

Prelude

to a Change of Mind



a novel

by Robert Stikmanz

Second Edition
The First Book in *The Lands of Nod*



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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is coincidence, except of course in the instance of those small, non-human individuals who have colonized the author's mind through acts of psychic hegemonization. No coincidence in that.

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Dedicated to the late Ricardo Sánchez,
an intuit in the grand style

Acknowledgments

WERE IT NOT FOR THE FRIENDSHIP, encouragement and example of many, this book either would not have been conceived or would be vastly different. The world in which this account is set was discovered in 1984—in the context of another book still in development—at a time when I was collaborating in business, art, politics, music, and publishing with Michael Ambrose. As influences on *Prelude to a Change of Mind*, Mike and his science fiction/weird fiction/fantasy journal, *The Argonaut*, must be rated huge.

Other writers, publishers, and particular works to whom or which I owe an incalculable debt include:

Ed Buffaloe, editor/publisher of *Aileron* and poet of *The Nolan's Ghost* and *Xlate*;

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and the late Albert Huffstickler, poet of (among others) *Night Diner*, *Walking Wounded*, *The Old Man*, and *The Smell of Distance*.

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Lastly and most inclusively, *la compañera de mi vida*, Janel Nye, reads all with fresh eyes, never stints opinion or advice, and challenges every hurdle with the spirit of possibility. To her, *besos, abrazos, and muchísimas gracias*.

Robert Stikmanz
Austin, Texas

Editor's Note

AS ASSIDUOUS AS I AM IN my pursuit of the elimination of error as old Diogenes for the glow of an ideal truth, I am reminded by the wrr of a wandering thrm that mystery is no error & flaws are but a frame for brilliance; that nothing is truly lost nor sorrow a diminishment of transcendent beauty. Thus, dear reader, Master Stikmanz, in his linguistically studied & peripatetically slipper'd ginger way, assured me that the sundry variations & capitalizations of all the creatures of the Noddish world, and I use that term most loosely as Nod is but the name of the game, nay, the holy oracle, by which certain devotees of the co-existent universe, and that too is a loose descriptor for the intersecting realities described in this first foray into said intersecting realities, one of which is this self-same world whereby you read these scribblings, speak of things as they are were & ever never will be, are exactly as they should be in this transconsensual moment. So rest easy, the thrm'm await to ease all pain. Just have a pipe with Jackanapes, crank up the zoot horn croons, & slip most sweetly into the true world of the brilliantly unreal. The editing has been done.

Ric Williams

Foreword to a Prelude

THE WAIL OF A TENOR SAX, the thump of a bass, the gnashing of synth keyboards and guitars, the metronomic rhythm of a drum machine augmented by random whackings of old Ford hubcaps, cast-off electrical junction boxes and miscellaneous resounding found stuff uncorked and decanted in a wedge-shaped office tucked into the corner of a senescent strip mall at the savagely urban intersection of Interstate 35 and U.S. Highway 290 in what in 1984 was still northeast (as opposed to central) Austin. By day the space was a small, quiet, not-prosperous-enough commercial graphic arts enterprise adjacent to a busy franchise print shop; by night it transformed into an eerily lit studio production space seething with patch cords, speakers, tape recorders, and mix boards—the entire room mic'd so taut with reverberation that the mere twist of a bottle cap could become inspiration for another improvisational jam, length and direction unknown until it happened.

Other times, the studio served as meeting hall and newsletter production bullpen for the raggedy-ass Socialist Party of Texas, its torchbearer the anarchist urban gorilla Cleveland Maxwell, who provided the beer and—with Rob and other heads—plotted revolution. No small coincidence that the member rosters of SP-TX and Jam Cadre were nearly identical.

Such was part of the context in which the someday to be Robert Stikmanz, but then still just Rob Lewis, clacking away on a primitive word processor so obscurely named that it will likely never be curated in the Museum of Obsolete Tekker Knowledges, wrote the primordial draft of the story out of which came the novel you're about to read. In between sharing duties of our graphics studio and musical sessions of aforementioned loose-knit group of friends known as Jam Cadre, Rob would retreat to the dim inner office, a glass-enclosed room dominated by monolithic phototypesetting equipment, to huddle before his C/PM computer and tap away at the story.

In earlier times and places, Rob and I, some of the Cadres and other friends collaborated on sundry magazines, chapbooks, poetry readings, and arts events. The eye of the vortex was a thin sliver of the student-infested edge of the Hyde Park

neighborhood just north of the UT-Austin campus. There, during the gathering night of the first Reagan term, neighbors and friends drifted in and out of each other's houses and lives, a few congenial spirits coming together for periods of time brief and long to collaborate on creative projects. Some souls went their own ways earlier or later, a few went into and out of business together, others into and out of closer relationships. It was a time of all-night chess games, spinning the platters, pick-up afternoon baseball in the neighborhood park, late-night poetry readings, wee-hour excursions to diners and cafes—and casting about for meaningful ways to resist or subvert the oppressively dominant paradigm.

Some of us were not just writers and poets: we wanted to be publishers. I'd been issuing the small-press SF/fantasy zine *Argonaut* since 1972. Along about 1982, I got together with Rob, Mark Smith, Rhandon Hurst, and a few other like-minded individuals to publish the literary popular-culture journal *Window Magazine*. At the same time, Ed Buffaloe and Michael Gilmore were producing their wonderful *Aileron*, still one of the finest literary zines ever to come out of central Texas. And over and around and above us all was poet Albert Huffstickler—"Huff"—the coffee-drinking, cigarette-smoking, free-spirited genius loci of the Austin literary scene, such as it was or has ever been.

Later, in actual commercial business together as Liberty Graphics, Rob and I produced a number of chapbooks for Huff, including the legendary *Night Diner* and the first incarnation of his multiform chapbook *The Old Man*. We also continued *Argonaut* and did other short-run print efforts as we found time and money. And, naturally, we discovered, like so many writers and artists before us possessed of a burning ambition to publish, that literary action and the pressures of running a small business rarely mixed in one's favor—but damn, it sure was nice to have our very own production studio and ready access to cheap printing!

But through it all, Rob kept writing.

In time, of course, Life Went On: the band dissolved, the business folded, and the friends followed separate ways. Around the end of 1988 Rob married and left for a period of exile in Iowa. I kept *Argonaut* going for a few more years, finally ending its two-decades-plus run in 1995. In the late 1990s Rob

could no longer resist the call of Austin. He got unmarried and moved back. As he told me recently, he gave up “trying to write bad poetry” to engage his formidable talents in more interesting prose directions, the fruit of which you hold in your hands.

The foregoing contextual digression may not mean much to you unless you were a part of it or part of other times and places like it, but perhaps it reveals something about inspirations behind the present work. As may be inevitable in the case of a work born from a swelling mix of liberation politics, raucous noise, creative labor, and riotous fun, your ultimate interpretation of *Prelude to a Change of Mind* will differ from mine and everyone else’s. Probably you have never before read anything quite like it. But stick around. I guarantee you will be hearing much more from the changing mind of Mr. Stikmanz.

Michael Ambrose
Editor & Publisher, Argo Press

One



THE TINY WOMAN STEPPED FROM THIN air and darted off without a look to see who followed. In a burst of speed, she dropped to all fours, galloping across the cabin and through a door to a second room at the back. Her way was obstructed and her path confused by increasing dozens of her kind coming out of the air to fill the log walled structure. She zigged and zagged past diminutive women and men, old and young, materializing around her, complicating her run with the abrupt fact of themselves and the stout wooden rods most of them carried. A final leap carried her to the side of a flushed and thrashing form struggling on a low cot.

On the bed a human, a young woman—some might still have said girl—moaned and sweated in restless, fevered sleep. She muttered brokenly, crying out now and again for faces absent or mercies unknown. Her arms and legs knocked with great agitation but little force against the low wood frame that bore the thin, canvas-covered pad on which she tossed, its lattice of stretched hemp creaking loudly.

The bed was simple, the homemade mattress stuffed in small part with lumps of batting, and in larger part with scraps of old fabric too worn or ratted for other practical use. Modest though it was, it was nevertheless fitted with muslin sheets and wool blankets against chill nights.

At the head of the cot, against the wall above the sick girl's head, the tiny woman leaned forward, her dancing fingertips playing lightly over the flush of the girl's face. With coos and sighs, the slight figure warbled as she worked, and sang wordless lilting harmonies to the girl's moans. More of the little

people moved close to the bed, singing wordlessly, contributing a palette of warring and chattering calls, stroking, patting, or tapping, so that no portion of the girl went untouched or unserenaded.

A steady stream of the arrivals moved in and out through the door, some staying to mill behind the first rank at the bed. These sang in concert with those who touched, ready to slip into an open place whenever one nearer the bedside moved away. Beyond the threshold, the outer chamber teemed with these beings, all barking or chirping or crooning a variegated racket. Periodic laughter rippled through the mass of small men and women stroking, patting and caressing each other a room away from the sick girl.

Constant at the bed, the tiny nurse nimbly worked the girl's forehead and temples in a light massage. The three fingers and two thumbs of each of her hands spread widely apart in a vast reach that allowed her to stroke a broad area with a simple motion. Like all her companions except the very youngest, she wore a skirt and shawl of sturdy homespun, unbleached, undyed, unadorned. The shawl was held by a simple clasp at the shoulder. Unlike most of the others, however, she carried no staff.

The faces of these small folk were bare, but their hair grew lushly in a thick mane that sprouted from scalp and jaw line, disappearing at the base of the neck into the tops of their shawls. A light fur was visible on the legs extending below their skirts and on the arms that reached from beneath their upper garments.

Through the twittering, chattering, lilting din bounding off the walls, an interference-ridden short-wave voice, or successive voices, barely rose to audibility from a radio in the main room. It pattered ceaselessly in a tinny, excited whisper, cataloging the passage back and forth of despoliation, murder and brutal fervors in the name of Il Duce, the Emperor, the Fuhrer, of Democracy and His Majesty. Through the crackle of the ether, it spoke of the Revolution, the Fatherland, the Motherland, the Republic, in the name of Freedom, of Destiny, of the Red Army, of God and Country, of Profit, on and on in tones all the more alarming for their dispassionate calm.

The room in which the young human tossed was a lean-to, an add-on intended perhaps as a large pantry, but now snugly

filled with the cot, a chair and a large chest—and two to three dozen singing, barking, cooing, trilling, active, milling, beskirted beings of small stature and ceaseless activity. The low rear wall was about the same height as these folk, so they stood freely beneath the ceiling's angle even in the tight pass between wall and bed. One window pierced the end wall across from the foot of the cot, though the opening was tightly shuttered, and did little to relieve the chamber's gloom. Beneath this window stood the trunk and atop the trunk lay a brush and mirror. Apart from the plank door that opened out into the main room, nothing interrupted the bare, rough timbers of the walls except a hand-drawn calendar and a small shelf by the head of the bed that served for a nightstand. The bed itself was a simple wooden frame raised on stubby legs just enough to clear the ankle high boots placed underneath in company with a pair of well-worn loafers. Both pairs of shoes belonged to the delirious young woman struggling unconsciously within the sheets.

Her name was Meg, Patricia Margaret Christmas, to be precise, but for all her eighteen years she had been called and had called herself Meg. The cot she so restlessly occupied stood in her room, a tiny room, in the cabin she shared, in season, with her father. That season was the burn time, the hot days and dry weeks when forestlands are most vulnerable to fire. She and her father were part of a thin pepper, vigilant ones and twos, strewn through these woods to watch for the telltales of combustion.

This particular cabin, a rough but tight structure of heavy, clay caulked boles, stood in a high grassy clearing among mountain forest. The meadow opened in a mixed wood of fir and aspen, graced at its upper end by the addition of down wandering spruce, and gated where a path entered its lower edge by two ponderosa pines. Beside the cabin, its adjacent watchtower—though still a good, huffing climb below the tree line—stood eminent above a broad range of lesser slopes and changing timber. During their periods of residence, father and daughter shared this unassuming home, and shared also the task of peering from the tower, gazing out from their clearing over the expanse of lands falling away into storybook vistas, eyes open against signs of fire.

As Meg lay self-bound in her tangled cot, remnant fever still tossing her weakly now and again, the season was near its final

days. Fall color was well advanced in the foliage over which she was charged to watch. Even an unfamiliar observer, scanning the site she and her father had occupied over the last months, could see that it was partially secured against imminent departure. First snow in that high place would isolate it completely.

Rewarding the persistent ministrations of the small folk were signs that the girl was resting easier. The fever held on, bated if not beaten, but she lay more quietly amidst the song erupting on all sides. Her lidded eyes danced in dream.

She mistook their voices for birdcalls. Dreaming, she floated in an enormous tropical colony of giant parakeet flamingos. She dreamed they nuzzled her, and some of them, not those close by, interrupted their otherwise unending polyphony with laughter.

The little beings who attended her were not long in perceiving a gradual relaxing of the crisis, and a quite evident note of relief entered their vocalizations. An old greyhair had stood at Meg's side, clasping the girl's hand and patting it tenderly all the long hours of the worst, while others more actively worked about her form. This oldster now lifted the hand against its cheek and released it, retiring to the far corner by the door to curl up and, without ceremony, go to sleep.

A young man, walnut skinned and ruddy maned except for a white patch in the hair under his chin, stepped into the open place at the bedside, dropped his staff at his feet, and took up Meg's hand. He yodeled expressively to the room at large, a cry that was picked up at the door by a mother with a prattling toddler on her hip, and passed by her with embellishments to the room beyond. There it was echoed, improvised on, adjusted to and adapted until a memory of its shape was part of every detail in that dense tapestry of sound.

The young man stroked, rubbed, tapped, and patted Meg's hand and upper arm, much as his companions were doing over the rest of her body. Much as the woman at the head of the bed did with Meg's face and crown. Some of those who attended the girl wore expressions of focused, diagnostic concentration. Others showed faces like that a virtuoso might wear while playing a favorite song on a cherished instrument. Those not at the immediate bedside expressed a more general exuberance, patting and brushing themselves and each other nearly as much as

their companions did Meg. They returned the taps and caresses of those moving around them, who in turn touched and were touched by those on the other side of successive intermediates. Thin, wiry, small—the giants among them were under three feet—these chattering, chattering, wringing, cooing, clicking, barking, warbling beings were constantly stroking and being stroked by each other.

From her dream, Meg smacked her lips and licked them with a dry tongue. Her eyes fluttered and opened, peering for an uncomprehending heartbeat at the woman who played with such tenderness over her face. She closed her eyes again and whimpered. The tiny woman withdrew a hand and released the clasp that held her shawl closed, revealing as she did so a bare chest and belly framed by a satiny pelt on her shoulders and back. Her lactating breasts were full and firm. She clambered onto the bed and, carefully, straddled the girl. Leaning over that chapped and bloodied mouth she pressed beside one nipple, causing a drop of milk to fall onto the girl's dry, swollen tongue. She pushed the breast onto those lips and they responded. Her milk, its thick body warm and deliciously sweet, was exhausted in moments by the hungry girl, but it was enough. A dribble at the corner of that parched mouth gleamed faintly luminous in the room's deep twilight.

Meg swallowed the first time painfully, but the second time with greater ease. The third time was weak but without apparent discomfort. Her eyes opened and she scanned the faces of those beside her bed.

She thought, "There's something odd about the bearded lady's hands."

She turned her head away and fell into dreamless sleep. This seemed to give the little people a great deal of satisfaction.

Satisfied, also, seemed the one who watched from his perch on a ladderback chair forced close to the girl by the confines of the room. He rocked the chair onto its two back legs, placing a hand on the neighboring wall for steadiness, and closed his own eyes for a count of ten.

No sooner had this watcher relaxed his vigil than one of the small folk, passing by the radio in the other room, barked sharply at the droning short-wave broadcast. It stopped and fiddled with the dials, twisting the volume sharply up and

tuning in a clear signal of big band swing. As one, the little people erupted into a pulsing, boiling fusion of ancient clog and instinctual jitterbug.

Bouncing, rhythmic enthusiasm spilled a circulating current into the sick room as a continuous train of dancers flowed through the door, spreading the joy and craning to check the condition of the girl. Bedside attendants never left off their ministrations to join the revels, but as they rendered tenderly unto Meg they twitched and bopped in time to the music, all of them warbling, barking, shrilling, chattering, chuttering, wringing and whistling their own additions to the melody.

The one who had watched from the chair opened his eyes again at the crash of the song. Rising, he threaded his way through the dancing mass to the radio, beside which he patiently stood until the end of the tune. He smiled at the cavorting beings filling the space before him, even allowing himself a few snaps of the fingers and a bit of tapping of one foot. But when the piece ended, he switched the radio off and disconnected the battery. Through the sudden quiet of the music's wake he heard the passage of a late flying ouslam disappearing outside in the night.

Quickly, he crossed to the cabin's door and out into the darkness. He stopped abruptly and stood motionless, gazing up again at the long missed constellations of his native heavens.

Two



WHEN MEG SURFACED AT LAST INTO consciousness she could not identify the twitters and trills rising around her. The birdlike song she had absorbed in her sleep did not last long in any case. At the instant she became truly awake the nearest voices changed to a deep, open throated hoo-hooing. Like a conference of baritone owls, this new call washed out from beside her, taken up by additional voices to ripple from her bedside into the adjacent room. And yet—her brows knit ever so slightly—from out there she continued to hear the trilling song's more remote but fundamental texture.

Pats and caresses ranged over her entire body, tiny hands playing a feathery percussion. With effort, she held her eyes fully open. The light, at first so blinding, became, as her vision adjusted, the dim half-light of the cabin with no lamp burning, the shutters closed.

Moving her head was still more than she could attempt, but its angle on the pillow allowed her eyes to track the room. Beside her the bearded woman and several like her, male and female, ministered to Meg where she lay.

She focused on the bearded woman, who responded with a long, tremolant coo and a series of glancing strokes to Meg's face. Meg saw that the woman's "beard" was actually the lower, front part of a mane that framed the creature's face and grew down under her loose shawl, onto her back and shoulders.

The tiny being's face seemed not quite human. The nose was just a little too long, almost like a modest version of the pendulous nose she had once seen on a monkey in a photo from National Geographic. The eyebrows were a little too arch, the eyes deep and too liquid.

The hands surprised her so much that when she noticed them she hiccupped. From each narrow palm three long, slender fingers were opposed by two thumbs.

"Like a koala," she mouthed to herself.

Strange as the appearance of these creatures was, however, she felt safe among them. Their presence impressed her as exotic and beautiful, and their ministrations soothed her spirit, softening the bone ache and alleviating the weakness that held her down. She glanced at those clustering around the cot then looked back to the one beside her head. That one, cooing, gently turned Meg's face slightly, then reached up to separate the fastener of her shawl.

Beneath it, she wore nothing above the waist. Her mane covered her neck down to her collarbones. As much as Meg could see around the drapes of the shawl, the woman's arms, back, and sides were lightly furred. Her breasts and belly were hairless. Laying a hand to Meg's cheek, the woman leaned over and with the other squeezed one of her breasts. Two drops of milk fell on the girl's slightly parted lips. It was the sweet drink of her previous waking. When the woman leaned close and pressed her nipple to Meg's mouth, she took it in, hungry and grateful.

The tiny woman stroked Meg's hair as she suckled.

A few mouthfuls were all her nurse provided, yet the effort of feeding tired Meg quickly. Sleep waited slim moments away. The harshness in her throat shied from uttering even a whisper. With only a little more energy she thought she could muster a tentative, "Dad?" But she did feel better. Better each moment her companions stroked, patted and sang.

Under her blanket she wore what felt like a soiled diaper.

"I have to get up," she told herself, "real soon."

Later, the woman half woke her to nurse again in the dark stillness of late night. When Meg had finished, the woman climbed onto the cot and snuggled close alongside her. Meg fell back to sleep with the small figure cradled by her arm.

Three



LONG BEAMS OF EARLY MORNING BROKE through the seams of the eastern shutters. For the first few seconds Meg's mind hung out of gear. She watched the slow drift of motes through the thin slices of light. Her nurse still nestled, sleeping against her side, a tiny creature hardly longer than her arm.

The room around her still hummed with a low, somnolent chorus of shushing respiration.

Abruptly, her mind clicked to alert as she detected a heavier, wakeful breathing in the corner behind her, away from the window. Her nurse and companions all sat up at once.

Meg, braving the pain, turned her head, mouthing, "Da..." but broke it off in the face of a stranger seated in the chair beside her bed.

His curly hair spilled into his beard from under an unbilled brocade cap. Though taller than her nurse by a good eight or nine inches, he was still remarkably short. Trim and well knit, he was also extraordinarily broad across the shoulders and chest. His hands, while wide, callused and horny, were configured with a normal arrangement of fingers and thumbs. In addition to the cap, he was clad in a shirt of red flannel and heavy trousers of some buff fabric. The pants were tucked into brown leather boots laced tightly to just below his knees. His eyes held some part of the liquid depth of her nurse.

His breath drew deep and slow.

The normally configured hands—normal, that is, in having the usual number and kinds of digits—were frozen in what looked like a stage in some peculiar version of cat's cradle. He held a string, a coarse, loose cord kept from raveling by a knot

at either end. On his lap lay a pile of fiber, semi-organized into loose turns, and a stick on which was twisted more of the string, its end a delta into unspun hanks.

"Not your dad, I'm afraid." He spoke in a kind of low rumbling, his accent both thick and musical. "I go by Jack."

He winked at her.

"Jack Plenty. My cousins and I found your dad and you at death's door. You'd made it out of the cabin and you were tossing and weeping in a great fit when we came in on the vibes. Your dad was slumped onto the table next to the radio, his whole body all shaking. Ekaterina got you onto the cot there while I tried to do something for the old man."

He paused and dropped his gaze to the ground, letting his hands fall into his lap, oblivious to the tangling of the string.

"Pantisocratic fever," he observed softly. "Worst cases I've ever seen."

His eyes turned up as if referring to something on the underside of his brow, bunching the skin of his forehead.

"Some rot about genetic might-probablies and all around you, whatchacallit, Enviro's mental triggers. I don't know. It was that radio."

He jabbed an index finger emphatically toward the other room.

"Neither one of you should have been listening, not with your who-you-come-froms what they are. Especially not for years, like with this more outright stretch of the Long War."

He began trying to sort out the snarl in his lap, pulling at some loop here, another there. Progress evaded him.

"We home in on the vibrations, you know. Just sort of beam in on the fever vibes and here we are with our little tenders come to procreate and nurse."

Flicking the tangle loose, he waggled one hand to the side, as though indicating an unseen presence.

"After insemination they give up milk for two whole years before they conceive, the healing milk, like balm from Gilead..."

He kissed his fingertips.

"Like the spittle of an angel's kiss. But their bodies won't realize a fertile egg until two years done and their milk becomes the ordinary suck of pretty babes."

He winked, then shrugged.

"Okay, slightly special. Doesn't keep them from going through any motions, though. Not at all. There's no stopping them from going through any kind of motions."

His expression went from smile to frown.

"Terrible thing, though, this fever. Your case."

Leaning back, he almost looked down his nose at her.

"Mostly, this crud is the only clue we have to incipient pre-dispositional empathy traits in full humans. You know, genetic marker and all that stuff."

With his free hand he began to pick anew at the wad of string.

"Mostly." He paused, shook his head once, then went on. "Mostly, it takes shape in the wearies...and crummy gut, mild to acute. I've seen hives from time to time...and burning water. All that type of telltale."

He leaned closer.

"But a man dead and his bairn nearly so...I don't know what to make of it, I truly do not. Ekaterina probably knows. I'm a little vague on the theoreticalizing, myself. Much more the feelie type, you know?"

He was trying to tell her something, she was sure of it. He did not seem to require much from her, certainly not an articulated response. What he was saying was about her, or at least concerned her, and meant something about the state she was in. She would have to sort it out later. She tried to focus on that thought: that, later, she would have to figure out what this man was trying to say. She hoped that concentrating on a single subject would help her stay awake.

For a few seconds the ploy worked, then the dryness of her eyes became a burning and tears flooded her vision. When she blinked in reflex some trigger was tripped and she dropped toward sleep. As she fell away she heard the man saying, "I have composed a line or two on the subject, if I may be so bold."

He cleared his throat, then continued,

"The fever pitch that burns all night..."

Whatever came next was lost in the gulf.

Four



*“...PSYCHOMASTERS! PLEASURE GIRLS BUST OUT SMILING,
insincere,
working for wages, wanted for wages, unwilling unfulfilled,
strutting a highlife without satisfaction, that much is clear,
that much and a few other things not listed
in the particular bills
detailing goods obtained from the leaning plazas
of Bobbo’s lawn,
Oh, babble on, fair muse, my tongue is yours as you will.
Atta way to call them; small or large, that is, or small...”*

She finally opened her eyes after a long struggle in which she tried to believe the droning voice was part of a dream she could push through to quieter sleep. It seemed this weird man had been reciting on and on forever. Some piece of her, she realized, had been listening to his twisting verse, but like an eavesdropper more than an audience. He appeared to need nothing from her. Even sleeping, her presence alone was enough.

*“...containerless, tinless, bootless, fruitless, of no account
and beloved, therefore, of the lesser gods, the odd sprite
splintered off from the all inclusive light of heaven’s mount,
the Rudys of paradise, the LaVernes, their Chevies, tight
with all roads and steady in the spray of the many founts
of the demon’s drool, not one whittle to pass our sight...”*

His words seemed to hammer at her—senseless, rambling, flitting subject to subject like a nectaring insect. Unable to

follow, she tried to shut it out, to sink away from the flow of language back into unawareness. His voice persisted, never slowing even as it rose to shouts or sank to whispers in a train of emotional passes she could not connect to the words springing from his throat.

"...corsairs come upon the winds, great scimitars flash in the gleam of the single winking eye of voyeuristic heaven, blinking in the shifting veils of cloud, a clangor, a clash between the slight colors of natural day and the bruise of industry's leaven mixed into our food for thought, the abutment a gash upon the reflections in our hearts of the seas, all seven ranged 'round us like a relish tray around the bowl of dip, good herbs stirred into a fatty, gelatinous liquid, sipped on the crunching chomp of those yummy sticks of celery..."

"Shut up," she thought. "Just shut up. I want to sleep, sleep. Go away." Curling into a ball, she clapped hands tightly over her ears. He went on.

"...fair is as fair would have it, the briefer wings, the wing-a-dings, the catalog, so many graceful killer boys, so many ships, so many stones in the armory of distant slings, false glories accosted amidst the attitudes of playthings, toys in the hands of giants, in these midge's hands the ringing of the bells of perdition, duck and cover. The perfume cloys, clutters, clogs the intakes, affronts the senses, perfect tension drawn out to the perfect tautness of a high string on our lady's harp, to pluck and fondle under discretion's tarp, for as so change our attitudes so changes our grasp of this one what in a hell of creation..."

"...Sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep," she repeated as a bludgeon in her mind, a pounding mantra wall erected against the torrent of language vented by this incomprehensible Jack.

"...Sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep," she timed it to the pulse in her throbbing temples.

“...Sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep...”

The effort of continuing this inner chant soon exhausted her, and she slipped into enfolding dream. But the odd man's words followed her a ways, to stand just inside the boundary of waking, hailing her, then slowly fading as with distance.

Five



HER EYES WERE ALREADY OPEN AND focused when her mind woke. Sharp pains came with every movement of her head, so she did not shift her gaze. Thirst, and the extreme dryness of her mouth, brought a longing for the milk she'd had before. This, in turn, caused her to realize she was alone with that peculiar man. Her nurse and the others had vanished. The room seemed oddly lit, filled with a dim, wavering, dirty golden glow.

She was looking at Jack when her thoughts restarted. He and his kit were slightly blurry, as if he were less solid...or had begun diffusing into the atmosphere. She blinked several times hoping to clear her eyes, but he would not resolve into focus. Everything else in her field of vision was sharply defined.

Jack was oblivious to her stare, lost in his own activities. He had oriented his chair so that he could prop up one leg on the wall, and there he sat, naked except for a cloth worn as a short skirt. With his right hand against his leg he was spinning more lumpy string from his twists of combed fibers. With his left hand he kept the thread tight and took it up onto his stick. Each time his hand passed along his leg he rocked forward until the chair was almost flat on the ground, and then rocked back onto the two rear legs as he took up the new slack onto the spindle. Neither his process nor his pace indicated a great concern for producing a large amount of string.

He was speaking while he spun, she realized. The merest hint of an echo followed his voice. He seemed to be composing a poem, trying different versions of phrases and sentences.

*"The gift we spin and cord and weave and sew
and reshape some winter afternoon as cookies
is the number one pipeline to what you better believe is so..."*

"Wait a minute," he interrupted himself. "That line walks with a crutch. Better make that

...is the number one pipeline to what you need to know..."

He seemed to repeat this line silently, testing it, weighing it. Satisfied, he went on, "So, then, that makes it,

*The gift we spin and cord and weave and sew
and reshape some winter afternoon as cookies
is the number one pipeline to what you need to know,
The Big One, the pro who shows that you and me are rookies,
a kindness against a beat-you-down life's unnerdings,
a balm because the hearts of seekers readily bruise.*

"Now that's what I call a working first verse," he congratulated himself. "Which brings us to the second verse. Let me see. Good poetry always moves from thought to action. The first one was pretty thoughtful, if I say so myself. Took me a deal of thinking, anyway. So, then, what kind of action? But there's only one action right for The Big One, right? So that's easy."

With a flourish, he declaimed,

*"Consequently, let me put this sacred gift, this grass,
fair communion, into the bowl of my Chaldean chalice
blown of a creamy, opalescent glass
and fit for suction by all who forego malice
toward the world of each-and-every's birthing,
which is to say, lovers of the greeny muse."*

At this, he pulled from his bag a chambered instrument to which a long hose was attached. The top of it looked like a small eggcup with what appeared to be soot around its edge. Jack removed this, revealing that the cup was the head of a narrow pipe that ran to the lower of the two chambers of the device. The device itself was, as Jack's poem had said, of a creamy, opalescent glass, although dark with what seemed an

internal discoloration. He separated the two chambers, opening the lower. From his bag he took a small flask, from which he first filled the chamber with a transparent, amber liquid, then poured a healthy swallow down his own throat. This caused him to cough and his eyes to tear.

"Oh, stuff me!" he said, "but that is good!"

He stowed the flask and closed the now liquid filled lower chamber, which he refitted to its mate. This upper piece he opened, removing from inside a small wad of moist, leafy matter. After closing the upper chamber, and adjusting the hose that emerged from its top, he pressed the leafy matter into the little cup on the end of its pipe and reinserted the pipe into the larger instrument.

For a moment he raised the device as if in offering to someone unseen, closed his eyes and mumbled something beneath his breath. Then he stuck the end of the hose in his mouth, produced a lit match by sleight of hand, and then held the flame to the little cup while noisily puffing. In a moment the cup glowed with the presence of a steady coal. Jack inhaled slowly while shaking out the match. He held his breath until his face turned red. When he exhaled the room filled with a thick, pungent smoke. He took another long pull on the hose, held it again, blew another heavy cloud into the room. At this point he noticed Meg watching him.

"Hello," he said, his hand rising and falling in an exaggerated slow motion wave. "You're awake. Have a taste of the ol' communion chalice?"

Meg's throat no longer seemed familiar with the process of making words. She tried to speak, but could only struggle out, "What...what?"

"What is it?" Jack finished for her. "Well you should ask," he went on, "because this is no ordinary offered thing. Not for old Jack Plenty. Brought this from seed to sacrifice my own self, grown for flower not for fiber. Strictly religious. My own small measure of diplomatic reception of the ineffable intelligence of the immanent all. Uh, 'God' you might call it, the all that is, not the offered thing. That's more in the nature of a supply of prayers, you know. Not the prayers like spinning and weaving, but the other kind, the floaters. Sure you won't have a go?"

Meg moved her head in the least possible arc of a negative shake, at which Jack produced another match and helped himself to a third puff. The smoke hung thickly in the small room. It seemed to be making her dizzy. Only it wasn't dizzy, but something else, some other sensation she had no name for. She wasn't even sure if it was unpleasant. But whatever the effect was, it combined with the weakness that already held her to bed and made it that much harder to draw herself together. Completely limp upon the low cot, she slipped away from awareness of the room into an imagining that was some part waking fantasy but through which she watched herself move as though in dream. She was walking, sometimes skipping, down a wooded lane, humming the melody to a dance tune she'd heard on the radio. The light came through the trees blue and gold. She was content to continue along the lane as she followed it down toward authentic sleep. Just before she stepped across the border into oblivion she thought that the leafy stuff in Jack's water pipe must be marijuana.

"But that would be illegal," was her last waking thought.

