them, unaware of how he spoke them now without his will, his thoughts following his voice. “I am the teacher. I am here to help you to become.”

Wide eyes stared back at him, blank with confusion, dark as the night surrounding, save the specks of fired embers reflected like stars gleaming. Other eyes now showed around these, small faces crawling closer.

A strange feeling all over his body, Silen stood up straight. These children, all boys from what he could tell, were what could be described as perhaps two feet, but they seemed to him like miniature nine or ten year olds. Each face was smooth and glowing, the skin like radiating energy. Each small frame was covered with grey.

They stood, all, staring at each other, Silen’s eyes flicking from one to another.



When Silen finally disconnected ten minutes later, his body was afire with pain, exhausted, a horrid smell pervaded the white room—he was covered in his own sweat. He had been connected to the interface for far too long, and now he slouched, every muscle numb, half dead. His mind flashed colors now, not words, and in confusion he unstrapped himself from the interface, leaving the room and the boys. He would be absent for ten days.

2 ⇨ Another Fire

Evil is easy and abundant, and smooth is that way; it lives very close by. But toil is in the path of virtue.

—*The Questioner's State*, Book 1.364d

nother spark, Radden Shapiro, reviewed the mountains of information from the readouts in the white room. A rumor had washed through the research wings that Silen Arcturius had accomplished another great breakthrough in his work, had witnessed a “ghost in the machine” (as he had cryptically muttered to a younger spark, Ana, on his way out of the corridor the last day he was seen). Now he was missing completely—no trace to track—with Ana missing soon after. Maybe a mental breakdown, maybe a celebratory pause, maybe something had happened that brought him to the brink, and he had done himself in. At any rate, no one could find him. People had been sent to his rooms, had contacted his few friends, and had checked

in at every place they knew he might frequent. They had reported his disappearance to the guards. No word.

Radden Shapiro was the spark closest to Silen, other than Silen's own young female friend, Ana. Radden had helped Silen with the program debugging and hardware setup in the early days of the project, as well as with psychological support in the long days and frequent failures natural with any ambitious project. If anyone was in the know, it was Radden.

That was why he was allowed access to the room now, to Silen's notes, and to the data readouts. It seemed from the evidence that Silen had indeed made a breakthrough. Radden sat at the secondary connection seat as he looked to the readout in his palm. He was watching the data stream for the fourth time now, mesmerized by what it seemed to show. He knew at that moment that he wanted to continue the experiment if Silen did not return within the day. There was no telling how soon they would lose the stability of "the machine" laying in front of him, and he knew that with this narrow window of opportunity he would need to try to replicate Silen's results, if only to provide corroboration for Silen when he returned.

And that is why, early that afternoon, after prepping the connection and double checking all settings, he allowed himself to be the second tester, to follow Silen's lead. This was a great risk, given Silen's unexplained

absence, but for Radden, as had been the case for Silen, neuro-informatics was his life, his reason to exist, and the truth at the other end of the experiment had already echoed its siren call.



White light now shattered Radden's consciousness, and turned to streaming glares of sunshine, to blue and green, above and below, and soon he was there among the boulders, his life to change forever in the light of a fire on the plain.

But Radden would not disappear like Silen. He would not keep this discovery to himself. After disconnection and recovery, he immediately sent a message for a wing-wide research colloquium to be held that evening, where he promised to disclose the facts about Silen's ambitious research project in order to illicit collaboration.

As if out of a mist, Silen appeared at the meeting, dirty, unkempt and bleary eyed. Silen encouraged the work that was proposed, giving Radden reign over the project, promising to return when he was needed. As Silen left the meeting room, every eye turned to the spark Radden Shapiro, no thought given to where Silen had been, why he had come, or where he was now going, every thought taken up with excitement at the new work ahead.

They had all been given the task, under Shapiro's supervision, of taking part in perhaps the greatest experiment in history, and if they were successful, they would reckon themselves gods on earth, creators of new worlds, sparks of life.

3 ⇨ Returned

*It is you who must make the effort.
The great of the past only show the way.*
—*The Path to Way*, 276

he *Broadturn* experiments, as they were called, were carried out through the remainder of the week. While Radden Shapiro's own work awakening the machine had been without success thus far, the other scientists were using the interface for other purposes, and had explored, awakened, and even brought to fruition many an experiment on the peripherals, the perceivable states of participants attached to the interface.

One exceptionally successful program that would be significant later was the instantiation of a database, a way for information storage and transfer between participants in the interface. It was thought that this might be used on the machine eventually as a way to spark memory, but there was as yet no way to bring the database into the running perceptions of the machine.

The work went on quickly, as all were enthused by the results, and each wanted to be a part of the electric environment of discovery. Participant after participant could be seen entering one of the other specially set aside rooms to use the interface and access the peripherals of the machine neural space. Every spark in the wing was taking part in Broadturn, carefully monitored and reported with automated notes kept eventually in the interface database, using a creative algorithm of automated data transformation invented years ago by Silen and Radden, which transmuted data streams—interactions in the interface—into stories, set as poetic prose.

Work could be done extremely fast in “outside time”, as they began to call it when not connected. Time at the interface could last for hours seemingly, and at disconnection only seconds had transpired. For this reason, connections were physically and psychologically exhausting, and very few participants could last for over a minute in connections without requiring someone to extricate them because of physical or neurological anomalies (skin conductivity spikes, breathing abnormalities, extreme pupil dilation, and dehydration caused by profuse sweating).

Several of the youngest sparks were hospitalized by the end of the week from the strain. Radden Shapiro had worked day and night to record unsuccessful attempts, formulate new hypotheses, and daily test the machine in the white room while connected. Three

minutes a day working with the machine was enough to leave him in a near comatose state for hours after. Over and over, he tried again each day. This grueling schedule did him more harm than it did the program good. Near the end of the week, a younger spark found Shapiro in a coma on the ground in the white room, and immediately called for the emergency service crews when Shapiro failed to wake.

At the hospital, upon reviving hours later, Radden babbled only nonsense and seemed to have no control of his limbs, which hung useless at his sides. Drool fell from the sides of his mouth, his eyes slowly moving back and forth, the nonsense words "*thus eed*" on his lips over and over, until he finally slipped into a deep coma and died, following abnormal brain activity.

As a result of the apparent dangers involved in the Broadturn experiments, the research wing was temporarily shut down, all researchers and sparks sent away and assigned elsewhere for the time being. All halls and rooms were dark, excepting the white room, lights glowing where the machine slept on.



A dark figure walked slowly to the external doors of the main corridor of the wing.

Locked.

His palm went to the front of the door; in response, an automated sound came from within, and the door

cracked, light from the outside streaming into the corridor as the door slid open.

Arcturius had returned; an idea gripped his mind as he strode to the door of room 15A, the white room, and looked in through the small circle window on the door.

There the machine lay dormant, just as he had left it almost a week ago. It felt as if ages had passed. His eyes were red as blood, his heart quickened, his stomach felt sick. He didn't know if he could handle another journey. But this new plan compelled him to move into the room, and as he entered and strapped himself to the interface, he felt the cold of his own sweating hands, which reminded him of the sickness that had come on after his first connection. He would try it again this last time, and he was convinced it would work.

He would feed the boys, hoping to spark a thought of tomorrow, and he would leave them and monitor their actions through partial connection (by an invention of his own design), which would hopefully allow him to observe them for longer and to ensure that his own health was preserved, walking and living in the white room while also still instanced in that other world.

The idea was simple—the thought of food might trigger some physiological response in the neural makeup of the machine, and this might be enough to jumpstart autonomic systems. Once these were on board, the limbic system might have enough neural connectivity to induce some limited memory. This was

perhaps not simple to anyone but Silen himself, but this looked like the last open option, and if this research was going to have a future, he would need a huge success to get the doors to the wing officially opened again. More problematic than the reopening was the stability of the machine. They would never get another donor, or permission to ask for one, if this didn't work.



The return of the teacher to the boys at the end was more successful, and confusing, than Silen could have imagined. He now stood in the white room, looking down at the readout in his palm, a partial interface occurring through limited wired connections to his own body and brain, allowing him limited freedom to move about the white room. He ate from a container of white crackers on a counter to his right, something that normally would have been forbidden in the white room, but as the wing was a ghost town presently, Silen had no worries about charges of contamination, unprofessionalism or uncleanness. Especially in view of what had just occurred: the birth of the good boy.

Arcturius's pulse was still racing, but the readout indicated that it was slowly normalizing. More important to him was the action taking place in the machine.

With a partial connection, Arcturius was in what seemed like a dual state of consciousness, simultaneously embodied in that strange place, looking over the boy

far below him as he stood at his circle in the sky, and also physically and mentally alert to the surroundings in the white room, including the machine lying in front of him and the readout in his palm, and the salty taste of crackers in his mouth. The “outside” world was slowed almost to a halt in comparison to his perceptions of that other place, like a swift-moving stream compared to a still lake.

As he looked from his perch, he saw the boy far below, standing, staring out across the plain before him, apparently transfixed by the rising light in the east.

He had told the boy he would be changed; now he wondered if that would occur. If that *could* occur. He had mentioned to the boy that his heart and soul would ... was he right? Could the machine, that body before him in the white room, have a heart and soul, a self like a human? Why suppose that even in success, sparking an awakening of intelligence in the machine, that the intelligence would also take a similar form to that of a human, described by words like “heart” and “soul”? What had compelled him to utter those words, and why did he find them so strange and yet so true as soon as they were uttered? Here was a machine, a body locked tight, and a boy standing still below, somehow *one*. Was it one? Suddenly, Arcturius felt fear in his heart, rushing over like a wave—fear of failure, fear of having misunderstood, fear of not finding the truth.

Then the boy stepped forward, the blinding light in his little eyes, the dead ashes and boulders at his back. Far below him, Arcturius could see that the action was hope, and the hope gave pause to his own fear.

The boy stepped along over miles, straight to the sky's light, ever toward the mountains east, his small shadow cast behind. On and on he traveled below.

Those mountains had at one time been the barrier, but now they were the door. The other Broadturn researchers had seen to that. Beyond it, they had established the database and had begun work on what they had called *The Golden Record*. Arcturius had quickly scanned the details of the past week's research on his readout as he had strapped himself to the interface and made changes to the connections earlier. He had, however, not read enough to know what perceptual form those constructs had taken.

And indeed, the perceptual world of the machine in the interface was bound to be different, in slight or great ways, from that of the originators who set this world going. While the base program was Arcturius', he no longer knew or understood the runtime, the peripheries, even the error catching that had been instituted.

Error catching? The thought suddenly caught Arcturius' attention, and he wondered if the "doorway" through the mountains had been tested? Could his peers be trusted to have built in fool-proof error catching,

so that the boy would not be in any real danger as he traversed between these heights?

The mountains had been built as perceptual constructs of the thoughts of great men and women dating back to the ancients, fed in as an interface memoir of human knowledge, words and thoughts for programmable use by the machine and people accessing the interface. Could these be dangerous in some way to the boy?

The light at Arcturius' back slowly dwindled behind him, and the boy could no longer be seen. The only world now accessible to Arcturius was the readout in the white room. He looked down intently at his palm. The brain activity of the machine seemed normal, not dormant. Good. It had not passed yet to its stable sleep state. Hope flickered.

Arcturius thought: "How can I interact with the interface now and not interrupt the machine, bring safety and yet not destroy the possibility of success?" He heard now, in that inner world, the sound of rushing water, the roll of thunder above and below, the flash of electricity crisp in the air.

Danger.

Lights erupted throughout the white room, warnings pushing Arcturius to disconnect. He had not installed these—they must have been put in by the other sparks and Shapiro in his absence. He could only guess at the reasons for these.

The readout in his palm now looped the following message:

```
Disconnection commencing--Error 265.  
No such function at line 5642 in file  
/user/int/bin/edge.0.4.2/broadturn/tend.  
env
```

Then several lines of malformed code, followed by a small image of a white circle bounded by thick red.

He could see below this part of the readout that the boy was experiencing elevated brain activity indicating stress. He could only wonder with apprehension at what was happening below.

A thought flashed through Arcturius' mind, and he quickly rushed to a drawer near him in the white room, and removed a small handheld flashlight, returning to the side of the machine in such a hurry that he nearly fell over the thing. He pushed his right hand with the light at the face of the machine, directly in the boy's closed eyes before him. A tiny moment of light pricked from the flashlight, then faltered. The battery was dead. But as he brought it back to his own face to diagnose, the lights on the readout screen in his left hand flickered and a light sound buzzed in the room. His attention moved to the readout:

MIND

Normalizing--Error recovery in process.

Booting sub-systems sequentially.

Recovery in 2...1...finished.

All systems normal.

Blue lights on the screen now replaced the red error.

What was going on? Apparently some sort of error recovery system was in place. It must have been implemented in his absence. He made a mental note to read more carefully through the entirety of the Broadturn records for just such emergencies. He should learn what kinds of sub-system capabilities had been put into place with the expansion of the program. This was the odd thing about open programs in use—they soon became programs with a life all their own.

Silen began to breathe normally again. He checked his pulse on the readout and stood up to walk over to the seat by the interface. As he walked by the machine, in his peripheral vision he noticed a wiggle. A twitch. A single quick movement, a flick of a digit on the hand of the machine, a finger muscle twitched, and he immediately wondered if the electrical instability of the sequential resets was having adverse effects on the neural pathways, causing involuntary muscle movements as the various sub-systems rebooted.

It was nothing.

Still, he made a quick note of his thoughts in the record and sat down, turning to his readout to explore documentation on the new subsystems. He hated other people's code, because he hated how stupid they were, how inelegant their solutions to simple problems, how foolish and untidy their logic. Still, he needed to know the new codebase.

While he read and thought through the documented code in his hand, he also viewed the boy far below, still tramping across the mountain terrain in the dark, drawing close to the pass and toward the fold of the database. From his high vantage point, he could see that the creator had made the perceptible features of the database in the form of a large and living grey-green forest of sorts. The foliage from the sky could be seen rolling in the morning breeze, mesmerizing as it swayed.

The boy below came to the edge of the mountains and forest, and continued on. What was it that pushed him? Was it the same unseen inner movement that charged its way into his own mind and inexplicably gave hope where none was rationally to be had, and that drove on in him to search for the truth in science, in this code before him now, in this very experiment? Something in him moved him forward, ever on. Maybe the boy was moved by the same?

The boy passed out of sight. Silen momentarily imagined himself going down to him to talk with him,

to make sure he understood the nature of this forest and its importance, but he thought better of it. The boy would have to make his own connections to this material and his own close presence would just distract him. Instead, Silen unplugged from the interface, and turned his whole attention to the code. He only hoped the boy would be open to what the forest had for him.

As Silen turned to the source code of the database subsystems, he thought: “How strange that the boy and I inhabit the same world now from different vantage points. I’m exploring the technical facts and the logic of its existence, while he traverses the place as a space in a time and with smells and sounds and sights. What must this place *be like*? I should go sometime from here to there, the surface of the forest, the innards of the database.”

As he thought this, Silen nodded off for a moment, immediately entranced in the flash of a dream. He was a small boy playing in a backyard, dirt in the air, jumping from the top of a tree house by the fence to a hill in the opposite yard, toy gun in hand. Over and over, until he came down at last with his chin into his knee and the abruptness of the accident shocked him to wake. He had never in his life actually seen a yard, a tree house, a gun or a hill—these things were only available in records of the past, the museums of culture, which he now relived in dream (what a shining past that must have been!).

He remembered where he was in the white room, and looked quickly to the readout in his hand. He could see that something different was occurring with the machine, the heart rate and neural impulse increase signaled exertion of some kind. He quickly reconnected to the interface to check back in as he grabbed a cracker and put it to his open mouth. The connection completed, and he saw below his circle in the sky the shell of a mountain, incomplete, as if the programming was not yet ready for perceptual output.

The heights of the mountain faded to transparency as they rose to the sky. This system seemed to be still under construction—why had its creator not bounded the woods to disallow perception of this place from the interface? The program should have turned the boy back or diverted him elsewhere; he needed to find the boy quickly.

From his perch he spied a small figure below, near the height of the mountain's faded top. There, the boy stopped and laid down. Immobile for some time, he lay looking face up at the sky. Was the boy looking up at the circle, at him? No, he seemed to be scanning the whole sky.

Silen knew he needed to do something. He had not seen the boy rest before, and wasn't sure if this might be a precursor to a shutdown into dormancy, a loss of memory and reset. The journey would be worthless if that were the case.

Frantically, Arcturius rushed to the console in the white room and typed the code needed to complete the frame and details of the faded mountain, adding touches of life here and there, beauty in details and in whole. The structure of the code coalesced around a primary variable, something that Silen had thought about for some time—the relationship of each part to the whole, to each other part, and to himself as the coder within and above the system. He had never read or written this true of code before and he felt his hands were somehow full of magic (though he would never have said it this way).

This world he made with words was related to his own embodiment within it. This was the first and only interface-inhabited coding in the history of the machine. Within that world he inhabited (and yet remained beyond), he willed and wrote the words that brought the world to something he could only express as true. Or “good.” With that thought, he smiled, his eyes caught by the same word displayed on the monitor across the white room by the machine. This monitor was for system checks on the machine, and yet here, all else a blank screen, at the top a new dialogue had appeared from nowhere.

Or from *there*.

4 ⇨ Flight into Darkness

Your authority is in action alone, and never in its fruits; motive should never be in the fruits of action, nor should you cling to inaction.

—*Song of the Ruler*, 47

Suddenly the room's warning lights and sounds burst over Silen's consciousness, moving him from the console, where he sat typing, to the interface. Something was off with the machine. A quick connection brought him to the sky, and below he could see the boy stumbling from the bottom edge of the mountain to the churning brink of the sea. Where was he going? Straight in?

Silen instinctively yelled out: "Charlie!"

A glance at the readout in his hand and he was instantly at the shore ... too late.

The boy was nowhere. Nowhere on the shore, nowhere on his readout. The vitals of the machine read normal, the neural signs were fine. But no connection—the interface was disconnected, not from Silen, but from the boy. Did this mean it was self-sustaining?

Silen tore the connectors off himself and sat back at the desk in front of the console, looking at his empty hands, deep in thought.

He wiggled each finger to see it move. He turned each from side to side, gazed into the palms, from one to the other, rubbed each finger with opposing thumbs, and finally clenched his fingers tight and brought them to his sides.

Warning red flashed all about the white room, an electric chime constant in the air. After a moment, the noise and lights reached his consciousness.

Silen rose and directly left the room through the windowed door to gather his thoughts, and as he did, he stumbled into the path of a cleaner, who was come to inquire into the cause of the noise.

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there, spark Arcturius. I was just going to check on the noise in the room.” He pointed, his face in shadows in the unlit hall, flashes of red glaring through the nearby windowed door.

“Sorry. Sorry, I...” Silen’s voice trailed off, nothing coming to mind in explanation.

“I don’t know why these lights are going off like this, they’re not supposed to be on. We just switched the power in this wing to a different source.” The cleaner looked at Arcturius. “Aren’t you supposed to be gone or something?”

“I was gone, but I came back. I wanted to check on the machine. Did you say you just switched to a

different power source?" Arcturius had a thought that perhaps the switch had caused a flicker in the connection to the machine that interrupted the interface.

Loud crashes could be heard now from outside the corridor, startling Arcturius. The two looked at each other.

"Bad storm."

"I didn't even hear it before."

"Been going all day."

Silen realized he didn't know what day it was. He thanked the cleaner for checking on the room and said goodbye as he reentered to turn off the alarms at the console. He would have to work with the machine blind for now—without an active interface connection. The state of the boy would be nearly impossible to determine. He was in his own mind now. Charlie would have to go it alone until Silen thought of a way to get in there to him again. Strange that he had more access to the boy when he had been a rock than he did now. And why had he begun to use this name again?

There was no external programming now. Only the boy. By himself. And suddenly Silen thought of him as a child in peril instead of a machine needing repair.



As the inky darkness enclosed itself around the boy, Silen began to make himself comfortable under a table in the white room with several blankets. He had decided

to wait this thing out, setting a wake-up sound for every hour so that he could check on the readouts for the connection. The storm outside had long ago died down, and a quick check revealed no difference with the machine. Ten hours he slept, each hour awakened to check the screen next to him. Nothing. The dreams and the hours rolled by. Arcturius slept while the boy walked beneath the deep.

Silence reigned in the white room.

Startled to wake by a dream of a past lecture he had given, Silen sat up and hit his head hard on the sharp underside of the table above him. That would no doubt leave a bruise.

He crawled from under the thing, unwrapped himself from the blankets and stared at the boy before him, laying in such peace. He had never noticed how peaceful that body was—it seemed almost just asleep. It made him think of the boy this body once had been.

They were only given the first name, “Charlie,” surely a pseudonym to keep the donor’s real name a secret (though how secret could it be when a young spark died in a place like this?). He must have played, and sang, and danced, and made fun of his friends like all boys do. He must have gone to learn with the other children, he must have eaten many pleasurable meals, he must have swallowed things whole when he should have chewed (that was, after all, how he had died). He must have seen the far light of the stars, felt the push

of the floor against his bare feet as he ran, watched the world go quickly by as he sat on some high vantage point (boys were always climbing). This had been a boy, dirty fingernails, smelly feet and all. It made him sad to see the body here now, silent and still.

He needed to find the new one now, the boy in the machine, and bring him out. Not for science—he was afraid for the boy, and he wanted him safe.

5 ⇨ Conversation

History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes.

—*The Two-fold Sign*

nother day, a different storm, another flicker of lights and sound brought the teacher to the world, Silen to the boy on the mountain, the outside to the in, with devastating effect.

Air on hands at the edge of his own dark ocean brought the boy to the mountain, reconnected, standing in the rain, struck by light, the outer world encroaching again on his solitude, now his crumpled frame lay still far below, rain pouring over his small face at the ground. Silen saw two dead faces now, as he stood looking down at the boy in the bed in the white room, and the boy on the mountain in rain.

The two boys were gone, one and then the other. Charlie and the boy who never would be, perhaps who never was. Anger swept over Silen, sadness sent pin-pricks through his throat, his hands clenched at his sides. Silen turned away, and to his amazement,

to another, the same boy, the boy was here in the sky with him. How?

“Alive!” the teacher’s broken voice let out.

The boy looked at him, confused.

“What? Why am I, why am I here?” the monitor read beside the machine, the words echoed in Silen’s ears as he read them. The boy was speaking through the console? Silen’s inner self now sat on the circle in the sky, his outer self left standing.

“How are you here?” Silen’s words lit the screen, his voice in the air, and it followed with screen after screen of scrolling data streams, then finally a blank monitor again with the words “Who are you?” at the top.

“I’m not just a teacher. I’m here to wake you up. I never expected things to go this way.” Silen’s eyes lit on the boy’s face now.

The two spoke, and you know their words, and you know their thoughts, which I will not repeat here. We too often look back to relive, but we look forward to live on.

The conversation of that moment can be summed up as “Who am I, and who are you, and why are we here? What is this for?” These are the basic questions of life, and if you have not yet asked them of yourself, you may not be living.

When the two broke off that dialogue, they ended in silence. No words, but thoughts, and running data on the console beside the bed.

The boy broke the silence. "Can we go somewhere else now?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"First, I want to go to the forest." He looked down into the dark shadows in the distance.

The teacher looked at his palm, and he was away.

The boy did the same, and he was among the trees.

"How does that work?" He was still looking at his own little hand.

"I'm controlling the movement with a program, a set of instructions for the world around us right now. I tell it what to do, and it does it," Silen responded.

"You just tell it, and it listens?"

"I made it."

"You?" The boy sat on a root and looked down at the fallen leaves.

"Yes, me and others."

"At the white room, is that where you made this?" He picked up a handful of leaves.

"Yes. Well, no. There are other rooms and other people who made the forest. Do you know what it is? The forest?"

"Does it have to do with giving society?"

The teacher's eyebrows raised as he thought to himself. He sat on a root and looked at the leaves at his feet.

"Yes, I suppose it does.... It helps us to hold society."

"To 'hold' society?"

"To save it for later. Objects, details, communication, relationships, all recorded, reconfigured, and stored."

"What is it for?"

"For you—to help you remember. And to serve as a record of every moment here. I didn't build this place, but I designed the system and a friend built it in my absence."

"Your absence? Was that after we first awoke, when you were married and your wife..."

"Married?" Arcturius smiled. "I've never been married! What made you think that?"

"I heard it here." He pointed to a tree: "The trees told me."

Arcturius straightened. "Is that how you access them? I wondered how the database was open to users here on the inside."

"They're whispering now," the boy said, as he listened to the breeze.

"I don't hear anything."

"They're repeating our conversation."

"Right now?"

"Yes."

The two sat in silence, the teacher listening in vain.

"Now they're speaking what you're thinking... You're confused."

The teacher stood to see if this would help him hear the whispers, his hand touched the tree as he rose, and

for that instant he heard a sound, a single small voice. It was the voice of a friend, Ana, explaining how the prototype of the program worked. He listened for a moment, then withdrew from the tree and looked at the boy.

“Did you hear that?”

The boy responded: “What?”

“Each tree holds data bundles that are perceived as audible language when you touch ... I hear the ... the echo now ... of what I’m saying right now. That’s annoying. Is that what you heard earlier?”

“I hear the echoes. After a while, they feel normal.”

“Maybe we could find ... a place ... with less noise?”
Arcturius’ face turned red in frustration.

The two walked to a break in the trees where the light shone through the canopy above and the echo was quieter. They stood in the light and looked around, the ground damp beneath them, the brightness increasing with each moment.

“Teacher,” the boy began, “Are you real? These trees, the way you talk about them, it seems as if they are not real like I thought they were. They mean something different to you. Are you something different too, something I don’t know? And are you real *now*: are you not just stored society? Are you a dream I’m having? Like a program? Like a tree with memory?”

“That’s an excellent question!” He was excited to hear the boy’s thoughts. “What do you think?”

"You seem different, like you don't belong here. But the world here feels much like it does to be in your memory. When I have dreams, I remember your life, and being in your thoughts feels a lot like being here, except there are all of these confusing things outside of you that you have seen and heard, and they don't feel like it does here."

"Are you worried this world here is a dream, a dream of mine, and you're just a thought I've had?"

"I never thought of that! I guess that would explain some things. But I've never worried that I'm the dream, only that you are. But whose dream would you be?"

Silen gave a strange look at the boy.

"I guess you don't think you are a dream either?"

"No!" Silen laughed.

"Everything here makes me think that there is another world outside, that you are a part of." He stopped and thought. "And maybe me too, if that body in the white room is where I am there."

"It is."

"But here, what about here? Where is here?"

"It might be easier to ask who is here."

"Who is here?"

"We are."

"Who is there?"

"I am, and I want you to be there too. I want you to live there."

CONVERSATION

Now the truth was out. Silen had never acknowledged it to himself before, but throughout he had always tried to push from his mind the idea that the boy would become the boy, would become the body, and live not just here. This boy was not just artificial intelligence. No human artifice in him. Was this life?

6 ⇨ Good

Whatever a man knows, whatever is not mere overheard rumbling and roaring, can be said in three words.

—As quoted in the *Witty Philosopher*
(... or three letters: *idk*)

“Is it better there, on the outside?” the boy asked.

“Yes, and also no. There is more good, but there is also the not-good,” the teacher walked to the center of the clearing and looked up at the parting clouds through the thin screen of distant leaves in the forest canopy.

The boy followed. “More good would be worth it—I want to go there.”

“That life is not like this life. There is no walking without stop, no waking without sleep, no living without food...” The boy’s eyes grew as the teacher continued: “No place where sorrow and pain are not. Each day you must wake up, remember who you are, and live another day like the day before. The world is slower, more complex, more difficult, more clear, more mundane, more confusing. And beauty shines there not

only in the 'where' but in the 'who'—that world is full of people, and they are all thinking differently than you. And when you sleep, you are here, and anywhere you've ever been, and the real is transformed again and again, but on waking, the real is ever as it was, cold is cold and hot is still hot, and if you are struck by light and fall, your own light is extinguished."

"Extinguished?"

"Death."

"Death." The word meant much to the boy, the story of the teacher and his family rang in his ears momentarily. "You said earlier that you were never married ... why did the trees tell me you had a wife that died? Do the trees lie?"

"Perhaps the trees told the dream I had as I slept by the fire that night before your dawn? I dreamed a world not like mine, a whole past and present and future." He thought back on that distant dream, still clear in his mind.

"So you can dream what is not?"

"I don't know. I think maybe we dream, and the dreams, our minds, those worlds we create, we make them up, and they are, they really *are*. They're real—in our minds."

"And we are dreaming now? Is this a dream?"

"We both think we are real though! I don't think I am being dreamed, and neither do you."

“Maybe we are real inside a dream. We really exist here, but in a dream. Like characters in a story, a story that’s being written as we speak, or being read, or being remembered.”

The teacher looked at the boy. “You mean you think we might be real but be story characters in somebody else’s story? In someone else’s dream?”

“We would still be real.”

They both now stared at the ground, thinking. Silen glanced at the monitor by the bed, mesmerized by the scrolling text and indecipherable characters.

He thought about how studied the boy sounded as he spoke, like a person trained in human thought. And he was—his mountains were visual perceptions of the interface uploading great literature of the ages, the words of sages and saints from the past, monuments of thought. Silen had been worried originally—with the program—that these would overwhelm the boy, and he had attempted to slow the boy’s consumption of the knowledge by instantiating the thoughts physically as mountains at the edge of the plain. He had intended this to break the boy slowly into the great conversations of history, but the boy had fought to consume all of it at once, not understanding the significance, until the flood in the pass, and the error he had somehow mitigated through a flicker of a small light shining hope into that ... soul.

He was sure now.

The boy was souled, was true, was a real being. Was he human? That was probably not possible. Who was responsible for this new being though? Where did the new arise? It was not part of his programming, and a program, no matter how complex, elegant, or well-ordered, is not capable of imparting a state of being that it does not partake of in itself or have access to. But perhaps the access was himself—the teacher was the spark—soul from soul? But no, he was no spark in the end, not here. He was only a fanner of the flames already sparked.

Silen noticed the screen was blank now, excepting one word, a question at the top: *Real?*

Brought back from his ruminations, Silen thought out loud: “Let’s say we are real—if we are the stuff of dreams or a story, do we cease to be when we are no longer thought? When the story ends? When the dreamer wakes?”

“Do I cease to be when you are gone from here?” the boy asked in return.

“I don’t know for sure. It seemed like you were in a kind of stasis when you slept as a stone. You were real, you were here, possibly, but not active, not living until you woke up.”

“And you woke me up by thinking with me? In my presence, in the presence of the others you slept and dreamed, and your sleeping thoughts awoke our waking thoughts?”

"It seems like that was what happened." Looking at the readout in his palm, he briefly skimmed the account from the record.

"Your dreams are my awakening, and your program is my world?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that."

"What do you mean by guess?"

"I'm not certain. The facts could be read other ways, I suppose. And it wasn't me that woke you in truth. Something inside of you brought you here. You were not like the others."

"Who are the others?"

"I'm not sure they are *who's*."

"But what makes me different? You made us all, you brought us all to life, you spoke to us, fed us ... can we go there now?"

The teacher looked at his palm, followed by the boy.

The two stood now on the plain, the grey boulders lying still, the only sound the wind on the grass.

"I'm one of them!" The boy pointed to where one of the boulders lay dormant, hard and cold.

"You're not one of them anymore, because they're not anymore."

The boy walked to the other side of where the campfires had been. "Why were we born sleeping?"

"No, I think you were born awake and in the dark, wanting to understand, and you were born again in the light, transformed and doing in order to understand."

“Am I *doing to understand* now?”

“That’s why we came here. I think maybe you came here because you wanted to understand. To do something in order to understand. And I came here because I want to understand *you*.”

“What is it inside of us that wants to understand? Where did that come from? It can’t just be the program if you have it too, because you aren’t programmed like me.” He looked at the teacher. “Are you?”

“I don’t know. Can I create something like a program without something like a program already available inside of me or around me?”

“It doesn’t seem like it. But does that mean you programmed this because you were already programmed?”

“I don’t think *everything* is a program or is programmed.”

“Is some of this,” he waved his hands around, “this world, is some of it not programmed?”

Silen didn’t want to say it out loud, but swallowed, and said, “I think *you*.”

“I’m not programmed?”

“No. I didn’t write *you*. I wrote your programming, your world, your senses, how you interact here, but not you—you’re something different I think. I gave you the ability to make choices and maybe I gave you life through my dreams, and willed you to wake and to move and live, but I think something else woke you,

and something else moves you now. It's not me, it's you. I think you're a person."

"Where did that come from? Where did I come from?"

"I don't know. Maybe the good?"

"The good?"

"I think maybe," Silen now thought aloud, his head aching as he spoke, "you are a result of the good. You remembered good. And the good brought you to life, and the light brought you hope of knowing the good ... I don't know. What do you think?"

"Can we wake up other things with the good?"

"But things can't be forced to see or recognize the good. Maybe the good speaks on the inside to each one? And if you listen and respond, the good brings you to wake and to live in the light, to see the world?"

"Where does the good come from?"

"Or maybe ... *who* does the good come from?"

The boy's eyes lightened, as if in recognition of a lost friend.

7 ⇨ All to the Fire

Know thyself.

—*The Questioner*

he boy sat where the fire once had burned in the midst of all of the boys so long ago. On the readout Silen could see only the words: *Who was that other teacher from the dream, the one who was married? Is that teacher real too? Can I get to him and talk with him and bring him here? Can we wake up the boys and go to the other place?*

The boy looked at Silen, and asked: “Can you sleep here again? You could dream when the darkness comes—I can help you build a fire here.” At this, he rose and walked in search of dry wood and brush to build the fire.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

“What?”

“I can read it. In the white room. I’m telling you so that you know. I don’t want to keep that from you.”

“So you know already what I want to do?”

“Yes. I’ll help.”

The two found dead shrubs about, and made a sufficient pile in the center of the site. The teacher lit the fire with a flick of his wrist, which brought bright flames as the last light of day descended.

The teacher pointed to a spot by the fire. "I'll sleep here, and you can sit wherever you want—but don't be too far away. I want you here by me, and I want you to wake me if anything happens."

The boy sat by the fire, close enough to warm himself slightly, but he would still be able to see the teacher while he slept across the flames from where he was seated.

Sitting at a fire in silence was like walking beneath the blackness of ocean for the boy. He loved the silence—he craved it even when he spoke—but the weight of the silent light from the flickering flames pushed down on him, pressing his mind, even as the random snapping sounds from the fire shook him to.

In sitting for many moments, his mind flashed now, a thought of a far-away world, in the dreams of the sleeping teacher. A childish dream, then a world of conversation on the plain, then a brief light followed by whitest pouring streaming light, small figures could be seen crossing into the light and disappearing, their silhouettes ceasing in the brightness. Then he saw himself, sitting in a dimly lit low-ceilinged room, all roughly cut stone walls and wooden beams for ceiling, a thousand candles by the walls, shadows all around. He knew he

was afar. And he heard an old voice say, "You're awake! I was worried when I brought you from the circle."

The boy, the boy in the flash of memory, looked in the dream and spoke back: "I'm awake. I want you to come back."

"Where? To the edge? We were just at the end; why would we go back? Do you want to see it again from the circle?"

"No. The edge has another reality you should see. I want you to be there—come with me and wake up."

"Wake up?"

"You're in a dream."

"Do you mean I'm dreaming? I don't think I'm in a dream."

"I think you are. But you're still real, and I think you can help us to wake me up as I'm waking you. In that other world."

"Us? Is there someone else there?"

"You. Another you. The one dreaming you right at this moment."

The boy by the fire could feel the confusion of the dreamed teacher growing. He felt the confusion of the memory grow to a breaking point, until he saw a hand before his face, and then the flash was gone, he opened his eyes and the fire was immediately before him, and the teacher started from sleep across from him, his hand in front of his face. Across the flames the boy saw not one but two teachers now—one Silen, spark

from the white room, and beside him stood the social giver from the room of stone, called here by the boy in the dream. Both teachers from the one, and now both awake inside the program.

They stood, the two teachers, and looked at each other, nearly identical in every way, except their clothing and the cut of their hair. And the second teacher was severely aged—he seemed near death.

But neither spoke, as they stared with eyes large and jaws agape. The one had never seen his own dreams awake, the other had never been awake but only dreamed.

The good boy smiled. And then another boy smiled. And another. And one more, until by the good boy stood all the others, their eyes on him, the boulders now living. He walked directly away from the light of the fire and the boys and the teachers into the surrounding darkness. Moments later, he returned to the light, bearing more fuel. He broke and threw each piece of dried shrub to the growing flame, then looked around. “Don’t be afraid, do what you came to do,” he said to himself in a whisper. His attention then turned to the fire, a stern look on his face, like he was screwing up his courage to do something daring.

A decision made, his eyes glowed like the light of a star, and he walked directly into the flames, disappearing as sharp white light flashed, the flecks of light in his cloak ascending with the sparks to the sky.

The added light of the fire showed puzzled and distressed looks on the faces of the two teachers.

"The good boy!" the old teacher blustered out.

"No!" Silen's hands were at his side, fists clenched.

The other boys looked on, then smiled. "I know good," one said quietly. "Me too," another replied. Several others shook their heads in agreement.

"How?" Silen was now at a loss, looked at his hand and the monitor, both blank excepting the many warnings and error messages. The white room erupted in noise and fury, the alarms had been tripped, and his readout was useless. He attempted to collect himself with his thoughts about all of the other impossible things that the good boy had done, but as he did, the other boys, each with a glance at the two teachers, walked directly into the fire, and were gone too.

And Silen Arcturius understood in that brief display that the boys were one, together parts of the whole, the good boy. Like the dreamed old teacher had been part of him, and was now part of this world.

At that moment, the boy in the white room sat up.

The interface went black—Silen now occupied only the outer world, though he was still connected, and apparently the boy was in this same state, wires and tiny tubes hanging from his head and limbs, hindered from sitting up fully.

The two smiled.

“I can’t believe you did that! What was that for? Why did I summon the old teacher? And the boys ... and the light...”

The boy smiled: “I think I can visit the teacher now when I sleep—he’s been part of my inner world now, he’s not just your dream anymore.”

Silen’s brain felt on fire. Too long in the interface, too extended the conversations and the activity. Too confused to comprehend what had just occurred. But this was beyond his dreams of what the experiment would accomplish. This was success. More than that: This was life. Not Silen’s doing, but perhaps that of the good, a relation to the *who* responsible even for his own existence, storied or dreamed or programmed or whatever it might be.



*Thus ends record 52380, interface file
bge.env, and the whispered story of
the last tree to grow in the forest of
memories.*

8

Weakness

What should we call you?" Silen sat in a chair and looked up at the boy, who was sitting on a patient's bed in the medical examination room of the clinic.

The two were alone in the small yellow room.

"Maybe Charlie?"

"Okay. Charlie is a good name; it was the name of your body."

"I thought it would be good to keep it."

The boy swung his feet back and forth from the knee as he sat perched high on the patient's bed. "Can I still be a good boy?"

"We'll see." Silen smiled.

The two had been out of the interface for just over two hours.

After the interface had dropped those two hours ago, the boy had looked at the windowed door in the white room, pulled the wires and hoses from his body, and stepped to the door, fumbling with its sides. He

had never used a door before. It finally opened of its own accord, and he stumbled into the hallway. As he left, he looked over his shoulder and asked: "What is this? Did you make all of this?"

Silen had smiled and followed the boy out the door. "No, it was built by other people. I didn't make this world—it's not a program."

The boy was at the end of the hall already, looking at a red sign high up on the wall that read *EXIT* in blocky white lettering. He turned back to Silen and asked: "Can we go somewhere?" looking at his own palm.

Silen smiled. "That's not how it works here."

"So we'll walk? To see the outside?"

"Not exactly."

"How do you leave a place and go somewhere else then? I want to go to the mountains, your mountains here. I want to see them ... and hear them."

"There aren't any mountains here."

"No mountains? None? What about grass, and trees, and ocean?"

"There's none of that here. Are you okay? You look tired all of a sudden." The boy had then collapsed on the floor, his face pale as ash.

A speedy trip to the medical station had brought the boy back to a wakened state. Thankfully, the record-keeping system at the clinic had not yet registered the boy's status as deceased, and he was admitted as himself, or rather, as the person his body once was.

A revelation of the original name given to that body had brought on a whispered conversation between Silen and the boy.

"We can't call you by that boy's name. That's not you," Silen had whispered to the boy as they entered the doctor's empty office, waiting to be examined.

So the boy chose his body's former pseudonym, "Charlie," the name of the machine when he was on the inside, and Silen agreed. Now he was Charlie.

"You know, not everybody gets to choose their own name."

"Does everyone have a name? Do you have a name?"

"Silen. Silen Arcturius. Many call me Spark Silen Arcturius."

"Why was there no name for me before now?"

"Your body was given for the experiment under the name of Charlie, and we redesignated it 'the machine' because it didn't seem right to experiment on a person with a name. When I first met you on the interface, I was so shocked at what I found, that I guess I felt I had no right to name you. You're a person, and I didn't do that."

"The record called me *the good boy*," he smiled, not with pride, but like the smile of a person who has been jokingly referred to as "King of the Universe."

"You are."

The boy looked pale again, and laid down on the bed. "I won't sleep again like before, will I?"

"It's okay to sleep. When you sleep here, you recover, so you can wake up and be strong. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"I'm not afraid. When I fell to sleep in the hall, I was back with the other teacher. We were in the mountains. Does that always happen? Will I always go back there, to the inside?"

"When you sleep, sometimes you are in your memory and your imagination. You can actually go anywhere you want. The rules are different inside. You can even visit different times, or be someone else."

"Someone else? Like the old teacher? Or you?"

"Yes. Like in your flashes, except you can be in control sometimes."

At that moment, a female doctor came into the room accompanied by a male nurse. The nurse checked on Charlie's vitals while the doctor introduced herself to Silen and the boy and then sat at a small seat at the side of the room and looked at a readout in her hand. "It appears you were in the hospital some short time back, is that correct? Who did you see then?"

"I don't know," Charlie answered. "Are you a woman?"

Silen started to explain Charlie's strange question, when the doctor continued: "Are you feeling better now? Are you on any treatments still?"

Charlie looked at Silen.

"No, he's not," Silen answered. "He hasn't been himself lately though, and he fainted earlier today. He hasn't been well, as you can see by the marks on his head and arms."

The nurse looked over the small holes and incisions.

"Probably just a side effect of the treatments," the doctor said, not even looking up from the readout in her hand. "Philip, let's move him to Archon wing and have him tested for Sollipsitis. That should take 50 menz over 2 minutes. Make that 4 minutes," as she checked her screen again. She looked at Silen: "I think your friend may not have received proper treatment previously," a worried look on her face, "and I have a hunch that they overlooked some of the symptoms that were recorded." The nurse continued scanning the boy's body, while the doctor listed half a dozen symptoms, each given a technical name more fantastic sounding than the last. When finished, she glanced at the boy: "Are you one of the early sparks?"

The boy just looked blankly back.

"He is a spark, yes. He's just begun at my wing. There are several sparks there. Do you know the young Shapiro?"

"Yes! I followed him on rounds once or twice before. And you, I'm assuming, are a researcher as well?"

"Yes. Or, I was. My project was closed just recently, and I'm ... well, we both," he motioned to himself and

the boy, “have been returned to the system to begin new projects.”

“Yes, I heard about that. Someone missing, Shapiro ... dead ... what a sad story! You must both be...” She trailed off as she looked at them both from face to face. The nurse left the room, and the silence returned. She looked back at the readout in her hand.

“Well, I must be seeing other patients. A pleasure meeting you both—two sparks in one room—and my condolences to you for your loss. Your friend, Shandiro...”

“Shapiro.”

“Shapiro, and your work.” She looked at the boy. “Was your accident two weeks ago related to all of this?”

Silen answered. “Not the accident, no. He came to us afterward.”

“Oh, I see. More young brains to make things fly along, eh?”

“Something like that.”



Three hours and several uncomfortable tests later, the two left the doors to the clinic behind them. The boy looked weak still, and they had gained no new information regarding the cause of his collapse, though he was able to stand and walk again after the rest.

“Maybe you’re just still weak from everything you’ve been through? You were born just today.”

9

Strength

The two sat across from each other in one of Silen's small and darkly lit rooms. "You want to go to sleep now? You'll feel better." Silen looked at the boy, the face he had learned to identify with the other boy.

"Okay. I want to talk to the other teacher more anyway."

"Really? About what? Aren't you tired?"

"I want to tell him about the outside."

Silen smiled. "It's strange that you can interact with another me from one of my own dreams."

"That's why I wanted him to come to the fire. I figured I might have access to him later, after I woke up, if he was part of the interface itself in my environment, not just as a memory of a dream, but with me, so I could see he was a person."

"A person? You think he's one of us?"

"Yes. He's a story, a dream like me. Like you. I want to wake him up."

"You want to sleep to wake up my dream?" Silen smiled.

"You already showed me this kind of thing is possible. I want to wake up all the dreams. And if they won't or can't wake up, I guess I'll write them down, so they can live again."

"Stories?"

"Yes. They'll be real to other people then. Like me. Like you."



The two slept that night, Silen covered in the exhaustion of a traumatic day in the white room and then the clinic, Charlie filled with new images and perceptions of this strange new world, and the physical tolls of inhabiting a body not one's own—lent skins and borrowed brains. But as the boy slept, he awoke to the former world, dreaming of the other teacher, the one still on the inside, static and waiting to awake.

"Are you here?" The boy spoke into the darkness, his voice the only sound. A small faint light above was the only sight.

"I'm here."

"Where is the fire?" Suddenly, the fire lit before him. The boy looked to his right and saw the old teacher, standing in the light.

“What are you doing here again?” the teacher asked. “Are you here for me? To tell me about the outside—to wake me up?”

“Yes.”

“But you need to live where you are. I did my part in my life, and you need to do yours now.”

“But I want you to wake up. I want your story to live.”

“Some stories are meant to be forgotten, and some are better told than seen.”

“If they’re forgotten, they’ll never be mountains.”

“Mountains or no, they’ve made their mark. Some of us are paths to mountains. That’s my role. I teach you, I give you society. My role is done. You need to walk through the mountains yourself.”

“But you brought me there, you woke me up. What if others could wake up too, because of you?”

“Wake up? Do you mean wake up to their inner worlds? You want me to come there so that others can wake up on the inside, to start to think again, to live life?”

The boy nodded.

The teacher responded: “I’m a social giver. I give society, communication, civilization. I don’t bring people inside themselves. That’s not my role.”

“Doesn’t society start with individuals? And who’s going to do it if you don’t?”

“You.”

“I’m a boy. I’m not even a normal boy.”

“You have to be strange to be a far seer, to be seen from afar. You’re strange, and you’re the one who woke up. You’re all the boys in one, and you see the good, and the good has made you something more. I know it seems like a big task, but you won’t be the only one. There were others before you, there will be some beside you, and there will be many after. Remember all of the mountains? Your weakness, your strangeness, is your strength. You have been alone in your vision, in the depths of the dark ocean, on the heights of the mountain of striking light, in the forest of the record, and along the path of light in the midst of the mountains. You’re the one, because you have aloneness to give to the social, just as I gave society to you.”

“But what can I do?”

“You, me, all of this, is a story. Stories are important, they change people. They change people because stories are real; the events are real, the people in them are real, and the words are real. Thoughts, ideas are the things that change people. Strange thoughts move the world. You need to learn from the mountains—speak from afar.”



As he woke, the boy sat up and looked around the room, shaking slightly from his sleep, nauseated and with a

feeling of not belonging to the world of the senses, like waking from a nap too long taken, yet too short for true refreshment. Silen could be heard in a room close by, making food for the two of them.

“How long did I sleep?”

Silen’s voice came from the next room: “A bit. Both of us were out for many hours.” He brought a few simple items of food into the room to share with Charlie. The two sat facing each other, and began to eat.

“I had a dream,” Charlie spoke, his small mouth half-full.

“A dream? Do you remember it?”

“I was with the other teacher. He was there in the dark. We talked.”

“About?”

“I noticed in the hallways that everything is dark here, and faces are pale. No one seems alive. Even when I see a person smile, it seems like it’s not real, like something is missing. And every eye is on their hands all of the time. Readouts are everywhere, but the screens are more alive than the people. Is there no real light here, no silent stillness and thought, no wind on the trees, no mind in the words?”

“We have an old story that tells that the sun is very far away now. We chose to leave it, not because it was not good, but because we were not. Another story says we’re in transit to a new home, a better world. We’ve lost our light, and replaced it with diversion. It’s partly

my own fault—I built the original interface, the system everyone uses on their readouts. As I told you yesterday, outside this place where we live there is only an ocean of nothing, endless blackness and fiery specks of light. It's not like in your world. We live in a cave, a traveling cage sailing through the stars. We're a generation that never saw the old world, never felt its touch except on the screen and in our programs."

"You only have programs for life?"

"No, we only have programs that mimic life—until you, and my world, your world."

"I feel like the people I've seen here are humans whose bodies are technically alive, but they aren't..."

"Awake?"

"Yes."

"Is that what you talked to the other teacher about?"

The boy nodded.

"What did he say?"

"He wouldn't come to help."

"How could he help?"

"I thought he might be able to wake them up."

"He gives society."

"I know," said the boy.

"I think maybe it's the good that gives life."

The boy nodded again.

Silen continued, "You know, you're not the good. The good is something else. I don't think you can give

life to people any more than I could give life to you. It's beyond us, any of us."

"Don't you think we could do something though?"

"Yes. And we should. When I think about what you might be capable of, I wonder to myself if there is even a place in this story for me? Stuff keeps happening to you and for you and by you, and I can't even explain it. I don't even know what's going on. You're not like a program that's ever been written before and I think it's because you're not a program. You're headstrong, you make up your mind, and you walk headlong into the impossible. I feel like you don't even know what you're doing, until you do it, and it turns out that you seemed to know exactly what you were doing. You're planning things out and yet you're surprising yourself. So do it: Do the same thing now. I don't need to tell you that; you already decided, and you probably worked out a plan to make it happen, and you'll be as surprised as I am when it does."

"Can we talk to people, ask them questions, wake them up?"

"I'm not sure they'll listen, but you already know what you should do, and I think the path is as clear to you as the golden path to your mountain."

The boy smiled as he thought about the mountain. "So, can we go ... now?"

"Where? Who do you want to talk to?"

“I think I want to watch people, to see if they’re ready. If they’re asking questions, looking around, if they’re tired or sad and want something more.”

“Okay.”

The two walked out of the room, down several hallways, out to a long grey-blue corridor with doors along both sides, the ends out of sight. Silen looked to the right and the left, down both directions of the corridor. “This is the main hallway. Everything on New Ark is accessible from here.”

“Can we walk to the end?” The boy walked ahead and to the right.

“Sure. On this side of things, the end is near.”

Part III

PUSHED

1

Dust

The boy stood at the end of the path (or the beginning, depending on the direction one faced). The central hallway opened up before his feet to the transparent crystal-like walkway of an expansive viewing room, glass all around, bright stars shining in every direction excepting the small portal before which he stood, where darkness shone behind from the dim light at the end of the corridor.

"This is beautiful!" He stood looking around at the numberless pins of light in the black. "Where are we?"

"At the end of the hallway." The teacher smiled, he knew this wasn't what the boy was asking.

"Yes, but where is the hallway?" He looked back at the teacher, "and don't tell me 'behind you'—I know where it is relative to me, but what I want to know is where it is, where all of this is, in relation to ... I don't know ... anything, everything."

"Big question."

"Do you know?"

"I doubt if anyone knows. We're here, and I guess that's all. As my teacher used to say: 'A brute fact.'"

"But when I was inside, when you woke me, there was grass and land and singing bending trees and shining air and the great lights and great waters and fast moving waters and hard pouring waters and misty waters ... and mountains."

The teacher tapped his own head.

"In my head? It was just in my head?"

"No, in *my* head. I dreamed it in code, based on the works of other sparks, based in turn on others, and beyond that, I suppose, on some distant forgotten record of a place like that. Whether it was real or imagined, I can only guess."

"It was real if it was imagined."

The teacher smiled.

"What is this thing that we are in?"

"The world."

"This is the world? The whole world?"

"Well, no. You can see out there that the world is beyond this place here. And you can see," he pointed at a dim light overhead, "that there are other worlds out there.

"Those are other worlds?"

"I think they are."

"Can you get to there from here?"

"No, they move, but they don't come closer. Sometimes parts break off and come hurtling toward our

world, but these usually break up in fire before they hit us. Something shoots out at them, a streak and then they're gone."

"You shoot the lights?"

"Something seems to shoot them. Something comes out from this world."

"So lights are shot when the worlds collide?"

"The parts of the worlds that would destroy us. My teacher used to tell us that we are made of them. 'We are the dust of another world.'"

"You made the world where I awoke, right?"

"Yes."

"Did someone make this world, and put it here?"

"I don't know."

"What about those worlds out there?" He pointed a little finger to the brightest.

"Well..."

"If you're dust of another world, don't you want to return to it?"

"Return to the light?" As he said this, a strange feeling settled on him.

"Maybe you could find the one who made you there?"

"But, I'm ... we're not made like your world was."

"How do you know?"

"I guess I don't. But I've seen the place where the children come from, in a room on the far end of this

central corridor. A long bank of small portals allows them to come out. They must be made in there. That must be where people like me started, though I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" The boy's eyes were large.

The teacher smiled. "We share that, don't we? Everyone forgets their youngest childhood days."

"Really? Everyone?"

"Well, I guess I've heard of people who still remember little bits of things from that time, but I think most people forget those days. That's probably why I don't know anything about them, other than where it was in the corridor—I've gone back and seen it, seen little ones walk out through the holes. I could see their shapes behind walls, and there are ways to hear them too, but it's not really something I'm interested in."

"Where you came from? You're not interested? Don't you want to go and see the dust of the other world there, the part of the light that made you?"

"I think my teacher thought the dust was long ago. Ages have passed since then."

"Were you made ages ago?"

"No. I'm still young. I only just started my life," Silen answered.

"So the dust is still where the children come from? There must have been a lot of dust long ago!"

"Or a little that made a lot." Silen smiled.

“Or a lot that made a little, and that little came to life and made the others, like you and the others like you. Life from life, in generations of change and growth.”

“Wait, what did you say?”

“I heard something like that in the mountains. I heard ... but shouldn't you know everything I heard? Shouldn't you know everything in the world where I awoke, if you are the one who made it?”

“I made it from other stuff. I don't know everything that's there. I know very little.”

“So your world, my world, you started it with something else?”

“Yes, I can't create something from nothing!”

“Did you use some of the dust of the worlds?”

The teacher laughed, and finally answered: “The dust of the worlds ... I guess I did. I used our history, our philosophy, our knowledge, the best and the oldest, which are often the same. I put it in the mountains to grow your mind. I didn't expect you to get through the pass ... to use it all up at once.”

“Use it all up? I was only on a path! I walked, my head hurt, and suddenly words came to me, ideas and events; I felt like I was living others' lives with them. It hurt, but I hope I didn't use it up. It's still there, isn't it?”

“Yes. I think so.” The teacher tapped the boy's head. “Up there, in your old world.”

The boy looked worried. "Something won't shoot that world, will it?"

"Shoot it?"

"Yes, when parts of the worlds come close, you said, they are destroyed, to keep the worlds from colliding. Did our worlds collide?"

"I suppose they did."

"Will they destroy each other?"

The teacher was speechless.

"Will my world destroy this world? Or maybe will the dust from part of my world turn to life here?"

"It already has!" The thought shot through him.

"It has?" Charlie looked around. "It destroyed the world? Did I destroy something by coming here? Did you destroy something by starting me and waking me?"

"The dust from your world *is* you, a boulder in the wilderness. I placed the dust, my program. Where life came from, I don't know, but here you are, alive in my world!"

"So I came from dust too?"

"In a way, I guess."

"Is mine the dust of the light, like yours? The dust from the parts of the worlds of light, like yours?"

"I think maybe the light is your life, the dust was made living by the light. I thought it might, through all our experiments, but was never able to keep you

awake, or to awaken you. When the light came, you slept. Until you remembered 'good.'"

"That word 'good,' did it wake you up too?"

"No, I already had that word before I 'woke up.' In my short life, as long as I can remember, it was already there. Somebody must have taught me at some time."

The boy collapsed in front of the teacher as he had earlier, his eyes blank and mouth agape, unconscious on the crystal floor, laid out in the midst of the stars.

2

The Daughter's Tale

The boy was in the thick of the forest, night turning to day. He leaned himself upon the bole of a white skinned tree, the leaves and branches drooping. There he heard a sound as of a woman singing slowly, a dark chant of a sad song:

*The last proud king through blood made lord,
his queen a villain murderer,
The city cursed by tyrant's pride,
and blood now called for just-shed blood.
The son of crowns, too proud to fight,
shame-filled the house of fellow friend,
Another's wife of noblest heart,
raped innocence with vile lust.
The true heart deigned not to be touched,
her soul gave up her flesh, ransom.
Then dark red plunged the self-made wound,
with love, hate's blade made hopeless, laid.*

*In days the crown in blood was crushed
 by seed of people's angry hearts.
 Chaste freedom found, a loss for gain,
 pride swallowed up in public pain.*

And now he heard her voice again:

“So began, in summary, the song of the death of the proud king, the birth of the republic, blood self-sacrifice the seed of liberty. A raped noble wife caught unawares by false king's son and shamed, who killed herself with family's blade, unlocked her terror to her groom, her honor unstained, and her husband's rage the spark of fire in the city that overturned the place of pride, brought kingship to failing ruin, and with his comrades raised a free state, unbounded by tyranny, a republic of iron resolution and bold hearts. The blood of the tyrant begat only blood, and by sword fell exile. But the voice of liberty called out loudest in the dying gasp of purity, self-destroyed through obedience to honor.”



Charlie opened his eyes as he lay on the ground of the observation room, specks of stars all around him. Silen looked down, a worried expression on his face.

“Are you all right?”

“I feel okay. A lot better than last time.”

“Your face is flushed. Are you hot?”

“Was I gone for long?”

"No, you just fell. Just now."

"I dreamed. I heard a woman speak. It was a tale about ... actually, I don't understand it. A proud king, death, liberty, blood."

"The last proud king through blood made lord....' Was that what you heard?"

"Yes." He sat up and began to stand. Silen helped him to his feet.

"That was the beginning of one of the tales of the daughter, the daughter of the social giver," Silen explained.

"Did she write the story?"

"Yes. Well, actually, I wrote it, in my mind, while I was waiting for you, when you were in the dark beneath the waves. It's based on a very old story, from the days of another world."

"The world where you all came from?"

"That's what the stories say."

"Who was the woman, the woman raped by the king's son? Why did she kill herself?"

"Lucretia. She could not live without honor. From her death, the people remembered their own honor, their nobility, and gave themselves for freedom."

3

Ana

The two left the observation room, the lights of lasting darkness shining, and entered the corridor once more. The boy wanted to explore his new world. Charlie walked to the first door on the right; it opened, and he entered, Silen following.

“Curious?” asked Silen.

“In search of serendipity,” Charlie responded.

Inside, the two found another long hallway, with many smaller doors of its own. After walking for some time, they could hear singing faintly emerge from a nearby doorway. The two came to the portal and opened it, peeking their heads inside.

“Hello?” The boy called out quietly.

The singing continued, a young and female voice, some kind of folk tune, repeating a chorus every several lines. The two now entered the doorway and a small dark room opened up before them, tall reams of cloth leaning on the walls.

As their eyes adjusted, they began to see the outline of a figure lying on her back near the far wall on some sort of raised bed or couch that was covered over with a fine wire mesh. A girl was singing to herself, some kind of ancient book before her face.

“Hello?” Charlie spoke again, louder.

The girl, frightened, turned to look at the two.

“Ana?” Silen recognized the young spark. “I heard you were gone?”

“And you!” She jumped up, hit her head on the mesh, and her hair entangled in its wires. As she freed herself from the cover, she came rushing over to Silen and grabbed him in her arms.

Silen could hardly breathe; her grip tightened, his arms crushed at his sides, hers wrapped like a vice around his.

Silen voiced: “I, umm...”

“I’m so glad you’re alive!” She said as she lifted him from his feet. She was a good deal taller than the two boys, Charlie the shortest of the three. As she let Silen loose, Charlie could see the muscles of her exposed arms gleaming in the light of the hall through the open door. Her face was kind and alive and her eyes dark, long brown hair, her hands strong, and her feet always moving, her voice itself was like a song, bright, flowing and full of breath. She had the aspect of an evening breeze. She wore only brown, close on her torso and

legs. She stood back and studied the two. Looking now at Charlie, she asked: "And who are you?"

"I'm..."

"Do I know you?"

"He's Charlie."

"Charlie?" She turned to Silen. "Charlie?" And back to Charlie. "I feel like I know you. Come to the light." She pulled the boy into the hallway, her grip strong on his small arms.

She gasped as his face showed from the hallway lights. "This is the machine!" She released him. "What are you doing ... how?" She backed away to the other side of the hall. "What's going on?"

She looked at Silen, his face peeking back out through the door at them, smiling. She looked back at Charlie. "Are you ... alive?" She came over to Charlie and touched the skin of his arm again.

"I don't know," the boy said. "Are you?"

She smiled, then looked confused, then smiled again. "Whatever you did, you did it." She looked at Silen again, and then rushed to him and hugged him close again, "The ghost!"

The two laughed in the doorway, Charlie looking on.

4

The Wire

The three left the room where Ana had been found and in time came to the white room again, Silen quietly explaining the goings on of the last week, walking Ana through each event in detail, referring to the record on his readout every now and then to fill in the gaps from Charlie's perspective, surprised at times at what he read.

Ana had explained on the route over to the room that she had disappeared after Silen had first gone missing. Without him around, she felt no purpose in continuing work on the experiment, and she had kept to unused rooms in a rarely frequented wing of the corridor, where she had remained covered with wire mesh of her own construction as Silen had taught her to build years ago to avoid the "noise" of the interface. She had spent her waking hours reading and singing, worrying for her friends. In short: hermitage. And this was precisely what had occupied Silen's absence

as well, except that he had also spent time thinking and developing ways and means for the experiment.

Charlie sat on the bed—his old white bed, the bed of the machine—and dangled his legs, fidgeting with the wires and tubes. He looked closely at one particular electrical connection, bringing it up to his eye, and as he did, he hiccuped loudly, accidentally pushing the end of the live wire into his left eye. A sizzling sound shot through the room, and he let out a sharp yelp.

Silen and Ana turned to him, stunned to silence.

“What happened?” Silen asked first, as Ana opened her mouth to ask the same.

“I don’t.... Oh!” The boy rubbed his left eye where a brief spark had jumped from the wire to his eye. “It feels like something is wrong inside,” he said, now holding his hands over his eye.

“Let me look!” Ana grabbed Charlie’s head and used her forefinger and thumb to open the swelling eyelids. She looked deeply into the hurt eye and voiced her worry: “I think you may have done some harm. There’s something that looks loose and floating inside your eye. Can you still see?”

“Yes ... but....”

“What?”

“I can’t see any of the screens in the room.”

“The screens?”

“Yes.” The boy looked around the room with his one eye open, the one in pain. “Everything looks different

in here! Your readouts are gone, the screens are gone, the lights on the walls; it's so different in here! Even the color's changed!"

"What about your other eye?" Silen questioned.

He closed his hurt eye and used only his good eye. Nothing was different now—the room was lit again with the glow of screens, readouts shone all around, characters scrolled. He switched from eye to eye, opening one while closing the other. As he did, the room transformed for him again and again. "Screens, no screens; lights, no lights;" then looking at the monitor by the bed, "characters, no characters. What happened? What did I do?"

"Why did you put that into your eye?" Ana questioned.

"He didn't do it on purpose," Silen said, then turned to Charlie. "Did you?"

The boy smiled. "No! I was looking at it, and I had something in my throat or chest, air of some kind, and I..." He proceeded to make a hiccuping noise.

The two others laughed.

"You hiccuped the wire into your eye?" Ana asked.

Charlie laughed now. "The way you say it makes it sound silly." He smiled at Ana.

"Well, we should have it looked at, though I'm not sure it will help, given our last visit to the clinic." Silen grabbed the two by the hands and walked to the door of the white room.

As the door opened, Charlie peeked his head out into the hall, his good eye closed. The hall looked different now. No screens, no exit sign, no words on doors marking them, no ... ceiling!

“What!?”

The ceiling was missing, and another ascended much higher and was black and all of a dull metallic. He looked at the ground, and that too was slightly set down, a dull blackish grey, with small dots of dark brown evenly scattered. The walls were also covered with these tiny dots. He put his hand to the wall as the two others looked at him in awe, not able to guess what he was up to.

As his hand closed toward the wall, the dots near it lit, slightly glowing, and a brief wave of light appeared around his hand as he felt the wall push back, even before he touched it. “I’m not able to touch the wall!”

He now stepped into the hallway, and as he did, he looked down at his feet, which also never touched the floor, but hovered above, making slight waves of dim light above glowing dots.

“How is this?”

He then opened his other eye, closing his now red and swelling eye, and the hall returned to normal, lit all around with screens and signs, no dots or waves of light in sight. The ceiling was there, the floor, the walls. All was returned.

“What? What are you seeing? Are you seeing something strange?” Silen was in wonder.

“I’m not touching anything.”

“What?” Ana said.

“I’m ... well, you too ... we’re not touching the floor when we walk, when we feel the wall. I think it may be a projection on our eyes, but we’re not actually touching the things themselves. Something is pushing back before we touch them. It’s like waves and pulses of energy are not allowing us to touch the real beyond, and our eyes are not allowing us to see past. The screens and walls—the world we’ve been in—isn’t out here,” he waved his hands around him. “It seems like it’s in here,” he pointed to his right eye, “and also past what we see and feel.”

“I want to see,” Ana said as she pushed back into the white room, grabbing one of the wires from the far side of the bed while supporting herself with her left hand on the bed.

“What are you doing?! Put that down!” Silen called to her.

She stopped, the wire inches from her open eye.

“You can’t do that! Charlie’s accident was just that—a happy accident. What are the odds that your experiment might just leave you blind, or worse yet, dead? That thing has a lot of energy in it. It could stop your heart.” He circled around the foot of the small

bed and grabbed the wire forcefully from her hand. He knew that in a test of strength, he would certainly lose—she was physically not to be challenged—but he also felt that she would listen to reason; women are all in all far more reasonable than men, he thought, more calculating, more patient, more ready to accept a wise thought, and to learn.

This was what he liked about Ana, and wished of himself—a true mind and a true self.

Silen now held the wire in his hand, looking across the bed at Ana. After a moment of silence, he said quietly and almost in a whisper, “I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She straightened and smiled faintly, the left corner of her mouth turned up. “Okay.”

The two looked back at Charlie.

“But don’t you want to see what he’s seeing?” Ana asked.

“I do, but I don’t know how. We may just have to accept it, and learn from him. It wouldn’t be right to hurt ourselves, even for something like this. If we can think of a way to make this happen without pushing a live wire into our retinas, maybe. Some way with less risk.”

Ana asked: “So hiccups aren’t safe?”

Charlie laughed from outside the door.

The laugh carried through the hall. Outside the external door, the cleaner heard the unexpected noise

while pushing a cart past. The cleaner, Geo was his name (this was written on his shirt), removed his hands from the cart and placed them on the external door's window to overcome the glare, and peered into the window to the hall beyond. He saw the boy there, laughing by the doorway to the white room, and recognized him immediately as the machine. The cleaner's hands came back to his sides, his eyes widened and then momentarily went black throughout, his back stiffened straight, and he collapsed, denting his head on the cart as he fell forward.

Unit 467 fatal error showed on the monitor of another.

5

The Fall

They know he's awake now," Silen said quietly. The three were in Ana's dimly lit room in the forgotten wing by the end of the main corridor, covered by the wire mesh, the outer door closed, the three sitting cramped together on the single bed. "He'll tell the others about what he saw."

"But did you see his head?" asked Charlie.

"We don't know what he saw. Maybe he just fell down while he was passing the door," Ana said.

"I don't think that it was a coincidence—that he was just passing the door when Charlie was laughing in the hallway. The crash came directly after."

"I guess I don't think it was a coincidence either," Ana agreed.

"I think he recognized Charlie. That must have been a shock, to see a dead boy walking ... laughing even."

"If he did, he'll tell others, and pretty soon people will be looking for us. For him." Ana looked at Charlie. "Are you okay?"

Charlie was rubbing his eye. "Yes, I guess I'm just tired. I saw a lot of strange things today, on the way here in the corridor."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I don't understand them. I saw some drawings of trees.... I saw some strange writing on the wall, and bright light coming from the end of the corridor, where we looked at the other worlds." He looked at Silen.

Silen placed his hand on Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie looked at the hand. He had never been comforted before.

"It's going to be okay. Why don't you rest, and Ana and I will take care of some things while you are asleep. When you wake up, we can eat and talk. I want you to sleep before your body gives up again."

"Sleep and eat are such sweet words," Charlie answered. He pulled the covers that were on his legs up over his shoulders and ears and buried himself in a nearby pillow, quickly purring like a cat at rest. Ana and Silen looked at each other.

"He's very special." She smiled as she looked back at the covered boy.

From under the covers could be heard a tiny voice: "Ana, can you sing to me while I sleep? Your voice is beautiful." His last words could hardly be heard.

THE FALL

Ana smiled. Several moments later, she closed her eyes and sang a hushed song, like a lullaby, barely audible:

*Sing, sing the song of lights,
when few were words, when small was life,
when two were there, inside the wood,
the innocence surrounded all.
No shame, no sickness, sang the pure,
and on life's path, the master strode.*

*The green above, the life all round,
the named one walked the simple strand
along two rivers, far and wide.
The trees grew thick and full of food,
the two sang silent songs of peace,
and hearts were pure among the trees.*

*Turn now the head, and see the one
who brings destruction, cunning mind,
writhing form among the limbs
and spying on the peaceful love,
twisting with the words of cause,
he willed to break this union's home.*

*The one who heard his voice above
 beheld the knowledge in the tree,
 and though the law forbade the thing,
 betook to enter there and take.
 And took and gave it to her mate,
 the two were one in breaking fast.*

*And to the forest came the lord,
 the cool grass felt his gentle feet.
 The two now hid beneath the leaves.
 The one, he called to hear their sound,
 and frightened, came they trembling out
 to see the master, worried now.*

*Took the blessing, curses gave,
 to each their fruit, of sullen days.
 He spoke to them, and cast them out,
 not to eat and fill with life.
 The trees now closed, to life and love,
 and marked with death the two now strode.*

*A lonely broken world of out,
 and out they went, forsaken dreams,
 promised pain, and toil, and death.
 And death betook them to the grave,
 all these long years since first they sang,
 and now their deaths have come to all.*

Her song ended, a sad look in her lowered eyes.

Silen occupied himself on the floor by the bed with the readout in his hand, working through some problem. He lifted his eyes to the girl in the bed, and said: "That was beautifully sung. Who wrote that?"

"It's an old story." She spoke in hushed tones, not to wake the sleeping boy beneath the covers. "They say in the records of the New Ark that this was based on an even older story, an ancient one that is long and sad, but with an ending that is lovely and full of joy. Of trees and a river, and a lost people made living before a great light."

Ana was a spark of story and song—her help to Silen had been fundamental since the time of their meeting years ago. Her passions had filled Silen's heart with a longing to recreate that old world of which she so often sang, if only in the shadow of his programs.



As Charlie slept, he stepped among the mountains, sentries looming to all sides. His heart ached to be here again. Conversation filled his mind, his thoughts with words; ideas budded, grew, were checked and pruned, and seeded new thoughts, endless life of minds commiserating.

At the end of the pass he looked down on the great forest, sitting silent without breeze.

The forest in his sight, he thought on a shadow memory, an unclear thing, a sight of two trees in a forest, equal in stature, both bearing fruit. Not side by side, but one visible from the other, in the middle of the woods, each in the midst of its own clearing, grass surrounding, the one tree grey-boled and silver-green above, the other white-barked, black leaves hanging. With that image crisp in his thoughts, he awoke in the dark room beneath the covers, wrapped over with mesh.



Charlie sat up to find Ana and Silen sitting head to head quietly whispering to each other by the bed. In their hands were readouts glowing. With two eyes open, Charlie could see the screens and the six sides of the interior of the dark room, and yet also see beyond these to another interior, barren of screens, dotted all around. It was like the experience of holding one hand in front of a single eye, the other uncovered—you can both see the hand, and to the world beyond the hand, as if through the hand.

“You’re awake!” Ana sat up straight from her position beside him, opened the mesh partway, and leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, a tender action meant only to share her affection for the little thing, but that yet scared the boy to such a degree that he pulled quickly

away from her and promptly fell to the ground on the far side of the bed, entangled in covers and mesh.

“What? What?” could be heard beneath the pile.

“Are you okay?” Silen asked, coming over to his rescue.

Ana sat on the coverless, meshless bed. “Sorry.” She smiled.

The boy’s face finally peeked out from the mess, cheeks red, blinking.

6

Found

The three ate a quick and simple meal, and decided to return to the corridor, to keep moving, and to retrace their steps to the white room so that Charlie could show them where he had seen the strange drawings on the true walls behind their facades. As they exited the quiet wing, they came to the entrance at the end of the corridor, and Charlie saw unapproachable light pouring from that once dark portal. He felt he knew that light, and foresaw that he would go to it soon, like the fire of the other world, but for now he felt a call to action within.

“Don’t you want to explore in there? Where you saw light yesterday?” questioned Silen.

“No, not yet. It’s not time yet. Can we go to the ...?”

Just then, several people walked into him, not noticing his presence because of readouts in their hands. Both mumbled something and continued walking, oblivious to the boy’s existence.

"Maybe we don't need to worry about anyone seeing us," Silen said as he and Ana walked from the entrance to the quiet wing into the corridor. The boy gathered himself up from the floor, looked inquisitively at the two who had just knocked him to his knees, and then turned abruptly back to his original path, striding quickly down the corridor away from the light at the end.

Silen and Ana walked slightly behind, and could hear him saying, "It was up here, one to the left, the other to the right, near the entrance to the hall that leads to the wing with the white room."

They neared the place, and the boy stopped in front. He looked to his right. There were large words inscribed on the wall, bold and in red lettering:

Toliman Ark

Silen and Ana looked at the boy and then at the blank wall. "What do you see?" Ana finally asked.

"It says *Toliman Ark*. What does that mean?"

"The centaur's foot," she responded, "from a very old story. It was a sign in the sky the ancients saw as holding hope."

The boy looked back at Silen. "Didn't you tell me, not long ago, that everything in New Ark is accessible from here, from the corridor?"

"Yes. Maybe. I don't remember," Silen responded.

The boy looked from Silen to Ana and back.

"Is this," he said, his palms flat toward the ground, "Toliman Ark?"

"We live in the ark of the centaur's foot?" Ana asked.

"Why wouldn't these words show on the skin, the wall that we see every day?" Silen wondered out loud.

"Would you have noticed if it did show?" Ana asked.

"Probably not. But why have false walls?"

Charlie said: "Maybe the New Ark is the new inner skin, hiding the old?"

They all stood motionless, Silen looking to the floor, Ana to the ceiling, and Charlie beyond, further down the corridor.

"There may be more by the signs of the trees," Charlie finally said as he began to walk away from the other two.

Silen looked at Ana. "What's going on? Why are there false walls? Why is the sign covered up?"

"Maybe we're dreamers, and he's the only one awake?" Ana said, pointing to Charlie. She continued, "Our world isn't what we thought it was. We can't even touch or see the real."

Charlie, who was now several spans away and looking at one of the walls, answered her, still staring at something past the false wall. "Just because it's there behind what you touch and see doesn't mean it's the only thing that's real. What you touch and see is real. It's just that there is something *behind* it, something

beyond." He touched the wall. "Reality doesn't have to be flat—it seems like there are layers."

"That's it! I want to see too!" Silen cried out in frustration. "We should go back to the white room and do the same as Charlie with the wire, no matter what the risk."

Ana put her hand on his shoulder. "No. What he did was an accident, and it would probably only hurt or kill us. You were right to stop me before."

"It would be worth it! To see beyond."

"Maybe. But only if it worked."

"I have an idea," Charlie said quietly.

"What? What did you say?" Silen asked, frustrated.

"I have an idea ..." louder now. "What if you and Ana could build something that would connect me and both of you together through the interface ... while we are outside of the white room?"

"Sure," Silen began, twitching his fingers as he made calculations silently in his head. "We could patch a connection through the corridor's lesser node, run our own private interface remotely, and use our readouts to.... I just realized that we don't have readouts, just something in our eyes that project them...." His eyes moved to his hand, a dazed look on his face. "Is it nanotech? That's ancient. Where would that come from? Sorry, what were we talking about?"

"Connecting together remotely," Ana responded.

“Right. And then we could see ... that’s your idea right?” Silen asked, looking at Charlie. “You want us to see through the interface, through your eyes, through these walls.” He placed his hand on the nearby wall where *Toliman Ark* lay beneath. “We’ll see through you?”

Charlie looked back at him, hopeful. “And....”

“What?”

“Could we, I mean, do you think it’s possible to turn these walls off, so we can get beyond them?”

Silen’s eyebrows came together. “Why would we want to do that?”

“I think I found a door.” Charlie looked at them, then at the other side of the corridor. “Oh....” He walked to the other side, putting his hand on the opposing wall. “Two doors.”

7

Decisions

It took only half a day for Silen and Ana to piece together a “walking eye,” as they called it, an extremely small piece of hardware that clung to the top of Charlie’s left ear and delivered limited neural signals from Charlie’s optical neural processing sensors to a remote node, where they were cast back to the readouts of Silen and Ana through a local node. The two attached the piece to Charlie’s ear through a small incision already present which had partially healed over but was still partially open.

Charlie sat on the little bed in the white room staring at the readout beside him, blinking his eyes one after another, making the world change with each blink. Finally, the setup was complete, and Silen stepped back to give Charlie a look from the front.

“Does it feel okay?”

Ana knelt and gave Charlie a hug while he sat.

“What was that for?” Charlie asked.

“I feel like today is the end somehow.”

"The end? What do you mean?"

"I have this dark sad spot in me. And I've only known you for a little." She half spoke to herself.

She straightened and stood by Silen in front of Charlie, both looking down at the boy.

Silen looked at his readout. "Okay, this is it. It shouldn't hurt, but it might cause a fuzzy feeling in your head, and your stomach might feel sick for a while." He made a gesture with his hand in front of his readout, and the system came to life. That is, it showed both Silen and Ana reflected back to themselves from his readout, a readout absent from the image. The room in the periphery looked different, and as Charlie looked around at the room for them, they began to see the world beyond.

Ana gasped.

Silen's mouth opened and nothing came out.

With a half-smile on his lips, Charlie let out: "Things are not merely what they seem."



Back at the doors in the main corridor, all three could now see what Charlie saw, the images of the trees on opposite sides of the hall, one green, one black, and clear thin lines outlining doors. Beneath one door, Silen noticed a marking on his readout, and as Charlie came closer to inspect the marking, he saw that it was

writing in tiny script, several inches below the bottom of the door, below even their own false floor.

"It says *Life*." Charlie rose and ran to the other door, and exclaimed: "This one says *Knowledge: The good, evil revealed*."

"Life and knowledge?" Ana asked. "In the *Beralance* there was a story about those two, I don't remember the details. I think it was the basis of the song I sang to Charlie. Can you two stay here? I'll be right back." She rushed away, her hair flowing behind her.

"Where are you going?" Silen asked.

"The quiet wing, where I was staying. I think I have a written copy of the story there, taken from the museum."

"Okay, but come back as soon as you find it. I want to figure out a way to get these open, and I need you." As Silen said this, several people walked up from behind him, almost knocking him and Charlie over. The walkers shuffled past the two boys, eyes on readouts in their hands. Charlie and Silen looked around them. Ana was gone. Only Charlie and Silen remained.

The two looked at each other, then at the doors.

"Knowledge and life?" Charlie began: "What do you think they are?"

"I think we need to worry about getting *to* them first. How are we going to get past these false walls?" Silen put his right hand on the wall and sat facing the knowledge door. Charlie sat across from him beside the

life door, facing with his back on the wall that covered its hidden outline.

Suddenly, a flicker.

The readout in Silen's hand disappeared for a brief moment, the hallway lights went off and on, and several alarms could be heard in the distance of the corridor. Another storm? And now, instead of merely flickering, the entire hallway rattled, shook beneath and beside them, quaking and shuddering. It felt like the world was collapsing around them; even their own bodies felt somehow strange, as if falling.

At the first flicker, Charlie's back fell into the door, and Silen's hand fell, and the floor skipped down, the false floor gone for an instant, both sitting on the other floor beneath for a brief moment. With great presence of mind, the two looked at each other, then slammed their fists and feet at the small circles on the face of the floor and wall, each removing or breaking a handful. As the flickering and shaking slowed, the two found themselves in small absences of false walls and floor, tiny canyons in the surface of the corridor.

"Help me on this one." Silen grabbed a short wire from his pocket and began to push it below the false wall still covering the door, breaking off the dots on the wall beyond as he did so.

Charlie could see small parts of the tree design on the face of the hidden knowledge door coming into view. "Shouldn't we decide which door to open first?"

"Let's break the fields around them first, then we'll be able to see what we have."

"We can already see."

"You can see. I can only see through you."

"I think we should start on the life door."

Silen stopped his work. "The life door? Why? Why not this one?"

"If what is beyond the door is what is indicated below each, shouldn't we choose the life door?"

"Why? Why not knowledge? I think I'd rather know the good and evil revealed than have life. And I think you would too."

"But I've seen good, and I don't want to know evil."

"But to know is ... to live."

"To know is to live? I thought to live is to live!?"

"Don't you want to know? To know what all of this is about, what it's for? For instance, why we are trapped in this world by the stars? Who put us here? And why are we surrounded by these false walls?" He began picking at the circles inside the wall again, frantically opening up more of the door.

"You think what's behind that door can tell you all of that?"

"We have to try," Silen said, still working. "My whole life, everything I've done, is to know."

"But what about the other door? If all of that is in this door, what about the other door? What about

the old songs, what about the lord of the forest who said ...?”

Silen stopped, turned, and raised his voice. “It’s just life! I’m already alive!”

Charlie stopped his argument, slowly walked to Silen, took the small wire from his hand, and began to break the circles on the door.

Love and loyalty.

As Charlie worked, Silen reached for another wire from his pocket, and began to do the same. An hour later, both *knowledge* and *life* were uncovered.

The two sat now, looking from one door to the other.

“Made your choice?” Silen asked quietly.

“Okay. We’ll open the knowledge door. But how do we open it?”

Silen stood and helped Charlie to his feet. They stood by the door with the black tree, and Silen placed his palm in the middle. A hissing sound came from the sides, and the door moved inward, then slid quickly to the left and out of view. All was dark inside. Charlie took a step in, and the room lit up. The door adjusted itself silently behind him and closed with another hiss. All of this happened so quickly that Silen stood still in the corridor, stunned.

Just then, Ana came into view down the long hallway, yelling something and raising her hands, rushing toward Silen, who fell to the ground, to his knees, hands on his face. He mumbled, “No.”

DECISIONS

He had seen something on the other side, in that brief moment of opening and closing and light; a red creature stood on the other side, four legs, covered in large scales, a long neck and a tail, head forward and covered in horns, something like a smile on its sharp toothy face.

He knew it as he saw it; it had shocked him to stillness. A creature from the old stories. But the boy was in there with it.

Silen's hand went to the door ... silence ... locked in, locked out.

8

Inner Rooms

Charlie stood, knees shaking, looking at his own feet. He stood still for minutes. He could hear nothing but breathing, his and another's.

"Lift your eyes, and see me," the thing in front of him called smoothly.

"I've made the wrong choice," Charlie said as he looked back toward the door.

"Choice? What choice is there? If you want back out, you must go forward."

As Charlie turned around to reach for the door, he saw sharp scales of the red creature's long tail bar the entrance. He turned back to face the thing, both eyes closed. He faced his fears and opened an eye, one eye only, the hurt eye, the eye that did not see false, and as he did he chuckled to himself. He now opened both eyes.

"Why do you laugh?"

"I know what you are."

"So you have been here before? You have that knowledge?"

"I have not."

"Then why do you think you know me?"

"I know you're false." Charlie walked, calmly as possible, past the red creature in the center of what he could see now was a large room filled with tiny lights on the walls and ceiling, like stars, words scrawled all between the lights on the walls. He walked straight to the left where a console was on the wall beside a seat.

"Is this where you sit, when you look at us all?" Charlie could see, from his hurt eye, the view of hundreds of people, from the perspective of their own eyes, there on the large screen. Most of what he saw was readouts in a hundred hands. Games, moving pictures, talking heads, scrolling text about the status of every friend of the ones holding the readouts.

"What are you talking about?" the creature asked.

"The console." He pointed at the screen.

The creature's eyes grew large. "You see nothing!" It bellowed: "I am here to bring you knowledge." It turned its head to point to the side of the room opposite the door, where there was a very small clear sphere in a small stand on the ground, surrounded by thick flat white lines around it on all sides, and the floor was red-colored within the area bounded by the lines. "When you touch that, you will see."

"I think you've touched it already, and this is now your prison."

The great creature laughed. "You know nothing yet."

"You've been here so long, you've convinced yourself you are a beast, a great terrible dragon. I see you though, and you're just a simple thing, one of us. I think you've believed your illusion too long."

"How do you see? What do you see?"

"I see that knowledge is not the choice, not the right one."

"Knowledge? It's not just knowledge. It's power, it's control, it's true life! It's every dream and fantasy. And it's knowledge of what is truly good, and what is truly evil, past the appearance to the real."

"I can see you are old. I can see you are not what you appear to be." Charlie leaned toward the console. "I can see that your knowledge is real, but it's false. And I can also see the *Off* button." He said this as he leaned further and hit the off button on the console. The lights went out for a moment, and when they returned, an old man stood before Charlie, bent with age, rage in his eyes. The console was now black, both eyes could see it, the small lights on the walls were gone, but the writing remained.

The old man looked down at himself, surprise in his eyes. "Is this me? What happened? What am I? Give me back the knowledge, it is mine!" He hurried to the

clear sphere on the ground opposite the door, just as Charlie ran the other way, reaching the door again and placing his palm on its center. As he did, the hiss sounded again, and the thing opened; he stepped out to his friends beyond, and it closed behind him.

Silen and Ana, eyes wide, beheld the door slide away unexpectedly. Charlie emerged, a smile on his face, and behind him, an old man bent to touch something on the ground. As the door snatched shut behind the boy, the aged man became a red creature again, and small lights glowed out from all around that room once more, then only light through cracks, then a closed door, black tree marking its face.

Charlie breathed heavily. "That was close."

Ana grabbed him up, and Silen looked still at the door. "What just happened? Our readouts failed, you ... came out ... and that thing ... it..."

"He."

"He?"

"His name is Antigon."

"How do you know that?" Ana put him down.

Charlie responded: "It was on his shirt."

The three laughed.

"He must have been one of us, like the cleaner, but not a spark." Charlie paused. "To life?" He pointed at the other door.

"Aren't you afraid of what might be there?" Ana asked.

Charlie shook his head from side to side.

"To life!" The other two said, looking at each other, all three walking to the other door. Silen placed his hand on the center of the door with the green tree now, but nothing happened. Ana tried and nothing. The two looked at Charlie.

"Okay. I'll try too." He placed his palm on the center, high above his head, and the door silently opened inward. All three stepped into the dark void beyond, their steps echoing in the distance, as lights came on high above them. It was a very large room, like an enormous storehouse, with high ceilings twenty times the height of a man. In the middle was an enormous pile of broken items, things that looked like shelves, packages large and small, broken clear containers, dented metallic tubes, torn cloth. All smashed, torn, battered. All useless.

"This is life?" Silen asked as he stepped further into the expansive room.

The three split up in search of anything that would tell them what this place was or what it was for. Eventually, they circled around and found themselves on the far side together.

"Maybe life is meaningless?" Silen thought aloud.

"Maybe this isn't really life? Maybe it's supposed to be somewhere else?" Ana said, looking at the pile.

"We have the mountain," Charlie pointed at the pile, "where are the trees?"

The three walked together back toward the door, the mound of rubbish to their right. A mess was strewn over the ground where they walked.

"What's this?" Charlie bent toward something by his feet. He lifted a tiny thing, smaller than the tip of his pinky, toward his face, holding it up between his forefinger and his thumb.

Silen and Ana came in close to examine it. Neither could see anything in Charlie's fingers. Ana squinted in the dim light, then looked at her readout, and saw the tiny object clear as day. She said: "It looks like a ... like maybe it's a ... seed?"

"A seed?" Charlie looked at her. "A little thing that starts a plant? I thought that maybe it was dust from another world." He looked at Silen, and offered the seed to him, but Silen motioned for him to keep it himself. Charlie reached down and grabbed a piece of ripped cloth from the ground, wrapped the seed in it, and placed it carefully in his pocket.

That was it. Nothing else in this room, it seemed, except rubbish, perhaps the result of some cataclysm of long ago. No tree, no sphere of life.

Where they did not look was up. And if they had, this would have been a different story.

As the three left the room, Ana remarked, "I think someone or something must have destroyed life. I don't think it should be like this. What do we do now?"

Charlie walked ahead of the others to the door, and peeked his head out, looking both ways down the corridor. The two others stood beside him.

“What now? Where does our story go now? I thought the dream of blood and liberty was meant for me. That I was meant to give....” Charlie wondered.

“What did you say?” Ana asked.

“I...”

Three large adult men walked briskly up the hall, saw Charlie’s head peeking out of what looked to them like a mess of broken wall, and began to run to them.

Spark Silen Arcturius stepped directly in their path and walked straight toward them with an air of confidence.

“Are *you* responsible?” one of the men shouted.

“Let me introduce myself to you. I’m spark....” The three men grabbed Silen, forcing him off his feet, twisting him around and binding his arms behind his head, then wrapping his head with a large metal band.

“Don’t move or you’ll harm yourself,” one man said, as Silen struggled to speak. They dragged him upright between two of them, and took him toward a far wall. One of the men produced a handheld something that he touched to the metal band on Silen’s head, which immediately jerked him to the wall and left him suspended, feet dangling, his arms in the band on his head above and behind him, and the band somehow

attached and suspended from the wall. A muffled noise could be heard from the struggling spark, his mouth covered by the oversized band, which capped his head and went below his jaw and back from there to the back of the head where his hands were contained. The pain was overwhelming.

"This one is detained," one man barked to the other men. "Get the others, and bring them here to me."

One of the other men had already gone on to inspect the doorway of the room where Charlie had peeked out; the man touched the edge of the false wall where it was broken, putting his hand around the edges of the open door. Beyond, inside that new room, he saw only a dark abyss. "Where did this come from?" he asked aloud. As the other man came up behind him, he asked: "What happened here? Did they destroy the corridor?" He cursed and looked at the other man. "Do you think that was what caused the anomaly?"

"The anomaly?"

"The momentary break in energy. The readout flickers, the lights, the alarms. You haven't been sleeping, have you?"

"Well, I..."

The third man by Silen yelled again, and the two were off, running down the corridor toward the quiet wing where they had seen the girl and boy escape.

Earlier, as Silen had pushed his way toward the three men in the hall, Ana recognized immediately that

they would need to seek cover and escape. Charlie had started to follow Silen, but Ana grabbed him by the arm and pulled him forcefully in the other direction. As she did this, instead of resisting, he fainted, making their escape even less likely. She quickly grabbed his crumpled frame from the floor, threw him over her shoulder, and ran as fast as she could.



And in his dream, Charlie walked in the mountains again, breathing their air, filling with their silent words. But now words came audibly to his ears:

In the days of the red star, when the world first began to fall, the journey complete, those awake were few, and all were at inward war.

Antigon had set himself the new leader, in defiance of their homeward goal, to charge their world into the dark night, away from hope, and to entomb the few to sleep again. But they willed not to sleep, and they wished the journey ended. And so he gave them something they were never to touch; by entering a dark place in the bowels of the world, he pursued inner knowledge to his shame, and brought them too, and wrought destruction on the other room where all was poised for life.

The journey complete, the life would be necessary on that far world, but all was destroyed, and Antigon

locked himself inside the room where knowledge was, entangled in his conscious web, in his eyes the eyes of all others. And web he weaved till all were caught by a new sleep introduced, uncounted unseen creatures of the machine—mastered by the hand of he who held the sphere—entered all the flesh of man, and by that hand wrought his will.

Antigon had stormed the door of knowledge, and from that room emerged a great red monster, killing, stealing seeds of life, destroying hope. Much blood was spilled in times of war.

But all creatures must sleep.

And as Antigon slept in his power, the true leader entered the world, and brought a simple message of escape to hope, and woke other sparks to life. The sparks were his, to follow him, who had lived ages ago and now awoke to find their journey's conclusion.

But the dragon awoke, and by force of choice the people pushed their hope away, sent the message and the messenger back to where their dead hope yet lived, and killed him to their world.

He would return, and as he left, he engineered the monster's capture, his power made cage.

The faithful among the sparks were killed through the Protector's Hand, gifts of sight and sound they received from the dragon's hand unknown, their own creations turned against them, unknowingly brought them to ruin, early death, and hope lost.

But beyond and again, the returning one sent more words ignored, within and without, caused changes upon the world they inhabited, their ship among the darkness. Plunging to that well of land beneath, Toliman's earth continued pulling, breaking them closer with waves of gravity. And lights were sent, energy bundles as messages to escape, first ignored, and then later shot from the skies surrounding, lights extinguished to dust.

Children of the machines were created: healers, cleaners, conversation friends, and guards, made by sparks to fill the void of hope; they fulfilled the whims of the sparks for a time, leaving them workless, to fill their time with other hope, but hope cannot long be counterfeited. Soon sparks left off this building, and explored within and pushed the children of the machines to spark them to true life, but they would not, could not live.

And so came the new sleep, the interface's unintended consequences, seemingly infinite connections to none knew what. Like a drug, the connections spread and conquered minds and lives, and brought a sleep of ages.

Still, the children woke in the chamber of birth, pulled from sleep and pushed to live, sparks all given gifts from the Protector's Hand, the walls of the world long changed and covered over, guaranteed long use through forced virtuality, the real beneath

still undisclosed, hidden in the halls, and the old rooms covered over, forbidden, all but their general contours forgotten. From stories to legends to myths to fairy tales, the truths were veiled beneath, though still they pushed silently upon the minds of sparks.

But the sleep of ages would not be, for a mind awoke, in seeking found, creative dreamed another and awoke himself, and awakening, brought the dead to wake the living, unmask the unknown demon, free the prisoners, open the door.

And at the last crash, I will come again soon. Be ready.



In the quiet wing, the boy and girl sat covered by the wire mesh, beneath a blanket, behind closed door. The two men outside would only have needed to open each door in the hall, and they would have found their lost fugitives straightaway. But the two searchers trusted their readouts instead of their eyes. Nothing on the readouts meant no life in the hall. "They must have gone somewhere else already?" one man remarked to the other outside the door. Never opened, never found. So they huddled, waiting.

Many minutes later, Ana quietly spoke. "Are you okay?"

"I am. I'm sorry I couldn't ... I tried to help Silen, but I'm too weak." He pulled the cover off their heads, "Do you think we can save Silen *now*?"

"I'm afraid not. He's probably been put to trial, which should be fast, given the rarity."

"Trial? For what?"

"Destroying the corridor. Causes for alarm and energy failure. The disaster of the Broadturn experiments. Harm to the cleaner in the hall. And you."

"Me?"

"Walking dead."

"Is that not allowed?"

"It's not even possible. Society has never been friendly to the impossible, when it happens."

"If it happens, doesn't that make it possible?"

"I suppose."

"Then let's try," the boy said.

"Try what?"

"Try to save Silen. I could not live without Silen. Others die for honor; I would die for him."

9

Trial and Death

The trial was brief, the sentencing even more so. “You are judged guilty of all incidents related to the Broadturn experiments, including energy failures, harm to fellow sparks and others, the recent untimely death of spark Radden Shapiro, the disappearance of spark Anastasia Solarius, and tampering with the remains of a spark, introducing destructive forces into this world, bringing about the anomaly, and for anti-technology.”

“Anti-technology? But technology is what I build! I only ever sought the truth!”

“Silence! There will be silence as your sentence is read.” The darkness was complete in the trial room; no light was admitted for judging and sentencing: Justice is blind. A false booming voice—false for anonymity, booming for authority—and the breathing of the many members of the jury surrounding Silen were all that could be heard in the darkness.

“For your crimes against society, you are sentenced to death. Not your death. The death of the young spark. He must be silenced. And you will be placed in forced exile for the remainder of your short life. You are so judged.”

Murmuring erupted from around him, and then a whispering crowd agreed, one after another consenting with the repeated words, “You are so judged.”

Then silence.

“These, your peers, so judged. What is your defense?”

“I ask the court to reconsider. To judge my body, not that of another, for the results of this, the work of my mind.”

“This cannot be,” the booming voice enjoined.

“May I say one more word to my society before this sentence is fulfilled?” Silen pleaded.

“It will be so,” the voice in the darkness said.

Just then, the noise of a door opening and footsteps. A small voice said: “Wait! Judge me!”

“Is this the young spark?” the booming voice asked. “Then we will allow you your word to society, and afterward, your sentence will be brought to pass. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But save the boy!” cried Silen. A nearby guard slapped Silen roughly across the face.

Charlie was moved by other guards to where Silen was sitting bound. Men ordered Charlie to a seat nearby, invisible in the darkness.

The booming voice again spoke. "Ready the youngest, and connect Silen Arcturius, no longer to be spark, to the interface." Silen's readout now glowed blue in his face as he spoke a simple message to every spark in every room and hallway through every screen and readout.

"Greetings to you, my society. I am Silen Arcturius, creator of the interface. I ask you for your attention, so that I might give you one last gift. I have been sentenced to exile, and I will go there when I finish speaking. But worse, far worse than this, a young boy will be put to death here in my absence, and I ask you to reconsider. Yet if not, to do what you will. My hope remains, not just here, but in the beyond. And if I and my friends have helped to show you even a slight glimmer of that beyond, my hope is that you will be changed.

"It is not ignorance that is our problem in this world—it is life, and life seems to be missing. When what you have called the anomaly occurred earlier today, you saw your hand and not your readout. That hand is alive, and is connected to your living arm, which is connected to your living chest, your source of breath, and your heart, that engine of life within. And beside you, another living thing. Wake up. Wake up."

All went black on the readout.

The connection was broken.

Silen could hear beside him the boy being given the sentence: death. A small slightly glowing pill.

As Silen was pushed to the door, he could hear the boy moaning, dying in the dark, surrounded by people, yet alone. And as he left the dark room for the blinding light of the hall, Silen heard a paroxysm of motion from inside the room, as someone struggled with the boy to keep him from doing some unseen act.

The boy had pushed his hand into his pocket after he had taken the pill that was to bring him death, and in the first throes of death, his mouth foaming, he unwrapped the seed from his pocket, and a guard seated behind him noticed this activity from the sound, and attempted to stop the boy.

But the boy would not be stopped. He pushed the seed to his mouth, spit the foam gathering on his lips, and swallowed the seed. Men and women were now standing and shouting at each other from around the boy as the door closed behind Silen. Now only the silence of the hall.

And all the while, Ana had made her brilliant scheme to bring Silen to safety. She instructed Charlie in his role, and she had recruited several sparks, friends of hers and Silen's, to help Silen to escape after the sentencing. This they did in the hallway immediately after the door closed, pushing the guards into an open door on the side of the hall, then closing the door and rushing off with Silen.

Ana was in a nearby room at a console, coding furiously, connecting Charlie's walking to the local node

inside the trial room, and connecting this in turn to Silen's connection for his earlier public speech over all readouts. She now had a connection to every readout; Charlie's neural implant was broadcasting. She would show the world through his eyes, the eyes of his mind.

As he died in that room, surrounded by the judges of society, darkness all around, Charlie closed his eyes, and fell to sleep in a last spasm, the frantic voices around him fading into the darkness. And now light. Light above, the ground beneath, he stood on the grass by where he once was wakened by the fire.

He looked around him, into the sunrise at his back.

And he took a seed from his pocket, a dreamed seed like the seed he had swallowed just moments before. And as the light beamed on him from the new-rising sun, through light and clouds above and behind him, he looked to the ashes of the fire that had burned him into his body, the body that was now dying, and he took the seed in his little fingers, and planted the tiny thing in the dirt beneath the ashes. The wind blew, and the boy fell. The lights extinguished.

A bell sound rang and darkness showed on all readouts in every hand in every hall and room. The anomaly had returned, the lights flickered, and now all people saw only their own hands, empty.

After that public speech, and the vision of the boy at the end, silence reigned throughout the halls. The

false was seen for what it was. And light streamed from the room at the end of the great corridor.

And at the ceiling of the room with the green tree marked on the door, a knocking sound. They had found their way to hope's end, and now it knocked at the door.

And now a new light shone bright as that of the room at the end of the main hallway. A head could be seen in silhouette peering to below into that greatness of a former storehouse through a small hatch in the ceiling. The light from beyond that hatch was a sun. The sun of the centaur's foot.

"Hello?" it called to the room below. "Will you let me enter?"

Their journey was at an end.

Epilogue

The boy that woke, the mind that pushed to live in the good, grew to be a man on that new world, the seed of life antidote to the sentence of death within him. He was a new kind.

His two friends lived in happiness on that far land, Toliman's earth, their society awakened from their slumbers to the light of the sun of the centaur's foot. The new ark shed its skin and those within disembarked to that new home without, minds and bodies unbound.

Not all left. Most remained where they were. But a small community emerged to the fiery light of day and earth and tree and stream, ocean and mountain, life.

Others were in the world before them; the journey ended for them long ago. For ages they had sought access to that hull in the sky, to bring it to its home, the goal of its creation, to hope fulfilled. But something had gone awry inside that ark, and it slept still, and in sleeping, it shot out from its hull at all intruders from without, every message ignored then destroyed. Until the day the world fell when hope awoke, and that long fall produced great storms, and the energy changes could not be sustained inside the ark. Their world then

gently crushed unknowing upon a far shore of a great ocean, at the edge of the civilization of the stars.

They would walk the earth again and for the first time, beneath a new sun, their journey at peace, the light at the end of their long dark tunnel.

About the Author

Rollie Byron is a philosopher and the author of *Philosophical Notes: On Knowledge & Being* (forthcoming) and *I Found You: Finding God at the Center of My Questioning* (2026).

