

Tales Of Men And Women In A Pdf File
Front Cover Of The Paperback Book

Seventh Edition

Tales of Men And Women

Stone
Riley

Know Ourselves To Make Our World Anew



Tales Of Men & Women

Subtitled:

**Know Ourselves
To Make Our World Anew**

Selected written works of Stone Riley

Seventh Edition

76 written works
with 135 fine art pictures
published by the author in 2016

- Dedication -

To all our *Goddesses and Gods*,
in love, respect, thanks and praise,
and to our beloved descendants
in the *Good New Age*,
this work is hereby dedicated.

- About The Author -

Stone Riley is a Pagan multi-disciplinary artist,
a member of the ADF Druid fellowship,
an enthusiast of the Seth Material,
living in New England U.S.A.,
and keeps a huge website with work of many years
available to the public, mostly free of charge.

He is a pro-Earth pro-democracy non-violent
anarchist concerned with social justice causes.

We can build real democracy.

We can build the Good New Age.

The author's website: www.StoneRiley.com

Get books or pictures: www.StoneRiley.com/retail

Tales Of Men And Women In A Pdf File
Publication Information

**Tales Of Men And Women
Seventh Edition
(In A Pdf File)**

subtitled:

Know Ourselves To Make Our World Anew

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Text, pictures, book design, cover design, cover
painting, proofing, editing and publication
by Stone Riley.

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Title of the cover painting:
"Eternal Dance"

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Part One: About The Book



About The Book

Digital image based on an acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley

**7th Edition Precis:
This Time Of Destiny
a poem of reality**

October 2016, nearly Samhain:

I am a Darwinist. Darwin's final paragraph of his first great book has come true, and in my lifetime I have seen it coming true.

That paragraph predicted that as we gathered data to check Darwin's theory of life's natural evolution, our knowledge of ourselves would grow much more complete and true. It has done so. That means, as Darwin knew it means, that we are all together proven to be children of Earth. I have watched our culture gaining wisdom in response.

And I am a Jungian. Indeed, the Pagan movement in our country is precisely the journey Doctor Jung prescribed: We inmates of the prison of the Modern World can escape through the doorways of our souls out to universal realms, bringing consciousness with us, and return here conscious of sacred freedom and power in our hands.

That has been our Pagan movement's constant tactic and strategy, which I can testify from being present ever since its birth. And now we see this new faith in the human soul's deep freedom accepted as a piece of common knowledge in our country, spreading widely, giving hope.

And I am a web technician. I've made a living as a software engineer since before that job title existed, then later made one of the first artist websites on the web. So I can feel a spark of pride when saying the idealistic hopes we felt back then have been fulfilled. Indeed, nowadays that handiwork opens many windows that were shuttered tight.

But do I dare to tell the most vivid current case I know of the web usefully opening secrets? It is a case of horror. It is a YouTube video of real horror, and an undeniable proof against a brutal ancient tyranny:

The video is from a hand held cell phone camera inside an automobile somewhere, streaming up to some small corner of the web, there recorded for immediate worldwide distribution. It is some day last month. The scene inside this car is shady, for there appears to be a shady tree outside the window, and the unseen hand that holds the cell phone is remarkably steady while the picture slowly scans.

Then we understand the person with the camera is the driver, because we see the person in the passenger seat who is slumped toward us, leaning on the driver, and this person's eyes and face are definitely asleep – or maybe dead – and now the camera pans down enough we see a huge pool of blood covering the person's shirt front.

If you are American, you have by now decoded the passenger's facial composition, so you've seen this here is one of our underclass, legally semi-human and anciently enslaved but now fodder for our prison industries, but now deceased.

You've noticed that if you are American, so now the camera slowly comes up and shows a fist with a pistol in the window, trembling with fear and/or fury, pistol pointed right at you with its finger on the trigger – although really pointed at the unseen driver in your place – so of course you strain to see the gunman out there and with no surprise you see a policeman's hat out there.

And all of that is true and none of it is new except the fact that now you and many thousands more have seen it, and nowadays you've likely felt the freedom of your soul to challenge lies, and nowadays you've likely heard of proofs that we are all together here Earth's children.

So now let's build the Good New Age.

A Note On Verse Style an opinionated poem, codicil to the 3rd edition

Written long ago in the age before hip hop:

In many of the poems here, I've used a verse style drawn on the ancient mode: declaiming for a present audience from memory, instead of modern styles meant to be read in silence, monk-like, slavish word and jot and tiddle softly tick by tick exactly from a printed page into the velvet cave of single consciousness, preferably, for mercy's sake, without your lips even moving.

Therefore here extreme metric elasticity, scaffoldings of metamorphing metaphor behind all merely aural dissonance or rhyme, and other technical peculiarities of pseudo-extempore verse you may be unfamiliar with unless, of course, you've ever heard a good announcer on the radio.

Apologies for any inconvenience.

But may I be quite frank in my opinion?

Poetry in America today doesn't work very well. It speaks thinly and vaporously, compared with what it ought to do. It's far too dogmatic in its recipe of sweet luscious distillate of consciousness of consciousness.

You'd almost think that ours are not the broad horizon days of Homer nor of Shakespeare nor (to put the case more seriously) of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, despite the obvious fact of course they are. Our poets chain themselves to Robert Frost, the watercolor man, with rare exception, all in fear of exile into Tartary. Even our primordial Titan of the worldscape's edge, even Ginzberg, must assume a neat and tidy parlor space behind your eyes as the reverberating chamber for his enormous Howl,

even felt required to stand still in some private room behind his eyes or in some small walled garden like mad Dickinson kept so fragrantly watered, as his starting place for each stride out to meet the universe.

Your average poet scarcely peeks outside the realm of "me!" at all.

No wonder so few people listen to the stuff. It's mostly dull as dust. It's ready for a re-think.

But me? Well, I plan to seize the listener's attention. I want to grab him by the short hairs of his brain and shove a picture in his gaze. Is that too rude or something? I have a lot to say.

We have a lot to say.

It's time to tell our story.

I don't mean journal entries. I mean it feels as if the world is tumbling upside down and there are cries all over of alarm. I mean it seems like Sartre said: the god who led us here is dead and we are left to riddle out the horrifying situation. Like Jung and Joseph Campbell and Margaret Mead and Dorothy Day said, we need to tell the truth in such a way that we can understand it fully deeply broadly with our whole selves. It's really not enough to press our faces to the page. We need real paintings too.

It's now as though the hallways of Lascaux stand empty waiting for a brush.

**A Few Brief Excerpts
From This Book
audiomontage poem,
codicil to the 5th edition**

Death is not a fearful thing because there's love. Mystery should not be feared but sought; its wonder is the path out of our doubt and pain.

To trust someone who tells you that they know a way; that isn't easy. And then to ponder and ponder and finally choose then wait on tenterhooks; and then at last to do whatever mumbo-jumbo that you're told will help the ritual begin, and then to really listen to the sacred tale, and call the god or goddess to your open soul, and really do the dance or pantomime or such for all you're worth; and then, with your body throbbing and weary and bound into a space of darkness, to await the deity. How hard is that?

An old blind man up by the table's head rises carefully to stand on wobbling legs. Some good girls and boys assist this blind old gentleman to find the chair that some have run to set in a shady spot beneath a tree. Our local champion poet brings the painted harp and gives it, bowing by his knee. And so he strikes the first note on the strings. He begins to sing amid the ringing chime. This reedy thinning voice cries out the tale of great Odysseus who came home.

Down southeastward from the rugged mountains of Anatolia, east across the desert from the valley of the Nile, west from the green plateau of India, there lies a land of dry rolling hills and plains, scattered with lakes and thick lush marshes. Here two rivers, broad and mighty, wander to the Lower Sea.

Early summer is a coming of age. It brings a leap into maturity for Nature and for human hearts. The sun is rising up to rule the sky; the moon has turned her crescent and is falling low. It is a time for us to plow and sow. It is a time to glory

in the forces rising in the Earth and dance in Heaven's light. Why not rejoice?

At one time, long ago, the king of Britain was a man named Vortigern. You have surely heard of "Good King This" and "Emperor That The Great" and too, as well no doubt, "Potentate Whomeverwhich The Wise"; but Vortigern was a bad king, a foolish one, a man of no accomplishments at all beyond the grand theatrical air of power and bold command in battle.

On the very day when Jack was born, his father was killed in a war and so his mother resolved to raise him somewhere quite apart from the corruptions of human society. She took him to a little cabin deep in the woods where almost no one ever came. There he grew with trees and animals and earth and sky as his parents almost as much as she was.

The tambourines had come out of the basket first. One of the women stayed there in the cave on this side of infinity and sang a song so they would not be lost and then the rest flew off or swam or ran or climbed far off beyond our human realm onto a certain distant mountain peak or craggy island. There they set a camp and sang and danced and struck their little jangling drums.

Behind Janet's house there was a path through an old garden over to her friend's house way over there. It was a wild old garden with all the trees and grasses and shrubberies and everything. There was a big rock in the center with a huge old wild rose bush bending up over it, a whole big rose bush in the center of the garden, with roses on it. One bright spring morn when there had been a little rain to wake up all the beautiful smells, she stopped to smell a flower.

With heart risen up into her throat, wondering at her hope, she threw together this and that then went out through the sleeping dew-wet camp and came upon the big fellow standing nude and barefoot, chanting at his meditations. Strong arms strained toward the growing light. The white mane tumbled down. She felt her old eyes aching to be filled.

The girl ran the few steps in to Selma's open arms, arms that opened wide to hold the girl. Then she had to let go of the child to pet the long and shining hair. "You fixed your hair real nice!" the mother said. "Raymond brushed it!" Melody answered, full of pride to have her brother's care.

When the mystic words were done, up they stood and the mother beckoned the daughter where they stood there at the hearth and each pulled loose each other's bow and helped each other take their tunics off and lay aside as if, almost, this was a simple night of homely life and they were bound to bed. Some of us cheered but others elbowed them to silence.

I cannot say, Oh one is mine and one not mine, for my one human heart strains to encompass both and strains to examine them with the fear and hope and joy and shame and trembling pity that are all alike the province of one heart.

Harmonica is the world's easiest instrument for making warm pretty notes, but of course all I hoped to do that time was just practice with it, tried to show them how to stick pretty notes together struggling through a practice session, quizzing your soul and the universe thereby, and inching maybe toward a tune.

So, what principles can we teach a boy that will help him guide his manhood into good behavior? Respect yourself, and earn your self-respect. Support and protect your people. Comfort anyone who is in pain.

Me a young man, me a young soldier, by luck myself evading war and yet myself behind another face – a friend companion there where we are serving empire – he is chosen bride of its war machine and promptly taken and promptly dead amid enormous slaughter, and me speaking No among the soldiers and taking punishment but soon escaping.

Five times since Uther's wooing, the glowing Moon had turned the face she shows the human world, so on that summer day the Lady Duchess Igraine would stand the sea cliffs and trot the stone-fenced country lanes of her Cornish realm with belly well swollen and many distant thoughts. Only five moons

more there were ere Yule when she would pace her privy chamber again in yearning expectation of a different man, the child of brilliant light who was not her husband's but her nation's and the world's.

The garden faeries had mentioned Destiny in their question, had they not? Now, Destiny is a force that draws you toward it, but so what? What good sense could he make of that? And would he ever live enough that he and they could find agreement on some answer?

Love is not the thing, nor hate. Faith is not the prisoner's chain, nor doubt the prophet's holy flame, nor greed the mother's teat touched to the sleeping baby's lips, nor is blessed charity the tyrant's grip. All this is life, but what is life? What is the melting of all opposites?

Now see the truth of All: All is one thing: a world of self-same strangers, cable of many threads, garden of night and noon and morning, magic loom of all there is.

Preface To The Sixth Edition

It's now 2012,
middle February,
many years since this book's first edition,
and the editing is all finished now except this preface
and I'm in a hurry
and I don't know what to say.

See,
I've got something else to do this morning.

See,
I'm working on another story now this morning
– a story for performance which,
in this coming spring, in the current context
of the human race, might have some realistic
chance to enlarge the love and beauty in our
politics, but only if I have it ready for
performance by this coming spring –
and so
I really want to get this edit of this book all finished
but I don't know what to say
in this last piece.

Well,
what if I simply make a list of major changes
since the prior iteration of this book ?

-
- I've added some new items.
- I've added pictures.

–
Is that okay?

Preface To The Third Edition

Hello again, my darling friends and friendly strangers. The time has come again to launch my little book out on the waters of the world again, for I have got new isles with new inhabitants to show you.

Now Merlin makes his first appearance, his second and his third. Clark Gable's here along with dark Pandora and her small guitar. Who else? The Lady of the Lake again, in a new adventure, and the Fairy Queen, and the simple girl who bests that awesome mistress in the art of love. A sorcerer weaves his mighty spells to benefit a young apprentice. An honest sailor and a soldier drown in pounding Death but speak. Another sailor weeps his last despairing blessing on the world and fires a fatal shot. Some ragged minstrels sing to gain their supper. There is a bit of whirling dance as well.

And we shall wander landscapes where the boat makes shore. There is a continent to stride if we head west. I'll guide you to a shadow puppet show or to a garden where the roses grow all wild and tangling, to a bubbling fountain by an oak, the meadow where a patient hunter waits, a pool wherein the starry heavens glow around a wandering soul, the cavern of a hollow hill. A bit of this, a bit of that. The magic door has been prized open and you are welcome.

Once more it proudly says upon the cover "published by the author". This time, though, the job is done more properly. It has a proper binding to the proper cover and it was printed on the best machines available, heedless of the vast expense. This is non-fading ink This is a good commercial grade of paper.

If you have got these pages in your hand for free, good luck to you, but if you've paid me as an honest person would, then all the better. More copies are available by mail, from my address that's listed on the title page. It makes a lovely gift.

Other advertisers say a diamond is forever, but what is that to mortal men and women? A diamond for the price that you and I could pay would hardly sparkle in a magnifying glass. I say: A story is begotten and comes forth and walks about the very way that we do. With a good story, every time you look at it, the thing has grown. Herein stand some true companions. Herein lie some places which will seem to you alike a second home. I say, by rights you ought to voluntarily pay more than the asking price to get this book. But that is up to you.

Another thing. My health is good but I am growing old. Perhaps it has been wise for you to wait until the third edition – with so much invaluable material now added – but surely you should buy and read it now. Speaking fairly, I may even say that Divine Lady Providence now intends for you to buy this book. After all, perhaps there'll be no fourth edition.

For example, let's suppose that you are standing at a bookshelf in a store. You're wondering how to spend your time and money. Most likely there is someone there nearby with whom, in truth, you'd rather chat if you could only quite be sure that they would see your heart and beckon to your soul with theirs. And yet you've plucked this book because of its unusual artistic cover, rather idly aimed your glance within somewhere and thence progressed to here. Now I believe you have three choices.

1.) You might close this book and put it back, stroll over and speak some little thing to interrupt that person's thoughts, here in this very public place, hoping past all hope that you will conjure up the very line of poetry to touch their beating heart. But experience has surely shown this is a rash unlikely scheme with little chance.

2.) You might close the book and put it back, stroll away alone and hope that someday Luck and Fate may let you find some such a one as they may be, but then amid more intimate circumstances where talk and touch are more expected. But surely, you have waited quite enough already.

3.) You might, right now, laugh out loud and point here at this page. Have you done it yet? Surely they have glanced – at least a moment's glance – so if you're quick you have the chance to look them in the eyes and say: "Now this is so fine!" I guarantee you get at least a smile. After such a boon as that, I'm sure you'll close this book within your hand and, later on, pay more than the asking price up at the counter. And too, considering your author's soon impending death, this possibly could be your final chance to find your heart's desire.

I wish you well.

Stone

Twixt Lugnasadh and Mabon, 1999

Preface To The Second And First Editions

I was a young man for awhile and for part of that time I was a U. S. soldier in Germany too. A few miles from my barracks there was an ancient Roman fort that archaeologists had dug up and largely rebuilt. I've always read a lot of history so I knew there was a certain likeness between myself and the old fellows; like the U. S. Army, the Roman Army came to Germany as conquerors but then stayed on to protect a new society that grew up there. Naturally I went to visit the old fort one day and I am delighted even now with one particular thing the scholars had discovered there. It was another, even stronger, likeness across time.

Now, part of my job in the U. S. Army was driving a jeep. Those army jeeps were rugged, ugly, totally utilitarian little cars and they did not have an ignition key. You see, lives of thousands of people might somehow be lost if an army jeep needed an ignition key on the day when I misplaced it.

Therefore, they were simply secured by a chain which you could loop through the steering wheel with a padlock. That way, whenever a driver such as myself misplaced a key he could simply bust the lock off with any handy rock or tool, throw the lock into the bushes at the far end of the parking lot, drive away and buy a new lock at the P.X. to replace it. Very sensible, right? Typical military logic.

Of course the Roman G.I.'s did not have jeeps. History teaches us that really the Ancient Romans lived in a very different world from ours because they made it different, not just in artifacts like automobiles, but in the ways they thought about things and lived with each other. Still, they did have a surprising

number of artifacts that are familiar to us every day today, like for instance, padlocks.

That old Roman fort was very interesting and impressive. It was all large. It was a large area built up with long tall rectangular buildings and surrounded by a very high imposing wall, all built of massive logs. It was the most massive and durable log structure you can possibly imagine, dwarfing any other kind of wood construction I have seen before or since. I believe it is historically quite accurate for I am sure it matches descriptions given by certain writers who saw such places with their own eyes.

Many things were different than in the barracks where I lived and worked. I found many points of interest as I wandered the reconstructed grounds, studying the admirably informative and detailed signs that were placed all around to benefit tourists. I wandered outside first, beheld the general layout with a soldierly eye, examined the wall and the various gates and the maps that were beautifully printed on the signs.

Then I went inside one of the long tall barrack buildings that had been furnished as a museum by the modern scholars. They had put long glass museum cases in that building and they had placed inside those cases many hundreds of small objects which they had dug up in the place. Of course every object or group of objects was accompanied by a printed card and photographs of where the particular thing had lain. About half way down the second case there was a busted padlock and its matching key.

The accompanying card said this was indeed the matching key – for the modern folks had tried it and the mechanism worked despite the damage – although it had been found in a spot quite distant from the broken lock.

It seems this little primitive security device – for it was a puny small specimen worked up by hand from bits of ancient sheet metal and rivets, even less imposing than the machine tooled solid brass ones on offer at the P.X. by the dozen – it seems

this little primitive padlock had been used to secure the great back gate where ordinary people often came and went, beyond the inconvenient gaze of the front gate's guards. (Typical military logic.) There was a photo of the same back gate which I had admired earlier in my tour, and some nearby bushes that stood on the spot now where the lock was tossed before.

The tiny handmade jewel-like key had lain trampled for millennia in the dirt near a barracks where some guy like me had evidently dropped it unknowingly.

After I examined the lock and key, wishing to reach my hand in through the glass you may be sure, after I had read the card and seen the photos, then I smiled about the whole vast situation, about the universe and everything.

Then suddenly I felt distinctly some kind of transition happening in my body. That lasted for a curious moment. Then I experienced an even more peculiar sensation.

A time tunnel seemed to open before my eyes, a vortex like a cornucopia that I stared into, spinning slowly, full of unknown shapes in black and white. This time tunnel was just at eye level for me, about two feet wide and maybe two feet deep. Scarcely had I beheld it when I had the further distinct sensation of being lifted bodily, tipped over so that the crown of my head was toward the vortex, and then I was shoved in. As you can probably imagine, these vivid and curious impressions did seem strange.

I do not know how or when or if I managed to escape alive; I just suddenly just found myself standing there again, still smiling, but with the firm conviction I had been *somewhere* and done *something*.

It was the most curious trick my mind has ever played. There have been other tricks but none of them quite close to this. For one, there was that time at the old royal palace in Korea when I was actually struck dumb by beauty. That seems close but different as there I remained at least partly conscious throughout.

Yet still, maybe this fit of profound peculiarity can be blamed on beauty too, blamed on that instant when I suddenly smiled at everything. Perhaps I should. Or maybe I should do like Romans would and blame it on the gods.

In any case, I know for sure that unknown place where I have been inspired the stories in this book and many others not yet written. They come from *somewhere*.

– Stone, Yuletide 1996

Afterword To The Third Edition

A message from the author

The best thing we can do is help each other. Not that it's an easy thing; it's not.

Oh, you may easily hold a door aside to let a blind man pass or teach a young girl how to sing or show a tortured soul some cause for new true hope, and the blessings that flow from doing right shall then infuse that moment of your life, and from time to time all of this shall flow quite easily through your hands. And I bless you for the doing of these things as well. But in between those happy moments, what other business should we be about?

What I have learned so far is this:

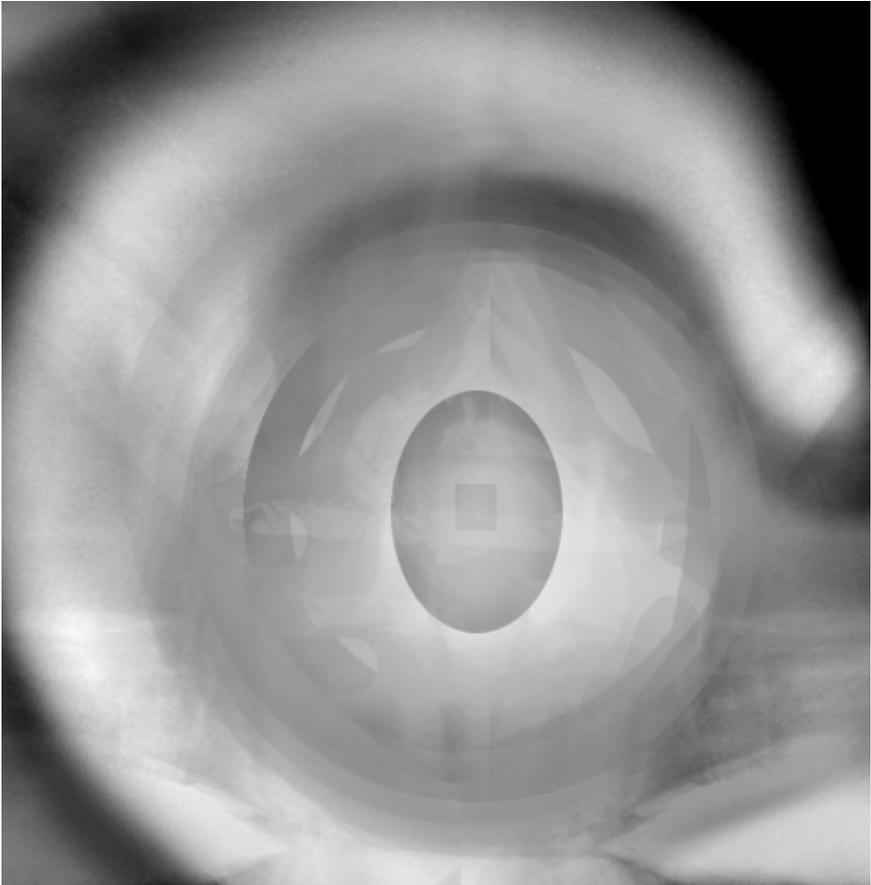
The subtle mighty flow and ebb of this world has set some highest destiny for each of us. Our highest destiny is written in our stars perhaps, or in our genes, or in the living web of circumstance wherein we stand; written there by knowing fate perhaps or striving tangled chance but anyway illumined deep within us by a distant ray of brilliant light. Your proper business is to read that epigraph in you and to live the life that it foretells.

This book is all about some folks who try to live like that, guided by some whispering inner light, each in their own way struggling through the tangles of the world. Some find an open path and some are lost a while. My faith is only this: that every individual who does what he or she should really do will clear the road a little, build some wayside shelter it may be or strike a bargain with the spirits of the place, set a flowering lily here and there or scatter apple seeds, turn and shout back to the rest about the further view.

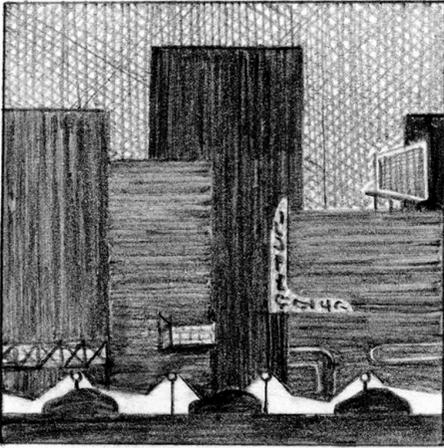
This book is the fruit of twenty years for me, twenty years searching for a poet's voice while scribbling anagrams on electric bill envelopes packed in a stack of shoe boxes on the back of a closet shelf, sketching scenery with burnt end sticks on scraps of birch bark that I toss out of my mountain cave onto the breeze.

I've gathered up some of the bits and pieces, arranged and edited the parts to make a whole, glued the cover on and put it here for you to find. I most sincerely hope you get some use from it.

Part Two:
On The Threshold



On The Threshold
Digital image by Stone Riley



Seven Of Swords
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Picture Story

a memoir of beginnings

It was Boston long ago, back when that was a home front of the war in Viet Nam. I was a young ex-soldier, poor, doing some political action work, not yet doing art.

One day I chanced to see a photograph exhibit, all one artist, all black and white but quite an opposite to Mathew Bradey, small exquisite stuff, in a very sunny space at the Boston Public Library, and one of those pictures really caught me.

I called her up. Why not? Her phone number was put out there for the public to see, which included me, and it was local. Her female housemate or friend or lover answered and I politely asked for her. Because that picture clearly showed, at least to me, an ideal I had been clinging to for a while.

She came on and I politely asked if it was possible to buy a print of that specific one. She hesitated but then – quite reluctantly and largely out of curiosity, to judge her voice – gave the address and said to come over. It was a subway ride across the river.

The apartment was about like mine, as you might imagine. Old sofa, old chairs in a dingy old Victorian parlor. And it was an awkward conversation. How to ask me who on Earth I was? She soon got to it though, explained her situation briefly, politely

let me understand that she ordinarily sold professionally to publications.

I responded quite sincerely with the simple truth: I'd seen the show and that one had struck me and the reason why it had, me an ex-soldier. And besides, I was putting up some pictures (in my old dingy apartment with old furniture and with my friend or housemate or lover) and that one was a picture I would like my home to have.

She thought. She asked me if I hung around the artist scene, of which I hadn't thought before and so I mainly shrugged. She tried to think of more to say or ask but finally nodded, still rather dubious, undoubtedly for several nonspecific reasons, and disappeared into the cellar stairway door.

Her friend or lover or housemate poured some tea but not some conversation.

She came back up, switching off the stairway light bulb by its string, waving the new print in the air to finish drying it, slipped it in an inexpensive paper mat and charged me less than the cost of materials.

And that was my admission to the art world.



Treasure

Polymer clay
sculpture by
Stone Riley



Y Is For You

From Alphabeticon

Digital image based on
acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley

Wood And Water

a short story of beginnings

One year when I was very young, a long time ago, in the early days of the Great Depression, my husband, whom I loved as much as life, lost his employment and came home late in a taxi rather drunk. One of his friends had telephoned so I was aware but he said nothing himself, only that I should go up to bed and he would follow.

Of course I did, you see, because that seemed to be what was wanted and we had even kissed and caressed. But instead he took a shotgun out to the garden and killed himself, from a pair of sporting guns my father gave us at the wedding. Naturally, having heard, I ran out and found him there like that. And so that year was the first year of my search for understanding.

Of course we were Episcopal, so that's where I began. Our bishop was a wise old widower, by everything that I had ever heard from him, so there I sat drenching a starched lace hanky in his tea parlor, myself entirely curled up inside his largest plush chair – and no doubt weeping as big an ocean as Alice did when she was down the rabbit hole – the worldly old gentleman patting my hand, mumbling from his trove of homilies,

and a moment came when I must decide whether it was very smart to tell about the sex.

I had rehearsed it several ways. I could not get it off my mind, you see, that my lover, whom I had even married, preferred murdering himself to having me. The utter bastard! I couldn't get that bit of it unstuck inside my brain. So me there, bosom heaving, spying round the hanky at the bishop.

Well, after that embarrassing misunderstanding there were the Catholics. Yes, I tried the Catholics. Our housekeeper took me. More than once. And Mass was beautiful enough; that big old cavernous cathedral in Boston with colored light and colored shadows too and incense and all the lovely mumbo-jumbo. But there was that great dripping corpse, and naked too, hanged up there. He looked sorry for everything all right – good and sorry – but dead, dead, dead. Too much of a good thing perhaps. No thank you.

But now that I had delved among the lower orders of society there was a lot from which to choose. That very autumn, on Tremont Street on a corner of the Common, coming out from lunch with some old sorority pals, where I had moaned and wept some more because inevitably the chit chat got around to men, there was a mission band tooting on their horns and leading passersby in hymns.

I stopped and in a bit the traffic light changed so I went across. I wiped my tears and said: Why not? What's there to lose? After all, my dear old pals – and they undoubtedly all already thought me off the odd end anyway – they had been so totally obliviously insipid in the face of life's mysteries that now this smelly raggedy crowd lifting up their souls to Heaven were, to me, looking quite like all those heart warming Dickens characters. And there, shouting out the tunes, there was a young female minister.

Oh well, a spell of mopping floors and dishing macaroni to surly tramps was quite enough to wear most of the Homeric shine off that. Nothing in principle against it, certainly, but simply not my sort of job. No panache whatever.

And then my new friend, the girl pastor – one night when the kitchen was closed and we sat together with coffee mugs

and I confided all my deepest troubles. She finally had no answer except to say that all of it would be clear if I allowed faith into my heart.

But faith in what? I was so damn earnest.

In God's redeeming grace, she said.

But redemption from what? What sins did I commit? I didn't do the bastard in!

I had guilty thoughts, she said.

So that was that. There was no credible guilt in me – in fact I had been betrayed and without reason – only anger and such as that. And it is a useful thing, not an evil thing, to ask hard questions; and certainly one must ask them from whatever place one finds oneself.

But meanwhile I had fallen in with others there. I was a young adventuress you see, prowling, on safari more or less – or a freelance Mata Hari perhaps – and there was a subversive cabal brewing among the mission's congregation. Mainly Mrs. Updyke and her husband Ed. They seemed to be gathering up a few other transients for a mission of their own. They always spoke in whispers. That's where I heard of Sister Amy in Des Moines. Good Sister healed by laying on of hands and there were countless miracles daily.

Have you ridden in a 1919 Packard? In 1931? Across half of North America? I was already then a veteran of a certain memorable night-long jaunt a few years before – in the back of a dusty Packard full of Vassar girls and Harvard boys and truly nauseating gin – so I was quite prepared, relieved in fact, to buy this car which Mr. Updyke found for thirty-five dollars, instead of the embarrassing expenditure it would have been for luxurious Pullman tickets for our valiant little pilgrim crew.

Des Moines! I scarcely knew the place existed. Paris would have seemed prosaic by comparison. So I donned my traveling kit and leapt behind the wheel with maps in hand and off we bounced. I nursed that car as far as Henderson, Kentucky.

Two sleepless nights, a boiling radiator and two flats had been dealt with already in good order, but then there was a muddy snow. It slid us sidelong down a long steep hill while

I was wrestling with that Charybdean transmission shift lever and the wheel and brakes. Perhaps actually it's merely that I was so sore and tired by then; I remember that my arms were positively wooden from the shoulders down and there's no need in Christendom to talk about my bum.

It happened so slowly, one of those nightmares where you're stuck in tar and nothing does to help, but actually that slow. Then there was a rending snap like bone and we dropped tail down in the ditch.

I'm quite sure Mrs. Updyke sang out, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow!" Loudly.

And Mr. Updyke certainly complained, presumably to Heaven, "Damn axle broke."

"Don't worry;" I may have cried like a perfect imbecile; "I have money."

And just down the road a little farther on, with its snowy tin roof gleaming in the bright morning sun, one of nature's marvels called the Clear View Cafe was then beheld by all. Miraculous. True salvation.

There were other cars round about the place and smoke was flowing from the stovepipe. There was distinctly a smell of cooking grease. That smell especially reminded me of wonderful frosty mornings at father's fishing camp.

It was a large rustic cabin with a sign stuck up above the porch in front. Clear View Cafe! We all climbed out, I hid my pistol in the pocket of my coat and we slogged in.

Well, to make it very brief, an extremely comely man – in a weather beaten outdoors way, you understand, and maybe thirty-five or so – he had a long apron on and his arm extended full of plates – he paused in going to and fro while we were standing there inside the door.

You must understand that he moved like a professional dancer. And this tall well-proportioned extremely competent and intelligent appearing and altogether toothsome fellow with gleaming hazel eyes and fashionably pomaded hair – that was the fashion then you know – he called out to me rather loudly above the other voices – I was in the lead of our little pilgrim band of course – and the fellow said exactly this:

"Hens eggs, sweet potatoes, corn pones, buttermilk, and mountain coffee. Seventy-five cents a plate if you can pay and if you can't then you can work instead. Nobody ain't left here hungry yet this week."

That Middle South accent was like a damn meadowlark or something. And the sodding bastard grinned at me.

Well, being a truly perfect twit – young widow and all that – I struck a kind of pose and waved and shouted for everyone to hear; "Yes! We will be paying!"

To make a favorable impression. You understand, I was walking on as female lead. Astaire tangoing with plates, you see. I was quite naturally, on the instant, smitten simply arse over kettle. I understood instinctively that his tuxedo jacket was hanging on a peg out back.

Look here; suppose one found oneself somehow transported magically to the wings at a Broadway show and then Astaire, from center stage, suddenly beamed that big smile of his directly one's direction. And the script was obvious; he could have had me on the floor with no more ado than perhaps a friendly handshake. Ye gods, how randy are the young! Bless me, I began to dream of pillow talk.

Well, to make it brief, I was very sorely disappointed by the ease with which our difficulty sorted out. Mr. Updyke was asking round at once and found a car for sale that would get our pilgrim crew through to Des Moines and no mistake. They'd fetch it there and we'd be on the way again within an hour or two – at any rate by afternoon – and they would take the wretched Packard off our hands as well.

My secret heart was broken by the news. And then it didn't help a bit when my fingertips touched Mr. Astaire, his elbow, while he was setting down our plates, and I gazed up in his eyes and felt as though he looked into my inmost soul like I was that rippling pool in those obnoxious Renoir lily pictures. Shivers absolutely everywhere. You know, everywhere.

I definitely understood that I could tell him absolutely everything. And the peculiar thing, looking at it now, is really that I could. By some odd coincidence, he was a very fine man.

I knew that about him the moment when he pulled a chair out at the table just near ours, firing jealousy in my secret heart. He sat there and began speaking quietly with someone else. It was a poor woman with a baby.

I didn't listen to the conversation – in fact, I couldn't stand to at first for jealousy, and then would have been embarrassed to be listening – but it was obvious enough that she was very poor indeed and had been weeping.

He touched the baby's cheek and everything. Whatever had been said, he got a little trembling smile from her at least. And then, to everyone's surprise, certainly to mine, the fellow fetched a violin and removed his apron with a bit of ceremony, so to speak, and sat himself in a nearby corner and began to play a quite beautiful melody. I'm actually quite sure that it was Debussy.

Tears welled from eyes, you may be sure. I think they must have run down from my chin. I was not the only one who simply sobbed.

That tune and another one and a third. And he lifted up the mood with each one right to the last – perhaps one of those Appalachian fiddle things – many were smiling and clapping to the time, myself as much as others.

It was as fine a piece of magic as you would ever wish. Another tune like that last and someone might have cleared away some of the furniture to dance. I might have tried a turn with Mr. Updyke.

But then the fellow laid the violin down in his lap and – he was seated close by, you see – looked about and announced there were some chores out back which "needed doing" as he said, then looked at me directly. Perhaps I might lend a hand, he asked quietly, if I had a mind to.

In fact, he rather smiled and nodded to indicate he wished I would accept the invitation. Being such a twit, of course I gasped and glanced about to see if any others saw the possibilities that leapt to mind for me, or saw the blush that rose into my face. A private assignation! But somehow no one paid the least attention.

Just right out back, he reassured me; wood and water for the kitchen.

In fact I would have leapt into his gentlemanly arms except that there was not the slightest hint of Eros in his manner. Or perhaps more so because of that. Not that I would have minded in the least a blanket in the woodshed (a sort of thing which had occurred before a time or two with fine enough results) but let's be practical.

Contraceptive practices were awkward at the time and I had brought along none of the requisites. This romance was going nowhere, or not at least today. Romance? What sort? Some different kind than I had known perhaps, a thing which needed time and space and exploration before one paid respects to Mother Nature.

And anyway, there was a definite responsibility to get those pilgrims to Des Moines and that responsibility was mine. There was a job to do, a hard one, a task I did not relish in the least, but a job that suited my capacities and to which my word was given. But with this man perhaps there could be pillow talk before – or else without – the fuss and bother of the rest.

In short, I fairly leapt up to my feet and followed through the dining room, out through the steaming kitchen – there were others there with whom he spoke – and to the woodpile and the pump in the yard out back.

It was all melting snow and forest mountains, a distant view of fog shrouding the forest valleys you see, and a brilliant sky with a breeze and birdsong and birds at wing. The place fairly pierced one to the heart with every glance. The place was breathtakingly beautiful in fact. There is no art or poetry on earth to make a finer scene than that was.

Me stopped there like a post, gazing rapturously round, he said, "Pretty, ain't it?" But his voice to me was so much of the place that I could scarcely recognize the words and had to shake myself awake to answer "Yes!"

But he had brought along a wheelbarrow with an ax and several buckets and, all the more keen to impress him now,

I snatched up the ax when he had scarcely set the barrow down. There was the woodpile and the block.

With a manner of expertise I asked, "They want it stove size?" and he answered yes.

He did take out the buckets and hang one on the pump but really then just stood by to watch how well I'd do. That made me angry but happy too; his care for my safety, you see. What right did he have to care?

And the first chop went very properly – we smiled at one another because of that – but by the third or fourth I could scarcely get the billet balanced up on end because my arms were sore again. Damn Packard.

My swing went wild and actually knocked the billet flying out among the trees. That was embarrassing but so spectacular we both laughed.

"Where have you come from?" the fellow asked.

So I leaned on the ax. I laughed again and nodded and answered, "Boston."

"Could it be you are a mite worn out?"

"I'll do the buckets."

That was better anyway. One of those things you don't remember until you find yourself there again: the way those old large water pumps seem like a human being when you operate them. Of course the parts are misarranged – the arm sticking out behind the person's head and so forth – and one can't decide if they are vomiting, urinating or perhaps lactating – but the gush sounds so much like stomach noises and that squeaky sigh when you pump the handle up and down is unmistakably a human voice.

It occurs to me now that it must have seemed unmistakably erotic at the moment. It must have done. Here I was working to make it squirt, and doing so repeatedly, you see, in a professional manner. I certainly did feel as though my husband had made me out to be a whore. With a whore a man can choose yes or no without owing any explanation.

In any case, I know that is when I finally broached the topic.

I remember that I'd just pumped a very vigorous gush that overflowed a bucket and splashed around my feet. I was throwing my whole heart and soul into the job actually. So I lifted that one from the hook and swung it over to the barrow and there I was facing this new man, just as he had swung and then was pulling out the ax.

There may have been an unpleasant tone in my voice perhaps. "I suppose you're a minister of some sort?" I asked. "You act like one."

Perhaps in fact my tone was dripping sarcasm.

But he laughed again; that gentle comely laugh. He was apparently quite used to people's tumultuous emotions. He shook his head and said, "Me? I get called a preacher now and then but it never stuck. Most people, if they like me well enough, just call me Cousin Jack."

"And people tell you things about their lives and you give them answers?" I know that came out of me as nothing short of a snarl or a demand.

He shook his head again and said, "Generally the best thing I can say is just the same thing Joe Louis says. You know Joe Louis?"

That was a bit of shock. Yes, of course I'd heard of him but I was of the same stupid opinions which my class held on race. Still, I must have heard someone at some time voice a thought that the great Negro sportsman was being cheated. So there was some inkling that the case might be in some way pertinent.

I said I knew of him. What did Joe Louis say?

And this fellow did a kind of dancer's slow boxing move, dodging from a punch, that was so full of grace it seemed to linger in the air and I couldn't breathe to see it. He said, "Roll with the punches. Just roll with the punches."

But I had to cast my eyes around the sky and distant hills. I cried, "Impossible!" He was silent for a moment so I looked at him again and then went on, "There are some things one simply must try to understand. You cannot let them slip away."

Yet still he stood there silent, looking straight in my eyes and waiting.

"All right, Cousin Jack!" I cried. "How's this one: My husband blew half of his head off with a shotgun just because he'd lost a job. Damn it all! My family is still rich! And he did it where I would go find him. What kind of man would do that?"

Looking level in my eyes, he answered with a little nod, with his lips pursed and "hmm", really just acknowledging that he had heard and seen what was described and understood.

Then I must put my hand before my mouth to say the rest but my head felt clear – quite like I stood up with my head up above the fog I had been wandering in – and I pronounced it very clearly. "And he did that instead of coming into bed with me! What kind of man would do that? To me!"

Then there was a most particular sensation, the first time I had ever felt a thing like this, someone really looking at you, a thing which one feels very seldom. It was as if there were some sort of lantern light, quite soft and gentle, emitted from his eyes or from his face that shone through mine and shone around inside from place to place while he was carefully examining inside of me, examining everything I was and everything I'd ever known or seen.

It feels as though you are a book with turning pages. It felt as though gentle fingers carefully touched me everywhere to find out what I was, arousing nothing, while tears were pouring from my staring eyes. That moment passed. Then, seeing I was steady still, he nodded once again and then appeared to descend very deeply into thought.

And, to my extreme surprise, still lost in thought, he then went back to chopping wood. And not mechanically, but tending closely to it all.

But I could not go back to work. I was entranced. I stood and watched him. The ax came down to chunk into the wood and he would lean to pull it loose then bend to toss the pieces by and set another in its place. It was dance, and the moving rhythm seemed to help him think.

And now and then he breathed another "hmm" as if some pieces of the puzzle locked together in his mind.

What sort of reasoning was being done? To me it seemed past imagining. Half a dozen sticks he must have done like that while I stood waiting.

At last he stopped and leaned his weight on the ax again. He looked me in the eyes again and said, "It might be that your husband was scared of you."

That was stunning. I'm sure I shouted, "What! Afraid of me? For what? I was a gentle wife! And passionate!"

But he simply stood up to my outrage. The astounding fellow said, "Yes, that's what I mean particularly. It may be he was scared of feeling shamed. Shamed in his own heart, by his own lights. You probably know this already, but manhood is a peculiar thing. A fellow can't do manly business properly unless he's proud, so there would be another shame. It may be he was scared particularly of feeling shamed when he was in the bed with you, when you were being gentle with him."

I burst out into sobs and must have leaned against the cold iron pump to keep from sinking to the ground and may have tried to kick it, hit with my fist, but that was idiocy and soon I threw another bucket on the hook and threw my body back into the work.

The damned coward, you see. To be quite frank, I was shouting obscenities for a while until that seemed weak and stupid too. And, to be quite plain about the scene, one should mention I was rather famous among my college pals for the wealth of obscenities that can be learned being a sportsman's daughter.

But be that as it may, I eventually subsided into silence except that sighing squeak and the liquid gush as I thrust the handle up and down and certainly something of a grunt when I swung each of the heavy buckets back into the barrow.

And Cousin Jack was chopping then again until he paused to speak. "Of course, doing it where you would find him; that does seem mean."

I stopped, feeling just frozen still as ice, and held my breath.

He said, "But of course, maybe he wasn't thinking too clearly."

Now, that did for me. I'm sure I sagged. Simply all the strength was gone from my limbs and I sunk down sitting on the muddy ground.

Poor Bill! The poor sodding bastard. What had he gone through in his short stay on earth? My mind seemed to be suddenly full of every moment when I'd ever looked at him. What had I been to him besides a playmate? I'd been the love of his life, a great attainment, a thing he must be worthy of. I'd felt all of that myself and known he felt it too.

And he had slaved at that sodding job he hated just to prove his worth and build his wife a bank account.

But then my other voice again: The coward! He'd left me here alone to face the wreck and ashes of his death. Could I forgive him that? No, no matter how I tried, because I was myself and here I was alone. Forgiveness? No. That would have been destruction to myself. That would have meant that he was right to turn away.

But then Jack asked me, while I was sitting there curled up and pounding at the soft earth with a fist, asked me "Do you have to be the judge?"

And of course I answered something like: "Yes! A person needs to judge."

A strong person needs to judge, one who hopes to go through life as themselves, for that is how one makes oneself distinct from others. That is a way to live through pain, by saying you are something else besides. At that time I did not see another way to do so.

But Jack, still resting leaning on the ax, replied to this effect: "You don't need to judge the trees or birds or hills."

And that absurdity was so absurd that I began to laugh. There was some sense somewhere in that, or so there surely felt to me even then, and yet it was so far beyond my understanding then that he may as well have been quoting *Cyrano de Bergerac* about the moon.

I must have felt some sense of riddles, riddles everywhere. I know that I was laughing very loudly simply at the rank mad carnival of life – for which the only sane response will always be rude laughter, in my opinion – and I was somewhat even

splashing in the mud by then until he came and took my hands and helped me up.

He even held me round the waist to hold me up, his arm pressing on my breast or visa versa, and he even reached to brush the leafy mud off my behind. And that was quite acceptable because in fact I rather felt as though we had made love. But that only took a moment and in the moment afterward we still held each other. Or it might really be confessed that I was clinging to his arm.

So right beside my ear then, he spoke. It may have been a whisper but also had the sound of words being carefully chosen.

He said, or I remember that he said, "Well, I ain't necessarily looking for a woman right now." And then I know he also said, "Anyway, I'd likely guess you're passing through on important business."

I nodded then I shook my head and here's what came from my mouth: "No, I am not necessarily looking for a man ... right now."

Certainly my body was demanding him to a degree which I found amazing, one can even say personally shocking.

Certainly the physical activities and sensations were a thing to fill one's imagination. There might have been a victory in it too, psychologically, a cry of independence from my troubles. Perhaps even some forgetting of the other male body with whom there had been so many exotic pleasures so many times.

I may have trembled. But truthfully I wasn't ready for that sort of thing. What sort of weak and needy lover would I be? I'd be a beggar. A sensation one must call disgust and horror rose in me with that thought, a deathly fear of being stupid with him, a fear of clinging and demanding.

And so I did the opposite exactly. I turned in his arms, shoved back from the embrace and grabbed him by his coat's lapels. I would have shook him if I'd had the strength. But what to say? Then, looking in his face, there was a kind of clarity one can't describe. I mean, I saw a clarity in him.

He stood there quite as open to my searching as I had been to his before, but inside of him – where I felt full inside

of thundering contradictions – inside of him one saw a sort of bright and open sky.

Ah! So! There was his magic power! In a way beyond my comprehension then, by means of some riddle which slid from my grasp immediately, at least I saw that somehow one can learn unlimited powers of vision and understanding.

Understanding: yes. Now, there's what I wanted even more than sex.

The fists with which I gripped his coat struck his chest repeatedly, pretty solidly, and I was quite demanding.

"How can you see things so clearly? How is it possible to see inside the skins of things so deeply? How is it done?"

His hands were on my shoulders and his fingertips suddenly pressed into my shoulders even hard enough to bruise, in a positively electric excitement at this question, and a fascinating look of wonder filled his face. But to answer he simply pointed toward the nearby trees.

He quite urgently whispered, "Look! Look there!"

I looked where he was pointing.

There was some sort of brightly colored bird hopping round among the branches, among the heavy bending leaves and dripping snow, you see, but it then chirped and seemed to merely twitch its wings and vanish. So I was staring at the empty space where a living thing had been before.

Of course this pierced me to the heart – I must have sighed or cried out something with the shock – but he whispered just as urgently, "All right. And now the light! Open your eyes wider and let the light through!"

Oh, frustration beyond measure. Yes, I saw the light in the hanging water drips where it was glimmering every color light and darkness. It was glistening in the sunlit crystals of the little heaps of snow.

I could smell infinity, the moist and burning light. It flashed out of the falling drops and wove a sort of web of jewels, just like I'd later hear the Buddhists say, before me and around me from the very air which tasted on my tongue with every breath.

I could have reached and touched the universe with fingertips or held the source and sum of everything nestled for a moment in my hand. But at that time there seemed to be no solid substance to it.

Try as I might, I could not hook into it with my eyes to pull it inward through my eyes into my skull inside this bag of quivering human skin. My dear dear rage was a solid thing which filled me, and the fear which, of course, I now felt was the heat which had my living anger boil like lava. But at least I was alive.

There was no room inside of me for light.

Oh, youth is wasted on the young. I was so earnest, such a simpleton as well. Bless the child I was. That year, with all that boiling stuff, I could have simply let the universe come flashing out from me to find itself. I could have let it through flashing outward instead of in.

But what are years to spend? The learning is the treasure and soon enough I would learn.

In any case, you'll understand, this spiritual exercise was utterly exhausting. I was holding down the rage and fear with all my strength and meanwhile also reaching out to try and seize the universe.

Good thing I'd had a solid meal. Good thing the fellow held me up. Perhaps it was just the sex simmering between us, but truth to tell, I never found another yogi half as good as him, and he self-learned in those beautiful Kentucky mountains. But finally I must shake my head, despairing of it.

And he said, "You'll get it." There was a most surprising mixture of respect and compassion mingling in his lovely voice.

Would I? Ever?

"Yes," he said, "because it's easy when you finally get it figured." And he said, "You're not scared of it."

"It's beautiful!" I cried.

Were people frightened of it? Yes, of course I understood at once that's why there are so many lies about it, people saying they can sell it to you in a jar and that kind of thing. But that was not this fellow's line of merchandise at all.

And so of course I took another look at him. I'm sure I pushed away to arms length to look him up and down. There I was now come to my senses in this world again, yearning for a universe, and leaning on this most amazing person who had simply pointed toward everything which at that moment I was capable to see.

Perhaps the best, he had let me show myself to me.

He had stood up to the rage without a flinch. He had stood up to the possibilities of what some lunatic might do there in the yard behind the kitchen. Ye gods! For all he knew, I could have murdered him.

In actuality, to tell the truth, for all which one can say about it now, some ridiculous moon-struck widow might have pulled a heavy little bulldog pistol from her pocket and left a perfectly innocent fellow lying in a pool of blood.

Some different fellow than he was, and perhaps I might have done.

But none of that was in his face or manner. There was simply concern for me written all over him, in his hands that held my body firmly and the way he leaned his head and knit his brows and searched my face for any sign of pain.

Well, then, was there some possibility that I would be like that some day? Me? Me as Florence Nightingale?

One thinks not. Scarcely. If me a yogi, why not Cleopatra or Marie Antoinette?

But him. Him! What a decent chap! Not Lancelot at all but really more of Chaucer's knight in fustian tunic. Yes, I must come back here some day and tup him well, just for proper courtesy if nothing else. Damsel in distress, and all of that!

And so of course I asked him then, "What is it like to live without fear?"

"Oh . . ." he said, "there's still things I'm scared of."

"No," I said, "not like it was before."

"No," he said, "not like it was before."

"You have to tell me."

"Oh . . ." he said again, "There's nothing to it. You want to know? What it's like?"

What frustration! What was the magic formula for living as he did? How does one walk about the world immersed in wonder? I fairly shouted, "Tell me!"

"Well . . ." he answered finally, "the best that I can say is something from a book I have. Before I come back from the war you see, I slumped around over there and picked stuff up, some books, this one in particular. I could show it to you sometime."

"Talk!" I demanded.

"Oh, well, see there's a little story. It's in China ..."

"China!" no doubt I screamed.

"Yes, and at the end it says is this . . ."

He glanced about the place there where we stood. Did he mean to indicate this place and time – this world – or was he watching out for spies eavesdropping on the secret?

Then with a smile which started very small but grew across his face as though it snuck from hiding somewhere, he spoke slowly, maybe savoring the words.

"Before you let the light go through, you chop wood and carry water. Then after you let the light go through ..."

So he was laughing nearly. He glanced about the place again and gestured toward it all to prompt me to complete the thought.

I had to smile with him, from his smile and from all that was obvious around us there. I saw he hoped that I would get it. How many did? Directions for a fearless life of knowledge of the beautiful? The formula to transmute your soul from gross to gold? The eternal recipe for worlds of wonder?

I rather grinned and nodded, struggling to force the words out past a laugh ...

"After you let the light go through, you chop wood and carry water."

Chapter two:

Bohos – that was grand. We really tried our hands at everything you can imagine. Unfortunately, my paintings were horrid. Bert Stein – he was a friend of mine – you must have heard of him; they have some of his things at the Boston – the

homosexual cowboy painter. He tried to break it to me gently by saying it was true my composition was "jejune" but my coloring was interesting. They were atrocious.

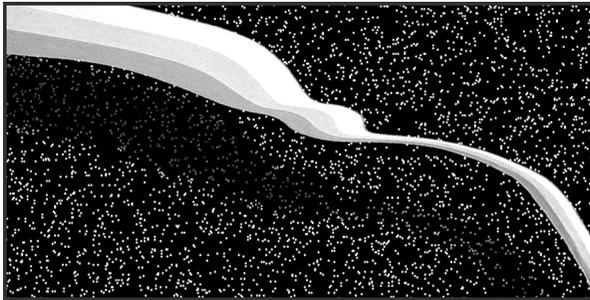
But amateur theatricals, that's where I made my mark. Dancing naked! Bert and I and some others – was it Dottie? – there was Ike of course – we did a send-up of Rites of Spring at a Hollywood garden party once. Of course I produced and directed and danced the lead. I even got the orchestra stripped off to their undershirts at least.

Hilarious. What an entrance! Silk scarves and peacock feathers entirely! The crowd roared. What a riot.

Of course we drank far too much and smoked bales of marijuana. There were some suicides and auto crashes. There were some botched abortions. It was the Great Depression and independent artists didn't eat. We were a bony orphan crew but childish fun was free.

It's a good thing Boston Trust kept sending those widow pension checks my dear Bill left. Our crowd waited for those beautiful telegrams; that's when we'd eat.

That was California in the thirties.



Z Is For Zodiac

From Alphabeticon; Digital image from
an acrylic/canvas painting by Stone Riley



E Is For Egg
From Alphabeticon
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Nature Walk a poem of the past

There were three quarters of an hour in one sunny summer day when I and a young boy whom I had just then met found ourselves – by quite unlikely circumstance – lost up on a wooded mountainside.

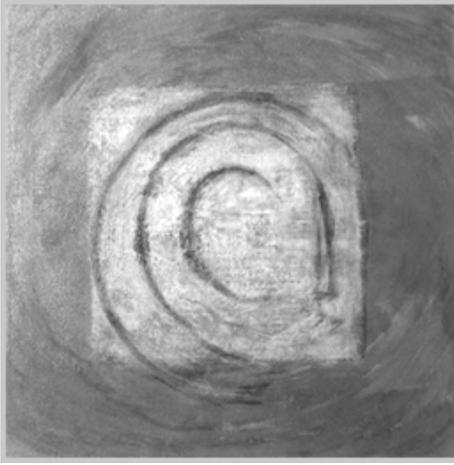
We had no gear. We were alone. I damn sure had to find the freaking road. I had to keep the young lad hardy too. That is a mountain range where failing hikers sometimes die.

I helped him choose a fallen hard wood branch as walking staff and taught its proper use to save your ankles from a sprain. I watched for any large fresh scat and warned against the verdant beds of poison ivy as we passed.

And yet, to my delight, it soon became an easy pleasant task and I was very very happy in its doing, very glad indeed to have his gruff and silent earnest company; me looking round to see the strange little boy catching up, me grinning at his frown.

I found a dry rocky stair-step way beside a steep and tumbling rivulet, so cool in dappled shade that we did not thirst. I did not ask his name nor offer mine – for I had best be cautious of his childish self-protective delicacy – but when the thing was safely done I made him shake my hand.

That was so long ago that now
I would not recognize his face.



The Poet's Craft
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

A Sailor's True Tale a memoir of a past life

Early summer is a coming of age. It brings a leap into maturity for Nature and for human hearts. The sun is rising up to rule the sky; the moon has turned her crescent and is falling low. It is a time for us to plow and sow. It is a time to glory in the forces rising in the Earth and dance in Heaven's light. *Why not rejoice?*

One autumn night a gale came howling in across the rocky northwest coast of Spain, in from the trackless sea. Eight brave sailors and a leaky boat were lost. The tons of corn for which they cast their lives into the game were lost. High hopes and pride were lost. The money in the game was lost. All was lost save I who was their captain and three other shipwrecked wretches, beaten, bleeding and torn, twisted and broken, cast up high upon the cliffs, spared by fate to die a different day.

The year exactly I do not recall but I see my shipmates still through driven rain and foam clinging to the leaping deck, all eyes straining through the raging dark, to spy the horror which must surely soon appear: the looming eminence of rock. The moon was high enough and just past full that night but we

were riding in the vanguard of the gale, not even shreds of gleam, and doom was still invisible a rod away.

I still recall the sudden pounding roar of surf. *I still recall the crashing splintering and screams. I still recall my scream.* I still recall the brutal wet and pain and cold. I who was their captain had been proudest of them all.

It's summer now; the world is waking now to warmth and light. It is a time to grow. It is a time for all that went before to burst into new form, a time for all the fields forgotten through the winter's gleaming night to sprout with green. It is a time to take possession of yourself and do things right.

We were boys together, all of us were boys. I was twenty-one that awful night and my first mate was twenty-three. It was my uncle's boat. Father long ago had run away to Africa to die in glory against the Moors and my uncle took his place; a good man was he.

My uncle was a smiling merchant with warehouses in Seville and Malaga and other towns, and interest in many ships. I walked his partners' decks since I could walk at all and he placed great trust in me. I sailed as mate and navigator and supercargo all up and down the coasts of Spain and France and Italy and showed my aptitude and grew in pride and made my reputation, all before a razor ever met my cheeks.

It was an age of glory when Spaniards trusted fate and trusted a man among men. I trusted my self-learned notions of the winds and storms and currents and tides.

One year at last a rotten little tub fell to his hands entire – he owned it himself outright – and he lent it to me. Three years I sailed as captain of this little tub with daring pals as crew. Three years we sailed in weather no one else would dare, for glory and for money too. We counted all our earnings out among ourselves in shares, like pirates or privateers, and always claimed percentage from the merchants, not a rate.

We took the dangerous consignments, dogged the hurricanes, set sail against the tide in lowering skies; we did whatever

I the captain calculated we should dare. They obeyed me and I was proud. I loved them too. We went around the towns with purses too full to jingle and our names on every whore and seaman's lips. I was a hero in these little towns, a man among men, but still I was a boy.

It is magic how the green sprout shoulders by the clod and stands up to the sun. It is magic how the calf emerges from the cow and stands on wobbly legs and looks around. The butterfly emerges from the worm, the nestling from the shell, the leaf and blossom from the bud. Long have they waited for this hour and suffered much.

The field lay fallow half the year to rot in ice and snow. The tree has budded in every thaw and frozen back. A thousand worms will die to feed the bird. The cow was hobbled long by her great belly and stands at last in pain. With staunch enduring courage Nature hoarded up Her power to burst forth now in glory.

Shame! Shame! There is no end of shame for one whose heart is swollen full of pride, and all the channels of his heart are stopped with stone.

My heart was broken by the sea that night when all but three of my trusty and beloved followers died, broken by the sea which I had set to tread and conquer. My heart was shattered on the rocks where I had led them. My heart was broken, thrown up on that desolate coast and yet somehow left beating still.

When morning finally broke and fog was lifted by the coastward wind, when our damned gale was far off ripping at the roofs of Leon, a fine clear autumn day came on with frosty breeze and the three survivors shouted for us all by name an hour or two. But neither I nor the other dead answered. They struggled their way inland while I cowered in the rocks in shame. Oh, in my guilty misery how I longed to be transported back one single day, or else to die! And I was still a boy.

The story runs on quite long but I'll make short of it. I passed another night up in the cranny of the seaside cliffs, and strangely it was fever and thirst which made me want to live.

Dreams clotted my brain; every admiring stare which ever greeted me in any town and every tavern toast and every pleasure cry abed was turned back to me now in despising hate; my murdered comrades' women jostled one another in my dream for stones to strike me.

I longed to live, but far away in exile. Another morning and a sail came by; I hailed it with all my feeble might and the good men came in their rowboat to my rescue. Their sloop was outward bound to the Canary Isles, leagues away far out to sea, and there on those dry islands life dragged on for years.

An old bitter merchant wife lived there with a run-down wharf and warehouse from her husband's legacy and I ran that warehouse for her. She was meaner to me than to any one else; I dressed in rags and suffered from her tongue and drank myself to stupor with Canary wine and counted it my due.

There is a striving in the human soul toward home. We struggle so but only long to lie down at the Mother's breast and hear Her crooning lullaby of peace, of rest; we long to hear Her say that all our failings are forgot. We know She waits somewhere on a summer isle with open arms and open heart. Yes, all that matters is the way left yet to go.

Oh, blessed forgetfulness! This world is a long hard school for a child of man and oft we must forget the lies to learn the best. I did not know the way to Her. My only oblivion lay then in a flask of wine.

One spring the old widow died. No one owned her ramshackle business then; the sheriff came to lock it up and take her cash. I was soon penniless. How can I tell you what things were like then? I was twenty-nine. I lived in part on charity and part by telling tales like this one in the bars. I preached against pride, and steady on I drank. But I did not despair;

there was no passion left in me, not even for despair. I simply waited.

From autumn dusk to winter night, as life subsides to lay down chill and dormant in the Earth, a true man lets his pride and shame both wash away. Then at winter's turning when the Sun has reached His farthest ebb and when the Moon sails high and near, They change Their spiral courses to gradually return.

When your hands are empty and the heart beats slowly in your breast, when you lie in lonely exile far from home, when you stand at last unarmed and naked against the tide, with the gates hung open and the wall thrown down; then at long last Wisdom, blessed Wisdom, whispers to your ear:

"Be thou still."

Force nothing in that time. Long not for the man you were nor for the days gone by. By its own power the rising tide comes fresh and new; let passion swell up new and find its way through clearer well springs in your heart. When summer's full you'll feel the surging power in your hands. Be thou patient, for life is good.

Birth, death, birth and death. One time the waves would sweep across the deck of a Spanish admiral of the Caribbees and a sailor would let go a line, joyful and triumphant, to slip away into the Lady's deep embrace.

When next I found that watery way the body was drugged to stupor, drunk, oblivious to the soul-deep grief of a murdered race, stumbling about an alien town as weird as Hell – I was an Indian. Face down in the gutter of the street I lay and called down the merciful rain.

Death, birth, death and birth, we are allotted all the lives we need.

The loving Goddess weeps for such a failure of a spirit thirsting light but death's forgetfulness can be a critical relief, and a noble sacrifice of clinging hope as well.

Life ebbed down in a youth who waited patiently in the taverns and along the wharves of a port in the dry Canary

Isles. Vainglorious guilt for my own wasted years and my own foolish pride had burned down to a glowing grief and then to just regret.

It was an heroic age for the Spanish race; the folk would toast their heroes' famous names and deride their countless victims while I sat apart. These were the folk who cheered thousands to the Inquisition's burning stake and I had been their child.

But nothing was left in my heart of the lust to conquer and the lust for fame which had compelled my deeds before. I knew their way was wrong and I knew that life could hold much finer joy than they conceived. It seemed there was no will left in me anymore for there was nothing I desired except a place to be with *Her*, the mistress of my dreams, *the Lady of Life*; unknown to all, my only longing was to somehow make that secret mystic union real. I waited for a death to come and trusted it would take me home.

To learn one lesson in one life is quite enough to call that life well spent. Let me tell you now what it was I learned before I tell you how. (As an Indian I would find that every trail is home, but the Indian's a different time and another tale.) As a sailor boy of the Spanish race I learned a true man walks his trail alone.

The waves that cross a heart are naught but ripples on a pond; the true man's heart is deep. The tides of love and joy that swell up in his heart spring from divinity. He walks impeccably; with every step he does exactly what he must and like the eagle's flight his spirit soars. A true man goes upon this earth so like a god and when his time has come he flies away. Full of gladness, always heedless of fools and yet a fool himself, he does his part.

There is scant upon this page to tell the rest, ever so fine I write. Would that I could paint the detail of the morn my ship came in and how the townfolk crowded all that day and night to hear the seamen's tales. It was a vessel of our

ever-victorious Admiral of the Caribbees, from far across the ocean to the west, which hurried home on some important business with our king.

Would that all the news of Indians enslaved or dead could reach your ear, the news of heathen cities burned and golden idols melted down for righteous coin.

Would too that I could paint the face I saw among that crew, my boyhood chum, my first mate from the long-lost boat, and tell you how among the crowd I fainted at his feet. It is enough to tell how full of pity was my friend to find his friend so low, and how he carried me away and how we talked.

I opened my mystic heart to him but he did not approve. We had been together in glorious youth; he was still young and I was old. I told him every vision of our Holy Mother I had seen, and how She differed from the pale weak virgin of the priestly tales, or the harlot Eve, but to him it was a madman's raving. I told him how the love of Her consumed my soul; he begged me never again to speak such deadly thought.

How can I describe the joy it brought to speak of Her at last, as I had never spoken to a mortal soul. He got me on the ship, signed on as a sailor once again and bound for home, and every moment we could steal from duty still we talked.

No words can tell the joy it was to speak my heart out loud although in whispers, the peace and comfort and power it bought, and every word was right. I saw then as I'd never seen before that life and death and everything was good; I was with Her at last.

So now this tale is nearly done, take from it what you will. Scarce a pocketful of hours was left before our ship made shore. My friend and I sat whispering in the dark, I full of joy and he of fear. The ship was bounding under lots of sail when suddenly the seas she plowed through turned to great Atlantic swells and she began to lurch; an officer on deck was crying out for men.

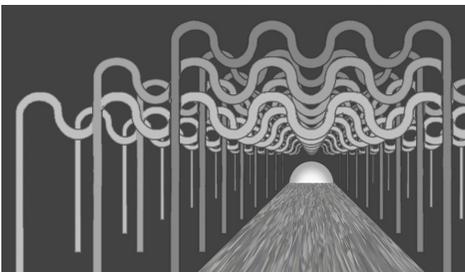
Carried on wild abandoned joy more than my wasted limbs, I made the deck with all the rest then crawled and clambered to my work up in the vessel's bow.

Heads of good-size waves were crashing over our poor wooden shell. No man has known such combat if he has not been to sea. Foaming torrents buried me head deep and pounded at my frame; scarce was breathing possible and every moment periled I would wash away, and yet I struggled on.

Suddenly somehow I came into the place I sought and yet once there, victorious, found that in such raging chaos I could do naught. I wedged my toes into a crack, braced hard against the sprit and clung for life to the very rope which I had come to slack away.

But how long could I stay? The mighty strike of wave increased with every blow. I was submerged entire and strength was failing fast.

Well, this human life is strange. Struggle mightily a bit, find your god, learn great things and always in the end you stand alone. So cling to life until you're washed away or let it go? I smiled and let it go.



R Is For Ride
From Alphabeticon
Digital image by
Stone Riley



Persistent Dream
Digital image from
an acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

My Dear Child **a poem of despair and courage**

My Dear Child,
You'll understand,
I cannot write to you as often as we both would wish.
Everything is so hard here. It's hot.
The Sun here is horrible this year,
and food is running low.
It's hot.
We're glad you left, despite the loneliness here, really.
You see, the gardens have died now, they all died.
It's hot. The water's low.

•••••

Our neighbors whom you know next door,
whom you remember,
whom you think of with fondness I'm sure,
are doing poorly still.
We had them over yesterday for tea.
They have nothing left to sell.
They ask about you. We reassure them.
Are you still well?

•••••

Soldiers have been through here again recently,
the brown ones.
They took some girls and boys away, I don't know why.
They say they'll feed them.
There was a lot of weeping. It's hard to stop.
Is the war over yet? We haven't heard.
We had a letter from you in the spring. Are you still well?
Do you have soldiers there? What kind? Are there many?
Are there bombs exploding?

••••••••••

Some days it's hard to rise from bed,
with only us two here now.
It's easier to lie and think.
I think and think.
Do you remember the woods out behind the house?
Of course you must. But do you remember sometimes,
just a little maybe sometimes,
walking out there once, the first time we did,
you and me, the first time we ever did,
when you were very small I think?
You got stuck in the blueberry bushes!
They were up above your knees!
You couldn't even step,
tangled all around your feet like that,
and you fell down flat, you darling little thing,
face flat down into the soft earth, leafy soft, damp,
and I hauled you up by one little hand,
like a god from a machine,
and you were like a mighty hero truly,
angry at that berry patch
and wanting to press on through!
Me like the helmsman of Odysseus crying that
we must turn back.
You are such a pretty brave child, my dearest.
You must be doing something good, I think.

Are you well?

••••••••••

Do you remember all the birds? There used to be
so many birds.

The noise they made. I find them dead sometimes.

I found one dead last spring. Just after your letter came,
that very day, it gave me such a start. A pretty little thing,
a wren, brown. A wren.

Among the dry forest floor, dry litter sticks, and
there it was.

I had to cry so loud: "No, this is not you!" I cried.

But in the woods. It was. There were ants on it.
That day was early spring you see, but dry and warm;
the little ants, the small ones,
they were running in and out the tiny nostrils
of this little bird dead,
tiny head, stiff legs,
but it was still a body whole, its eyes wide wide,
in my hand
as I picked it up and held it close to my eyes to see
and ants were running in and out
and chasing around my fingers.

So I spoke your name of course and wept
and spoke your name
more times than anyone can count.

But you are well, my dear dear child, or not?

••••••••••

It is so easy nowadays to sleep,
to fly on the wings of dreams, into some other country.

But she woke me suddenly there in our bed, your mother,
waked me suddenly, shook my arm so hard
and gripped it in hard fingers so I turned back to her there,
she was my lover you know,

whom I treasured far above all else,
some time ago, but I could not speak for seeing her here,
being in this hard time of hardness,
in our dark shaded room, but light.

Those eyes sunken in, those cheeks shrunken thin,
those lips thin from hunger,
those lips parted scarcely, moving, whispering,
crying to me quietly,

saying:

"I dreamed about the child!"

•••••

She whom I once loved said to me:

"I dreamed I flew away. There was a land somewhere.
And the sun and moon were reaching toward each other
and they were spinning spinning spinning spinning.
And there was a forest there.
And our child was there.
And there was a burst of flames."

•••••

I can't sleep now. I'm awake. She woke me.
I can't sleep now so what on Earth can I do?
If you get this letter will you tell me?
Are you well?

Heaven help me,
Here I stand on the front step of this old house,
looking out into that road you left on
praying to some god I don't know,
that you, my child,
will come walking here,
around that corner over there and up this street,
right now and
come answer all my questions.

But I'm seeing now. I have to see it now to look for you,
I have to look and there it is, the road.
There is the road right there.

I'll wait till evening when it's cool at least,
but I'll go in now and make a pack
and go out back and cut a walking stick.

Will she go with me? I hope she will. I love her so.
We've helped each other so often.

How far can an old man and old woman get,
down this road around that bend?

A mile? Not even

and even then how could we ever find you?

But I don't even care. I cannot care.

I cannot count the cost of everything and drink
the sleepy tea of fear
again, again.

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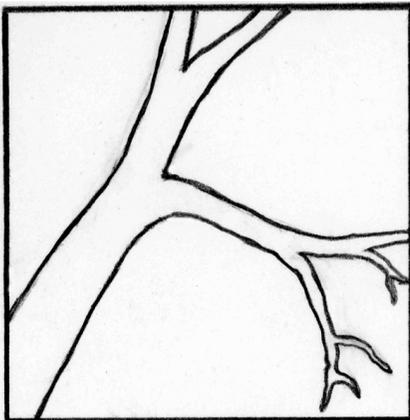
Here's what it is:

However long that I am alive,

I swear however long it is that I'm alive,

I will be alive.

.....



Seven Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



Image Of Two
From *Alphabeticon*
Digital image by
Stone Riley

Journey To The West a poem of clear consciousness

Love is not the thing, nor hate. Hope is not the mouse's scurrying feet and owl's sharp beak, no more than these are fear. What is the purpose of the poppy's fate then, or the logic of my heart blood's heat, or yet the celestial motive of the sky's Great Bear? How do we live? Why has the Cosmos brought us here?

When I was full of hope, I thought that was the beginning and end of all things. Then, full of yearning to be loved, I dreamed love was the wellspring of delight. But then, immersed in deep despair, I chose to live this life for purposes that were far too obscured in smoke and flame for me to know and name. Why did I, in that dark hour, choose to live this life? Why did I not yet fly away?

Love is not the thing, nor hate. Faith is not the prisoner's chain, nor doubt the prophet's holy flame, nor greed the mother's teat touched to the sleeping baby's lips, nor is blessed charity the tyrant's grip. All this is life, but what is life? What is the melting of all opposites?

There is a man I truly hate; there is a woman whom I love. That man is dead as he once wished for me, the woman never met although my eyes search through the worlds for only she. Where is this woman who'll return my glance? Where is that ancient foeman now when in my hands I hold his broken

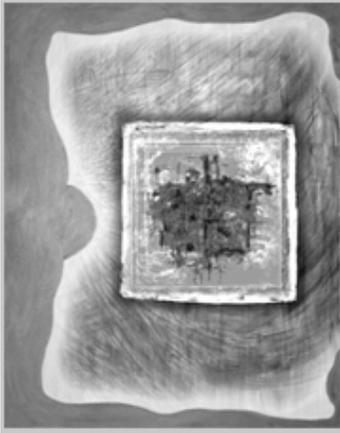
blunted lance? And where am I? Where is this land wherein I stand alone? What is this place? Is this my home? I simply call this place my Skysealand.

One year when I was young and starting out across this continent, I strained my eyes to look ahead to map the way. That year, each Monday I would take a poem from an ancient wisdom book and I would fold up the coded rhyming wisdom neatly into my purse. Then for seven days I'd search the curving trunk of every tree and every mottled turtle's shell that I might pass beside the way for explications written there by unseen hands for me. Well, the Gods were generous and kindly gave some of their secrets up, but the boy I was then did not know their language well.

An eagle's mighty flight; a turtle shell; amid the lovely ripples of a brook, the various colored pebbles very artfully arranged; I made the best of it I could. Indeed, several turnings of the way and crossroads were very helpfully pointed out to me in advance by these magic signs. But now I've come a good way further on and, even though the sunlight and the stars and meadow flowers and hills and snow now all sing and whisper to me audibly; and even though the web of jewels of which all things are made stands manifest and visible and palpable to my fingers; yet even so, more hidden secrets still remain.

Buddha says that all is bliss. Solomon recommends a carefully considered trust. Christ says you should take his word on faith. Ganesh and Krishna both respectfully suggest that you can dance your life with happy grace. But for me, Merlin stands with a lantern held high in his hand, leaning on a wooden staff up on a windy mountain top. That wind blows down to gently touch my face and it speaks to me in a woman's voice and all she says is just: "come".

No, love is not the thing, nor hate; not victory nor defeat. Whatever guides my fate, whatever it may be that lures me on, whatever it may be, it is not anything that I can know so as to name.



Prometheus
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**Reawakening
a poem of clear consciousness**

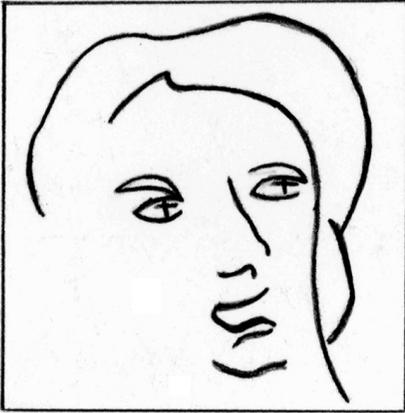
'Twas moonless night. 'Twas early Spring.
'Twas in a sheltered valley pass
amid the highest uplands of the Windy Hills.
And here beneath a starry sky,
so black and cold, so deep and still,
here lay a mirror lake awaiting.
Stars above and stars below,
from depths of sky and lake they shone,
their eerie shadow bathing Earth
and filling all the distant world with secret song.

A footloose wanderer, a nighttime walker,
the seeker of a strong and noble soul,
leaning on a staff of oaken wood,
stood drunken with the beauty
of this haunted place which welcomed him.
Perhaps he was not here.
Perhaps he lay somewhere
wrapped in his cloak beside a dying fire
and dreaming.

Bright Venus drew him on.
Above the farther hill stood silver Venus,
beacon of the dusk and dawn.
Her light shot to his heart.
She drew his footsteps down
across the grassy slope, across the pebble shore,
until he stopped with boot heels on the Earth
and toes into the water where,
gazing in the mirror depths,
he knelt to pray.

Why do the hearts of men
reach out beyond their ken?
Why does an earthly soul forswear its bonds
to journey forth and there commune with gods?
There are no men and gods.
There is no Earth and Sky.
There is no one but One Forever Singing.

Eyes fluttered open. His own face,
all translucent in the deep and all aglow,
gazed back through dreaming eyes.
No more a mortal man, what was he now?
A shadow in the lake? A shadow in the air?
Or just a song?
This moment fear was gone.
This moment when a seeker gazed
in through him in the deep
his soul was everywhere,
so doubt was washed away.



Page Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

An Eagle's Mighty Flight a memoir of distant vision

I was on a religious retreat one time, at a campground in the New England woods, and it was a time when I was very troubled about some personal issues. Really it all came down to a question of courage and a question of which way to go.

Now, as you may know, the bald eagle is very sacred in North America and I knew this in a theoretical way, just like I knew that various species are seen by humans as great sacred animals all over the world. But bald eagles are very rare in New England these days, and every other place where I had ever lived, and I had never seen one flying free.

Well, I went out walking in the woods that morning in a very prayerful state. I was not communing with any specific deity, you understand, but striving to open my being as a whole to the Universe as it was manifesting there where I was in that region of physical existence. And I was offering a request for specifically useful wisdom.

I had stopped to sing some chants along the way, and such as that, and then came to the big open meadow where our rituals and celebrations were done on that retreat. Of course I paused in the shadows of the forest edge to stand and gaze on this sunlit place, empty of other humans there so far that morning,

but a space where a human community lived consciously inside of Nature. And I was opening myself again and sending forth my yearning prayer again as I had done in several other scenes along a wandering path.

A mighty eagle rose from the treetops of the farther verge, absolutely in the center of my right eye's vision.

It was huge, exactly spanning all the breadth of my right eye's vision.

Up it rose with mighty wing beats, but only high enough to easily clear the tallest trees, facing straight away from me, and beat its way straight ahead of me until it disappeared beyond that close dark green horizon.

Should I explain the meaning that I immediately gained from this or can you read the omen?

There is a little more. Some months passed, another year, a different summer. A lady friend and I drove up to a big public fair they're having annually in Maine. This big do is a folklife festival, natural agriculture exposition, left wing political convention, free speech venue, handicraft shopping outlet and down-home tourist attraction rolled up into one, with definite overtones of Nature veneration.

For example, I bought myself a really far-out hippie magic hat for use when doing children's storytelling. A useful item and excellently crafted. But along the way to that, before the tent where they were selling these unusual hats, my lady friend and I walked into a big tent that was reserved for Native American endeavors.

The air was somber. This was not a merry day for them. But still, I had a sense of something waiting.

We threaded through among the nearly silent shifting crowd in the labyrinthine paths between the laden tables of the merchants, artisans and activist associations, there in that deeply shadowed grassy hall.

Then finally, not quite to the sunny open door at the farther corner, I came upon a little family camp defended by a barricade of tables. That is the only apt description, unless one were to

say the family huddled there were on a boat adrift, the tables being gunwales and the shifting crowd a sea.

A man, his son, the young man's pregnant woman. A look near desperation on the father's face, he standing, gazing on the son who sat, the woman in his arms, on a blanket on the earth, she looking resolute and very young, the boy in some confusion. The eagle's gift was now to be repaid.

The father and the son were fine carvers in wood, the man a master of that art, the son apprentice. Beautiful pieces of their work were set out on the tables, statuettes of beasts and birds, implements that must be sacred to any needing hand. There was an album of photographs of more through which I leafed in hopes that clarity would come before the moment came to speak.

But then the father looked at me, resentful of my looming psychic presence, and so I must at once snatch off my Druid's kind of cap and lean upon my tall Druidic walking staff in a very modest and apologetic bow for the interruption and let the words flow how they would.

With the woolen cap held to my heart, I heard this from my mouth: "Good morning, sir." I gulped a breath. I shrugged. "I don't know your people's ways; I follow Celtic ways myself."

The father let me have an impatient but accepting nod.

"But if I can take a minute of your time, there's a story I'm supposed to tell."

Astonishment came to his face almost as if – I have to say – this meeting was foretold. That felt to be the obvious impression.

And blink! The boy was on his feet, pressed to the father's side just like a brother would have been, and with astonishment written on him too.

And so I rose into it then, an open gesture with an out-stretched hand, but then a gawker from the crowd perked up, a smile stuck on his silly face as if to see the show, so I must bring a curtain down and there we stood as if it were indeed

a camp with darkness all around and I a stranger from the darkness come to tell a tale.

I told it briefly, the man still nodding with impatience, now straining toward the story's end as if that were the only thing he didn't know already. The morning of my walking prayer for guidance from the land, the meadow field, trees beyond, Mighty Eagle rising. It filled my right eye and flew ahead.

And the lesson I had read in it: I said, "I understood from this that I should go strongly! Forward!"

I paused.

He nodded, quite as though to say my reading was obvious enough and obviously correct, but he waited for the rest.

I said, "And now today, although I don't know why, I felt that I should tell this to your son."

I shot the lad a look.

A gasp from them, a startlement beyond before, and to each other's eyes they turned and deep into each other's heart they gazed.

There was a story there I have no wish to penetrate, a privacy I do not want to understand.

With humble thanks and bows, unheard, unseen by them, I took my leave.

I went and found a magic hat.

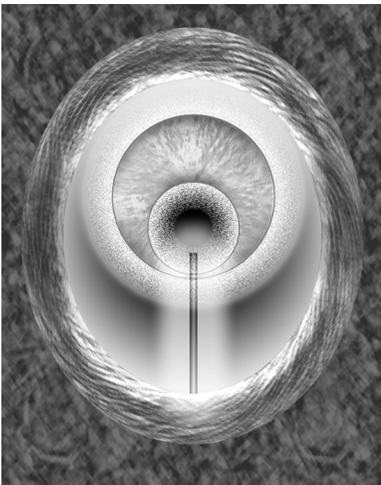
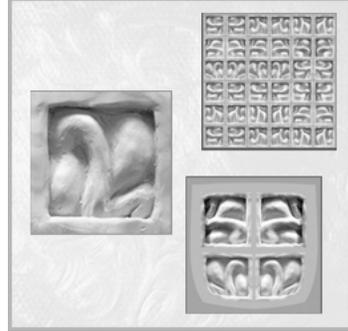


Image Of One
From Alphabeticon
Digital photo-
montage by
Stone Riley

**Seventy Five
Jackson Street**
Digital image from
a clay sculpture
by Stone Riley



Seventy Five Jackson Street **a poem of mythic reality**

Seventy-Five Jackson Street in Worcester Massachusetts
is an old empty red brick factory like countless thousands
of others in New England in our time.

But more particular,
it's one of several city blocks of them that I drive among
while delivering a child – my lovely young granddaughter –
to her school most mornings.

All these abandoned red brick mills,
each one of them, in city blocks or standing
in the countryside, small or large,
so imperious with their profound squareness
– so many myriad of red flat bricks all in
Pythagorean vertical flat planes –
and so astonishing with their transcendental emptiness –
habitation now for long gone souls now passed
to elsewhere who in other time labor here daily,
living lives like mine inside that place
– while I pass by or sometimes
stop to stare
they fill me with strange emotions.

These are such human things.
They are so still and old and yet
– as life forever must be hope –
I see each one to be an ancient womb.



Temperance

Acrylic / canvas
painting for
Spirit Hill Tarot
by Stone Riley

Going Home

a contemplation of reconciliation

It's often said that we cannot go home again because it isn't there. There is an ancient aphorism saying we can never step into the same river twice because it's constantly a different river. There is a famous poem "Death Of The Hired Man" in which the poet offers cold comfort by only saying home is where they have to take you in.

But on the other hand, it's also said that at the end of the longest journey we come home to ourselves. I do believe it. I do believe for all of us there is a place of calm and rest deep in our soul waiting somewhere at the end of struggle.

In the tales of Jesus there is a moment very near his death when he cries to Father God, "Why have you forsaken me?" In all of Christian lore, this is certainly the moment which I find most difficult to reconcile with my understanding of that faith's central comfort.

To me Christianity seems generally a path of hard-won joy, not surrender to despair. And I know joy is possible in this world, not only in a paradise elsewhere. That story well depicts the very furthest point of struggle but I feel disappointed that the writer did not paint a picture of peace one little step beyond. That passage of that scripture story only says that after uttering that cry Christ sighed and gave up his soul, nor does that writer even say to who or where he gave it.

But in that sigh, as in a drop of water, may we find a hidden universe?

Also in the Bible, the deepest two of King Solomon's books use two different storytelling modes to demonstrate the human meaning of that sigh, which all we human beings sometime sigh.

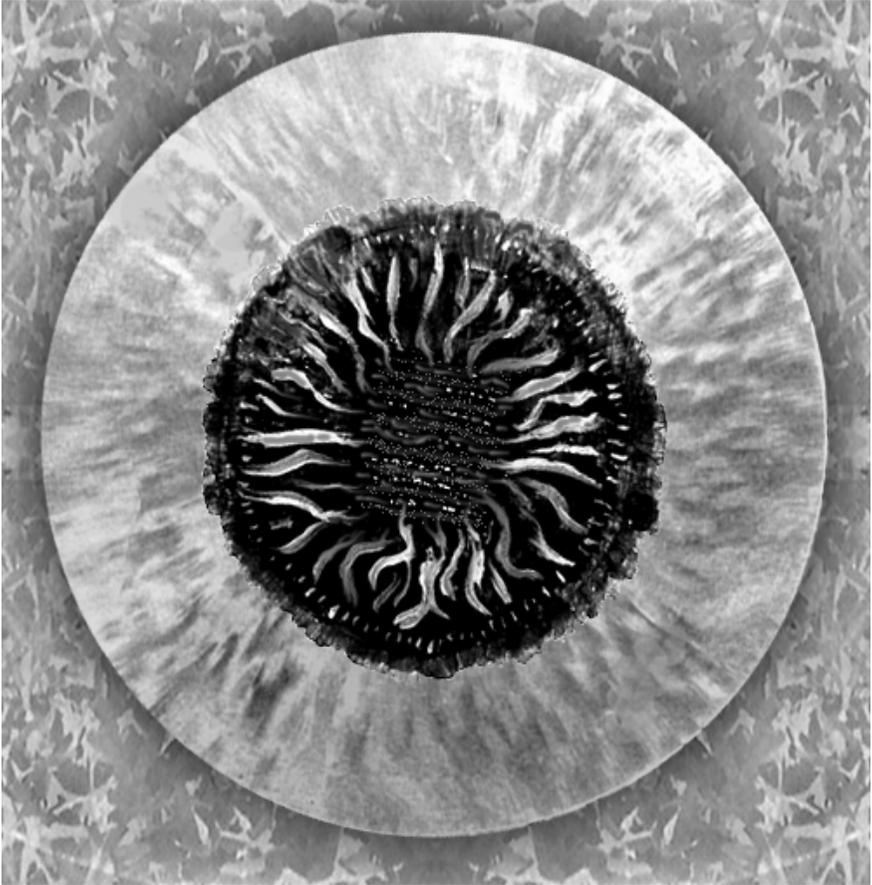
Ecclesiastes, at its culmination, finally shows an elder speaking from a place of wisdom to the generations of the human world. So far so good. But then in Job that same author made the ending like a childish fairy tale in which all the happiness that was lost before is magically restored. Perhaps from reading those great books together, perhaps I should paint for you a picture of a rainbow's end and it would also do as well.

There is a wise and passionate striving in the human heart toward home. We struggle so but only long to hear a murmured lullaby of peace, of rest, whispering that our failings are forgot and love has found us now at last. Should we not say that is a wise passion?

So here at rainbow's end, here is a landscape of the heart's desire, the place of suffering's end, the dreaming place where all that's gone before is reconciled in mythic understanding, dissolving to the glow of fiery light in watery mist.

Should we say, in fact,
our contemplation of that lovely place
is, in fact, our journey there?

Part Three:
The Feminine Path



The Feminine Path
Digital photomontage by Stone Riley



**Earth
Dragons**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Also The Dancing Ground Again historical fiction, a poem on religion in ancient Greece, a chapter from the novel Dark Of Light

There was a moment when she knew her marriage bed and all of that would never be. Or rather when she knew that if all that were never done then still her priesthood would be worth the lack of it. Or rather when she first with conscious judgment chose her priesthood absolutely past all that, regardless what might be. It was so hard for boys to take a girl like her but by that time, that afternoon of choice, her dearest childhood chum already had a husband and a newborn.

A stitching bee. She was home for the holiday. Old Auntie Kettle plucked a random fussy little child from underfoot, examined it and knowingly declared "Oh, he wants to eat!" And with a glance about the little yard where they were sitting at the work she then of course thrust the hungry child into the bosom of the only healthy milking woman present. Of course, and yet . . .

Sixteen herself, her infant then days old, scarcely yet a week of life between she and the tiny one she loved above all else, and it her first, and never yet another child had she yet put to tit, and sleeping unsuspecting of this breach, this

betrayal of a holy trust, this fracturing of sacred love, it sleeping unsuspecting nearby in a shady basket cradle wreathed with dainty flowers.

Old aunties know their work. There was a choice to make – community or selfishness – and now was time to get it made.

The young mother's face was blanched in horror and she stared.

And the priestess girl, the closest friend, the cousin tried and true, the intimate of bygone times, now come home for the holiday, was sitting just beside with mouth agape, astonished at the shock of such an ordinary thing. And her own tits were yearning to give suck. And yet she understood it all intensely without jealousy.

No spite and yet suddenly the tears burst out in panicked grief that such a life as this, of such surpassing beauty as this was, would not be hers. Where would her Goddess take her? Was she a stranger here already? The temple's early years – the years they gave the girls and boys who would apprentice back into the village rites – were almost done and no one thought that she would leave Elfesus. So could she ever again be home in this loved and dreaded village yard, this place of utmost courage? Was she a stranger here already?

Here was, in fact, the tragic fact that had and has informed great tragic song and poetry across that culture-world from Ur to Ireland. To live where they were living, with the means of living that were then in hand, humans must compromise continually between competing demands which were, despite the contraries of those demands, so doubtlessly innate to human nature or else so innate in the way that they perforce must live, as to be both, contrary though they were, doubtlessly sacred. These people danced a labyrinth with every step.

And then she understood that understanding this so well – that seeing this eternal tragic majesty of human life so well – was more than human heart could bear at such close reach.

She was not made to be one of the aunties here where every instant of your life demanded so much acquiescence to the Fates. And this was just the very thing the village boys all feared of finding in her bed, this wish for knowledge over faith. This constant groping in the cavern of the well behind the eyes. This blaze of unaccounted thought. This laughter bursting from her weeping heart. Indeed, they understood her to be mad. And here and now – on this particular ground at this particular moment of this life – she was.

It can't be said the fit of laughing weeping took her unawares this second time. She felt it shadowed when she saw her well loved cousin start and stare. Then when the well loved cousin nodded, pulled the chiton down and held the hungry one to let the hands and lips seek out the teat, she felt it like a storm of knowing rushing up her spine. Then when an eager voluntary squirt dripped down the little cheek the fit came fully on.

She sat there slumped down on her stool just like the other time, the stitching things all fallen from her violently shaking hands and trod beneath her tapping feet, but this time knew exactly why she laughed and wept. The world was just so beautiful. And yet, what was the use of this? The dire frustration of these crippling fits – the inability to work, the liability it placed on her companions – all came exactly to this point: They who were so beautiful, how could she ever serve them as a lunatic?

But then her well loved cousin looked her in the eyes to gain attention, looked down at the child she had at breast, looked into her eyes again with dire anguish manifest in each contour of her face and silently clearly asked: "Dear priestess friend, is this a crime that I have done?"

Did they see she looked at things they did not see? Did they realize that this insanity was saturated all and all with holy revelation?

Apparently they did. For it was Auntie now who stood behind her quaking body, embraced to try to hold her shoulders still, and – even while her head was bobbing to and fro and even while the sobs and laughter barked out of her throat – the old matron bent to speak distinctly in her ear: "Is it a crime what I have done?"

The fit then passed immediately and never would return. She sagged into the old woman's arms. She gulped and gasped for breath. She cried out hoarsely as the spittle flew: "It is so beautiful! It is all so beautiful! There is such courage! What is good is done!"

And in that moment she had chosen
priesthood far beyond all else.



Six Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



New Hope
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Cornucopia
a poem of religion
in ancient Greece

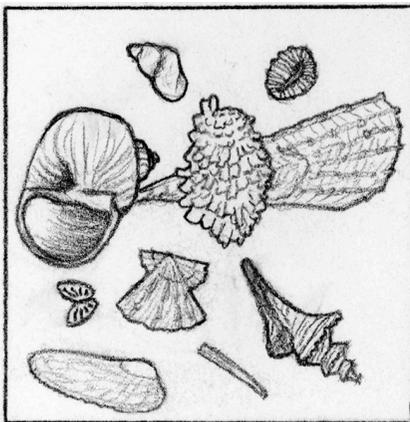
However much we live by choice and will or else by faith in guidance on the labyrinthine passage through our years, however physical or insubstantial each of us may feel here in this world, however well we know we are a soul or almost deny it, however sharp and hard and alien the countless things may feel which touch us here or else how poignantly we hear the harper's song of meadow flowers and snow and hills and sea and sky and fellow-souls and reach forth our fingertips to touch the billowing and glistening spider's web of liquid jewels which this world is; however much we know that we are God; yet still all of us humans yearn to somehow see the place – perhaps a single point somewhere in infinite space and time or else some all-pervading all-creating mind – from which all this has always come.

The old Greeks had a Mystery At Elfesis. It was a huge boisterous pilgrimage from Athens to a magic hill beside a distant shore. At regular frequent intervals for several hundred generations, in the cooling time when summer's barley crop was in and the rich fields awaited autumn's second sowing, then the whole folk of the city would rise up with song and dance and shouts and entertainments and tramp out a day of dusty miles, their brightly painted statues tugged along among the

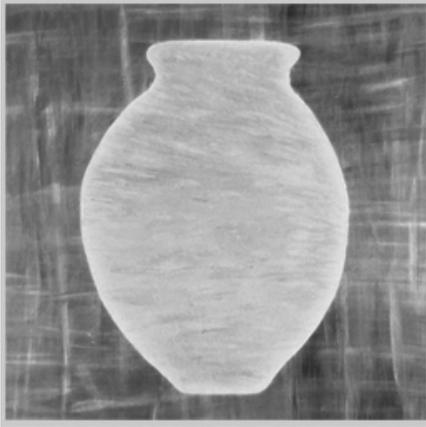
throng on a cart hung with bountiful floral decorations, out to the mystic hill where temples had been built and where, in fire-filled night, Our Mother would appear.

A tall young priestess always led the way, a tall covered basket burdening her head, hand in hand with a boy of tender years. Each time there was a crop of new initiates. These several dozen folk would walk and dance in sacred garb known as the "beggar's shirt". This was required for them to gain admittance to the final in-most sanctum of the flames. And on the way there was a stop where these several dozens aspirants were tested by an oath.

At an old stone farmhouse along the way, inside the high-walled quiet private courtyard, beneath a shady apple tree on a wooden altar, that tall wicker basket lay with all its contents carefully spilled out on folds of linen dyed a blood red crimson. One by one each aspirant was brought, a drapery lifted by to suddenly reveal this work of art right there within hand's reach. And yes indeed, as prelude to the simple oath each person then must touch and lift and carefully replace each little bit of sacred this and that which eternally spills out from Our Mother's womb.



Ten Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



Ancient Urn
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

The Illyrian Women **historical fiction: a novella** **of religion in ancient Rome**

Six naked women; naked but for plain white goatskin sandals which they must put on only for this sacred day.

Six naked women, carefully quickly walking single file along a sacred path down toward a sacred hollow in the hills, half conscious, deep in meditation, deep in reverie, priestesses carefully walking here through the civilized tame forest of this township where they and their forebears have been farming and raising families, doing every kind of business for many many generations, where they and their mothers and their mothers' mothers have walked this sacred way on this sacred day for countless generations.

Six naked women whose skin prickles with the cool breeze, all reaching inward toward a single mind but clothed in every kind of physical body; an old bent one first, with a tall walking stick from which there hangs a lighted lamp despite the morning light of summer's end, and then one who is greatly pregnant, hands clasped under her great belly for a little ease, then a young one, almost a virgin, frightened, here for the first time, then a tall one, then a burly one with a basket full of things slung on her back, then another old one at the end.

Six naked women quickly stepping a sacred path down toward a sacred hollow in the hills. There should have been nine, you know, last year there had been nine and normally always there had been nine but since the last time when they walked this mile the Goddess whom they went to worship on this day had taken four and only one, that frightened young one, had yet appeared, had yet been trained.

Six naked women. Naked, as you must surely see, of life's trappings, of the various regalia, all the clothing and ornaments that life assigns to each of us for insignia of our class and station. Oh, you might know a lot from the broken nails and calluses on some hands and the fine manicures of others; most of these six and their mothers and their mothers' mothers had been women of reaping and threshing and milking while others had been bakers or millers, others had been genteel ladies or enslaved whores but this morning was the solemn harvest sacrifice and for this morning they wore no ragged patches nor any jewels but only the flesh upon their bones.

And the greatly pregnant one, her callused hands with broken nails clasping under her belly, she was their chief in this generation. She was their best, most expert Priestess of Demeter that this township had brought forth for a long time, for the generations of living memory at least, a large-hearted deeply feeling woman who could often on an instant turn her ear toward the divine lips and hear and repeat to them the Goddess' words, just on an instant.

Six naked women. Truly none of them felt the grass and herbs that brushed their legs nor even felt the scratch of bushes on this path that knew the goats and deer but seldom knew a human tread. Even the young frightened one was not concerned at all with such as that but rather she was frightened of the Goddess, as she might well be, and frightened too of being frightened and unable to perform whatever duties were required. Even she, yes all of them, were fully concentrated on the place that lay ahead, on the little deep stony cave that lay in the hollow of the hills, the dark cave cold and deep within the earth, and

before it there the spring-fed pool and the foot-worn path across the portal stones, the portal stones where humans had been known to faint and die.

Yes, all their thoughts flew there before them so that when they reached the portal place itself the cave's cold breath seemed nothing but an echo of their thoughts. Yes, as they made the final circle round the little pond as they must do, the deep gleams and echoes and reflections of the water that struck their eyes were reflected magnified infinitely all through their clear open souls. Over the portal stones at last, into the darkness of the cave they diligently trod, without from anyone a moment's hesitation, into the darkness and deep within.

Her husband did not know she was Chief Priestess of their local district. That was not the kind of thing a man was told; in fact, it was a serious crime for any man to intrude on their secrecy. Of course, I guess, he knew that other women had begun to treat his wife with particular respect in recent years but actually, I have to say that in these last few years he was becoming less and less aware of anything in the world, anything real. This was a terrible worry and sorrow to her but her husband was mentally obsessed, by this time in his life, almost to the point of madness; obsessed with envy. As misfortunes and calamities beset their little realm his spiritual condition grew worse and worse. It was a terrible drag on her, a huge extra load for her piled up on top of all the rest. So now by the harvest at summer's end she knew that he was far past human aid.

Let me tell you about this husband's situation. The person whom he chiefly envied, as you must see, was the landlord in the fine manor house. If truth be told, misfortunes and calamities befell the landlord too. The epidemic took some of his loved ones, the flood washed out some of his own best land, the price controls and taxes emptied his purse. But of course the rich man's troubles were nothing to the poor man who struggled life long on a sharecrop patch. This rich fellow had made a fortune in the army, before he came and married onto the district's big

estate. People said behind his back that he had bought their local heiress like a slave.

Well, this past winter, when the bloody coughing fever took so many folk and the sharecropper's little son had gone, at the very moment when his wife brought the ruddy little corpse out to him, standing alone together in their empty windswept garden, and she laid their motionless unbreathing baby in his arms, what do you think the poor man said? He rounded on his wife. He berated her. He would have raised his hand to strike too if he could. You will not believe this. He berated her because, he said, it was her fault he had not gone into the army and come back wealthy too. With their dead child in his arms.

Let me tell you one more thing about this, even earlier, the year before. Remember on that day when the women walked their holy mile, that old bent woman with the staff and lamp who led the way; in mundane life she was the landlord's widowed mother-in-law. She was mother to the heiress whom the fellow came and bought. The Chief Priestess, you can see, regarded this woman as an elder of their secret order more than anything else, a fellow-priestess regardless of the social difference. But, as I say, the husband had no inkling of this and so one time, the year before his young child's bloody death, a strange and troubling incident occurred, foreboding of his worsening state.

It was spring, very humid, unseasonably warm. The priestess and her husband were in the village marketplace, he at the smithy entertaining sweaty fellows there with acid humor while she was over eyeing woven stuffs at a fabric stall. Their little toddler, the babe with a single year to live, he played in her skirts while their older boy stayed by his father at the forge. It was getting on toward evening.

Just then the rich old lady in her litter happened by. She stopped to talk with her good friend. A few minutes on, the lady took pity on her litter bearers, for the two tall slaves had carried the ornate chair and the frail old passenger on their shoulders all about the place all day and they were dripping sweat and breathing hard. She commanded them to set the litter

down and sit. So therefore, as you might expect, the priestess knelt beside her on the Earth and still they talked; in fact they held each other's hands. Now, any normal person viewing this tableau would see nothing in the least unusual. If you were a woman from that district, naturally then you would know the two of them were friends who shared in secret rituals. On the other hand, a man or a stranger to the place you would see a wealthy woman deigning to be civil to a ragged laboring wife. But not so her husband.

The sturdy stocky fellow in the old stained clothes was standing with some other men and boys about the blacksmith's shed. Just then he was making the gesture of donkey's ears, his hands wagging beside his head, heaping ridicule upon some person to everyone's delight. But then he looked out to the marketplace and spied his wife across the way kneeling by the wealthy woman and the two of them holding hands. Somehow, though I cannot tell you how, this tableau took a horrible dimension in his mind. The fact is, somehow, he thought the landlord's mother-in-law was going to have him killed. I cannot explain this fantasy. He thought his wife was either plotting in his death or begging for some mercy.

Suddenly the poor man rushed out to the street, sobbing uncontrollably, and threw himself face down upon the paving stones, breaking one of his rotten teeth down to a stub so that his brain was stabbed with livid pain. He crawled closer, mumbling incoherent supplications with the blood and spittle dribbling from his lips, and reached up to finger the litter's blue gauzy curtains.

Everyone was stunned. The two slaves started, stood up, yanking their old frail passenger unevenly and painfully up, for which she immediately struck them with her rod.

The priestess was thrown backward, twisting her ankle, landing on top of her child who screamed, but they were both simply astonished far more than hurt.

Bystanders hurried over. His buddies from the forge rushed out. They picked him up and managed to make out his

mumbles and repeated his jumbled words to the crowd. So then his buddies desperately tried to minimize the thing, for a penniless madman in those days was far worse off than dead, and two or three of his friends hurriedly strung together a hobbling kind of explanation. They blamed it on a trick of light and shadow somehow, or the noisy forge, or on the slaves somehow. After all, if you suddenly got a vision of your life at risk, his buddies said, wouldn't you do something strange? But surely no one was actually hurt, were they? Surely not. There wasn't any danger from him really, was there? Surely not.

This occurrence was more troubling to everyone than I can say. From then on everyone, especially his wife, and secretly his elder son, watched him with suspicion.

Madness came from the gods, you know. So did floods and epidemics, naturally. In a way the price controls and taxes too, for by these years the Emperors were claiming to be gods. But seriously, you must see all things in this world spring from the divine realm like from the soil. You must see that. What do the Mysteries of Demeter prove if not that? Surely it is so. And so, of course, impelled by desperation, when those six naked women had stepped across those portal stones into the womb of Earth they hurled themselves with all their might into another world.

Their rite inside that cave was strange even to themselves, and so they'd plotted it all beforehand with scrupulous care; and yet it was very plain. The mistress of the single lamp reached up to set the tiny flame into a stony glimmering black niche; all else but the tiny point of light and glimmering rock was darkness. Half in, half out of consciousness they stood close in a ring, so when they swayed and danced in place, skin would find itself caressed by skin, breast pressed by shoulder and buttock by thigh.

The tambourines had come out of the basket first. One of the women stayed there in the cave on this side of infinity and sang a song so they would not be lost and then the rest flew off or swam or ran or climbed (I cannot tell) far off beyond our

human realm onto a certain distant mountain peak or craggy island. There they set a camp and sang and danced and struck their little jangling drums and launched away their one Chief Priestess higher, deeper, farther still. (All this was something that their mothers' mothers did here in a different time of desperation, and others now and then before.) So then they sang and danced and played their tambourines and prayed as hard as they had ever prayed. And then at length, at weary length, just as they hoped, the divine voice of their Great Goddess came blowing through them like a hurricane.

Their Chief Priestess shot back by them like a bird before a gale, or like an arrow from the bow of Heaven, and they were seized up too and flung back to the cave from which they all had come. The burly one who stayed and sang, she was still there clutching at the rocky floor and screaming her one single note to guide them home.

So then the bread and wine came from the hamper. They forced themselves to eat and drink reluctantly at first, then gulped it down. What had that voice, that terrific voice, been saying to them? What words were in that awful gale of breath? What message could they take out to the waiting world? None of them spoke; none asked aloud; their Chief would tell them soon enough. Their Chief said nothing.

Some of them whispered one thing or another in the dark. The new one asked aloud, "May we sit down?" She did not know that all the others had by then already sat or lain but with a laugh her aunt, the tall one, told her so. They groped about and took each other's hands for strength or embraced each other and rubbed each other's backs for warmth. They all grew cold. Still their Chief was silent.

In fact, their Chief was waiting, listening, hoping for some more, and touching her own soul with delicate fingertips as one would touch a drumhead for vibrations set there by some other drum. Finally she just gave up and sadly told them, "That's all. Let's make the sacrifice and go."

But the other old one wouldn't have it – the old one who swept and fetched and made the beds wherein in earlier days she'd lain for patrons at the inn – she spoke up firmly. "No. You've got to tell us. We didn't hear anything but just the Lady's breath."

"Oh . . ." their Chief replied, "But then, you see, that's all there was. It's like She only said, *'I am with you'*. That's all She said."

Well, life is full of mystery, is it not? Here were a band of humans who knew far better than most could know how to commune with gods. And yet they had gained nothing for their trouble. Had they not?

But I must add another burden to the heap of troubles and sorrows carried by them all and by their chief priestess more than most. If you shall understand then I must tell you all of it. Toward the end of this summer, with the fevered dead all buried, with the flood come and gone, real disaster had then struck.

Near that summer's end the Emperor had sent forth a new decree. The almighty Emperor, in some distant palace, with one impression of his seal, brought down complete disaster on their heads. You see, these calamities they had been suffering here in this little corner of this minor province of Illyria, in fact these calamities and many more had washed across the whole vast empire for a good long time.

The whole vast edifice of the immortal Roman Empire was now crumbling undeniably at last and the current Emperor thought he knew just how to prop it up. He issued a disastrous decree.

All poor farming folk would now be bound to the land with chains. With one impression of that imperial seal in a distant place, they were all enslaved in all but name.

It was announced by the Magistrate in the town hall on the first day of July. New laws were read on the first day of a month; that way they would be simultaneously heard in towns across the Empire.

On this particular day their little town hall here in this corner of Illyria was crowded with unemployed loafers, as it generally was in recent years. The loafing men perked up when the Magistrate strode in and strode up to the lectern; in fact a wave of astonishment washed after him through the hall. This Magistrate was a short fat man who always dressed in fancy style, always with a sword, but today he had a sword and dagger and his fancy armor too.

And the landlord was with him and four of the landlord's sturdiest slaves as well and all these men were armed as heavily as they could be. They stood around the fat magistrate at the lectern, formed up like bodyguards, and there he opened the fatal scroll.

The new law was titled "Insuring Dutifulness of Rural Labor". It was worded plain enough. First it quoted from an obsolete decree by a dead prior Emperor where he commanded everyone to work hard for the nation and he commanded magistrates to punish loafers such as these. (If it hadn't been for all the weapons in the hall that day, someone surely would have scoffed.) But then the new law added some provisions specially for sharecrop farmers.

Understand, poor farmers all across that Empire had been laboring in a sharecrop system then for generations so that their land and crops were not their own. But now suddenly with this new law a magistrate and proofs and witnesses no longer would be needed for the punishment of slackers; your landlord could punish you too. And suddenly the punishments for slacking on your job were greatly magnified. You could be dragged to your place of work in chains and kept there in chains and beaten till your work was satisfactory. And if you proved unruly in these fair corrections, then of course you could be maimed in certain ways or killed.

The Magistrate rolled up the scroll and slapped it hard upon the lectern and shouted at the top of his shrill pompous little voice, "Now you filthy tramps will learn a thing or two!"

Suddenly in fact, in all but name, they were owned as slaves.

Her husband was affected badly. The blacksmith had come round on a mule, riding around to tell his friends, and he had found the family out at supper under the broad tree by their small stone cabin. At first her husband truly flew into a fit of madness. As the blacksmith rode away he began to mumble. Then he did some shouting in between the mumbles. Then he picked a hammer up he had been using and began to beat the table very hard.

That was when she grabbed a basket that was handy and grabbed up their surviving son by the scruff of the boy's shirt and took off for the woods. Shouting to the lad, "We need to pick some herbs!" she hauled him bodily with toes barely touching ground and him struggling to look round back at the raving man. She was also burdened now with a seven-month fetus in the womb.

She got well out of earshot of the house and vowed to stay away for half an hour at least. At first the burly half-grown boy argued fiercely with her. He worried her because he tried so hard to duplicate the man. She thought of hitting him in her distraction but spoke to the Lady instead and the lad settled down to sullen quiet.

She got busy finding herbs and teaching him a thing or two about them, if he would learn. After a while she edged closer through the forest to their little house, heard nothing and came closer still. The man was still there, quiet now, sitting out in the last light of the evening with a mirror in his hand – a beautiful old silver-mounted mirror that they had, the family's only piece of actual jewelry – staring into the mirror in the failing light and making weird distorted faces at his own reflection.

An hour later then the husband finally came inside the cottage, announced he was off to get employment at the manor house, and dressed himself in rags. He would take the boy along to show him how it's done. He helped the boy at tattering some

dirty garments. She was horribly afraid, you may be sure, of what could happen next.

She refused to let the boy go, but to no avail; the man was too much in a fever of activity to even notice a woman's pleading and threats. She would not hear the details of that evening at the manor house until next day – until next day when the six women assembled and the landlord's mother-in-law described it all – but I will tell you now just how it fell.

The man walked the two miles to the manor house dressed in his worst rags, endlessly muttering. The half-grown boy beside him in the evening dark walked in rags too, glancing up to his father's agitated face, the boy filled with more and more powerful misgivings. After some futile tries at first, the lad could not find a single word to say because there came no answers.

They arrived. The man knocked as loud as he could on the front gate then begged the porter slave to bring them in. It was quite a normal thing for suchlike folk to come like this on begging missions, but the time of day was quite irregular and the porter certainly did recognize this fellow who had thrown a fit of madness in the marketplace.

Still, the porter consulted with the butler slave and the butler consulted the master in extremely tentative phrases and the two ragged ones at length were brought within.

Not only the landlord and his mother-in-law were there, lounging after dinner in a pleasant conversation, but also a woman friend the landlord's age from another district who was visiting a while, and also a younger man and woman who were that lady's children. (The landlord's young wife was far away with their little daughter at a spa in Germany, seeking relief for the girl's weak health.) So the poor sharecropper and his boy walked in on five aristocrats who lounged luxuriously on satin couches and he and his boy beside him laid themselves face down on the blue tile floor.

The young lady gestured toward them and spoke up with a sharp joke at their expense but the landlord spoke kindly. What did the good citizen need so badly as to interrupt their social

hour on this auspicious day? Was there some new emergency in the neighborhood?

Oh no, the poor man answered, rising carefully enough to kneel before the landlord's couch. He had just come here to wish him well and holy blessings and to offer all congratulations on the new-found powers their wise Emperor had bestowed and to remind him, if he might, how well he was respected by all and to remind him just how well and fully he deserved to wield such power in the neighborhood because of his famous military success and so on and so on and so on. He repeated all of this more times than once and finally trailed off to a stop.

The landlord grinned. But was there, the landlord asked, any particular reason that his fellow-citizen had stopped by? The hour was late. Really, what did he want?

Oh no, the poor man answered again, and though he searched for something new to say he just began repeating it all again.

The landlord interrupted firmly. Praise was fine, he said, but truly, as the poet wrote, we all wear donkey's ears. He ventured to expand upon this common thought. Life is a stage and truly all of us, like the poet wrote, are the gods' buffoons.

In truth this old soldier did read the classic poets a bit and he genuinely took some of their lines sometimes as guides to life, but he was not much of a scholar and often did not know for sure what poet he was paraphrasing. He wondered to himself if Livy had written that about buffoons and donkey's ears but doubted it. He wondered to himself whether his lady friend might know, and thought to ask her later in more intimate circumstances.

Oh no, the sharecrop farmer interjected when the landlord barely paused, certainly no one could ever put the donkey ears on such a famous man! Surely the gods must smile whenever he . . .

"Enough!" the landlord cried, "Do you take me for a fool? Why in the gods' names do you come to my own house and talk

as if I were an imbecile? What do you want? What's in your crazy head? Tell me or I'll beat it out with my own fists!"

Now that twelve-year-old tenant farmer's son became a man. He saw his father melt in the withering blast. He saw his father's jaw drop open and his face blanch white, his kneeling body sag.

The boy rose from the floor and stood, embraced his father and strained to lift him up, urging him now to leave. A big muscular man stepped from the shadowed doorway to really lift the sagging man and, at a gesture from the landlord, easily carried the farmer off.

(This was a foreman slave whom the butler had sent the porter to fetch, unbeknownst to all, and who had waited silently.)

The boy then heard hilarious laughter fill the hall. In fact, all of the aristocrats except the mother-in-law were laughing hard enough to split their sides to see the ragged gibbering fool carried off limply like a child in the big slave's arms. The farmer's boy was dying now with shame, burning with rage.

The aristocratic youth had come up off a couch at the far side of the room and come up close at hand with a dagger half-drawn from his belt. This fellow was a supple, lithe, smooth athlete of gymnasiums.

As the stubby, lumpy, muscular farmer's boy stood seething in their boiling laughter, wondering what to do, this young aristocrat saw fit to punch him hard straight on his head, a hard quick echoing bewildering clout beside the ear.

Dizzy now, the boy looked round and stood his ground and blinked and tried to comprehend what might be happening. He had taken part in various little brawls before and with his rage now at its utmost peak he took no notice of the young man's greater height nor of his longer reach nor even of the half-drawn knife.

First the boy stared hard up into the young man's eyes, trying to overpower the fellow's will, and then he brought his arm back hard to swing, to smash the fellow's nose, and then

he felt the point slice into his back below the lowest rib. It was an amazing feeling and he stood stock still.

"Oh Darius, see what you've done!" the fellow's mother shouted. "What a mess!"

The fellow gripped him by the shirt front, up into the air so they were eye to eye, grinning in his face. "Don't worry, Mother, he's not hurt. Just tickled his liver a little." The stinging blade withdrew. The fellow set him down, commanding, "Stand up steady, you son of a bitch." He stood.

The mother was relieved to see him steady on his legs but she had something else to say. "Darius," she spoke in truly scolding tones, "that was extremely rude. At dinner! Our host could throw us out and no one would call him wrong for it."

The young woman, the fellow's sister, clamped a napkin to her mouth, vainly struggling to hold back unseemly guffaws. Tears rolled down the young woman's cheeks.

"Oh tut, tut, Cybele," the landlord answered, "youthful vigor. Youthful vigor. Give the lad his due. Where I come from it's called a virtue."

The knife was back inside its sheath by then. The fellow spun the boy to face the door and kicked his rump, raising gales of merriment anew, and the poor boy went sprawling in the shadowed anteroom, landing at the foreman's feet like bundled straw.

And so he too was tossed out beside his father and the two sat in darkness in the roadside dust. The father wrapped his arms about his head and wept in bitter mourning while the boy just sat in stupor, staring into nowhere with his life blood oozing out.

They made it home near midnight. The priestess heard some doings in the yard and rushed out to find her husband throwing a rope with a noose tied crudely at its end over a tree limb, their motionless silent son standing by leaning on the tree's tall trunk.

She ran and shoved the man and he fell down, collapsing into helpless weeping. She got the two of them inside and got

two cups of sleeping tea inside of them. She had brewed the tea with foresight that it would be needed.

In the dimly lighted house she did not find the boy's seeping wound till she had got him into bed and her hand came back with sticky blood, so then she must get him up again to inspect and wash and bandage then get him back to bed once more at last.

The man stayed inchoate and mad, although nonviolent, all through the weeks of summer's end. He spent much time abed or sitting here or there staring aimlessly in a stony kind of fascination. The landlord came and saw and gave dour looks and sternly commanded the wife to get the crop all in, but left them otherwise in peace for now.

The priestess worked up bits of rope into restraints and hid them about the place ready at hand in case of need. She hired a neighbor man to come do her husband's work beside her in the barley, paid the man with meals and half a precious penny every day.

The sturdy stubby muscular boy was better than his father, working hard at harvesting, the knife wound healing by his mother's care, but sometimes he would break into frustrated inconsolable weeping or fits of cursing far beyond his age. At least he could speak what troubled him. He cursed quite clearly at the powers who held a grip so tight upon his life. His mind was now as fixed on vengeance as his father's was on envy.

And now the priestess felt her belly swelling constantly with the new child, stretching near as taut as it could ever be, and her breasts began to show the final marks of pregnancy. Moon forest omens showed her a peculiar picture of who the child would be. The baby had not turned as yet – the child itself did not feel ready yet despite the lengthening time – but omens reassured her all was well.

Her Women of Demeter met as often as they could; they hurriedly inducted their new young one and plotted this year's unusual work at the cave.

So thus did the women come to be there, naked, cold and shivering in the dark, and waiting for their Chief to tell them some powerful and consoling liberating thing which, unfortunately, she did not know. The Chief Priestess only found that phrase repeating in her mind:

"I am with you."

They made the usual sacrifice, stalks of the first-cut barley of the township, a certain number of stalks artfully braided into a certain shape that I will not describe. An armful of this grain had been brought from the township's first ripe field by a field hand to a woman of that farm who wrapped the small sheaf carefully in soft cloth and handed it to one of these priestesses who was standing by.

The stalks were then braided by the new one of the six, under the moon of her induction rite, instructed by her aunt and watched by all the others while they sang a lovely hymn. This ritual object, made so fearfully and reverently, now wrapped in softest rabbit skin, came out of the basket in the cave at last.

The barley figure's wrapping was most carefully removed. The women all then stood together in a semi-circle, arms around each other's backs, and gazed at the glimmering surface of the rock where the tiny lamp had stood for all this time. Above and behind the tiny light, grown by Nature from the surface of the glistening damp cavern stone, there stood a remarkable likeness of their Holy Lady's shape.

The glistening natural image looked as soft as black flesh. The little niche was an altar of incalculable age. In what generation past had someone found this startling lifelike shape? How many generations now had knelt here in this place? The sacred barley doll was left there now as it always was, left for the Lady's mice to eat.

They sang a final hymn of thanks. They clasped each other tight and their Chief spoke an ancient prayer of praise. The old woman who had led them in here with the lamp took up the lamp and also her walking staff and led them out. They paused in a middle chamber to brush the damp cave soil from

their bodies with their hands, to adjust their sandals and attempt improvements in the darkness to their hair.

They talked a little but not much. The tall one told her niece the young one, "Now, in this next part you're still a holy woman! Don't forget! Stand up straight!" So they processed in single file with a few false steps out through the narrow passage to the outmost chamber of the cave, with sunlight gushing in, and as their procession entered the dazzling light, a cheer arose from the many women who now waited in the world above.

The old priestess in the lead paused before she crossed the threshold stones. She set down the lamp, now flickering nearly empty of its fuel, and raised her arms and cried to the waiting ones, "She is with us! She is with us! She is with us!"

There were perhaps three hundred women and girls there waiting, a huge crowd spread out through the forest around the little pool. The further ones were only now scrambling to their feet, women and older girls lifting up the baby girls to see.

They had been singing and even now their last abandoned lyrics wafted from the further edges of the crowd into the woods, into the sky. They all took up the cry, "She is with us!" and as the line of priestesses emerged into the daylight world this chant became a shout.

The naked women stepped out over the portal one by one as waiting women bundled them in white linen antique robes and they went to places on a little spit of sand under a great willow tree nearby at the water's edge. Five of them came out so.

The Chief Priestess should emerge last, then she would stand before the others on the little beach and address the crowd. But she did not appear. They waited. The chant died down.

Quite concerned, the strong burly priestess started back but just when she had reached the dour dark mouth of that haunted cave, the Chief Priestess did emerge at last into the light and stepped across and stood still just outside the gaping gate.

Something in the air surrounded her. Those farther away could see it ripple and shine. The strong woman just beside her, well accustomed to the feel of sacred space, knew that it was sacred space around her.

She had not left the holy inmost chamber of the holy cave but instead had brought it with her. The countenance showed focus and determination, clarity. The eyes revealed a state of being that the strong woman also knew; they were deep pools. The stance revealed great power. Her fetus had dropped down low between her thighs.

It was utterly plain suddenly to the five who had seen her naked just an hour before that the great swelling of her belly was inches lower and had turned downward. Then while the whole crowd of the township's women watched, a pulse of light shone bright from her for a moment. Those who were close could see a ripple of contraction passing down her body.

Beneath the pool, deep among the strata of fractured rocks and water and sand, as yet unknown to humans, divine forces touched our physical world and a new channel of the spring broke open.

(Dear reader, if miraculous doings of this kind exceed your limits of belief, then I am sorry.)

This new channel of the spring passed through a bed of certain minerals whose natural action made it warm and a little bubbly. Out from a cleft of rock beneath the sand not far off from the beach this new warm water quickly spread.

Had you been there at that time, friend, you might have seen scarce wafts of vapor, smelt a subtle whiff of earthy sweet perfume, and any doubts you have would thus be answered. But really no one there had eyes for aught except the woman come out from the cave.

The pregnant woman walked and yet she seemed to float with every step. She laid one arm across her strong friend's shoulders and they made their way together down to the beach, shaded by the great over-arching tree, and there walked out near knee-deep in the pool.

Her waters broke. The gush of liquid, tinged with green, mixed into the holy pool where it was green and dappled with the blessed willow's shade.

She sat herself down. Her strong friend sat behind and embraced tight under her arms.

The old priestess who slaved at the inn, she came and knelt before her open knees to catch the child; she dug the sand out too, dug places for the Lady's feet to bring her knees down more correctly, dug a cavity into the sand where this blessed and divine child would fall.

The antique linen garments of these two floated around them all.

Except for some who prayed aloud, the whole stunned crowd waited silent and scarcely breathing until the old priestess kneeling at the holy chapel of the open legs, studying her friend's ecstatic face, this old woman shouted loud in astonished wonder, shouting to no one or to everyone:

"She *is* with us."

So then the crowd first cheered then took up that chant again, now quietly and rhythmically, more like a song.

The Chief Priestess was not herself by then, not by half. She was transfigured, infused with the divine, possessed by a great immortal spirit that was her spirit.

Basically, of course, this transformation was not new for her; it was a regular part of duty, a normal thing, a thing she had been carefully trained to do and that she often loved to do. But this descent of the Great Goddess here today was far more complete and full and deep and rewarding than any she had ever felt before. She rested in the great embrace.

It had begun, of course, when they shot her from their island camp to Heaven. She did ascend into the very heights. She had been singing praises to the Goddess as she flew and the Good Lady welcomed her with open arms into Her bosom. There had been an exultation there as great as any she had ever known and endless. There had been the utmost sense of love and longing too.

Although she tried to speak, there had been no words and this distressed her. As the only answer to her distress she opened her eyes and found herself among her comrades in the darkness of the cave.

She found them asking what the message was. She found herself searching, waiting, puzzling, listening and not hearing any words. And yet it was not dark because her mind was full of a most peculiar soft bright light.

She found herself giving up the search for words until that phrase had come to her, "*I am with you.*"

She repeated that phrase to them. They found the barley figure and placed it in the niche and stood to sing the ancient song of thanks.

The ancient words were medicine to her. She found herself relaxing, melting, sleeping. She realized that in some way she was asleep and dreaming.

The ancient words of thanks, the sacred melody that countless souls for countless generations had intoned in this deep place, they had a healing power. She had not known there was such power in human thanks. She felt the many cruel cuts that life had dealt her knitting together now like clean small wounds.

She had a feeling similar to one sometimes in sleep when a person feels their waking self somehow awake and yet no less gives up all to the power of the dreaming soul; but it was her dreaming self awake and some other soul, a great immortal soul, to whom she willingly gave up her power so that she seemed to stand an inch or two behind her body.

She whispered the ancient prayer of praise. She found it rushing from her lips, her lips barely keeping pace, and at that time she felt the baby squirm to turn itself head downward in her womb. The other soul now in her soul smiled and very gently laughed.

That prayer was long. It listed many names by which the Lady has been known to human folk, listed too Her countless children among the goddesses and gods, described as well Her

love for the inhabitants of Earth, Her sorrow at their cruelty and pain, Her longing for their joy, Her love of joy, Her love of love. Somewhere along the way the priestess began to speak of "Mine" and "I" instead of "Hers" and "She". Also, she felt an obvious understanding of certain puzzling passages that never had seemed clear before.

The human woman felt the pangs of labor start and yet it was as though all in a dream. In truth, she was deep asleep and dreaming truth.

They made their way out to the middle chamber where they paused and fiddled with their things, then out into the light. She waited in the final shadows as she must, for she would emerge the last, but there she stood alone awhile, feeling but not feeling some contractions, leaning on a column of stone, dazzled by the flood of brightness.

But then at length she saw her big strong friend silhouetted in the light and she came out at last.

She found a most remarkable scene before her. There seemed to be a wind-song in the air that sang a welcome to herself, the Lady. The tree leaves sparkled in the breeze and they too sang, but they were the Lady herself singing in reply a phrase that chimed all through and out of her like a silver bell; *"I am with you"*.

Little birds were singing those words with Her voice as well, so too the stones that stood up from the Earth around, so too the soil itself, so too the crystal air and light, and something in the rippling water too intoned a deeper note in harmony.

Distant forest creatures of all kinds held up their heads to hear, then sighed and let their eyes fall shut. She beheld the crowd of people there just like the rest, just like the deer and bugs and badgers and the milkweed, and all were singing.

The water drew her then, for it looked so soothing. It seemed clear that a person bathing in that pool could let go of every ill and fear and anger. Every weariness could be refreshed. The water held a form she saw; it held a great soul.

She stared into the liquid expanse and saw a man. The Lady in her laughed and sighed to see Her lover. His face was young and old, bearded and clean. His eyes were bright and warm, framed by a clear countenance and tousled hair. His form was fully sexual. His body glowed with health.

He whispered to Her, inviting Her into His holy arms. She found herself leaning on her friend and walking to Him, full of longing for His perfect comfort there.

Her senses, already turned toward strange directions, now became completely overwhelmed. The sparkling water tickled around her feet, laved her ankles, massaged her calves with erotic fingers. The little wavelets licked her knees. A sweet perfume soaked into her.

The human woman never had known such physical pleasure. She felt a great release when the waters broke, although she did not know its cause, a great release and union with the lover of the magic spring.

Fulfilled and satisfied for that long moment, she had sat herself down, relaxed in His embrace, but soon she felt the exquisite tension rise again, recede again, mount again, in undulating waves.

Transported by this infinite joy and mercy, she had quite forgotten she was giving birth until the ultimate ecstatic thrill washed through her and washed out of her and she collapsed in utter emptiness of any further effort and a smiling old woman before her held up a newborn child.

Hundreds of people around her sang. The water was somehow relaxingly warm and had a soothing feel upon the skin.

One friend behind her held her steady, let her lean back at ease. Another friend before her held the newborn infant, half in and out of water, held it toward her, its eyes still squeezing shut, making motions with its little mouth and limbs like a sleeper who just now awoke.

She didn't take the baby yet but washed it first, rubbing off the birthing stuff. It was a boy. Of course it was a boy. The

forest omens told her it would be and now she fully understood those omens, understood the secret mystery, understood the reason why it was a boy.

The pulsing purple natal cord still ran from its little belly down inside herself.

There was a small commotion on the beach behind, a woman coming forward offering the two priestesses remaining there a length of string and knife to cut the cord. With a few hushed halting unsure modest words she was giving them a fancy lady's silver dagger, golden braid she'd pulled off from a satin sleeve. This was their heiress, the landlord's wife.

The cord was quickly cut. She put the baby to her breast and felt it enthusiastically begin to suck. Four squirts of milk from her other nipple of their own accord flew forth and mingled with the dappled water.

In a final easy squeeze the afterbirth was done; they quickly hid it in a dripping linen wrap. They carried her out then to the shore, to a mossy bed that some had made at the foot of the singing tree.

They dried her and the newborn boy with soft cloths, very gently dabbing and massaging them like great pieces of ripe precious fruit. They covered her with a clean but ragged soft wool cloak donated from the crowd.

It was surely time for her to speak now, to address the crowd. She knew that time had come and knew exactly what to say. In fact, a certain kind of worthy pride was on her, the kind of pride which an invoking priestess or priest will often feel after a great spirit has come and gone, the kind a poet justly feels after inspiration speaks. The Lady and She would speak to them from her same lips.

With a voice remarkably clear and loud she bespoke them this:

"All you who are oppressed with illness, fear and anger; all who are sick and weary and overburdened with your load; send home for blankets. Rest here with me tonight; fast with me,

bathe and drink in the holy spring. Sleep with me here tonight and dream so we may see what tomorrow brings."

So it was done. That first night at the magic pool, the township's women and girls refreshed themselves. Many remarked with great surprise the miraculous new subtle virtues of the water. Many were the powerful dreams they got that night from the Goddess and the God, dreams of deep comfort and wise counsel. Many awoke with illness banished, weakness vanished and old wounds healed.

The wealthy heiress woke that new morning early in the dawn, rose from her blanket on the Earth and searched for her sick daughter whom she found dancing merrily with other girls among the trees.

Next night the township's men and boys refreshed themselves. The Chief Priestess of Demeter decreed it thus, that male and female alike should use the mysterious waters. Her women quickly devised a new ritual of fasting and prayer and song.

Her own husband awoke that second morning with new eyes in his head, blinking and looking round, and talking with a different temperate voice like no one had heard from him in years. He did not understand what happened nor did he have the slightest notion where life would lead him now, but that seemed no matter.

Her elder son awoke with different eyes and voice too, a calmer confidence in his look, a kindness in his speech. People awoke and looked around themselves and wondered.

Her new son, her third son, the magic child who was born that wonderful day; life would be a tangled web for him at first, confused by peculiar notions people had of him, wildly confused by his own relentless soul.

But he would find his proper strand of life despite all that. He would become a full true Priest of Bacchus. There had never been a true whole Bachic Priest in that corner of the world, not even one, not even since our human race had first placed foot there, for they are very rare.

As you would expect, his legacy in that little corner of our world would be very great. He would take up the burden for the people there of all the madnesses that are wrought by injustice. He would heal them with touch and talk, certainly, and with the dreaming waters of his birth. He would run the hill tops with the deer.

But best of all, he would gift the people there a deep true form of Saturnalia. To manhood grown, he would decree new laws and rituals for that topsy-turvy festival which they and their children would obey most carefully, which would make of it a real annual communal healing for their folk.

The woman herself was never quite again like before. Everyone hailed her and her women now and brought them gifts. Few were there who ever dared to stare any of them in the eyes. They had all the time they wanted now to dance and sing and pray.

She herself would use this time to seek the many faces of her Goddess, to know the One she worshiped more and more. But this new life brought with it, as it must, different burdens, different trials and worries.

The township built a temple by the warm spring pool, close by the little strand and lovely willow. Within a month they had it simply built of wood and that stood for thirty years until a proper one of stone could be designed and financed and finally erected.

It was a temple to the Goddess and Her lover son the God, with a pilgrim's dormitory. They put a fine-wrought iron gate with a big ornamental lock and a high iron fence in front of the terrible holy cave.

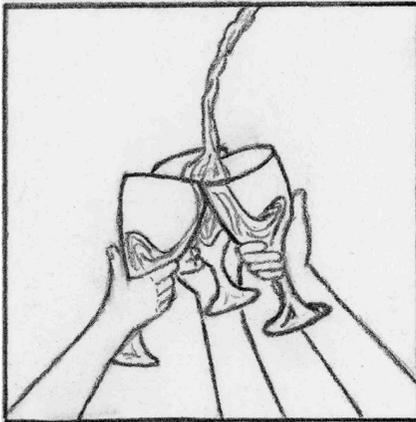
The landlord came next spring to bathe and do the ritual, to sleep and dream and wake. The old soldier washed away a thousand hardened scars. That landlord took the waters and also every other landlord there for seventeen hundred years.

After a few generations came and went, they had to change some things. They found they must change the decorations on the temple and call the deities by different names. They changed

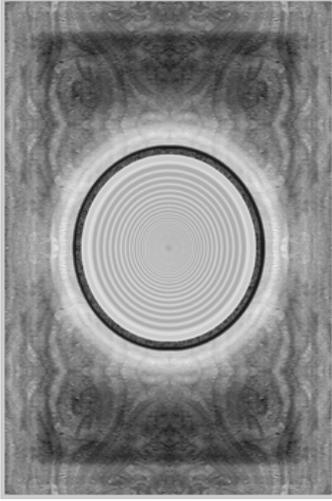
the holy story too, which seemed very hard to some, but in fact it seemed no matter either.

In fact, pilgrims still came in a steady stream to walk the lovely garden paths around the pool in prayer and bathe and do the other rites as well and leave their votive gifts of grateful love; especially in autumn when, it was said, the green willow's shade would tint the water in a certain lovely way.

In truth, all were refreshed who came with burdened yearning hearts.



Three Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



F Is For Fruit
From *Alphabeticon*
Digital image by
Stone Riley

The Medium And The Message **a short story of loving vision set in** **Houston, the author's native city,** **in the times when he was young**

Selma looked down in the bitter cup of dregs and saw again how the milk had curdled in the coffee. "Now ain't that fine?" she spoke to herself out loud and answered; "Nasty." But she had slowly sipped the vile stuff down to these last grainy drops.

It wasn't even yesterday's pot of coffee neither, but the day before's. She had to drag out to the Foodarama now for sure, with the coffee gone and the milk sour. She couldn't hide in here in this dark house forever.

Raymond looked in around the open kitchen door, so tall he was, with little Melody beside him.

"Mamma," Raymond said, "we're going to school now."

Hardly glancing up, she said; "That's good, honey. You're a good boy. I'm proud of you. You take your little sister on to school, okay? You take good care of her."

Raymond kind of cleared his throat and hesitated, and then said; "Looks like there's ripe tomatoes."

Now she was sure the boy was testing her. Could she drag out back today to scratch a little in the garden?

She looked him in the eyes seriously and answered; "Okay, we'll have some of them for supper. Okay? I promise. I'll get some cucumber too, and milk. I'll fix pork chops maybe. How 'bout some mustard greens?"

"Mamma," Melody spoke in her sweet voice, "are you alright?"

That drew the woman's eyes to the sweet girl's worried face and the mother answered very earnestly; "Don't you worry, honey; Momma's going to be alright. It's just some bad times going on. It's just the blues. Everything will be alright again real soon."

She really had to get herself together now. And she suddenly wondered, to her shame, what had the little chickens had for breakfast?

The girl ran the few steps in to Selma's open arms, arms that opened wide immediately to hold the girl, but Selma had to hold her damn cigarette away from the child and that distressingly cooled the warmth she loved to feel from the little one.

She held the burning cigarette away behind her back as she leaned down in the hard kitchen chair for the embrace. With only one free hand, she had to let go of the child to pet the long and shining hair.

"You fixed your hair real nice." Selma said, reaching with the damn cigarette to stab it in the ashtray and put it out.

"Raymond brushed it." Melody answered, full of pride to have her brother's care.

"Momma," Raymond spoke up, leaning on the door frame, unwilling to leave with a question in his mouth that he really had to ask; "you want me turn the sign around?"

The sign? What was he getting on about? Oh yes, he meant the "Closed" sign that hung on a string inside the front door glass. Could she open shop today at last? What if Missis Johnson came around? That old lady could be a first-class

pain sometimes. Could she handle something such as that? Sometimes the work was hard.

Suddenly, with new resolve, the woman stood, turned to throw the stubborn cigarette into the coffee cup where it hissed as though in anger, and she said; "Sweetheart, I'm gonna turn that sign myself."

But as she herded her two dear chicks out through the darkened little house, out down the creaking hallway's floor, straightening up her open robe, she realized the frowzy house dress underneath was hardly fit to greet the public in.

Out the children went on down the front steps, hand in hand, to the sidewalk with many backward looks so that she smiled and waved as reassuring as she could. She left the piece of cardboard hanging "Closed" for now, until she dressed, but anyway she pulled the dusty black cloth down that she had hung around the glass in mourning.

How long ago had she hung that black cloth there? She opened up the door again and looked out on the day and found with some surprise that it was getting on to fall. The tree across the street was turning red.

Her grass was cut but weeds had grown up tall around the posts of the front yard sign. That really looked a mess. July the seventeenth, her mother had passed on. And six years back, her husband too.

Buttoning the robe, shuffling in the cloth house shoes, she went out to inspect the big tall sign and saw its faded paint, some of the letters even peeling. But Raymond could take care of that in half an hour on Saturday and he'd be glad to help.

That long-gone rainy day when Jim and her brother Billy had put it up, that came to mind. There was a dark rainy picture of them leaning proudly against the new sign right here, splashed with mud, in their rain coats holding the shovels, somewhere in her photo book.

Jim had built signs for a living too, slaved and saved to buy his wife this little house, until a different rainy day

had blown him off of one downtown. And now Billy gone off too.

Standing steady on its stout legs, up above her head, dominating the tiny yard, the sign board read: "Madame Selma – Spiritual Advisor".

Feeling still the new resolve, Selma washed and all and got into her nicest daytime dress, the rose-red one, and put on good shoes and the beaded necklace and ear rings and finally the big amber finger ring that her mother's palsied hand had pressed into her palm as a final parting gift.

Thus fitted out, she turned the cardboard sign at last and stepped out again to get the paper where it lay beside the front porch steps. She sat down in the easy chair in the corner of the tiny parlor by the hall, a few steps from the door.

She rose again to pull the parlor's dusty drapes back from the dusty windows. She sat again and found the baseball section of the paper. She saw there was a pack of cigarettes and a book of paper matches and an ashtray there on the little table.

She thought she'd better call some of her clients on the phone and say that she was working now again, so they could spread the word around. She craned around to check the ticking hallway clock and thought it was too early yet for that. Well, if anybody happened by, although nobody would, for another hour or so, then she'd take care of that. She'd make some calls at half past eight.

She struggled with herself about the damn cigarettes. Her throat was sore from them and her mouth was tasting awful lately. And yet, she wanted one to calm her nerves. She hadn't worked since way back in July.

Would it all come back now? She took one from the crumpled pack and reluctantly put it between her lips. She took the paper matches up. She pulled one of the flimsy matches loose and struck the light.

The little orange and purple flame burst into human shape before her eyes.

"Momma!" Selma cried in shock, staring at the flickering form and face. The cigarette fell unlit to her lap.

"Hey there!" her mother's voice spoke quite distinctly in her head.

"What you doing in there, Momma?" She held the amazing match up close to stare.

"What you think I'm doing? I'm talking to you."

"How come you ain't come back before?" That was all that Selma thought to say in that startling moment, staring in the translucent glowing face that bloomed out of the tiny stick of burning paper. She had struggled hard for two weeks and more to call the lost beloved soul after it passed beyond the veil, and she had never got no answer.

But then the tiny flame puffed out into a tiny coil of smoke that also vanished.

The voice in her head then faded fast away, fading toward some distant place, but she distinctly heard the old woman's exasperated tone in the faint words; "You light a candle, girl."

The silence of the room then seemed to echo round her. In a panic then to get it back, Selma rose and dashed about the house. Candle? What kind of candle?

She went from cabinet to cabinet, opening doors and drawers. Here were the Jesus candles, Mary candles, Saint Sebastian candles, skeleton candles, naked man and woman candles, naked man and woman kissing candles, green money candles, golden lucky hands, bleeding hearts, black cats.

There were those in tall glasses with shiny colored paper round, and those with molded shapes. Each kind was hidden round the house in some particular kind of place to fit its nature. She opened every box to look inside and ask if these were right.

Reluctantly at last, she went back to her bedroom, lay down on the floor to reach beneath the bed. She sorted round and found the small box in which were hidden things she'd struggled over in July.

Reluctantly opening the lid, she knew this wasn't right. Here was the most elaborate bleeding heart that she had ever done, the tall glass jar coated thick inside with smoke, with nothing but a spoon's worth of wax remaining in the bottom by the time she'd given up, the glass all twined about with plaited black and purple ribbons that held within their toils as well a rose of purple silk. This too was wrong, but looking at it set her straight.

Selma walked straight to the kitchen then, looked inside a jumbled drawer to get the paper box of ordinary plain simple household candles that were there for when a fuse got blown or storms blew down the wires so that the lights went out.

Looking at one of these short stubby objects in her hand, she almost saw her mother's stubby shape, almost saw there shaped in that wax her mother in a patched and faded dress. Now, that was right.

She stood the simple candle in a simple glass on a simple saucer, brought that to the brocaded table cloth on the round table at the center of the parlor. She went and closed the parlor drapes. She pulled up her favorite working chair, straightened up the candle wick and finally lit it.

There in the steady flame, her mother reappeared and frowned.

"Girl!" her mother said. "What took so long? I been waiting and waiting."

"You been waiting! Momma, I conjured you and conjured you when you passed and didn't hear a squeak! Where are you? Are you alright?"

The old woman's voice was coming perfectly clear, exactly that real feeling where you can't be sure if it is in your ears or someplace else. Now her mother spoke with the perfect sound of real surprise; "Huh? You conjured me? How long's it been?"

"Two months and two days. Long enough, I swear."

"Ain't been that long, has it? Seems like yesterday."

"Momma, where are you? Are you alright?"

"I'se fine dear, just fine." Momma smiled a little smile to reassure her daughter.

"We're all just sitting around here like some kind of park, just shooting the breeze. Nice place, trees and flowers and birds and bees and all, real quiet and peaceful. Don't you worry none; your momma's doing fine. Seems like yesterday, though, I swear. I had no idea it's been so long. Hey, that old bursitis in my knees is gone. I feel just fine. But listen here, Billy's got in trouble, ain't he?"

Selma's brother. "You heared about that Momma? It's awful. Billy killed a man."

"That's what I heared. Where has he gone to?"

"Momma, it was awful but it's not his fault. It's not his fault. He smashed this fella's car up, see, by accident, and then the fella got mad and jumped him. Jumped him with a bat, for God's sake, and Billy was just barely out of bed by then, and with his arm in a cast too. Momma, it's not his fault; the fella would have broke his head."

"Stuck the fella with a knife?" the old lady asked.

"That's right." But now Selma was worried that some kind of turmoil of divine judgment might be going on about her brother. She had to ask; "Momma, how did you hear about it?"

Momma shook her head and clucked her tongue. "Girl, that dead fella's here of course. Just showed up. He told me."

"Oh." Well, Selma realized it had been a silly question but the answer was a relief.

"Look here," Momma repeated, "where has Billy gone?"

"San Francisco. He's moved in with Aunt Louise."

"Louise? My sister Louise? No! That woman hates me."

"Not anymore, she don't. She was crying and carrying on at your funeral like a water faucet. She was weeping and wailing about everything. She told me you took a boyfriend of hers one time, and said you owed her money, and all of that, but she forgives you now."

"Oh. Well, okay. That's nice. But you look here. You send my Billy boy a telegram right now. Today."

"Momma, nobody sends telegrams anymore. We've got telephones now, remember?"

"Telephones? Oh yeah. Okay, you call my Billy boy on the telephone today. You tell him to stay there. Understand? You tell him, stay put where he is and he'll be alright. You understand?"

"I understand, Momma. He can't come home?"

"That fella's friends are gonna be looking for him. They'll be watching for him for a long time. They'll catch him if he comes home. You tell him."

"Yes Momma, I'll call him right today and I'll tell him."

"You make him promise. You make him stay put."

"I'll try to make him promise, but he don't listen to me much."

"You tell him I said so."

"I'll say it."

"You tell him I wagged my finger at him . . ." and Momma wagged her finger at Selma ". . . and I told him myself that if he don't stay put, I'm gonna be mad as all tarnation."

"I'll tell him that. I'll make him promise."

"You might be wondering why I'm worried."

"Huh?"

Actually, it had not occurred to Selma to wonder that. Of course the old lady would be worried that some fellas were looking out to kill her boy, of course. But now Selma stopped and thought. Why would that bother a dead person so much? Then the answer came.

Selma said; "Somebody with a name that starts with M. Right? M. Mabel. Marjorie. Morning Glory. Matahari. M. Martha. Martha. Martha Somebody. Right? There's some woman there. Billy's gonna get married in San Francisco and have some kids. Right? What is it; two kids? Three? Three kids, right? No, the last one's twins so its four kids. Right?"

"Selma, you tell him that he's got to leave off gambling. Martha don't like no gambling."

"I'll tell him."

"But she don't mind drinking if he don't drink too much and don't get in no more fights. You can tell him that. No more fights."

"Okay."

"Is there ships around there? You tell him that Martha's daddy's got a job doing something with the ship docks someplace around there. Maybe he can find her that way."

"I'll tell him. I'll tell him that you said so too. That'll keep him busy."

"Well, okay. Girl, I'm proud of you. I feel better now. You do your momma proud."

There was a space of silence then between them. For that first moment of the quiet, Selma felt how glad she was to look into her mother's tender eyes again, but suddenly then she felt the contact slipping from her grasp, felt the woman beyond the mystic looking glass of flame just starting to turn away.

"Selma, honey. I think maybe now I'll get up and take a walk. You know, it's so pretty here, maybe I'm going to just get up and take a walk around and see what's what."

"Momma?"

"Yes?"

Selma hesitated now. She wanted badly to ask something now, but what? Exactly what? She finally simply spoke: "How come they do all that? I mean the men. How come they do all of that evil stuff?"

Momma frowned and sadly shook her head.

She answered; "It's just in the blood, honey child. They can't help it. They's got to be proud in their own way, see. Your Jimmy now, he's a real proud man and he's a good one too. He would have done that kind of stuff that Billy done, before he got a wife and kids. And then he would have killed somebody too if he had to do it for you all someways. It's just all in the

human blood. There ain't nothing you and me, nor God, nor nobody can do about it. That's just how they got to be. And if they weren't so proud that way, they wouldn't bother messing with kids. It's just the way they care."

"Momma, I miss Jimmy something bad."

"I know you do, sweetheart. And I don't know why he had to go away. But you'll meet up with him again. You will. Love is stronger than everything else. It is. You'll meet him again and you'll be happy. But you got stuff to do there nowadays, see?"

"I got stuff to do here?"

"Girl, you got the work to do. I taught you that. Missis Johnson needs you."

"Missis Johnson! That mean old biddy hen? Why's she got to come around? I don't owe that woman nothing!"

"Honey child, don't you see by now? That old woman's like a child to you. She is. She's just like a child beside you. Somebody's got to help her through and you've got the gift to help."

Now suddenly, being told, Selma saw the truth in it. She had a gift, and if you've got a gift you've got to help out where you can.

"Selma, honey."

"Yes Momma?"

"The door bell's gonna ring."

"I ain't got no door bell. Your old house, you had a door bell."

Suddenly then, the brass knocker outside was pounding on the door. Selma liked to jumped a foot.

"Who's that?"

"Baby, you know who that is."

Selma sat there waiting, looking toward the hall and back. The knocking stopped.

But then the knocking took up once again.

Momma spoke; "Now, you go let her in. And then you do your stuff. Now go ahead."

"But Momma! Are you going to leave?"

"I'll hang around a little while, for you. You can tell her I'm here too, if you want to." Momma laughed. "What's she gonna think of that?"

"But Momma!"

"Honey, you just call me when you want to talk. I'll always listen. And I'll come back when I can. Okay?"

The rapping at the front door didn't stop this time, but kept on quite insistently.

So finally Selma stood and pushed her chair back from the table. She had to stretch herself. She looked and saw her mother was still there in the flame.

She heard a whisper; "Now go on; do your stuff."

And so she very gently lifted the saucer with the glass and candle from the center table, set it very carefully out of the way up on the cupboard as she went out into the hall with many backward looks. She reached the door.

"Selma!" Missis Johnson said, spying through the frosted glass, her voice muffled so she cried out loud. "Selma! Can I come in?"

Selma opened up the door, although she couldn't help but stand there in the way at first.

"Selma, honey! I am so glad! I was just walking by and saw you've turned this here sign around. Can I come in?"

"Missis Johnson, my momma's here."

The woman shook her head emphatically and spoke up to correct her.

"Your momma? No, your momma's . . ."

But then astonishment grew in her look, slowly overtaking disapproving disbelief. And then the woman reached to remove the spectacles from her face, as though she might hear better that way. But then she shook her head again.

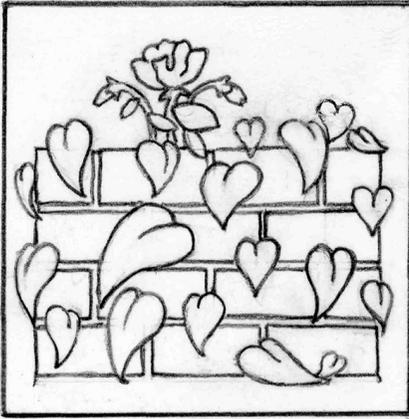
"You don't mean? You don't mean?"

"Yeah. But Momma says that you should come on in.
What can I do for you today?"

Missis Johnson very warily peered in around the door.



Six Of Swords
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



Five Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

**Queen Of
Heaven
And Of Earth**

an essay in the history of religion

Down southeastward from the rugged mountains of Anatolia, east across the desert from the valley of the Nile, west from the green plateau of India, there lies a land of dry rolling hills and plains, scattered with lakes and thick lush marshes. Here two rivers, broad and mighty, wander to the Lower Sea. Rain is scarce here (the desert lies on either hand) but the rivers do not fail and the silt they carry from the distant mountains is marvelously rich.

Long ago, when only hunters roamed the distant mountain woods, when Egypt was a string of isolated towns, when metal tools were new in human hands, a people came and made this country bloom. They organized themselves to cut and dike and constantly maintain canals across the land, to channel water through their fields from many miles away.

These two rivers are now called Tigris and Euphrates. This land is known to the modern world as Mesopotamia or southern Iraq. The nation which those ancient builders built here is now called Sumer.

In Sumer the people wrote on small clay tablets with a pointed stylus in a script of quick little marks and punches, then they baked the clay tablets to last for eons. In our own age there are men and women who come to dig out relics from

the great high mounds of earth and crumbled brick which once were cities and these clay tablets are prized above all other relics that they find.

And these tablets, among the many things that they have taught us, have taught us songs and stories of the people's goddess, the divine Inanna.

All up and down the rivers with their many winding branches and their many lakes and marshes and canals, the people built up fields from swamp and cut out fields from the scrubby dry land where shepherds long before and long since ranged, and they channeled in the brown water to make crops grow.

All up and down the waters they built big towns. Some of their towns, like Babylon and Ur whose names are still familiar to our ears, would stand in place for ages and grow great while others lapsed into oblivion.

They lived together in big towns because in this country, with this kind of massive irrigation, farming had to be the business of a big organization. They believed in law between themselves and natural law which ruled the universe. (If there were no immortal law, how could such age-long work go on?)

And so therefore, among all of the goddesses and gods of the sun, moon and stars, of storm and fire and wind and war and elemental creation, they worshipped a special patron goddess who was both justice and fertility and who was said to own all fertile land.

All things which sprang from the womb were Hers, all things which sprang from Earth. She was Venus, the star which rules the morning and the dusk, a silver flame. She stood upon the winged lion which drew the rain god's car.

She was Inanna, Queen of Heaven and of Earth, who loved the people and was loved by all, all gods and goddesses, all women and men.

The ancient Sumerians were marvelously inventive. They built up fields from swamp by weaving tons of reed into mats

and laying it down. The land was without timber or stone so they created fired brick and with brick they did build large.

They built brick palaces and slums, city walls and towering pyramidal ziggurats atop which their grandest temples stood. (Date palms and fruit trees they had in plenty, and willow trees and such, but stone and real timber lay far beyond the borders.)

They made money, silver disks and rings of standard size. They fished the waters from boats of bundled reed and built their country huts of reed. Furniture and fences and a thousand things were woven from the ever-present reeds.

They made written law and contracts and bills of sale and loans and receipts and written accounting, for they had a thriving trade. In fact, scholars say they were first to invent writing itself, beginning with accounting tokens (little modeled bits of clay that represented so many sheep or bullocks or bushels of grain) and ending with a literature that recorded the farthest heights and depths of beauty and ugliness we humans can know.

From this literature, from the pages which our scholars have restored, I would like to briefly recount four tales of the divine Inanna. These tales were surely performed in the streets and temples as ritual plays at certain times each year.

The words our scholars find for them are beautiful, with a kind of unrhymed mythic power equal to our own greatest poems. Their rhythms have a subtle whispering command.

The goddess who emerges from these baked clay pages is beautiful indeed. Among the many deities of Sumer, Inanna was the people's special patroness for it was She whose marriage to a mortal man brought both fertility and law to their land, and it was She who stole justice from the gods into the human world and it was She who forced the gates of Death itself to bring back ever-renewing life.

The first of our four stories tells entry into womanhood. It shows Inanna as a girl in a house by the river, both desiring and fearing what may come.

Her destiny, her hope, is shown as a willow tree – nurtured by Her hands for years in Her secret garden – in which three demons of Her fear have come to dwell. She calls the gods for aid but none can harvest this tree to help Her into womanhood.

Divine realms are realms of eternal balance, of hope and fear balancing, of law and chaos balancing, of male and female balancing forever. Instead, Her mortal brother Gilgamesh, mighty workman, hero, man of men, will chase the demons from the willow tree and chop it down with his great axe. He bids the craftsmen of his city carve from this tree Her shining throne and bed. She fashions the regalia of a king for him to wear.

Honored counselor, Jewel of Heaven, Creation's Joy!
When sweet sleep is finished in the bedroom, You appear like bright daylight.

The second tale I would recount describes Her daring seizure of wisdom and power, how She took boat from the wharf of the human city to the dwelling of the gods and brought back law.

Her mother's father was the god of all waters, keeper of all of wisdom's treasures, embodiment of thought itself, and She outwitted Him.

With a cunning and haughty eye, He sat Her down to feast and drink, as if in honor, and sought to overawe Her with the powers at His command. The god sought to make the girl a fool. He twisted Her around with flattery and promises of gifts.

They ate and drank in high frivolity, and though he lost His wits, She kept about Her business all the while. He promised all the treasure chests of wisdom. When He called for them to dazzle Her, She bade Her servants seize them and She made away. Back to the city of humans She rode in her boat to give them justice, science and skill, all the powers of the mind, and to rule among us in Her glory.

It seems that on Her holidays the people would parade with songs and costumes and dance. Pipes and harps and drums

and a kind of tambourine they had would lead them through the streets with all the priests and priestesses.

I sing "Hail!" to the Holy One on the horizon! I sing "Hail!" to the Holy Priestess of Heaven! I sing "Hail!" to Inanna, Great Lady of Heaven!

Holy Beacon! Fill the sky with light! Brighten thou the day at dawn!

I sing "Hail!" to Inanna, Great Lady of Heaven!

Awesome Lady of the high gods, crowned with great horns, You fill the heavens and earth with light!

I sing "Hail!" to Inanna, Moon's first daughter.

Mighty, majestic, radiant, ever youthful – To Inanna, I sing!

Each city had a king (their word was "*lugal*", meaning "strong man") and at the new year festival in autumn when the deadly heat of summer was past, when life returned after death, the king would come in marriage to their queen.

The story of her marriage is our third tale today. It tells of their bodily joy and all their words of love and it says that She chose him.

Without a blessing such as this from their own goddess, a king could be never be aught but a warlord in the people's eyes so every year the king would lead the march to Her secret chamber in the temple, atop a tall hill built of brick, to lie there with Her honored priestess and so to seal the nation's union with the divine.

In the tale he is Dumuzi, chieftain shepherd, mighty hunter, smart and strong and fast, but he is a man. Only by his union with the Goddess, by the gifts of skill and wisdom which She gives, could he truly rule. For after all, She is fertility and truth, the green land Hers.

And after all, through all the turmoil of a nation built of city states as Sumer was, through all the civil wars and dynasties of a nation which stood for eighteen hundred years as Sumer did, when everything grew old, it was only the sacred temples

with their knowledge of the sacred rites, which stood through time and pressed law onto the power of kings.

Our fourth and final story shows Her death and return. The high summer begins to burn, the time of death on Earth approaching inexorably. Inanna turns Her ear to "the great below", knowing this is the only realm where She holds no sway, knowing there is nought else that She fears, and knowing that with this fear Her life could never be complete.

Adorned with regal crown and jewels and gorgeous gown, She sets out on the mystic path but then at each of the seven gates of Hell, deeper and deeper into the Earth, She is stripped of Her powers and adornments one by one.

At last She kneels before the judges naked, kneels before the throne of Her long-lost sister who is the Queen of Death. And they pronounce Her guilty and they strike her down.

For three days the Queen of Heaven and of Earth hangs lifeless from a hook in the cavern below the Earth and beneath the Sea, beyond salvation. To know the meaning of this tale, we must now know that it is She Herself who was the Queen of Death; it was She Herself who was the tortured and forsaken Queen of Hell.

It was all the fear in Her of Herself, cast away when glorious womanhood was seized, when the willow tree was cut for Her throne and bed, which now pronounced the guilt of glorious life and struck it down.

For three days the Queen of Life hangs lifeless in the cavern of the Great Below and Her sister Death writhes in torment at the sight.

But Wisdom hears the tale and will not rest. Wisdom, Her mother's father, hears the tale and will not let it be. But Wisdom has no powers there in Hell.

Yet Wisdom sees that He can turn the trick of sending Death a love for life. This is the trick of making the desert sun revive a seed to see it grow. Withered Death Herself must quicken to the hope of growth.

And so He sends two servants down to comfort the loneliness of Death's pain. Wisdom sends two servants down to moan with Death Herself in pain. She is persuaded and she lets life go.

She is comforted and lets Inanna go.

Alive once more, and greater than before, for She has regained the half of Herself which was forsaken, Inanna flies with angels of death on either side. Now in one being, life and death, out from the gates of Hell flies forth the Queen of Earth, the queen of love and fear.

And so we see, it is the law that life and death by turns shall rule. So it shall be forever.



**Shrine Of Ishtar
Beneath Jerusalem's
City Wall**

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley
and Zoe Salmon



Queen Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Gemini
historical fiction: a short story
of the Pagan movement in America

He said; "I haven't got a thing to give you."

His eyes fell away from hers in such a perfect look of shame that for a sudden instant she was quite convinced it must be false, an act, and she was made a fool again. He was a professional actor.

But then he drew breath, a deep breath to speak some more, and the firm thick flesh of his barrel chest expanded against her hand between them. She felt his words vibrating through her hand and through his hand that pressed so near her heart. "I feel so very old!" The soft drawl pulled and twined the five harsh words out almost into a melody. The graceful accent seemed exotic to her, foreign, full of times and places. But now she really felt the pain in it and realized that he, like she, was a poet true, regardless of the falseness in this world. The man shook his head again. He looked back to her eyes.

They lay there face to face, embracing lightly in the morning sun, the woman's blouse by now pulled off and tossed aside. Their knees were intertwined among her skirt. The man's gauzy sleeveless robe was open and thrown back; one arm was his new lover's pillow.

She replied too lightly, smiling, with her voice coming out surprisingly throaty and hoarse; "What? Do you think this is a girl here looking at you? You are a very beautiful old man!" Surely time had been quite generous with him.

Her free hand was on his thickly muscled thigh – in fact, it was the fervent way she had grasped him there that just one moment past had somehow forced him to stop and look away and make confession – so now she very gently petted where her hand lay, comforting as she would have touched a troubled grandchild.

She stretched her toes to rub his ankle too, and leaned to press her mouth very tenderly at the center of his bosom.

His face seemed deliberately quieted now and open so she returned his glance seriously. And in his eyes it was a shock to find the man's spirit standing in there still and quite prepared to be examined through and through. The fellow was holding up his soul to another's gaze in simple courage such as one will seldom find. The shock, and it had hit her immediately, was knowing that she'd have to dare to give this gift that he was giving her.

But she accepted. She reached imagined fingertips to touch the being standing there in his eyes. Something suddenly happened like a high gate swinging wide and suddenly she was looking deeper, gazing on a panorama full of pride and grief and much else too, a lifetime of achievements and mistakes. So, yes, here was a storyteller worth the name.

She looked a moment then withdrew. Here was a powerful earnest soul, but with much sadness. She felt her own nature rise up full of yearning, but would hers find a mate and twin in him? Even for one true day? His spirit had a way of flowing forth in such brutal honest eloquent words, and it could touch so tenderly with such thick hands.

And the long white curly locks that fell across the well-shaped face, the forthright white soft curly beard, the web of wrinkles round the sad deep glowing eyes and tender lips; this was a countenance that knew its own soul well.

She regretted now how carelessly she'd smiled and joked in such young lust. Truthfully, was this man too old for her? Was he too old for anyone?

They lay together on a brightly woven blanket on a bit of warm sand, a secluded tiny beach where thick green forest leaning over water hid this corner of a still green pond. Round them ripples of the breeze wove a tapestry across the surface, darting gleams of green that might have seemed to weave the summer birdsong into water.

Above them, from the woods above, one crisscross trail tumbled down, through a steep jumble of buried boulders, through brambles full of ripening berries, to the tiny patch of strand. Descending down the little path, looking onward, you would see the open pond out there between the leaning trees, as though this is a threshold.

Nor does the forest really end, for to your left a pocket full of lily pads and cattail stalks, a little shallows, tells the buried rocks lead further down. In that shallows, that crowded little bit of watery woods, the leaping frogs go splash and fish make rings of ripples and peculiar popping bubble sounds when they rise to catch a bug.

And indeed, above the still green pond out there a humming cloud of mating insects swarm, while hungry dragon flies dart in their midst.

But she had lit four perfume candles round their pleasure bed to clear the place, to make an altar space. She had knelt and said a blessing prayer with each she lit while he, in unbidden harmony with her, stood with arms outstretched and face up to the sky, they both immersed in that moment's saturating flow of boundless life.

It was cool, an early morning in late summer in forest hills with a pleasant breeze to rustle in the cattail fronds, and she had fetched him here to learn if he might be the one at last, if even for one day.

Last night, by her courteous invitation to this guest, they had sat at the fire together – their camp chairs side by side

among the chatting jolly campfire crowd – and shared some lingering looks and laughs then touches, finally sharing that instant when you hold a hand and look into a face and cannot speak, all while others there gave happily astonished looks to one another in the flickering blazing light, hiding smiles behind their hands.

For her to eat, he'd roasted little spicy sausages then burnt marshmallows exactly per her order. He had uncorked her wine and poured. She finally realized how absolutely fagged to bits she was and absolutely must go stumbling to her tent at once or die, and beckoned to her daughter for assistance, but the stranger had leapt up instantly, gently fetched her to her feet with no apparent effort, then laid a chaste kiss on her cheek.

She had felt without a doubt his strength was real and deep. She had let it flow into her weakness too, up through their clasping hands and up her arm into her quickening heart where it glowed warm. Refreshed enough at least to fold her canvas chair and safely stumble off into the dark on her daughter's arm, refusing his offer to help her to her rest, she smiled to him a final time then sang to all; "Good night sweet friends! Good night!"

So then she dreamed. Waking in a darkness full of living sounds and scents, she cautiously decided that a bit of dalliance would bring the truth to light. Certainly it would if carefully arranged. The first glow of dawn eventually came up, painting distant clouds with brilliant rays.

With heart risen up into her throat, wondering at her hope, she threw together this and that in a large basket then went out through the sleeping dew-wet camp unerringly, coming on the big fellow standing nude and barefoot, chanting at his meditations. Strong arms were straining toward the growing light. The white mane tumbled down. She thought; A stallion! Stretching forth its neck and nickering! She felt her old eyes aching to be filled.

She gave her eyes their way upon that totally male body, not even quitting when he turned and they both spoke.

Slowly then, a few words more. Might he wish to breakfast by their scenic lake? A twinkle in the words to let him know the pond is small. She knew he felt the gaze quite palpably because his manhood rose up strong. And then at that she was surprised to feel an ardent smile come to her lips, though coy and holding back from absolute consent, and yet inviting him to more than words would say.

All and all, she was amazed to find in herself, even now, the sense to play this thrilling game.

And then he had grinned! He stepped up close so that she must expect embrace, expect to feel this massive nakedness at once, but then the man only tenderly touched her cheek again and took and pressed her hand to his cheek too. Just a moment and he'd quickly pulled on sandals and the light but clinging brightly colored robe to come away.

She'd let him lug the basket full of blanket, bread, honey, candles, and miscellaneous other ritual stuff – more than would be needed surely – on through the woods, and watched how slight the cargo was to him, and let him hold aside the fragrant dew drip branches as they went. He might have picked her up as well if there were need. And finally when their shady altar bed was made and there they stood – when she clung to him and turned her face up to be kissed – he was as eager as a starving man.

But now, so much farther on again, so far toward where their hearts led, he had stopped because he wished to tell the truth.

She took his hand that cupped her soft old sagging breast and kissed its palm. She'd learned by now these fingertips could draw fire on her skin, or trembling cold as she had seldom felt. She knew his lips were hard or soft, how like a babe he sucked, as though to somehow coax forth mystic milk. But she wondered at the rest. Seeming as long as those that trailed behind, long years stretched ahead.

He said; "I can't even offer you a real love affair."

She looked away.

He said; "I have a duty at home. I hope you understand. I swore for better or worse and I can't walk out now when the worse has come to worst. There's nothing but a desert there, and yet I'd be a thief to run away. There might be a future beyond that for us, yes there might, or else today and tomorrow, this might be the only time that you and I will ever have."

The woman cried out; "But I'm so lonely!" Tears welled in her eyes; she blinked them back. One overflowed. He leaned to kiss there where it ran, but she feared that if she really let them go, he would weep as well.

She felt his breath all warm and scented like herbs fresh in the ground when he sighed; "I know. I know!" A pause and then a whisper; "We can't let this go. Living like I do, this is the most joy I can even hope to find. I know some art of pleasure, truly I do, and I shall show thee dear, so can't we say this is enough? We can't just let this disappear as though we'd never met. That would betray the powers who brought us here."

She answered silently, swearing to herself; *Right now I will be happy!*

And so, in their embrace she turned her face to him again and grasped the long soft locks to pull his mouth to hers. She pushed her tongue in roughly, fiercely, for that moment wondering if a man could feel like this when entering a woman's mouth. She felt a hand come up her skirt, pushing up between, tangled though it was in cloth, insistent for the intimate touch, and so at once she wriggled from the skirt and let him pull it off, then laid her knee up on his hip. She took and put his hand where it had nearly been before.

She felt the fingers slowly gently part the intimate flesh exactly as they should, exactly as hers would, exactly.

Her hand went reaching for the Old Man for the first time then, and found he was the thing which pressed exactly on the aching spot as would some carven image with a cap of silk. She found how well it filled her fist. The stout twig well befitted the tree, like all its parts.

She could not help but grip quite hard and rub the silken tip hard on the tender spot so that his wondering eyes came wide and he gasped. His fingertips inside her twirled kaleidoscopes of swirling bursts of color. She felt herself pulled close in firm embrace and felt a pinching at a nipple too but then a blinding lightening current shot her through. So then she scarcely knew whose skin was touching whose, which parts of flesh were hers and which another's.

His mouth went to her ear and slightly bit her there. She showed her teeth as any angry tigress would. She wanted now to cry out loud some crude outrageous thing, to cry the utterly abandoned phrases she had scarcely ever dared to use with a man, the words that really speak a poet's truth of sexual love, but panting breath could not take shape. The years had fallen by unseen.

She was a priestess, faithful daughter of the Earth and Sky, yet she'd tramped a million miles on the journey.

Lost, wandering out from painful disappointed childhood, she had gone out with some beckoning call echoing in her ears. What called her on? At first it stubbornly remained unknown and so she tramped the dusty corridors of city life. An early marriage smashed, she had two children to raise.

It was her babies' echoing laughter where she heard the call again. It was the babies' faces where she first beheld the God and Goddess splashing gleeful in the bathtub in their manifested grace. She called them little Ariadne and Dionysos.

She threw herself to mother them and soon picked up the poet's pen as well. She screwed her courage up to read a batch of poems at a party; they were liked; they brought respected comment and drew admirers round. She mailed some to a magazine and found herself in print alluding artfully to beautiful strong spirits.

She met a lady then, an old lady full of good humor, who smiled and almost winked across the tea cups, and asked about the Goddess and the God she knew.

She scarcely knew, she said, for foggy mystery lay thick on everything, lit only by her heart.

"Yes;" the old lady sighed; "the mystery!"

So then she found herself among that lady's followers and friends.

It was a close-knit and good humored bunch of chums mostly, a dozen folk or so who'd help you out when need arose, and weep on your shoulder when they must. Now and then a new one came or an old friend went and others hung about the fringe. They'd stroll the park and haunt the bookstores and cafes, her toddlers running after pigeons, dozing in a carriage by the table. There were some thrilling love affairs but no one stuck. It seemed there was no Orpheus who truly struck the harp strings to her tune.

The bunch of chums would telephone then toss stuff in the cars and drive about to pick each other up; then off into the country for a day or night or weekend or a week or even a fortnight once, if someone was inspired to organize the outing in advance. They found some lovely spots out in the hilly wooded countryside to camp quite inexpensively. That's where they really wove their rituals and danced their prayers and drummed their throbbing drums. Her children grew with smoke and dirt and flowers in their hair, with mystic seers among their playmates.

The old lady knew a thing or two all right. She was a witch all right. She led them all to teach each other the Tarot and how to read the stars and omens in the flight of birds and rustling leaves and rain, to listen carefully with your heart open wide when you were spoken to, the way to mist your eyes and see the truth beyond what seems the truth.

And too there were the carefully crafted smells of burning herbs and the various shapes of space opened in the mind by various sounds and colors and symbols. They found the landscapes that are there, of course. They found the ways that gesture shapes a consciousness. Some of them learned to heal with touch, and other worthy skills.

Sometimes they'd find their smiling Old One leaning close and whispering; "Now isn't this fun?" And they were led on and on to ever larger mystery.

It is amazing to discover that your soul is real. You find it's woven from the same stuff as the world, that all the world is somehow nothing else but soul.

The first night when the young one stood out in a meadow, every garment plucked off one by one, standing absolutely naked and defenseless then except for perfume drawn by a kneeling chanting man in sigils on her prickling, trembling and erotic skin, when she then sang to beckon in the shining Moon; that brought amazement full and true.

The Shining Lady came and sang with her, spun one soul into the cosmic soul, sang visions of her journey on, even while the young one's limbs swayed through the ritual, while prophecies were shown to the other beings there. A witch was made that night. From that night on, the flowing branching spirit force, full in everything, stood out as clear as anything, and she could touch that power just as well as dip her fingers in a flowing stream. And too, at her heart's inmost place a gate out to the holy realm would open at a finger's touch if she just spoke the password "love". Spirits of every realm now came and went before her shining eyes.

But the vision that was sung of her own future – only broken swirling bits returned out of memory later – that was a mystery she did not wish but could not refuse. It told that she would walk ahead of others, often alone.

Then one dark evening when the prayers began, a black moon low in the cloudy sky, their wonderful old witch had clutched her chest and cried in pain. Within the tiny space of half an hour, refusing to be moved out of their sacred place in the dark light, she'd spoken cheerfully to all and passed. Oh what a celebration then! Thanks and farewell! Wrenching sobs and smiles. Mystery manifest. So then the young one's turn had come to lead and she grew old.

Where she led, that was the difficulty. Even her own twins, grown into strong youth by then with soaring hearts and independent minds, they took their mother to task when it came out.

Consulting none, she'd screwed her courage up again and penned an advertisement for the largest city paper. A month went by; she took it from its hiding place and wrote a check and sealed the envelope and pressed a postage stamp onto the corner.

"Do The God And Goddess Call You?" That was the headline, bold in print however small and crude the type, there in the newspaper column with the churches. There were her name and telephone. Somewhere in the rich poetic paragraph, she'd even dared to place the true word "witchcraft". That true word in particular stared out stark from the soft white page into a realm of blind cruel souls. She'd advertised she was "accepting students for a modest fee".

Some moments of the following years became a walk through other people's Hell. She was a lightening rod for good and ill. Cursed and ridiculed by turns from pulpits and television screens across the state, sifting through hopeless crazy applicants to find a hopeful few, she persisted at the job.

It was a good thing that the babies were well grown. Her erstwhile long lost husband reappeared, waving monstrous lying papers in his hand to try and take them. She had to face police with pistols drawn and show the children live unhurt and lift their shirts to show there were no scars, and yet by this injury itself especially her son was scarred. She must coach them both to speak convincingly. Struggle and worry beyond belief. She had to plead her priesthood in a court of law. She prayed for guidance earnestly and constantly and was inspired to carry on through all.

At last, seeming like the final blow, a different man appeared with lovely rhymes and fresh bouquets and lying smiles that burned her lips.

Even their Old Lady came in a warning dream but she was standing now face to face with the hungry beings at the far tag end of hope and needed reinforcement. She fancied herself in love at last. She fancied love can't lie. It was a trap. At length she was betrayed, bereft, a fool with empty hands and purse and bruises on her tear-stained face.

But all in all, despite the worst, the thing went well. New friends appeared to help in countless ways. New ones learned and taught her too just as they should. They laughed and cried by turns. With turning years the awkward burden grew more easy slowly.

At last one moonlit night, to her surprise, thirty-seven trusted well known folk arrived when she expected eight. To her astonishment, a priest and priestess she had made bade her to stand at the altar, standing still and gazing to the stars with implements of sovereign power in her hands.

The fire took hold, rising up in its central place to blaze out on the scene. Leaves rustled on their boughs in sweet assent. A drum was tapping softly and panpipes sighed. Outside the firey light, among the trees, a deer stood still to watch. The priest knelt down to kiss her feet and knees, her womb, her paps, her lips, her brow. Anointing her prickling, trembling and erotic skin with perfumed oil then smoke and light and clear water and dark earth, with prayers of praise and invocations of divinity, they set a silver crown alight with jewels on her head. When it was done, they held her while she lay among their arms and wept.

So now at last the whirling years turned kind. Time seemed to spin down nearly to a stop. She felt herself almost daring to relax.

One Hallow's Eve a television fellow came to interview the chief high witch of Boston. She felt it was an offering of peace, or hoped it was. They taped it on the comfy sofa in her parlor by the flowered drapes. She wore a very modest dress. Followers and friends, her son especially, were loitering about behind the camera nervously supposedly for her support.

When it was done, her daughter's kind husband stepped up with a handkerchief to blot the sweat away.

The television people aired her carefully constructed ninety-second speech two times that Halloween. Death is not a fearful thing because there's love. Mystery should not be feared but sought; its wonder is the path out of our doubt and pain. She later wrote it up, expanded to a quarter page, for one of the newspaper magazines. A local Christian minister came by for tea.

And more. They had this annual magic camp out now, the tenth year running, rain or shine, peace or war. There was a modest registration fee. They had two reams of flyers mailed and passed from hand to hand by every June, posted in the bookstores and organic grocery shops. They placed notices on the inter-net.

It was ten days at the start of each September. One night every year they did a wondrous powerful summoning of Sky, next night a summoning of Earth, and on the next, a call for all the troubled beings in this middle world to come and take the blessing. Many were astonished with the beauty. It seemed the forces whom they conjured made the whole thing stay on track.

And they had fine lectures, demonstrations free by volunteers, authors reading manuscripts. Musicians played and dancers danced. There was art for love of art. There was a bulletin board with sign-up sheets; all got a chance. Druids and yogis and Lakota taught each other chants. Friends brought friends and teachers brought their students. People came from far away.

And too, by now she almost was a guest. Her people let her run the main events, solicited her new ideas, but mainly took the problems of the thing out of her hands.

And then three winters past she got a new idea. It took some weeks to bring the governing committee round because the registration fee must be increased a little bit. They'd hire professional entertainment. Why not? Support the artists! And

the campground they were using had a big canopy with a stage. She finally had to bring the trump card out. She finally had to slap the kitchen table so the coffee cups jumped and tell them, "Well, see here! I got this in a vision!"

So far it had gone pretty well. They had a harper that first year who wove a spell of peace and purity that lingered powerfully on through the magic spells. Next year it was a dancing fiddler and her little band who made their feet to stamp and dance so that the workings hummed. But still she felt the vision unfulfilled.

He was a traveler. He was a journeyman philosopher, now and then paid for the work. He claimed the curious title "talesman" on his letterhead. She'd telephoned the references he gave.

By this year he'd got a large bouquet of various stories in his head, old ones and new, each one possessing some particular dose of truth. Some of them rose from far beyond the veil of time, with others being recent memories.

The thing was, he could herd a flock of folk there down the paths of foreign realms so every person looked about and found a bit of treasure for themselves. The key was that he felt them listening. Sometimes deep in trance, he'd open up his heart and feel each twist of hope and joy and fear and doubt among the crowd.

And then he felt his senses were the senses of the tale, so that the story found a way to spool out as it must for them. And then again, sometimes he'd simply follow blindly where a spirit led, and simply try to paint some puzzling mystery he was shown, scarcely guessing at the scenes and characters himself.

She heard of this performing artist from a friend who said he was quite good, a real magician. She telephoned long distance twice, chatting cautiously twice, then tore apart the envelope when it arrived, examining the photograph with care. The picture made him look near mad. Was that good or bad publicity? She called the references.

She finally hired the man to stand before her crowd of followers and friends and strangers in the night just following this morning when they lay in beauty in each other's arms. He was hired to speak for one long evening outdoors by their fire, if weather would permit, in just the way his ancient predecessors would have done, to see what wise ghosts might be conjured up and made to speak, or else, if demanded by the weather, use the canopy and stage.

That was the deal they struck, exactly. That's what she'd printed in the schedule of events. Three hundred dollars he was being paid. The large fee was consideration for the miles that he must come and for the fact he would be sleeping in his truck at no expense to them. And she thought attendance this year would be up again. He sent some excellent reviews from which she made space in the schedule to print quotations.

Then yesterday he had arrived. The old priestess sat beneath a shady tree, over a tall cold glass of lemonade. She watched the actual flesh and spirit of the fellow painfully climb out from the cab of a dark green camper truck then bend and stretch and twist in sorely needed exercise. Fifty yards of emptiness shimmered between them.

The big fellow looked to see what gaze was on him, and she was taken by a sudden undeniable subtle power. She looked into the fluid web of life and saw its countless strands all knotted up. But then he stood up straight to look at her. She straightened too and saw dissolving knots come open to the beautiful reality beyond. What did this vision mean?

So now, where insects buzzed and cattails swayed and berries ripened in a new day's sunlight on their thorny vines, the woman who was old and young and great and small and bent and straight and he and she was nearly knowing all at once. In a mad carnival of shooting flame, all past and future spun in her eyes. She danced with mad abandon in the fire and All was fast approaching the explosion into One.

But then a jagged detail of this world today stuck fast within the gyre. It struck a nerve and she jumped back. The woman saw or heard or felt: a group of holiday revelers were coming close.

She knew it clear. It woke a startled horror in her heart. A little troupe of happy men and women going for a naked swim on holiday, their sandals plopping on bare feet and towels down bare backs, now strolling through a dappled shade. Had laughter reached her ear? Had spirits spoken there? The seeing in a single instant point of time slammed shut the gates of joy. She had awaited this one hour in trembling hope, and waited in that hope for years. She had dreamt of a beautiful loving man each and every time when she had reached to comfort her own self in lonely solitude. And now she thought their sacred privacy was lost despite due invocations of the greatest gods.

Her hopes were vain. Her works were vain. What were the candles for? What was the jumbled hocus-pocus of her whole life ever for? It seemed insoluble cruel mystery. And thus she felt she was found out committing great stupidity, and she grandmother of the clan. She felt enraged. She felt betrayed.

The man by then was gone too far in her to see at once. He only knew the woman who lay sheltered and spread open in his arms had cried aloud and that her cry had changed. But then he realized some enormity had come to pass.

What was her cry? Anguish and pain! He forced himself to freeze his ministrations. He had been thrilling to the woman's joyous dance, his lusting body all consumed with wrapping into the writhing shape so that she danced in him. But suddenly the panpipes had been struck out of the piper's hand. Now, when the beauty that forsook him for so long was his again, the clay went spinning off the spinning wheel and somehow shattered on the wall, broken like his heart so long had been before.

He was bereft, ashamed and full of pity too. So he cried; "Dearest, what have I done?"

"Coming!" she only stammered, wrestling with his penetrating hand.

And so the time was lost in weird confusion. He had not felt that coming through the fire that way was giving her the slightest pain. So now he thought to try some new notes on this instrument of theirs, to pick her up again, gently now, to then thus stride with her toward completion. So he reached on further toward a place to softly squeeze, reaching round her back to gently tease a very puckered teat, his shoulder now even between her twisting thighs indeed, and his tongue wet with desire to taste, but she shoved his face away.

The woman was frantically shaking her head and wrestling in the tangled stiff embrace. She stammered, pointing with a shaking hand and scarcely holding back a scream; "They're coming! People coming! Through the woods!"

Dumbfounded then, he let her go. At last she stilled, but with her limbs drawn up like a rabbit crouching, staring past him with flame-lit eyes. So he looked up to the forest path, disbelieving that it could be so. They were there.

The little crowd of people stood and stared. Some pressed forward for a better view.

If truth be told, he did not comprehend her panicked shame. His honest impulse on the moment was to cover up the lady as he could, perhaps to lightly lay himself upon her, then to look up over his shoulder and speak some terse brief sarcastic greeting in a very sharp voice.

Surely that would make the point. These folk were naked Pagans, were they not? Are not all acts of love divine among such folk? Did not the glinting altar candles stand as perfectly obvious signs of the sanctity they were so lewdly breaking? By all the powers of justice and of joy! Each and every one of them must fuck a thousand times more frequently than she and he! But the holy dancer curled her soul and body up and seemed to want to vanish clean away.

Therefore he rose onto his knees and faced the gawking crowd. His hands clenched and unclenched in fury.

His robe hung open and his manhood still stood up. His face and chest were still hot crimson flushed. Any lout would clearly read what they had been about and count it good, but now his lover clung behind his back, pressing very tight with arms around his waist and her face behind his shoulder, hiding her sigils of their passion. At least, he thought, she seemed to find no fault in him.

One of them spoke, some stupid chuckle and a joke up there in the forest verge. Another one apologized. Several stared at his cock so it further swelled into its proper shape, speaking to him inwardly of pride before fools. One of them turned and turned about then actually bent to pluck some berries from a bush as any monkey might have done in stress. But they did not leave.

These folk were strangers to him but perhaps they were the lady's friends. That seemed unlikely. Or else she knew not one and they were toadies of her fame, fascinated with this living picture like an ancient Goddess revealed in copulation.

He thought he ought to shout and wave and shoo them off like hens but he was stuck there in a web of doubt. He'd hired out for the job of showing holy secrets to these folk. And there were times before in younger days when he had freed his nobler self to dance proud passions naked for a crowd. Deep in his soul still stood the prancing antlered stag at rut. The writhing tangled two-backed body they had stumbled on; was it a weird grotesquery to them or sacred myth? What was his duty now?

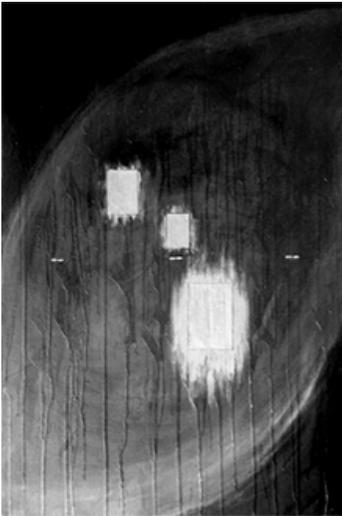
He knew not what to do except to sniff the spirit wind and try to sense the thing, and meanwhile shield his doe-like lady from the obscene glare.

But then a startlement. He felt her choose an instant first before he saw the choice. Shoving hard on his shoulder, she leapt up. He turned to bellow like a wounded bull but found the rending cry stuck in his throat. His hands reached out but they were empty of all gifts so he must let her go. He saw the fleeting soul and body, saw a candle knocked aside and yet left burning as she went.

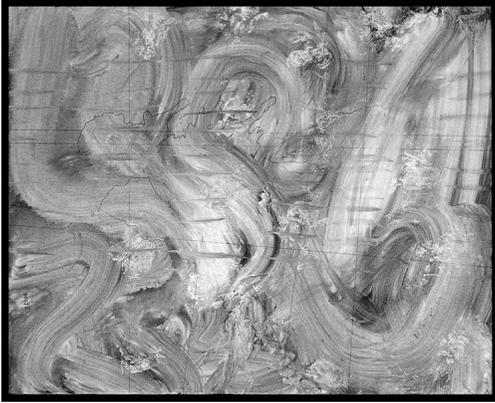
And then, to his astounded joy, the lovely being fluttered up and flew away. She was transformed.

But then again, as slow as anything can ever seem, the spirit's arcing dive into the pool seemed achingly slow. That instant at the peak seemed as if the curving form which had so lately spread so open in his arms were hung upon a darting ray of green green light, alike some dragonfly caught on a silver pin.

But then again, the waters opened to receive her.



The Search For God
Acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley



**Portrait Of A
Young Composer**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Glamour a short story after the war

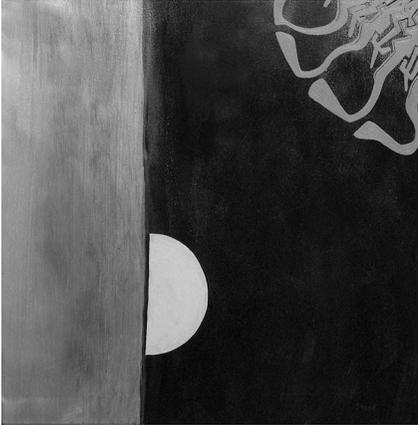
Whispering in the glowing dark, in a voice of aching hushed intensity that rushed out from his open soul, Mr. Clark Gable spoke: "Don't say goodbye. I couldn't stand it if we said goodbye!" He pressed his hungry mouth onto the woman's throat below her ear.

Mrs. Betty Harken pressed a hanky to her open mouth to mute her gasp. She was truly trembling this time. The large glowing close-up of his noble countenance, there in the intimate darkness of the matinee, was just the way he would have looked in bedroom dusk. Imagination's phantom touch played on her skin while vivid carnal images flooded her mind's eye.

What if she actually had relations with this man of the strong open heart? How would it be? How would it be from beginning to end? With her girlfriends there at left and right the place was safe; she knew that if they saw or heard there'd be no fuss. So Mrs. Harken leaned forward, whispering very quietly behind her handkerchief to Mr. Gable; "Don't go! Don't go!" She pressed her handbag deep into her lap as if it were his hand.

This was their guilty pleasure, she and her friends. They'd gotten through the War in perfect innocence this way, chatting to each other that the actors were just like their missing men.

Then when the War was done and Bill and the others came home safe, their little movie club had quite dissolved in hopes of married bliss. The ladies were all thrilled at first with honeymoon thoughts but then they grew despondent when the hopes went crash.



Gazing Within
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

They found how hard and troubled the real men had become in just those few enormous missing years. All four of them, all of their men, seemed sullen or angry or else driven by hard desperation in the times of joy, as though the world were still at siege. These real men seemed quite overfilled with strange relentless memories that left scant room for tender open simple sorts of love to come a-creeping in. There was no music left in it, no art.

It had been she, Betty Harken, who had pulled the girls back together, got them going to the shows again. It was no innocent pleasure for her now but a guilty one, she even with a baby now. Now she allowed herself to really consciously lust for these other men. She took the mental pictures home to paste onto the moments that she really had. She sometimes wondered secretly if with this choice her youth was given up as well as innocence.

Up on the screen, the man and woman kissed in deep embrace. The music rose in spirals and the whole scene spun. She felt the burning flush upon her cheeks and breast, felt her trembling body edging closer toward the climax, so she removed the handbag, forced herself to sit back, forced her mind to think of Bill instead, forced her body to relax. *Later*; she told herself.

Afterward, the girls were sitting crowded in the small back booth just a few blocks over at the Blue Moon Cafe. They sipped their coffee, nibbled at their sugar rolls. It was still daylight now. It was an autumn afternoon, edging now toward dusk, a Saturday like any other. Half an hour more and they'd go home.

"Betty!" Mrs. Ethel Jackson said. "Did you see that dress? In the street scene at the flower shop. Did you notice that?"

The conversation had not turned yet onto the serious topic of the men.

Emily spoke in Betty's place; "What dress?"

"At the flower shop."

"Oh yes!" Laura Dvorjic interjected. "The one with the full skirt? How could they let her wear such an ugly thing?"

"Ugly! No!" Ethel spoke enthusiastically. "I really liked it."

They all agreed or disagreed.

These four young married ladies were sitting at their coffee cups and plates as if the world around did not exist. The crowded little diner was full of human sounds and cooking smells and yet they felt that if they huddled here together there would be some kind of bubble to hide their shared desires and troubles. This particular booth stood in a sort of semi-hidden elbow of the place in a wallpapered corner. There were even low wooden screens put up behind the seat-backs in the Blue Moon's booths to reassure the patrons of imaginary privacy.

There was something someone said about another dress, but Betty Harken then was looking out to the big window in the cafe's front. In this alcove booth, you could only see the front from where she sat.

She found herself preoccupied with wondering whether Gary Cooper really would be shy if you could spend a night with him alone. How would you touch him first?

There was a man out on the sidewalk there beyond the storefront glass, standing under the cafe's backward painted letters, a lean tall man in a neat suit leaning on a cane. She wondered why that fellow out there made her think so strongly of Gary Cooper. Perhaps it was the way he seemed to sag as he leaned, borne down by deep and secret pain. "Mr. Lewis!" That was a start; she realized she knew the fellow, one of the high school teachers. Then she realized she had spoken his name out loud.

"I beg your pardon?" said Laura, always polite but unhappy to be interrupted.

Betty looked about at her three friends. She looked back to the large front glass. She was alarmed to find Mr. Lewis, as though the distance did not exist, looking back right in at her.

She broke off the glance with him very quick. "Don't look!" she cried. "There's a fellow outside there. A history teacher!" She worked part-time as a substitute herself, at the high school some days.

"Lewis?" Emily asked. She knew him too. "Does he see you? Is he coming in?"

"No, I hope not. Oh yes, he's seen me but I hope he won't come in. He's just like Gary Cooper."

Emily craned about part way as if inspecting something on the further wall, but leaned out into the aisle where she could peek. "He's coming in!" Emily Gorham knew the fellow pretty well. She had no babies yet and so she still was working full time at the school. In a rather scathing bitter voice she whispered; "What a drag! I hope he won't come over."

"Why?" laughed Ethel. "What's the matter with him?"

"He's such a sap. All he wants is a shoulder to cry on. I've had enough of that!" Emily turned her face stonily to them, away from the whole world and just to them, as if their psychic wall of privacy must be rebuilt.

"What's wrong with him?" Betty repeated the question.

"Hush!" said Laura and Ethel both.

"I didn't know you went for the Gary Cooper type!" said Emily out loud, still dripping acid.

Betty could not help but hide her face behind a hand staring at the poor man limping into the crowded noisy narrow place, though Laura secretly clamped her hand on Betty's knee to try and make her stop.

Betty thought the fellow leaned more heavily on the cane than she had seen him do before. The soft fedora hat was pulled down hard upon his head, a shiny military pin stuck on the band in place of any feather. His gait was slow and halting. He did halt for a moment by the counter where some other fellows looked up for a greeting and shook his hand.

But then he looked toward their booth again and found Betty's eyes were on him; a sudden spark glimmered in the shadows of his gloomy face. He came on back.

So then at last he stood there at their table's open end. He was a tall man with rather sunken hollow eyes and cheeks, still young, well dressed. Above his pocket's neatly folded handkerchief, on his heart, there hung a tiny medal on a ribbon. The nice gray flannel suit seemed half a size too large, as if he'd shrunk within. The others, all but Emily, looked up.

He reached to tip his hat. It seemed a mortal effort done by force of will. In a voice that seemed more deeply sad than any Betty had ever heard, even on a movie screen, he finally sighed. "Good day, ladies!" The words were very slow, as if dragged up from silent depths to stand in place of other words he could not say. His eyes were lingering on Betty's form and face in an obviously yearning gaze.

Betty nearly blushed. She said; "Hello Mr. Lewis!" She reached to touch her throat below her ear, to show the wedding ring and hide at least one breast.

But Emily then looked up directly into the man's eyes and interrupted with an icy tone; "Hello."

Lewis glanced to Emily and there became stuck. It seemed to take an instant for her cold voice and stony gaze to really sink into him though. When it did, Betty saw his eyes twitch out of focus and she thought a look came into them which was nothing short of terror. But then the horror seemed to pass into the solid pain again. He stood stock still a moment more. He looked beyond the women to some other place. He tipped his hat again. He limped away.

When he was safely gone, hooking his cane onto the counter by an empty stool up near the front, pulling his stiff reluctant body up onto the high backless stool, opening the menu to stare within, then Betty broke the silence. "Emily! That was cruel! He could have pulled a chair over and sat right here, for a minute anyway."

"Did you smell his breath?"

"What?"

"He drinks. It's only Saturday afternoon and he's hitting the sauce already."

Laura said; "I didn't smell it."

"He's staggering!" Emily replied.

"For God's sake;" Betty cried, then leaned forward trying to whisper; "he was wounded in the War!"

In fact he'd told her that. Last winter sometime Betty had found herself alone beside Mr. Lewis standing at the water bubbler in the teacher's lounge.

She'd helped him reach a paper cup then asked an ordinary question about his service. He had pulled a few words from deep inside. The Navy. The Pacific. Was he wounded there? Yes, a bomb. And he'd slapped his thigh in a quick angry blow as if the flesh had been a traitor.

Then she'd stared into his face while he looked down. She'd seen a most peculiar thing, a look of shame and guilt. Guilt? She'd wondered since. Since then she'd read a scientific article that men who live through battles sometimes feel ashamed to have survived when others died. Thinking of it tugged her heart. Was that it then?



**Self-Portrait
In Late Winter**

Acrylic on assembled
canvas & cardboard
by Stone Riley

At that moment alone with him she had not understood at all but only reached to lay a hand tenderly on his shoulder in the simple sincere hope to reassure a fellow soul.

So now in the coffee shop Betty impatiently tapped her spoon into its saucer and a brown droplet unexpectedly splashed up. She said; "Emily, see here. You could at least be civil. He is a veteran."

"No, you see here. He's such a Sad Sack. Always is. Just like the damn comic strip."

Laura spoke up to that. "Emily, that is cruel. What's gotten into you?"

"Oh!" Emily cried. But then her tone did soften somewhat. "Oh...!" She looked around to each and all, and found that none yet understood. "Look here; I get enough of that at home. I tried talking to that guy, I really did, and he won't say two words to me.

I tried!" She looked around again and found some sympathy was opening in her friends' hearts and so she ventured on into the tale of woe which they had heard a hundred times.

"Do you know what I get from my Jimmy now? That same damn Sad Sack shit. Or else, he gets mad and won't even say why. Any goddamn little thing, and I don't even know why. I swear, if Jimmy ever hits me, that's the end. Or else he's all laugh a minute, and that doesn't make any more sense either!"

She shook her head emphatically.

"I swear, I've had enough of that. I don't need another drunk insane son of a bitch!" She looked at Betty very firmly and shook her head again. "You don't need it either, sister. Sure not from Gary Cooper over there."

So Ethel trotted out her old stock trick of twisting things into a joke. "Oh!" Ethel said. "I see it now. The green-eyed monster!" She even wagged a comic finger right in Emily's face. "The woman scorned! What? What did you do? You pulled your garters up for him to see, didn't you?"

That got a laugh from Laura and a smile from Betty too but not from Emily.

"You've got a wild imagination, pal!" said Emily.

Then Laura interjected, pointing an accusing finger; "Know what I saw her do one time?"

"No!" cried Emily. "You promised you'd never tell!"

"It was some guy at the department store; she walked right out of the dressing room in front of him and she was still straightening up her tits. In a bathing suit. She did. I was there."

"Liar."

"You did! And then she was *soo* embarrassed."

All awaited the confession.

"Well . . . !" said Emily slowly with a hint of pride and humor too at last; "they are my nicest feature. Shame if no one noticed."

Betty tried to laugh at that just like the others did, but the truth was that she did not care for Emily too much right now. The woman was a foul mouthed tease and flirt. And the cruelty – jealousy or whatever it might be – that was a side of Emily she'd seen before but never quite so plain.

The men had sacrificed so much and here this woman was demanding more. But then again, Betty thought, what did she do herself? She deceived her husband quite deliberately. Who was worse? Bill did not know that when she got on top and looked down, she always blurred her eyes and saw and felt inside some different man.

Perhaps he knew it, more or less, and tried not to care. Saturday evenings these days, she would come home from the show, the baby still with her mother-in-law for another hour, and Bill would come home from the job. That was their time alone.

One Saturday the girls had indulged in a particularly frank chat about the movie stars and afterward, feeling the pinch of guilt, she asked Bill if he minded that she went.

What? Why would he mind? He seemed to be probing for the truth.

Some fellows might be jealous, Betty carefully explained.

Jealous? He had spoken the word as if it were ridiculous and nonsense. Bill said that he knew she went there for the stars. He said they were a bunch of actors. He clearly felt it was a stupid shallow thing she did.

He did not know the depth of feeling that she really had for the beautiful romantic art portrayed up on the screen. He did not know and she did not tell. She did not tell him that his love these days seemed cold and ugly. That was the kernel of her deceit.

The friends chatted on in good humor now, but Betty's eyes were drawn to the crippled man. He was a profile among the others sitting up there at the counter.

A conviction came to her about that moment when she'd lain a comforting hand on that man's shoulder.

In that one instant she had done a good and noble deed; suddenly she was convinced of its importance. This philosophical reflection led her on to feeling better. An understanding flowed from it regarding beauty, truth and art. That pure moment of true religious pity was as fine as any actress ever could portray and she had done it in utter simple innocence.

That momentary passing scene beside the water bubbler had grown like one red poppy sprouting from the tangled soil of two people's lives and it would live fresh in memory forever. The understanding seemed too fine for words. There was the blessed innocence opening out of tangled guilt. There was real life more artful than any art.

But then Betty took a start. She saw what he had done. She saw him lift a tall brown bottle to his lips and saw him lean back, pouring a long heedless draught straight down. Lewis then glared fiercely at the empty bottle, set it down, called too loudly for another beer. There was a mindless heedless ugly manner to the gesture. He had become a drinker.

All in a flash, she felt betrayed. Her father was a drinker to his dying day. But then she breathed and calmed herself again, asking what right there was to judge.

So then Betty spoke out loud; "Emily, why is he so sad?"

"Who?" Emily craned around to follow Betty's gaze and saw him there. She answered; "Lewis? His wife, I guess."

"His wife?" asked Betty in surprise. There was another actress in the drama.

"Yeah, the poor woman's sick. I met her once or twice. Heart condition. Doesn't get out much, poor thing."

Now what of that? This man was getting drunk here in a public place while his sickly wife at home fretted in his absence. Betty's father was a drinker to his dying day. She bit her tongue. It was not her business what he'd done but all the same, she felt her sympathy had gone to waste.

And so the time ticked on. The girlfriends chatted of this and that. Betty spoke little, preoccupied with watching. To her considerable distress, the second bottle came and went and was replaced by yet a third which was likewise gulped down.

Some people by him left and she could see the sandwich on a plate that went untouched. His voice rose too loud again, with his hand waving some oratorical gesture, so that he heavily leaned to one side and had to grip the counter's edge. The other man beside him pulled him back upright and patted his slumping shoulder. The aproned counter man went over.

Betty thought again how she had sympathized and spoken in his favor and even let him leer without objection. She almost spoke out to her friends, almost framed scathing words to say: The homely little diner was becoming a saloon. He put his head down in his hands. There was the very picture of a weak and irresponsible man. There was no innocence and beauty there, no truth transcending all we know. He was no Gary Cooper.

Laura said something about persuading Fred to kiss her better. Emily looked around at the clock, pulled up her cuff to check the time against her watch. There were enough minutes left that she felt no need to mention it.

Very frankly, Ethel asked Laura if Fred would kiss her everywhere she wanted; Laura gave a sour look and answered no. Betty said she'd given up on that. "For Heaven's sake;" Ethel spoke in a rueful joke; "they've all been to France."

The demure Laura started in upon a most surprising tale of Monday night. She'd gone to fetch Fred in from the garage for supper. On the moment's inspiration, with black grease still lodged around his fingernails, she had taken down his calendar and leafed through the dirty pictures, him leaning over her shoulder.

It was a really filthy one, she said. And she had gotten him to do just like the people in one of the pictures did. She blushed in telling it.

Very startled suddenly, Betty realized that Mr. Lewis was stumbling past. He was not looking at them but staggering back toward the toilets. Betty shuddered in disgust. "I'd better go!" she said.

"What?" asked Laura, glancing at her watch. "There's a little while left."

Betty said she must pick up the baby.

"Well . . . !" Ethel said, quite surprised, "Well, you might straighten up your hat. And call me about that bank account. Okay?"

"Yes, I will."

Betty quickly stood in the aisle and brushed the crumbs off of her lap. She was in a rush now, hoping to get out before the dreadful fellow reappeared.

She would look into the window glass to fix the hat. Driven by a mental picture of him urinating, picking up her purse, she quite forgot it was her turn to pay. She wound a hurried way between the tables and the customers and made the door.

Out on the sidewalk finally, in the creeping deepening dusk, she gulped the autumn air then turned to look into the glass as she had planned to fix the hat. The homely little restaurant, seen from outside here, was like a deep perspective painting full of glaring light and shade, and seemed a dirtier place than it had been before. Next week, she thought, they must go to the Busy Bee instead.

Betty Harken folded her arms to embrace herself tight against the coming chill.

Looking up and down the street, she spied the big elm across the way that was turning autumn gold. She tried to conjure up some bit of verse about that sort of thing to elevate her thoughts; Emerson perhaps, or Dickinson or Keats. She could set a class of students to the task.

There was a taxi waiting at the corner; should she take the cab or walk? These good shoes pinched a little on the toes.

She had the necessary cash. She walked a few steps toward the taxi up there at the corner. *Damn!* she thought, it was her turn to pay the cafe check. Who cares? The next few steps she almost ran.

She was a thoughtful, careful, intelligent woman who took great pride in being fair. Was it Shakespeare, she wondered, trying to recall, who wrote that little poem where he's in despair because his lover "shits"? That was the last word of the final line. Sarcastic. She frowned and shook her head at her own attitude.

For Heaven's sake, the man had drunk some beer and gone to pee. She'd read the poem once in college; was it Shakespeare? In college she had tippled some herself. So what had gotten into her? Was it was the damn romantic movies?

It was her own unyielding sense of guilt. She had flown into a fantasy where she was pure and holy muse to a noble wounded warrior, like a fucking tale from fucking Camelot. She shook her head again to clear the unaccountable tears that were welling out and looked about and gripped her purse and walked a few steps on.

And yet he was a wounded warrior true. And there had been one moment of utter innocence when she had reached to comfort him. That moment obviously had touched his soul so that he sought her out among the others of this crowded world.

But then the sick wife, that was the thing which brought the truth to light. It could be a true romance, it truly could, except that the nobility was now corrupted in his soul. She was a muse without a worthy poet once again. The man was out here getting drunk and ogling women while his legal wife sat home alone. There really was ugliness in that.

And then a startling shout in a strange voice came from behind. It jerked her from the reverie and she turned to look. Lewis and another smaller fellow, the aproned counter man, were standing just outside the cafe door. The smaller fellow waved his arm. Lewis leaned upon him with the cane dangling

from his free hand. The smaller man was shouting for the taxi cab.

It was her cab by rights. The men were just a few yards back and the checker-painted car was half a block the other way, across the street, its back to them. She looked that way; the taxi didn't move; the driver didn't hear.

What if she simply hurried on to it? That's what Emily would have done. *Christ!* she told herself; *Fuck!* He was a wounded veteran; she couldn't even think of it. But she plainly couldn't share a cab with a leering boozing sot. Thoughts came of the fellow pawing at her clothes; that confirmed her sudden choice. She'd walk away.

So Betty Harken turned right on her heel. That put her going back toward the two men but the sidewalk here was wide enough that she could walk right at the curb and miss a confrontation.

Lewis now was hobbling alone, the little counter man just watching in concern in case he fell.

She came to Lewis, she stepping briskly and he an arm's reach off, slowly hobbling with the cane. But he did look to her face; she looked away without a word.

The woman stepped right past, right through the cloud of desolation that engulfed and emanated from the man. She quite distinctly felt him stop and turn to gaze at her retreating form and felt him reach to silently raise his hat.

He whispered toward her back, quite pathetically, scarcely audible; "Good day!"

She quite distinctly felt the fearful sadness which then fell upon him as she went.

That Saturday, she could not bear the thought of sex with Bill. She switched the radio on to concert music, lay down on the sofa with a book and claimed a touch of cramp when Bill arrived and knelt there for a kiss.

Bill disappeared into the kitchen, made some kitchen sounds, reappeared and knelt again to mention various things

that he might fix to eat. Betty nearly pulled him close, but felt so pleased and so relaxed that she chose scrambled eggs with cheese instead, a helping of buttered green beans on the side.

Actually, of course, the early supper took too long. When things were made and the table set, all of it by dear Bill, when the wife and man had filled their stomachs' appetites and smiled across the plates, the hour had gone some minutes past to fetch their baby. She told him that she must. She was afraid, she truly said, to take advantage of his mother's patience. He was disappointed but agreed. He went to fetch the baby in her place.

That night between the diapers and his weariness, he found the necessary time to court his wife. He fetched her pillows to the sofa, made a pillow of his lap awhile, his hand upon her breast and hers upon his arm. He answered questions that she asked about his work. He leaned down for caresses and a kiss then held her hand.

Shortly though, he must jump up to get the baby this or that but didn't mind. He realized that he had tried sometimes to show this kind of tenderness and finally, happily, his wife was now accepting it. He worried though; perhaps she felt quite ill. Actually, for her this was a most surprising luxury she hadn't known in years; being courted, being coy.

She did try to reassure him several times about her health without ever quite saying she had lied. Several times while this went on, Betty spoke to herself in new-found wonder; *I really have a husband.*

Next time when Bill sat down, she nestled her head into his open lap and looked up with the most suggestive smile that she could find. She reached to give her husband's thigh a pinch then let her hand wander.

There were some minutes a little later, after they went to lay their infant in its tiny bed, but before the minute when

the husband's limbs would be too tired to stretch, and that is when they made twenty minutes of honeymoon.

They found the easy way of lying face to face, a thing last done the night they were engaged, the night before he'd left for War, and rediscovered now.

This time, she gladly thought, there was no fortress wall between the semen and its womb. Hera of the marriage bed would choose their fate. He gently rocked them both in deep embrace and she pressed her fingertips onto his face and watched the pictures of some other faces flicker on the dim-lit contours there.

None of the other faces stuck. Deep in content and growing joy, she thought this moment must be one of Chaucer's tales. Even that poor fellow Lewis whom she'd flirted with; when that mournful ghost appeared this night, he lingered but one instant longer than the posturing phantoms of the movies did.

Her mother came that Sunday, and her sister, and her sister's toddler boy, and the friendly Hendersons from across the road. Her sister's husband was out of town for work. Betty made a big meat loaf with the canned soup recipe, mashed potatoes, the special candied carrots, greens. She'd bought the more expensive coffee and a pretty cake.

Bill embraced her several times, quite by surprise sometimes, as she did him, and they let their hands have liberty.

In the kitchen, Mother said; "I guess you two are really married now!"

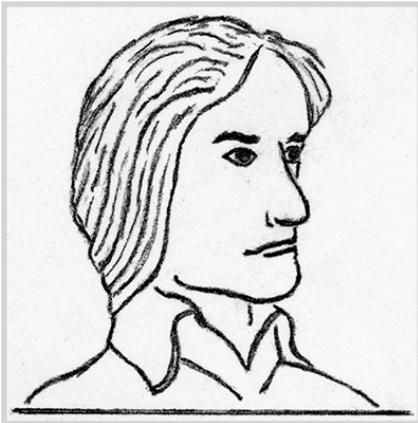
Between the people leaving, when the evening radio shows were coming on, between the diapers and the bottles and the rocking chair and soap and towels and all, with violins that sighed like scratchy ocean breezes on the phonograph, they came to each other among some plates and cups and pillows and an old quilt on the living room floor behind closed drapes and there disrobed each other and there made love.

The problem was, she thought, that she had not grown up. So what, she thought, if tonight is not last night; she must

get used to that. It was too planned tonight, without the same discoveries. They tried the gentle way at first but found he was too energetic and well rested. The penetration was too shallow for his appetite.

Hoping for the best, she took another more exotic pose from a description in a book and coached him what to do. She felt the penetration hard and deep and moved with it and let herself sigh with his groans. Hot semen flowed.

So next, hoping for the best, with a little work she got him up again and climbed astride. There was a way to bend her hips that made it fine enough. She even placed his fingers for a certain touch and held them there. She hadn't done that in a while.



Page Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

Why had she been so cruel to Mr. Lewis? But she wasn't cruel. It was not her job to heal the sick and lame. The cruelty she'd truly done was in that comforting touch itself and in the kindly looks. In such a state as his, that must have seemed like promises of love. It had been right to walk away.

She thought of Gary Cooper then, what he had been to her, and Cary Grant. She looked at Bill and thought that here her sworn husband was in the actual act of love, and this was real. With his other hand kneading her breast like a loaf of bread, she thought of babies and the climax came.

Some moments later, lying where she fell from him and bathed in sweat, all spent, her head pillowed on his muscular leg, her husband quietly began soft kisses where she wished at last, and so a trembling gasp, and so she swore quite solemnly that now she was a wife.

Monday morning half past eight o'clock, Bill gone off to work, the baby crawling where the two-backed beast had been, the telephone rang. She dropped the broom and went to pick it up. It was Miss Hodges at the high school. She was the secretary there. Could Betty take a long assignment? Today? Perhaps a month?

She told Miss Hodges that she'd try to set things up. She had agreed with Bill to earn all that she could until the next new baby came. She called Bill's mother, heard it ring until it was picked up. The lady laughed and definitely agreed. Betty called Miss Hodges back.

Was it a month for sure? Probably. At least. Today. An unexpected opening had occurred.

At just past ten o'clock she pushed her way into the high school office. The place was crowded full with moving people large and small, with many objects in their hands. At a back desk with a typewriter sat Miss Hodges, evidently watching for her, just then glancing up when Betty arrived.

The woman stood at once and spoke quite loud and terse; "Mrs. Harken!"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Parmenter will see you."

Miss Hodges led the way through the gate and round a corner to a glass windowed door, but Betty put a hand on her arm to make her stop and speak a moment first. What was the opening?

The secretary seemed distressed and harried both at once. "Mr. Lewis won't be coming back!" She hurried off.

Now what was that? Well, the man had gotten drunk and shouting in a public place. What further mischief had he done?

He was well liked here at the school; he'd be forgiven much. How serious must the problem be to make this fuss? She knocked.

Mr. Parmenter then performed a whole little act of opening wide the door and helping with her chair. He was a portly older balding gentleman with a jowly sagging face. He went behind the desk again and sat back down. Betty meant to ask some proper questions but he took a breath and spoke first. "Well," he slowly said, "something's happened!" He looked into her eyes and waited.

"I understand that I'll be taking Mr. Lewis' classes. Is it all history?"

"Yes. Well then, you've heard the news? His wife . . . and all?"

"His wife? His wife? No, I haven't heard, only that Mr. Lewis won't be teaching here."

Parmenter was in a vest that strained its buttons, a rumpled shirt and bright bow tie askew, leaning forward on his elbows with fingers very tightly entwined so that his pudgy hands together made a single pudgy fist. His answer to her words at first was nothing but a silent stunned look until he said; "You haven't heard?"

"No, nothing, not at all."

Parmenter leaned further toward her over the large desk with its neatly arranged things. He fell into a whisper. "I don't know how to tell the students."

"But tell them what?"

"You haven't heard?"

"No! Please!"

"Well;" the fat man carefully and reluctantly spoke, now rubbing his hands together; "you see, last Friday night his wife passed on."

"What!"

"You didn't know? Were you a friend? After all, there was the heart condition."

Her mouth had fallen quite agape. She tried to pray a childhood prayer from Sunday school but only found the silent words: *Oh God!* Then there had been Saturday afternoon with her at the Blue Moon Cafe.

She spoke; "What has Mr. Lewis done?"

"He shot a bullet through his head,
at home, this morning."



**Self Portrait
On The Night
The Occupy Camp
Was Raided**

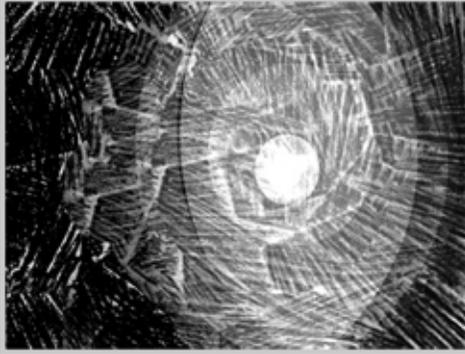
Digital image from
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Gorgon **a riddle poem**

She who brings us each to birth and feeds us each on
one another's flesh and so devours us all;
She whose flesh our flesh must therefore surely be;
She from whom our yearnings have all sprung;
She whom each of us must therefore either vainly seek to flee
by some false magic trick of not thinking or else acknowledge
as the inmost holy ground of being;
She whose waking was the tumult of the universe, whose glance
ignited stars, whose hand outflung the teaming galaxies which
in each trembling particle yet sings her song;
She whose thoughts we think,
whose way of seeing fills our eyes,
whose beauty is all beauty and all fear;
She who frames all hope and destiny;
She is Reality.



Sheila Na Gig
Digital image by Stone Riley



**The Soul's
True Yearning**
Digital image by
Stone Riley

The Soul's True Yearning a poem contemplating wisdom

The soul's true yearning is to make itself known.

That is a common thought among our most poetic thinkers. After all, it makes such lovely sense of our intimate experience in inward contemplation, when we go to find and understand the things within, behind the masks which we ourselves present the outward world. Go in courage through dark places seeking truth about yourself, and familiar but forgotten forms do stand forth from the dark toward light and consciousness. Hidden faces do appear and even speak.

And it makes such lovely sense about the hidden nature of all things. If the soul of all the world, like her daughters for each being, yearns toward the unity discovered in the flickering but brilliant candlelight of consciousness, then we are the Hieros Gamos. We are all the holy bride and groom.

And it makes such lovely sense about the way before us. Do we lose the wit to do good in this world? Do we close our hearts and fall among the evils here? Does the bridegroom stumble on the way to bed? Only for a moment. If we simply truly love, then ecstasy is in our reach; passion and compassion lure us truly on.

The soul's true yearning is to make itself known.



Three Sisters
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

The Three In British Lore a philosophic note on mythology

"The matter of Britain"

That's what scholars call the King Arthur tales – and have done since the Middle Ages at least – as if that vast dense web of scenes, characters and plots – living new in every generation even since before King Arthur coalesced into a single name – as though those stories are the very substance of a land. And indeed, the ageless worldwide Triple Goddess, she who always is the land, permeates those tales for good and all.

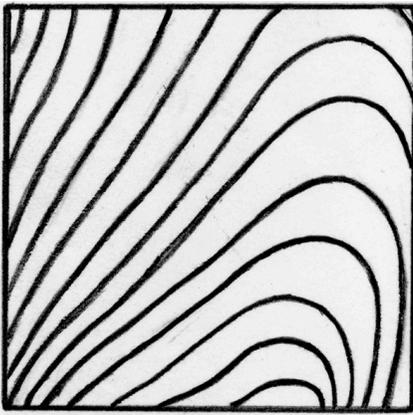
She who is birthed and brings to birth and takes away; she who arms and tames and rules; allure of every treasure, joy of every pleasure and Fate of every doom; the human spirit's quest at every step a penetration of her mystery; her bonds within herself the binding force of every oath and spell; she is authority beyond all striving kings because she is the ground of being. At once both manifest and hidden and the filmy veil between those opposites as well, she is the self-woven cloth of reality.

In the British stories – on that gale-blown yet fertile green, sea-girt misty northern isle – this real and ultimate deity becomes the land and waters too. Wells are weird and

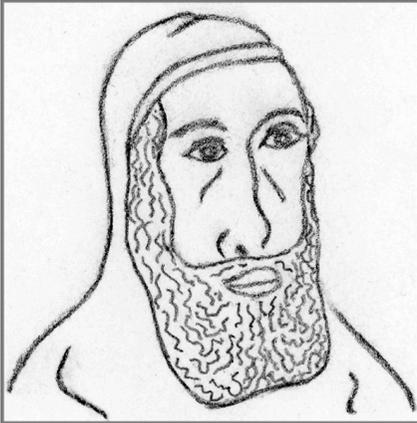
sacred in the world these stories tell, cool breath wafting up from deep below, tended close by worthy priestesses. Above the crashing waves at rocky headlands, female beings hover in the salt wind spray. Beside a ford a ragged crone awaits. From a silver pool a woman's gleaming arm reaches up to throw a mighty weapon to a hero's hand. And when the mist comes on a certain plain, abyssal waters rise to make a mystic marsh-rimmed lake wherein a certain hill becomes the Lady's isle of immortality and apples. And through it all there is the number three. Most unmistakably, these women – mortal or immortal, sisters, cousins, mothers, daughters – quite often manifest in triplets all with similar names.

Three is a basic fact in human thought and comprehension. It is, for us at least, the first harmonic of infinity. If there are three then there is everything.

And finally we must add: Where there are three there is a fourth. Many earnest devotees of the Triple Goddess in our world today speak of a fourth figure manifesting in their lives. Among the Maiden, Mother and Crone, between the center and the last, between attainment of maturity and the descent toward death, they find a presence and identity they often call the Queen.



Four Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



King Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Janet And The Boy Tam Lin a folk tale for young people

It happened one time that an old man went out to a fair in a distant town.

This old man was big and stout but he had a sturdy wooden stool to sit on and some friends found a fine place for him to sit, in the shade of a tall tree on the edge of the park just by the road. They put up an old brown tent there too and let him sit inside the open end of it. And that was a real fair all right, with drummers banging and bagpipes blaring away whenever they wished and sportsmen shouting and some very loud singers further on. A clear bright morning it was indeed and the place was packed with folk strolling up and down among the tents and booths, with vehicles excluded for the holiday.

The old fellow just sat there by the road talking with anyone who chanced to happen near and then when anyone would stand still long enough for it, he would tell a story. He would hold out his hat and charge every person who might stop and listen one penny. And these were real old stories from olden days that everyone else at the fair had heard of, but nobody else knew.

Well, two kids heard about all this and they snuck around the side into his tent. They sat right down on the ground beside him but he was busy having a drink of water from a jug and

biting off a huge mouthful-size bite from a whole loaf of bread and he didn't seem to notice. They waited quietly while he chewed.

There were just two kids, you see, a girl and boy holding hands, and the girl was named Emerald. Emerald was usually quite shy but not this time. Just as soon as the old man swallowed and looked down at the two of them in surprise, while he still had quite a few bread crumbs stuck in his big white woolly beard around his face, she spoke up and introduced herself. Then she asked; "Can you tell us a story about emeralds or sapphires or rubies?" Emerald was holding their combined two cents in her hand but she didn't offer it to the fellow yet.

Well, the old man blinked at her and she blinked back. He looked then in her eyes and realized that she was smart and so immediately he figured out that he must come up with a real good story to stop her going around telling people that he couldn't. He racked his brains a minute, took off his tall magician's style of hat and scratched his head. He finally shrugged and told her that he didn't have one, but that was kind of fibbing. Actually he kind of did. And he looked in her eyes again and smiled. He raised his eyebrows and said to her; "I know a story about a rock though. Will that do?"

Emerald smiled back. She could tell for sure that he was kind of fibbing.

Kind of begging then, he asked again; "A rock; will that do?"

And she was not a mean person in the least, so of course she nodded.

So the old man closed his eyes, sitting there on his little stool, and he leaned his elbow on his knee, like men will sometimes do, and he even covered his eyes with that hand to shut out the sunlight. That was just to make sure that he would see the story's pictures when they magically appeared inside his eyes, so he could talk about them.

The old man suddenly perceived a very life-like moving magic picture of a girl so he pointed at it and said this:

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One time there was a girl named Janet. Janet was probably, I guess, about thirteen. I guess it's something like that anyway. Anyway, she was old enough to fall in love.

Behind Janet's house there was a path through an old garden over to her friend's house way over there. Janet would walk over there pretty much every day – she'd walk there and back too usually – to play with her friend.

It was a wild old garden where that path went, with all the trees and grasses and shrubberies and everything and the wild strawberries and the flowers just growing every which way that they pleased. Birds would fly through all the time and there were some cats who prowled there too. There was a big rock in the center with a huge old wild rose bush bending up over it, a whole big rose bush that just grew bending across that big rock in the center of the garden, with roses on it. The path came right up to that spot and then jogged around and ran off to the neighbor's house, you see.

One day – it was a summer afternoon and a very fine summer afternoon indeed – there had been a little rain that morning to awake the beautiful colors in the garden and all of the wonderful smells – and Janet stopped to smell a rose.

She was very carefully just leaning in toward the big thorny bush and stretching up her face to smell the closest flower, and she pressed her nose very gently into that flower, and she just got just one whiff of that rose perfume, and she breathed it in, and the smell was as beautiful to her as any flower that anyone ever smelled anywhere in the world. It smelled beautiful all inside of her you know. And then! A voice spoke from the rock! A man's voice! Talking out of the rock!

Well, she was startled I may tell you. She was scared.

The man's voice – no, really it was a boy's voice and it was really beautiful and bright so the boy inside the rock

sounded like he was singing a song to her – and his words were these:

"If you would take from young Tam Lin a touch of Tam Lin's tree, if you would sniff my tender rose, then you must pay a fee."

Well of course she was affrighted and she ran on home.

But that night she could not stop thinking how beautiful that voice had been, the way it seemed to sing so very brightly. All night she lay awake, kept up by the brightness of his song as though it was like a burning candle beside her bed. She thought about the magic boy's voice and wondered about his face and his eyes and how his hands must be very pretty. Of course then when the sun come up she hurried there again. With the morning dew wet all over everything, she stood there again to smell that rose. And the smell just turned into beauty inside her again.

And then the air trembled all around the rock and the bush and the whole place – the air just trembled like it does sometimes when there's a wind coming close – and the leaves on the rose bush made a sound like "shush" and the boy's voice spoke again, sounding very gentle this time but loud to make sure that she would hear:

"Once thy've come, my lovely dear, and once thy've come anew. Wilt thou now pay to young Tam Lin the fee which is his due?"

And he appeared. Just, he just appeared. He looked like a ghost though. Have you ever seen a real ghost? He looked like he was made of smoke I guess, or like a bit of fog or a bit of misty cloud standing right there beside her in human shape and bigger than her and kind of sparkling too. And this sparkling cloud just shone as bright as anything, it seemed to her.

And Tam Lin was a fine-looking lad I'm very sure indeed. She stared into his face and she took and held up his hands to look at his hands and all of him was just as pretty as she'd

dreamed though, as I say, he was all made from something like cold smoke.

So Janet said to young Tam Lin:

"What fee am I to pay? You are a Fairy lad; what do your Fairies say? What thing have I your heart desires? What is your regular fee? I've got a silver penny in my pocket if that would comfort thee."

"My heart's own darling miss;" spake he; "I claim one tender kiss."

And so, Janet kissed the boy and he kissed her back. And she took his hand and squeezed it one more time and pressed his hand against her heart and then she laughed and ran away.

But you know what people say. If you just only kiss a Fairy boy, you know, sometimes you get a baby. And Janet did! She got a baby! The summer weeks were rolling past and Janet could feel a tiny baby growing inside her tummy. Can you imagine how that felt?

And her tummy started to get big! It did! It felt kind of like a little raisin inside of her at first, like she'd swallowed a little raisin and it just stuck there and wouldn't go away. And then after a few days it felt like she'd swallowed one of those little tomatoes that you see, the little kind. A few weeks went by and she felt like she'd swallowed a whole big huge turnip that wouldn't go away! And her tummy got so big that some people could just look at her and guess that she had a baby.

So, she finally went to her father then. Her father was sitting by the fireplace in their house and smoking a magic pipe that he had and he was thinking about all kinds of things when she came over. Janet pulled up her dress up over her tummy to make sure that he would look at it. She even took his hand and Janet pressed her father's hand onto her tummy to make really sure that he would understand.

And her father smiled. His eyes came open wide staring at this tummy that had a baby in it and, I tell you, he smiled so

big that even all of the little hairs in his eyebrows kind of stood up and the baby inside felt cozy from his smile.

And Janet's father said:

"My darling miss, you are a woman in your bloom! This is a tender sight to see my grandchild in your womb!"

And Janet smiled back at him.

But then her father said:

"Janet dear, you are so young that I must take a hand. Bring in the man who gave you this and I will make everything grand!" He said; "Bring your boyfriend here so I can talk to him honestly and I will make sure that he acts like a real gentleman. I will make sure he respects your sovereign rights and he shall become a father to your babe in every way. Everything that is your due from this fellow, I will make sure he pays."

Well, what could Janet say to that? Her boyfriend was like a dream. She could not even really think about their kisses, much less speak of them. And the only money he might own would be phantom Fairy treasure and their baby was even probably some kind of Fairy baby. And how could she possibly explain about the softness of the rose's petals on her nose and the rose perfume? She thought and thought and racked her brain but not a single thought came to her mind that she could possibly say.

Oh there was such a fight at their house then! Such an argument! Her father got really very angry when she wouldn't say who the boyfriend was. Her father shouted at her. He said; "What kind of horrible boyfriend have you got that you won't let me see?" And he was going to lock her up somewhere! He told her that he would. He really might lock her up someplace and then tell everyone he was trying to protect her. He could. And he called her stupid names!

Oh, the poor girl ran right out of the house in a weeping fit I may say, a fair proper huge great weeping fit with shouting

and tears so she could barely see, and she ran out directly to the roses.

But you must know by then the blossoms had gone by. Summer's end it was for sure, and by every summer's end rose blossoms always have gone by. There were petals scattered on the ground, a million wilting petals all around the great stone where she was standing. Before, the bush would hold its flowers out to her but now there was nothing left except dry thorny flower stems sticking out. The bush was going to sleep, you see, because of course it felt the winter coming.

Oh, the poor girl was shocked. She wondered what to do. She got hold of herself and stopped crying, though. She got hold of herself and decided to call out for Tam Lin, to just call out to him and see if he would answer. So Janet softly whispered this:

"Wake thee up my darling boy, wake thee from thy slumber. I have got thy tiny babe and it shall have its father."

And the cold rock trembled just a little. A faint faint voice that sounded drowsy came out of it and she leaned very close to hear. Tam Lin kind of muttered; "I must be dreaming. I dreamed the fair maid spoke and said she has my baby But then he snored. He snored. Then the rock shook just a little as he rolled over in his Fairy bed inside the rock. He went straight back to sleep.

Oh, you can imagine how Janet felt! Can you imagine? First off, she was ashamed of herself that she had run out here all worked up in such a fuss and now finds out that she has gotten such a lazy fellow. That's for sure. And she was angry.

Know what she did? Janet just bent down and shoved her hand right into the rock! She did! She reached inside the rock.

You see, really it was a door to a whole Fairy castle that was under all the garden. A whole Fairy castle was under the ground under the garden and under that rock there, and Tam Lin was like a guard at the castle door. You see, that's what the rock really was, the magic gate to a whole Fairy castle! Janet

just shoved her hand right inside that rock and she felt around in there. She felt around and felt something and she grabbed it, and she had Tam Lin by his leg.

"Oh what is this!" cried young Tam Lin. "The fair maid's gone fair mad! You!" he cried out through the door; "Let go me leg!"

But he did not strike at her hand. No he did not. He did not even struggle when she squeezed to get a grip. Young Tam Lin was a gentleman.

But then as she was just about to drag him out – and him not even kicking or screaming – then bump! She couldn't pull him out of the rock. She realized she could not even get her fist out of there unless she was to let go. But she definitely did try to yank him, you must know.

But every time she yanked, Tam Lin would give a little shout. She'd yank to pull him out of the rock and he'd go:

"Oof! Ouch!"

See, he was laying there inside the Fairy castle right at the front door. That was his station like a soldier. He was just laying there in his bed inside the front door when this human hand reaches through the door and grabs him. And he wouldn't mind going out to her but he can't get through the door and she keeps yanking on him.

"Oof!" he says; "Ouch!"

And of course, she doesn't give that up until another idea comes to her head. This one was a better idea too, I guess. She lets go of his leg in there and pulls her hand right out without him. And then she starts reaching up and breaking the old dry flower stems on the bush.

Do you know why she was doing this? Because there's something important on the ends of the old flower stems on a wild rose bush. Do you know what it is? There's something important.

On the ends of the old flower stems there is a little piece of fruit there, a tiny kind of fruit that's called a "rose apple".

It's not a regular apple at all, it's way too small for us human folk to eat but some of the birds love them in the winter when there's snow.

A thick deep fall of snow will cover the rose bush like a heavy soft blanket and it makes places inside among the branches like little caves where the birds can go. They get sheltered from the weather while they eat the little fruits. And besides even that, there are seeds! There are rose seeds inside the rose apples on the ends of the old dry flower stems. But now Janet is snapping some of the stems so they hang down loose.

Now Tam Lin sings:

"Oh no fair maid, thou should not do! I stand guard for these things! The apples must be on the rose to feed the winterwings!"

And with these first words that he sang to her instead of just talking, that mist in Tam Lin's shape appears and stands there tall beside her. And Tam Lin kneels down and takes her hand and looks up in her face and says:

"For my sake darling, for the love and joy you find in me, for the joy this babe may bring to me, please spare the rose's child."

She kneels down too and throws her arms around the ghostly shape but there's nothing solid she can hold.

"Why won't you come with me?" she says.

"I cannot come!" he cries. "The door's locked shut with golden bolts and golden chains wrapped round. This ghostly mist in your sweet arms is nothing but my song!"

And he goes on to sing:

"Alas the day I wandered here to seek the Fairy Queen!"

And he sings his story to her. He used to be a human boy, he sings. He was passing by one day at twilight in the evening in the spring. He saw the Fairies dancing round this bush and heard their music ring majestic and sweet. And he saw the

lovely Queen herself standing on this rock and shimmering in air so he went ahead and joined their dance.

You know what that means! When you find Fairies dancing and join in with them, you can get stuck! You can get stuck for a long long time! He'd been living with the Fairies ever since. And he told Janet that he used to be happy there with them but not happy anymore without her.

Oh, that was one surprise after another for Janet. What was she to do? She begged him, was there any way for him to get out of Fairyland?

And he replies there is one way. There is.

Tomorrow night is Halloween! It's Halloween tomorrow night and all the folk of this whole castle will dress up in their splendid gear and deck their great Fairy horses with shining armor and all like that, and they will carry long spear pikes with banners on them that will glow like skies full of stars.

Yes, tomorrow night halfway from dusk to dawn the Fairy host will ride out on the human land. They will ride out on the human land all covered with a shining cloud of power. They've always done that there, you see, every year.

You know, when human beings first came here a long time ago and the Fairies decided to live underground – a long time ago – the human beings and the Fairies signed a contract. That's right, we have a contract now, and that contract says those particular Fairies can ride out every Halloween night in all of their fanciest gear, no matter how scary it gets.

See?

And down there at the crossroads of that path, Janet must wait. Halfway from dusk to dawn on Halloween, she must hide in the shrubberies right by the path while this whole weird host of Fairy folk in amazing costumes and armored horses and pointy spears with flags flying come trotting along.

She has to crouch down in the shrubberies with a dark blanket over so she looks like nothing but a shrubbery herself

there in the dark. She must be very still. Would you do that? Would you do that for Tam Lin?

And then! She has to keep peeking out of the blanket to see Tam Lin.

He tells her, look for the glorious Queen on the most glorious horse for there behind her on that same horse will ride a prisoner of the Queen. That prisoner will be he. Janet must leap out of the bushes right in the middle of that whole army trotting along and grab him and pull him off onto the ground. She has to. Would you do that?

She tells him that she will.

But there is even worse!

Once she has got him on the ground at the center of the road, she must hold on to him no matter what! He warns that he will change shape into scary things. If she wants this fellow, she must wrap herself around him and hold on tight no matter how scary he becomes.

First, he says, he will become a roaring lion and even though the lion may try to claw, she must hold tight.

And then, though he becomes a big dog and snaps, she must hold onto him tight.

Then he will become an eagle with sharp claws struggling in her arms to spread its wings.

And then a huge disgusting slimy stinky frog!

And if she wants him she must hold on tight through all of that, for then he'll turn into a piece of red-hot glowing iron, like a red-hot glowing iron statue lying with her on the ground.

Then she must have a great bucket full of water ready that she can dump on him. She must quench him like a blacksmith does with red-hot iron, you see. She must quench her man.

Then she must wrap him in her blanket for he will be lying there in his real self, but naked on the cold ground and weak as any new-born baby.

So she agrees to all of that, everything.

She promises to do it all.

And Tam Lin kneels down again and takes her hands and kisses them. He says:

"Thank you once and thank you twice and thank you now as well. Though Fairy jewels may glitter bright, this castle is my jail. Though Fairy harps may stir the soul and Fairy songs the heart, though Fairy wine is honey sweet and Fairy meat fair tart, I am nothing but a prisoner here for lacking you."

And that next night when the Fairies are all getting ready for their ride, putting on their fanciest silk and satin skins that shine with countless jewels and putting on their heads that look like helmets with shining eyes, and they're getting their horses all decked too – well then, Tam Lin puts on rags.

He puts on rags! To show everybody how he feels. And he puts golden handcuffs on his wrists, golden manacles with golden chain, to show how he felt. That's what Fairies usually do instead of talking; they do something for you to see. That's what they like to do instead of talking.

So then the great castle door where Tam Lin's bed was kept, that door was thrown open and the Fairy host went riding out.

And Janet was sure hiding down at the little crossroads. She had been crouching in the bushes by the path two hours at least. At least! She was warm enough under the blanket there but she was getting pretty tired of pretending to be a shrub and it gets pretty scary out here in the garden alone waiting for Fairies.

I can tell you, every time anything moved or made the slightest sound she would jump a foot even when it was just an owl or cat or mouse. Well, finally she saw a glow appear over there where the rock and rose bush were and she got a hold of herself quick and pulled the blanket up to hide her face. She was peeking out.

And here they came. And they were gorgeous in all their gleaming array on their great horses with banners all flying high among the terrible sharp points of their spears. A ghostly glow was all around even with the moon so bright and the horses' hooves made the earth shake like the top of a drum.

There was Janet peeking out from her hiding place and saw the Fairy Queen! There was the Fairy Queen herself on a splendid horse and riding on the rump of that horse there was a boy in raggedy clothes.

That boy was holding up his hands to show his golden handcuffs.

Janet just leaped out and grabbed him by the leg and just dug her heels into the dirt and yanked on him. Down he came! Down onto the earth among all of those horses' hooves. She grabbed him with all her might.

He turned into a huge lion that was roaring and trying to get loose. She held him tight.

He turned into one of those big dogs that looks like the size of a horse with scratchy fur and that dog struggled and snarled and snapped. But she held him tight.

And then he was an eagle like the ancient eagle kings of Old Carpathia, an eagle that could shade a whole wide valley by spreading out its wings while it swooped down from the high mountain tips to the green pasture by the valley stream and there would snatch a calf up in its knife-sharp claws. Such an eagle was this boy, so she held him tight.

And then he stank! Suddenly he just reeked like a rotten swamp! Suddenly she was holding onto this huge frog with bumps all over it and there was gooey slime everywhere! And the frog said "Croak!".

But then suddenly he got so hot! He changed shape to himself but he was made of iron and it was glowing so hot red that it was bright. And good Janet jumped up and grabbed that bucket of water there and threw it all over him. There was a big cloud of steam but then there he was!

It was him for true, Tam Lin in a real flesh body. He was just lying there on the earth at the little crossroads weak as a newborn babe. He just reached his hands out toward her for he could not talk. And he was naked too, so she ran and got her blanket and wrapped him up.

It was only then that Janet looked around. After all of that she looked around and saw the Fairy host were there. They had been riding round and round while Janet was doing all of that but they were totally silent and the earth was still. She looked and stared because no single sound came from all these beings riding around.

And then the Fairy Queen appears. The Queen rides in to the center where Janet is sitting by her man, and Tam Lin is lying weak and helpless all wrapped up. And the Queen looked down into Tam Lin's face and frowned. She shook her head. She spoke him thus:

"O giver to the chickadees, this looks a mean small deed. 'Tis very harsh a sight for me, thy new sworn sovereign liege. Oh, I knew well thy human heart but strove to comfort thee. Though I knew well your fickle parts, thy oaths were sworn to me. Ten times of fifty times, my lad, thy wing did brush my leg. Twice ten a hundred times, good boy, ye pecked my swelling figs. Twice two two ten a thousand times, I cupped thy peeping eggs. Thrice three three hundred million times I've nested on thy twig. To go fleeing thus from my house in rags, ye shame me and betray me."

And Tam Lin weakly shook his head 'no' because he knew that he'd better not make her any madder than she was. You'd better not ever do anything to insult the Fairies, especially not her. Don't ever insult the Fairies! But all he could do was shake his head and hope she would understand.

And when she got no other answer but only that, the Queen reached her fingers down inside of her bodice and pulled out a shining crystal rock that she had between her bosoms and she held it up for him to see. It wasn't very big but it was crystal

like a diamond with red pulsing light shining from the center from a blood-red ruby that was flashing inside.

The Queen held this crystal up for Tam Lin to see and she frowned at him and the ruby light flashed around all over the ground and the trees and the garden and shone up among the stars. And she said this to him:

"If I had known when you first came how you were bound to go; if I had known so long ago that you would leave me so; if I had seen how we would part, I would have pressed this Fairy stone into thy breast to be thy heart and taken thine from thee."

And with those words all said, the Queen reached into her purse and pulled out a lizard! A lizard! And the lizard leaped up out of her hand at once and leaped high through the air while she also threw that Fairy stone as hard as she could throw and the lizard caught the stone in mid-air in its mouth and flew a long ways and landed with a big rustle of the shrubberies way out there somewhere among the trees.

The lizard vanished with the jewel still in its mouth, somewhere in the forest, and one of the cats who go out at night to prowl, that cat ran off chasing it but he sure didn't catch it.

- + -

Well, the pictures stopped right there and, feeling quite surprised to see no more, the old man stopped. He felt disappointed how it ended so abrupt and he found himself worrying that Emerald would dislike it too. He waited patiently a moment more with eyes still shut but all there was was just a small figure of one of his friends down in the left corner and that friend was waving at him to go ahead and talk.

So the old man leaned down to face Emerald up close and opened his eyes and blinked in the light. And from the way that she was frowning back at him, he saw that he was right.

The old man said to himself; "Oh dear! She's waiting for some more!" The girl was certainly not reaching out as yet to hand over the pennies that she promised.

"Well then," the old fellow said to her, "a lot of people think that story has a terrible ending but it's okay. See, people think it's horrible how the Fairy Queen would have reached in and ripped out Tam Lin's heart and put a stone in him instead, but that would have been something good from the way the Queen sees things.

If he had come back to the human land with a Fairy heart, he could have walked about everywhere seeing all of the magic in the world instead of just the stuff like everyone sees. He could have walked back and forth to Fairyland as he pleased. But Janet wanted him and he wanted her so he came back to really be with her all the time. Do you see?"

Emerald nodded at that, but still was definitely waiting for more.

The old man scratched the back of his neck in a certain spot to think, and then ventured on: "Well, how about this: That's where babies come from. Babies come from love. They had that baby and they had some more and all of the human people in the world now come from them. And every time a human baby is born even today, it's one of theirs too."

He looked at Emerald and she looked back as cool as you might please. But then suddenly, the sly old fellow found a new trick up his sleeve. To his great relief, his friends suddenly held up a picture in his eyes at that very moment while he was looking at Emerald.

But then, seeing how good the picture looked, he felt like holding it back for a surprise. He squinted his eyes to try and make Emerald feel she really owed the money now and if she didn't pay then he could say that she was cheating.

She looked carefully at the old man's face while he puckered up his eyebrows and scrunched up his nose. She understood that look of mean determination right enough and she was not the least bit sure if he was fooling.

He asked her in a rumbling voice; "Did you like the story?"

She looked down at her hand where the pennies were and felt ashamed to see them there. She was just about to hold them out when the old man shouted; "Wait! I forgot! About the jewel!"

While she gaped at him in startlement, he pointed way out beyond the park where there were woods – or maybe he was pointing toward the distant ocean or the stars – and he said:

"I know it for a fact; if you go looking for the Fairy stone, someday you'll find it. I know this for a fact. And when you find it, you can press it right into your chest and keep your human heart as well and then you'll see everything!"

"Me?" she cried. "Me?"

"That's right!" he answered. "I know it for a fact."

She stared into his eyes to see if truth was there.

Quick, she stood up and reached out to give them over and the old fellow with a flourish of his hand pulled off his tall magician's hat and held it out for her to drop the pennies in.

Emerald held the coins over the waiting hat just like it was a wishing well. But then suddenly she once more turned a hard look on him and asked in a very hard voice: "How do you know if I can find it?"

And of course the old man answered; "The Fairies just now told me."

So Emerald then made a wish just like that shaggy old bedraggled hat had been a wishing well somewhere. She wished to find the Fairy stone someday. She silently dropped them in.

There's one thing left to tell and it is this:

Suddenly a wild applause broke out. They both looked up in great surprise to find maybe thirty people, maybe forty, standing about. The strangers were clapping and laughing and craning over each other's shoulders like it was a livestock show with geese or ducks, and standing up on tiptoe too. The ones in back were pushing in, so those in front were even being slowly shoved in reluctantly under the edge of the old man's tent.

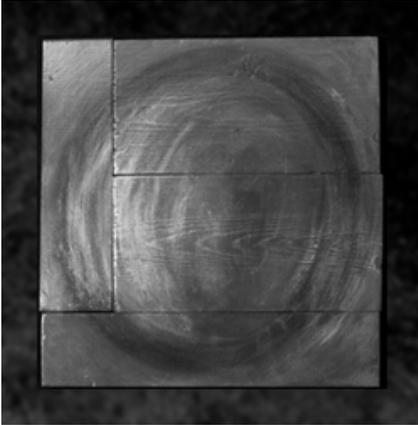
Well, then the boy stood up, the one who'd come with Emerald and held her hand. He hadn't said a word or scarcely moved till then, but he was a smart good lad. He was kind of wiry, and he had to kind of unfold himself to stand up, and he stretched rather like an eagle spreading out its wings. The lad then reached to take the old man's hat right from his hand.

The old man just said; "Huh?" and the lad winked back to reassure him.

Then the quick boy stood up before the crowd and held the magic hat and cried to everyone; "Don't dare sneak off until you've paid!"



**The Lightness
Of Being**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by Stone
Riley



**Chop Wood
Carry Water**
Acrylic / wood
painting by
Stone Riley

The Lure Of Adventure a poem of spiritual dedication

One time there was this bright young girl, quite enthusiastic, who took the summer off to hitchhike all around the country looking for the meaning of life. Right off she started hearing people talk about some guy named "Cousin Howard".

The first time was a mini-van covered with day-glo peace signs and flowers. They pulled up where she was standing and she looked them over and there was a big Egyptian hieroglyph decal on the window so she climbed in and they were all jabbering in their freaky stoned out way about Cousin Howard. Apparently a rock musician. That guy had cosmic vibes, they said. They had just come from a concert or something of his in Seattle and were going home now back to Frisco but were headed east and almost to Des Moines. Hearing this, she climbed over a naked woman to a window, opened it for air, declined the pipe when it was passed and got out at the next motel. But all night she couldn't get the slowly throbbing tune out of her head that the freaks had been trying to hum.

Next day or so there was the pair of Mormon missionaries, young guys in a white convertible, top down, screaming to the radio they turned up blasting but white shirts buttoned

up with neckties pinned down neat like they were let loose on the world and didn't know what to do with it. Stacks of Bible tracts were fluttering and flying off into the wind. She was fascinated by their energy. She leaned up from the back seat and asked where they were going. Why, to see Cousin Howard in Albuquerque, they shouted. To ask him about God. They swerved to narrowly avoid an on-coming bus and she parted company with them at a waffle house.

But by then her curiosity was piqued. To tell the truth, she had begun to seriously ponder what she would ask someone who knew about God. And that tune kept playing in her head.

Next morning she caught her first bad ride. She'd slept out at a campground, bed roll under the starry sky, and frankly looked a mess and therefore felt relieved to have this very respectable seeming man her father's age, black but her father's age and the kind of business suit he wore, in a family kind of station wagon with Michigan plates, pick her up.

But he began to talk about his family and very soon began to weep. His wife had recently passed on. The man was inconsolable, no matter what she said. She felt so young and ignorant. "Don't worry about me though," he said through his tears, "I'm going to talk it all out with Cousin Howard in L.A." She frankly couldn't stand it anymore, weeping with him, mile after mile of relentless grief stabbing her heart, and kissed his cheek goodbye at a truck stop.

But she was questioning herself: What should she have told him? Could someone teach her that, someone who knew about God? And the tune took on a soft mournful wail.

Then there was the rusty old chugging school bus full of migrant Mexicanos – men, women, children, boxes tied down on the roof – going to a rally in Salinas where Cousin Howard was scheduled to announce next year's labor union plan. They made her share their scanty meals.

They broke down where the road rose steep into the mountains and she was sitting among the skinny listless children,

wondering at the struggles of the passing generations of the human race and wondering at the inevitability of grief and wondering what she would ask someone who knew about God, listening as the tune took on a kind of mariachi beat, looking out as the mountain shadows lengthened across the breathtaking land, her eyes full of tears from some emotion which did not seem to have a name, until a couple of brothers from the bus coaxed her to go on ahead in a car full of contemplative nuns who happened by.

Now, these nuns somehow took a notion that she was a wandering prostitute. Therefore they insisted – absolutely insisted – that she must spend a day or two at a lovely retreat their order had just up the road. Chance to clean up and think a bit and maybe pray and everything was free. They'd soon be by again in case she wanted to go hear Cousin Howard preach about divine light in Butte. Divine light? Was that what she needed?

She lay there in the simple room on the simple cot, moonlight and scent of pines on a gentle breeze through the open window, exhausted but unable to sleep for the empty ache of ignorance she felt. All these miles and all she had was questions. What thing, what kind of thing, was she seeking?

She went to gaze out, saw a tiny fire twinkling among the trees down by the lake and thought perhaps the sisters there wouldn't mind company. Hot dogs and marshmallows maybe. Wrapped in the blanket, sandals on her feet, she found her way.

But it was a man, alone, sitting gazing in the flames. His face was old and creased in the flickering light. His hair was caught back in Indian braids and a single dark feather graced his tattered hat. As she approached he gestured toward a place across the fire. She was welcome.

Was she dreaming? She took the invitation. But immediately when she sat, she said "Cousin Howard?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Who else?"

"I have so much to ask!" she blurted.

"Shhh" he whispered, a finger pressing on his lips, and smiled and seemed to sort of wink.

She tried to hush herself, to hear the breeze, to gaze into the flames, to relax into this dream which seemed so distressingly real, but her heart was demanding answers.

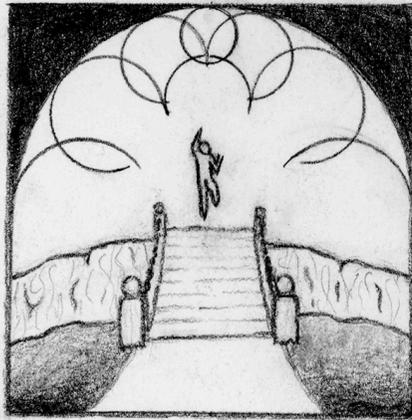
She tried to think what were the questions but nothing came.

She opened her mouth and one word "Why?" sighed into the air.

Instantly his finger pointed somewhere and he cried, "Look!"

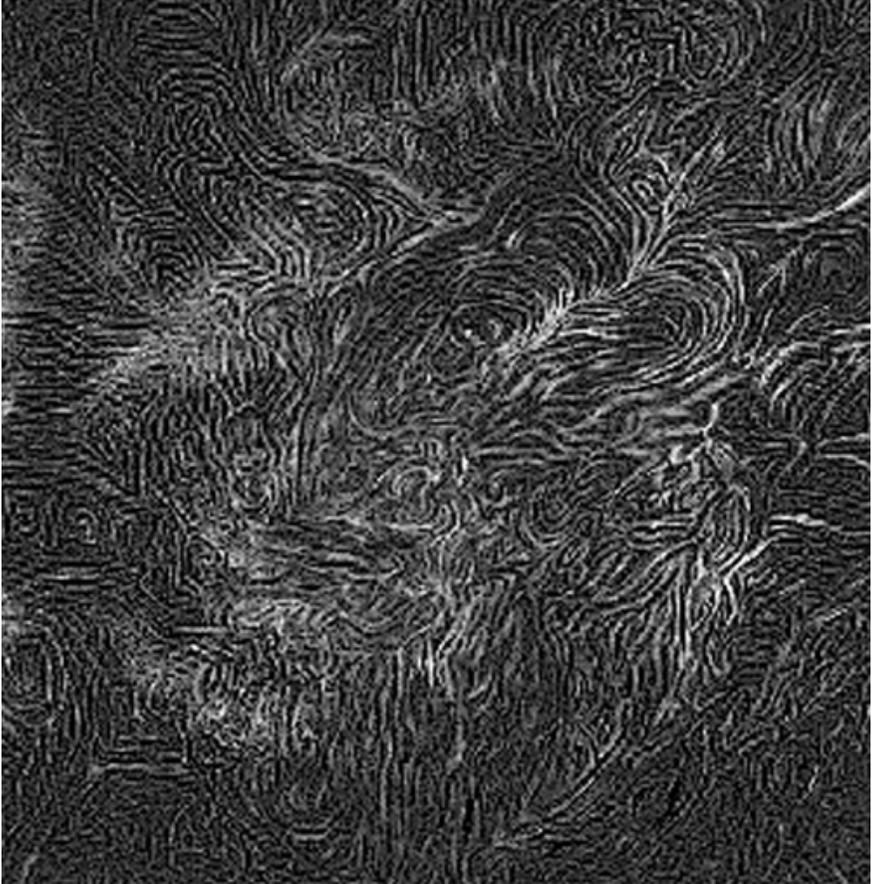
She looked out through her veil of wonder. There was the rippling moonlight and the glowing water. There were the singing shadows of the trees. There was the boundless circle of awareness that filled her soul.

There were no other questions.



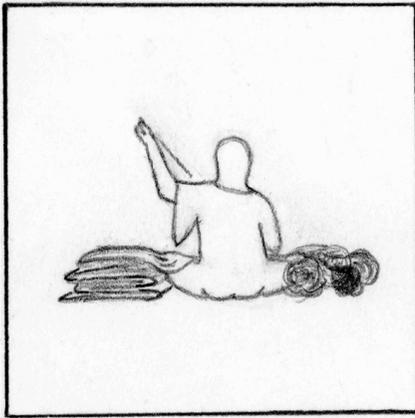
Nine Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Part Four: The Masculine Path



The Masculine Path

Digital image based on an acrylic / canvas painting by
Stone Riley



Three Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Sunflowers **a poem of art**

Van Gogh began with black wax crayon, pocket knife and tough cheap commercial wrapping paper cut in squares. Equipped like that the young man taught himself to paint. No, better if we say he let himself be taught.

He'd hire in old men from the pension house around the corner. Each chosen one would climb the narrow stairs up to the flat the genius shared with a depressive sometime prostitute who was his Guenivere,

then sit there in the open window light with a threadbare black wool overcoat hanging from their shoulders, sometimes leaning forward on a cane. A few copper sous which he could scarcely spare, that was their honest fee.

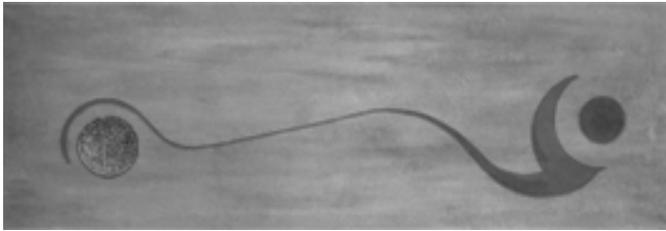
And this was Van Gogh's Paris. No more the merchant's son he'd been in Amsterdam, no more the stiff and stilted peasant scenes he'd drawn on proper artist pads, for here and now the thing had come down to a nub.

And this ensued: War veteran or horse drawn taxi cabman or carpenter or gardener or thief, each old man would open out the soul with which he'd learned to face the world.

And each immortal spirit, thus unfolded, a manifested work of art itself, would rush in through the staring eyes down through the arm down to the fingertips which gripped the hard wax stick which were let move,

so it might sculpt the likeness on the sheet tacked to a board held in the artist's lap. A bit of careful scraping with the knife to catch the highlights right.

Sunflowers.



Memory Of Veronica

Acrylic / canvas painting by Stone Riley

(Depicting a tragedy in which
the artist was not innocent.)



Alchemical Eve

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Creativity From Within anthropology report on psychic power

We step out in new directions. We turn our minds and hands to new tasks that we choose for ourselves and we choose work that is hard. Now suddenly this is another way to seek the truth for this is work that blossoms from our inner selves and shows us to our selves yet also presses out against the boundaries of what we think is real to tell us truth about the world.

May I describe a piece of video? I've seen it only once. A very rare short documentary, an anthropology field research recording really, about twenty minutes long, observing two spirit doctors in Central America. Very interesting. This is true.

The soundtrack and color are poor. Occasionally we hear some English from a local translator who is on-screen now and then, or from the anthropologist who is operating the camera and so invisible to us, a sort of ghostly presence.

We find ourselves in a tiny village, very old, been there for ages, quite traditional, in a thickly wooded valley. As we quickly learn, there is a branch of medical care that's still done here by normal human practice. Everyone is going to act like

everything we'll see is perfectly commonplace and normal and nothing is surprising except perhaps a few things near the end.

Spirit doctor #1, with a patient, inside a dark but spacious hut. A tiny fire is thinly veiling the wide dark room with smoke. The patient, female, is lying on a blanket on the earthen floor, attentive but silent and as profoundly calm as if this were a Reiki session.

The practitioner, a shaman, in this case an active wiry man in middle age, devotes himself to dancing round the patient, shuffling really, making music with a rattle and his voice. He has a slow rhythmic insistent repetitious song. It's obviously a powerful tool for deep hypnosis and he behaves as though in ecstasy.

Outdoors now. Time has passed. Arrives now doctor #2, actually currently a young man seeking the profession, a stranger from a distant place, walked for miles on forest tracks to introduce himself quite cautiously to #1 who is frankly amused and skeptical. He's not a doctor yet but has come here in hopes to get himself changed into one. They talk.

In the forest: #1 and a couple of merry sidekicks, maybe nephews or sons, have got #2 quite securely tied up to a tree. His elbows are pulled around behind and he's asking is this really all necessary?

The old gent assures him that it is, oh yes oh yes oh yes, so the butterflies will come during the night and teach him his song.

The young fellow seems slightly reassured but apparently there's a kind of giant ant in those parts and now, after the old guy's demonstration, the two laughing sidekicks start picking up these big insects off the ground and pinching them very carefully in fingertips so their jaws will open and they're hanging these venomous little poison clamps on the fellow's tender flesh.

The old guy does one nipple and soon we see they've got these things hanging off his nipples, lips, ears and eyelids even.

There's about a dozen of them. One would suppose it is a psycho-active drug but the lack of any quick intoxication leads me to guess that the effect mainly depends on the candidate's ability to self-induce a trance.

The fellow's squirming now with gritted teeth so the old gent takes a professional serious approach and assures him very seriously, oh yes oh yes oh yes, now the butterflies will come during the night and teach him his song. Watch for the butterflies, he says in parting.

Cut to morning. Young #2 seems quite refreshed. The sidekicks are taking off his rope and he limbers up. The old gent asks a little fearfully if the butterflies came.

The young fellow frankly seems a trifle bitter at this question; No, he says, it was the toucan birds. Toucan birds? the old guy asks in frank surprise but the fellow only grunts as answer. I've looked it up and toucan birds are said to croak like frogs.

Back in the treatment room. Wide dark space again all thinly veiled with smoke.

Again the total calm except that now there is an energy and pride in the old man's steps we did not see before while he dances chanting round his patient.

There is also another patient on the earthen floor, over there, and there the new shaman takes his rattle from a leather bag and begins his version of the regular routine, in utter easy confidence, with a different song.

That is creativity from within.



Lunar Anima
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**King Of May
a poem of
nature worship**

Oh birch tree! Straight and tall ye stand
between the Earth and Sky,
so many times my little height,
yet on the Earth ye'll lie.

Oh tall one, we shall take thee down,
and lop thy branches clean,
for May Eve comes to human folk
and thou shalt wed our Queen!

For thou shalt be the one, my Lord,
whose power swells in Spring,
the soul in beast and branch and corn,
and every inch the King.

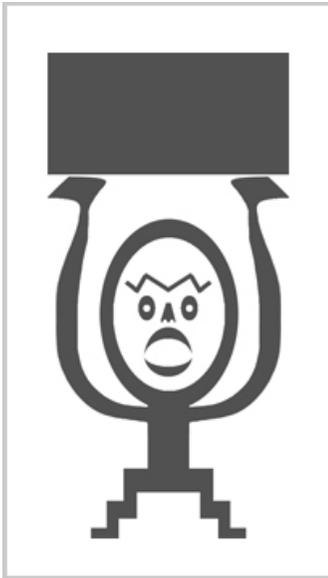
Fear not while shivering to the axe,
wail not while bending o'er;
the majesty thou hast as birch
shall be thrice ten times more.

Soon thronging men shall bear thee up
unto the village square,
into a ring of swaying maids
who'll hymn thy presence there.

Thy wife's rich womb shall take thy tip
and joy shall sing through all,
while green wood buds and meadow blooms
and larks take up the call.

Lend us thy towering beam, my Lord,
forgive the death we bring;
we'll join thy soul to those Great Souls
whose pleasure makes all things.

With ribbons round we'll twine thy shaft,
bright flowers we shall don.
Around thee, King of May, we'll dance
and sport the Sabbat long.



Do The Hard Work

Digital image by Stone Riley
based on a drawing by
Devon Keelin

Do The Hard Work a poem of war resistance

Shouldn't there be snow? It's February in the outlying reaches of the Alps in southern Germany. We are out on the porch of a tavern that clings to a steep valley's green grassy wall, nursing mugs of beer in the rising twilight.

We are the tavern's only customers. We scarcely speak and scarcely make a sound for we are keeping secrets, each their own.

I go lean on a rail to watch the darkness move. It's coming toward me, rising from the valley's shadows far below. The air is still and clear and it's not even really cold.

We are five men. Our little truck is parked up by the road. It's 1971 and we are U.S. Army soldiers, stationed in this country on a Cold War stalemate line instead of being sent to fight in Viet Nam.

The old sergeant, commander of our little journey for this evening, he who kindly halted here and even bought the beer, comes to lean against the railing beside me. The young corporal who is driving also comes and sits down on a bench beside and slowly takes a sip.

The old sergeant, this professional soldier, to show he's talking to me, looks out there where I am looking. And he breaks the silence: "I admire what you're doing."

I've just done thirty days in army jail for doing war resistance work. He and his corporal are transporting me and two other malefactors also just released back to our regular duties. He has now given me military information about morale.

He has spoken very softly.

Surprised, I look into his face and look away. I whisper thanks. So: What does this means that I ought to do?

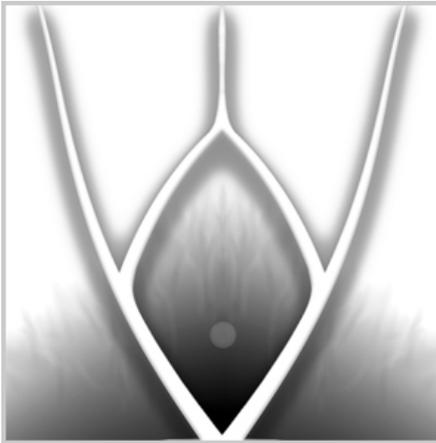
And then, down there below, laboring to rise out of the rising night, low to the grassy ground and laboring up this hillside, I see a crow at wing.

Do the hard work.



Blessings

Polymer clay
sculpture by
Stone Riley



Open Door
Digital image by
Stone Riley

Three Lessons For Boys a lecture on living well

I believe that all human boys everywhere should be taught three basic lessons.

1. Respect yourself, and earn your self-respect.
2. Support and protect your people.
3. Comfort anyone who is in pain.

Of course we must teach love and beauty. Please do not believe for an instant that I doubt it, even though these lessons I propose are more mundane. Yes indeed, we must constantly teach love, beauty, joy, freedom, the thirst for divinity, the hunger for justice, and all the rest. Of course we must. Our highest revelation, that all things are one divine beautiful whole, this perennial shining revelation is the fundamental thing which can lead us truly into right behavior. But what is the best way to teach the universal high ideals to human boys? Like any individual, a boy must discover the truth in his own life while he goes about expressing his own nature. For you to believe any truth, it must hold good while you strive to be the person you were born to be, because that is the only kind of proof which will really satisfy your doubts. So how can we

teach our sons that love and beauty are the truth? I believe these three lessons can do that.

The difficulty is human nature. Our male human instincts push us out into the world, and yet they push us home. They lead us into war and yet they lead us into peace. They give us madness and they give us sanity. Basically, instinct is simply an inborn desire to act in certain ways in certain situations. This is pretty straightforward for some beings but for us humans it is complicated by our survival strategy.

Our race has evolved with a certain survival scheme in mind, that we shall be very free in seeking understanding of the situations where we find ourselves and then very free in choosing a goal or object for the emotion which our understanding arouses. To carry out this scheme, our people are born with powerful but vague, contradictory and overlapping instincts.

Thus we often find ourselves morally confused, searching earnestly down our inborn list for the proper thing to do in some situation where we are. Both sexes find themselves in similar states of confusion, of course, but the male's natural role has put a number of dangerous violent impulses onto his list. His emotions were evolved for a hunter, defender and victor as well as a provider, healer and teacher. His contradictions are likely to be improperly and unjustly destructive to people around him. There lies our difficulty.

So the riddle is this: What principles can we teach a boy that will help him guide his natural manhood into good behavior? And the riddle's knot is this: An individual must learn the highest guiding truths by enacting their own nature; and a human male's inborn nature often speaks of violence; and violence is often too destructive. Please bring to mind all that you know about boys and men, then consider my proposal again:

1. Respect yourself, and earn your self-respect.
2. Support and protect your people.
3. Comfort anyone who is in pain.

I think these lessons can clarify a boy's understanding of the situations in his life, and then suggest good goals for the actions to which his understanding impels him. As the child matures, he comprehends each succeeding lesson well enough to test it and confirm it. Each testing broadens the hoop of landscape where he feels that he belongs. Each confirmation enlarges the compassion that he feels; first compassion for himself; then for his family or nation, then at last for everything. The boy learns high ideals through his success, by seeing that the lessons work and by looking for the larger truths that ever make anything work out for the best.

I think the phrasing which I offer here is pretty good, though it is certainly a thin outline. Serious questions surely do remain. What behavior proves a man has earned his self-respect? Who are his people and who are not? What comfort do we owe to those who have justly earned their pain? Boys must be guided through these questions by their elders, and men should seek guidance from philosophy. But too, as you struggle with each lesson, the coming lessons serve as a guide. You can earn respect by supporting and protecting. You can support and protect through compassion. Then finally you can let compassion bloom according to the highest guiding truths.

I know this answer which I offer here is nothing new. The question that we're asking is a hard riddle but not a new one. Our current culture is very strange but we are human nonetheless; we do not need a new answer for this puzzle, only a fresh statement of the answer. Most certainly, these basic lessons have been taught all through history by our kinfolk in countless other cultures, and I think the way I've listed them is a pretty fair rendition. In my own experience, I have seen each of the lessons very clearly demonstrated in a different culture.

First: "Respect yourself and earn your self-respect." This was taught me by an American Midwestern farmer. He journeyed off into the world and then, after many perilous adventures, settled down back home to raise a family. His main standard

for respect was that you ought to be resourceful, useful and courageous.

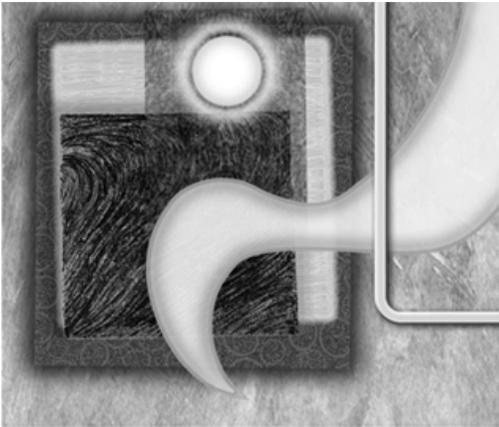
Second: "Support and protect your people." I saw this danced by a Plains Indian enacting the meditations of a young warrior on the eve of battle. The youth finds comfort in the knowledge that his people need him. I saw this danced in a theater with an orchestra, and the contrast of new and old thrust an awareness on me that the lesson is timeless.

Third: "Comfort anyone who is in pain." I found this in an ancient story which was opened for me by the whispering of spirits. The story has been told and retold to our present day, and still it clearly echoes a very ancient time in a distant land. The old tale is British, but it ends with the hero crowned for he has shown compassion worthy of the Buddha.

I have heard the lessons from many other sources too, but for me these were the most compelling and vivid. I only hope these lessons prove to be some help for you.



**Fine Day On
Rocky Neck
Beach**
Digital Photo
by Stone Riley



Catsong

Digital image
based on an
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Catsong

a memoir of magic

*These events took place in 1980 at age 24, early in my 2nd marriage, while *The Simple Tarot* was being made.*

Some long years ago, at the time when I had first begun to practice magic, I was a young man with a wife and little child living in the city of Houston.

We were poor and the place we lived in was a run-down big apartment complex, not a tall apartment block but a lot of long low two-story buildings. That city stands on a prairie near a tropic sea, you know, and hurricanes blow through there frequently, so most of the buildings there are built quite low. This place had a long row of apartments facing another row with a long courtway in between where there were sidewalks and plots of grass and unkempt shrubs and planters with weeds and flowers and such, where our children would all come out to play, and then behind that was an alley for the cars, and then another long low building with a courtway and another – and so on and on, several acres all built up like that, crowded full of people, lots of children with their toys and bikes and trikes and games. It was run-down and poor and ill kept and the shingles might blow off the roof in storms, yes, but it was nice.

And there were cats. Cats. A whole society, a town of cats.

You see, there was a kind of little patio in front of every door. On the ground floor every door had a wooden fence and a gate, and on the second story it was a balcony with stairs. It was just a little space but kind of private, kind of public, where you could put a chair and sit, and many of us would set out food and water there for the cats. We on the ground floor would leave our gates open just a bit. You know how humans love to live with other species. Well, even though the humans fed them – and doctored them too when there was a need – yet still these were not tame pets by any means. No. There were many dozens of them and they were living in their own world by their own feline law.

Maybe you've been lucky enough to watch some other species in their own society like that. It is a rare treat.

The cats partly lived out of grocery cans of meat, yes, but mainly on vermin. There were those giant filthy tropic cockroaches, those awful cockroaches big as your thumb that smell of stinky oil at night and scurry loud across a floor; the cats kept them down all right. They'd pounce on them and gulp them down in just two crunchy bites, with the little legs still wiggling. And mice – there surely were no rats – they ate the few unlucky mice that wandered in and such as that. So the cats lived outside where they hunted, among the bushes and the patios, although we humans would sometimes let a polite civil individual into our house to hunt inside a while and then exchange respects when leaving.

Maybe you know this too: Tom cats like to club up. Most of the toms preferred to hang together in a little gang and take possession of a generous open patio. Other porches belonged to a mother with her periodic broods of kittens. Some individuals preferred to roam about. When the human kids came out to play with bikes and balls and toys, the cats would lurk within the bushes and watch, then come out sometimes for a soothing belly

rub. You can imagine. It was no Tahitian paradise like Gauguin painted but it was pretty good.

But then one summer day a child molester came into the neighborhood.

At that time I had only just begun to practice magic, and only lesser magic still, but at least my eyes were open. So, from the first time that I saw this horrid fellow – he was someone's uncle visiting, you see – I knew he was a hungry tortured soul with another hungry spirit on him. There's no other way to tell you how that fellow looked. He was a little man, haggard with a malicious grin always on his face, always wringing his hands, always bent like there was a heavy weight on his back, just exactly like some character from Dickens, and always trying to hang around the children, always trying to chat them up. You couldn't call the cops. Houston was the kind of place where poor folks do not call the cops, not unless you absolutely know there's something going wrong. We feared the law. Nobody really knew what this fellow with all this evil on him was actually up to, if he was actually doing anything at all. When adults looked out there in the courtway and saw him, they would just cringe and call their own kids in and slam their door.

This went on about a week. I bespoke him sternly one time, standing close, glaring in his knotted countenance. I warned him off but he did not hear and so I walked away.

Well, let me tell you just a bit of where I was in life. I was young but had in my few years tried to live properly. I had tried to do my duty with sufficient courage when a need arose and tried to act with charity. I tried to always show all kinds of folks an open hand and open face. I had done all that – for so my father always taught – but as you know, that is not enough to fill a person's spiritual needs. My spiritual hunger was the sort that leads a person toward the mysteries of life, toward the hidden truths, beyond the boundaries of common-

sense, toward the shining goal of reality and wisdom in their nakedness.

Just in the normal way of suchlike things, quite surprisingly and quite by chance, I had stumbled on a proper teacher. By that time this teacher lady had shown me where to stand upon this grassy plain to start the hidden path. She had given me, by then, to the holy art of telling fortunes; that was one thing. How to commune with disembodied spirits too. A little about herbs and minerals and music and scents and such. Just a little. And that particular witch was very given to ancient incantations in forgotten tongues, which is totally out of fashion in the Pagan movement now, but which she enjoyed to either cry aloud or else sometimes to scratch the peculiar words on little scraps of genuine parchment with colored ink. So on. And I was gladly taking all of this into myself to try and see what was the truth of it.

So there I was, a genuine and bona fide sorcerer's apprentice, with a real fearful danger for my own child and others on my hands, a danger which no other person in my neighborhood had even the least inkling of any means to face. There was simply nothing else for me to do, now was there? If you had been learning all that stuff and wondering how much of it was real, you too would feel required to take that challenge up. Wouldn't you? Right. You would have to at least give an honest try at banishing the hungry spirit which you plainly saw riding with its talons gripped into that disgusting insect of a man.

And so it was done. My teacher looked up the problem in her books. She copied out a ceremony for me, on ordinary paper with ordinary ink. And she came over the house and spoke with our little girl. Understand, she was a quite intelligent kindly woman and she spoke very well to our child. And she gave our little girl a large talisman, a protective thing, a disk of leather with a picture painted on it. The picture was a powerful wolf painted on it, looking alert and strong in a snow-clad

wood, and the child should hide this talisman in a secret place by day then keep it in her bed at night. And the child evidently knew there was a danger lurking. To my surprise, our little girl accepted this unusual ornament in the manner actually of someone who is feeling some relief. And my teacher told me that the next night after that day's night would be a good time for the job, according to astrology, of which I have not got the slightest understanding.

Well, what would you have done in somesuch circumstances? Put yourself in my place (kindly for a moment do) and pretend that you have found yourself somehow alive in somesuch strange unreal fantastic real actual pressing emergency situation, with this piece of paper pressed into your hand, and answer this: What would you do?

The ceremony called for me to very calmly wait until one hour after midnight, with the child asleep, then go into her room where I would accomplish everything with murmured spells, in English, and with a peculiar pantomime of exact ritual gestures. I must cast a bright sphere of divine light around the tiny room and the sleeping child, then put myself above the place to hide, and call the evil being in, as it would think, to feast upon this seeming victim. Then, with incorporeal blazing sword in hand, I must swoop upon the disembodied thing and hack it, bleed it, pierce it, weaken it beyond repair.

I built the fortress temple as instructed and hid myself and called. The thing arrived from somewhere across a dim-lit empty plain, arrived in the form of a giant running spider several times my size, and I went to it. I set upon the imaginary it with that imaginary blazing sword. Several times the ghastly thing retreated then came on again and I must dash to the new quarter of my crumbling walls to hack and thrust some more. But finally it had had too much, lame in every leg and spurting dark gouts of blood that vanished on the whistling wind, so that it finally screamed and fled across the empty plain from whence it came, away far out of sight.

Can you possibly imagine what this was like? I swear by any living power you may wish to name, this is all true. All that stuff you hear about other realms of reality; in some way it is true. This combat was imagination, obviously, all in the mind's eye, but true imagination is not fantasy. Once I was prepared, the clear and powerful impressions following thence were forced upon me by the force of some real being outside myself. The mask of all these doings, you might say, was in my head, but the truth of them was not. Beyond all of my expectations, beyond all prior experience, I stood in the spirit realm and fought for good. I was utterly convinced of it as I am today. I was elated and my heart was very glad but I was trembling and exhausted too and dawn had nearly come. It was startling to learn the fight had taken several hours.

I'll tell you quickly how that bit of the affair came out; it came out for the good. Two days later with another spell I finally trapped that weakened spirit in a candle that I made of molten wax. At my kitchen stove in that small home, in broad daylight, even as I poured the molten fluid carefully to the candle form, that hungry wretched wounded thing came screaming in and fell imprisoned in the wax. I wrapped it tight in paper as my teacher said, and later gave it to her so she'd cast the thing into a fire and banish it to realms more distant from our own.

Next time that I saw that little fellow, he was a different man. He was quite utterly changed, apologetic in demeanor, meek and mild. I stood before him once again and stared hard into his heart. There were human weaknesses still evident but he was clean at least of the ugly thing that had been on him. So I pray he might be well. If he is dead, I wish him rest.

But in that morning, that early pre-dawn morning when the awesome fight was done, after the hungry spirit fled, after that disembodied battle in the small child's room, inside the crumbling fortress built of shining light that stood upon some distant empty plain, with the exhausting hours passed since it

began, first thing I did was this: I heaped back up the glowing stones of the imaginary walls into a semblance of their power and mouthed a whispered blessing by the bed. Then I left the silent room. The child was sleeping quietly.

I sat out in the living room. That's when I saw the dawn was near. The light was slowly growing, glowing darkly through the window glass. And so, gathering in my strength again, I watched the sun arise. The sun came up. It shone in through my front window and little bits of rainbow struck upon the walls. There was a pretty crystal hanging in that window there and the light came through refracted, casting lovely bits of rainbow everywhere.

Those of you who walk a rocky path like mine can verify that when you reach the early upward slope which I had reached, and if you are a worthy candidate as I had evidently been, then the universe conspires to offer worthy tests. The universe conspires to let you exercise yourself so as to learn. So it had done. This timeless fact of life was that event. And if you pass those tests it offers fitting treasures as reward, and treasures that your eyes are fit to see and hands to grasp. I tell you now, only one reward in this whole universe could fit me then. After all that I had seen and done, after the heedless hungry evil whose nakedness I'd gazed upon, after that blood gushing to the wind, the only treasure for my eyes and hands would have been some proof of fundamental beauty in this world. That's what the rainbows were. I knew at once on seeing them; a treasure and reward strewn in jewel-like bits around that room, a confirmation of surpassing loveliness in fundamental things. My eyes beheld the colored light with joy. My hands went out to touch the beams of it.

I did not know that there was even more treasure yet to come.

My heart was full of gratitude for all beauty in this world, and for the strength it gives, and for that sufficient portion of its strength which the divine light had gifted to me in the struggle.

So I soon arose and found a little pottery dish and a bit of charcoal and some frankincense. You know, by that time in this life I owned a jar of frankincense. So I quickly got the charcoal lit and got the tiny pile of incense smoking on it and took the dish out to my little patio outside the front door there, then held it up to the sun in earnest prayer and set it on a little table, an offering of gratitude and love for the power of light that comes up manifested with the day. So there I stood leaning on the bit of fence and basking in the light and letting the smoke curl around me as it would. And so a new thing happened.

Cats. Cats. Yes, cats.

Just across the way, at the neighbors' place across the little courtway there, there sat the usual gang of toms who owned the neighbor's patio under feline law.

Now, that particular little club who owned that place consisted of four tom cats, one big old brawny fellow with hardly a brain in his head but covered in bulging muscles, and three of his equally brilliant sons. They all looked much alike except the different colors. All were tiger-striped, you see, but the big old dad was orange, like one of the lads, while another was blackish and the other gray. But the old fellow was biggest and meanest and therefore undisputed boss. I knew all this from lengthy observation. Right now the big old fellow was lounging there beside the opening of their gate, rolling on his back most luxuriously on the cool cement before the day's oppressive summer tropic heat came up, while his three sons sat about like bodyguards just washing themselves and feeling quite important, just the way that stupid toms particularly will do if left to their own world.

I stood there hanging on my fence, you know, and studying these amusing quite Shakespearean fellows and smiling at the fineness of the world so manifested in its richly woven quirks, and wondering if the wisest human person in our world could extract any bit of moral lesson from this bit of feline tale, but there was more and finer yet to come.

Movement caught the corner of my eye. I looked and saw, way down at the far end of that apartment row, way down at the far end where the buildings gave way to a vacant lot that stood in prairie grass extremely tall and thick, prairie grass chest high on me in that vacant lot down past the buildings' end; two new cats had appeared from out of there and these two new fellows were creeping very carefully in the shadows along toward us, evidencing every sign and gesture of utmost caution. That wild and primitive prairie out there is called buffalo grass.

From the way they walked it was quite clear these fellows were strangers in this cat town. And as they approached I came to see how dirty and skinny they both were. Bony. Grimed with dirt. They walked shoulder to shoulder right in step and leaning on each other – maybe you've seen cats who really trust each other walk like that – casting wary glances everywhere – then they spied the gang of big toms by the open gate. They froze. I must guess they were drawn to this strange dangerous open place by drifting whiffs of the heap of luscious food that waited in a lump on a plate in there beyond the opening of the gate. Perhaps they smelled the bowl of water. They were starving.

But it seemed the three bully guards had not spied them yet, still preoccupied with washing, so the new fellows, with every move like a single being, fixed their gaze upon the gang of four and stepped off again, shoulder to shoulder, coming on again.

At last the bullies spotted them but they did not stop. The big guy saw them first and started, startling his sons, and they looked too, at this pair of dirty skinny tramps who now had the unmitigated gall to just stare fixedly at them and come on right ahead. The two strangers now were simply coming on while striving to fix a baleful glare upon the four. Well, the three sons jumped to their feet and started doing that feline thing where you stand sideways and put your back up and show your teeth.

Oh, they looked fierce all right but the tramps just kept on coming, staring with their baleful eyes. I was amazed.

Finally, when the new guys were maybe ten feet off, just when the big boss too at last jumped up and was turning sideways, getting set to show his teeth and hiss quite horribly as he could, suddenly the new guys stopped. They stopped. Unbelievably to all of us, they sat down upon their backsides in the regular cat way with every sign of confidence and startling self-composure. They straightened up their bony bodies tall. I was amazed but now I understand. They had a magic trick. They knew they were in range by now to hurl this overwhelming stupefying spell of magic they had got from somewhere. And so help me, that is what they did.

The two guys, both as one, turned their faces upward to the sky. They opened their mouths wide. They sang.

They sang. These two souls sang one long single note in perfect ringing echoing harmony together. Where had they learned to do this? How had these two wild ones from the buffalo grass learned, and learned such confidence that it would work? They hit this one note exactly and immediately together, not even reaching for the note but both at once, their two screechy voices blending in a tone that I have certainly never heard from human throats, a tone that pierced right through and struck a chord of splendor in my brain. Splendor.

Music can do such things. Certain notes and rhythms have effects. There is a rising strain that tears the heart from out your breast and sends it winging toward some distant home that waits for all our race. There is a certain waterfall of cascading notes that wakes the lonely yearning for your long-lost love, even if you haven't got one. And this particular vibrating piercing wail had mystical effects. It brought transcendent vision. The world opened all around, as if this cosmos were a blossoming rose or lotus flower. Oh, it was lovely.

The world there in that place vanished when that note struck in my ears then penetrated to my brain. All of space in

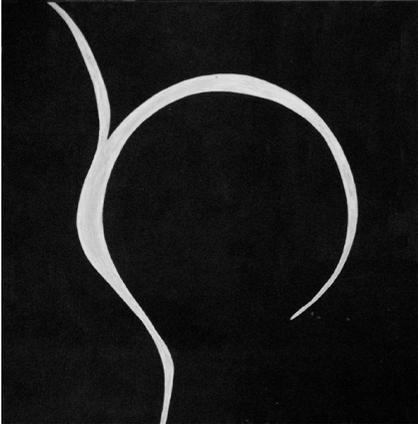
all directions opened. So then the wheeling stars turned round at every hand while I marveled at the vast infinity of space and time. And when it stopped, it was a startlement to find myself somehow back again. I simply blinked. Once more I leaned upon that bit of wooden fence as if I'd never left. I had never heard that note before and never heard it since. And these were cats.

Well, the four bullies were farther stunned than I. This mystical vision thing was apparently new to them. They stood frozen even when the long note faded. Their stupefaction obviously lingered.

And so the two ragged troubadours eyed them, eyed them warily to check on the effect. And suddenly the big guys simply sagged. All four sat down at once with eyes open wide and staring unblinking at the singers. The skinny troubadours then, reassured by this delayed response, crept cautiously around right by the four into the open gate. Without a backward glance, they laid into the fragrant feast of meat and water. The four watched them for a moment, then began to wash again.

And that's all of this tale. The sorcerer's apprentice gained a test and, having passed the test, was granted just and glorious reward. My heart was full of strength and beauty and amazement and that wondrous vision, all of it, is with me to this day. One sorry note that I must say: the orchestra broke up. That's how musicians are sometimes, you know. One of the fellows stayed there in our neighborhood but the other one I never saw again and surely no one else has ever heard their mystic song.

And by the way, this story is all true.



The Life Of Plants
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley



Guarded Portal
Digital image by
Stone Riley

Touching The Stag **historical fiction: a short** **story in the bronze age**

He had never kept any exact count of the years but this was his forty-fifth summer. That was damn sure pretty old for the way this country was and he was proud of it. He was a big burly sod with lots of life still in him and this morning he was set to prove it. He stood there on the brow of the hill, his belly bulging over his woolen kilt, the young Sun's warmth on his face and breast, the blood pumping through the heavy muscles of his limbs, and he leaned on his spear, spying all around below for something big to kill.

There it was, down in that clearing there. Among the shady trees he'd seen some movement then, straining his eyes, had forced his mind into the distant details of the scene and forced the movement into shape. A lone stag was grazing in that bit of meadow. A fair set of antlers stood up like the branches of a birch when it raised its head to glance around. No great rack; the animal must be young. From the way it moved, it must be full of solid meat. The place was large enough for a fight, most like. It was upwind from here.

This seemed to be a real hunter's perfect setup, if he got there soon enough. For a long moment though, he carefully studied the distant moving points of light that showed the white-tipped rack of horns and his mouth went dry. His throat tightened up. To his astonishment, his heart suddenly trembled like a little bird. He squeezed his spear and made no move.

All the others, his nephews and sons and cousins, were still back there chewing on their breakfast, lounging under the spreading hilltop oak where they had camped last night. He looked back at them and a bitter scorn rose in his tightened throat. After all this time and all his deeds, there was nothing left to prove to them.

But then there was his third son busy honing a knife even while sitting there in the sunlight eating. This had been no promising child at first but now had become his pride and joy. There had been a summer day like this, a year ago, when he took that lazy child out to the hunt and in the dusk brought home an eager lad with rabbits on his belt. Who says an old man makes weak babies? And his young wife swore this was his son. She must be right; he took good care to scare the young braves off of her and she turned her nose up at the other old guys.

He stroked his rough white beard and grinned. Three times this winter one of the girls had dragged him off into the woods to get a proper fucking. Over the years he had acquired fine skill and reputation. Not bad for a man his age. Not bad at all.

Now his third son looked over at him and the boy's whole face lit up with pride. He called; "Hey Pop, what is it?" The father only nodded to the boy. "You saw something, didn't you?" But now the man doubted what to do and knew not how to answer.

The lad would not be silent and called again, very jolly, "Come on, what is it? You're not just standing there to piss over the cliff."

He had to laugh at that – it was the kind of thing his own father used to say – and with the laugh that rolled up through him came a sense of wild abandon.

"Gentlemen!" he called to them all, "Gentlemen!" Then when they looked; "I'm going for that young stag in that clearing." It sounded right. It felt very good.

They stood and smiled at him. It was no boast, what he had said, but only telling his friends where he was going. They all came out to see, he pointed to the place, they stared out there and nodded and rubbed their chins and spoke approval.

But the boy stared out there longer than the rest. He glanced to his father, looked away again, and asked, "You're figuring to go alone?"

And that glance was awful. There was no admiration in the boy's eyes now. It was fear there now, not the jolly fire of comradeship. Doubt squeezed his throat again. Did the boy know something?

He ran the calculation quickly through his mind. Only the single beast, young and probably not a veteran of many fights. The trees were thick, the brush was thin and the breeze was holding steady; he could surely stalk right up to the clearing. The place looked large enough for handling the spear and there was his best knife on his calf. There'd never be a better chance for a single-handed kill. The boy was only worried. Instinctively, he reached down now to untie the knife's handle.

So he then came up close to the boy and took his hand just like he would have done a man's. He looked the lad straight in the eyes and said, "Son, I can't just let weakness creep up and stab me in the back. I've got to know if I can still do this. When it's time to quit, I guess I'll quit; but I've got to know."

That also sounded good. There was truth in that for he badly feared his growing weakness. But there was a lie as well. He wouldn't quit, not ever. He would die at this game on some summer day but he wouldn't say so now. What he had said was truth enough.

The boy sighed deep and nodded. They let each other go. The fellows slapped his back and shook his hand. They pulled his buckle loose and took his kilt away – dangerous encumbrance when you're stalking through the woods. He looked down at himself and, just for luck, rubbed the old blue spirals tattooed all around his loins and tugged his dick. "My God!" he said and looked up to the Sun. Now it was time. The others backed away.

Skill. Here was the first skill of a fighting man. He closed his eyes and sucked his belly in and swelled his chest with the delicious morning air. The Sun's warmth boiled into his flesh like steam boiling from a cauldron. The Earth was solid underfoot, solid and damp and alive, just like a woman lying under you, and a feeling like that passion flowed up making every muscle hard as rock. His phallus sprang up. His legs began to twitch, and then his arms.

He opened his eyes, fixed them on the stag still down there, still grazing unsuspecting of its doom. He sang to it, "Stay, stay, stay," and let the spear leap up into his hands and point to it and pierce it, and then the glowing spirit of the spear leaped out as quick as thought and thudded into its side. "Stay, stay, stay." His feet were making little steps in place. He let his body crouch. He let his lips curl up into a snarl the way a wolf would do, and let his brow draw tight in furrows. "Stay, stay, stay." Now it was time.

Down the rocky face of the hill, crouching, perfectly in balance, a heavy man dancing quickly with precision. Not one pebble came loose in his hasty descent because the ground itself told his feet everything, and suddenly he was out of sight among the trees below. Now this was another skill, the silent stalking. He had learned it in the same way he had learned to make a woman gasp and giggle, by letting himself be taught.

Now down among the trees he slowed and watched for the way ahead. The trick was to avoid brush and fallen branches

and always keep your bearings. When you got close you must stay hidden.

Here was a stand of bramble which he squeezed around without a pause and without a scratch – the kilt would have snagged if he had not been naked. Now a shady open place and his feet missed every mushroom – no need to step on one and free their musky smell. Now a fallen holly tree forced him toward the right. Through all of this zigzag course he kept his prey's location firmly fixed in mind and tracked himself across the map that he had seen from the hill above. Here were the four tall birches he had seen. Here was the patch of marsh. There was the broken oak.

He passed a boar's den and paused an instant, freezing very still to glance around and mark the place for another time. He crossed a deer trail that went the wrong way; soft fresh dung but he gave it no attention. He hopped down a bank and over the little brook; this was very close.

He saw the light change; there was a clearing straight ahead. He froze again. He waited.

He was crouched and balanced, ready to move any direction. All his senses were open wide. He waited while patterns shifted inside his eyes as things responded to the breeze. There was movement out beyond the trees. He smelled the stag. It snorted and he heard it loud.

A little closer, several steps, brought him up beside a thick ash trunk. A few steps closer still, into a dark piece of shade. Now he could see. There was the beast.

"Stay, stay, stay," he whispered quieter than the rustling leaves. He was not close enough to spring, not nearly. The stag was on the far side of the clearing with its buttocks toward him, head down in the grass. It raised its head a little with every mouthful and peered into the woods, intrigued by distant sounds and smells. He took the opportunity to walk closer, right up to the clearing's edge beside the final tree, and there he knelt. His spear was pointed in the right direction and its long thin

narrow head hung very still in midair, embedded in the final bit of shade. Nothing but a stretch of knee-high grass stood between the hunter and the hunted and yet it was too far. If he sprang from here the stag would bolt and be away. If he crept out in the grass some little thing would jump and cry. If he circled round he would no longer be downwind. He could be waiting here all day. Something must be done.

He changed his song. "Come, come, come," he whispered quieter than the new shoots of grass pushing soil aside.

The animal made no move. It was not enough. He let the patterns blur inside his eyes. He let the sunlight flow into his shady hiding place, into his flesh until it warmed his blood. He let the cool damp Earth rise up into his crouching form and turn his body hard. He let his muscles quiver as the God and Goddess merged. He sang again, "Come, come, come."

The stag's ears twitched. It raised its antlered head. It sniffed the air. For just a moment it prepared to run, but then relaxed and sniffed again. It looked his way.

Now for an instant there was a round brown eye fixed in his soul. Around it flowed the Earth and sunny sky. For half that instant he resisted, but then let go and felt a jet of power leap through everything. He heard his voice out loud, "Come, come, come." Here it came.

This was the oddest thing that he had ever seen. The stag walked calmly toward him. Not only that, but it looked at him, with its head high and cocked over to one side. Not only that, not only did it see him here, but it knew what he was and what he wanted. He had heard their thoughts countless times before but none had ever spoken this directly to him.

If it had spoken with a human tongue it would have asked, "Do you dare?"

So did he dare? The animal was waiting a dozen strides away and as he watched he saw the battle fury coming on it. The beast lit up like fire suddenly taking shape in tender. It trembled. It put its head down, waved its ivory-tipped antlers

at him, snorted flame, and threw ripped clods into the sky with knife-edged hooves. It thrust its face out toward him and it bellowed.

So there he was, a fat old man clutching a stick with a metal point, kneeling by a tree. A well-armed being two times his size confronted him. A good knife was strapped to his calf. He was not so quick as in the younger days, but still plenty strong. He knew a trick or two. He knew the unity of God and Goddess. Despite the creeping years, he stood now at the very height of human power. He realized suddenly and rationally that all his race could not bring forth a better individual to try this deed. The fathers and mothers were surely watching. There was simply no other thing to do. Yes, he would dare.

So then he summoned in the battle fury on himself once more. He let his vision blur. He let the Sun come in, the Earth rise up and felt their passion stir him like an infant stirring in the womb. He let his breath turn into fire. He let his soul bloom out about the flesh, all flaming red.

Age and trickery were on his side. He had planned this and done this before.

He came from the shadows with a shout. The spear was tight tucked under his right arm and aimed directly at the enemy's face; it was really quite invisible. He waved his left hand high and wide to make the creature guard or flee from it, an empty threat. The stag turned toward the left and sealed its fate. But with the spear so badly aimed, and with the left arm out of balance, he was most unlikely to redirect the point so well that it would pierce the heart in that first thrust. Here was the animal's hairy foreflank too soon; behind it here the tiny spot through which a long thin blade could slide by bone and muscle to the target.

The spear point was descending toward the spot as he sidestepped and turned to get a straight approach. His right arm, tucked in at such an awkward angle, struggled for the right adjustment. The point touched to the hairy skin and slid

in too high by inches; the lungs were pierced but not the heart. There had been too little time in the headlong rush. The beast would die but not at once; its fate was set while his was still unknown. Now all depended on the second stroke.

The spear haft thudding onto the hard flank caught him in midstride. If the butt had not been clutched so tightly he would now be on the ground and subject to the flashing hooves. Even as it was, he must regain his footing and withdraw the weapon properly in hand to strike again, all before the enemy could turn and thereby wrench the weapon from his grasp.

The stag was slow to make its move. It had never been badly wounded before and the pain was a horrifying shock. It stood frozen there as if by winter's icy blast. While he clung to its hairy shoulder and struggled to his feet, he felt the horror through and through its being. The moment's advantage was his and he knew it; the awful pain now shooting through his own chest was only just a brief surprise like wounds that he had felt before. How was he hurt? He did not know, but he knew that he could do the work.

Despite his unknown wound, he took a stance and yanked the weapon free. This was very odd for he felt it jerking free of his own body. The pain was somewhat less. Quickly but very carefully he touched the point just at the proper spot which he had missed before – and felt it touch between his ribs. He leaned hard into the work and yes indeed – he felt the blade slice inward toward his own heart.

The stag was still unmoving so he took the time to do it carefully, guiding the blade by the searing sensations which he felt himself. But this was much too slow. He felt the alien mind reach into his, felt its sudden knowledge of his aim and saw the big living body leap up high and whirl away. The blade was free again; the chance was lost.

O Mother, he prayed amid the blazing pain, let this be done and finished! A hoof came up and cracked the spear and sent it flying out of sight. The antlered head came round again,

now with the branching horns right at him. As he caught and grappled with them, a point ripped through his forearm and for an instant the animal staggered with the searing flash of his torn flesh. He got his left arm about the antlers at their roots, lodged his wounded right arm in their branches as best he might, leaned back and clung on tight and tried to get his thighs about the snout to rob the animal of breath. Now the shock and shove of beast on beast was all there was.

He was too heavy for the stag to really raise its head but it plunged and shook and kept him off his feet. With every plunge and shake the ivory points came near to gouging out his eyes or ripping through his cheek. He feared that his arm lodged in the horns might break. Hot blood welled up choking inside the chest. There was no chance in Earth that he could reach his knife this way. The animal was tiring, half smothered, half drowning, racked with pain, but he was breathing just as hard and tiring just the same. If he dropped off and got his knife then he would have to fight the hooves again. His mind spun in and out of blackness.

He did not dare to plan his move for fear the animal would know. He simply let his body do the work like in a dance. The head came down, he landed on his feet. The head went up, he got his back into the job and forced it on up farther. It backed away, he got his right arm loose and grasped an ivory tine for better leverage. That was the winning trick.

The weary head went down then up again, he forced it farther up again and this time twisted. Blood spouted from the wounded flank. Pain gushed from his flaming lungs all up his back and neck. One time was not enough. The head came down, he got a better grip. The head came up, he twisted. He was unconscious for an instant, blind for a moment, but still he stood. There had been the awful crack of live bone splitting. Life drained out of him.

The stag's knees bent and its whole frame collapsed so that it lay down on its breast. The man collapsed onto the Earth

as well and there lay caught, his legs beneath. The man was breathing. Somehow still, so was the stag. Someone somewhere spoke, "Let this be done and finished."

So then, animated by this unknown voice, the man struggled to sit up beneath and pull the stag's head across his lap. He reached and found and drew the knife. Their breathing was slow and shallow. Their limbs were twitching. He laid the knife's sharp edge on the great strong throat, across a throbbing vein. He laid his other hand upon the forehead above the round staring eyes, full of surrender now. He whispered, "Young son, let it go."

He pressed down hard upon the knife and slid the edge across and let the blood gush out onto the ground. He closed his eyes, leaned aside to lay himself upon the body. Speaking to himself: "Now let it go."

Now came a magnificent vision.

He was sinking deep into profound sleep and yet his soul was still awake. The stag was with him in that realm of dream. They stood together, each leaning heavy on the other, the man's arm over the broad muscular shoulders. He had never been so close to such an animal in peace before.

A misty silver fog was all around and yet a light gleamed straight ahead and so they walked toward it pressing one another side by side. All but that light was deep gray shadowed weariness. Both of them felt the weariness. With every slow step they panted and moaned.

Now the mist cleared a little, just around them, and there was the black mouth of a cave. In the steep face of a hill, one great rock lay slantwise on another and there was room for them to walk beneath. They stood and gazed. That tiny piercing point of light shone deep within.

He felt the light calling. It was the first gleam of the Sun on New Years morn. It called, "Let everything be born again!" The big stag nickered and went ahead. He stood and watched it go. The creature descended into that dark place till

it was wrapped in blackness, till its footfalls and its panting could not be heard.

Then came a breeze at his back, standing there, but not a breeze of air. It was a wind of souls. At first he only felt a few but then he saw the river of ghostly beast and human shapes. There was no end of these departing wraithlike souls, countless in their number, flowing all about him, brushing past like the rolling waves of a swollen stream running by an island rock, into the black cave, toward the gleaming light. Deep in the cave there was a pool of rest and comfort; there they flowed and as they laid themselves into the phosphorescent liquid, myriad voices sighed in release.

Then rose the Sun. Over the lake of souls within the Earth, a great light dawned. Beams reached out to every recess of the rocky cavern and struck on glinting jewels. The light was suddenly so huge that all melted in it; the lake, the souls, the shining jewels, the boulders of the cave itself; and there he stood amid a meadow with the Sun ahead.

Grass was sprouting from the fertile soil. He saw it stand up and wave, brushing at his legs, and saw the little mice all scurrying among it. Insects whirred and fluttered in the light. Then meadowsweet and thistle sprouted, stood up tall and bloomed. Then seedling trees came up and grew to saplings, reaching out their limbs to hold leaves in the Sun. Then larger furry things appeared, squirrels and hedgehogs, ferrets and badgers and bear and wolves, hurrying about their business in the forest that now grew tall. There were deer passing before his eyes. There were human voices calling somewhere distant.

But the light grew brighter still, flooding through the woods, flooding through his eyes, flooding through his skull, and the all-enveloping world spoke to him. In a female voice the world said, "So it is done."

That voice was echoing in his ears. His eyes were open. He awoke.

He still sat with the dead stag's muzzle cradled in his lap. Sprinkles and rivulets of blood around them dripped from the trampled grass into the soil. A livid aching flame was burning in his back; it must be sprained. The beautiful dead beast was laid down neatly on its breast as though in sleep, but the long thick neck was twisted half around in a most unnatural way with the head propped up by the antlers between his knees. He saw that the ragged gash along his arm had already closed and certainly would heal. How long had he been in the land beyond?

He reflected on the meat this animal had now become. All of his people would share. The creature was now hide and hair, sinew and bone, gut and glue. There was some handsome jewelry in its horns. So too, he would be meat for wolves and worms and crows someday. His ribs would make a trellis for the roots of things that love the Earth. Meanwhile his soul would do what the stag had done, return to dance in all that lives. It was all so beautiful.

The knife was in his hand. There was another thing that he should do. There was a custom in this country when you kill a valiant foe. The mothers and fathers and the children had their due.

So now he disentangled his legs from the branching horns, pulled himself from under the heavy head. It was a struggle and the torn muscles of his back were screaming. He managed to stand and then, a matter of pride, to straighten up. He hobbled around to the beast's side, knelt as comfortably as possible, shoved and heaved the body to bring its belly toward him. Then he finally held up the knife. He looked up toward the distant hill where his fellow men were surely watching.

But they were not there on the distant hill. They were here close among the trees just at the clearing's edge. The fellows had raced together down here from the hill and then they had stopped in various poses. Their faces stared at him with obvious enraptured awe. It seemed that his own young son had halted

them, for the boy now stood poised ahead with arms out in the gesture of holding back a crowd. They looked so comical he had to laugh. They all looked like marvelous satires of themselves, except the boy who seemed so much like his dead grandfather.

Very well; the final act would be done better with them close by. He shut his eyes. He reached out to the men and found their awe had opened them fully to the power of this ritual. He reached back to the village miles away to find the women and children at their work and play. He reached out to their burial mound and stood there at its cavern door for a moment to call the ancestors' souls. He gathered all of them, past and present, into his arms and flew back to this little clearing where he stood them all close around.

Now all of them were here. He had never before felt their presence so strongly. He had never before known the meaning of this act so clearly.

Now he came up, standing on his knees, the knife in hand, and opened his arms to the whole world. All the plants and animals of his vision were suddenly with them. Everything suddenly was vibrating with a song, one perfect tone, a harmony of male and female voice. The stag was alive once more, its soul returned, lying still and calmly waiting.

He descended to his work, brought down the knife, sliced the tough hide of the belly, opened it and reached inside. Here was the purple liver, organ of the courageous power that made this creature great. He gripped it and cut out the little bit around his fingertips. He held the morsel up for all to see. He could not tell which world it happened in, but somewhere all the folk cried out in joy.

Now he held the morsel out and squeezed a drip of blood onto the soil; now he laid the bit into his mouth and sucked its juice down to his belly. A silent bolt of lightning struck. Here was all blood, all juice, all fire and water, all power of life. The world's song rose to a thrilling pitch and then began to throb; it was the beating of all hearts.

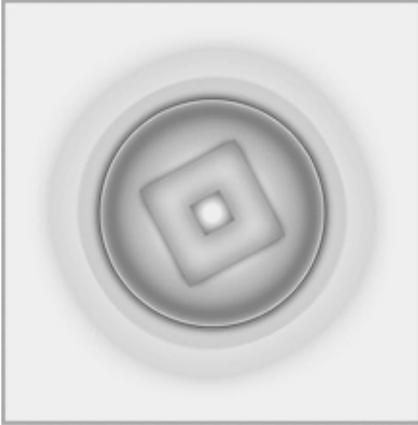
He gulped the morsel down and let its power spread out to all who were gathered there. All flesh was one. All souls were one. He held them for a moment more then let them go. He let them drift away, each with a portion of the power that the hunter and the hunted conjured here. The glowing light that lingered from the lightning bolt, the throbbing song, the presence of the multitude began to fade.

The man struggled to his feet and stood up straight again. The other world was with him still and always would be now. His injuries and pain were nothing to this joy that set his body glowing bright as midnight fire. He opened his arms again to the men, to the women and children, to the mothers and fathers, and spoke:

"Thus we shall eat."
He understood it now.



Ace Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley



**The
Heart's Desire**
Digital image by
Stone Riley

The Gentle Folk a short story of mythology

An old Scots mechanic – John McGrath by name – was the very last person in the U. S. A. who really believed the Gentle Folk are real. And his was no charming childlike thought but belief from experience for when he was a comely Highland youth a fairy maid had seduced him and then striven to lure him away into her realm. There, she promised, he would abide in crystal mansions, dine with jolly company on dainty fare and live a hundred years for every ten he might in Scotland. But he fled to Ohio instead.

It was sure unusual wisdom in his youth that Johnny did manage to demur. The fair strange maid appeared in his little room in his family's rural cottage every night for weeks – slept with him, entreated him, caressed him more gently than human fingers can, professed her love, whispered in his ear – still he would not say "aye" though he deeply feared to say "nay".

So then suddenly all in one day he sold what he could, gave away what was left, signed onto a freighter in Perth and was gone. And he didn't stop till he walked in the door of some kin they had in Perth County, Ohio.

Yes, but mark this too: In the twilight evening of that day when our brave boy left home, his elder sister had been walking on the road back to their house and thinking of him, and when this sister of his turned past a bend she came upon a maid standing on the roadside all alone, a strange maid whose sad Gaelic song may be translated thus:

"Oh what shall a forsaken lady do when a fickle lover's flown beyond the deep and rolling blue?" For it is well known that the Folk do not cross waters.

All right now, 1968, a modest red brick house out on the edge of town in the town called Lochland, Perth County, Ohio. A girl and boy have called on the phone and stopped in – or I should say they're a woman and man, seeing they're actually students at the college – and they have a tape recorder. It's one of those big square heavy machines with the big spools like people had in 1968 and the boy did his best Hercules imitation lugging it, to benefit the girl's opinion of him, as they came up McGrath's front walk.

They are studying folklore and they have come to hear old man McGrath tell all about the Gentle Folk and a little about himself. College students had just started doing that kind of thing, you know, in those days. So old Johnny McGrath is sitting in his lumpy threadbare easy chair on the back porch holding court with a big silly grin on his face and leaning toward a microphone like a TV star. He really loves it.

First thing after they turned it on, the boy had asked if he lived alone and he had answered, "Oh yeah, my wife's been dead some twelve years now. I always told her she'd work herself to death," and he laughed at some private joke that they ignored, "and she did."

The boy brought the microphone back toward himself and said, "Looking around your place here, Mr. McGrath, one might get the impression you work pretty hard too."

The kid was really working with this project, trying hard to get enough of the atmosphere onto tape like his professor

said. Looking around the yard, for posterity, the boy recorded, "You've got about a half acre operation here, I guess. Appears very well maintained. Nice garden. I see what looks like squash and carrots. Bit of a wood lot. Nice shade trees. I see you're painting a fence today. Do you keep any livestock?"

"Nay. I tried keeping rabbits for a time but I could na' stand locking 'em up."

The girl jumped in, "Do you have any children?"

Old Johnny hesitated for a long moment as if in doubt, but the girl didn't see the joke so he eventually answered, "None that I know of." In actual truth though, it had been a secret heartache to him that the luck of life had led him to marry a woman who, the doctor said, turned out to be barren.

Let me tell you how these two students came there. One of the neighbor children had been in that professor's folklore class a year before. That neighbor girl had been hearing McGrath say one thing or another about the Gentle Folk from time to time her whole life long so she wrote about those memories for that class, which that professor had then read to students this year.

And of course that professor had been seeing "Scotland" one thing and "Scotland" something else around that corner of Ohio for his whole life. Thousands of Scots had settled round there so not only were there place names in plenty, but people had "Scotch Craftsman" hardware stores and "Thrifty" grocery stores and on and on with some plaid always painted on their store fronts and signs, and here and there et cetera. The high school teams were "Celtic Warriors" There was a bagpipe band in town parades. So on.

But it was America and it was 1968. So that professor was just delighted that apparently some actual living person out there actually believed in fairies. To tell the truth, this boy and girl whom that professor sent had talked it over and agreed that old McGrath was either crazy or a liar and they just politely decided to keep their mouths shut on their scientific conclusions.

Still, they really did want to record whatever he might say and he was a charming fellow. I guess they warmed up to him as it went along.

The night before in bed though, near approaching sleep but still not quite, he saw her face. He heard her voice too and he had not heard her talking for a long time. With a hard sharp edge to her musical voice she said, "Don't you speak ill of me Johnny. You'd be no gentleman speaking ill of me!"

And he answered most sincerely, "Never have I done and never will!" Then he sat up bolt upright and sweating.

It was a very long afternoon with that damn tape recorder. The fun wore off. It must have done something to his brain. Into that microphone he poured every bit he knew about them.

He repeated some old beliefs that he himself thought nonsense – that fairies steal babies, blight crops, sink ships, poison cattle, wither men, that kind of thing, silly charms against fairies, silly things like that – he decided it was only fair to pass that foolishness along as foolishness. Although he did allow he did not know for certain knowledge none of it is true.

Some things he mentioned firmly as his own experience, that the Folk live in hills and ancient barrows and do not cross running water, guard old places and come out to dance on certain nights. He mentioned very cautiously that Folk and humans sometimes fall in love but the students did not even take that up.

So, a little further on he came back to it, ventured a thought aside that Folk and humans hold opposite opinions on this thing of love. It's not a bolt out of the sky to them, but a thing a person chooses, and to be held responsible for consequences. Still, perhaps for the best, the interviewers showed no interest in this bit of dire philosophy.

Mainly he passed on the realistic things about them people in the old country in his generation said they knew, everything he'd ever heard his more reliable neighbors intimate they knew.

That whole strange afternoon with that damn buzzing tape recorder did affect his brain in some mysterious way. He

was sure he felt some mysterious sensation afterward and the feeling did not wear off and then when he sat up sweating after another vision in the night there definitely was a damned buzzing in his ears.

In that night, starting from this second vision of her face, but this time silent, at first he thought there was a horse fly or mosquito in the house attacking him. In his deep distraction from the vision still half-seen in the dark he swatted at it several times but then quieted and listened. He was hearing it in both ears equally and constantly, unchanging. It definitely was the busy hum that damn machine had made the whole damn afternoon. Or maybe not.

Maybe it was like the ocean sounds sometimes when you lie in a bunk close by the hull in a steel ship and you listen very carefully, a deep liquid humming echoing sound full of distance, full of beings far away.

Or maybe not; maybe it was a blood vessel bursting in his brain or a stroke or a tumor; maybe it was a fly of death after all buzzing in his ears.

When morning and a decent hour came he rushed out to the doctor's office. The dawning sun had brought him no relief, nor had a cup of coffee nor the morning news nor half a breakfast.

In fact, by now he was a bit light-headed and definitely queasy. The buzzing in his ears was totally unabated and by the time he reached the center of town he'd fancied a dozen equally plausible medical causes for it and fancied quite a few likenesses for the sound. It was like the car motor in middle gear. It was like the radio hum between frequencies. It was like the background sound when he stepped outside his door in the daytime, the background whisper of all distant creatures going about their business.

The doctor examined him quite thoroughly as the doctor always did. He always seemed to be a curious chap. This time, though, the fellow did a lot more looking in his ears and throat

then testing reflexes – having him walk about the room and stand in different poses while he was half naked to be observed, things like that.

And furthermore, the doctor went to fetch some books that he looked in several times. At the end of this commotion, Johnny with his clothes back on, they sat together in chairs in the examining room and talked.

The fellow told him, "I hope this won't alarm you but I don't know what it is."

McGrath interjected, "But is it serious?"

And the doctor answered, "I don't know what it is. If you were younger I'd just tell you go home, go on about your business and see if it goes away. Many people get buzzing in the ears and it goes away with no ill effect and we don't know why. The brain is very complicated. Then there's an unlucky few who get buzzing in the ears for years with no ill effect, except it is so annoying and disturbing. And we don't know why. But then on the other hand sometimes it is a sign of something coming, a precursor. I'd like to put you in a hospital in the city just for observation, where they're more likely to save you in case something does happen."

"Something like a stroke?" Johnny asked.

"No, maybe like an aneurysm. Or maybe nothing."

So Johnny pondered. He rubbed one hand across his face and through his hair, and then the other hand across his face and through his hair. He closed his eyes and reached in deep inside, reaching for the in-most clock spring of this fear. Yes, he could feel something coming for sure. But without doubt he knew the doctor's plan was wrong. So he asked the fellow, "If I were a younger man you'd let me go?"

"Yes. But, see, with you in such good health as you've always been ... well, sometimes with someone as healthy as you have been for so many years, sometimes suddenly there is a major problem."

So that's all it was. The fellow was just afraid for him; that's all. He asked, "So you think the whole rig's going to collapse at once? All the tires will blow and the engine will throw its rods all simultaneously and the gas tank will spring a leak?"

The doctor smiled and shook his head a little and relaxed. "Well, it happens that way sometimes." The fellow pondered a moment, deciding what to say, and then went on, "Look here, John, your file says you were born in eighteen ninety-eight but you look to me more like a man of forty-five or so. I've read about your kind of case but you're the only one I've seen."

The good doctor pointed to a mirror across the room where they could see themselves sitting side by side.

"The first time I saw you I was young and now I'm middle-aged but you're the same. To outward appearances pretty much the same hair, same skin, same teeth, same eyes. You've come in here for a check-up every year, you broke your arm one time, had that concussion once and you got a cyst removed. That's all. But I'm afraid because I know it can't go on forever."

"No, it can't go on forever, I know that." There was a quaver in his voice. "You're right that something's coming too, sure as anything, just around the bend. But something's always coming. You know, now to speak on it, I bet that's why we're here with our feet on this flat ground at all; to see what's coming."

Well, he wasn't going to any hospital or some strange city just to make the doctor feel better. What he really had to do was get home and relax. He decided that he very badly needed to calm down. He determined at all cost to make a pot of chamomile tea. But then on walking out into the street he realized with great surprise that the buzzing had been soft while they had sat and talked. Just now suddenly it was loud again.

So he drove away from the doctor's office very slowly, thinking furiously, and turned left, the wrong way, at the light. He experimented inside his head a while and yes indeed the sound would depend on how he listened to it. When he turned

his thoughts deliberately away, yet gave some little corner of attention, there was a great lessening of both volume and rhythm, like a cello playing softly. Lost in thought, he kept on driving quite a while.

Actually for a moment he did notice that he wasn't going home but it didn't matter; he could have driven those roads around there in his sleep. When he gave the buzzing really full attention that was different too because he could discern a number of different notes in concert and some of these notes seemed very intriguing for unknown reasons. In a way, of course, he was asleep doing this but then woke up suddenly with a start, the car quite still and his foot pressed firmly down upon the brake.

There were cars stopped in the road. This was a back road but there were several cars all stopped. People were turning off onto the roadside and getting out and talking with each other and walking off into the woods. It was a bright sunny summer noon. The barber's wife, Mary McCutchen walked up to Johnny where he sat there in his car stopped in the road and Mary said, "What do you think?"

He shook his head vaguely. It was surprising that the music didn't change from shaking his head but only from his thoughts. He stammered at the good woman half a minute, utterly lost, but finally made out one end of his tongue from the other. "What in the world is going on?" he asked her.

And she laughed at that. "What in the world? That's a good one. What world do you mean? " And she slapped him on the shoulder and she walked away, back off with the others into the woods.

So he pulled over too and he got out. Coming through, he saw it was just a little copse and out beyond these trees, beyond the people where they stood, there was a big pasture they were staring at and pointing. Johnny came up on little Bill Cahoon, the little hardware man, who was holding a paper – it was a photograph – that people came and looked at in his hand though no one seemed to want to touch it.

"A big round thing with lights just like a saucer," Bill was saying, "just like they say, and it landed right out over there and left that big circular mark. I was standing right exactly here when it landed. I'd seen the light driving by so came to see and here it was landing. Then it took off and left. Eleven-seventeen p.m. last night and I don't give a damn if you believe me."

So Johnny looked out where the little hardware man was pointing and suddenly in his mind's eye could see his home. He could swear that ring out in that Ohio pasture was a fairy ring where the Gentle Folk had danced one of their reels there in the knee high grass of Scotland.

Johnny McGrath had been to war, World War One. He had simply been a truck mechanic back behind the lines over in France but the horror of the thing had found him nonetheless. He was close enough to the shooting that big artillery rounds could come in where his lot had stayed and one time one of these big bombs came just out of nowhere, out of a quiet night.

It was the very first shot of an offensive, you see. That happened. There was a great explosion among his battalion's tents and then confusion. As luck would have it he had just walked out across the road, into the center of a field to look up at the stars and though he'd heard the shrapnel zipping by, and though his ears were ringing, he was safe.

Suddenly now that same sensation overflowed his heart: gratitude and relief. And he began to look about himself with different eyes at these innocent civilian once-born mortal folk whom he had known so long.

"What fools these mortals be."

The line from Shakespeare curled around his consciousness among a curving rise and fall of woodwind melody that now pervaded all his thoughts. But that word "fool" was lush and green with pity in his mind, pity for all these folk with their innocent silly vision of saucer machines from space, with all their lives so penned in by false horizons.

And still he knew himself as mortal too. Still he knew that he had chosen to be mortal and he knew the outcome of that choice was coming due.

He waited up that night, you may be sure. He had no food, no drink but water and that pot of tea. After a great deal of reverie and puzzling it all about, he thought what he might do. He took a tin whistle that he had for many years, the good old Scottish kind, and sat out on the porch in back in that ancient easy chair and tried to play along beside the melody he heard. He was long since out of practice but picked it up again easily enough. Soon his fingers on the little instrument were simply prancing.

Immediately it seemed to be right. It seemed the melody would wait for him a while, sometimes, then whirl away a bit and then come back at last to let him lead again. Sometimes he and the melody even let the singing crickets lead and for a little while an owl. You may be sure that it was marvelous. You may be sure, although he did not dance, it was a dance.

And then at length, in the kingdom of clocks, the hour eleven-seventeen came round. John saw the fiddler then at last, across the grass up in the branches of a tree, sawing furiously on a glowing nut-brown instrument held the old way in the crook of his arm. The fiddler was tall, young, gently swaying with the night's gentle breeze as though perhaps a tree branch himself, tapping his foot up there – and he looked right down at John and grinned.

John suddenly knew and certainly knew, and yet did not believe, who this boy fiddler was. Joy, hope, gratitude, regret and fear wrestled in his breast. It was his son.

The two of them kept playing but the rhythm changed. By some trick the laddie now seemed to focus differently. I mean, it was no longer just a jolly dance they played but a coaxing conjuration too and just as they had been playing toward each other now they played toward others somewhere else.

By glances and posture and somehow by the music too, the laddie fiddler drew the human man's attention to a spot below him in his hawthorn tree, a spot on the open lawn before the trees, and there was some strange phenomenon happening there.

Something strange was opening or unfolding inside the air. With his heart risen up and firmly stuck inside his throat, John played a skirl upon his small tin flute, a whirl of notes to liven whatever it may be and beckon, then another skirl and another and another.

If he had known no better John might well have thought that something was arriving from the distant stars above – or equally that something was emerging from the earth – for some kind of dark yet brilliant dazzle glowed all round about in a way that seemed to shine both up and down. And there was a whirling movement.

This was all totally new to Johnny McGrath. When the woman of his dreams had come to the little room in the little cottage long ago it was always done with his back turned. She would speak to him first and tell him turn his back and then appear but there had always been this same fantastic glow washing the whitewashed chamber walls.

Then it struck him what the strange opening whirling movement was. It was a heartbeat. His mind's eye all at once focused within. He whirled in a surging current through the tough muscular chambers of his own heart. Then it struck him how truly tired and strained that muscle was. Then he was struck with the lonely heartache of all these years. Then he was struck and struck again by a pulse of overwhelming light. Then all was still.

A number of them stood there in the fairy ring before the hawthorn tree. One of them was she herself, another was their son, but there were more.

Johnny stood up, lightly now, stepped down lightly from the porch but then he just stood. To her he said, "I'm very sorry to have left you."

"Aye," she retorted with some vehemence, "and ye've been gone long enough! Yer little voyage is done. Ye know that don't ye?"

He hung his head in deep despair. He did manage to look across into her flaming eyes but did not speak a single word.

So then she softened. And she stepped out toward him lightly over the grass, her filmy glowing gown swirling around her youthful form. "Look, look," she said, stopping within arm's reach but still not touching. "I've brought the whole family! There's the aunties and uncles. There's me mum. They've come to dance with you."

Still he stared, but now with a dawning of astonished hope. "Fair lady," he whispered, gazing deep in her eyes, "can it ever be as it was?"

And so she touched his arm. Her fingers laid upon his forearm for a moment then caressed his hungry skin more gently than human fingers can.

"Oh, aye, aye;" she sighed in answer, "it's just ye tried me patience, dear one. I doubted what was in yer heart."

"Oh, Lovey, Lovey," he replied, embracing her at last, "I was just a cowardly youth and I was afraid but if you truly love me all is right!"

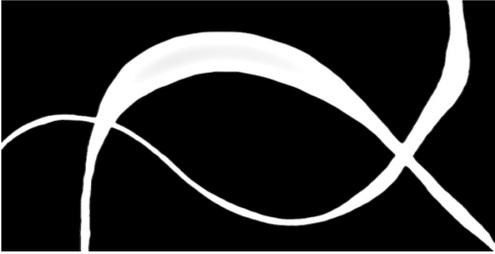
And so the fiddler, stepping to the circle's center, began again, slowly but then fast. She and he, their bodies swaying already to the deepening rhythm, she drawing him by their clasping hands across the grass into the ring, only one time did he glance back to the other world. There were the lonely house, the empty form upon the threadbare chair.

Of course we cannot follow farther – Johnny McGrath has left our realm of clocks – but let me just assure you friends that our hero's fate where he now dwells is good.

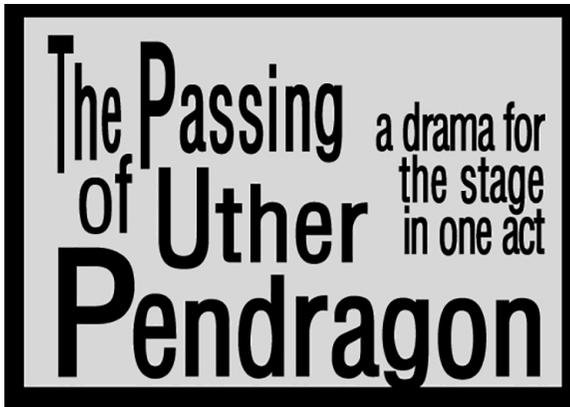
If you would doubt a human man could live and love and prosper in the finest ways in such a land where he has gone to

dwell, then kindly calm your fears. He is just a man but still a man is much.

Indeed, just realize: we human ones have lived a great variety of lives, done a great many different deeds in different ways, envisioned countless visions, thought many thoughts, played many tunes.



K Is For Knots
From Alphabeticon
Digital image by
Stone Riley



**Uther
Playbill
Title**
Digital
image
by
Stone
Riley

**The Passing Of
Uther Pendragon**
a one act play in King Arthur's time

INTRODUCTION

This version of the play is arranged for very informal presentation by two actors with no stage setting and little preparation. Two actors read from scripts held in their hands. It would be best for them to walk about a bit, posing and gesturing, but nothing of that sort is definitely required. They might just sit still on tall stools the whole time and simply concentrate on good dramatic voice. Thus, in a pinch, one single rehearsal shortly before the show might be enough.

In this script the two parts are denoted "Woman" and "Man" but please do not feel bound by their gender. It would be best if the two performers have distinctly different voices but they needn't be female and male. In any case, whatever else, their voices should express their parts. The Man's character is generally militant, willful, demanding, while the Woman is most often cool, contemplative and deep.

Some care should be given to your dress. Plain black clothing would certainly serve, but on the other hand you might prefer a bit of dash. If you have a shirt with stars and moons printed boldly on it, that might be ideal. Just keep in mind that this

play takes place beneath a midnight sky; don't let your clothing distract the audience from that.

THE SCRIPT

Woman:

The Passing of Uther Pendragon. A dramatic play by Stone Riley. The audience all take their seats. House lights down.

Man:

Curtain up. A few plain wooden chairs at center stage. Stage lights up but dim; light like guttering torches; shadowy, complex and flickering. In fact, the stone walls at the backdrop of the stage show that we are in a torch-lit medieval castle hall. Perhaps there are festive ornaments hung about the walls, for we have come here to a feast.

Woman:

No. No ornaments are hung about at all. The dark high stone walls are bare except for one tall wide stone-built window over there, up stage left, that now stands shuttered tight.

Man:

Actually, see, this great window over there is a screen on which various pictures will be projected as the play goes on. It looks like great wooden shutters now, with a bar across, but that's just the picture projected on it now when the curtain goes up.

Woman:

Hush! The Young Man enters at stage left.

A spotlight follows him.

This Young Man wears a jester's suit, for he's a comic entertainer, and in his hand he grasps the scepter of his office, a stick with on its end a grinning puppet's skull. The Young Man enters; he runs and dances toward the further wing.

Man:

Hark! My Mistress comes! Oh, she is good! You'll see!
Lady! Please! Thy noble audience awaits!

Oh no! She tarries. Oh, I know that cook. That sweaty cook! He drips into his awful pastries. He wants her in his bed. Oh! He touches her! She touches him! Oh! But who am I to say her nay? Such comfort I would gladly give myself, but she'll have none of that from me.

That cook! That cook! That is the man I know! He is a thief. Last Sabbath afternoon, I beat him good at bowls and he would not pay! I pulled his nose. Now, what is that? That is a pasty from the Duke's own table! I saw them there myself! And look, my Lady gives a kiss for it! Oh! Oh!

Oh, she is good. See how she kisses. See that hand? Each move is grace. Oh, comforts I would gladly give indeed. Yet, she is old. She is old. That silver hair! Those knowing eyes! That magic giving touch. She tells me, find a girl. A girl! There's what she says to me. Once the covers are tucked up beneath her chin, I am sent scuttling away.

She tarries.

Behold! My Mistress comes!

So, enter now the Muse, old and hobbling on a cane, stage right. The Young Man tries to help her to a chair, but no: she stands. She speaks.

Woman:

A long long time ago – but not so long ago as you might think – the people of Britain trembled in fear of coming civil war, for Great King Uther lay dying with no heir.

Yes, good Uther The Dragon who had held the British folk steady through the long and bitter Saxon Wars, held them steady in his gentle hand; yes, strong Uther of the Dragon's Head who had held the British army steady in his mighty hand all through those bloody Saxon Wars;

he had come down to his end without a child;

and the soldiers who had fought those wars were already brawling now every day in violent contentions in the streets

of several towns, for championship, vying which of their captains now should take the crown.

Yes, even with Good Uther gone sick-a-bed this week ago, dying of an ancient flake of poisoned spear point that had lodged inside a scar inside his ribs, many years ago, on a day of battle, and dying of his weary heart.

Man:

A childless king, aye, so thought the world and so thought he as well, for he had loved one woman in this world; and the woman whom he truly loved and who loved him in truth; they had shared one single night of carefree bliss. They had shared one single night together thigh to thigh in naked trust in all their lives – one night – because she was the good wife of another man.

Woman:

So now this man lain down in a shadowed lamp-lit chamber all hung with painted canvasses, done by masters, but built of stone, this loving man; the heartbeat slow, the brow grown cold; up he strained from fitful dream and heaved a mighty sigh:

"Aah!"

so that the captains and the servants gathered there all drew close. He raised a trembling hand toward the shuttered window and commanded: "Show me the stars."

Two elder servants hurried to push tall rattling shutters back, the old nurse who, as a little girl, had helped to wash him at his birth, and the hobbling hooded master brewer who was the nurse's bedmate now.

And there the great window stood open; open to the glories of a midnight sky all pricked through up and down by needle points from the dense atmosphere of brilliant suns that blaze away far out there, far out there beyond the heavy thick veil of watery dark that cloaks our realm; and yet a very fluid Earthy sky this was, whose scented substance softly glowed blue-green with cool moonlight.

Man:

Now the window breeze, the easy breath of a rare calm autumn night beside the cold and stormy Narrow Sea – this wind which now these people surely must feel as if it were the breath of stars – this entering breeze brushed gently by the small bouquets of green silk Chinese ribbon twined into a garland that was hung high from the rough tall posts of the royal bed,

and it touched Uther's face and naked breast, as cold as he but pressing hard, so that the wounded man was suddenly pressed down hard by an amazing weight and he fell heavily into the pillow and, almost uttering a silent cry, surrendered all the meager power that he found still within his grasp, surrendered any hope of further struggle;

and all of this while his dim eyes stared unblinking outward from that seaside tower toward the midnight sky.

But then a great annoyance suddenly came to life within the sick man's mind, a great annoyance at himself for having not yet thrown away the line and made a sail to seek some passage toward the further stars.

He twisted then about in his frustration, wrestling blindly with the swan's down coverlet until, except one leg and foot, except the big thick ever-seeping bandage on his lower left side, now torn aside to let the bleeding show, and the glistening cup-shaped wound, Uther lay completely naked.

Woman:

He felt as if some landsman's type of little carrack shell – the kind of tiny boat that any good farmer's boy and girl might build in half an afternoon from naught but hairy hide and sticks and grassy twine and wax – with naught but small things in their hands for tools and stumps and rocks for cobbler's anvil – that just that sort of landsman's boat was being held ready for him now.

Man:

He felt as if he only need look over his shoulder in some new

direction, and there would be his first loyal boyhood pal, fine in manhood now, standing waiting, smiling, with the tiny leather boat pulled out beside a tree.

The time had come now when they could let it down there into the broad estuary by the castle's lower gate, with the ebb tide tugging firm and impatient on the ropes, and Uther would just hop down like a young man would into the fragile shell.

He would take to the oars at first, he decided now, because he had to test himself; he needed, first of all, to see how soon that fabled ethereal tide would force him to rig the linen gull's-wing sail that would stand head-high, and let himself lie back for a rest. He even heard that good fellow standing by the tree call out and laugh gaily and saw the beckoning arm gesturing among the trees.

Woman:

But even now this dying king spared a glance about the place where his body lay. He twitched his head to cast the glance. He wished to spy the reason for his bitterness. He wished to know what should be done before he turned away.

And with surrender come and gone, and with this new intention known, Uther felt himself overtaken suddenly by another dream.

He felt the sky wind lift him up and set him down too soon with feet upon that bridge of nearer stars that spans our sky – set him down with feet on the first climbing steps of that glorious shining bridge of the Milky Way that you and I now know as the span of our own galaxy – so that the wind pushed at his back and he must walk with feet stirring up the glowing dust, he must walk the bridge most spirits walk away, but living still, in wondrous dream.

And soon came he to ground amid a little camp of sleeping cattle guards. Twas in some snow-specked frosty valley pasture way far north of there, he thought, and some good man with his sons come out to mind a herd, and all the hearty

fellows wrapped in blankets by the low fire with weapons close to hand and wrapped in slumber.

The herding dogs perked up to see him pass but their old bitch judged best to keep the moonlight's peace and this old lady of the pack hushed them all again with a long whisper of a growl, and then stern looks, and then raised her white brows and winked at him and cast a look down toward his feet.

And so he found there then beside that dwindling fire a certain boy. Beside that boy he felt compelled to kneel and gaze upon a pensive face.

Man:

So stirred the boy and glanced up in his eyes, almost awake.

Woman:

So spoke the man, seeing there these eyes which he had seen in many yearning dreams before; so spoke the man:

"This is my child."

Man:

So awoke the man. So awoke the dreaming man when the fading campfire rose up in shooting embers that shot now in a fountain from his opened eyes for all to see. And though he could not rise, a fair great bellow rolled up from Uther's rasping chest, and with fingers bending back around the bedboard, he gasped out loud the name "Igraine". So was named the absent mistress of his heart.

Woman:

The air was still for a minute then, and then extended whispering, and some rude discourteous shoves, and then a bearded captain of the royal guard was shoved up forward to stand by his pillow.

The fellow bent down close. Though Uther saw naught else, for all else was a haze of broken memories, and darkness that seemed reflected in the countless glittering bits, yet Uther watched this fellow through an oval tinted pane that seemed clear enough, that seemed to shade in green the only window

that seemed open to that world where he had walked in light so well.

Those who stood back further were urging the fellow to speak.

Man:

"Sir King!" the fellow shouted.

Woman:

Uther answered with a faintly waving hand.

Man:

"Do you know me?" The fellow shouted loud. Then, seeing that the glowing eyes flicked in seeming proof of conscious thinking cognition, the captain hurried quick and loud into the duty of his report, in quite the very way as if he'd come upon his dying king atop some quaking wall amid whistling cannon shell.

"Do you know me?" The fellow bent again closer to the eyes and turned his face side and side one time to help them see. Peering closer still, he judged it was no use to call a lamp, for the eyes themselves seemed definitely to shine, now seeming quite like Baltic amber.

"I am your Lady's paramour!"

No further flicker came and so the fellow hurried on:

"The Dukes and Council all as one sent me pelting forth, before last dawn, with horses ready at the stations from the trumpet call, to beg the Lady's presence, and I have just returned, still in my muddy gear and spittle beard, as all may see, but she will not come.

"I hurried up the stairs and then I heard the shout. I begged with every trick a paramour can know – for all those tricks I know from easy practice, as many good wives will testify if asked at law – and I have conjured them on her very earnestly and earned fine smiles, but she will not come.

"I finally asked if she would come to your command, Sir King, and she answered this: 'That is men's work.' There's

what she said. She has already sent from her retinue just some old nurse who, she claims, was present at your birth and has the power of benediction. But now she refuses to send more, nor better medicines to boot. Men's work, she says. She will not come."

Woman:

All the gist of that long report flowed through Uther's ears in twisted sound, and yet a point stuck in his consciousness that Igraine could not be found, not even here now at the end. So he gathered up two rasping breaths and turned his head to whisper to the crowd;

"Merlin Emrhys." He vigorously blinked his eyes to gather up a hold on vision, and there then Merlin stood. The king's fingers reached and twined into the old magician's woolen hood.

Man:

Hovering in the oval lighted space of Uther's vision, the Great Druid spoke: "I am here, old friend."

Woman:

The muttering breath then was quite inaudible to other ears, but came to the great philosopher perfectly plain. Now they stood in some other place. Standing, hands holding each other's arms, Uther spoke to Merlin thus:

"Merlin! You prophesied a boy! You spoke it twice I heard myself, and all of it seemed perfectly plain."

Smiling warily, hands on each other's arms, they began to circle one another very carefully step by careful step, and the king went on: "So. What then? Did I fail you in some contract in some way since then? Or was it just that little hop and skip in my dancing-bear routine, that I never did learn to your satisfaction?

"Or were some gods displeased somewhere, with my hopes of advancement? No, I would have seen that much if that were

true, seen it with just that silver looking glass you gave me. No; so then, wherein lies the failure?"

Man:

Uther got a momentary grip on Merlin's shoulder, lost it, got his thumb into the arm pit which was left unguarded for an instant. Thus restrained, Merlin let himself grow bull-like, with horns and ears and snout and hooves, so that he was a great-humped minotaur. Seeking then a real true grip into the arm pit's flesh, the king said:

Woman:

"A-hah old chum, perhaps then this riddle can be taken by the bones; yea e'en by the bull's own bones. Perhaps I have it right here, eh?"

Man:

Oof!

Woman:

It that right yet? No? How's this: My nonexistent son was never truly prophesied at all; was he, friend? Truly? It was my very dream to have a boy, and yet you lied."

Man:

And Merlin answered, loud for all to hear in every realm a human voice might reach; "Yea, Friend Uther! Your child was truly prophesied by me! A child to be the finest king to ever stand between these shores!"

Woman:

So Uther gathered up three rasping breaths, and shouted toward the world which he had known, with all of his own strength and more. He shouted thus: "Where is my son?"

Man:

"Peace, old friend;" the prophet spoke; "he is hid safe in love's embrace till now and all will be fulfilled in time."

Woman:

"Can it be?" spoke Uther in that other place. "I should have known."

Man:

"Peace, old friend," the prophet said, "and easy loose your lines. Voyage forth in peace, old friend, and steady breeze. Mind the current drift round Virgo's Shoals and the Whirlpool of the Mighty Forge. Steady steer for the one light at the dark edge of the Moon, then find a coastward wind along that shore to fetch you home. And run to port in rising dawn. Fly from this battlefield in peace, honored friend, for when you go, the new man comes."

Woman:

So then, standing in that other place, the aged priest spat into his own left hand and reached, with thumb and fingers spanning toward the ears, to press a few dry drops of spittle into the royal brow, while the king let his head bow down as one must do to undergo that bit of Druid ritual.

And with that bit of ritual, Uther felt as if a new eye opened, an eye that seemed to gaze perpetually into the stars both up and down. For a moment to him too, it seemed as if the glittering shapes that had been jostling round him for these hours, now had surprisingly formed into a shadow of an all-encompassing shape of every color, many colors that were far too dim or brilliant for an eye to see.

And yet somehow he felt as if he caught the outline of its shape. It seemed to be a picture of some harbor town spread out upon a pretty spit of land that curved around to make the harbor mouth from either side. He thought a tide must be pouring in to fill the tiny anchorage just now, so looked the action of the ripples far and wide.

Now to minister to the king in proper legal order, the mourners found and carried and stood the aged midwife there. The only females in the room were she and a whelping rat and the rat's

last cub beneath the bed inside the floor. The midwife's palsied hand produced and then held forth a tiny vial of fluid, a green glass vial with gold cap dangling from a cunning hinge wrought at some Fairy hearth with tiny pliers and hammer; fluid to be dripped upon the head.

Man:

At once, several willing hands of magistrates and dukes, horny hands far more accustomed to the grip of war, all reached out at once in hopes to catch the jewel-like trembling vial in case it fell.

Woman:

But in Uther's staring eyes she was all women.

Man:

The curving cheek was like all other cheeks, the eyes and chin and brow all like the female countenance itself, and of these countless forms it took inside his eyes, the form which shaped itself most certainly for him was this: Igraine.

Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine on that warm summer's day of flowers bending to the breeze, when they had kissed their fill and promised more. Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine reclined, with eyes startled wide in wonder and then languid in release when he had proved his cunning skill.

Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine rose up beside to stand upon their sheltered mossy bed, against the brilliant light; and she, holding open her linen robe like lifted wings fluttering wide above them both, and standing as a bird must stand in air to soar, and laughing bright, she'd bathed her bones and spirit in the wind.

Woman:

But now the face of all women spoke. And she said this:
"Do ye know me, Child?"

Man:

"I know you, Mother."

Woman:

So then ye hearken to me, Son. Ye hark?"

Man:

"I hearken, Mother."

Woman:

"That crescent land where thou art bound to dwell a space; ye've seen the chart?"

Man:

"I've seen the place meself, in dream I think it was; and too, I have been told the way by a friendly well-trying mariner who even gave me guided study of his charts one night, with lens and candles. And he said that I understood them well!

"Mind the drift at Virgo's Shoals, he said deliberately for me to hear not more than half an hour ago, and also mind the Whirlpool of the Mighty Forge, if such a spectacle with such a name as that should chance to heave in view. Make for the one light at the dark edge of the Moon. There catch a coasterly for home."

Woman:

"Ye'll run to port in rising dawn? It would not suit to fail the inward tide, hearken ye, for others long before yer time have missed it, and the tale was told and retold since then about their homeless wanderings. Fail not yer first in-going tide at Troytown Spit!"

Man:

"I'll run to port in rising dawn indeed."

Woman:

"Ye'll be a shining prince in that fair land."

Man:

"Mother! Shall I?"

Woman:

"Ye'll bend the harp and sing the melodies right from the birdies' throats, me well-beloved, and father many men."

Man:

"Mother! Shall I?"

Woman:

"Ye be me truest well-beloved, me one, and all that shall be done is done, and all that shall be done is done by thee."

Man:

"Mother! Shall I go? Now?"

Woman:

"And blessed; go."

And so, in the death bed chamber, the falling droplets from a sacred well came down, cascading billowing scent of white and scarlet rose among the wettened stones.

Man:

And so the bended fingers on the bedboard quite fell slack, the glowing eyes reduced to shiny coal. A final tremble, and the thighs came up as if set fit to dance a piper's tune, and one final bloody gout from the wound to soak the mattress through, to drip into the soil and rocks below to mark the place as sacred altar where this man passed.

Woman:

And so the sacred waterfall washed down.

At last his vision cleared. Wipe clean the windows of perception, and throw wide the windowed doors. The countless glittering crystal bits of every hue, each with its sound and taste and calendar and isolated meaning, came all translucent to him now like glistening glass; they smoothed like sun-warmed ice to form the moonlight's colored warp and weft.

And then the moonlight was the ever-intertangling sap-filled vine of leaf and stem and bud that makes our realm, and out through the castle's postern gate, there among the leafy shrubs, his old chum grinned and waved most energetically.

Man:

"Come on! Uther now, come on! The tide's still good!"

Woman:

They could not help but kiss like girls, then, muscled arm round muscled back and thigh to thigh, to jig the opening steps of Dance For Joy, for which the guardian spirits of that wooded shore produced a lively breezy tune.

But then when the new boy hopped down to the fragile shell, then the mortal blood dripped down through rock to water veins, so that the people gathered about the death bed, one and all alike, could feel the fluid virtues of the air drain down out of that place,

leaving the chamber's air most strangely warm and thin and still. The scents of various meats and herbs then were plain.

Man:

A seagull then was seen!

A young cadet who had snuck in the door in simple hope of seeing miracles, his simple plan to pose there as a messenger till senior rank might send him packing; this young cadet shouting while he ran to point out of the window at the sight:

Woman:

The white bird painted by the dappled moonlight gleaming from the waves below, its wings held wide and turning far out of view across the sinking water, just the way a single one of them will often do to track the smallest kind of fishing craft.

Man:

And then a slapping wind came up to knock the shutters from their hooks. Just as neatly as an oaken gate that turns on iron pins, the rattling shutters closed and latched themselves at once, and then the mighty crossbar fell, and so the window stood there well and truly shut.

Woman:

King Arthur started, dreaming of the distant noise. No king in that realm then, he was a boy of twelve.

The sharp pebble that had teased his scalp all night, there beside the dwindling fire where this secret king lay in a woolen wrap among his fellow cattle guards, this sharp pebble may have pricked a nerve just then, or else the distant sound itself was loud enough to wake him with a jerk.

Man:

He knew it was a dream again at once, not thinking that the trouble was a crafty band of wolves or thieves. He plainly felt, clinging to his mind, the plastic flesh of someplace he had been, or such as that, or else he heard the faces pulled out of shape speaking to him from behind.

Woman:

The thing which he'd done with these weirding dreams so far was to lean back on his elbows and gaze half way up beyond the horizon at the countless sharp points that are often brightest there.

At home he'd moved his bed, to the foot of his foster father's bed to find this kind of view, that gentle good old knight, and had been blessed with a transit of Venus. Sometimes the clarity of the stars would lift the dreamy cobwebs and all would disappear like foot-sore dust into the holy dew.

Man:

His elder brothers, all of them elder by numerous years, clumped in drunk one night, protesting to their Knight as a legalized committee, having dragged in a magistrate's most disgruntled clerk from the town with his bowl and scroll to witness any deal, that the family's foundling foster brother should not take the liberty to move his bed, even with no spoken leave from anyone, even usurping that so-far unallotted space where he was at that moment somehow loath to rest his little butt.

The good knight smiled but shut his lips, pressed them with his fingertips.

The band of brothers stepped back to a corner, taking time to plan another speech. But then Arthur had calmed them all by standing tall on his bed and giving a very formal wave of his hand; three waves, in fact. He had laughed then, and claimed a championship that he had won from them at draughts.

And there, tonight, he spied the lower cloud of stars which in that latitude must look to any human eye just like a flight of hillside stairs, seen in profile on the hill, just beyond some near-by valley, up to the Milky Way. To win such spectacles as that at draughts is quite a play.

Woman:

But now he found a different thing. He realized tonight this view would let the weird dream's full memory take shape before his eyes instead of only in his brain.

He held his thumb and fingers up as if to make a peephole in a screen. He beheld now in memory what he had seen before in dream, awake now to judge the sights and sounds of it against his little hoarded self-learned store of wisdom.

Our brave boy beheld this: A man-like being robed in glittering light, his brow encircled by a wreath of green silk Chinese bows. This peculiar spirit descends down those hillside stairs and, taking royal shape and face, strides here across the intervening valley.

A goddess green willow tree, beneath whose canopy he finds himself – whose ancient roots run through this ground – she smiles down.

The Great King kneels therefore within the canopy, and looks to Arthur's face. The royal eyes drip tears to see his face, and droop their lids in pity, so that a bleeding wound opens somewhere in the sky to sprinkle on his head like rain.

Man:

And then the Great King spoke those words which he, the boy, had found no wit nor dare to even hearken in a dream:

Woman:

Here is my child.

Action:

(They embrace.)

Man:

Curtain down.

Woman:

Applause.

(Finis)



Picture 45

From "The Passing Of Uther Pendragon:
A Fine Art Graphic Novel"
Digital image by Stone Riley

The God At Noon

a painting, poem and commentary



The God At Noon

Acrylic / canvas painting by Stone Riley

The poem:

The tremendous fascinating mystery,
which we can easily see
each time we look out at the world
looks back at us too
and it beholds us
with an infinite number of eyes.

The commentary:

Here is a very ancient vision of divinity:

How often has a human caught the glittering eyes of fox or mouse or deer or bear or lion in the teeming forest or the grassy plain and – with a shudder or in sudden awesome ecstasy – they felt everything outside themselves look into their being? How often have the voices of the wind told someone that the spirits of the land are watching? How often has the twinkling light of stars stabbed deep into a human soul? How often has that penetration broken through the calcined layers of a wounded heart so it might love again, or opened darkened places to the light of self-understanding so wisdom could

begin? How often has the awesome power of beauty caught us unawares?

True, now in the modern world today most times we find ourselves outside that forest and that grassy plain. But find ourselves, we do.

So then, where does one meet the infinite here in the artificial places where we live so many days? Often we will cling to one another, finding sanctity behind a lover's smile, in compassion for some wounded one, or in the mysteries of a little child. Or often we will find the mirror of the universe among the things bequeathed by old ancestors, in some carven bit of rock or on a painted wall or in a tale of ancient heroes.

Our masks of god do change;
the world around us changes.
And yet the vast and holy consciousness
behind all masks is there alive as ever,
still awaiting our returning glance.



In The Beginning

Subtitle: Meditation
On Guaguin's Wood
Carvings, acrylic /
canvas painting by
Stone Riley

Merlin In The Garden

a non-socratic philosophic dialog on war, peace and the life of plants

I must tell you, patient friend, that in that one full summer of peace amid the savage war (while King Uther Pendragon threw himself into the civil duties of Great Magistrate which he had so long neglected) that in that one peaceful summer the Great Druid of Britain did become a true friend of the Garden at Chalice Well.

Perhaps you'll notice that I choose to capitalise the word "Garden" as though it had been the generally accepted title of some thing. In sad fact, very few people ever gave the garden at Chalice Well any name at all because people saw the whole place as one thing and instinctively felt the water spirits were its ruling force. For a national institution that was so well loved, Chalice Well was poorly understood. The average Celtic Briton of Uther's time probably just felt that the whole hillside and steep little vale of the sacred precinct was a fount of miracles which they were glad to have and let it go at that.

For their own part, the deep granite spring itself and the two stone-lined pools and the two rocky streams which the spring fed on the grounds were thriving from all the worship. As you know, humans who took the waters there very commonly experienced divine visitations – indeed, in good weather there

would be whole weeks at a time when at least one such powerful radiant spiritual event would happen every day – and as you may know, water is very receptive to that kind of energy.

And while the spirits of the waters throve and became large (with their fame on the lips of a grateful nation) so they began to ignore the earthly plant spirits of the place more and more until at last by Uther's time the waters finally saw the beautiful garden all surrounding them as little more than vegetation.

In this particular year, the year when Merlin's mental state forced him to take this leave from duty that I'm telling you about, Merlin was noticing a peculiar thing the staff were doing. Whenever the flower beds and lawn and trees and hedges of the institution came up in conversation among the staff, people would lower their voices and avert their eyes and yet speak more rapidly. Something seemed to be afoot.

In fact (as Merlin did not know at first) the plant spirits had refused to appear when invited to the Chapel during the ceremony back at Yule Eve, a thing never heard of before, so that in the first grey light of the first dawn of the new year the whole able-bodied staff of Chalice Well must go out on a singing trek over every foot of the winding narrow snow-paved garden paths and they must stop frequently for earnest prayer.

After that extraordinary Yule, you may be sure, the staff were excited and worried and so by now, with a vibrant spring raising the plants into their height of power, the humans of the place watched and waited but knew not what to do.

But Merlin had not yet fathomed these strange doings and no one had seen fit to explain. Thus, you may understand, when Merlin went out one afternoon in the first week of June – the first week of his well earned healing retreat too – he chanced to find himself gazing at the Gushing Fountain from rather far back up the hill among some shrubby yew trees and then, you will not be surprised to hear, he found himself conversing with a rather different and smaller kind of being than he may have thought to meet.

With a little flash of orange light – while Merlin was just standing there in the spotty shade of the yew trees and rummaging through his purse for a snack – a small green person materialised before him, a little green humanish person standing in the next bit of shade ahead, all clad in a skin of bits of leaves and shaking its fist in evident frustration toward the Fountain. He or she looked to be about six inches tall. Actually though, this particular faery was one of those who grow big and small repeatedly while you stare at them so Merlin knew at once that it was more than a chance seeing.

And so he called to the being; "Wilt thou have a crust of bread from me?"

The small/big person gave over shaking its fist at once and turned to him, replying; "Nay, a sip of beer will do."

While Merlin retrieved the large full bottle from his generous purse and removed its stopper and handed it up, the spirit closely examined his heart then said; "One day let's have a talk." And she or he reached down a viney twiggy hand to take his offering. Then she or he immediately vanished, bottle and all.

Well, what to do?

Merlin sat himself outside the Chapel's private door that evening, the lovely old carved private door beyond the back hedge where members of the public do not go but where the staff buzz in and out like a beeline at the knothole of a hollow oak hive, and he waited for some one in particular to have a chat.

Of course he waited for Mistress Flora. Of all the spirits who lived as actual humans then in that place, she was the closest to the earth instead of the water. Even though she was embodied then as just a teenage woman and even with twin babes to occupy her time, she was of course the humans' leading gardener and leader too of some of their most important ceremonial prayers.

She came on soon enough, with her little boy and girl toddling along a ways behind, each tied by their own string to the apron of a good old gentleman. Flora herself was hurrying

ahead lugging a huge basket packed with flowers and greenery to decorate the Wishing Altar but she certainly stopped when she came upon the Great Druid standing there patiently beside the Chapel door silently and courteously holding up his hand in the sign of one who would like to speak.

Mistress Flora put down her bulging load and stepped up at once and smiled in Merlin's face and took his hand in both of hers to remould his fingers into a simple sign of friendly greeting.

So Merlin smiled too and briefly described the meeting by the yew trees and asked her thoughts.

While the babes toddled up alongside their elderly gentleman – whose hands were rather full of bundled greenery too – Mistress Flora nodded and smiled a little more then answered.

"Yes!" she spoke. "We hope ye'll sit down some morning for a mite of chat. I mean the garden people want to have a talk, not the staff. We're thinking about the way things always change."

But that was all she managed to explain. That much explanation seemed to exhaust the young woman's store of ready words and she knitted her brow and searched in vain for some more human sentences that might reveal to him more of her people's thoughts. But meanwhile, her two sweet babes – no longer occupied with walking and now clinging safely to their grandfather's trouser legs – took to slapping angrily at one another's hands.

So Flora went on at last; "Ye'll understand our meaning right enough, good druid, if ye'll hearken. Please, I know ye shall."

But Merlin did not have the strength as yet for magic work, not even for an operation like this one which promised to be so large a part of the Great Work.

He considered it seriously and longingly and tried to sum up for himself the good and bad aspects of the proposal but could not find any reason not to try. He even thought of three good common British sayings that seemed to clinch it:

'Real opportunity doesn't come along just every day;' and 'God gives mortal strength;' and 'Idle hands find idle work'.

So indeed it seemed like he must accept the offer to hold a serious philosophical discussion with the flower garden but he just didn't have enough of the real world's madness washed out of him as yet to undertake any such a like-kind doing. Ghosts of noble soldiers he had known and loved and saved and lost were coming yet to visit him nightly. That particular summer Merlin had to take the waters for weeks before he was fit and unburdened enough for any kind of renewed effort.

All through June and July, Merlin scarcely even found it in himself to lend a hand around the place in little ordinary ways. It was even midsummer before he took up the staff's offer that he should lead one of their invocations and even then they let him choose which deity he wished to call. Many pilgrims must have wondered at the silent weary dark-enshrouded man, whose face some of them knew, bathing with them all that spring.

But finally then one morning at the end of August there sat Merlin at last, cross-legged and motionless from dawn to nearly noon, perched on a bench in the garden of Chalice Well (for his mother had implored him for the sake of his bones not to sit too long in dewy grass) staring with utmost interest at a stand of hollyhocks in bloom twelve feet toward his left.

Now in late summer those were the only large generous flowers there (for the garden had no rose of Charon) and for several long hours a veritable flock of bees dashed among the blooms, among the more than man-tall stalks draped with their fuzzy leaves, the stiff leaves and stalks all together rustling in the warm breeze, conjuring a cloud of sound around the plants. This music was primarily a buzz and hum of insect joy that so much nutritious pollen was to be found here and taken so easily.

Merlin's mind kept turning back to the reproductive essence of the scene, to its physical reality. All through those intervening weeks, the garden had been enticing him every way they could to wonder about that question which they had conveyed

to him through their young woman: how everything constantly becomes something else. Every glance of his upon a seeding stalk of grass brought back the subject to his mind, and every touch of his fingertips on wood and every wafting mushroom scent.

Just yesterday he had chanced to meet Miss Flora in the children's nursery room beyond the kitchen and he had finally agreed, to her delight, and so this morning now he had promised to give the senior chiefs among the garden people every possible chance to talk to him.

So, he had slept last night upon some relevant philosophic maxims then wandered out into the rising sunlight, bringing a courteous gift for the garden of course, and thinking to himself how much that day so far felt like a widower's first date.

So there Merlin wandered out with a gift in hand into the fragrant summer dawn and sat down where an unseen faery voice bade him, and turned his face in the direction he was bidden, and waited patiently and most attentively through the whole show which was then presented.

He did not really feel that he got the point of the presentation till near its end, till near eleven o'clock, very near the hour when the sun must blaze overhead and force them to rest from their efforts. What was the garden trying to say?

What was the question they were posing for him to lend his thoughts to? Obviously, the bee and flower motif gave him to understand at once that reproduction is a method of creating transience and change, a way to explore the possibilities offered by the world around you, but that idea must be just the starting point. Surely they must be saying more than that. He finally got it after hours listening, as I say, but only through a long and winding train of thoughts.

On one hand, the intercourse of hollyhocks and bees was strange to him indeed. Here was an hermaphroditic being who thrust itself up tall to hold out its sexual organs in a fitting way to copulate with beings of an utterly different race.

Furthermore, the beings of that foreign race spared scarcely a thought for the service they did; they generally saw themselves as robbers of the plants, like so many insects do, and felt themselves fiercely loyal to their own separate scheme of reproduction.

But on the other hand, the beauty of the flowers was just as plain to him as to the bees. In searching for a shape and colour and scent and flavour which would work as an attractive charm upon the senses of the pollinating travelers, the plants had hit upon a form that attracted his eyes too, and magically struck up inside of him (just as it did in the bees!) a deep instinctive tune of immortality and pleasure.

From this, many questions arose. He must struggle through them then in search of ones that shone more brightly of truth than others did, for those would be their opening statement in the discussion.

For awhile Merlin pondered how this scene had come to be. He guessed perhaps the eldest wild ancestral hollyhock originally had stood up taller than its squash and pumpkin cousins so as to hold its blooms above high thick-crowding grasses on some prairie and charm some bees who flew up there. Then human gardeners too had found its descendants charming and they chose to pamper hollyhocks among themselves and carry them wherever there were flying pollinators of any suitable kind.

Thus these descendants, these performers, soon arrived upon this particular little stage this morning and various questions arose from that: why is the world not full already; why did the grasses grow tall and how did other kinds of beings play a part; are the likenesses of things more true than their differences or equally true or less; but none of this seemed quite exactly to the point.

At last he wondered what other ways there were in which the destiny of bee and flower and man converge. Upon that wondering, a bright white light appeared high in his mind's eye and the buzzing of the bees struck his ears with a new bright

chime and a subtle brightness of colour flooded the whole appearance of the scene.

How do their destinies converge? He fixed that in his conscious soul.

In truth behind truth, he and the spirits of the garden were converging toward some common vision, and the birthing force of that coming vision was the reason they all seemed to be here. Realisation is a more real thing than any individual beings who might appear to play host to it, for awareness is the universal stuff of all. Thus a brightness could pierce his soul's imaginary skin when he chanced to touch a glowing realisation. And yet, this thought about the fundamental nature of awareness did not seem to lead further on. He set this paragraph aside.

He focused on the scene through his physical eyes again and noticed the colour of the blooms. The trumpet-shaped cone of petals was a deep red then at their base an inner crown of a peculiar white leading toward the bloom's interior.

(We may marvel that Merlin could focus his perception on such fine detail at a twelve foot distance.)

He spied a flower where a bee with its fur all covered in yellow powder was just now kneeling on a spot of crimson flesh to leap and fly away and thus there was revealed an area of paler flesh. That white was not white, for he could feel a faint strain at that spot in his field of vision. That faint awareness of strain convinced him immediately that there are other colours which the human eye may struggle to see but cannot.

With that, he was suddenly convinced that to the bees, those radiating centres of the flower petals all this morning had been flashing brilliantly with dazzling sunlight. And what of that? It showed the error of his judgment before when he had thought that the blossom's beauty was alike to himself and to the bee. In fact, the blossom was differently beautiful for himself and the bee because of a difference in their physical bodies. This felt as bright and true as any thought before.

He came back to the whole scene before him, to its reproductive nature, to the question of how their destinies converge,

and to the initial question of how everything constantly becomes something else and as well the initial seeing that reproduction was a way for these immobile plants to explore their surroundings. He rested on those points a little while then chose a new approach. They had chosen to show him bees and hollyhocks. He had considered the hollyhock awhile so now what of the busy flyers?

It struck him to ask how much the bees were like the garden spirits and how much like the humans too. The bees of a hive love one another so fervently that their desire for individual life is very little felt. They work themselves to death without resentment and some kinds die whenever they venture to sting in the hive's defense.

Merlin knew that the 'king bee' (for that expression was used by humans in those days) was really the hive's queen, that they had chosen her only to lay their eggs and not for any other regal duties.

The bee hive is so much more collective enterprise than most humans knew, a collection of the members' imagination as well as their will. If you have ever witnessed a swarming hive all make a choice at once and all fling themselves into the air and dash off together in the direction of some distant place, and especially if you were a practitioner of psychic arts while seeing that amazing sight, then surely you will know what I mean.

The garden spirits were certainly a hive as much as that, Merlin knew, for he could just as easily draw back and talk with them all together; he spoke with a mountain just as easily as with a rock or tree or worm that helped to make the mountain, or with a whole rolling weather front as easily as with its individual winds and vaporous clouds.

But differences between the plants and insects flew immediately to mind: the garden's queen and king lived in much more unity than the queen bee and her wandering drones; land spirits are strongly rooted to their physical place while animal spirits are not.

And a great difference for humans too: humans build such a perfect marriage as the bees sometimes but very seldom and Merlin himself, the representative human on the scene, had never been a committed part of any such.

So then he thought that he had strayed from the question of how things are alike onto how they are different. But no, he then immediately saw, in fact it was the opposite; he had tended longingly toward the unrewarding question of how things are alike even after he had definitely realised that the faeries wanted him to wonder how things are different.

For Merlin – a human – it had always been a source of most attractive joy to see the endless subtle common nature of all things in the world, for this was a thought far different than his typical accustomed thoughts, a thought that conjured feelings of secure peace, a thought that seemed to be purely and deeply good because it always reassured his hope; and yet it was a thought which is evidently not important to hollyhocks and their kin.

It occurred to him that bees must surely share his accustomed weariness of striving and his fear amid all the competitive killing and dying that is common to animal life. Too, the bees and humans both managed to struggle through all of that by reducing all the world's complexity to simple rules of life. All of that would seem to suggest that bees as well as humans experience a joy beyond their usual experience whenever they chance to realise that the myriad separate things around them really can be seen alike in fundamental ways. That is a lodestar of how most animals live.

But none of that at all could be said of the garden. The garden lived by striving to fill every corner of its reach with a mass of living substance and that is a very different strategy than the beasts'. A garden did not yearn for peace because it never very much waged war; it only girded itself for a fight when some horde of pests descended and even then put up a weak defence. No, variety instead of unity was the great ideal for plants and that was why plants shaped their individual

bodies so freely and cross-bred so strongly and mutated so fervently.

Merlin wondered why he'd never come upon this thought before: plants are far more powerful than beasts. How many stands of forest had he seen that were all denuded by some host of marauding pests, and a whole season's food production lost, and yet the selfsame trees leafed again prolifically next year? Plants are far more powerful than beasts, with every cubic yard of their habitation place so much more full of powerfully nutritious stuff, and all of it done by a strategy of diversifying.

The faeries of this particular garden place had rejoiced with dance and song one day when a healthy thistle seed blew into a spot where nothing else had thrived; and now in one corner of the chamber behind his eyes, the faeries held up some pictures of that celebration. (Merlin was very glad to see those little pictures and to feel the joy around them, for he and the garden today had managed very little direct mental communication; this sudden bit of contact made him feel that he was coming up at last close behind them on their trail of thoughts.)

Well then, it must be a stunning transcendental vision for plants now and then when they realise that everything really can be changed by will. Therefore that surely is a lodestar of their life.

For a being in a human life that thought generally holds a perfidious evil attraction, stinking of corrupt self-destruction. But human philosophers do not generally say the omnipotent power of will is definitely evil, rather that it is a fact too strong for human frailties, often even feeling they may theorise some extremely good god to exercise it. Surely the plants likewise know the human ideal of cosmic unity is a basic fact even though it reeks of stagnation to them.

So, the feelings of humans and plants are not precisely opposite but they are strikingly different and born of different ways of physical life. So now he understood their inquiry, and also understood why they had sought a human being – an animal – rather than a hill or star or season or deity with whom

to converse upon it. One of his fondest ideals was bad in their eyes and one of their fondest bad to him.

So now he had this: How is it that everything constantly changes to something else? Is it because good and evil beyond our normal seeing are the same? Is that how all our destinies converge?

At last Merlin let the lids fall down over his physical eyes and sat there for long minutes basking in a penetrating light of pleasure. The bees by now were struggling in the warm sun too much to give him much attention but he felt the hollyhocks and the whole garden relax and smile together with him.

Now, as per their agreement, he must ponder that awhile and try to come back someday with a thoughtful reply. Surely the garden had gained some partial increase of wisdom from his thoughts so far, just as he had gained a bit from theirs, but in truth he had only just barely managed to grasp their main intent.

How is it that everything constantly changes to something else? Is it because good and evil (beyond our normal seeing) are the same?

Is that how all our destinies converge?

I can tell you that it took considerable effort for the lean brown man to stretch himself and slowly stand. He realised how warm he was in the sun but how cool his sweaty gown felt in the breeze.

He brought his gift over to the hollyhock bed – it was simply a large watering can full of rich green algae-laden liquor from the rain barrel near his bedroom door – and examined everything carefully close up while pouring out these two gallons of rich brew slowly through the can's long neck among all the plants in reach, poking his long spout here and there down low where they were very crowded.

He now saw there had been poppies this year in the foot-wide strip of ground between the hollyhocks and lawn. Only the dry grey curly flower stems of them were left by now, the bright orange petals and clump of leaves all gone, each stem

standing up a foot high above the carpet of green thriving penny-leaf at their feet, each dry stem left alone to hold up its drying capsule of the tiny ripening dust-sized poppy seeds.

The tough springy corkscrew stems (all that remained above earth of their race) swayed in unpredictable directions at his slightest touch. Very soon the seed capsules would dry so much as to pop their mouths agape; then their bouncing in the wind would sprinkle their magic powdered essence round about. After that, of course, the heart would be gone from the flower stems and under the next rain (or even the next watering can) their very bodies would dissolve enough to collapse and sink below.

These plants were surpassing beautiful to Merlin. Because he was the kind of thinker that he was, a spinning geometric symbol appeared in his mind's eye to try summing up his vision of the poppies. This geometric figure was the astronomer's symbol 'Earth': a circle with two lines crossing in it to show the cross-roads of the elements.

This mystical glyph appeared to him superposed upon the top mouth end of one of the poppy pods but it didn't fit the little geometric circle figure which the pod had sculpted on its face. The thin puckered mouth of drying plant material made a circle figure with ten radii instead of the Earth figure's four and so the Earth figure spun and whirled upon it in his mind's eye.

You may be sure, this piece of geometric vision (which you and I might find to be a little interesting) was full of splendid concentrated meaning for him. And he counted this vision as a gift back from the garden, as more than ample recompense for the can of thick green water he had lugged out there at dawn.

But then the water quit gushing from the end of the long spout. He was already holding it tipped down steep to drain every drop, so truly the can was empty. Merlin laughed out loud at his own shock and disappointment with this inevitable event and looked up at the great noontime sun and shook his

head disparagingly at his own sudden change in spiritual size. What did the Sky care about his running out of water?

Of course he was familiar with the thought that good and evil are the same if you can look beyond the manifest needs of life; he personally knew of beings in the universe who are so big that their immense lives are undisturbed by any struggle between "dark and light". And he was familiar too with the notion that the struggle between "good and evil" is the motive force within all earthly life, though he had personally rejected that idea for being too simple. But the garden was proposing a different thought than those to him.

The garden faeries had mentioned Destiny in their question, had they not? Now, Destiny is a force that draws you toward it, different from Fate which carries you along. But so what? What good sense could he make of that? Destiny, Change, the relativity of Right; he doubted that he knew these subjects very well at all.

He wondered how long it might take him to get back here to offer some relevant questions in reply. How old would he be by then? And would he ever live enough that he and they could find agreement on some answer? What were they looking for after all? How did this philosophical inquiry offer hope for resolution of the garden's conflict with the waters?

In the meanwhile these matters would brew in his mind, especially this matter of right and wrong. Oh yes, any spirit incarnated in this world (this hard earthly realm where all the elements combine) must constantly discern what is good and bad. That is a lodestar of life on Earth.

But what is the truth inside that truth? Why do all things change, endlessly and constantly, into other things? Is it a fundamental truth that the most powerful opposites really are the same, and thus there is no power holding things in one shape or another?

The destinies of all things surely do converge, but can this be the reason that they do: because they all sum up to zero, not to infinity nor yet to one?

Over the coming years these things would sometimes plague him and sometimes yield to his thirsty lips the sweetest kind of consolation. In human terms, it might be long indeed between his visits to that garden bench.

Friend, I can tell you a thing which Merlin did not ken until another visit later: the reason why the garden spirits had resolved to undertake that philosophical discussion.

Just the mere comprehension of such powerful questions by such patient beings brought an increase of the garden's power, for they were thus holding themselves up into the main stream of the Great Work and thus they began to draw the attention of some very strong souls. They sank their roots a little deeper, held their leaves a little longer in the fall, and put up new leaves sooner in the following spring.

Also, as you would surely guess, with all the congress of cogitation going there, more of the humans stopping in at Chalice Well took up lingering among the flower beds to think deep thoughts.

There soon occurred some very splendid visions of Love among the roses and just as soon, one old half-hollow oak gained fame as a proper speaking tube.

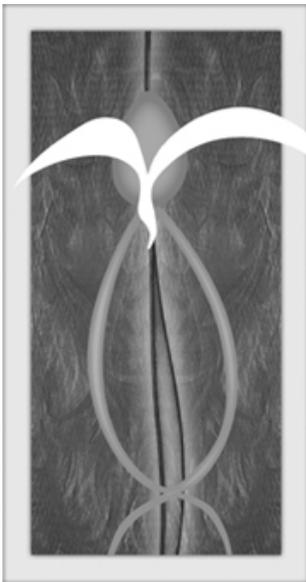
This was the big grandfather tree who had stood long years of service down beside the little outflow dam of Chalice Well, dropping many of his acorns year by year into the water there where the two streams of the well converge and jump and run away; he had a little open slit among his buttressing roots where people now found they could slip in offerings or inquiries and whisper and listen to replies from various realms.

The staff took to making time among the plants a regular part of the healing ritual which they offered to the public, so that each little bunch of naked bathers would troop up from the cleansing pool to sit and sing awhile among hydrangea shrubs and such. They soon began, of course, to find proper names for the various spots about and they got some new signs put up in various places giving visitors directions to "The Garden".

Ah now, my friend, you must know too that it was very well for the Great Druid to partake in this bit of strength, for he would soon be called back to his duty.

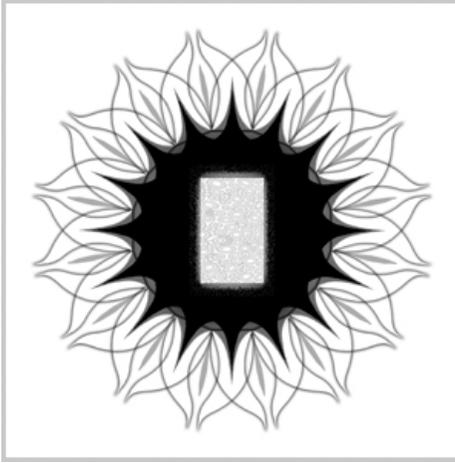
Five times since Uther's wooing, the glowing Moon had turned the face she shows the human world so that on that peaceful summer day, the Lady Duchess Igraine would stand the sea cliffs and trot the stone-fenced country lanes of her Cornish realm with belly well swollen and many distant thoughts.

Only five moons more there were ere Yule when she would pace up and back her privy chamber again in yearning expectation of a different man, now with her ladies present too. She would shout for Merlin then, shout silently with all her might and grief for a great druid to come quick and spirit off this new man to long years of hidden safety, this child of brilliant light who was not her husband's but her nation's and the world's.



Horus Rising

Digital image from
acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley



Inspiration
Digital image by
Stone Riley

Preface **a poem of achievement**

April 2001:

In August of my fifty-fourth year, leaving my last wife, I moved out to a quite peculiar place a friend had found for me to rent – a kind of modern day shack to tell it candidly, though plenty roomy for a bachelor life – at an old ex-horse farm no longer working, on an elevation of the ground called "Spirit Hill", a steep round haymeadow hilltop where a range of small size forest mountains hold up the skyline all around, at a dirt road's end, amid several hundred acres of these well-loved wild New England woods. Of course fine little creeks wind and tumble down the bony creases of this land.

And my new place had – and still has now – several small rooms, one of them with lovely morning light, and in that room I soon propped up a soft pine board left over from some simple furniture just built, and picked out the old art brushes again from their tool box after leaving them aside for twenty years. (To tell it candidly, I'd made a sign or two and such as that from time to time, so had the proper kind of paint on hand as well, though in few colors.)

I painted me a picture for a space of wall. I must. Who else would paint the picture that was wanted in that place? It

was a magic morning picture of the Sun. It turned out pretty goddam good, to my surprise and even shock. (That's speaking candidly.) Now – eight months on and eighty-seven pictures later – much has changed for me.

The walls are full for sure with only space remaining in the attic. But my interior space has blown out to the furthest reaches of the stars beyond all walls, and I have reached down to the deepest waters of the soul, and found myself alive in all the realms of myth.



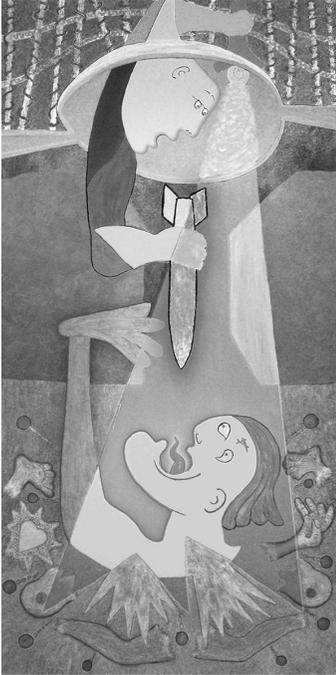
L Is For Lake
From *Alphabeticon*
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Part Five: Dire Confusions



Dire Confusions

Digital image based on two paintings by Stone Riley



**Drone Strike
In North Waziristan**

Acrylic / canvas painting by
Stone Riley, Often shown at
the artist's anti-war poetry
and story performances.

**Drone Strike
In North Waziristan
a memoir poem of
war and love**

My son and his wife just had a baby, a beautiful
new astonishing human child.

Last month two women went out to a water well
at night and were rendered into bloody pieces.

I cannot pretend that these two things
are different sorts of things,
pretend that they are not
the same type and quality of fact,
for they are human facts.

I cannot say, Oh one is mine and one not mine,
for my one human heart strains to encompass both
and strains
to examine them with the fear and hope and joy
and shame and trembling pity that are all alike
the province of one heart.



Clockwork

Digital image from
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**Shock And Awe
a war poem**

Here's a combat story from Iraq that I heard on National Public Radio one morning.

The report was very brief so please forgive me if I have to fill in some details. That's really what you do with a radio story anyway and the incident apparently was pretty typical; so I probably can't go very far wrong.

Anyway, the lead point element of one of our mechanized divisions has reached their current designated spot on the road to Baghdad. They halt, drive off the road and they form up their vehicles around the landscape like they should. The commanding officer of course naturally sends some guys out in tanks and Bradley armored vehicles to scout ahead a certain distance up the road. The radio reporter happened to be a passenger in one of those particular Bradleys so he tells about this.

So pretty soon they spot a major ambush attempt. Our guys, well trained and still alert despite the sleepless grind, see it in time with their computerized vision screens. The enemy has put some tanks, maybe half a dozen tanks, probably

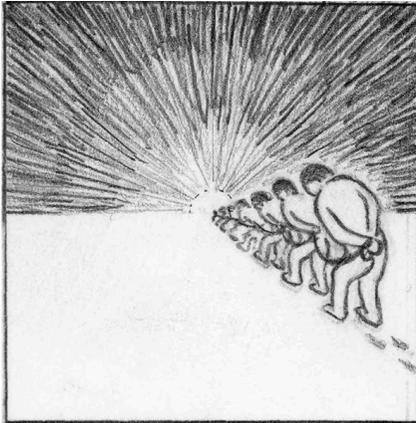
big T-72's I guess, lying in wait, hiding in among the little houses and the little mosque and palm trees of one of those dusty little adobe desert villages.

Our guys stop and deploy and – while they're still maneuvering outside of the enemy's effective range – they pop all the enemy tanks with one round each. They all explode and burn. That's good shooting. And pretty quick our guys are on their way again.

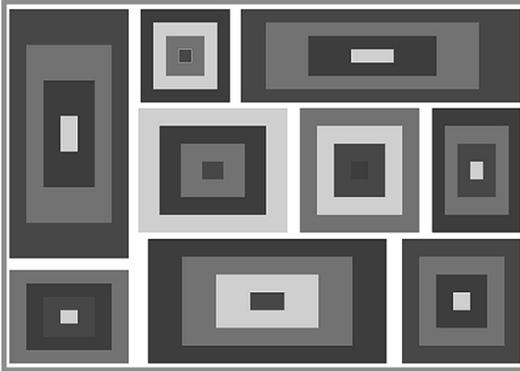
Now here's the thing. They go as far forward as they're supposed to go and turn around so now they're rolling back. They reach the ambush site again. Now here's one single enemy soldier left alive, all alone on foot, and he starts shooting at their armored vehicles with an ordinary AK47 rifle.

They pop him with a cannon round.

That's what we're calling “shock and awe”.



Ten Of Swords
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley



Corridors

Digital image,
design for a
painting by
Stone Riley

What Is Money? a pamphlet about economics

Issued by the author as a pamphlet on the streets of his city during the Occupy Movement in summer 2012.

Important:

Please see the 2016 addendum at the end.

Money is a way to do arithmetic with human lives.

It is a kind of magical arithmetic that lets us try to represent human relationships and interactions as precise numbers, to try to record and weigh our doings properly and fairly. It is used by most practitioners to try to bring secure balanced justice into their lives, and as a vehicle for their honest creative skills, but it is used by some to lie (with tall tales, misleading metaphors, masquerade, etc.) and thereby to steal.

In all of human history for which we have discovered and deciphered news reports – the last few thousand years – people have been complaining that money doesn't work right.

People feel it ought to be a kind of stuff, solid real stuff that accurately records human rights and skill, a proof of the honest rights of those who own it, but it's always fantasy pretend stuff instead. That is to say, the calculating and recording (of which money actually consists) often yield astonishing results

opposite to the sense of art and justice that most people seek when engaging in the practice.

And of course the astonishing results often happen when those who are in charge of record keeping and calculating are also in command of violence, and thus are free to invent tricks that make the money stuff (and the rights it's said to rightly represent) belong to them. And they often command laws into existence to bless their theft, to try to magically instill shameful paralyzing guilt into their prey but invigorating righteousness among themselves.

And in fact, there is much to and fro in all of this. For the last few thousand years, wherever people use money much, arguments about how to do the sums properly have been endless. We are always changing money – the procedures, laws, words, and even our basic ideas about it.

For example, new laws were created in the late 20th century for credit cards as a kind of money. In a larger example, we always try to have a clear idea of what "real" money is but our idea shifts.

We might agree gold or silver coins are the real money, or else pure tokens (stamped bits of clay or printed paper slips etc.) or maybe ledgers kept in holy temples. If we have no money we agree is real, people run tabs on each other and try to agree on arbitrators for disputes. And beyond money, we share for free with people we agree are family.

Circumstances change and social forces shift so these arrangements are a constant struggle.

Indeed, in extreme times it can shape up like a grand life-or-death sports event where people doing the various professions in a country get up opposing teams (like the Soldiers versus the Farmers versus the Clergy in medieval Europe) then load a huge wagon heaping full of money stuff and vie to shove it their direction on the national playing field.

Using that kind of analysis today you'd have to say the game is currently the Moneylenders plus their servant Poli-

ticians against the Workers with the money wagon shoved right down to a crumbling cliff edge that marks the farthest boundary of every city's Central Park. And when we read the daily news this mental picture is vivid and exciting.

But that sporting view of economics is useless when we're losing the match so badly. If we say "It's Them versus Us in a game of Struggling For The Money" we'll only be maneuvering on the same old field. Conventional thinking is a losing strategy.

Can we quit the fatal haggling? Somehow can we recognize that the wagon full of money stuff is just pretend – nothing but a metaphor for electrons in computers owned by the banks – and then can we walk off the field and find a better pitch?

Shall we consider using magic?

First let me describe the desperation of this moment.

1: There is no chance left of stopping global warming before it yields tremendous pain and dislocation; in fact, it is already doing so and very little action is being taken.

2: Our money system is now obsessed with a grotesque ideology in which all of Earth is treated as a gambling hall; all the excesses of addiction which appear in such a place are seen as proper human nature according to the current laws and philosophy of money.

3: Our country, the United States, is an empire whose ruling elites failed the tests they set for themselves in seeking world domination; they have turned toward home with a wish to conquer here; they have tried to stupefy and overawe us, tried to drive us to a slavery of debt, and – failing here too with the inevitable rise of resistance – they have largely gone insane.

4: The U. S. government – born as a republic and then evolving toward democracy, but now deeply corrupted in the money craze and panicked by its blunders in the imperial wars – has turned tyrannical; our government now imagines threats at every point on every map and often acts with extraordinary cruelty.

5: In short, nothing is stable. Everything is changing and will for a long time. The current money system – which uses bank computers as undoubtable holy scribes – will dissolve the first time the worldwide web goes out of service for a week or so. Retail sales, pay checks, taxes and much else will be impossible. People will try unofficial local kinds of money but that involves serious difficulties of its own.

So, in this awful wreck how can we possibly help our children and their children and theirs have decent lives?

Shall we consider using magic?

At the start of this essay I wrote "magic" as a psychological term to mean "magical thinking". That term refers to the kind of reasoning where we mix real world facts with themes from myth, instinct, etc. and believe or act on the result.

First I said money's most basic act – assigning numbers to your human doings then calculating with them, then feeling like the mathematical result is something real and true – is magical thinking. (It's based on the same mental process as buying a lottery ticket because its ticket number is your birthday.) Later I said money laws have a magical function for us; laws can make us ashamed of being in debt and proud of being owed. I might well add that being in debt is an especially fearful magical thought.

Insights like this are useful; we will see things more clearly if we identify the human mental magic processes in money, as different from the facts of circumstances. For example:

Let's say some day you're on a committee to create some kind of unofficial money in your town. Okay? Might happen? Systems of this kind face real difficulties but let's say that you use insights about psychology to make the system fit the way human beings think. I would say that you are "using magic" very well.

But let's go further. The word "magic" is also used by artists nowadays, so let's consider that.

If you hear a creative artist say "magic" in a way as if it's professional technical terminology, they basically mean "beauty" but they mean beauty of a very useful sort.

When dancers, singers, musicians, actors, poets or comedians go before an audience, or a painter imagines her audience beside her, and if the work is going beautifully, something happens which they often think and speak about as if an enchanted circle has been cast.

You feel a powerful flowing empathy among everyone there and you feel as if the work is waking up in that empathic circle. The work will be shaped like it should be for those people and while it takes shape you gain new understanding of it. That's what artists call "magic" and it really works when art is done beautifully.

So here is the conclusion of this essay. Here are my suggestions for the future, for the benefit of our children and theirs and theirs.

I suggest that you prepare yourself to work on that committee somewhere developing unofficial local money that will be so useful that people will continue using it long after the worldwide money system disappears. (It will help them eat and shelter from the weather and keep peace in their community, etc.) Or if you never get that job, some other opportunity to be useful with money skills will certainly arise.

First, there is a book I suggest you read. This book is by David Graeber, a nonviolent anarchist college professor who is a leading intellectual in the Occupy Movement. It is one of the major sources for this essay. Read it twice at least.

This book is titled "Debt: The First 5,000 Years" and it is full of excellent true stories. They are from the whole length of recorded history and from reports by anthropologists who studied what money is and how it's been used in societies across the world. These stories in this book will serve you as a treasury of real examples to help you build your work on an accurate understanding of human nature as relates to money.

And secondly, I suggest you dance. Learn it from your human body and by watching others. Let dance show you how energy flows and thus how beauty works in creative art.

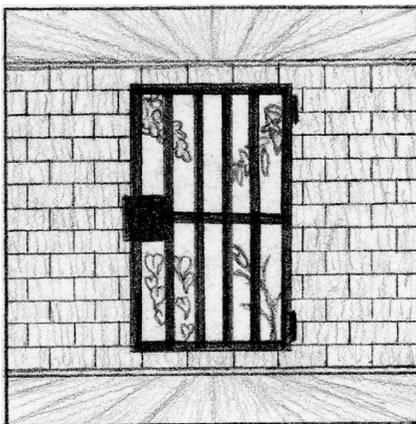
Finally, I suggest you see your work as art.

Addendum in October 2016:

In the years since this very jaunty pamphlet, through a long psychological research project, I've reached a better understanding of money. The human mind's extreme fascination with money was my entry point.

Of course money is a magic prison that we weave for ourselves, but evidently it is woven from some extremely compelling wicker wands of instinctive thought and behavior. Judging from the strength and consistency of our compulsions, even though they always lead to evil when we obey them to imagine money, these thought and behavior patterns must be ones that served us very well indeed in our natural habitat.

I think we weave money from these two features of our evolution here on Earth: Our instinct for panic hoarding and the art instinct re Dr. Denis Dutton. I invite you to consider this proposal and put it to good use somehow in your work.



Four Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley



Eight Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

**Madness
And Hope
political analysis**

Written in 2005:

In old British stories – Shakespeare's Lear and MacBeth, the King Arthur tales, others – there is an understanding that when the king is sick in soul, a pall comes on the land. Today our President is mad. By all appearances that we can see, he is insane. And yes indeed, as real as anything it feels like a twilight permeates the air across the country, an ashy twilight that is dirty on the lips and tongue. Our story of our America has crumbled into this. Like in the old Greek land of shades, it is as if our bread has turned to dust.

The other evening on the radio I heard an excerpt of a speech that Mr. Bush is currently giving to assemblies of admirers. He said his scheme for Social Security, in which the government would borrow trillions, would save Social Security from going broke. He is not saying this patent nonsense to anyone except admirers and the White House spokesman has quit pretending that it's true. And similarly, long after the world had learned there was no cooperation between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, long after Mr. Bush himself had nearly said as much to reporters, he continued saying to supporters that there certainly was, and the fact was worth our children's lives. Did he think no one would notice?

What else? There are far too many aberrant behaviors for us to do more here than pick at random. What comes to mind?

Last summer Mr. Bush, with remarks about the nation's deep gratitude, hung one of our highest medals around the neck of Paul Bremer who, as all the world is well aware, very badly botched his job as viceroy in Iraq and thereby dug the grave of Mr. Bush's hopes there some feet deeper. A medal? Astonishing.

And more, of course, about that horrid war which hangs so heavy on us: Mr. Bush righteously proclaims freedom for the world while the army he commands, as we all know, sinks to barbarity in pursuit of orders, its routine practice now to kill and maim innocent bystanders by the thousand, to imprison and torture randomly, to break and enter houses without reason, to shell civilian places down to rubble, to shoot on sight on least suspicion, to kill wounded disarmed enemies who fall into their hands. Mr. Bush righteously proclaims freedom for the world while the police whom he commands claim a right to imprison people more or less forever without lawyer, jury, judge or show of evidence. How can he say "freedom"? Has he no contact whatsoever with reality? Or else perhaps he has no conscience? Or else he chooses to have none? What sense can possibly be made of this?

What else? He was barely reelected by three percent and, flushed with triumph, immediately declared he now possessed a mandate to redesign some of the country's basic institutions. He pays for tax cuts, made supposedly for economic stimulus, by piling up enormous debt which will inevitably drag the economy down. He often starts up programs which by all accounts he wishes to do well – education, health care, foreign aid – then after grand pronouncements forgets to find the money that they need. Our greatest city was gravely struck with terrifying loss of life and a few months later Mr. Bush offhandedly remarked he didn't think much anymore about capturing the man who did it. Early on he made a decent speech on global warming, a threat which may destroy all civilization, and then the subject vanished from his mouth. This is not a normal mind.

Of course, much of the confusion might be due just to incompetence. Could he simply be Mr. Clueless? Certainly there is a loose hand on the reigns. The dollar's value plummets

internationally to the point where China's central bank, which holds more of our bonds than any other, announces that they see our money as unstable. Farm policy lurches drunkenly; first farm supports were out and then were in and now are out again. Environmental protection takes some little forward steps and giant pratfalls. Relations with the Congress virtually collapse because, the Congress members openly say, his subordinates lie so much. Bills are offered to the Congress accompanied by fictitious facts and figures. Bills are actually designed to have the opposite effect of what their title says. And they deceived the Congress into voting war. Relations with the opposing party utterly collapse because the worst excesses in his party are turned up to maximum volume: fanatical religion, character assassination, shameless propaganda, voter suppression. This is either impotence or villainy in the Oval Office – which?

Institutions of world law and international alliances, built up through deep historical decisions, are tossed aside in fits of pique and vast imperial dreams. And there is that appalling offhand ignorance of our clearly written Constitution; we behold, for two examples, a President blithely saying publicly that he declared the war and officially agreeing in a secret memo that his decisions are above the law. There is his elementary blundering in military strategy, as though he's never read a book about that subject or failed to comprehend the one he read. There is his ghastly childish glee in making war. This villain is profoundly ignorant.

But is that possible? What kind of mind would translate such empty ignorance into such icy confidence and such persuasive charm? What is the consciousness we see? He looks to be a sociopath.

I recall specifically the last time I heard some knowledgeable person being interviewed and, when they asked this knowledgeable person what the President would most likely do about some issue, this person ventured a guess at what the President would do, on the grounds, they said, because that choice would definitely be the most logical thing for him to do. Of course I had often heard that little formula of words

countless times about other Presidents before, quite customarily, for all the decades of my life since Eisenhower's days – the President will surely do some particular thing because it's simply logical – but, as I say, the last time I heard that said of Mr. Bush was early in his tenure several years ago. And, of course, that particular knowledgeable person's guess at what Mr. Bush would do turned out completely wrong. I guess that person feels disillusioned now. I know I do.

Now you listen to the news and you hear the interviewers and interviewees all accepting that the logic of the Presidency is broken. Now instead they all try to predict the President's choices by analyzing his emotions. We have descended into chaos.

To be a little more specific, I have to say that nowadays news analysts seem to mostly try to understand our President's hunger. They seem to mostly ask: "What does he want?" At any rate, I certainly do hear this asked as often as I heard the corresponding logical debate before. And it leaves me with a sort of fearsome insecurity. It leaves me feeling loss and grief. It leaves me feeling fear and pity for our nation and that man. And this sensation is the very definition Aristotle gives in his "Poetics" as the rising inundating wave of tragic drama.

Of course I oversimplify to stress that single transformation in the coverage of the news. That is one thing that caught my notice but there are a thousand different things. Each person may discover some different moment when their understanding of the word "America" has cracked.

Or else so far they haven't dared to notice. Like all those soldiers suffering and murdering in the field and armless legless veterans and families whose youth was snatched away, like those now made destitute, and who still say the war is good, like those who voluntarily lay upon this President a faith as though he were a god, for if this madness is devoid of holiness there is no meaning in the sacrifice, like those whose willing sacrifice is so enormous, of course like them there are many more of us who merely wish to salve their conscience as Americans or preserve the good opinion of their neighbors and employers or preserve

some intellectual scheme to which they've pinned some pride, and therefore still persist in denying all the evidence of observation, therefore still insist that Mr. Bush is good and wise.

Of course the madness of a king is apt to be contagious and the nation, although awaking from its fever dream, has not yet fully dared to waken.

And yet there is his charm. That needs explaining. What does that famous warm and funny charm consist of? I suggest that you watch carefully next chance you get to see him work a crowd, or perhaps you'd like to find some video on the world wide web. I'll tell you this right now then you can judge it for yourself. He's like a stage magician doing what they call a mentalist act, a fake mind-reader, but in a clumsy trundling way.

He guesses what the audience most likely hopes to hear then cranks out a string of platitudes and acting poses along that line. He has a stock of platitudes and poses and often has them well rehearsed. As with the stage magician's act, the viewer's hope to believe does half the trick and the performer's steady unwavering relentless refusal to acknowledge anything he doesn't want the audience to see provides the finishing touches to the trick.

Sad to say, if we yearn for a leader in times of doubt, we may find great relief in this charade. The dupes even often laugh in their relief. They often fancy they are admitted into secret truth. He's even gone so far to tell them he is sent by God. Doubt is fear and fear is painful to our minds. That's all there is to it. Find some video and see if you agree.

Of course he isn't very good at this, lacking understanding of the mind and the empathy a mentalist requires. Handling skeptical questioners is totally beyond his reach. He definitely does best with an audience selected to contain predominately believers, for their example may persuade the rest. I find all this despicable of course. This is a coward's cheat and, indeed, he hides from us in every way he can.

During the 1999 Presidential campaign, then-Governor of Texas Bush did an interview with Talk Magazine. The reporter

asked about a famous prison execution of a convicted murderess whom the State of Texas had killed a year before.

Time Magazine later excerpted the interview:

"... [the reporter] described [Governor] Bush mimicking the [imprisoned] woman's final plea for her life. 'Please,' Bush whimpers [to the reporter], his lips pursed in mock desperation, 'don't kill me.' . . ."

Karla Tucker, the woman whom the State of Texas killed, had sent a letter speaking to him personally as a fellow-Christian. But she was guilty, Mr. Bush explained, and she was just one more. He executed one hundred fifty-two people in five years while Governor of that state. And he also secured his supply of victims by vetoing legislation which was intended to improve the state's corrupt judicial system in its notoriously grotesque mistreatment of the poor.

Here's something else that I respectfully suggest you look up on the internet. Search for the phrase "narcissistic personality disorder". It's a form of sociopathy. It has several sub-types, one of which is called "serial bully". Find an article that concentrates on explaining the official DSM psychiatric diagnostic criteria in layman's language. You might check the author's credentials by further searching on their name. Print the article and go through the official diagnostic criteria, as there explained, with a pencil, as a checklist for what you've seen of Mr. Bush.

I often think of Shakespeare's Lear these days, but cruel as he can be in callous disregard, Lear is not a violent man. One searches down the roster. Secretive brooding tricky cruel and vengeful Hamlet? Never; as I read him Hamlet strives for justice. Well then, Claudius? No again; a simple murderer, a character of simple greed. MacBeth? No, for he's a different breed, a psychopath. Then Henry Eighth? No, for he at least is deep of heart. Caesar? No indeed; he loves. Richard Third? Oh? Oh? Do I see thee, Richard?

In Shakespeare's tragedies there is no exit till climactic holocaust. Through some defect in their character or through a choice the actors find themselves in train with evil; once they

acquiesce in such a course their only end must be destruction. Our nation follows such a course, a dark crusade, a puppet march, tugged by our heart strings and the twisted noose of fear. But this is not a Shakespeare tragedy; it is ours. We can see ourselves and where we are and thereby choose some better path, individually at first then all together.

Not long ago, at the home of some friends, I fell to talking with a medical lady who has treated both human and animal patients. She described for me how much more easily our non-human relatives relax to die. We chatted on the subject for a while.

We groped our way toward a conclusion: We humans are such strongly social beings in our natural way of life that we tend to see dying as dishonorable desertion of our duties to each other, and thus a death among us is felt to need profound justification, to need a noble purpose, or else it has no honor. That was the conclusion of our chat.

And I think it's true: Death's fundamental horror, for us human beings, is the vast dishonor of it. So this patriotic call to which we have surrendered reason, this ceaseless shouting of our national honor, is done because it's felt to be an antidote to death. But of course it is a baneful poison.

And furthermore, like good conversation will often do, that little chat with the medical lady gave me food for thought for several days. I was reminded by it of Tolstoy's remark that death is the only subject of real art.

I decided we can take Tolstoy's riddle as referring – he being such a very reasonable mystic – to the evidence which death offers simply by its existence: Let's suppose he meant to say death proves that obviously more than one state of being does exist. From seeing death, we know we can be either here or somewhere else. For Tolstoy, any genuine artist would follow that evidence to construct their life very carefully. This artist would thus continually compare the inner understanding of their life to other possible inner understandings, wrestling consciously with every imaginable angel and demon along the way.

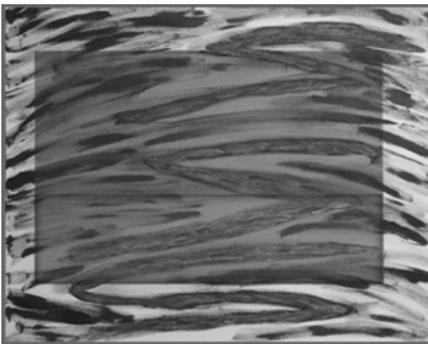
Might not any person of compassion and courage be such an artist? So shall we free ourselves to dance with life?

I also pondered on Tarot, an extremely interesting catalogue of the actual human life experience of many humans over many many years. In Tarot, by all tradition, the Death card does not mainly speak of death itself but rather mainly of the way we commonly weave on death a sort of imaginary knotted talisman, wrapping our whole stock of fears around it, as though our fears were twisted ribbons, till death becomes huge and ugly in our minds.

And yet, they say, that same card also indicates the great transformation that can occur by releasing such a fearsome knot through the power of conscious choice of how to think, through an improvement in perception. You must put yourself into a process of gaining wisdom.

Be all that as it may, after all we have discussed, the one twig of philosophy's wide-spreading tree on which I'd like to perch my flitting thoughts right now is this: Through conscious compassionate understanding of ourselves and one another, exercising realistic judgment as best we can, we can come to see the world with clearer sight. We can awake. We can awake by choice. We can rejoice amid life's pain and darkness, and we can treasure light.

Now what do we do with Mr. Bush?



**Markings
Number 5**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley



Minotaur

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Minotaur a rant on fascist militarism

Written in 2005:

Sometime since the last time when I stood to duty as a military man, my country has resorted to a fascist ideology for troop motivation.

In my time, a generation gone, the central ideology was definitely a genuine though seldom spoken loyalty to real people whom we knew back home. After all, our nation was proud to call itself free and our fathers had won the prior big war with a fundamentally democratic organization.

We were allowed a startling degree of free speech and even free political association, even the grandsons of slaves among us, even those of us in active combat zones, certainly along the quiet stalemate fronts where goddess Fortune had me stationed. Tales of heroes we were told concerned self-motivated individuals. The Plains Indians, rated as the world's best light cavalry for much of the 19th Century, had a saying: "No man can tell another what to do."

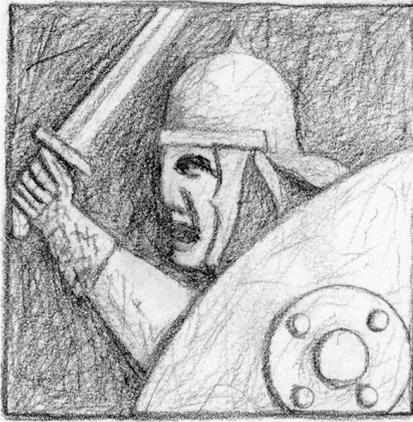
But now, find yourself in earnest conversation with a U.S. soldier and you'll hear, very shocking to my ears, a uniform ideal of loyalty to "God and my President". As though that were somehow a sane belief. God and my President! They use this

horrifying phrase so often that it must arise from uniform instruction. Nothing even vaguely of that sort was taught to us, nor is it any part of freedom.

They are even taught to call themselves not "grunts" as was our custom but "warriors" doubtlessly in hopes this trick will elevate the simple and disgusting job of slaughter to a noble role in myth.

Speaking as an earnest history student, let me tell you this: Fascism (to distinguish it among the various forms of tyranny) proclaims that the leader has divine guidance of some sort and that mystically to some degree he embodies the highest virtues of the nation. And it sees nobility in money, so that fascists throughout history are very fond of intermingling profit-making enterprise with government. Although today such a person in our land might profitably pose as a "good Christian man" actually the model of this leader is the ancient Roman emperor, from whose fasciae emblem our modern word derives.

Then as an earnest priest of holy Wisdom, let me also tell you this: Have no faith in faithlessness! The liar doth betray! And though he reaches with his fiery claws out to the furthest regions of the world, his foolish schemes will fail. He sows the dragon's teeth and Chaos there will reign!



Knight

Of Swords

From Simple Tarot

Pencil on paper

by Stone Riley

The Long Roads

historical fiction: a novella of the Roman army in Gaul

I was just walking down the road minding my own fucking goddamn business – gimpy hobbling really, with my aching back, I remember that, and hanging on a tall walking stick or something; something such as that. When was this? Clear as yesterday, I swear. I'm sure it was an actual road for sure, but a dirt township track really, a small road with gravel underneath and built up along the sides with little rocks, the way they always were, with the brown old winter leaves and needles wearing down to a dampish dirt just then as I scuffed along and putting down another year of padding on the top, and rather soft already, if I do recall, even through my worn-down sandals. I had army sandals. I was coming back from leave that time. No I wasn't; that's not it. Shit.

Hello sweetheart, can you pour my cup full? Bless you dear. Can you leave the bottle, please? I think these kind young handsome gentlemen will pay. Thank you very kindly, sir, and you sir too; you have a noble air, a gentleman's nod.

This was when? I was young. I had on combat gear. I think . . . that's it! I was a young kid and they sent me on a courier trip. That was it! I was one of our brave lads gone out to make some money and save the filthy Gauls from their disgusting Celtic ways, and it was a courier trip. But why in a god's Hell would they send an asshole kid with a sprained

back? It must have been in Britain. No; that was the first goddamn fucking time my back was ever sprained, from chipping all that fucking goddamn ice. There was this titanic ice storm early spring on the far side of the Alps with just my lone platoon stuck way up in the fucking pass and the army sixty miles away right goddamn down in the fucking city!

Oh yeah, every soldier that ever lived has pulled duty like that – of course – but I was actually officially voted "The Asshole Kid" that year and every platoon that ever lived has had one. Well, at least, when they don't have one they miss him, but when he's there they give him so much grief.

Anyway! You know what I was going down to look for? I wasn't even out to look for footwear. We didn't lack for much. The guys sent me out to look for orders. Can you believe it? No? It was an Alpine paradise and finally Top Kick figures out he'd better send for orders.

Oh, we had plenty of grub from the locals and we had their work details going around the place and started up construction for the spring. There were five good farms right up there by the pass within a half night's march from the station and more a little further on, so you had better understand we had enough supplies and we had one of the farm girls hired in to fuck and her mother too. And we all had money too, from the fellows' autumn payroll and my enlistment purse at first and then some secret loot one of the fellows had on hand. It was an Alpine paradise, but I had been waving every goddamn morning in platoon formation – I mean that I would stick up my hand and wave – and saying that we'd better check around. Finally, our lookouts spotted heavy dust activity down toward the city and still no letters or spring payroll or inspection came.

Gods in Heaven! That is it! I was actually sticking up my hand in platoon formation every goddamn morning for a week and this was actually what I was saying: "Let's go ask for an inspection." Thinking up new arguments. Right! See, I was proud of the job we'd done on the station house just since last fall and I was saying that we ought to send somebody down to ask for an inspection and we would show it off. And Top Kick like to tore my balls off the third time that I said it. And what

else was it? Oh yeah, the lookouts spotted that heavy dust down toward the city and this was even a damp spring.

Well anyway, Top by then, after he sees this cloud of dust rising above the forest mist horizon, was dancing on the parapet in sheer and utter frustration. I have never seen a human being actually yank his own hair out but our big old Top Kick was trying to do it and dancing up and down so that the green pine logs really bounced underfoot and so I, a raw recruit in some alarm twenty feet up off the ground, started back and looked for a steady post to grab.

I tell you true; I've stood on a log wall that truly was falling in the crush, with the timbers chopped out free of the ground, and it shook less than that, in the miserable moment when you're on top between one eye blink and the next you realize for sure they're pulling down the wall on which you stand while a whole sea of armed men dueling with each other surges one way or the other down below. And in that case, the parapet shook less than that. I never stood on a burning wall.

In sheer frustration, see. Was the army moving out? Why had they sent no word nor pay? Was there a war on now? Was there a battle already? It was likely just some spring maneuvers, but it could be anything and we could be left behind in our delightful little Alpine hideaway that might be enemy country now already. If we got left behind, how about our share of future loot? And if this country had turned against us, we'd better figure it out fast so we can hope to sneak back home through the mountain passes, but what kind of soldierly act would that be in any case?

You can imagine we didn't get much sleep that night, with all our dice and wine and ladies going around all while we talked it over at the sacred fire, but next morning at platoon formation, who do you think old Toppy smiled upon at last? I knew that moment that he loved me like he did the rest.

But really, they should have all chipped in and gotten me a specially commissioned gilded breastplate with sapphire tits and a picture of an asshole in the middle.

Well anyway, my back was a whole lot better by then, three weeks or so along, and I was hobbling along not too uncom-

fortable for half the morning going downhill on the local roads with no one but my sword swinging at my hip and the spear that I leaned upon for company and just simply following the sun's path after the first couple miles of mountain track. But the roads were small.

It was still morning yet, a cool damp breeze along toward noon in the heavy shadows of the big trees and buds sprouting out on every twig and here I come along. Whiffs of smoke from people's cabins. I remember I was mostly looking off into the heavy woods on either side there and growing a wee bit cautious since I hadn't seen a human soul for at least, maybe, half an hour. And that *was* enemy country just fifty years ago; I mean, fifty years before then. You still couldn't learn a goddamn thing from stopping the civilians that you passed along the way like that. Those Gauls were still Celts, really.

And here I come upon a holy altar in the road.

It was nothing but a boulder flat on top and stained with blood and forest litter fallen over it just like some farmer might have used to cut up something now and then, but right there at a wide spot in the road. So I stopped and looked around. I must have been dozing on my feet, I guess, because I did not see the thing before I come upon it, but here there was this wide round spot in the road with this altar at the side where you could look down toward a big oak tree in the woods and a huge grinning face was carved into that oak tree too.

That wooden face was staring at me suddenly and the big grin on it hit me just like somebody suddenly swung and hit you with a heavy hammer in the chest, or something such as that, and I staggered back. Now what on Earth was this? I blundered back a good ten steps and stumbled and fell and my helmet even fell right off and rolled away. And there I lay with my hurt back.

It was an altar different from any I had ever seen and I didn't even recognize the thing till I got right there, glancing down and realized this big lumpy rock on the left side of the wide spot in the road was actually a holy altar. The thing that fooled me was there wasn't any kind of statue or anything there, just an old oil lamp stuck up on a stick about a couple yards

on down beyond the shoulder of the road between two little trees, and then on down into the woods.

Although actually, there was a big bramble thicket of roses maybe out there with a small stream winding past and there were these two young pine trees flanking the view for you of this empty piece of woods beyond the altar, and the oil lamp hanging on the crooked stick, and I swear by all that's holy, me at that moment looking up and all around, that huge oak tree with the carved grinning face had disappeared. And there was something that simply struck you in the view out there that let you know the woods for sure were haunted.

Well, what on Earth was this? It was a kind of scenic overlook.

It was a wide spot in the road but I didn't look around myself till I fell and stopped. I guess somehow I must have been dozing on my feet, really, see, cause I had not even seen the ordinary-looking statue that I now saw, which I had actually walked right by just at the entry of this clearing. But that was just an ordinary statue of Mercury or somebody like that, and then there wasn't any statue of any kind or carved post or anything at the altar itself. See? Dozing on my feet.

I was confused.

And there was some firewood, some kindling sticks, neat and proper stacked there under a corner of the altar, under a little overhang. Firewood? Why was there firewood stacked beside this empty altar? There was no charring on the top visible from where I lay, but only thick moss and stains. Mushrooms were sprouting from the kindling sticks like on any piece of wood up there. So I looked around and saw another statue a few yards further on along the road where it narrowed once again.

It was actually an outdoor temple, see, with the road right through and another cart track going up off uphill just over there into the woods, and another statue there where the cart track left the clearing. See? Actually, there was an oil lamp on a crooked stick by every statue.

And, looking around there where I'd fell, I found there was a stone-lined small fireplace pit of moderate size in the

dirt at the center right where I had stumbled, just in reach, that was filled up nearly level to the ground with charcoal lumps beneath and a scattering of camouflage across it, as across all of the ground, of old brown scattered leaves and needles and acorns and cones. The gods know why, but I rolled over onto my elbows and leaned over that old fireplace at the center and gazed into it and somehow became a wee bit fascinated at that particular whirly pattern of the forest litter that was trapped in there in the small depression in the Earth upon the charcoal bits inside that little circle of fireplace stones.

I remember thinking to myself, this place was nothing but a roadside temple and I didn't know the style. No problem. It was a regular-used temple but just without a roof and walls so it must be one of those native Druid places. Druid, yes; I'm sure I thought I knew it right away, at last, for I had heard of their places of course, but I am sure that I did not tremble. I simply crouched there staring at that swirl of forest litter in that ring of rocks at the center and reached out my hand to take a gleaming little golden-colored thing that struck my eye.

Official Asshole Kid.

Then suddenly there is a whirl of wind and there is this figure looming over me, big as a god. My eyes raise up slowly to his face, up past this robe he's got on and his arms reaching out at me, and he is frowning like a thunder cloud and he speaks my fate. I remember all that all right.

Another drink? Sure, you bet. What is this shit? Sure makes you dizzy. What was I going on about? Just now? Yeah, the dear sweet army whores. You know, it's funny how a person can forget. It's all the dying that makes you forget. People live such complicated lives and then they die and you don't see them any more. Memory dies inside of you. Did you ever kill someone you knew? No? Nor you neither, sir? That can be hard, depending. Later on, I killed someone I loved. But that's a different story.

The pretty ladies. That fall when we had just arrived up at the pass, me and some other guys went out with the commissary corporal. We went all around the farms up there to draw the tax list up since I could read and write and speak the Gaullish tongue

better than average, and one place we found was this widow woman with just one daughter left about the place.

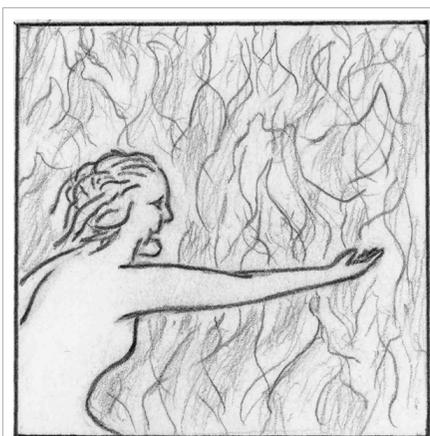
Old Skippy the corporal is leaning on a fence rail there by the house after we looked around and says politely to the lady; "What if we hired your girl to come up and stay at the station and be a whore? She's pretty as you are, nearly. For the winter, anyway? We'll pay one third up front in real coin, and she won't lack for food nor fire nor smiles. Another third midwinter, balance due come spring." That's what he offered.

And the lady really frowns and shakes her head unhappy at that, and even stamps her foot almost as if she's been insulted, and looks up at the sky.

But the farm is wrecked. Really. Wrecked. Her fella died real slow and didn't have a brother, I come to find out

later. Anyway, she stares around real hard a couple minutes and realized she had no choice but to think it over.

This lady's fence is down on the downhill side and most of her stock run off. The creek has overflowed and washed some of her better ground chock full of stones. Her barn is pretty full but she has showed us how the roof has sprung a leak and much of the hay's already spoilt.



Three Of Swords
From Simple Tarot
by Stone Riley

Her smokehouse, as we saw, is damn near empty. I'll wager that she's hardly seen a penny in her hand that year.

She finally straightens up and pinches her nose and asks how much we're paying. She says then, well, the daughter goes off sipping dew drops now and then but ain't never done no whoring no-ways. The girl's a free woman anyhow since poppa died, so the momma would have to ask her. But you could see the momma calculating. I'm a mountain farm boy too, and I

could plainly see they weren't about to drag on through a winter with what they had, and that was fall. They had to do something, especially with the taxes coming due.

So momma finally asks if she could come to visit anytime, and her girl would be fair treated like a free woman should, or else she'll take her home.

And Skippy, a good man with an oath, he draws his sword and calls me and this other guy to witness and swears upon the eagle on the hilt.

He personally guarantees the money and guarantees the girl a private corner all to herself in a dry snug cabin, and food as good as much as we eat, and momma can come to visit anytime the weather might permit and take her home if need be too, if honest debts be satisfied and no crime done, saving any actual military necessity. And furthermore, he mentions, we shall teach her daughter all the doings a woman needs to know, for then and later on in life; that as additional inducement.

So then the lady looks at old Skip real serious and turns her face to show the profile of her face. She then commences to pull her dress right up. She bends down and gathers it all up real business-like and gathers it all up above her bosoms and turns slowly about several times to show all of her shape and says, well anyway, if the girl says yes then could she work herself sometimes? And could her money make their taxes up, instead of the girl's?

Now Skippy was an older guy, maybe forty more or less, and tender hearted, and I could see right then that he had fallen all at once in love. And so we got two happy ladies for the winter and old Skip damn sure saw we treated them right.

Where was that? Britain? Naw, in Britain it was different, I can tell you. In Britain they burned our cities. They did us there just like wolves on sheep. This was the eastern part of southern France.

Why is it that I find all this is so hard to remember now? Bits of it come out of the fog so dimly, as if I were an old man now, and then some detail strikes a light into the mind's eye like tender taking light in a pile of fuel or like a light gleaming from a gemstone or from steel.

Yes, it's death that fogs your memory but it's life too. I lived a lot of years after that winter and spring and then, I know, a lot of years in other lifetimes since. The Druids got it right on that I guess, about rebirth. They got that straight. Have all my Roman Army friends been dead and then reborn like I, or is it just that Druid's curse?

They killed me with that mighty curse at that roadside temple, yes they did, though it steamed and stewed around me many further years. Is it part of that fate which they cooked for me that I have come back and walked this world so many times? Or is that how it always goes for everyone?

I remember the first time they came up, and it was beautiful. The weather wasn't bad and we had all been working hard all day, and they had come up with the civilian workers in the morning. I mean they came up with the work crew in the morning, queuing up outside the side gate just after sunup when our clerk came down to open shop, and then we worked all day.

I was the clerk, of course, as I think I mentioned. There was just a private's guard with me, of course, since I was a private, but when these two women from the farm appeared before me in the little doorway in the great log wall – just behind a laborer whom my two comrades were just then at that moment going about disarming – well I knew that I must call a sergeant.

The ladies were lugging a huge big bundle that looked like clothes and blankets and they pulled their hoods down to show their faces. They were evidently set on moving in.

I shouted back up to the tower to fetch Top Kick if they could get him, or another sergeant, and the tower shouted back. So, by then my pals have dropped the peasant's toothpicks and such into our strongbox and we've waved him on along to the bunch that's going to work, and I tell my lads to lug the ladies' bundle in and put it back someplace aside to wait. And they dropped it in the fucking mud puddle, they did, so I cussed the two fellows as best I could and they laughed at my lame attempts of proper soldiering just like they always did.

So the mother and her daughter, sturdy tall figures in their woolen wraps, they stood before me waiting, up there in a corner of the tall timber walls we'd built in one of the foothill passes

where the cool autumn breeze was always waving in the browning grass of summer's end and the grass of earth gave way to great granite stones that stood up against the morning sky, where the path led up between great standing blocks of stone that were a gateway of the mountains, climbing further on toward Heaven; there in this fort we'd built into the very wall of the mountains where a path toward home was threaded in.

And there before my little lumber desk near the side gate in the morning's purple shadow, the girl looked in my eyes. Her eyes were blue. I know that much.

And all that day, some of our guys would sneak off to stand watch at the cabin they were moving in.

And then toward nightfall with the shadows deepening, with the tools all honed and oiled and hung up for the night and the civilians counted back out through the gate again, Top Kick called us all together in formation in our dirty shirts on our little twenty square yards of Mars Field inside the front walls. And Topy says we're going to have official lecture on the whores.

Topy walks our little lines, beating us pretty much at random with his stick a little just for emphasis.

And the first thing he mentions is the financial situation. He states their wages and says these are wages, not piece work, so don't go tipping them too much. Save your money to chip in when we settle up. So forth and et cetera. And he commands of course the right squad shall have first goes tonight, the left tomorrow night. Of course some fellows almost groaned out loud at that.

Then Skippy puts his hand up and Topy recognizes him and Skip adds in that if the ladies refuse some particular guy for some particular reason, then just boo hoo he's out of luck, so treat them right. And he confides a lesson that he's learned from past experience: don't gamble with them, let them keep their stuff.

And finally Top goes into a thing beating his own palm with his stick and roaring like a bear that the whores can damn well do any goddamn thing they please around the goddamn place, short of stealing or cutting someone with a knife or military

treachery – if you got a grievance we'll hold a court – and that is damn sure that.

He had us break ranks and follow him and old Skip down our little alleys round the corner to the women's cabin where we gathered all outside and Skip knocked on the door.

By then, of course, our guys were hanging in over the window sills and shoving each other to look in so that from our sudden onslaught and our usual noise the ladies in some fright had retreated from their doings in the cabin proper back behind their boudoir curtain, dropped half their wool and spinning gear and then rushed out to get it once again.

So, with three dozen sweaty shouting Roman soldiers hanging in at the little windows and shouting back to those who could not see, there stood Corporal Skippy quite politely rapping at the cabin door and calling loud but humbly to inquire if we could enter. He pressed his ear to the rough planks of the door in hopes of a reply.

The lady of the house comes forth alone from their curtained private corner over past the fireplace and there was quite a comic little show like a stage play almost, for here was this timorous uncertain pretty lady in housewife clothes going out to answer the door for a strange man who wanted in to make love with her and/or her daughter.

We clapped and hooted after she had lifted up the bolt and opened the door a crack and she peeked out at him to say; "What do you want, sir?" As if she didn't know.

And when the laughter calms a bit, Topy standing there by Skippy speaks up in half-way French; "Ma'am, I better introduce the fellows to you. I better lay down the law about your house for clear and certain; lay down the law for them, that is. Tell about your privacy rules in particular. May we kindly come in?"

"All of you at once?" she says.

I call out the translation and somebody from the right squad yells "Not all at once!" and we all laugh.

Good old Skip puts in, "Well, half the guys tomorrow night but half tonight too."

"Yes ma'am," says Top, "if you wouldn't mind, that would be best. But see, we all got to come in right now, because I always got to make things clear as water for these apes."

We hooted all the louder, being apes.

So she opens the door for Skip and him and we climb and clamber in the little windows. There were a couple of decent plank wood couches there in the cabin room, all piled with blankets, and we heaved them around to lounge upon, and sat upon the floor, just like it was a show, all crowded in and many hanging on by me to get good renditions of the dialog when someone spoke in French. Top and Skip strode over to stand before the fireplace and do the lecture.

But the lady, she goes directly back into the boudoir corner once again behind the curtains and there is whispering behind those long brown and white plaid blankets that hung down to the floor while Top stands there with nothing much to say.

Well, he does point to the curtains where they touch the floor and says that is the River Rubicon. Aside from actual military necessity of course, we'll keep our noses out of there or else he'll strip our hides. These are free women.

But after a good five minutes of earnest whispering inside there, which we're all straining to hear with no success, while Top is bouncing on his heels and no one yet appears, he walks over and stands by the curtain and clears his throat real loud.

A hush from everyone, then finally momma's voice: "Yes?"

"Well, ma'am," says Toppy, "what we ought to do is – well, we got to get this thing started and I don't think these assheads will behave until we do – I'm sure you understand – so, if both of you could kindly both come out for a minute and remove your clothes."

We cheer.

The lady waits then scrounges up some Italian and says back real loud; "Is this well? For all at once? For all at once? In truth? You have been honest. If this is best, then yes we shall."

So Topsy goes a little further, says kind of hopeful through the blanket; "Maybe then by chance you know a bit of dancing too?"

Comes the girl's voice at last; "Dancing!" comes this sharp young female voice in some alarm, "I did not know you wanted for to dance!"

"Oh no, ma'am!" cries Top. "I don't mean really dancing, no I don't! Just any kind of brief lascivious display at all will do just fine, I'm sure! Maybe you could just come out and squeeze your tits and everything at 'em and smile. Just maybe come out necked and walk around and bend over a little, maybe, see. Cause, really now, I figure we better let 'em all get a real good look right now to start or else there'll be no keeping peace here tonight unless I stand guard all night myself. And then I'd have to beat the living shit out of 'em in the morning."

Now, that was going to be momma's first night humping three dozen hearty soldiers and I must say she handled herself quite well. She called back out to Top right away, still in Latin even; "Yes, we shall do something!"

Then the girl's voice pretty loud again then whispering inside while we shout all the encouragements that come to mind, and momma sticks her head out of the curtains, just her head, so of course we shut each other up and momma talks to all of us, but in French:

"We can show a little homefire hearth ceremony that we do sometimes on winter nights. We'll do some dancing with it. How about that?"

And we all cheered, no matter that the fellows hardly understand a word.

And she said; "Can someone light the fire?"

Now there was a great stampede up to the fireplace, all following me, for most must only guess what she had wanted to get done. Skippy barely steps aside intact.

The sticks were all there ready on the grate but I had seen the flint box on the mantle and I got it, so it was I who shouldered in to strike the light and hear the boys cheering when the tinder and the kindling took, and I plying the bellows with a

will. Me, Official Asshole Kid. And the whole crowd milled around back over to our seats on the couches and floor.

Then momma calls to us; "Do any of you have a harp?"

I translated and we looked at one another, shrugging no.

But somebody speaks up and says this fellow plays a flute. We had this old guy who really played the flute quite well; third sergeant he was. What was his name? He's dead, except I think I met him one time since, when he was strumming peaceful tunes that tore my heart out on a beat up old guitar in a U.S. Army mess hall far away at Christmas.

Well anyway, that time the lady asks what instrument he plays and I translated a flute to French, even though he was actually answering in French himself, that he plays the flute.

The lady says to him; "Well then," she says, "I hope it's loud enough. Is your flute big?" She gestures that and we erupt in laughter thinking, naturally, about his dick.

And the old sergeant says something like, to her in French; "Yes ma'am, it's pretty big and it makes sweet music." And I translated that to Latin.

While we're laughing she replies, "Can you play some winter music or some nighttime music of some kind? Maybe something for sundown, when night is coming. But not sad music; something with a pretty tune." And old Sarge sends somebody running out to fetch the thing.

The little show the ladies did, now that's what's beautiful. A few minutes on, momma and her daughter back inside and plotting what to do; the flute arrives and I shout to the ladies that it's here.

So momma sticks her face out through the curtains once again, the room all dim with mostly just the fire glow, and some lamps our guys had lit, and she says sweetly to the piper will he please begin.

Our old sergeant strikes a lovely strain that I had heard before often enough, a song about the peaceful meadows when the sun goes down and the shepherdess is bringing in the sheep, and after a verse of it, out the ladies came a-prancing out.

They were not naked then, not yet, but each had on a bright colored tunic like the Gaulish women wear, down nearly knee length long, but these were open down the front, for only a single bow was tied to fasten the garments at the throat.

So they walked out to the firelight thus: titties glowing from inside the woolen cloth, bare strong thighs and round wide bellies and curly pussies plain to view, bare feet stepping the floor, the mother so composed as if she wore the crown among a whole town's naked priestesses at a may pole or something like, the girl awkward as befit her youth and trying to pretend we were not there and almost stumbling on the flagstones as she watched her mother's moves, while the mother paced high-stepped neatly to the rhythm of the flute till there they stood before us silhouetted at the blazing fire.

They both turned toward the blazing warmth and knelt to pray. The piper stopped and all was hush.

I could not clearly hear the mother's whispered words. But when the girl then spoke her prayer it was that awkward girlish voice, that blend of hesitations and resolve, that mix of "uh..." and "mmm..." and squeaks with deep sincere devotion.

I started up there in the front row with my ears pricked up to the first words of the prayer she spoke. For one moment then I thought here was a girl I knew from home, but a girl toward whom I'd scarcely even dared to glance for she was another lad's.

Then when the mystic words were done – strong words of invocation they were, a prayer to Vesta Of The Hearth, but by a name she's known in Gaul, and words that deepened the hush around all of us and sanctified that room with powerful duty and love – then up they stood and the mother beckoned the daughter to her where they stood there at the hearth and each pulled loose each other's bow and helped each other take their tunics off and lay aside as if, almost, this was a simple night of homely life and they were bound to bed.

Some of us cheered but others elbowed them to silence.

And still they were not done. The mother found the piper with a glance and with a silent nod bade him begin again. With that soft melody begun, she knelt in profile to us – earning many

sighs – to take up each of the pokers and tongs and bellows and things that we had left about and handed each to her daughter, instructing with little gestures of the hand to stretch and reach up higher than she needed to reach in hanging each thing to the mantle board.

Our piper found some trick of sound he knew to lift the heart each time she did. The very gawky manner of the young woman's stance – on tiptoe one foot only, turning, kneeling, standing, leaning with one hand upon the wall, reaching up each time and all aglow in soft round flesh, the youthful swelling of her breasts that softly bounced, her trembling hand, her buttocks and the parting of her thighs – there was beauty past all measure to my heart. There were her large pink nipples bulbing outward with the swelling new growth.

It is the soft round fullness of a woman's breasts that beckons me above all else. Scarcely did I dare to think that I could somehow earn the joy of sucking these.

And then a bit of proper dance at last! The mother brought her daughter to the near edge of the hearthstones once again and stood facing and hand in hand began to prance a ring.

It was a wondrous failure of a dance almost at once, the piper growing too excited and fast as the women tried to spin, the mother stepping high and daughter stumbling, both gazing in each others eyes and laughing right out loud so we laughed – laughing in their pent-up fear of all these brutal men, I know – until they must just sit themselves together on the floor, embracing close, to let the music spin the ring alone until it stopped.

And so at last in silence then, the mother leaned to kiss her daughter's brow. One hand caressed the daughter's hair most tenderly. She whispered something to her ear, to which the daughter hesitantly nodded. Then the daughter turned to search our crowd with those blue blue eyes, for the first time I think, and with her mother watching where she pointed, my darling pointed straight at me.

Nothing else at all was visible to me for that instant. There was just a cloud of light around that clear and glowing face and those deep eyes.

There was a little more, I think. Perhaps they danced again. No that's not it; there was a little pantomime. I guess they'd prearranged the ending of their show. They stood and each one stretched herself and tried to yawn. I think I do recall the mother rubbed herself and squeezed her tits and butt and between her thighs more than she really would have done when going off to bed at home – but no, now that I think on it, perhaps that was a thing she'd shown her husband too, for it all seemed so natural – and now suddenly the girl was finally overcome with modesty, I think; I see her hands pressed to her eyes and breast a moment, all of which inflamed me more – so that her mother led her to me by the hand where I stood and I strode forward, with all the men cheering or guffawing at my luck.

I was the first of us to make love with that girl. With all the others driven out like sheep by Top, save old Corporal Skippy with the lady on the other couch, and with the window shutters shut against prying eyes, but not the noise outside, me and my heart's delight drank from each other for the first time then – love's sweet embrace – and lay in one another's arms until the banging on the cabin door made plain our time was done for now.

I asked her later, how did she manage that first night? She did as well as I could hope to do on my first battlefield. She said that as she bounced upon the creaking couch that night and got so raw and sore, she thought of me.

And she told me of a time, a little girl, she'd stanced a frightful bleeding scythe cut on her mother's leg. She had come there with the one purpose to save her mother's life again. Then I had somehow helped her struggle through.

While the winter fell heavy then wore away, she took me to her boudoir several times, of this may Fortune be pleased. For me one time when momma was away, she wore her brightest dress and sat me down on her own private bed, and then tried every bit of jewelry that she had, showing everything to me, in her finest clothes.

And so you see, when I met that colonel that is why I asked him for the green and scarlet broach.

"That broach?" he says and looks down at it. He shakes his head no and says; "Why, boy, it's only junk. It's painted brass. I use it for a purse pin for the weight. I was going to give you twenty-five cents."

"Oh no," says I, "If it's all the same to you sir, if it's fair, I'd really like the pin. It's for my dolly, see."

At that he smiles. His dark brown face was all worried creases, half from working for that general we had I guess, but when I say it's for my dolly, he really smiles.

And then the man confides in me. He pulls the broach from off his purse and puts it in my hand then sticks his hand inside his purse as well and says; "Listen here, son, there's talk we might be bound for Britain for the wars. It's only talk, you mind, but still. If you're to take your dolly there, you'll need much more than that." And he says; "Is it a boy or woman?"

I answer; "It's a very pretty woman, sir, and she can dance."

"Slave or free?" he says.

"She's free."

"Then this might do." he says and, looking down to check what's in his hand, pulls forth a big and gleaming hundred dollar gold piece.

I hold out my open hand again, staring at the gold you may be sure, but when he puts it in my hand beside the broach he clasps my hand shut between his and says; "Look in my face, soldier." I look and study and he says; "I am Antoninus Africa. Remember me."

So I repeat his name and tell my own.

And of course he says; "If we ever meet on any battle-field, remember me."

And that was that. Oh no, there's one thing more. He said to me too; "Always guard her freedom if you love her." And that was what I said beside her funeral pyre, for she was found with blooded spear in hand; "She was always free." Perhaps too free; she came with me.

It's well known that Antoninus was a former slave; that's why he spoke so. I saw this fellow through the thick of fighting in Britain often enough, and on parade of course, but never

spoke with him again nor had the honor of saving him with sword and shield. Perhaps he's dead; I don't recall. Oh yes, he's dead of course.

And there I was that day, just wandering down toward a Roman Army field encampment on maneuvers with a worn out shirt beneath my gear and hobbling and I flags down a horseman and ask if my regiment's anywhere about.

But they lead me to the general instead, and that's where Colonel Antoninus was.

Now, that general we had that time was an old sergeant but gone to wreck. He was a drunk. I guess he had his dollies for all his clerks – that's what I heard – and you know how well that works.

So here comes this straggler stumbling into camp with worn out shirt beneath my gear from some detachment that has been sent off and just fucking forgot, by the gods, through some damn clerical error or some such shit, and this general lolling on a chair in his chariot kind of babbles and stares down at me through bleary eyes wondering who the fuck I am and why the fuck they brought me to him.

Colonel Antoninus – that is where I met that worthy man – he prompts the general with some basic questions and I report our situation: timber palisade and tower; all peaceful and well supplied except for shoes and shirts and that we've missed a payroll; normal civilian traffic through the pass; Topy has sent word that the stone tower house should be done within two weeks or so, depending on the weather, and then stone walls by maybe midsummer. I say they sent me in for orders.

The general shouts out; "Orders? Hold your ground! Hold that pass no matter what!" He stamps his foot upon the chariot floor.

Antoninus, frowning deeply, reaches up to lay a calming hand on the general's fist there where he's got a grip on the chariot rail.

Antoninus says to me that all I've said has been well done but that I need to go and find my regiment to get our pay and orders and other needs. He nods over toward the way that I should go to find my own colonel's tent.

When I'm saluting, that's when the old fart blurts out; "Oh, Tony, something for the courier! He's beat. You give him something."

Then that exchange where I get the green and scarlet pin and the secret hundred dollars.

I plotted where to hide that big gold coin to stop the guys from claiming their proper share; all the way back I schemed and plotted. It was a huge heavy visible lump in my empty purse. Useless thought to bury it; it must be safe within the walls but somebody would surely see me if I buried it, or later going back to check. And if I hid it in our stores or even in our strong chest then good old commissary corporal Skip would surely find it and feel obliged to chip it in the common pot.

The only place there was – what does this really mean? – the only secret place there was in my whole world was in my public woman's jewel box. I would give the big coin along with the painted pin and she must promise I would have the money back to spend when urgent need arose.

There we sat on her cot with the sun dim slanted through the shutters in her little private corner, her pretty mouth open gaping at the gold disk in my hand.

Her mother comes in through the curtain unexpected, sees it, claps a hand on her own mouth to keep from shouting, turns to see the door is shut, falls down to her knees on the stones and grabs my wrist to look. The gold is gleaming in the dark. She asks us, gasping; "What is it for?"

I tell her something like; "I didn't steal it, but I don't want to share it with the other men. I want to save it for when there's need and it may save us."

She asks just whom I mean to save with it.

I tell her that I mean to save her daughter and her too, if I can do it with a hundred dollars.

She asks me if I really mean this and I swear a little oath that yes indeed, that is exactly what I hope to do if I can.

The momma frowns. She says that was the same kind of cowardly oath her people only swore in swamps.

I shake my head, don't understand. I mean, what is so troublesome if so well meant?

Momma tells that what I've sworn – only that I want to save the girl instead of that I really definitely would against any and all odds, you see, come what may and to include my own death – this is a weak cowardly oath. She says this twice.

I made up some stronger oath then, out of my head, on the spot volunteering some kind of sincere mortal duty toward her daughter that I don't exactly now recall, only providing that the girl must keep her loyalty to me, and to include my death if needed, no exception for my other duties.

Then momma nods her head and smiles real grimly and tells me, by her country's native law, with what I've sworn, that if the girl and me get down to fucking anytime in the next four weeks, well then we're bonded proper man and wife. "And," she says, "don't think you'll dip your wick in over there this month." and momma nods toward her own bed.

Oh yes, Britain!

My dolly's mother would not go with us to Britain at first, and swore that nevermore would she go whoring. Her pussy was her own again, she cried in joy. That late spring day she got her final pay, while we were starting to get our gear packed for the trip.

She went about our little fortress with a genuine Egyptian myrrh-wood dildo Top had gave her to keep her company as a parting gift, her taunting all the fellows all in fun. I see my Gooddie Lady even now, sneaking up above Skippy on the parapet stairs and when he turns around she pulls that big old dildo out from her skirts and squirts the balls to make the oil shoot out. She reaches down to rub the oily thing all on Skip's grinning face and in his hair. She told some awful lies too, secret like, to everyone about the beastly things that all the others liked to do. She bade us all farewell.

Too, she dictated the very oath that I agreed to speak at my own wedding. My future mother-in-law made me take dictation from her own mouth direct and she commanded Top to notarize it at the ceremony. She made me get an actual personal signet ring carved in ivory (a bit of which we had on hand) by the carpenter so I could seal it too myself, saying Toppy's signet of command was not enough.

I swore my bride every goddamn cent that was in my purse and in my bag inside her strong box too and a third part of my future loot and pay and half of what the fellows owed me, I being by then both a cagey artist with the dice and general fac totum, asshole kid no more. And if I did not do my woman's sums correct, I swore I'd be a thief. I swore my life away; I really did. I swore by Roman gods, who would be coming with us, that I'd sooner die for her than save myself, but none of this to violate my army duty.

And I did not ask for anything from her beyond the ordinary oath at all for Roman wives, and even dropped from that the anti-promiscuity demand, having been well advised how likely is a former whore to wander. And may the gods who ruled the moment of my birth be pleased, I volunteered some more. To please my dear, I called to mind what that ex-slave colonel said and swore I'd ever guard her liberty.

Our Gooddie Lady would not go with us at first, despite her daughter's many tears that they would part, but old Skip persuaded. Skip knelt down on his knees with his hands in her lap, out in the yard before the company, and swore that henceforth she would be his alone.

And so we stood there on those hearthstones where I first beheld the glory of my bride. Skip – being a consecrated clergyman besides all else – released a bird out through the window and watched it wing away and said the day was good.

We four spoke our final vows in turn, held hands in the regular way and spoke those oaths before the fire to Vesta Of The Hearth and Rufus Bright Child as the ladies wished, and sealed all the scrolls. Then while I laid that shining big round solar gold piece in my woman's hands, in a soft skin wrap so none would know, old Skippy hung a lovely blue bead necklace round his good wife's neck.

I ran him through. I ran him through. And even with a Celtic blade. He told me to. He willed it thus: he said; "I am a captain now and I command it. Run me through." He turned his head and gestured weakly toward a hard-used sword that lay nearby in a severed hand.

I bent my aching back to speak into his face. "NO! NO CELTIC BLADE! NOT II!" I cried above the din. But too, I held my empty hands to show I was disarmed as much as he and cried; "YOU ARE A SOLDIER. YOU CAN WAIT."

But still he lived and by all law he held command. He gasped to force the mortal speech back to his lips and whispered in the ear I pressed against his mouth; "It is a sacrifice. I am a dying priest and sacrificed. It's them that kill me. Use the Celtic blade. Better than an empty death."

My life is cursed, as you can plainly see, to ever hold a weapon such as that one was.

My hand is shaking. See? I spilt the wine. What wine is this? It's gold! See, with the candle light! Red Celtic gold! It's whiskey, isn't it? Good Scotch whiskey, isn't it? Oh, fill my glass again and let it spill upon the table if it will and let me end this awful tale.

It was my death that I remembered first. It's often thus, I've found, that when you think back to an earlier life it is the ending of it that looms out from the shadows first.

Now as clear as yesterday it is. "Never shalt thou see thy home again." That's what the Druid at the temple fireplace said, standing over me there suddenly when I reached out to steal a gold-colored acorn from his hearth, one acorn that alone was somehow gleaming red-gold in a sunlight beam, in perfect Latin I would clearly understand. Thunder like a storm he did while I, that callow dangerous boy, crouched and trembled at his feet.

"Never shalt thou see thy home again."

Twenty years I served, as was the army law, and took my discharge purse. A youth marched onto the roads to music of the blaring horn. A hard-used veteran straggled back alone.

Across the British Sea and weeks hobbling long summer dusty roads; a town in my dead wife's haunted country, a crowded narrow lane, a breathless hot twilight evening growing purple shadows late, and me plodding through the bustle yearning only for a soft bed that night for weariness and pain of old wounds and memories and wanting not another wretched noisy inn.

I was on the easy coastward road, come back the whole way almost then through France and only one day more, one river more, would find my boyhood land. For the Druid's curse a dark foreboding hung upon me.

I stopped and spoke that woman in the dooryard there, a young and pretty woman just exactly like some cousin of my wife's, who smiles very cagey and takes my offered coin held out and points toward the stable around the back. I'll have my threadbare cloak for blanket and her donkey's straw for bed. I'll have the filthy barnyard fowl for jolly company. Oh well, tomorrow home.

She frowns at my yearning gaze while I lean on my stick and search her face for some bare hint that she might somehow someways know me after all.

She frowns at my yearning gaze. She looks at my penny in her hand again, then looks up and looks at me very hard and answers a question that I had not even had it on my tongue to ask for one bare instant. She tells me this in these very words: that if I'm looking for a cunt I better find the inn.

The bottle's empty? There's a sin. There was some strength in it. Don't call for more; there is a drop left in my goblet here. Oh, look here at the red pools I've spilled.

I remember this most clear: bright moonlight through the crack of the stable door then sudden thunder and a very heavy rain with extremely gusty wind while I lie in a heap of straw wrapped in my ragged cloak below the roosting chickens up above, cloth across my face to breath despite the drifting dust, and I dream fitful visions of everything.

The stable's creaking in the wind. My wife – I think very long on this – she died from following me. My wife died, you see, when our army wagon train was sacked, hacked open with our baby wrapped to her bosom just like this hacked open – just like this. I found them afterward, dead in gore, and a well used spear was in her hand. Despite my freely given oath to save her by her gods.

That huge gusty rain for an hour in pounding sheets, rushing down the drain pipes, misting through the cracks of the lumber walls. No doubt it ran in on the floor. The donkey

chuckling and stamping. More thunder closer and the donkey brayed.

I brooded on the curse. Of course it would not leave my mind. Tomorrow, home or else my Fate fulfilled. Then cold water is dripping down to awaken me and then, almost at once, a full strong stream of it comes splashing on my breast and face while I lie helpless for lack of will. Now what on Earth is this? The chickens squawk and fluster all about in the air and cuss the way chickens do.

Scarcely can I see, but I had inspected the hayloft floor above when I lay down and now suddenly a torrent is rushing down between the hayloft boards. I reached into my shirt and find that ivory signet ring on its string, and clutch the sacred relic of my love.

The screaming donkey kicks his stall door loose and bolts out to the night. I lie still in the gushing silence, drowning in that pitiless flow. The timbers crack and then come crashing down.

I hear the thunder yet, and I have not been home.



Druid Game
Digital image by
Stone Riley



Antigone
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Merlin And Vortigern a legendary and metaphoric ancient history of folly and wisdom

At one time, long ago, the king of Britain was a man named Vortigern. Now you have surely heard of "Good King This" and "Emperor That The Great" and too, as well, "Potentate Whomeverwhich The Wise"; but Vortigern was a bad king, a foolish one, a man of no accomplishments at all beyond the grand theatrical air of power and bold command in battle.

Here was a person concerned with nothing more than his own desires, and so constantly, of course, here or there in the nation, people would rise in arms against him, trying to replace him with a better one or at least some other.

But Vortigern was very rich and had no conscience. Thinking that he must be firm against all such impertinent rebellions, he sent a minion sailing over the rolling sea to Saxon lands and there he hired whole tribes to fight as mercenaries for him against his own native people.

This vile plot seemed to achieve its purpose – so it seemed to him – for seven years. The alien soldiers filled his army and his court. They tortured or slaughtered or robbed to poverty anyone who stood up to even speak against him. And they seemed content to bask in the luxuries which he allowed.

But then Vortigern ran out of money. The Saxons wanted land as payment. He confiscated goodly broad estates in the east, in the British coast and hinterland toward Saxony (from where he might more easily drive them at some later opportunity) which he granted to them.

Then, of course, they brought their families sailing in many ships. Then, of course – after they had got their women and children and old folks, after they got their new homesteads begun, after they had got their forges fired and their armories pounding, after another seven years more – then of course the Saxons rose against Vortigern, to replace him with their own.

The wicked king gathered the small forces that would still obey him and fled to the west of Britain, to the tall steep hills above the narrow valleys in Wales. Being as decisive as he was ridiculous, he wasted no time there. Very quick he chose a proper site – a huge round hill right by the only highway through that country. He had in mind to build a fortress on that steep hilltop and fort himself up then – somehow, he thought – rally the nation to his native cause.

As you may have heard, in those times the strongest part of a fortress was its tower. Indeed, in that age a goodly tower might withstand a siege all in itself without surrounding fortifications of any kind. And so very quick he set his men to hauling stones and laying up stonework courses on that hilltop for his tall commanding tower.

By mid morning of his first day there the walls had risen to human height in quite imposing thickness and the work continued. But then the earth quaked. That big hill by the highway leaped and rolled quite like the ocean surf will sometimes do. Not only that, but a great cloud of steaming stinking vapor arose from the soil.

All of the soldiers threw themselves onto the ground and hid their heads under their shields in terror. Of course the stonework crumbled and rolled away.

As you may know, in those times those who studied nature were the Druids. Vortigern still had one Druid in his court and he called this man immediately and furthermore immediately demanded to hear the meaning of this terrifying thing.

This fellow actually was a Druid and he had the second sight. He had been trained for years by sisters and brothers of that order so he had the second sight. But he had long since sold himself in slavery for a tick of turnip seeds, as the saying goes, and so he lacked communion with any spirits of truth. So immediately upon the king's demand, certain coming events did parade before his mind's eye but he was not given any understanding of them.

So this unworthy Druid answered: "O great king! I see a vision! I see a young man and a woman, his mother, dragged before you here. This is a most extraordinary youth, a shining child, a flower of Britain. You shall know him for he has no Earthly father. Surely when such a blooming one is sacrificed and buried in your tower's foundation, then the spirit of this hill will see your generosity and be appeased and be your ally. Not far! Not far!"

At once the king sent riders galloping off where this fool was pointing, seeking the fatherless youth and his mother. Just as the fellow said, the riders had not far to go.

It was scarcely noon and two of these stern horsemen came upon a most unusual scene. There was a small town there among the hills and before the town there lay the flowery meadow of a ball field. The hearty men and boys were gathered there at their game but were not playing. No, all the men and boys were in a crowd around two at the center and there was angry shouting by one of these toward the other.

The quiet one at the center of the whirl was a most impressive person to the eye, tall and slender, strong and full of grace. He was, as it's sometimes said, both dark and bright. There was such a glamour on him that even in this mob of braves the people all stood back from him a pace.

The shouting one berated him bitterly the while, saying that he always won their games by guile and stratagem and such a rogue had never lived before in Britain. Then he said a most intriguing thing. He called the shining lad a bastard for, he said, he had no Earthly father.

The two horsemen rode right through the crowd, you may be sure, and threw a rope about him. He did not even look surprised. And at their demand, at once, he even led them to his mother.

Now, his mother was the priestess of the local well and she stood waiting for them there before the little shrine wrapped in a priestly garment. But these fellows were far too stupid for the obvious conclusions and seized her too and roped her too and led the two of them off to the great round hill where waited Vortigern among the rubble of his schemes.

When the mother and son were dragged before him, the king at once demanded to hear whether in truth the lad possessed no human father.

The priestess said, "Indeed, foul king, 'tis true. When I was young a prince of spirits came to me in dreams and in those shining dreams became my lover. In due course I was full with child and gave this lovely one to birth and called him Merlin."

Without another word from the king, with a gesture of his hands only, soldiers came with spades to dig right at the young man's feet, this seeming by his philosophies to be a means of sacrifice proper for the occasion. When they had made a pit man-size and deep they all stood back. So with another commanding gesture, the king summoned that stupid prophet to come and stand by with an axe.

So then Vortigern said to young Merlin finally, "If you would speak, speak now!"

Now I must tell you, although this lad gazed in the pit he had no fear of death. He had no fear of life. He had no fear of Earth, nor of the sky, nor of the sea nor anything. In his

few years he had communed with all these spirits and come away yet living.

I could show you many things of Merlin's childhood. I could tell you of his mother's teaching and his father's. I could show you timeless times when the little boy had lain enraptured in a magic forest glade among the wheeling stars, among the flashing crystal gems in magic caverns. I could tell true tales of Merlin's childhood you would not believe, save you are a prophet too.

But no, suffice it only now to say that by this time he had no fear left in him. Now when this horror lay before him there was no clamping hand upon his throbbing heart. No; instead of that, true vision filled the cavern of his living skull with roiling smoke and dancing flame.

Young Merlin spoke to the king's Druid. He loudly asked this man, crying out, "Have you the slightest notion why this hill quakes so?"

The false Druid answered, "Yes of course, you stupid child. There is an angry spirit in the hill."

"You fool yourself!" cried Merlin, "The nation all entire is quaking!" He said, "Keep digging, British soldiers; dig down to this hill's center heart. False prophet, do you know what waits to be revealed there?"

The king's Druid could not reply.

"A pool inside the hill," then spake the boy, "a pool of black boiling water. And when that pool is drained what shall we find?"

Again there came no answer.

"Two great dragons locked in struggle," Merlin said. "That is how the nation quakes."

Well, there was evidently now to be some battle of wizards and Vortigern wanted the winning side. He set his soldiers all with all their implements to digging and the pit grew huge and soon they broke through to a cavern in the hill and there

within the cavern all beheld the black pool, deep and roiling up in noxious steam and vapors.

"Now drain the pool!" the boy commanded.

Again Vortigern set the men digging, to break a hole in through the hillside. The black water gushed forth steaming and the pool was drained off to the valley and there below their feet, far far below, two great long serpentine winged things, beings with the heads of dogs and claws of eagles, one red, one white, wrapped about each other struggling, spitting, biting.

Gazing upon the writhing beasts, Merlin was filled with a huge true vision. I must not say it was a vision only because it was a mighty prophecy. I must not say it filled his mind's eye for it filled him all entire, flesh and bone and soul, earth and water, air and fire.

He was at once filled with the whole truth about the whole human race from our long gone founding to our distant end. The first savage family is with him on that hill and so are we descendant from his time. Our furthest children are with him there now, even now. In perfect detail everything about all our human kin is with him in that moment.

Beyond this seeming world in which we seem to dwell, this world with past and future, with this and that and left and right – beyond this world there is another world your soul can touch, a world where all things always are.

Merlin stood rooted in that world in that one terrifying moment and saw and spoke that world to ours. Those who heard him felt themselves opening out like roses blooming. I cannot tell how long it took – it was a timeless time. I cannot tell how near to dusk it was or how the sun had sunk when he was finally finished.

When the young prophet's words were done, Vortigern was heard to loudly moan, "No, no, no. I only meant . . . I only wanted . . . I only wanted to know what all this means for me."

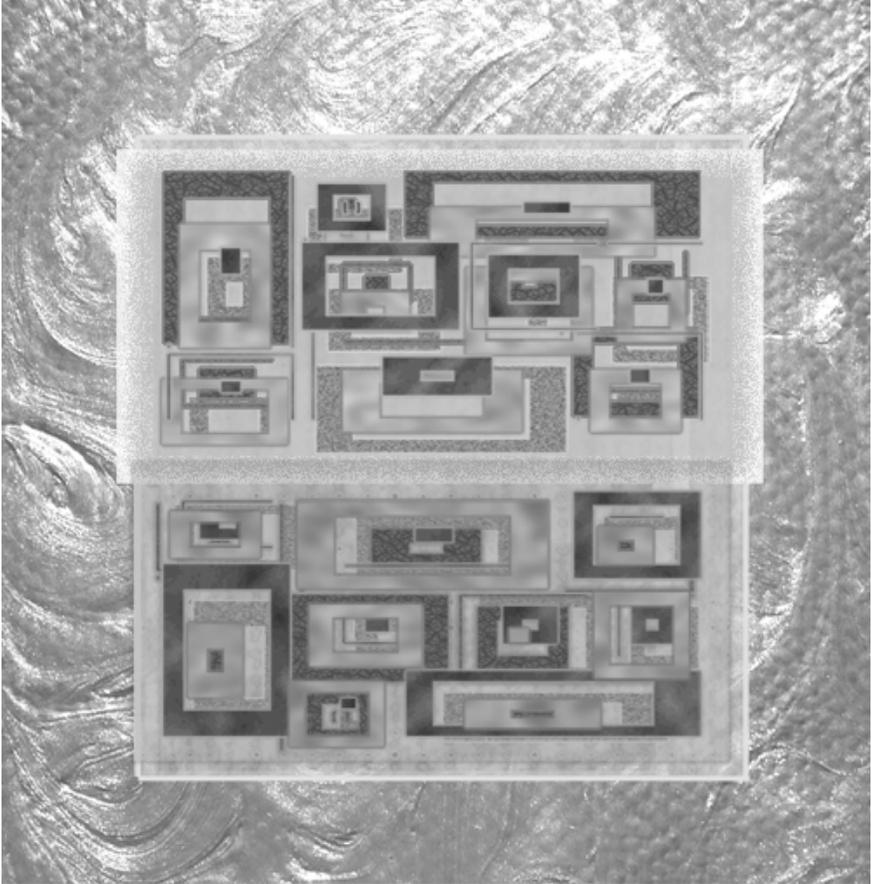
And Merlin answered. Every hair upon his head was glowing silver white and the air about him shimmered every color. He softly spoke and yet was heard by all:

"The king of Saxony now is landing on the nearest coast, three hundred boats about him and the whole armed hosting of that nation. A long war lies ahead, a war of many lifetimes, a war into the distant future till the nations are as one. Oh, as for you, your puny doom is written."

Ah, well, dear ones, that is our tale for now. Next time we meet, if any time we chance to meet again indeed, perhaps a gentler tale will come. Perhaps we'll hear glad discourse of Good King Uther who brought, after many years of strife, seasons of a gentle peace and fathered famous Arthur.

Better times are near at hand.
Fare well!

Part Six: The Human Path



The Human Path
Digital image by Stone Riley



The Fig Tree
Digital image
by Stone Riley

**The Fig Tree:
Where The Paintings Came From
memoir of art and love
note: this is document #5 in the
book *Documents For The Reader***

Beauty is our surest source of Wisdom; Nature is our clearest source of Beauty; Love for each other is our strongest voice of Nature.

There was a fig tree where I was a child, filling one corner of our little house's little yard. Its beauty was amazing.

Indeed, after my childhood study of that tree, beauty seemed so mysteriously far beyond human knowing that the word “beauty” seldom even passed my lips for the next forty-odd years. Instead, I would speak and think of “joy” as the real spiritual fundamental of existence.

I would remember stretching out my little self through the summer's sweet close fragrant shade along thick viney limbs, the green light kaleidoscopic in my human eyes, the stiff big

leaves rustling like paper in the breeze but so fuzzy against human skin, the fruit so strange and good. In unaccountable entwining ways the fig tree was perfection far past knowing. That was beyond.

But joy was inside me. I am joyful; I exist. That was knowable and known.

Then suddenly there was another summer day – me now far away and fifty-five years old but still there consciously a spirit in the fig tree – but now knowing more.

Now suddenly my self was felt to be obviously the viney wood – the sun soaked leaves, the strange good fruit and all – and all of this was known by its self, the self which was its self, my own self, to be extremely beautiful surpassing joy.

Of course the mode of this awakening, at last, was erotic love.

• • •

I was a lonely quiet child, for so I learned to be and learned I was. Happy laughter sprang up from my heart quite naturally, but in that house it found poor nourishment.

Our mother, from some cause forever now uncertain – perhaps her father's early death and then her brother's then her mother's – was a worried and sometimes despairing woman.

Our father, though he was the one who set the fig tree sapling in its place, was a very earnest brooding man. His childhood had been wounded by starvation poverty and then his youth by the desperate struggle of panic fear and dauntless courage in a great war.

This woman and man who made us – a girl, a boy, another boy who was myself, and then another girl – did right by us. Their love proved itself by unstinted labor that fed and housed and clothed us year after year, and in a gentle discipline that taught so well. They gave us health, honesty, literacy and cleanliness.

But love was not spoken in that house. It did not speak nor was it spoken. There was no tender touch. There were no kisses. There was not even wishing for a kiss.

• • •

In my childhood study of the backyard tree, the thing I noticed most was the viney kind of curve its trunks, branches and twigs all made. I have tried ever since, in poetry and paint, in clay between the fingertips, in word and deed, in every art, to make that powerful curve.

It was a compound line reporting all aspects of reality at all points it inhabited, the gravity and wind and sun and mechanical adhesion in the fibers of its wood and its evolution through previous habitats and its role in the evolution of habitats and the moral tendencies of the universe and plenty more sublimely joyful dancing fluid interactions of reality far outside my knowing.

That is to say, I understood the curving of the fig tree was extremely real. It was much more real than my unconvincing notions of my self.

And so passed forty years and more, although with various awkward twists as I tried to stretch my self into that viney curve and never figured how.

• • •

That summer I was fifty-five, I was in New England.

I was renting half of a strange ramshackle house on an unworked farm. This house's other half was rented by another fellow.

You'd surely say it was a run down place but he was doing photographs and I was doing paintings and it was a joyful spot. It was a four acre hay field hilltop deep in the highlands of big woods with a mountain view that would pop your eyes out. There was delicious air.

And that was new to me. The only thing in my experience you might compare it to was oceanside air – an air also full with fragrant palpable infinities of distant large and moving things about their business – but in this fragrant air of mountain

hilltop, a place full of forest beings who cast perfume on the air, this very open and very clear bright but deep green place where you would see Sky and World in every glance, and you would constantly see it all flow with storm or breeze or flow with rain or vanish into snow, there I felt myself alive among infinities.

Beside an ocean, in whatever weather, I've always felt myself in danger and a foreign traveler. But here I somehow became immediately a native of the wooded hills.

Well, the other renter there, the art photographer, was a thoughtful fellow, lonely, very nice, courteous, kind. He lent me a valuable photo reference book to make a sketch and I gifted back a tiny canvas that he fancied. I'd feed his cat when asked. Now and then we had some tea and chat.

He, my good neighbor, attended regularly at a Buddhist monastery that was there, nearby somewhere among those hills, for their silent walking contemplative retreats were a spiritual treasure to him.

Me, I had my girlfriend up on weekends quite a lot.



Picture 99

From "The Passing Of Uther Pendragon:
A Fine Art Graphic Novel"
Digital image by Stone Riley

This lady was the very person I had absolutely given up any hope of ever finding.

In fact, I had carefully calculated the arithmetical unlikelihood that she could be alive on the same side of the planet as myself and was mistaken. I had composed a philosophic poem in which her nonexistence stood as proof of something in the universe. That is to say, logic had failed me completely in the search for her.

And I could not possibly even list the lady's charms – her forthright honesty and grace and wit and intelligence and generosity and strong insistent heart that was proven so amply since, for through her virtues she would later save my life – because at that time when we had only recently met, I mainly saw her virtues only through an utterly compelling intuition that could not be itemized.

And she was similarly bewildered by this peculiar creature me. Indeed, both our feelings seemed to be that we must simply throw away caution and absolutely work this out as we went along.

And our next door neighbor is a quiet lonely visual artist guy familiar with Oriental stuff.

And I guess you may have seen the famous photos of those old Hindu temples where sinuous entwining lovemaking couples, all smiling very sweetly as they serenely consummate the universe, adorn every sacred temple archway and pillar.

You may even be aware that the ornamental vegetation crafted in those famous temple carvings – the curving viney trunks and limbs and sheltering leaves which those famous undying lovers inhabit and enact so joyfully – are, of course, unmistakably fig trees. Those sculptured fig trees are, to be precise, the same *ficus religiosa* species under which the Buddha sat for his awakening.

And, you understand, in the past year, since months before we found each other, I had achieved sudden astonishing

success in making beautiful paintings without yet knowing beauty is real. Repeat: without yet waking to the fact beauty is real.

Many paintings that will become Spirit Hill Tarot, if I may explain, were already crowded cheek by jowl among the others nailed up on my small rooms' walls – waiting since before I even knew that she exists – to greet her when she ventured up into the hills then stepped into my door, while others of them waited stacked among the leaning piles of canvases in every dusty corner.

Me painting like a lunatic, sawing and nailing frames between the painting sessions, me wondering what in the world I'm doing for all those months before she came.

• • •

So finally one day it is a lovely summer Saturday or Sunday.

A breeze that is quite irresistibly intoxicating in its meadow forest fragrance and also bursting with glowing sunlight radiance has all day been absolutely flooding the place through our open windows, all of which are open you may be sure.

She and I are cuddling, lounging very dishabile, luxuriantly satisfied for now, me more luxuriantly satisfied than I have ever been before in my entire half century life, you may be sure, and her too by every indication. Here we are in our little boudoir that opens on the universe, our little living room, which is at the back of the house where the wide window view of our steep round grassy hilltop, surrounded by the forest mountains, is more stunning.

It is a little room where big bright canvases over-filled with glowing shamanic vision and shining paint (three future Spirit Hill Tarot cards chief among them) cover all the walls above the tiny boundless island where we abide, we each touching each a fellow soul in the utmost holy intimacy of love.

I am growing actually hallucinogenic breathing in the scented light, studying the tactile structure of the mantic glowing

visions that sunlight is sculpting on the breeze-blown moving sail-like surfaces of canvas stretched on wood above us.

When any human being starts to seriously explore their mind, to let it work and see what gifts it brings, they will very soon – very soon – feel the pretended boundary between their self and all the world dissolve. They may take courage in that vast mysterious state instead of fear. They may find their other self who is native there and lend that self a voice and eyes and hands and sex in this world here. So come many acts of brilliant creativity.



Mask Of The Creative Soul

Digital image from acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley

For me – I who have learned to trust my soul who lives there beyond, learned to marvel at its workings – to me by then there comes as well a kind of saturated dumb and sotted fullness, a savoring and keen surrender – there comes a fascinated and delicious utter giving of myself into the flowing energy of creativity as to the flowing bowl of ancient Dionysus.

So I am drunk with her and I have been forever so it seems, ever since at least our first kisses waking in that day's transcendent and transparent waking dream. And even so, the endless hour is still morning.

So Neighbor knocks. He's knocking on our front door, not the back, doesn't see us but the cars are out there out front so he figures we must be here somewhere and he shouts a loud friendly confident hello.

I realize, suddenly, Neighbor will next definitely walk around out back, searching for us in the yard, sun-bathing out there with books perhaps as we often are, and there he will quite discretely peek into our living room's wide picture window just the way that I would do undoubtedly if the situation were somehow horribly reversed, and so I bellow back an answer.

After all, the lady has another life as a Quite Respectable Person who dresses very presentably you may be sure for a professional occupation in a city and goes home to the company of three dearly loved adult daughters who, I'm absolutely sure, cast unrelenting aspersions on the old nasty Hippie freak in the woods to whom their mom is inexplicably attached and to whom, therefore, I really don't want the lady carrying home a displeasing report.

So now I'm suddenly struggling to get this emergency sorted inside my head while rummaging among the bedclothes for yesterday's trousers.

The lady is amused. She pulls a sheet up to her chin.

• • •

So here stand two men, a screen door between them.

One stands out there in the stunning brilliant summer day, a bright day, standing on the doorstep looking up, outside looking in, holding a hand up to shade his eyes.

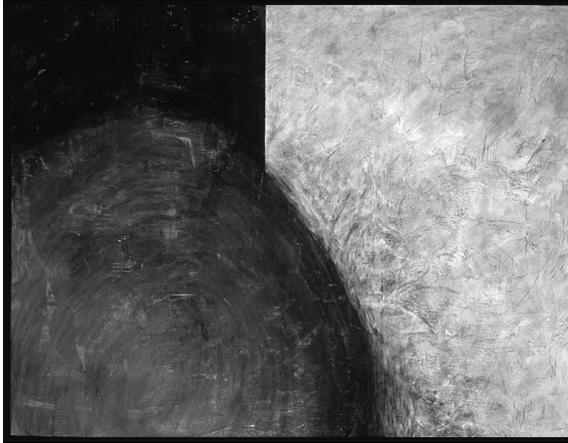
The other is an old stout fellow naked to the waist, silver hair and beard a tangled mass around his face, blinking and squinting there in the deep shade of the hallway, inside the dark screen door which he does not open.

But the old stout guy is leaning sideways now, bending like the hilltop willow tree that stands out there beyond the cars and little gravel parking lot, slouching onto the door frame. He has expended his reserves in dragging to the door and is now

overcome with a peculiar exhausted relaxation. He is trying to button his pants.

Both men know there is a woman in there.

So of course I am examining this memorable situation. Of course I'm thinking Darwin thoughts about how Nature is our lives and we are Nature.



The Way Of Tea

Acrylic / canvas painting by Stone Riley

From this new perspective of Darwin dynamics I suddenly see that all this body love is biologically powerfully recruiting me to join a Clan that sorely needs a good Grandfather because Babies are coming soon and the Matriarch of which suspects that she has stumbled on a quite exceptional candidate.

So my old lonely heart swells with relief and pride: She has chosen me for good reason. And I feel the blossoming of tender love that famous poets speak: Like a rose bloom erupting marvelously on a withered stem, I fall in love with her. That then suddenly disproves all my theorems of grief, so suddenly I begin at once surrendering the doubt and fear which all that loneliness always gave me.

But Neighbor is talking, as he has a right, shrugging ruefully, reminding me, apologetic since he clearly feels ridiculous – and maybe even feels made a fool and maybe even hurt – about the very interesting old wrecked beaver dam in the woods a pleasant walk away from there which he did mention a couple weeks ago one time, to his suggestion which I did indeed answer him that the lady and I would probably like to walk out for a look and to which he is going now to make some photos that are going to be very fine in this very fine light, so he shrugs again. And would we like to go?

And here, for your information, let me just interject that I am still sorry and embarrassed – ashamed somewhat in fact – that I never went with my good Neighbor to see that beaver dam which would have been interesting.

But now, in my intoxicated state, I am carried off by thoughts about the tender poignancy of life. I used to be so much like Neighbor just so recently and for so long before. And he is me of course. I have escaped that fate but should I rejoice or mourn? Of course I must do both and in them both know joy.

In fact, I am at last surrendering what remains of the fear and doubt my loneliness for so long gave me.

• • •

So now I hear a footstep in the hall and turn and look.

Now comes the Lady in her person.

I have heard her step and looked and seen her coming from the living room into the hall.

And she is there.

I gape.

She is appropriately clothed. She wears her lover's shirt from yesterday, Gypsy bangles at her ears and silver finger rings. The shirt falls just exactly long enough to cast the Sacred Mysteries of Venus respectfully in shadow. In the hallway's dark this gleaming female soul is glorious.

I either gasp or moan.

So the Lady is in the doorway by me now, within the darkly veiling screen. So the entryway is filled; no one will enter. She takes my arm in hers and strikes a friendly pose and says hello to Neighbor.

Neighbor's eyes fly to a spot in the air above and there they stay. But he says hello. Furthermore, he briefly, with quite commendable aplomb, outlines the friendly invitation to a scenic woodland ramble.

Before she speaks to answer him, she moves. It may be at first a gesture simply answering the friendly invitation in some normal way but then it is a dance. It becomes unmistakably an artist's pose.

Then it is indeed an apt quotation from great famous art which Neighbor loves, great art I know he loves because this pose of hers is photographed exactly and repeatedly in a photo reference book of South Asian temple architecture he recently took from his private shelf and opened to those pages of those photos with a lover's tender touch and then generously lent that book to me his painter neighbor.

In this brief dance, this divine erotic dance, the Lady took my arm to wrap around her back to put my hand exactly at her waist and there she holds it, her hand pressing mine with every silent signal of human touch that I must hold that curve of her fervent soul in strength.

So we are relaxed and yet we have embraced securely. And so, if I may say it in this way, the Lady's substance entwines in mine:

Her other hand goes up behind us, appearing on my farther shoulder and it grips; she gives her weight. She lifts her far foot just enough to put its heel above her near foot's ankle, so her knee arising slightly as the toe points obliquely down. So she is reclining on me like I am reclining in such languor on the wooden doorway post and I feel her relax, her substance now becoming mine so familiarly in an act of love.

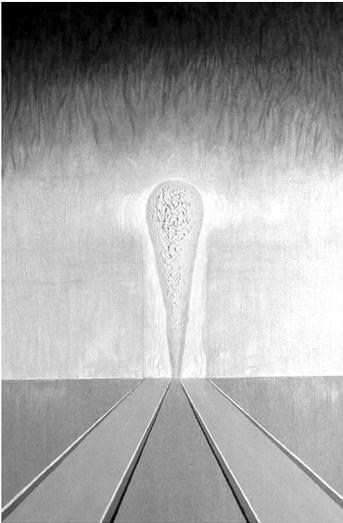
So what is this? Are we truly beings carved above the temple threshold steps, truly? Are we not? For this blessed place where all this glorious mysterious art is done for such hidden reasons; is this not a place of miracles for that whole summer long – which has not ended yet – and are we not its clergy?

Somehow in true, true fact – in facts somehow assembled there out of the actual substance of reality by brilliant workings done in beauty – we are the fig tree now. And thus the powerful reality of beauty has been proved.

For me this is an ecstasy.
And it resolves deep riddles
of human joy and meaning.



Rainbow Serpent Woman
Acrylic / canvas painting by Stone Riley



**Pensacola Bay,
Summer Morning**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Opening To Compassion

essay in morals

I recommend compassion. What is the meaning of this peculiar word com-passion? It is a passion with- and not about- our fellows. And passion is a feeling, deep beyond our other feelings, which we know we must believe and obey.

Compassion is a feeling that there is no blame because, beneath all combinations of outward circumstances, there is only simply innocence.

The deepest stirrings in our soul, if we gaze clearly in our souls, are the same forces felt in all our fellow beings. So forgiveness is a wiser choice, a choice with more truth in it, a choice with more understanding of ourselves in it, than blame. If in clear judgment we must act for other's rights, speak truth to haughty power for the future's sake, or call injustice by its name so cruel greed will stand unmasked before the world and justice done, we will do all that indeed with all our strength, but we will do all that for love and not for hate.

There is a strange transformation in our sense of beauty too, in our instinctive judgments in those moments while we hold compassion. Perhaps it is because beauty and ugliness seem so microscopically distributed throughout everything that

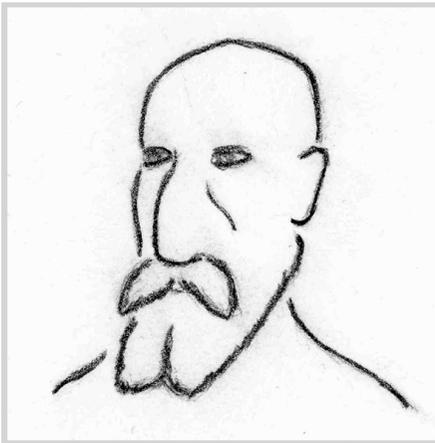
their tension becomes a source of infinite wonder. We may, like Van Gogh, weep at the haunted drama of a worn out pair of shoes or, like Dr. King, sincerely preach respect for the humanity of evil-doing men and women. Compassion is a sublime conviction that it is always me there.

And this is natural for human beings. This is a state of mind to which our human race is bred by living all together here on Earth, not only one for saints and geniuses.

Compassion has great value for us all because it lets us make peace with one another by accepting and believing the vast reality which always stands outside our selves. Logically, that surely means that it is deeply realistic.

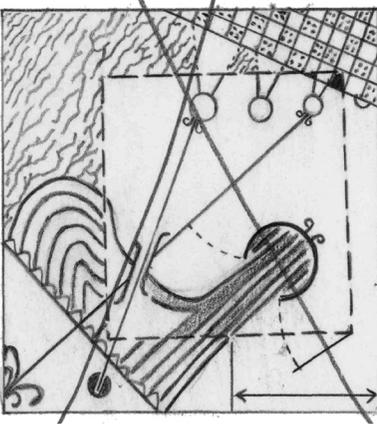
For indeed, the tremendous fascinating mystery which we can easily see each time we look out at this world, looks back at us too, and it beholds us with an infinite number of eyes.

From all of this, I think
we must do justice with humility.



King Of Cups

From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



Seven Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

Withdrawal Of Consent a poetic essay in political philosophy

Around nineteen-eighty. Back then, we were in a time of lies, lies on a very wide and yet pervasively intimate scale, as though lies were the air you breathed. I'll tell you one example of those times that infuriated me:

My fellow citizens were mostly still in love with our national U.S. propaganda lies and so there was a nonsense question you could ask. You could ask Mister or Ms Citizen this:

“Do you think America
is the greatest country in the world?”

Nonsense on its face of course. To rationally reply, just to start, they must apply some greatness score to every country in the world. Then if this is somehow done and if we win the tip top score, how then to reach the actual meaning? For we know what is meant: America is good and noble by its nature, and inherently in the world's nature. So how that? But if the citizen shall judge this inference is also done, the logic leads to marvelous conclusions.

For if the logic can be proved, or is assumed, then it confirms a pleasant feeling dawning temptingly as the preferred conclusion is approached. For the climax of the thought is this: Them and their nation righteously dreaming, forcefully leading, sunshiny gleaming, envy of the world and by incanting this

they feel themselves standing now with masterful sunshiny generous Gods.

So every American I asked ...

“Do you think America
is the greatest country in the world?”

... with very rare exception, would actually do exactly this: Listen to my question, think momentarily and see the difficulties of the question, decide to abandon thought, and shrug often, and answer “Yes, I think America is the greatest country in the world.”

Too frail to dare traverse the shadow of a doubt, these my fellow citizens.

They were doing this even after the horrors of the very horrid Vietnam War that were just recently gone by, vast horrors done by our soldiers from the very start of it and repeated constantly with increasing pitch of desperation right to the end, horrors mostly done by public order of our generals in fulfillment of our government's public policies and constantly reported clearly in the daily news; yes it was even then after those long recent years of vast and quite intentional evil, that enormous spasm of pointless furious insane destruction, it was then in nineteen-eighty and I was finding most Americans still somehow clung to their cherished lie that our country, unlike most other countries, is noble and does good.

My fellow citizens.

(And one among the dead a friend. We men young together there were waiting, he among us chosen of the war machine and carried to the perpetration, he the murdered by the war machine, promptly murdered, us friends there waiting, us one letter back from him all full of scribbled horrors and he's dead. That long ago by then, dead in summer nineteen-seventy.)

Fast forward. Twenty-eleven. Thirty years more or less and every one of them a year of startling surprises.

Two thousand and eleven. Me. Night. A city night. An electric glaring night of shadowed darkness here behind us where we stand but blazing penetrating light across the street.

We standing here – a large but unknown number of us – stood far out to left and right and all three ranks deep but crowding close to hold each other up against the blaring light – are actually, in military fact, a voluntary unarmed citizen militia, well disciplined by our ideals and ready. Waiting. Our drummers drumming loud and fast. Food and water being passed.

Waiting for the Boston Police to cross the street in line abreast and take the park.

The park, the Occupy encampment. The tiny liberated zone. The tiny zone of real democracy, of real news, real education. The zone of reality and courage.

Me a visitor tonight. Me with others come racing in a car tonight to make this muster, come racing from our smaller city's camp where we are fully occupied with our own version of the struggle.

Me old man by then but out in front to show some leadership, waiting crouching on the curb, but a squad of drummers shove in here so I fade back behind the line and find some other duty.

Me, I take up chatting. Chatting. Our fellow citizens, some of them, have come to stroll about behind our line and they want chatting. I hail one “Hi”.

This one a man the age that I once was. In that electric shadowed thrumming rhythm dark he does approach, is not shy but can't find words.

Youngish, so-called white. Clean and warmly dressed this cool night.

He is not shy but fuddled, confused, trying seriously to think but can't find terms. Clearly sees the movement of these souls, clearly sympathizes but yet cannot see why. He seems to seem to himself cloudy drifty and opaque.

Me, I guess I'll clarify him

Me, I guess I'll put the question.

“Can I ask you something?” (Sarcastically? Ironically?)

Uncertainly: “Okay?”

“Do you think America
is the greatest country in the world?”

Mister U.S. Citizen: He hesitates. He hems and haws, haws and hems, almost makes a little dance, offers something, takes it back. Then, at last, finally his countenance at last, his countenance portrays as if perhaps as if a useful thought has found him.

So now at last – at long long weary last – praise any god you wish – finally he does not answer.

Withdrawal of consent.



Pulling The Mandrake Root
Acrylic / wood painting by Stone Riley



**The Substance
Of Reality**

Digital photomontage
by Stone Riley

Focal Points
an essay on painting and storytelling

I sometimes hear, to my continual astonishment, that a painting ought to have one strong focal point. Why? I suppose this is intended to inspire a feeling of dramatic concentration.

But in fact a single focal point makes a picture dull and dead. No natural scene, nor any passage in a person's life, nor any moment in our mental lives, is so impoverished. Indeed, in performing for the public as a storyteller I have definitely learned that any drama needs a minimum of three vivid characters. Less makes insufficient fodder for the viewer's imagination. Concentration is not produced by an absence of focal points but by manifold harmonies between them so that the viewer may imagine them merging across the space between. And of course confusion, when a storyteller wishes it, arises from their dissonances.

Others sometimes say that a clever painter may arrange multiple focal points in such a way to lead the viewer's eye along a path. This is certainly much better than a single one, especially if the path describes one of the shapes which instinctively inspire some feeling in the human mind. It might be a square to lend a feeling of stability, the open ended "S" that's called "curve of beauty", a long diagonal for speed and vigor,

or such as that. Of course the path from one point of attraction to the next must be depicted clearly, probably by connecting lines arranged between.

And storytelling may obviously lend support to this hypothesis with its similar devices: the lifting melody of voice being like the curve of beauty, square marching cadences of voice being like a painted square, etc., and the need for plot to be a clear chain of happenings.

But I would argue that a composition of this kind is prone to two interacting faults: It may fall to pieces when a viewer sets their eye to wandering freely and it may lack surprise. Surprising discoveries are wanted in an artwork as they are in life. And our surprise, actually, is not aroused by either unconnected things nor that which seems inevitable, but by finding things connected in unexpected ways. Thus comes our marvelous sensation of assembling a discovery. And the greatest satisfaction is experienced when, scanning round about, we then discover signs of unforeseen connections permeating our field of view. Disappointment comes from irresolvable disjunctions, boredom from uniformity, resistance from compulsion.

There certainly are great paintings where the viewer's eye is powerfully urged along a certain path but they are ones in which those difficulties have been overcome, not disproofs of the difficulties. So is there some alternative idea for composition with multiple focal points, one in which we are not setting ourselves those problems? Let's seek a metaphor in performance work again.

Imagine a scene of final confrontation and resolution where the main actors of a play are gathered on the stage. As they take their turns in this finale of the play, the audience beholds their separate personalities, their relationships with each of the others and likenesses between them. A web is firmly woven.

Now suppose you made a picture with the points of main attraction distributed about the surface and with the space

between them filled with gradients of various sorts, offering continuous interest to the eye along all possible paths.

For example: Suppose you laid out a dark vertical thing, a bright vertical thing, a bright horizontal and a dark horizontal. Then you could fill the space with deliberately placed gradations of light and orientation. Surprise arises when the viewer realizes that one distinct thing has transformed to another. Further satisfaction comes when they take this hint and glance around and find transformation everywhere.

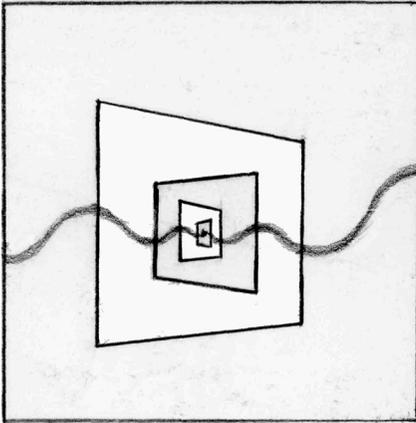
Of course bright/dark and vertical/horizontal are only two of the polarities which human vision hurries to comprehend. Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" lures the eye to human face, human hands and a mysterious comparatively amorphous region, a vague landscape through a mist, all of this mediated by intervening curves. Van Gogh's "Starry Night" offers heaven, valley, habitations, mountains and trees, mediated chiefly by their colors.

And that takes us to a deeper wider plane of work. If we emulate the greatest painters in spreading out a picture's focal points at various widely separated places in the viewer's mind – a larger space than any canvas – then whatever visual cues of mediation we provide become amplified by the mind's strong desire to integrate its inner doings.

Speak simultaneously to several different functions of human visual perception. Induce the human brain to think about as many things as possible simultaneously. The many dialects of Modern Art have well explored the means to do this sort of thing.

For example, you might offer fodder to the mind's proclivity for reading human postures or faces, while also imitating the kind of variations in the visual field that are made by mood and sound. You might craft surrealist shapes like Dali's, but with their colors weighted like Matisse and arranged in musical rhythms as per Mondrian. If you also offer clues of harmony among these things, the viewer's yearning to understand the world is conjured up to yield a rich and full experience indeed.

Once a viewer steps into the journey of a picture of this kind, it is as though they've gone to see a Shakespeare play or Hitchcock movie; they find themselves immersed in a world of chiming echoes.



Two Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

Major Arcana Of The Simple Tarot **an illustrated poetic cycle** **regarding art and human life**

I spent the year of 1980 studying Tarot intensively. The first thing that I learned was only that the task was hard. None of the bookstores even had a version of the deck whose pictures I could understand, and that did seem essential. And so I thought that I had better make one up. It was an act of desperation really, there in January. Tarot seemed to be a wide door into magic and I very badly wanted magic in my life. The trick was only that the door must be prized open so I might enter, and powers there emerge.

I had the Waite/Smith Rider Pack, the Aquarian Pack and one abstract metaphysics book about the subject. I had pencils and artist paper, rulers and compasses, sharp knives, proper glue, and such. I had my studies of Tao and Zen and Hinduism. I had the I Ching and a Ouija Board.

That seemed enough equipment for the job if one applies the rule of going lightly burdened. (After all, to take a running leap at such a high and distant target, one ought to go lightly burdened.) So, telling no one then at first in case it came to nought, I launched right in. I would see if it was possible to make a Tarot deck that I could comprehend.

I sketched a card or two then three or four, the ace of hearts, a few of the faces, and found the sketches good enough for me. I showed these few beginning prototypes to some folks at work and they could read them clearly. I found as well that these pictures, at least these few, could be drawn from carefully selected experiences of my own life.

And so I carried on.

Well, anyway, to further make the meanings clear I wrote a little caption at the bottom of every card, a brief illustratory exclamation or sentence. That seemed a bit like writing Zen commentaries on human life. Each Monday I would take a few at random from the Rider Pack and put them in my pocket, so to watch for them outside and gaze occasionally into their depths.

When the trump cards started turning up, as another study aid, I took to writing longer poems. That is the material shown here on the following pages.

FAQ:

(Inserted much later) There's blank space here so I'll address a few of Tarot's frequently asked questions.

1: How to learn to read Tarot? > Find a version of the deck where the pictures talk to you through your eyes, even if they only whisper. Ignore its accompanying book, if there is one, for a year at least.

2: Where has Tarot come from? > All evidence says Tarot was invented as a card game, an interesting and fun imitation of life, around 550 years ago in Northern Italy. The cards were beautiful painted luxuries at first, but newly developed printing technology was quickly put to use, making the decks cheap and the game popular. Soon an unknown genius fortune teller realized the game resembled actual life enough it could be very well adapted for divination. Since that was a strict society, and since it is a general rule that strict societies allow magic to be practiced by only the highest elites and the farthest outcasts, we may guess the unknown genius was a person of the Roma people, an oppressed and outlawed ethnic group then arriving from the East into that region. In any case, we know that in the next few centuries Roma women, working as criminal vagrant fortune tellers on the ragged fringes of society, grew Tarot into one of the great art works of the human race. Then later, in my youth, in a time when we were breaking society, we followed reports and rumors to this beautiful discovery and the current flowering of Tarot began.

3: But where do the bones of Tarot come from? I mean, why is it so similar to human life that it's excellent for divination? > I feel persuaded by a theory that the Major Arcana is from the Celts while the Minor Arcana is from the Greeks. The Major is astrology, a version of the zodiac like the sacred landscape sculpted in the land around Stonehenge. The Minor is more alchemical, something like a Hellenistic diagram of human physiology. Anyway, we know Northern Italy was a cross-
(Con't on next page)

The card:

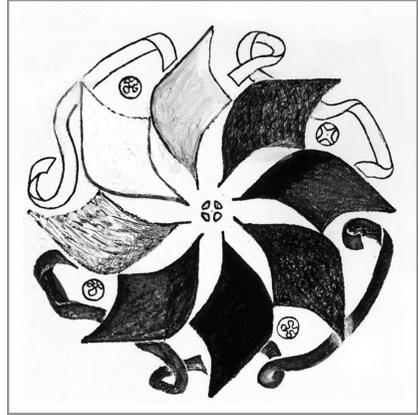
The Fool

Its number:

0

Its caption:

Glory! Glory! Glory!



Its Poem:

A clown leaps from the height,
this prince, this god of fools.
Unfurling colored wings of immortality
he soars out high. But, drunken
with the dizzy speed and power,
he folds one wing and falls
:
:
to this world.

(Con't from prior page)

roads of the ancient Greek and Celtic culture worlds, from before Roman times straight through into the Renaissance. After all, that is naturally a crossroads country, a broad and fertile river plain running down to the Mediterranean from the Alps. And so, as you have probably seen yourself, a great strength of Tarot is its possession of two Arcanas, two ways of describing life that are very wise yet very different. That yields its deep wonderful ability to describe our full and complex lives so realistically.

The card:

The Magician

Its number:

1

Its caption:

**We absorb the force
of nature and release it
as we deem fit**



Its Poem:

A clot am I of earth, wind, fire and water.
A breath am I of earth, wind, fire and water.
A spark am I of earth, wind, fire and water.
A drop am I of earth, wind, fire and water.

And yet I speak !

A human thing who names the gods.

The card:

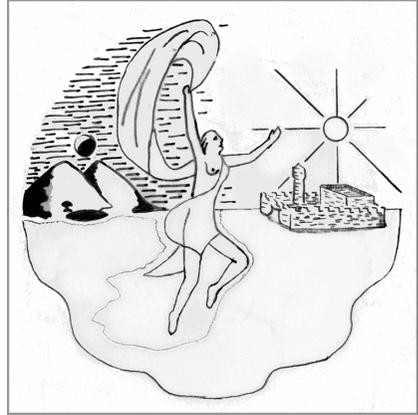
The High Priestess

Its number:

2

Its caption:

**A thin veil billows
at the borders of our realm,
infinity is hidden and
revealed**



Its Poem:

Cast your eye to the farthest shore
then cast your heart beyond.
There open your heart to the velvet touch,
the holy touch of dawn.

The card:

The Empress

Its number:

3

Its caption:

**The ancient mother of
our race was called the
giver of all things**



Its Poem:

Oh

QUEEN OF HEAVEN

mistress of our prayers;

Oh

grandmother **EVE**

you who first bore child

and gave it suck,

you who first laid hand

upon the newborn human brow;

Oh

PERFECT MOTHER OF US ALL

I, fruit of your womb,

call your name **BLESSED**

and kneel here at your feet.

The card:

The Emperor

Its number:

4

Its caption:

**The ancient father of
our race was called the
giver of all names**



Its Poem:

Oh

honorable father Adam,
you who measure space
and count the hours;
Your voice of power
invigorates both demi-god
and demon.

You

who cast a legal deed
upon this shadowy realm
and stamp a seal
upon all that is yours;

At will

you call the lightening bolt
or lift a roof beam high.

The card:

The High Priest

Its number:

5

Its caption:

**We honor the governor who
sees infinity and teaches truth**



Its Poem:

This endless eddied world of surge and flow
may here and there forget to know
that it is All
but dreams instead
that it is You
or I.

Yet in each heart will ever lie the soul's deep pool,
the porphyry bowl of lotus wine,
the self-dissolving sigh,
so to my lips the endless draught you pour.

When I have drunk
and bathed
and drowned
and sunk beneath the waves I've found
my self somehow composed once more
and lifted to a sunlit shore where
wind-soaked flesh
and bony core
become an echoing ocean sound.

So now the eyes within my head look round
surprised to see both You and I
with callused feet on stony ground
still at unbounded ocean's edge
immersed in flowing sky.

The card:

The Lovers

Its number:

6

Its caption:

**Through a veil a longing kiss;
then hard choices and
compromises; we must know
and become each other**



Its Poem:

Love, thou art perfect in all thy ways,
Perfection whispering on the waters.
(Consider our joys, have they not been
a strengthening bond these times?
Do I not know thee fair and well?)

So shed all lies which others tell,
lies of blind hunger, of fearful
jealousy and pitiful defeat.
Gaze into my clear heart
wide, calm and deep;
See here your own beauty rippling.

The card:

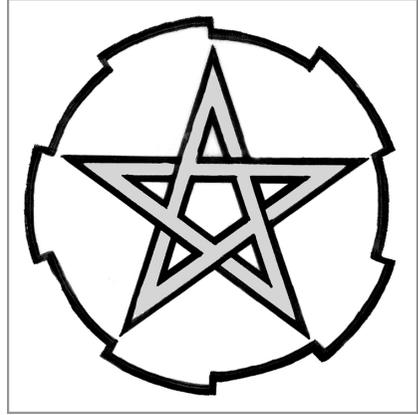
The Chariot

Its number:

7

Its caption:

**I & you – with & without
– dare & dare not –
such words provide
our power in this world**



Its Poem:

Like a mighty engine throbbing,
pistons counter-trusting within steel,
our worlds are driven by
their opposites within.

Cock jays perch in opposite trees,
and shout their individual song:
“I say, keep away !”
One living world is made.

The engine, armored centaur, heaves.
Upon its flank an emblem of its
government proclaims:
“I say, keep away !”

Split, we feel a master in our selves,
a governor in a bastion tower who hoards
up goods and keeps
a watch fire warm.

With rumbling gear inside of gear,
the turret and the cannon scan
beyond the border,
beyond our land.

The card:

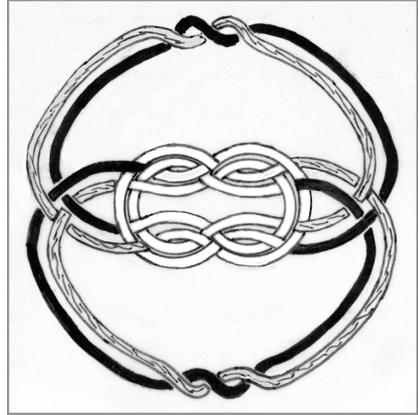
Strength

Its number:

8

Its caption:

**Cleanly united,
we shine within**



Its Poem:

Raindrop hanging still from a leaf tip
knows the mighty tug of Earth and yet moves not.
The filaments of liquid crystal knitting it,
pure star stuff,
have their own way.

The card:

The Hermit

Its number:

9

Its caption:

**Worlds touch,
we are moved**



Its Poem:

Oh master of the high pass,
priest of the scouring wind which keens
among my bones,
reach down your knotty staff unto my grasp
that I may climb;
and raise a song to greet your long-forbidden love.

It was your song which drew me out,
which echoed through my heart and soul,
a faint high thrill to which my body chimed;
so up from the master's pillow jerked my head
and out from the castle cloister flew my feet
till here at last before you now I stand,
trembling and childlike, in your silence,
and pray you to caress me once again.

Why don't you sing? Why don't you sound the pipes?
Why don't you toss aside that cloak, that spectral mien,
and clasp me to your bosom with a hearty laugh?
Why now at long last chill and numbing silence?

(Con't on next page)

The Hermit

(Con't from prior page)

Within the shadowy hood which blacks your radiant face
I do perceive half-lidded eyes which hint forbearance
and a tight-lipped little smile which answers: “Go !”

Bereft and yet obedient still, I turn away and blink aside
the tears to spy my barren home so far below.
And yet behold !

The wind has laid down to a murmuring sigh
and somehow, through your magic charm,
the waste I go to tread has turned to sparkling jewels
and to gold.

The card:

The Wheel Of Fortune

Its number:

10

Its caption:

**Having nought else,
we trust to luck**



Its Poem:

Tumbling headlong with its next step,
the great animal plunges through a matted screen
which hid the tunnel mouth and down
to the cave floor below.

Plunged from dusk into night,
but bred to a forager's quick wit,
it casts a glance about to see what light is shed
by the hole it fell through.

Suddenly landed in a new place,
it pulls itself up now to a comfortable squat and,
being one of the laughing apes,
grins back at its own breathless fall.

The card:

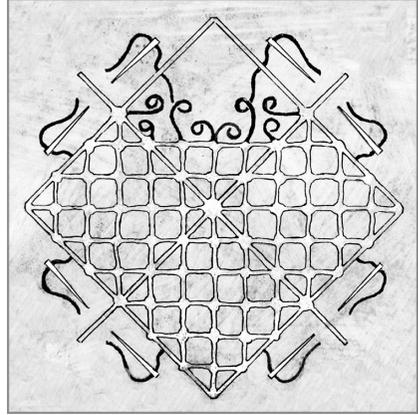
Justice

Its number:

11

Its caption:

**Knot by knot,
we weave perfection**



Its Poem:

The firefly, tragically struggling,
sheds her phosphorescent glow upon
prismatic drops of spider glue
which a patient hunter hopes may hold her fast.

Here in a meadow in a wood on a plain,
now in this first night when all the suns
and moons together call her kind up
from a long waiting winter sleep in the earth;

Now on this first night of love,
of life within the soaring phantom body
of a swarm of light, she has cast herself
into a net of jewels and hangs suspended,
half terrorized, half reconciled to fate.

The card:

Death

Its number:

13

Its caption:

**Our lives
wither and bloom,
memory scarcely lingers**



Its Poem:

Youth is tenuous memory and
old age looms a fantasy somewhere;
room by room in a spiral hall
I walk the land.

What dread surrounds that door ahead !
What dreams lie there? What friend
or beast turns ear to the distant
measure of my tread?

The card:

Temperance

Its number:

14

Its caption:

**Rushing from the height
of passion against
the hard Earth of reality,
we find the stillness**



Its Poem:

Water, blood of Earth,
come wash the poison from my flesh
and bring back life !

I dwelt with the others and thus became thus;
now I give my self
to you.

The card:

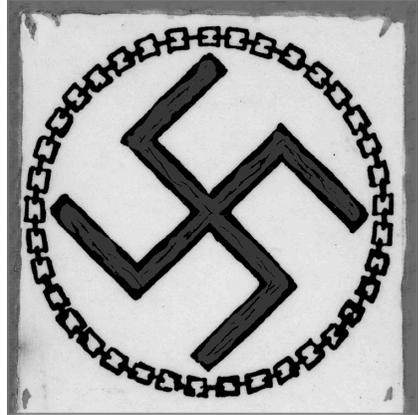
The Devil

Its number:

15

Its caption:

**Will can nearly
make us gods**



Its Poem:

A living creature crushed beneath a hero's thumb.
Seething hunger moist on lips and tongue.

A writhing knotty snake within,
if not on constant victory fed,
will climb up on the hero's spine
and pluck his heart instead.

By stealth or dare he feeds the beast,
each morsel meaning he lives still.

He is too strong to sacrifice
that scabrous fruit of will.

The card:

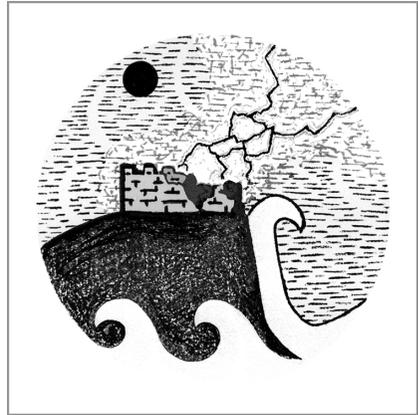
The Tower

Its number:

16

Its caption:

Our will is folly



Its Poem:

Upon this precipice built he a tower
to rule from high rich Eden's bower;
he fled the eye of God to cower,
to hoard up wife and goods and gear.

Spoke Fate: "In brittle silence sit you here,
"in age-long soul-deep hate and fear,
"all for the sake of goods and gear,
"and jealousy of love."

"Stand off !" cried Adam to the dove,
"Repeat my mortal boast above:
" I am a man ! Darth's pulse shall move
"beneath the tapping of my thumb !"

But thunder rolls from God's great drum,
the gale and wave and earthquake come,
with ripening time all strivings sum,
and every fortress finds its hour.

The card:

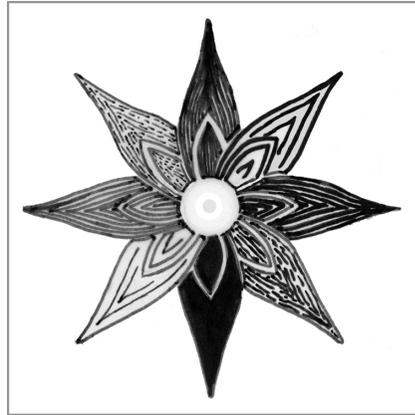
The Star

Its number:

17

Its caption:

**Prismatic, we burst
from a core of truth**



Its Poem:

Breaker waves 'neath
lowering cloud
of autumn, driven by an icy wind;
here I stand transfixed with longing
on the shore of Skysealand.

Human eye drawn always outward
stretches forth the human hand
toward ever distant grey horizons
where the elements all blend.

Cold the heart and cold the soul,
cold the marrow in the bones does grow;
the yearning eye knows what to seek
but the dogged flesh too weak?

Where is the rescue promised me?
How can my swooning heart yet come to be
a vessel of white light and sanctity
when all is dark and far from God's humanity?

A light !
Thank God, upon that distant curve
of blackening sea, at last a light !
So here I stand and through the eye
that piercing light darts to my soul
and there explodes into prismatic glow,
suffusing all.

The card:

The Moon

Its number:

18

Its caption:

**Intrigued, fearful, hopeful
and enraptured, we proceed
as though into the past**



Its Poem:

Whispering shadow on my pillow lay.
(Arise ! Barefoot ! No robe ! Away !)
“How far the chase tonight?” I say.
The moonlight never answered.

The card:

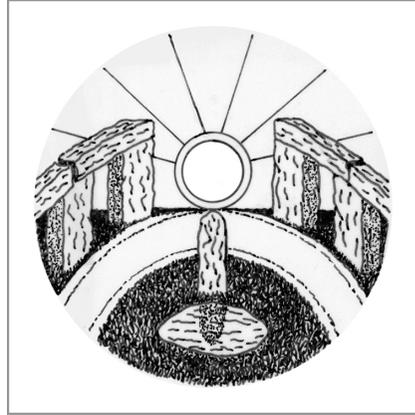
The Sun

Its number:

19

Its caption:

**Gates thrown open,
we greet
the vanquisher of night**



Its Poem:

Soaked with the cold blind night, I stumble,
blunted sword in hand, panting,
not even breath enough for prayer,
my charges huddled in the broken circling wall
not knowing where the next attack may come.

But children of two eternal ones are we;
He whose word is fire
and She whose breast is clay.

Oh glorious mighty SOL !
The first ray of Your rising
pierced me and my heart flew up
to kiss Your breath of flame !

You kiss me as You kiss the mother Earth
and bring back mighty mighty life !
I thrust down roots into her breast
and turn my face to you.

A circling temple from the broken stones
with altars male and female I heap up;
thereon this precious incense now I burn
to welcome you.

The card:

Judgment

Its number:

20

Its caption:

**Our ravelled threads
will all combine**



Its Poem:

Maze walker,
creature of a million colored chambers,
creature with a million colored patterns in your eye
long ago lost here, almost guideless, almost friendless,
guessing every turn,
your steps have crossed a million beckoning portals,
tramped a million halls.

Now a new eye opens,
the eye above your self, holding no patterns, and sees:
the foot and floor, the patterned walls, light dancing to
the counter-patterned eye; now all is one !
A dance of all reality, of great and small infinity,
whose tiny steps and boundless whirls make up yourself,
all that there is.

Now see the truth of All: All is one thing,
a world of self-same strangers,
cable of many threads,
garden of night and noon and morning
magic loom of all there is.

The card:

The World

Its number:

21

Its caption:

**Our lives – the limbs and
twigs and leaves of
the great life**



Its Poem:

Unbounded parkland;
where the master gardener passes
exotic seeds flame
into great maturity.

Of course
the weathered lips reveal a smile;
all a wish could name
is here today.



**John
The Baptist**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Fabio Saavedra, Where Are You? a poetic memoir regarding art and human life

Fabio Saavedra, where are you? You were a friend. I have two of your paintings on my walls today, that third one being gone lamentably to California. I have a folder of your drawings.

Your apartment just across from mine, across the poor and lovely courtyard where the Five of Cups stood waiting to be seen and where the Wheel of Fortune hung before my startled gaze one morning in the opened air, your apartment, that cool dark den of conversations. Where are your brother and your father and your mother and your wife? Where is your little baby boy?

Houston, summer 1980. I will never forget your generosity that day, the invitation to your brother's airy sunny house, where several of your pieces were arrayed along a wall and, much to my surprise, some honored person suddenly arrived, a famous critical writer visiting from South America your brother whispered to my whispered inquiry, there that day to view your paintings and advise.

I never will forget the manner. Utterly courteous and utterly confident of competence amid the nervousness that filled the house. Here was the Four of Wands indeed.

And when the honored critic, fragrant cigarette held delicately in fingertips to be a sort of ceremonial wand, duly progressing down your wall of paintings, nodding calming murmured affirmations of your explanations and your work itself, came to the little dining table where you'd stationed me, I duly arose with my little half completed deck of handmade paper cards in hand, seeing smiles around me, and made bold to speak with gestures of utmost humble courtesy, apologetic for the English which he did not understand and for the excess inches of my physical height, holding out the deck tentatively and shrugging, asking if he'd care to see a work in progress.

I never will forget your generosity that day, to share a treasured resource.

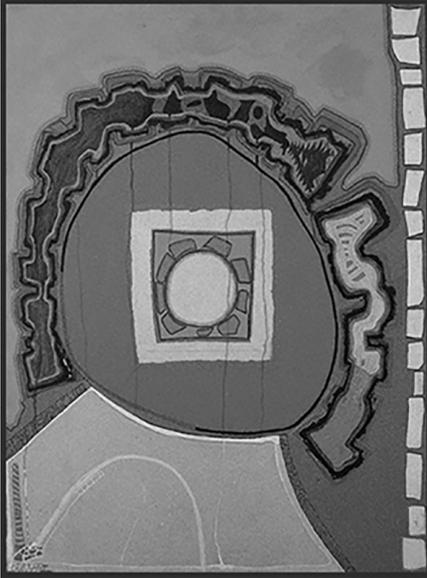
He found the pictures interesting. He manifestly did. He found some of them actually arresting, pausing for a moment, murmuring assent, as they filed before his eyes from hand to hand within the fragrant smoke.

Perhaps the Eight of Coins was one of those, its political dimensions being so acute in 1980 South America, although it was the man's Indian face I principally watched, in its intelligent pleasure in surprise.

Handing them back, smiling encouragement and nodding, repeating twice some word I did not know, he positively said the piece of work is good, smiling round to all, returning to the pleasant task for which he'd come.

So the project went on with confidence renewed. The damn things worked.

Fabio Saavedra, you are still a friend.



**En Espera
(On Hold)**
Oil painting by
Fabio Saavedra,
collection of
Stone Riley



**Untitled
1980**
Oil painting
by Fabio
Saavedra,
collection of
Stone Riley



Night Birth

Digital image from
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Little Sam

a short story of love and courage

One time Daddy and Mommy and Little Sam went to visit at the hospital. Sam walked along between the grownups, looking at everything, taking big steps, both of his hands way up to hold hands with them. It was a very strange place indeed. Now and then there was a funny smell kind of like bathroom cleaner but it was so strong it made his stomach queasy.

There were long halls where the floors were very flat and there were things made out of shiny metal, especially some funny beds with wheels and sometimes there were people on them and people pushed them in the halls. Everything sounded funny too and almost nobody was talking out loud.

It was overwhelming.

They went inside an elevator. There were buttons that lit up, and they went down another hall with lots of people all doing things. Now Sam was tired from walking so far with such big steps but nobody else was talking so he didn't want to say anything and he didn't ask to be picked up.

Then they went through a door, a big wide door, and in a room. It was kind of like a bedroom with a bed and chairs but there were some kind of curtains like bathtub curtains hanging from the ceiling and the bed had complicated kind of metal

parts instead of legs. There was a lady he didn't know in the bed and she looked right at him without any kind of look on her face at all. That was scary.

But Mommy and Daddy kept on walking, around that lady's bed, on toward the window with the sky outside. For some reason Auntie Ethel and Uncle Jack were here, in chairs beside the window. Uncle Jack looked like he was going to cry, looking down at the floor, and Auntie Ethel was leaning over rubbing his hair. She looked up and saw Sam and smiled and nodded like she meant to say hello.

Then Sam suddenly realized who else was here. There was another bed and Nana Sarah was lying in it under a nice blue blanket, kind of sitting up. Nana Sarah and Mommy were talking and Mommy leaned over so they could hug and kiss. Nana looked at Sam for a moment and smiled like Auntie Ethel had done but she and Mommy kept on talking.

Where was Baby Jessica? Ever since Auntie Ethel and Uncle Jack had gotten Baby Jessica, Sam had always seen them together – always – so where was she now? He looked in every corner of the room. That was scary too.

Then finally Daddy picked Sam up to let him talk with Nana. She was touching his arm and talking to him but her face was shocking. Her skin was the wrong color and her eyes were definitely yellow monster eyes. Her breath smelled really bad. She reached out her other hand and he grabbed it and held on and just then he realized what was wrong. Nana Sara was very, very sick.

Sam had been bad sick one time when he was little. He didn't remember it much but he did remember lying on a pillow in Nana's lap in the rocking chair, hugging the little gray teddy bear. He felt really awful then, like everything was wrong inside him, but they rocked in the chair and she sang a song and wiped his forehead with a cool wet cloth and he finally went to sleep.

So now he reached out and touched her forehead like she had done for him, but her forehead wasn't hot; it was cold

and he couldn't do anything for her. So he began to cry with big frightened sobs. Daddy held him tighter and whispered something. Mommy rubbed his hair. Nana touched his cheek very lightly with just her fingertips, right where his tears were running down.

"Samuel," Nana Sarah said, "there's something you should always remember. Will you promise to remember it for me?"

Sam nodded but he couldn't stop sobbing.

She said, "Always remember that you and me love each other very much."

* * * * *

It did not happen that same night after the hospital visit. Maybe it was the next night or the night after that; in any case it was pretty soon. Sam was home from day care and he and Mommy were in the living room listening to music and doing stuff. Daddy was someplace else in the house.

The phone rang and stopped. Then Daddy came in and told Mommy, "It's the hospital. They want to talk to you!" Daddy had a strange look on his face and Sam would remember all the events of that night very clearly from then on.

Mommy went and sat on the sofa in the living room by the phone, picked it up and said "Yes, go ahead!" Then her face turned pale. After just a minute more she said "Thank you!" and put the phone down. Then she put her hands on her face and began to cry. Daddy sat beside her and hugged her and put his face next to hers.

Sam came over and stood there wondering what was wrong. Daddy very quietly told him, "Nana Sarah died!" He coaxed Sam over close and hugged him too.

There was something they had told Sam a number of times that he had never understood at all. Nana Sarah was Mommy's mommy. He understood it now. So what if his Mommy died next? He would have to cry like Mommy was now. A wave of unknown fear washed over him. He pried one of his mother's hands away from her face, forced his hands

in around her arm, pressed his face against her shoulder and clung on tight.

It became a very long evening. After awhile Daddy and Mommy just sat on the sofa and Sam lay on a pillow at their feet. They played lots of music and talked a little.

Sam knew what dying was. One time at day care one of the mouses in the cage had died. Martha the tall girl saw it first and started yelling till everyone came over. People were poking it with their fingers through the wires but it didn't move. Its little pink feet with the knobby toes were curled up and its eyes were shut. The other mouses were still running around just like this one used to. Its name was Elliot. It was a boy.

Sam never cared too much about the mice but this was important so he watched everything. Miss Patricia took the mouse, washed its face and feet under a dribble of water in the sink and gently wrapped it in a piece of cloth. She led the children out into the yard, took a garden spade and made a hole back by the corner of the fence.

Next she unwrapped Elliot and held him out for the children to see. She told them that he had been a very good mouse. Finally she wrapped him up again, laid him in the hole, put in the dirt, set a rock on top and said, "Good-bye friend!" They never saw Elliot again and somehow Sam missed him.

And then there was the other time. He was walking with Daddy in the woods looking at all kinds of things. Daddy stopped and pointed at the ground. Sam didn't see the thing at first because it was partly under a big brown leaf but he squatted down to look and there it was, one of the speckled brown birds that hopped around the bushes in their back yard.

Daddy picked it up. It didn't move, just like Elliot the mouse. Daddy rubbed its back and said how soft it was. He held it out and Sam took it in his hand like Miss Patricia did.

He had never looked at feathers actually on an animal before so he rubbed them with his finger one way then the other. Its little legs were sticking out stiff like wires but its toes were curled up like Elliot's. Its eyes were shut tight too.

Then he noticed what was on the dead bird's face: tiny ants. A number of tiny black ants were running around in and out of its nostrils, around its beak. What were they doing inside its head? A sudden sick feeling came over him and he didn't want to know any more about this. He threw the dead bird down and stepped on it, trying to make it go away.

Now, Sam lying restlessly asleep on the pillow at his parents' feet, saw his Nana's face. She didn't move. Her eyes were tight shut. Countless ants were running in and out her nostrils and around her lips. With a horrified choking gasp, the little boy woke up.

* * * * *

Although the hour was late his parents lingered over bed time. They tucked him in with all his pet cloth animals then sat together on his bed and talked a little more.

His mother laid a hand on his stomach and a hand on her own. She asked, "Remember what I used to say? It's the same thing Nana used to tell me when I was her little girl. There is a shiny silver string between you and me here in our tummies. It's true. And the string goes between us all, you and me and Daddy and Nana too, because we all love each other so much!"

They kissed him then and left him in the dark, with just the dim little hallway light shining through the slightly opened door.

Little Sam gathered his toy companions into his loving embrace and kissed their fuzzy faces, faces that seemed alive and animate to him. His thoughts gradually wandered and slowly drifted into a kind of sleep. An hour passed without his noticing, and then a second hour.

Eventually a physical sensation appeared in his restless dreams. There seemed to be something warm glowing in his stomach. For awhile he dreamed about hot soup for lunch on a cold day. But the sensation grew even more physical and strong, a strange kind of gentle inside tugging different from anything he had known before.

So then he imagined looking inside himself and imagined the silver string glowing warmly and stretching off away to some other place. He imagined someone was gently rubbing on the silver string to wake him and therefore he awoke.

There at the foot of his bed, in a glow of moonlight from the window, his Nana Sarah stood.

Little Sam held his breath and did not move. The strange specter did not move. It stood in a way that Nana often stood, with its hands folded together. It seemed to smile at him with Nana's face, with Nana's love.

But that was more than he could stand. The horrid picture of the ants was unforgettable. He yanked the covers up and jumped down under them and he began to shout. His father was in the room at once and the bright light came on.

His father yanked the covers off, pulled Sam into his lap and held him close while the little boy trembled, panted and sobbed, his little legs making motions like running.

His mother was there too. She said, "He's never had nightmares like this."

The panic slowly faded. Slowly he turned his eyes to the place where the ghost had stood. There was nothing there now except the window just beyond and with the bright light here inside the glass, the world outside looked completely dark.

The blackness caught Sam's attention. He didn't like being scared. He knew the world outside was safe enough even if it looked black now. So he wondered if he should feel the same way about that other place where Nana was. Nana wouldn't hurt him no matter what.

Suddenly his father was carrying him out of his room, down the hall, into their room. His mother got in bed and held the covers back then his father laid him down in the middle and got in too. They turned their lamp off and the moonlight from outside was visible again.

Lying there between the two big bodies, it was like the time when they were walking down the hallways of the hospital except he wouldn't get to see Nana here. And the world outside

looked bright enough. Pretty soon Sam was struggling with the covers and squirming out. By the time his parents were sitting up he was crawling over his mother's legs and dropping down to the floor.

"Stay with us Sweetheart," his mother said.

The boy immediately answered emphatically, "No! Talk with Nana."

That shocked the woman. She threw the covers back and made to get up but her husband laid a calm hand on her shoulder, bidding her to stop.

"What did he say?" the husband asked.

"I think he said 'Talk with Nana.' "

"I thought so too. Let him go. Like I said, he's a gutsy little kid. Whatever that nightmare was, he's going off to face it. Everybody has to go alone, you know. Let him go now and we'll look in later."

* * * * *

Sam was back to sleep soon. The pets were scattered all around and the covers were all askew but he had the gray teddy in his arms and he'd found a corner of the blanket to pull across.

Immediately he saw the ants again. There had been many times when he had squatted down to watch the ants scurrying this way and that. After long observation he had realized that they were busy.

One time they had a pile of sand with a hole in the top. Some were carrying bits of things down through the hole and others were running out to go get more. It became a matter of fascination that such little animals behaved with so much purpose. They made him think about himself because he enjoyed doing things that way too, really fast go-go. And it was a new and intriguing thing for the little child to judge himself. So he liked the ants from then on. Whatever they were doing, it was probably okay.

He saw his Nana's face again. He thought her hair was made of soft brown leaves. He thought her eyebrows were

feathers and her smiling lips were made of shiny wrinkled flower petals. Yes – whatever the ants were doing, it was probably okay.

So then he gently realized that she was back again.

Whether he opened his eyes or not, I cannot say. In any case he saw her there in the moonlight by the bed, with hands folded and smiling love, her face like leaves, feathers and flower petals. And she could see that he was calm.

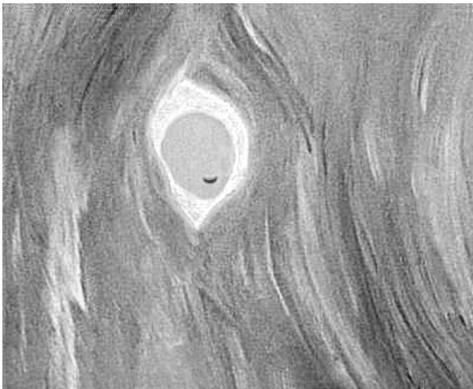
So she reached to touch his face quite softly with just fingertips and he reached to caress her caressing hand.

* * * * *

Then the woman and man awoke from restless dozing with their little boy crawling up between them into bed. The small child body curled and relaxed itself beneath the covers. They both touched him and felt he was okay.

The woman was about to ask but the child spoke first.

"Said good-bye to Nana."



**A Friend Visits
The Studio**

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley



**The Ecstasy
Of Saint Teresa**

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**August Evening
a poem of love and courage**

We are not imprisoned in ourselves and we are not alone. Your soul is not a single seed isolate in frozen ground nor is your heart a stone. No one can put up castle walls to hold themselves with any lock and key, for we are creatures of a teeming world.

Though we at times may fear the overawing beauty of a sunset or a dawn, the foreign eyes which penetrate our eyes, the grip of birdsong on our throat, the touch of whispering wind on naked cheek; though we at times may fear the loosening of the knotted strings of individual identity these intimate invasions bring, still soul beyond your soul is everywhere and crowding close.

Sit in company with a weeping woman, sharing grief for her beloved gone beyond the veil, and then up on the picture screen inside your brain behold a presence standing right there beside the woman's shoulder in an aureole of other-light, presenting emblems of some sort about some message they would have you speak.

Will you belie your claims of courage? You will not.

So turn an ear to seek a whisper from the very depths of mystery, and study carefully and breathe and speak.



Sacred Geometry

Digital image from
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

The Fisher King, Jack's Version

a folk tale of spiritual journey, used as a storytelling performance script

If I may, I'd like to offer you now one of the oldest stories that we have in the English language. For all I know perhaps it's the oldest story in the world that's been told and retold continuously.

You see, before the English were in Britain there was another race there whom we call the Ancient Celts. And before the Celts there was a race in Britain that we call the Picts. And before the Picts there was a race for whom we have not even heard a name.

These were the folks who stood up the first stones at Stonehenge, built tall Silbury Hill and the great long barrows across the countryside wherein to bury their dead, and much else too. Well, these people had a great story, their national story, I suppose. And they told it to the Picts. And the Picts told it to the Celts. And the Celts told it to the English. And the English told it to me.

So now I'm going to tell it to you unless you stop me. It's called *The Fisher King*.

Of course, you understand, it has been told and retold from mouth to ear and ear to mouth so many times that I do not

know the way those old folks told it. Like every teller since them, I must just try to do it justice the best way that I can.

One time in the island of Great Britain there lived a boy named Jack. Now, Jack was an excellent boy. He was quick in mind and body, strong, and able, modest, generous and polite. He was helpful, kind, courteous and obedient. He was the best boy you can possibly imagine. And the way that came about was like this: You see, on the very day when Jack was born – that very same day – his father was killed in a war and so his mother resolved to raise him somewhere quite apart from the corruptions of human society.

She took him off to a little cabin deep in the woods where almost no one ever came and lived there with him. And there he grew up with the forest – the trees and animals and earth and sky – with them as his parents almost as much as she was.

But then one sunny summer day, alas, Jack was fifteen. He was out near the edge of their wood – way out where the little road went by – looking for a rabbit to kill for their dinner. Just then three soldiers happened by along the road on horseback. Jack had never seen anyone on horseback and he was just amazed.

He said to himself, "Here are some men going somewhere from somewhere else and they have surely seen many things. I have been nowhere and seen nothing."

So he walked out to the side of the road with his mouth hanging open.

Now I must tell you, these were soldiers of King Maxin and Maxin was a good king. He made certain that his soldiers treated his people properly. So now these three were quite polite. They pulled their horses to a stop when they got near and one of them, the sergeant, called to Jack: "Hey there, boy, come talk to us, won't you? If it's not too much trouble, maybe you know a shady spot beside some water where we can rest. It's time for our lunch and our horses are tired."

And indeed, Jack did know a very pretty spot, a bit of meadow near a stream, and quite near by.

So then, while the men lay munching and chatting on the soft grass, and their big horses wandered about munching the grass, Jack dashed home to the cabin as fast as he could.

"Mother!" Jack cried, "There are soldiers bound to London, bound for the king's own house" (for so they had told him) "and I must go with them. I must! I must!"

The woman's heart sank in her breast but her son was fifteen now. She, being an excellent mother, knew that now he had been called so he must go. She wiped her hands on her old blue dress. She turned away so that he would not see and wiped her tears. She packed him food for the road, a real packful, and gave him his best walking stick and got his best pair of shoes onto his feet.

She kissed him and said a blessing on his head, and off he dashed back to the soldiers by the stream and declared they must take him with them.

Now this was fine with them. They slapped him on the back and said things like, "Brave boy!" and "You seem a likely lad". They said, "We'll make you a soldier too."

So off they went at a good pace with Jack trotting right along beside, for he was fast and strong. The rest of that day and half the next on the road through hills and farms and villages like Jack had never seen, through towns with streets and markets crowded full of more people than he had ever thought there could be in the whole world, until they came to the walls of great London town itself and went right in through big gates.

In they went to the very center of the great town where stood the house of King Maxin, a huge great hall. They left their horses with a porter at the door and just walked right in.

Now it was lunch time again and the hall was full. There was King Maxin himself at the high table far in front wearing his crown, with his queen at one side and his general of the army at the other. And all around were countless tables of soldiers over here, and clerks over there, with another whole army of cooks and waiters and waitresses to bring their food.

It was all abustle, I may tell you, full of clatter and talk. And those three soldiers marched right up to the high table way in front, right before the king, and made their report about the job that they'd been on and the king listened and thanked them courteously and bade them to places of honor at a table nearby.

So there stood Jack then, all by himself in the middle of this throng, before the very King of Britain, and the king looked down at him and he looked up at the king. Then, after a bit of silence, the king raised his eyebrows kind of humorously and asked, "Well, boy, who are you?"

And Jack answered, "Jack?"

I must tell you something. This was an excellent boy, the finest boy that you can possibly imagine, but he was still a boy. I mean that he lacked discernment. He lacked judgment. When choices were placed before him he could either stand paralyzed in total indecision or else he would just jump on something without knowing why. So it was now.

Knowing not what else to say, Jack spoke up strong. He said; "I want to be a soldier!" And the king smiled.

Three months they trained him. Three hard, hard months. Jack was already fast and hardy on his feet but they taught him to walk for three days and nights without sleeping, because when there is war a soldier must go where he is sent. He was already accurate with the bow but they taught him to shoot fast too, for when there is war a soldier must do all the damage that he can. He could already hit a running deer with the light spear but they taught him to throw the heavy spear for when there is war a soldier must kill men.

Then finally came the very day when his training was done and he was finally given to a company, the very first day when he came to sit with his new mates at their meal. The fellows shook hands all around and slapped his back and put him in a seat way down at the far end of the table.

And that very noon a certain merchant came to King Maxin's hall. This was a woman merchant, a trader in agricultural produce, I think. Her name was Andromeda, I think, and she

was well known to the king. He liked her because she always brought the news and she always told it straight.

Well, this merchant lady strode into the hall and right up to the front and before Maxin could even invite her to sit down for the meal she spoke to him; "Oh good king, I have seen a marvel! I have seen a marvel with my own eyes! And I have come here by the straightest road to tell you."

She was calling out loud so everyone would hear and everybody hushed. She said; "Way off north in your lands by Scotland, I stood on a high steep hill and looked down into the thickest forest in the world. It is a wild wood full of giant brambles, full of broken trees and dire bogs, empty of the human race, echoing with cries of unknown beasts. ...

"And at its heart there shines a blue lake clear and glistening as the blue summer sky. And there upon the lake shore a mighty castle stood, built of huge boulders like the giants used to use in olden days. It is the strongest castle in your realm, for I have seen them all. And as I watched, the castle vanished."

Oh, well! Amid the hubbub of everybody talking again, the king leaned over to his wife and whispered, "'Dear, if such a fortress stands in my realm then surely I must send someone to find out."

And the queen nodded, saying; "Yes dear, I think you must."

And then the king leaned over to his general and said out loud, "Well, if such a fortress stands in my realm then surely I must send someone to find out."

And the general said real sharp, "Yes sir, I'm sure you must."

And the soldiers all were talking among themselves, for if someone would be sent they knew it would be one of them. But that forest sounded pretty tough. There could be lions and elephants and crocodiles in there, or even dragons. And that magic castle! They were soldiers, not sorcerers.

So the soldiers were all elbowing each other and saying; "Hey Ed, how about you?" and "I don't know Bill, how about you?"

You can guess what happened then. Jack looked around at his new mates and the idea struck him that he had scarcely been anywhere and scarcely seen anything, unlike these other good fellows. And he thought he'd better speak up quick before one of them did.

So Jack called out, "I'll go!" A hush fell on the room again and everybody looked around wondering what fool had said this. So Jack leaped to his feet and waved his hand and cried again, "I'll go! I'll go!" The king, I may tell you, was just delighted.

They put him on an excellent fine horse. They stuffed his pack with supplies. They gave him a lovely broad strong sword and a purse with money. The merchant told him precise directions how to find the wood, but no one could tell him how to find the castle at its heart.

They had the army band playing "Happy Trails To You" and everybody waving from the doorsteps and windows when Jack rode out of town.

Seven days' ride, following the directions exactly. Then on that seventh day, he found that the road had brought him by a very thick wood. Riding on along, very soon he found a path that led from the road down into the woods, so he turned his good horse down into it.

He found the path was very narrow and twisty and it kept on pretty long, but the blue sky was perfectly clear above and there were soft fallen leaves underfoot. The forest stood straight up high on either side just beyond his stirrups, so thick with briars and twisted branches that it seemed like midnight in there, and strange loud inhuman voices were crying near and far. The awful noises did cast a shiver in his bones but the narrow path was open and sunny and no creature showed itself.

At a turn in the trail he glimpsed a beautiful lake some ways ahead, and the castle on the shore. Then soon he was

there on the lake shore with the castle right in front of him indeed. It had very high walls, an enormously tall tower, all built from huge stones.

And there was a door just standing open like company was expected. Jack stopped and sat on his horse and looked. He did not know what to do. He stood there staring, totally lost in wonderment, not even scratching his head, and sat so long that dusk came on and then there were lights inside.

Finally he just climbed down and tied his horse to a bush and walked on in.

There was a feast going on, with a table and chairs, but there was only a very small company. There were some young women, three of them there were, and the radiant beauty of their faces struck our young man's heart.

And there was an old man lying on a sofa, an old man with a long gray beard and a gold crown on his head. This old king had a big bandage covering his whole side, a bandage soaked with blood that dripped down onto the floor, and now and then he moaned with pain.

And the place was lit with hidden lamps that shone both dim and bright to make the air truly shimmer.

As Jack came into this strange hall the ladies immediately ran to take his hands and they brought him to the table to a chair. They brought a plate and cup and food and drink but he found that he could not eat, not even enough to be polite, not a single morsel nor one sip.

He was sore afraid to do anything wrong, you see. What would happen, he was fearing, if he scraped his knife across the plate or dropped his cup, or if the wine was strong and he got drunk and laughed out loud?

After awhile the beautiful young women silently cleared the dishes away and then came back into the chamber in a very strange procession. They came back in and slowly walked around the room. The beautiful young lady who went in front was wearing a lovely long pale blue gown that sparkled like

the new snow on a hilltop against a bright winter sky, and she held a large bowl up in her hands.

This large bowl was all made of gold and silver and set with jewels that shot out beams of light. As they walked, the ladies sang together in a harmony that stirred his soul and echoed from that amazing bowl through the air into his heart.

But that was soon over too and then they came to take Jack's hands again. They smiled at him very sadly. They led him up to a room in the tower and put him to bed.

He tossed there all the night, half awake and half asleep in fitful dreams. Through all of these amazing marvels Jack had spoken not one word. He did not know what people wanted him to say, so he said nothing at all.

When Jack awoke the castle was gone. A cold breeze touched his cheek and he awoke there on the ground. The sun was up but it was a chilly morning. His horse stood tied where he had left it. He looked around, wondering if the castle had been real at all.

There was the path up into the woods so he mounted and started up, but as he rode into the path the clearing seemed to close behind him. As he rode, he heard a loud rustling of leaves behind, and the groan of branches bending, and when he turned in the saddle to look, the forest was reaching across with limbs and vines to fill the path as if it had never been.

On and on he rode, but very slowly because he could not stand to hurry away. And when Jack got up onto the road at last, he looked behind. The path was simply gone.

He sat there on his horse and gazed at the tangled wilderness and felt a terrible pain in his heart. And you must know it was an empty awful lonely ache in his heart in just the same place where the ladies' glorious song had chimed before. That was a pain that no one can feel and remain a child.

So what could poor Jack do now? With so much beauty lost, with his heart awakened to so much mystery that simply vanished, what could he do now?

He began to wander. He became a doer of good deeds and a lonely tramp upon that land. Good work did come into his hand for him to do.

Yes, many's the time he came upon a crew of workmen mending a bridge or boat or fishing weir and stopped to lend a hand. Many's the time he found a lost child in a wood or crowded marketplace. Many's the time when he brought meat to an empty table.

He did grow in experience just as his body grew, and the gifts he gave were recompensed by gifts given to him. Good work did come into his hand and he did it, but he was always alone, scarcely even telling anyone his name, always with that deep loneliness and pain inside his eyes, and for seven years he wandered.

But then there was another summer day when Jack found that the road had come along beside a wild thick wood off in the north by Scotland. And the road took a turn and another turn and another turn still and came along beside a little clearing in the forest edge and there an old decrepit tumble-down cabin stood.

Jack stopped and sat his horse and gazed, wondering if any soul might dwell in such a miserable shack where the winter wind must howl right through and rains of spring must pour inside.

But just then, an old woman in a ragged blue dress rushed out from the sagging doorway toward him on hobbling legs. The ancient woman hurried to him, calling in alarm as loud as she could; "Young man! Young man! I pray, please help me! For the sake of pity help me!"

And she hobbled close enough to fling herself and cling to his leg there where he sat upon his horse.

The old woman looked up and begged; "Protect me! If ye be a true good man, protect me! My husband is coming home and he will beat me because I have no food!"

I must tell you something. In that land there was a law in those days that every man was king of his own house, though low

and wretched it might be. Whatever a man might do in his own place, none but a higher king could lawfully say him nay.

But King Maxin wasn't there to see things done, so Jack tied up his horse and found a stump to sit upon to wait. He had no wish to break the royal law but simply hoped that some good thing to do might come to hand.

He didn't need to wait for long. Very soon the earth began to shake with terrible great stamping footfalls. There came a roaring voice from out beyond the trees, bellowing; "Feed me! Feed me now!" And very soon from out beyond the trees there came a terrible great brute of a man stomping the ground as he ran.

He was eight feet tall at least and shoulders broader than he stood tall, chest like a great oak tree's trunk, arms and legs as thick as any branches. His hair stood up in spikes all twined with twigs and leaves. His long sharp yellow teeth were tusks like a wild boar's tusks and he had breath that you could see.

When this awful fellow saw Jack waiting there he grinned horribly and bellowed; "Ye little one! Ye best had flee, or be my dinner!"

Jack stood up though, and did not run. He first held up a stout club that he had, thinking that a simple show of firm resolve might do the trick. But the huge beastly man quickly drew a long broad sword and swung and snapped the staff in two as if it were a twig, so Jack must draw his sword as well.

The battle then grew fierce. The beastly fellow was not fast, but very strong. He swung hard and though Jack stopped it with a clang that shivered in his arm, he was shaken long enough for the fellow to swing again. Again the shivering clang and yet again; Jack scarce recovered from each strike and he must step back slowly, his knees buckling as he took the seven blows, fearful that some root would reach to trip him up and he would fall.

At last, when strength was almost gone, he knew what he must do. He knew what must be done. For pity's sake, for hope of justice, Jack gathered all the power he had left, coiled

his legs like springs and leaped up high into the air, reached to swing, and sliced the fellow's head clean from his shoulders so it tumbled on the ground.

"Oh thank you! Thank you!" the old woman cried as she came running on her crippled legs. She knelt to kiss Jack's hand. She kissed his hand and asked if there were anything which she could do in recompense for his great deed of charity and justice.

Jack shook his head and looked down at the dead man's grinning face upon the ground. Sadly did he shake his head. At length Jack spoke; "Perhaps there is some good from this. Perhaps you can guide me."

Jack looked into the woman's smiling eyes. "There is a castle somewhere in these woods. I was there long ago, although perhaps in just a dream, and I've dreamed of it ever since. Perhaps you know the way."

And she answered that indeed she did for she herself served at the castle fetching wood and water. So up onto the horse he climbed and she pointed so that his eyes followed her pointing hand. Somehow the narrow lane into the dark wood stood there now, beside the cabin just before his eyes.

There stood the narrow path now, open and sunny as before.

The good horse nickered happily and took him into the path with scarce a touch upon the reins. They came upon the first bend of the winding way and he turned in the saddle to speak his thanks. He looked back just in time to see the cabin and the woman and the man's body and the severed head just vanish clean away, and so Jack spoke his thanks into the air to both of them, wherever they might be.

The path was just as long and winding as before but now the cries of unknown beasts seemed naught to fear but only seemed to beckon him onward.

As he saw the lake below, dusk fell but then he was there at last. He stood there once again at the castle's open gate.

Once more the lights inside were lit so down he jumped and in he strode without a moment's wait.

Once more the little company was there, the beautiful young ladies and the old gray moaning king upon the couch. The oozing bandage was still dripping blood.

Once more the lovely maidens ran to take his hands but this time Jack said to them; "No, wait." He went to the king instead and knelt and tenderly lifted the old man's hand. Jack kissed the frail old bony hand and spoke; "Uncle, please tell me; what ails thee?"

The old man sighed, sighed very deeply twice and thrice. His voice came thin and trembling and yet loud with passion, crying out: "Oh! Oh! Long have I waited for one who would come and ask! Long have I waited, and now you are come!"

And so the old man told his tale.

He had been king of Britain long long ago, before Maxin's great great grandparents ever lived. This was no tangled wilderness then, but a famous lovely land of crops and cattle, human beings, honey bees, cattle and sheep, darting swallows, prowling foxes, noble stags and does. And this deep lake had been a treasure known throughout the world for its beauty and its healing powers.

But then there came a day the king went fishing on the lake, a thing he loved to do, out in his little skin boat upon the deep water with a stout pole and line.

That day he cast his line deeper than he had before and found a strong great fish was hooked. He pulled with all his might and saw a huge salmon glimmering as he hauled it up, a fish with every rainbow in world beaming from its scales.

He got the huge beautiful fish into his little boat all right, but then the salmon spoke. This salmon looked up in his eyes and shouted loud with a voice that seemed to shake the sky; "O man! O man! You must put me back! I am the spirit of this place."

But the king could only think how beautiful it was and how fortunate a man would be to have it for his own. He answered,

"No, I shall not put you back. I shall roast you at my fire and eat you on my plate. Then your powers will be mine."

And as the king dipped his paddle to push the little boat back toward the shore, a powerful drowsiness came on him so he felt his body sag. And as he grounded on the shore and tumbled out, this great gaping wound opened in his side and began to pour forth blood. And as he crawled in through the castle door, he saw the land growing up in tangled briars. And as he dragged himself onto this couch and drooped his head in pain, he felt the castle vanishing around him.

When the tale was done, the feast went on as it had done before, except the ladies smiled right gladly while Jack ate and drank his fill. The strength and joy of life came into him with every bite.

Afterward the ritual procession came forth as before, except this time the wonderful bowl's beams of rainbow light shot through and through him.

This time Jack gazed full on the gold and silver bowl and felt its radiance fill him as the wind fills out a billowing sail. He felt the ladies' glorious song ring from the very castle stones and glowing air, not only echoing in his heart but through and through his soul so that he knew not what his soul was anymore, and what were air and stone.

Soon, just like before, they led him up to the tower room and so to bed. He fell asleep quickly and this night he slept more soundly than he had in years, with dreams full of every pleasure.

Jack awoke with sunlight on his cheek, he thought, but when his eyelids fluttered open found not only sunlight had caressed his cheek, but too that the lovely maiden of the blue gown was bending over him to give a tender kiss.

The maiden smiled into his eyes and spoke; "All things await thee." She pointed with her graceful hand toward a little window of the tower room through which the light of dawn was beaming.

So up he jumped and to the window ran. Looking out, in great happiness he beheld the fearful wilderness was gone.

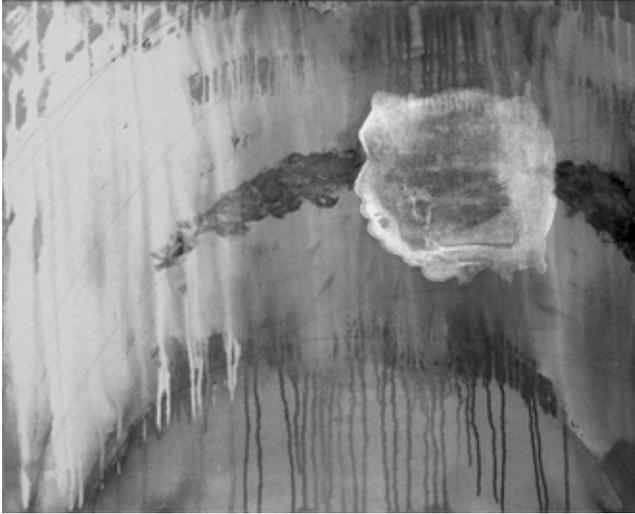
He beheld there in its place fine fields tall with standing grain, green orchards heavy with their fruit, good lanes with oxen pulling laden wagons on along, thatched roofs from which the families' hearth fire smoke was drifting up, stands of woodland where the deer and foxes ran, and all of this stretched mile on mile off everywhere into the distant hills as far as he could see with wrens and swallows darting through the sky.

He heard the splash of oars, herdsman calling cattle to the fields, women singing as they hoed the garden plots, children chanting at their merry games. He saw the lads and maidens strolling arm in arm down shady ways and heard a thin sweet melody breathed on the wind, and spied to find the distant hillside where a piper played.

Jack then felt a weight upon his head and reached up a hand and touched there what he found. Upon his head there was a kingly crown.



San Diego Bay Panel C
Canvas / acrylic painting, top panel
of a triptych by Stone Riley



Prophecy Of Global Change
Acrylic / canvas painting by Stone Riley

Prophecy Of Global Change **a philosophic essay**

The best book on Shakespeare that I know is a volume of lectures by A.C. Bradley, an old Scottish Oxford don, published first in 1904. In these lectures he teaches Shakespeare's greatest tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth.

Not only for the old professor's lively speech do I love him well – you can see personae rise up from the printed page and act like beings now alive – but also for the Great Bard's vision that the old professor squeezes out of terrifying wrenching tragedies and stands before our eyes. Here's what he tells us Shakespeare saw:

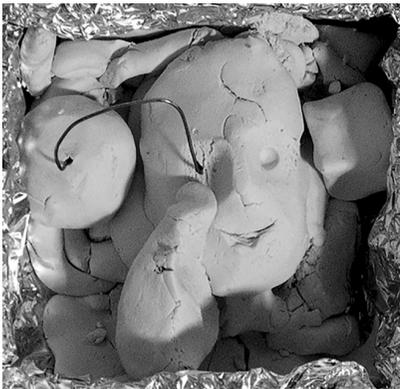
Through some lapse or defect in our character we find ourselves in train with evil; once we have confirmed or acquiesced in such a progress there is no other end for us but destruction. Perchance by some goodness in ourselves we may soften that destruction though to make it less cruel and more gentle.

Perchance then in this way there lies not oblivion but our freedom.

Now today the Earth is warming. Quite like some Aztec deity of violence, the Sun flies through a melting sky. And we, as though we stood and drew countless intersecting arcs through all the land and sky, we are today scientifically charting and diagramming all the countless overlapping spheres of ecosystems, economic systems, politics and realms of individual experience wherein the beings of this planet dwell, for all these realms are now changing simultaneously.

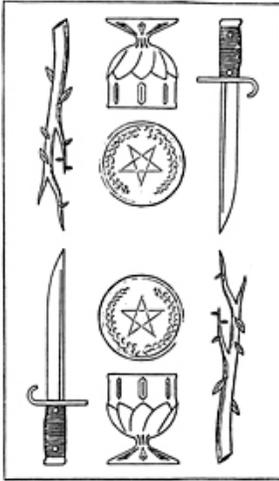
What is our proper hope? We will not change our ways till massive death has overtaken our own species; though many minds may change no hope remains by now to change enough to leave the world unscarred. It is much too late to stop the consequences of the age-long depredations.

And so my hope is this: To tell the story truly. To let the children of a future day know how and why we did this thing, and as well some understanding of some better wisdom which might have led us through a better course. This so our children and their children and their children may do better. Perchance beyond the cataclysmic tragedy there lies a different age of peace and reconciliation. Toward that day our finest duty is to learn and teach.



Hindsight

Polymer clay,
aluminum foil,
steel paper clip
by Stone Riley



Elemental Tarot Design

The back of all the
cards in Simple Tarot
Pencil & xerox image
by Stone Riley

The Witches' Pyramid a lecture on the philosophy of life

Four things which anyone may do to lead a fine full life:

To Know

means curiosity, the hunger to feel reality inside and out, to see and taste and smell whatever is really here. It means you must explore yourself till all your dark little knots of fear and stubbornness are cleared away. It means you must have faith this world somehow makes sense despite its great unknowns, its disappointments and its pain. It means you must temper all your doings with the deepest wisdom you can find. Do not lose sight of this: Beyond your life there is greater life containing yours. This is the root of all true knowledge.

To Will

means finding for yourself the things which you shall do. You know the reasons you are here, the things you seek, the object of the longing in your heart. You must abandon all false goals and pursue your own true purpose steadfastly. Doors open to anyone on such a quest. Challenges appear to test your ardor and hone your skill. The skills you learn and earn are those of self-control. Never forget: Your life is in your hands like clay. You are the creature born to do the things which you shall do. Be true to this. Be for yourself a lamp and guide.

To Dare

means casting off from home into a racing tide. It means breaking down your walls and stepping out into a broad dark land. There are moments which cry for action. There are times when you are much too small a child. These are times when you must grow, when you must set aside the limitations, possessions and identity that you have found so far. Without complaint, without demands, with no longing for the safety that has passed, obey the call of life. This is how we grow: The caterpillar wraps herself into a silky shroud and then bursts forth to fly.

To Keep Silence

means discretion and the calm of inner strength. It means that kind of patience which can let things be and yet the power to reach deep for truth. Thoughts are things which grow too quickly to a jostling clutter. Words have wings and ought not be tossed out heedless onto the wind. That is the folly of all Humankind, the true source of our evil and grief. Things you need to live wisely are these: Wholeness in yourself, acceptance of your fellows with their faults, access to the ceaseless fountain of inward light. All of this can be had through silence.



Knight Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

A Sorcerer's Apprentice a memoir of magic

My father taught me long ago that a really smart man is one who can do for himself, on pretty much any job that comes to hand, for himself or for those he loves or for any purpose that seems right. My father's ideal did turn out a bit too high for me in practice, for there is much I cannot do, but I did definitely come to understand that a smart person is a resourceful and courageous open-hearted person.

Then last spring, my step-daughter asked me to take a stronger hand in raising her little boy, to see if I could somehow lead the child a few steps further on toward self-possession, for this little boy definitely needs to learn some way to keep his wild behavior in control. He is a child of great promise but the very feature of his mind that's causing his unruliness – a soaring brilliantly lit and fiery imagination – is sure to be one of his greatest future strengths; this is actually a virtue which must not be spoiled.

All of this was unclear to me at first in the spring, not so clear as it became with summer's passing, but I did have some glimmerings at least of the boy's personality and strengths and weaknesses and needs; and his mother was correct, I thought, about the proper general approach that should be taken. This

richly imaginative and intelligent boy was a very likely one despite his tender years, both of us believed, to benefit from entering Higher Magic.

What this little man truly needed (if I may use a metaphor) was a lump of true philosopher's stone to clasp in his hand, so he could shine its light about to see reality whenever one of his flights of fancy might require. But actually, a different metaphor has taken hold of our doings in this summer: He needs to get the voice of Merlin to speak inside himself, like young Prince Arthur did, whatever real historical person Arthur was.

But the boy is seven. I have taught some of the higher realms of magic to adults and done some good, but he is seven. No magician that I know has ever taken charge of a serious student at that age. And how could I grope a path through such profound and foggy ground as Higher Magic with a partner who has never read a real book in his life (nor scarcely even a hand-written instruction) and cannot do so now? So, with the summer growing and passing – under the guidance of my wisest god – naturally I have taken to exploring the primitive Shamanic Rite. In that rite, or so I have always heard, only the barest rules and requirements apply.

I've really done a lot. I've told the boy a bit about the Fairy Folk and got his help in a work that I had pledged to do for them myself, where we opened the ground together, and the boy won a magic wand. I have introduced him to the honored dead. I've drummed with the boy, doused by means of a stick, gazed at the sky and forest with him, scried the doings of animals and plants with him and promised to scry a fire. We wielded a few sharp-edged and pointed tools together and the earnestly striving child did not even scratch me with the foot-long rasp.

I lately got a board of oak and fashioned a little twelve-string harp for him to listen to and then on the first day when he took the harp from the box where I am keeping it, there happened to come up on that day a little job of divination at which I was striving hard with my drum but had no blessed time

for, and as soon as I explained my problem, with no thought even of requesting help from him, he sprang to in proper order, a barefoot little boy in dirty clothes walking about the dewy grass with a primitive harp pressed to his ear, plucking the strings, and he came back later, much to my surprise, with an answer that proved admirably useful.

And other successful events have happened too, all along that line. All through circumstances and success, it's been one blessed shamanic thing right after another for months.

He is an excellent apprentice, despite his tender years, but this Shamanic Rite is a new thing for me, a place where I have never quite precisely been in this life (nor any other life which comes to mind) and I do not even have a human teacher in this subject, because my current human teacher practiced shamanism and left it some years ago. I have never even read a book with the word "shamanism" in its title, though I did try to read my teacher's once.

Shall I try to tell you what I've found so far? It seems to me there are a hundred things to mention and each deserves a paragraph.

For one thing, please rest assured that I am not copying exercises for the child out of books, not old books nor new. That would be irresponsible.

The priestcraft that I am plying should be a better-tailored sort; I shall do as much as possible myself in hope of gaining the kind of result that I think he needs. I am relying just on general knowledge of some principles of Mind, on a great many accounts that I have heard of different ways that this is done across the world, relying on my own more or less related experiences, and on my mysterious divine inspirations, and on the boy himself. I am relying greatly on the boy to do the best he can whenever tests and tools are set before him, however dotty they may be.

I am relying on him to make good choices if only I can make the choices clear. And too, I am relying on another deity

who knows us both, a little god of the love we share, to tell me right and wrong.

What else to say?

I am a modern Celtic Pagan priest (a Witch and Druid, to be more precise) and so a Pagan Celtic mythic theme has pervaded the summer's proceedings quite as if we'd spent the time in some kind of "Celtic Magick" theme park, or quite as if we'd been locked up as two prisoners in some astounding chamber in the Disney Castle.

The boy is mainly Celtic stock too, but he also lays claim to a bloodline of Tecumseh besides, the famous and admired Old North American visionary commander. When I look at this active and ambitious child, I think perhaps here is Tecumseh indeed, the selfsame soul come to this realm again, in walking distance of his former land, or at least a spirit like him.

And so, you see, my European witcheries must be woven in their finest thread carefully between my fingertips, so as not to knot and bind.

What else?

I think some basic theological training is required between us, but only the most basic. One evening he was here and we found ourselves alone in my tiny, overflowing, cramped, disordered library, and he was leaning over into a big desk drawer looking for some small thing which he did not find.

The boy glanced briefly to see if I was paying attention, whispered the word "*Jesus!*" as an expletive, then looked at me again to see what I would say. I suppose he got this item of speech from a fellow who is one of his other grandfathers, a plainspoken countryman with an overly religious wife. I told the listening child what came to mind, that he shouldn't talk like that because Jesus is a god and it's a bad habit being disrespectful to goddesses and gods.

"*A god!?*" spoke the boy's soft voice in sudden unmistakable alarm; "*Will he punish me?*"

I poo-pooed that in a hurry; no, Jesus doesn't really care who's disrespectful to him, Jesus will not come and punish you – and profanity is a bad habit too! That may be enough theology for now.

I guess there's just one other thing for me to say, about initiation.

It was just a week ago that the first thought even occurred to me of fashioning an actual initiation for the child. He is only seven. The thought of trying any initiation at such an age is almost preposterous and would even generally seem dangerous. Legal drinking age, whatever that may be in any given state, is usually required.

(All of the magicians I have ever talked with on this topic have professed an iron-clad rule of not initiating anyone who has not made love with another person, as another kind of minimum maturity requirement.)

Surely, all decent magicians see this piece of work as a clear and powerful aspect of the Great Work itself, and that is not to be attempted lightly. But this admirable boy is such an excellent apprentice – he pursues this whole business with a heart and mind so freely given to it that even an observer with an unbiased eye would be amazed – and his need for a powerful result is true, and I am his adopted grandfather.

And besides all that, the Great Work itself makes no demand at all for applicants to be mature, or if it did no person in this world would ever get to it. And frankly, if overwhelming circumstances really convince me that some initiation ought to be offered to some person, then *ipso facto* I am really sure that person has a right to take a running jump (if I may use a figure of speech) and try it.

So, last Sunday in the laundry room where I was folding clothes – after a convincing vision which I had got while smoking a tobacco pipe – I did offer him initiation.

Surprisingly, the language barrier was not too steep. Last month, the boy had briefly discussed his mental difficulties

with me. There was a moment when I stopped him right in the middle of acting out a fantasy – he was wildly waving a stick around toward my friendly dog as if he were a bold warrior against some enemy, the boy growling menace through grimacing mouth at the bewildered and innocent creature – and I asked him quite sincerely what was going on.

He was a mite startled to find himself suddenly outside the fence of his private Disneyland, but he listened to my sincere question and chose to answer candidly. His answer was simply to bang a fist one time on his temple and say with genuine frustration that his "brain" gets "stupid ideas", all while looking seriously in my face to see if I could take his meaning. In just that though, I felt he gave an apt and thoughtful description of his problem, and I hugged and kissed him, and promised he would get himself together in a few more years.

So then after my vision last Sunday, when the boy happened to swagger into the laundry room with a yellow beanbag chair hoisted on top of his head, I called him over to sit down on a footstool there by the washing machine and broke the news that we could try to fix his mental problem, if he wanted to, by means of a hard work of magic.

I described his fantasy mental situation to him as I understand it, as succinctly as I could, and asked for confirmation, which he gave by looking away and giving a curt nod and a "Yep". I did not offer any description then of what the work would be like, but only stressed it was a "bigger deal" than anything we'd done before.

As is his way, he asked just one or two apt questions then took the matter seriously and silently into consideration. I said in closing that he should bring his magic tools sometime when he comes over, if he wants to go ahead.

Then half an hour after that, he was doodling on a sheet of paper with a pen and found a tightly whirling pattern that he liked well enough to cut out with scissors and stick up on the refrigerator in a blue little magnetic picture frame while I

was standing there, and he called for me to look at this finished installation of free art work.

I saw this deeply swirling design in a tight thick frame on a white space, and it seemed to be a miniature impressionist depiction of the interior of a cave, with a sort of psychedelic reversal in color, from the perspective of someone lying down inside and looking even further in.

Rather startled, I asked him if it was a cave and he at once agreed that it was, with bright enthusiasm, as though he had been wondering what it was. According to the vision I was given by my god – and like I instantly informed the boy – the big job really should be done inside a cave.

"In a cave?" he cried, and I only had the wits at that moment to shrug and answer "Yes".

We shall not use an actual cave but a simulated one. I'll ask his uncle or his father or the young buck magician up the hill to scrape a little shallow pit in my back yard between the great old dying ash tree and some baby oaks – maybe even in the snow since winter's coming on – and we'll cover that with branches and blankets and an old skin off a dead sheep.

I have called one of my former human teachers, one of the local Witch kings, in hope that he'll be able to attend; that admirable scholar was a lad at the time when I took up with him, so he is young enough now to wield a shovel too if required. I have no doubt that such a simulation of a cave will do just fine in Shamanic Rite.

The boy has not been given a drum to take, which some authorities might claim is required, but this is Celtic style so I believe he ought to carry in the oakwood steel-strung harp instead, and the ashwood wand as well just so he's well equipped in case of Fairies.

But I shall ply my willow drum outside in a steady heart-beat rhythm. And too, before that does begin, I'll cast a Witch's circle up by the house, and in that circle tell a tale how Merlin fled the madding world of war into the woods and wandered

long without sleep or rest, and fled at last with his spirit as a wren pursued by hawks into a cave, and then we both shall stand and call Merlin to meet us there, conjuring that holy spirit by bonds of friendship; then we shall fly with such a pantomime of wrens as we can make, and the boy will crawl inside to pluck the harp and wait there for my ancient god.

And when Merlin arrives (as he or someone surely will) the boy shall call to mind all of the verbal instructions that I gave on how to properly make one's arrangements with such folk.

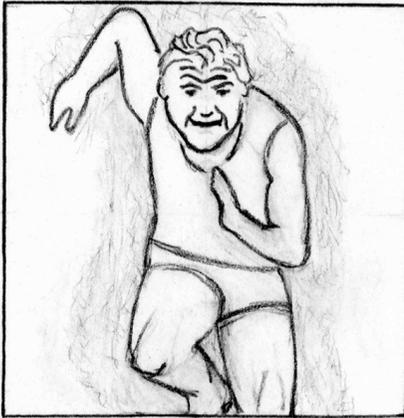
But mind, I do not know if this will come to pass or something else entirely instead. I have not even spoken on this topic of initiation yet with his mother, nor with her mother either (who is my wife) and I don't know how far the ladies will object to my judgment. But most of all, I do not know if my grandson will ever come to my house and say, "Grampy, I brought my stuff."

I warned him clearly that it is a hard job and I emphasized twice already that he can gain the same desired goal of possessing himself without doing this job at all, just simply through a few more years of age. If he asks me what is hard about the job, I don't know what I'll say, perhaps; "It makes you really scared!" But why is it scary, and is the cave too hard a place for him to be sent at all?

First off, going about this world with bouts of a kind of inappropriate madness; that is hard enough. And then, to trust someone (whether it is a grandfather spirit or any other kind) who tells you that they know a way; that isn't easy either for such a one as him. And then to ponder and ponder and finally choose (if he does choose) then wait on tenterhooks; and then at last to do whatever mumbo-jumbo that you're told will help the ritual begin, with your heart in your throat; and then to really listen to the sacred tale, and call the god or goddess to your open soul, and really do the dance or pantomime or such for all you're worth; and then, with your body throbbing

and weary and bound into a space of darkness, to await the deity. How hard is that? But then, and far above all else, some deity arrives where you await and you must raise yourself to speak with her or him or it, and you must feel a great increase of dignity.

Ah well, we'll see what we shall see.



Eight Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



**Awaking
In A Dream**
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**Awaking
In A Dream**
a poem of cosmic consciousness

There are many tales, of course, of Lao Tzu who, according to the legends, wrote *The Watercourse Way*, a little book of nature poetry upon which other thinkers then built up the lean, beautiful and tough spiritual philosophy of Taoism. Here's one of them.

The story flies us to the early morning of a day when our hero was a bright but sorrowful young man. He was a bureaucratic junior clerk in the palace of a rich and brutal warlord prince. The sparkling morning and the budding springtime garden grounds through which he trod to work belied the torment in the young man's soul. This day's duty was to be an awful deed which no one with an open heart could ever wish.

The garden path led on across a footbridge on a lovely brook and, setting foot onto the rising boards, his paces further slacked. His gaze was beckoned to the sparkling water. On the arch's highest little height the now unconscious footsteps stopped and – mind, heart and soul – he found himself drawn out into the clear deep rippling stream.

This was the moment when a human asks of "there" and "here". As another poet wrote, do I dream the butterfly or does the butterfly dream me? Gazing deep into the world I see only

countless things which mirror me, so what are "you" and "I" and what am "I" to do?

But in this young man's mind no riddle of that sort found any weight. The doubtless fundamental knowledge that this clarity exists would henceforth lure and guide his thoughts and steps.

The beauty of reality had ravished Lao Tzu
and he was struck with lifelong love.



Ace Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Dakini **a poem of nature consciousness**

It was astonishing the way that really loving one another made the sex so good. God forbid some accident, he was the one that she would marry, have some kids and all the rest of it. They hadn't quite exactly clearly spoken of that yet – for heaven's sake, how much to say and ask before you work a conversation up to that!

But now it's Friday afternoon again, her place tonight, and so her eyes flash to the office clock. Five minutes past! How had she let five minutes pass?

Papers stuffed into the filing cabinet, mash that small computer button off, check keys and wallet in the purse, shrug on the business jacket, smooth the blouse and skirt.

Last Friday night. The way their legs had wound so perfectly that he had simply pushed in all at once though they were just beginning. Astonishing.

Traffic. No choice, she had to take the goddamn turn-pike all the way to exit twelve in Framingham the same as every other goddamn day.

She pressed the brake then pressed it hard and saw that all the other people too were stopping – all of those faces, all those lives for miles around – and took the moment's chance

to pop the finished tape cassette, glance toward all the others scattered in the seat beside, decide to try the radio instead.

She pushed a button for an easy listening music station. Please, some random bit of fluff to calm her nerves. She loved the guy so goddamn much there was this stupid niggling whispering primate midnight fear that if she wasn't there he might somehow just disappear, might vanish from the land of clocks and living.

She laughed at that and looked out at the evening's open sky. He had a key. If she were late he'd set the plates and make the salad.

The war came on the radio. Five minute news flash every hour, even on the easy stations. Her conscience would not let her finger reach to mash it out – what if some of their children someday went? Would someone listen?

In its insanely easy tone, shocking that a human voice could say those things, a voice informed the ear that tremendous bombs had fallen and there was a battle. There were some counts of various assorted dead.

Gazing out into the soft and lovely sky, above all of these gathered lives, beneath this sky, she saw the horror falling here. But then again the music and the cars were moving. She'd throw herself into his arms and maybe weep.

But then, what was this vision halfway rising into consciousness? Real. Solid. Eros in itself. Something from the college days, sunny window, freshman dorm. Something sunshine warm her hand had lifted and her fingertips had touched.

Of course. Of course. That small golden heavy statuette the roommate kept up on a shelf. A goddess and a god fucking, standing, exquisite in countless fine details of necklaces and bracelets, anklets, belts of woven jewels the curving fleshy intertwining vine-like figures wore, smiling, gazing each into the other face and breathing each a breath the other just had breathed.

Their hips were bent and bellies pressed in such a way precisely that the phallus certainly was being held completely in that place where of all places it should be, just in the way that it had suddenly appeared and rested full and quiet, reassured and reassuring, for a breathless moment last Friday night.

Why did this vision
– that sensation –
come so near to comforting right now?
Yes, she'd throw herself into his arms and weep.



White Lilly
Acrylic / canvas painting
by Stone Riley



Universal Dance

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Being Many Voices an essay on painting

It took me more than twenty years to figure out how Modern Art painting is done and the secret (which is not, of course, a secret in the least) shows something fundamental about our nature. Each of us is many voices, voices which are more than us.

A recent painting, a goddess image, might illustrate this pretty well. I was yearning for some clear depiction of the moment when a deep inward journey brings you to the Lady Guardian of the Veil. For me the place where that occurs is very shadowed and dreamlike so I did the surrounding setting with a kind of heavily colored sketchy cartoon style like William Blake used in his great graphic novels. But I only know one way to illustrate the intense intimacy which I feel so palpably with that great spirit then; so I made the center of the painting a full-on realistic human face. So in this working viewers of the painting may experience two voices, of the spirit and of the place, through two different kinds of visual comprehension. Somewhat as though you simultaneously recited poetry and sang. That's Modern Art.

Or something else:

I was studying a painting in a museum one time, last spring, lunchtime from my paycheck job, perched on one of the little stools provided, sitting very still for quite a while and

staring fixedly, stalking a picture like a cat would do. It was two fuzzy gauzy patches of two different colors, three feet tall or so, a Rothko piece from maybe 1956.

Entered then upon the scene some high school kids. They gathered around this curiosity with smiles and silent nods for introduction. Most of them crowded right behind me, leaning down and actually craning their necks to peer scientifically over the shoulders of this purported Galileo and along his line of sight. Amusing. Practically a Monty Python sketch.

But one bright forward commendable young woman, standing to the side, spoke up, rather shrugging off some irritation, asking if I understood this picture. I claimed I did. Sure. I'd better, although I didn't say I'd better. Furthermore, I asked what she might make of it. Rothko was a mystic visionary, more or less an esoteric Jew.

The smart girl took a fair stab at the thing all right, lunging toward the canvas with a hand up, pointing. She allowed the red might be to stand for passion of some sort, fear or anger, and maybe green might be to symbolize ... Her waving fingertip was like to hack the picture deftly leg from wing and I could not help but cry out immediately "no!" several times repeatedly, actually in a sincere fit of mental anguish.

That sort of intellectual decoding mode can awake some pictures, Kandinsky's from his theoretical years and Torres-Garcia generally, some others, but never Rothko. Never Rothko. She was spouting nonsense, going nowhere, and she knew it from the silence she got back from it. Therefore her irritation at that thing. That picture simply does not talk in "symbols".

But how was I to answer? I did not know her. Besides, my thoughts before – when I myself was looking for a way through that particular canvas veil into the Holy Mysteries of the world – had equally gone nowhere. What if some well armed seeker strode boldly up to you in a public square, loudly demanded a koan or a rune at once and you (obediently rifling through your

pockets) found none? Embarrassing. Especially with a crowd of slackers lounging round.

But here's a dodge that's sometimes handy for moments like that: Glance outward and snatch an omen from the air. To wit: The smart girl had deftly demonstrated fencing; actors learn fencing; she might be an acting student; I might try an acting metaphor. This works more often than you'd think.

So I quickly conjured up an Arts Professor voice and turned its spigot to see what might come through. It spoke – to me as well as her – about a practical approach. You should look into that painting like an actor pondering their part in a script. Does it say "red"? Well then, put yourself in various modes of thought and feeling till this red is what you see, then speak from there. Green? Likewise cast about until you find yourself in such a place, then try to speak from both those places. I said all that.

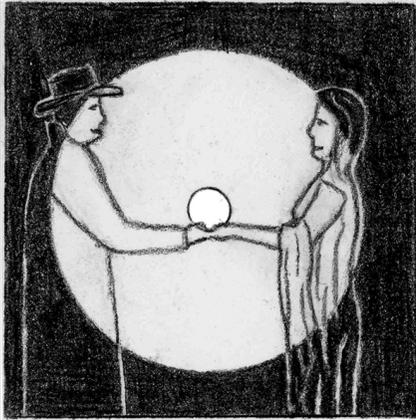
But I thought: All right, but what about some promise of the Mysteries? What about some little hint at least of Kabala or something of the sort? And yet that's all the Arts Professor said, and that even in a quite pedantic tone, rather scolding even, which I did not care for in the least. And even worse; to my horror, one of the slackers lounging round behind me actually giggled at the worthy girl getting marked down.

And yet she took it in good spirit. After first growling menacingly at the fool who had laughed, evidently in an on-going rivalry where she held an upper hand, she took the Arts Professor seriously enough to gaze into the painting for a long moment silently. And I could plainly see the colors of her mind folding in and out like a kaleidoscope or rather like one of those delicately tinted origami paper flowers that you can morph from shape to shape.

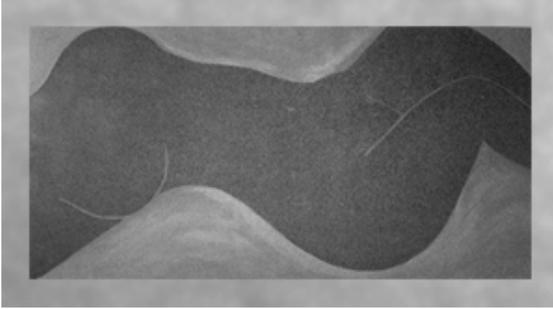
And then, wanting to respect her mental privacy, I looked away into the picture. And there was Rothko's mystic vision waking up to present life. There was not what you would call a flow of energy but more a wave of complex harmony standing

there now between this woman and the man who stood before that self-same surface with a brush. The colors of that Veil which stood before them both were billowing, overlaying, separating, merging. Amazing.

That's Modern Art.



Ten Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley



So Dream Of Being Earth

Acrylic / canvas painting by
Stone Riley

Earth Dieties a poem of chthonic consciousness

Deep in the land, all dreamers sleep.
The body and its hoarse demands are quieted,
are calmed alike to death,
alike to clay
so now the wonderer's soul and heart are free
to play their frightful and delightful play.

Deep in the land, all dreamers sleep.
Echoes of the eons then awake
with trembling whisperings,
with reverberating shouts of joy and pain,
to tell again the long long story
of all living here
between our earth and sky.

Deep in the land, all dreamers sleep.
What is the body, what the clay?
What are the living mind and soul,
if not the timeless true self-weaving tale?

Deep in the land, all dreamers sleep.

Part Seven: Telling The Tale



Telling The Tale
Digital Image by Stone Riley



Knight Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

The Blessings Of The Sacred Process Notes For An Art Career a memoir poem

The week, three weeks ago, when the “Not Afraid” mantra and its flyer came to me, I was very busy with other but related work.

Do this for forty years or so: Make art as beautiful and fine as you have ever made it, always striving to be useful for the prophesied Good New Age that Earth has now at last recently birthed (so let us say) and take it to the public. Do your best at that for forty years and you may find, as I have found, that periodically the work resolves down to the very focused point of feverishly preparing for a lavish little show of some kind somewhere. This new mantra came to consciousness for me in one of those very busy weeks.

Out of place, maybe; you wouldn't say the “Not Afraid” mantra nor its flyer are beautifully fine, unless their sheer utility seems marvelous enough you might consider saying so for that. But last year I heard a speech by Presbyterian minister adventurer Chris Hedges that brought some clarity to my long campaign and made me even dare to buy a good harmonica.

It was an interesting speech of many parts, but in one corner of it Hedges told how, when he was with the revolution in El Salvador as a war reporter, their revolutionary platoons would always carry novels and poets and musicians to a village when they came. In his telling of it I could see and hear the music playing, which he gave to understand was rousing and consoling ballads on rough instruments of rural troubadours. This rousing and consoling work, he said, was quite essential to their victorious struggle but meanwhile, he said, the novels and the poets brought beautiful fine art to assure the soul that it is good.

If your revolution is for life, then seeing deep beauty anywhere – in the land, or in the sea or sky or in Divinity, or anywhere – can be a revolutionary anti-slavery act. This seeing can let you know you have a soul and it at least is free. But seeing deep beauty in a thing compounded in particular of human art may give even more, as this can help you know – because a human soul like your soul has brought that lovely thing and that lovely thing speaks human language – your humanness is noble.

My harmonica work is very rough as yet – too unskilled to play in public anyway – but I did it, sitting inside our little art installation in a Unitarian church basement two Saturdays ago. My wife and I were sitting in it, and she smiles saying I'm getting better at it, even one time saying it was pretty. That was very nice, especially as our exhibit felt distinctly like a female kind of space, like sitting at a hearth. Harmonica is the world's easiest instrument for making warm pretty notes, but of course all I hoped to do that time was just practice with it, tried to show the public how to stick pretty notes together struggling through a practice session, quizzing your soul and the universe thereby, and inching maybe toward a tune.

This was not Chris Hedges' revolutionary ballads, but it did win some sympathetic attention from the public. A stumbling earnest practice mouth harp session as the live soundtrack to an exhibit of two old people plus homemade bountiful fine art

objects in lavish towering profusion, all of it masqueraded as a retail sales booth complete with charity bake sale and raffle, among a basement full of other booths. And the new “Not Afraid” flyer, with its bold big print, was tacked up on church basement columns framing our display at left and right. You could wander in and walk up and examine with your touch, and maybe buy, startlingly beautiful home crafted things unseen before and have delicious pastry. This when people feel a terror of their future.

It was the annual Pagan Pride event of Southern New Hampshire. If you are a Pagan in New England I guess you've likely sometime chanced on a vivid little performance or display or production of many sorts which my art career conjures periodically in our supportive lively small community. If not, then maybe I'll insert a web link >>here<< so you can view the unseen-before weatherproof prints – prints of paintings with breathing beauty that may stop your breath – prints which, that Saturday, were carpeting the wall behind our retail table floor to ceiling, each vivid print with its big charity raffle number tag attached, or the raffle tickets costing fifty cents, or the unusual books of poetic picture prose that stood on offer on our table, or the Tarot decks that talk to you through your eyes. Maybe they would testify to you that I'm not lying. This forty years has been startlingly real. And I am no longer afraid.

Of course you know there have been several decades, in and before the art career, when hope was a stranger to me. Because I am a creature of these times.

Political awareness waking: 1956: Me a little Texas boy come visiting, hanging out with older boy cousins and their pals, us shadowed in a fragrant summer evening, shadowed by the bright lit stands of a small town Georgia baseball game, they each solemnly affirming, pledging to Protect The White Race, me silently deciding not, and that weird moment now still lingering, that moment still blazing with despair and hope, still lingering for my whole lifetime at a center of our whole world.

And Global Warming rushing, which I have watched since 1959: The Scientific American magazine, serving me for a little school report, foretold the great catastrophe, and really nothing done about it ever since just so the Death White Empire could thrive, and my tremendous grief for these green lands where my old heart at last glows love of intimate intense presence.

So (to speak of grief) summer 1969: Me a young man, me a young soldier, by luck myself evading war and yet myself behind another face – a friend companion there where we are serving empire – he is chosen bride of its war machine and promptly taken and promptly dead amid enormous slaughter, and me speaking No among the soldiers and taking punishment but soon escaping.

So then the Paganism we built in this country, and its radical declaration of human freedom and human dignity and human power to do good, and then the magic coming real and coming real and coming real, and prophecies, and so the forty years of art in service to the Good New Age.

And so this month the mantra: “We are not alone and we are not afraid. We stand by Mother Earth now in her time of need.”



Page Of Swords
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley



**The Not Afraid
Mantra Flyer
(Front Side)**
Digital image by
Stone Riley

**The Not Afraid Mantra
Comments By The Author Of This Charm
(Printed on the back of the paper sheet)**

In September 2016:

What is this thing? This is the kind of mental and vocal exercise that most Americans nowadays call a mantra but which this author calls by an antique English language word for it: This is, in other words, a charm.

What is it for? The purpose of a charm / mantra is double: To calm and focus your thoughts when you have need of that, and to improve the life you live in some good way.

How do you do this exercise? You say the two sentences “We are not alone and we are not afraid. We stand by Mother Earth now in her time of need.” once or several times or many times, either speaking aloud or in your mind silently, either with others or alone. I really like repeating it 5 times with a group. Then you finish with something like “Amen” or, as I prefer, “So mote it be”. That is an antique way of saying “Amen” forcefully.

When? Do a charm / mantra any time you need to calm and focus. Or, for specially strong effect, in the moments

between being awake and sleeping. Or after sex might be good. Or when you walk or run, or during any rhythmic physical work. Or with a group of peace activists in an action.

What is this here charm about?

I believe in the Good New Age our Mother Earth is giving birth to now. The Old Age that recently died was insane with a lie that we humans must own and enslave Earth. For several hundred years in our society, that insanity was fundamental in our laws, enforced constantly in countless ways, and was proclaimed loudly by the godlike force of money. In the Good New Age now birthing, we will say that is a lie. Our common-sense will say that obviously we are all together Earth's children. That will be so obvious that it will stand undeniable in our laws and give money a diminished realistic role.

Our best thinkers now are saying that the new common-sense is the one great missing piece of our success. Amy Goodman, Chris Hedges, Naomi Klein, Russell Brand, and a great assortment of our other fine thinkers are saying this is what we need to make right now. They often put it that we need to remake the stories we tell each other and ourselves in our commonsense.

For you, in these fearful days and these few crucial years, certain moments will appear. In your real life there will be certain moments you can say, “Well, obviously, we are all together children of the Earth” and at that moment at that place your speaking will have powerful effect. In those moments you will teach. We will thereby build our commonsense, our new stories.

So, you see, I write these lines in modest hope
to do some midwife service to our Mother.

Our Mother is not dying.

So mote it be!



Lost Girl Found
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

Lost Girl Found

**a poem on strength and madness,
to a young woman in the Occupy camp**

Oh dear and darling daughter
whom I knew for brief and passing days,
you of grief and will to worthy deeds
here in this world,
and human failings too;

I pray all goddesses who ever are
in past and future present time,
to fill your life with worthy deeds
and blessedness and peace
and hero's glory.



Six Of Cups
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper
by Stone Riley

Pastoral Counseling With Tarot an essay on an essential psychic art

My work in pastoral counseling – as a religious minister giving people advice – is distinctly different from the work of a psychotherapist. There is some overlap in the two fields, certainly, but a psychotherapist studies and exercises a lot of skills that I do not. And vice versa.

Take an example where the two kinds of work overlap: Now and then someone who is afflicted with real mental illness has asked for my help. What can I do for them? I cannot ask diagnostic questions to see where they fit in current understanding of their disease. I cannot discuss recent research in their disease, or even old research. I cannot tell them whether some medication they've been prescribed is a good idea. I would not dare to venture such opinions.

Even speaking of therapy, though, there are some useful things I'm pretty well versed in – meditation techniques or prayer or mythic visualizations, for example – that I can suggest as therapeutic exercises, pointing out that you can use mental stuff to work on mental stuff, and thereby exert some force toward normalizing the chemistry and structure of your brain. And I feel this line of work is well supported and described by the great psychotherapist Carl Jung. So I can do that. And I can

hope – at least hope – that those practices may help them ease some of their pain.

And perhaps I can help them sort out the causes of their various psychic experiences. As a normal part of the mystic process throughout the human race, magical practitioners do have experiences that partially resemble psychotic episodes. A presence appears in your consciousness and there seems to be profound communication. Where has this presence come from? From a broken part of yourself or through a proper connection with the universe outside? I can check their description of those moments against both the literature of human mystical experience and my own experience. So I can offer comparisons with my client's experience, perhaps even tender some advice on what to do in those moments.

And furthermore, as someone who has developed what is often called either “poetic vision” or “shamanic vision” – the palpable realization that we all live every moment in mythic time – the comparison of psychotic episodes with healthy experience becomes more possible than it would otherwise be. Does the person's experience look like a normal inburst of real human mythical awareness, or does it not? Does that experience, that bit of story, look broken or whole and properly functional? This judgment may help me advise them. Should the experience be regarded as a guiding beacon or a symptom?

But still, most of my conversation with the person is pretty much the same as anyone might have with someone whose life is very hard. I try to help them find an accurate view of themselves and their situation. I look for options they might be ignoring and encourage them to consider ambitious goals like all of us should have. I buck up their courage if they need it. And there may be moral and ethical questions to explore in their relationships with other people, or with the divine. As with anyone.

And there is something more. There is a stock aphorism that I've always trotted out sooner or later in these situations. I tell the person: “Mental illness is a very hard life, but it is a

life that you can learn from." As is true of life for all of us. And so far – at least in every case so far – that idea has opened a fruitful useful branch of the discussion. In other words, we can learn from this life. We can all learn from this life.

And that brings us now to the usual sort of client, doesn't it? This is someone who doesn't need a psychotherapist at all. They need something therapists generally don't do. This is someone simply afflicted with life's bewildering riddles.

A typical example: A lady sits down and says "I have a question about my marriage." Then within the next fifteen seconds I am plunged head-deep into some particular Greek drama. She has been struggling, probably for years, to figure out the bafflingly intricate details of the drama's characters and plot. Me, at first I'm frantically treading water just trying to guess which play we're in.

Thank goodness for Tarot! The cards point right at the thing we need to get to. Every time, without exception, Tarot has an amazing magical power to steer the conversation in the significant direction. Sometimes our voyage even takes such a different heading than I expect, that I'm really struggling to put two and two and two together – until suddenly it all clicks into focus. With a very interactive mode of reading cards, where I often use them as prompts for pointed questions, things often click into focus for the client before they do for me. In those moments I can simply ask them to explain their new understanding of their situation. In any case, when the central knot of contradictions has been found, resolutions to it can be sifted through so life can move ahead.

And you know what I'm constantly keeping an eye out for while we turn over cards and talk? I am watching and listening – more than anything else – for some piece of information that she does not know. And not only looking for this in the cards, I'm searching for the presence of a riddle in the person's behavior. I'm listening and watching very carefully to every nuance of their tone of voice and face and body language for a disagreement with the words they choose to speak.

But we must really also discuss another type of divination. Sometimes it is far more appropriate to focus your attention in a different direction; toward your connection with the universe. Sometimes a clue to let the client move ahead can readily be provided by a "disembodied" spirit whom you know. Here again is "poetic" or "shamanic vision".

It might be some being with whom you, the counselor, already have a trusting relationship, and you may have found advice on such relationships in folk or ancient lore. Frankly, it sometimes feels to me as if a little crowd of ally gnomes is mumbling among themselves down in a corner of my mind's eye, an idea is reached, and one of them jumps up and gestures for attention. Of course I always hand on these pieces of advice to the client verbatim, so to speak. Even if I do not understand them well myself, the client often will.

Or sometimes there will appear the spirit of a departed human being, one with whom your client has an incomplete relationship, and this can be hard. True, many times the spirit merely needs to give a simple message of love and reassurance and that may be enough to let your client move ahead.

But there are other cases where lingering animosity and the grief of loss and even the client's own fear of death have been entangled into a really tragic puzzle. Indeed, there may be little hope of progress in the brief time of that consultation, but at least you can work to clarify the issues in the client's thinking. And you can at least trot out your stock of aphorisms on forgiveness, courage and acceptance. You can sincerely wish them well and give a silent prayer.

To sum this essay up in a single thought: We can learn from our lives through each other, and we need to.

And there is the abiding pleasure of the work. After a session I always tell a client this: "Thank you for your trust." They will teach you much.



Tarot World Map

Digital image by
Stone Riley

Invitation To A Student Of Tarot a magic poem

Here is a fortune telling system, a magic book,
a diagram of human life and soul wherein your intuition
speaks the truth your self can never know or soon forgets.

Here is the classic deck of picture cards,
the old city of 78 squares, the ancient map drawn
up as though life were an ever-shifting game of 78
tiles whereon each human token at each moment falls.

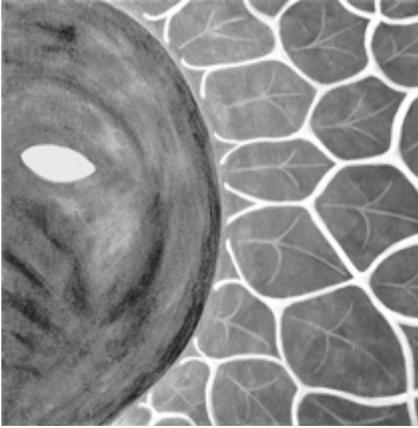
In this book of pictures, poetry and prose
you will come upon a certain numbering of roads,
a careful survey of the gods and men in their abodes,
a full accounting of the ancestor odes.

Naked, clothe your self in daring
and simply touch the flow of an infinite
and ever-present moment which you know is now;
feel at once the night and morning; thus come to be
like a dolphin touching echoes in the ever-present sea.

Ask a question, touch a page; there study what
good fortune and your own eye have to say. To learn of
life just ask for guidance; your own hand can point the way.

If you wish now, come with me; stand upon
my shoulders as I walk the sea. Repeat the journey
trod when you were young; hearken to the tale from
your own tongue. At every marker stone embrace the view;

Comprehend the truth and speak it new.



Green Man

Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

**Personal History
non-socratic philosophic
dialog on war and peace**

Caution: Difficult extreme symphonic realism style:

June 2010, New England, a warm summer. In my third year now as a retired engineer with an adequate pension, and after searching desperately for quite awhile for something beautiful and good to do with my time and other personal resources, I have finally settled in at an excellent volunteer job, and been doing it for half a year so far, doing what's called “historical interpretation”. In other words, I have become a costumed character in a history museum.

So, one summer afternoon I'm there portraying a store-keeper, supposedly a typical successful New England storekeeper of a previous period. I am standing in the back behind the back counter of a simulated successful 19th century country store among antique household items that are supposedly for sale there in my store and kegs supposedly containing nails and gin and whale oil and house paint pigment and shelves that actually display real handthrown jugs and handblown bottles and handsaws with gorgeous hard wood handles, a cornucopia of merchandise, some quite attractive, and all of this tableau got up to show a typical successful New England country store and its keeper in the year 1838, and me well trained to

talk about it. This is a major museum and the training here is excellent.

So there I am, presumably a sharp old bastard, standing there inside and toward the rear of one building in an extensive recreated village with a village green and mill pond and mills and a real working farm and trees, fences, roads, bridges, live-stock very much like 172 years before, this being a well known and highly respected large living history museum.

A boy and two soldiers walk in. My heart dissolves in pity.

I bid them a polite hello, a very brief greeting but meeting the demands of courtesy, not unfriendly but not smiling either, tentative, and they reply in kind.

What I've said exactly is one of my standard greetings: *“Good afternoon. Welcome to Judge Asa Knight's country store.”*

And what all three of them, the boy, a sturdy healthy clear eyed lad about fifteen, and the two soldiers, who are men in their thirties looking fit enough I guess but thin, have done in unison is this: Nod to me and answer *“Good afternoon.”*

This is America in 2010. Our country's empire is a crumbling castle in occupation of a crumbling island world. And our country's army has been wasted. It was puffed up on propaganda and then ground down. During my lifetime I have seen that done.

And so our soldiers, different from the distant time when I was one of them, now seem to live in a strange fantasy of clean heroic virtue that is horribly absurd. In fact, our army's practice of the art of war now openly includes a full repertoire of cruel violations of the law of war, law that was signed in their grandfathers' blood. And yet you can hear the claim of virtue in their talk and see it in the poses struck so often by so many of them, as if their suffering makes them good.

And now I can see that desperate tragic awful fantasy of military virtue, in a ghastly pose of sunny optimism, on these two men.



Six Drawings Of The War

Situation 1

Their clothing for one thing, just mentioning the obvious: Their lightweight informal civilian summer garb, pale colored garb, is worn with such an extreme of neatness that I am startled and wonder why it's done. Their informal civilian shirts look smoothly molded to their lean chests. Their slacks fit perfectly. The collars and sleeves and trouser creases all appear to lay or hang just right with precision that must have been deliberately measured, impelled by some strange faith or pleasure in taking every possible care however small, with any hope for luck utterly abandoned. Even on this warm humid afternoon they look as if their costumes have been ironed with starch immediately before they briskly stepped into my view. As I do, you may feel their pale colors, meant to glow with a clear discipline of mind and heart, glare with desperate grief instead.

And furthermore, more peculiar since at first I can't identify a meaning in this odd behavior, on briskly stepping in, following their boy, the two men stopped before me quite exactly equidistant to my left and right, separated by a width of floor they seemed to measure by prearranged agreement, an empty width of floor two arms wide which they could quickly reach across, as though a circumstance might spring from the unknown future where they must suddenly pass some important thing from one man's hand into the others, but definitely, in case a bomb explodes, no closer than they must, and they took startling minced little steps adjusting this, taking turns, smiling in a playful pleasure I watched but did not understand, they glancing up and down into each others eyes and to the floor and

back while taking tiny mincing steps, one man then the other, to left and right mutually fixing their placement.

And they are smiling openly in this brief joy. You could say, technically, they were marching in column, have formed a squad line and are enjoying their parade. I feel astonished, actually, wondering what they're playing at. What is this?

But once they've found a palpable balance, when they are finally feeling optimal positions of the floor in which to stop, both men then assume a firm straight pose that I do recognize, a pose I used occasionally myself, long ago, for addressing troops when plied with leadership appointment, but now me playing the troop. So now I understand at least that they are playing at some military activity in which they are encountering me. And so I feel affronted by these two.



Six Drawings Of The War

Situation 2

And their eyes scan my country store tableau that is before them, scan it systematically, glancing top to bottom in a pattern touching on the bottles and boxes and saws and brooms and everything, with a darting glance that also finds my eyes once or twice or thrice, potentially pleasant, offering to share a smile with me provided that I recognize them first.

But I cannot smile because in fact I don't recognize them. I'm staring at them thinking: Do I not know these people? Why have they come here?

The man toward my left I take to be the father of the boy because he feels himself in charge. He stands a little firmer than the other man and holds sunglasses, neatly folded, forward toward me in one hand, prepared to gesture with them if the

opening of our conversation falls to him; indeed, there's wordage taking shape behind his softly stirring lips. His eyes are bright. This is a gentle face this human has. I guess this trip was got up as an educational outing for his son and he is proudly happy in this family duty, for he loves the boy.

The other man, standing toward my right a little more relaxed, is more off duty. He seems to be here traveling as a friend, a guest, a brother officer. He might be uncle to the boy. He seems a bit less focused, less directed. I guess he's currently on leave or maybe even recently discharged to the reserves. But he is interested. He does not feel entirely committed to this moment here with all of his resources, but glad to play a part.

The poor child himself, the prey in this Chekhov drama, is around fifteen and so of course he's striving very hard to be a man.

When they all stepped in so briskly and took formation in this small dark place where sunlight falls on everything in patches, the boy instantly put himself forward, decisively front and center, just in front of me, two steps closer than his elders, closer to me than visitors usually stand, as though he's ready to assault the barricade presented by the simple ordinary plain wooden counter of a country store beyond which there stands a costumed character, a large man with gray hair and gray beard and glasses wearing a voluminous white shirt and over that a snug yellow vest that is woven with tiny flowers and over that a grocer's kind of apron, me standing there lounging (but suddenly struck completely motionless) leaning with my right elbow on a small wooden keg that is on the counter there for unknown reasons, me examining these persons who have appeared before me very intently indeed without a smile, and all of this extensive detail is pretty much as if this were instead some retail store in far Afghanistan that is very real and hazardous right now today, where I would be to him perforce either his enemy or friend. The child's innocent face shines up to me in happiness.

My heart is breaking for him. He is the creature life on Earth has made him, the male human youth of every age; he is

myself in other days. But he appeared here so unexpectedly I don't know what to say. My efforts with other children bound away to war have usually failed. I am not prepared.

But it is, of course, the eager boy who speaks. He speaks up clearly and asks me of guns. Hearing that, his father smiles.

“Could a customer buy a gun in this store?”

The boy's question was, in fact, a rather common one: *Could a customer buy a gun in this store?* Visitors mostly ask this question idly or some mischievously but he sounded it deliberately and in his mouth the word of “gun” had a subtle peculiar treatment that, in all of my experience with American military people, connotes a larger thoughtful knowledge of that ancient echoing word, a knowledge of the utterly consuming grotesqueness of “gun” (like intimate knowledge of a brutal lover) which the general public does not share.

“Gun” in that voicing is abbreviation, polite euphemism for some forgotten old barbaric noun of murders. You use a flat and lowered tone as if to speak punctuation, perhaps italics or an asterisk, and it is often followed by a tiny pause in which I gave the boy the customary tiny nod to indicate that I perceive the coded signal; I have recognized him.

So now, through this link of sympathy we share, the simulation he is running comes to mind for me with brighter vividness and more dimension. The question he has asked would be a living question, a significant or even major information item, if we were standing in a store like this today in far Afghanistan and he my enemy or friend. Among the saws and scythes and shovels here, what types of firearms would I have for sale, if any? Or, what am I willing to tell him?

Behind and to his right, his father smiled. The father had perceived the signal and the coded recognition too and so the father, eyes shining like the son's, leaned backward on his heels a bit, standing back a tiny bit, to mentally release his grip, to let his excellent child go on forward with the exercise of gathering knowledge.

I find the boy is gazing up at me. He is respectfully waiting for my next move.



Six Drawings Of The War

Situation 3

I'm sixty-three years old. Through earnest practice over many years at many venues, I have by now become an excellent storyteller. (That's why the management at this museum like me.) And along the winding way I've come of course I've been alchemically distilled into a poet / priest / magician. (The fundamental great arts do that to a human.) And so, in fact, to all intents and purposes, I stand here now before the boy today as an elder Druid.

In fact, to set the scene in classic images, like it actually appears in my shamanic eyes: Our situation is the same as if we were in Celtic, Greek, Chinese or Persian legendary days and a proud warrior took his son, a handsome lad now come of age, out to the countryside to train and, wandering in a forest there, they come upon a hermit watching in a cave. The warrior thinks: Surely wisdom will support our noble purposes, and so he prompts the lad to have a go at asking questions. That is what's happening. Wild untamed philosophy to manifest the irrefutable divine should now ensue, or else some powerful challenge.

And yet, that's not to say this moment is unusual. Of course all of us humans, awake and dreaming, are constantly enacting myths, enacting timeless play scripts that profoundly fully illustrate the tragic comic nature of human life on Earth, and by those means attempt to live like we should, and of course a smart old bastard like myself has learned to see the ancient stories constantly renewing and actually visible in my eyes as a kind of shadow show surrounding human doings.

And so naturally my breaking heart is an ordinary part of the work day here. For mercy's sake, I tell myself, your mystic astrocasting fails so often; just answer the kid's questions. It's stretching things a bit, I reason with myself, to see the boy as Galahad.

But still, this place in which we stand is a well known, large and very good living history museum. The staff here study constantly, we show the public a mantic heap of excellent material, and we draw an exciting crowd, on many days a crowd of thousands. This is a famous place where people come to seriously immerse themselves in serious play, both visitors and staff. Our village every day becomes a hundred acre stage set brimming with fine performing art. And furthermore, besides all else, this place is supposed to be a fertile valuable educational institution giving special care to children.

Okay, let's recapitulate:

In the sixty seconds since these visitors stepped in through the open door of my shady den from the clear bright sunshine of the dusty road and tree lined village green outside, they have confused me. What should I do? What should I do with them or for them? What is my proper duty, my best practice, in this office that I hold as an artistic educator at this museum? For this audience here before me, should I act as a human encyclopedia and simply answer questions, or be a magical philosopher? It is currently my turn to speak. Should I ante up with some small clear tasty information item or a tale?

But I should not imply to you that answering questions here is so simple either. We exhibit a mantic heap of top quality material and so therefore, necessarily, at least among the better staff, you see a kind of intuitive process when a better member of our staff, at least when things are going smoothly, interacts with visitors to answer their questions. Speaking technically, we do a process like cold reading divination to guess what a visitor would like to ask based on where their eyes come to rest or on their evident personal character or their behavior among the other members of their party, or such as that, with minimum verbal clues from them.

Only taking Judge Asa Knight's country store, where I'm working for this day, as an example:

- For one party of visitors I might launch upon a talk about the lovely fabrics on the shelves and the facts of how those fabrics got there on sailing ships from all around the world and/or on steamboats on the inland rivers or by the old canals or new railroads, and probably discuss the huge new textile mills of new New England cities that were absorbing large numbers of rural young women, with their entire human lives bundled in their luggage, in 1838,

- whereas I might regale another group with an examination of the newspapers that are lying on a counter in a corner by a window for the entertainment of my store's customers, and the roughly equal space which they devote to ads versus news reports, and the entertaining character of much of their news (a shipwreck with insanity and blood, a huge explosion with ghastly wounds on a battlefield in Spain told by a correspondent who was there, the shocking murder trial of a respectable physician in New York, etc.)

- or else the commodity price listings on the front page of the other paper, a Boston business paper, leading us to a discussion of the hard struggle that was farm economics here in 1838 and the young men who were moving west in droves in search of better land,

- or else the varied categories of ceramic wares and glass that we have on offer; all compounded out of Fire and Earth, imported or made locally, despised or treasured, with which the people staying here equipped their homes,

- or else my visitors might be a large flock of young children with their school name printed on all their identical shirts who spot my few small glass candy jars which I obligingly discuss and go from there to the toothbrushes made of bone and bristle that are also here for sale and the tooth powder that transforms into a paste when wetted on your brush and then the truly delightful tiny jewel-like bottles of brightly colored liquid labeled "Toothache Drops" and finally to the state of dental care back then which was not so very bad after all,

- or else the school books on my shelves and the public school house our museum has rebuilt a short walk up the road and the great achievement of the very high rate of literacy in this region back then,

- or else the different kinds of wood from which were made the various tools and containers that they see before them and that our museum tries to keep such wonderful information as the different properties of different woods from being lost amid the changing world and that they can do fine service for the world and earn my gratitude by learning and remembering things of practical use,

- or else for teenage children my clearly labeled liquor casks might lead into the terrible epidemic of alcohol abuse in this region in those days and therefore the temperance movement and the slavery abolition movement and the female suffrage movement and the movement for nature consciousness and the rest,

- or else, occasionally for older students of the human mind, the hot ferment of philosophical debate and spiritual seeking in 1838 New England, and the solid choice these people made for tolerance and universal freedom,

- or else the peculiar fashions in hats in 1838 New England, displayed for educational viewing on my shelves, and thus some little insight on the endlessly absorbing and surprising and demanding game of human clothes,

- or else the items of my clothes, my authentic apron, shirt and vest and necktie and woolen trousers but then the fact my eyeglasses ought to be a different shape, my haircut is dubious at best and my beard is not in proper style at all,

- or else how people wearing clothes like mine in buildings like this store lived with the summer heat and winter cold,

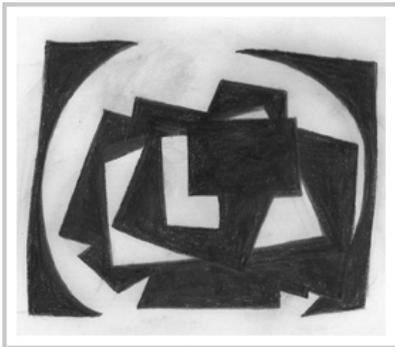
- or else the surprising way the stovepipes in this building are arranged,

- or else some details from the history of this building and the history of Judge Asa Knight who built it and worked it and really was a judge and an active citizen of his community,

- or else

- or else
- or else

and better members of our museum staff, at least when things are going well, navigate this mantic heap of brilliantly beautiful material by an intuitive process, guessing what a visitor would like to ask, given very few clues, by watching our visitors intently. So even just answering questions in this place is not so simple.



**Six Drawings
Of The War**

Situation 4

And the question on the table, on the wooden boards that stand between us, is geometrically complex. Superficially, it's just a miscellaneous common question often asked by miscellaneous visitors. But in a meta dimension these soldiers here are offering me a role in a mocked up training mission. In their view our simulated village simulates an area of guerrilla war, I simulate a local inhabitant of probable high value, and the marvelous sturdy young cadet who stands before me in his bright colored but modestly trim clothes has taken the initiative in seeking valuable intelligence. By their lights I'd do my duty best by offering their cadet a training experience that is nicely tailored to their purposes. In their projected total sum, in the farthest / closest or closest / farthest dimension of their current thinking, I am supposed to help these heroes win our wars.

But actually, on the other hand, in the real reality of these events, their real patrol has accidentally run onto an elder Druid.

How should I play this?

What I did, finally, was kick the can on down the road. I met his bet and did not raise, requiring him to either deal again or fold. I gave the boy, the trainee cadet, and his officers who I felt were trying to conscript me, a version of my standard answer, which I would give to any miscellaneous person too, but now for them in a spicy and enticing tailored presentation.

Using only small hand gestures while I leaned there on my keg, and with a slight animation of my face and stance, here's what I said, in these words exactly as I now recall:

“No. You could not. For reasons that I do not fully understand, this store did not offer firearms. They did carry ammunition: shot and powder, and also some parts: flints and flintlock mechanisms, but not the arms as such. There is some discussion here at the museum about this issue. Perhaps it was because there were many firearm factories in this region. You could walk to a firearm factory.”

(There's an instant glance shared by the boy and I in that final sentence: He asks me if I know and I assure him that I do: I know this youth could walk for any reasonable length of hours or days if he had a destination and found fair weather and a road.)

And then my mouth closed.

It did entice them. In fact it was only information anyone could get from me but I spoke it in their language. At least I tried to use their words, syntax, conjugation, rhythm and apparently succeeded. It was, or it sounded in my ears, like professional quasi-intellectual American military jargon of gleaming pristine quality and they did buy it. All three of them were strongly reassured. Their tentative uncertainty vanished. They gave me jolly smiles. The father raised his eyebrows high and clasped his hands around the sunglasses he held, as though applauding. The boy looked grateful.

In their great relief, immersed in their high value horrific simulation (the men naturally seeing themselves as trying to save the boy's life through good preparation, and the boy struggling to be a successful honest man) they almost laughed out loud. The men surely felt their child was walking step by step along

the razor edge of survival and sanity and health and currently succeeding well, currently with assistance from this costumed character whom luck had found for them, succeeding in a harrowing acrobatic act which they were terribly familiar with themselves through terrified experience.

Their relief was palpable. These men wanted their boy to live and prosper and be sane and good and they believed that I was now helping. Meanwhile, the boy was glad as if the motor of a car that had been grinding down to silence suddenly caught and started. He felt some power and was suddenly at ease. They now all obviously felt that I was on their side.

And it was their side's turn to speak.

And again, the boy was both direct and clever. In this same store today in far Afghanistan, having found a friendly source of detailed information, what information should he seek? In retrospect I have to say that his solution to the task was obvious: One information item that is very high on his Must Know List must be the current availability of high tech weapons to the enemy who are hidden among the population in this area. For the sake of life and limb and hope and pity, he should ask me about the availability of high tech weapons. And furthermore, a person in my position in this community in Afghanistan would surely have some information, or at least some rumor, to offer in reply. And this very good boy has a very good simulation of that question per our 1838 community immediately ready on his tongue, also thereby demonstrating a valuable historical perspective on the current situation.

So, he wants to know what I have heard or seen about high tech weapons available in this area and time.

The good boy licked his lips to wet his mouth so he could speak with perfect clarity and tossed his handsome head and looked directly in my eyes and asked:

“What about percussion caps?”

What about percussion caps?

The men behind him grin at this accomplishment.

Raised into the height of vision then by his power of vision, I look farther out than he is looking and I see the story:

By luck, recently, in a series of events already lit with magic, another tale has crossed my path that could fit into our puzzle here very neatly indeed. So, judging from that train of circumstance, from the converging multi-dimensional forest paths of these two stories through my life, and knowing all things are coincidence, trusting thence to luck, I surely think it is the one true story that he hopes to hear, the riddle that he hopes to riddle out, a coded treasure map of his island's labyrinth. It will be a true tale, therefore certainly a wisdom tale, but wrapped around a hard enduring challenge, a challenge to his father's vision and therefore to his father's power. In other words, it will be a story for a hero. So now I think this all makes sense. It seems I've been recruited to the young man's quest.

What about percussion caps?

The percussion cap was an important step in the march toward modern war, a small tentative invention in itself that became a key to major developments. With this small hardware item available, it became conceivable to put a weapon in a warrior's hands that would shoot bullets in fast succession even in the most demanding combat environments. {{The rolling deck of a ship at sea and galloping horseback will be important in the story.}} A percussion cap was about the size of an aspirin pill. It was a tiny pinch of highly explosive chemical cradled in a metal shell, reasonably safe and easy for a warrior to handle, beaten with a little mechanical hammer to create the initial spark of a firearm.

The boy cadet and I both know that much.

I also possess the following further information and the boy apparently does not but at first this secret item seems to me to be of low value to him:

In America in 1838, percussion caps could be manufactured at agreeable quantity and cost, and they were being used in experimental weapons worked up at various factories by various smiths, but an attractive application for them was not invented yet. No practical weapons with percussion caps existed here now.

No simulation metaphor for that secret further information springs to mind, no obvious similarity of those facts of 1838 and the battlespace of 2010 in far Afghanistan. Indeed, America's enemies there definitely obtain some effective high tech gear and a Judge Asa Knight in that community today must certainly hear at least some rumors about the enemy's weapons trade. And that current reality is very different from the facts in 1838 New England. So I have a storytelling problem: to tell the uncompliant facts of 1838, even though that's what the boy requested, would be disappointing. His question missed its target by about 10 or 15 years.

But on the other hand, visualizing it, I quickly see that as a dramatist I can shape this material into a pause, an anti-climax in our play. The disappointing stuff about the nonexistence of percussion cap high tech weapons in our place and time can be a segue, an empty bit of stage beside the wing, an empty bit of salesroom floor before an exit. I can invite our Galahad out through the curtains of that exit gate into the meta-meta-space of the shaman conjure story. Out there on that guarded circled magic plane, that parking lot for mythic ships, that central depot base of many labyrinths, I shall exhibit to the hero's gaze a horrid demon.



Six Drawings Of The War

Situation 5

Enter: Samuel Colt.

Of course, when a familiar figure of our everyday world is sketched as a monster on the epic scale and the picture looks realistic, that does surprise us. But of course the epic age is every day and the banality of evil is profound. It's often true

that when our neighbors say a thing is definitely good, but good in some problematical way, a close examination by our conscience will reveal that thing as simply bad, and knocking that small chip out of the smooth tableau of everyday will sometimes knock a chink out of a wall of blindness.

And so the demon I will conjure for the child's educational examination {{re Dr. Faust?}} will be Mister Samuel Colt, industrious and patriotic famous American master gunsmith. {{In a rarely told surprising true tale of adventure that I myself have only recently heard by way of a remarkable magical coincidental circumstance.}}

But first I must craft the segue.

The boy has just now conjured into himself sincere bravery, sincere awareness of life and limb and hope and pity, and suddenly has shot a look into my eyes and asked, "*What about percussion caps?*"

I have taken heart from his intelligence and courage. Therefore I now plan to exit from our current web of metaphor and invite him out a hidden backstage door onto a different sheet of drawing paper where an industrious, patriotic and successful famous gunsmith of our country will be realistically sketched as profoundly villainous.

What about percussion caps?

"Well ... " I shrug, "*not here in this region at this time.*" And I gesture empty hands and shake my head "no" and visibly relax my stance, sagging into my keg a tiny bit (the keg that is standing there beside me on the counter) (me thinking oddly that this bit of business is like King Lear's comic cameo appearance in the brothel parlor scene in Joyce's *Ulysses*). And I use informal language: "*It was pretty much all still flintlocks here.*"

It is obvious I'm disappointed. It is obvious I am not happy with the historical facts because they will not let me go on forward with our student's rather brilliant metaphor.

The second soldier, the man who seems to be the brother officer and friend, perhaps an uncle, shrugs his shoulders too

and smiles a smile that looks ironic. In other circumstances he might be offering a humorous comment of some kind to release our tension.

But the father disagrees. The father shrugs his shoulders, gestures empty hands, smiles false modesty, releases the tension of his stance paradoxically with an impatient dissatisfied toe tap and utters the sharp laugh you use when pretending to be embarrassed about your pride. In fact his pride is hurt and wants its turn to speak. If this were a different circumstance in which he was supposed to speak, he might be pleading an excuse for his son's failure.

And our student, our boy, our excellent cadet, leans his head to one side with his eyebrows up and lips pressed shut in a sincerely modest smile of pleasure, an expression that strikes me with the amazing talent of the human face for communication, an expression of the face that undoubtedly contains a shrug and yet is still clearly proud, as though his hands hold a bow that is still vibrating from a far flung arrow, his arrow gone purely straight but slightly errant, the fine boy clearly meaning: "Well, I took a pretty good shot."

Is that nobility? In our place and time, is this proud modesty of his in fact nobility?

So I conceive some optimism as a sister to my hope. Maybe this youth actually is Sir Galahad in some particular personal characteristics that will be effective in our world today. Maybe this one can win some Grail of transubstantiating holy divination fluid and through it gaze deep into our world's real reality and thus perceive our situation in some new way and thus break his mold and thence enact some really useful unusual achievement with his beautiful life and his profound resources. Maybe he can help somehow. Maybe hope is real.

Maybe hope is real, or maybe not. My other efforts along this line have seldom been successful.

Two summers prior to this I chatted with another lad going for a soldier. It was at a nearby college where I visit in assorted guises now and then to talk with the kids. This

fellow's graduation from the school was coming soon and he had learned valuable skills he hoped to give some honorable exercise. And this child was convinced that he could do the people of the world some good as a member of the American army, the same lie I believed at his age. If currently alive and whole I guess he's on the job right now. I failed that child. I tossed out every argument my grasping mind could find for half an hour but could not cast a shadow of a doubt across the fantasy.

And then last month another failure, this time personally a deeper bruise. This young man is more like I am now. This one shares my gaze far more clearly than the last one did. This one sees some of the visions that I see, holds some of the sacraments I hold, knows some of the gods I know and owns some of the pain I own. We both bring medicine to our talk. He is an Indian like I am a Celt. He touches my heart deeply and it seems that I touch his. But he chooses a different future than I choose: I swear to work against the empire for the world; he swears to work and fight. And I have seen us together talking later in a future in a tragic dream.

But on the other hand, there was at least one day when I pulled a child (who had already even hung the garb of martyrdom upon himself) back from the wars, and did it by telling stories.

But on second thought, I really ought to explain that incident somewhere else, perhaps elsewhere in this book. It's interesting enough and this episode here has grown too long already, this episode where a warrior takes his son out to the countryside to train and they find a hermit in a cave, simulated by an elder Druid in a museum, with whom they are now playing a game of questions in which the sides have shifted and the boy seems to be winning.

But at least you have become aware that I have had some prior success restraining someone from going to war by telling them a story, a difficult magic trick I am planning to try again now.

So let's resume:

I have said: *“Well, not here in this region at this time. It was pretty much all still flintlocks here.”*

Each member of my audience, each in their own way, has sincerely demonstrated disappointment at my breaking of the web; and well they may, for it was a web of deep suspense and high drama that we were weaving, all of us laboring together at the magic loom of human conversation.

So now I need to wait a finely graduated time. First heartbeat: Each member of the audience has grown to appreciate my disappointing speech and my own personal disappointment. Second heartbeat: They have probably conceded that our army game, the vehicle in which they traveled here, has stopped. Beginning of a third: They have probably begun to mentally change the subject. Good: Now me suddenly picking up the broken end of thread may give the pleasure of surprise.

I shrug again, much more largely now, and gesture toward the boy with an open hand of grateful praise. I make a mask of raised eyebrows and pursed lips (almost comic). I nod and haul a dramatic tenor voice (not quite excessive) up from the center of my chest to say:

“But it is interesting that you mention percussion caps ...”

They laugh, unembarrassed to be entertained as I am gratified to entertain them.

And I return their smiles but only briefly. I smile long and large enough to share their enjoyment, to agree with their enjoyment in sincerity, to say their pleasure is good. And all of that is true enough, but I am smiling only long enough for them to see it: Yes, our agreement on everything we've said and done so far is real enough and so I welcome you into my place and, oh by the way, this here is a place where you are guests of mine.

So then I strike the classic pose announcing an important story.

There is a certain gesture of the face and hands that has a certain psychological effect among a human audience: It gives them to understand that the performer now intends to tell an important story. I first noticed it in Greek and Roman sculpture, first a famous bust of Homer then monumental statues where assorted Caesars are shown as lawgiver. This pose can silence crowds under favorable conditions. Also contrarily: I have not seen any depiction of Hitler using it; Hitler's patented salute seems to be his substitution for it, a claim of godhood rather than a claim of truth and a call for noise instead of quiet. Also, judging from the few pertinent early photos I have seen, the classic storyteller announcement pose was apparently an ancient worldwide commonplace among shamans. Also, it was continued in use by silent film actors, re Brigitte Helm as Maria in *Metropolis* and many others. For a modern audience it sometimes seems to give a feeling of primordial existence, which I view in general as a visitation of real reality. The classic pose has natural variations to show a performer's friendliness or formality, the seriousness or humor of the tale, and probably some other issues. I enjoy it.

I struck the classic pose of a friendly person who is calling your attention so they can tell you a tale that is important and serious. And I began to tell a tale that I had only recently heard:

*"In our year,
1838,
the year we are enacting here . . ."*

My small audience nod their acceptance of this "once upon a time", accepting this invitation to set foot and heart inside the ancient human story space. Their eyes focus high and toward a distance, past my head and shoulders. Also, the two men fold their arms upon their chests in a show of judgmental assessment while the boy shoves his thumbs into his waistband indicating readiness to go. They have entered my lair entirely.

{ { Two months later:

{{ I'm struck by a new thought while struggling with this manuscript: Why do the two men settle in for my performance so easily? Why do they accept the strange change of mode so willingly? For the two men, though not the boy (who was lured by adventure), this seems to want an explanation. So in fact was I, without knowing it, elevating their guerrilla war simulation, which they thought had been exhausted, to a sophisticated and interesting new level of play? Maybe my archaic oratorical gesture (the so-called "storyteller announcement pose") helped them assign me a location on their stage that was more comfortable for them. Originally they saw my role as more or less "trainer cadre personnel", a potent authority indeed, like a Trump card in Tarot, but then they saw my archaic primitive gesture and both men simultaneously crossed their arms on their chests in a powerful pose of "judgmental assessment": so this might show they expected my next pose to be relatively weak, so maybe, I'm thinking now, they have suddenly tagged me as a simulated Afghan native storyteller. They have surely heard of such a person and maybe even heard one in person themselves; they are intelligent imperial officers whose duties must occasionally include observing local cultural stuff, a military task they are being called on to simulate now. And they certainly ought to care what a person of that kind might say, me being a kind of "primitive" newspaper. So maybe I've become, in their dimensions, a simulated Afghan native haji nigger storyteller? And if so, is it therefore also real, unperceived by me, in my dimensions? And if so, and if this guise helped open their ears for my secret real anti-war subversive message that was aimed against their side, unperceived by them as yet, was it therefore okay for me to play in blackface? And on the other hand, was I even competent to attempt a role with such Shakespearean complications?

{{ Two months plus several days later: But on the other hand, I'm thinking now, maybe these two soldiers are just weary and they are just happy to

find intelligent entertainment, provided that I do turn out to be intelligent and entertaining. I do apologize for this digression. }}

And I am speaking gradually, making chunks of talk, leaving breath for thought and vision between the clauses of a very brief paragraph or verse with which I now begin the tale:

"... *Samuel Colt*

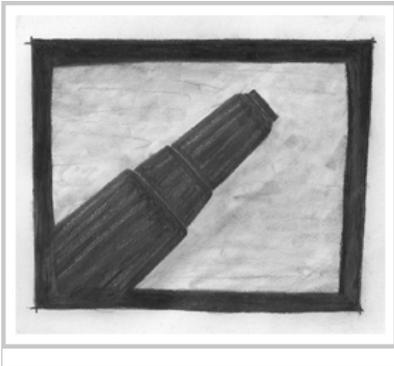
*opened a factory in New Jersey,
in Patterson New Jersey,
to manufacture
his new design revolver pistol,
that used percussion cap technology,
that would become the first repeating firearm
proved in combat ...*

... by the Texas Rangers."

I have spoken gradually with chunks of talk, so that these opening lines can sound like abbreviations, can appear in the mind's eye like hypertext tags, like pointers into other tales, and I especially strove to craft that final line (that darting invocation of the Texas Rangers) so that those legendary horsemen, of whom so many tales are told, might appear in the mind's eye like gleaming silver arrows arcing high away toward myth.

{{ Although there was also a powerful but softly spoken anti-climax in the verse's earlier line: The phrase "repeating firearm" which was merely whispered:

{{ Indeed, when that phrase "repeating firearm" shaped itself behind my lips, before I spoke it, in that fleeting moment, (me surprised and worried by its weak location in the poem's structure) reaching toward these people through my common knowledge with them, reaching toward their minds, there seemed to be a telepathic confirmation. I watched a slow blink of their minds' eyes turning inward while the phrase "repeating firearm" was brushing past my lips into the air, for in their eyes it seemed I saw:



Six Drawings Of The War

Situation 6

{{ These here are infantrymen. These here are foot men. These here are men committed to the fight in the closest possible intimacy of mind and blood, the victors on the field of Agincourt where Shakespeare called to them "we happy few, we band of brothers". These here are men Napoleon named "the queen of battle". And automatic weapons are the modern plague of their professional existence. These men are both the slaughtered mass lain down before machine gun nests along the River Somme and also the operators of those guns. And in the recent years which their own eyes have seen, a new design gun machine packed full of interacting little hammers, cheap to make and good in any land and weather, a new design compounded out of all improvements made in hand held bodily destruction since percussion caps, (a gun named "AK47"), out to the farthest corners of the world has finally replaced the last remaining swords and spears and arrows. So here's a thought they cannot help but think: Automatic weapons are their profession's contract with the Devil, luring them from ancient honor to a modern Hell. What damage have they done themselves with rapidly repeating bullets? Repeating firearms are their brutal lover's most attractive and distressing face.

{{ And that phrase "repeating firearm" went down whispering into a silence in half a breath it took to

say itself. So then a half line later at the climax of our tale those famous galloping hoof beats of the Texas Rangers, their fine mustang ponies charging flat out straight into the enemy's mass, their percussion cap pistols well aimed flaming from outstretched fists, those hoof beats echoed down into infinities of quiet, cavernously empty. }} }

To help my visitors weave that spell, I used risen stopped hushed vocal tones like adventuring question marks, prompting them to do their best to fill those footnotes in, to go searching for other true tales that would twine in here, to go questing off into the woods of all human lore for the gleaming deepened complex colors they could weave into our vision truthfully, other truthful stories which they may already possess or which I trust they will henceforth watch for in the universe.

In this book on this page let's punctuate the chords that I was pulling in the human voice and ear like this:

*"in Patterson New Jersey [... *?], "*
*"his new design revolver pistol [... *?]"*
{{ "repeating firearm [...]" }}
"Texas Rangers [... !! ?]"*

So in that brief opening verse I have found myself striving to compress the introductory chapters of an epic song or poem. This oratory is old magic.

And this is high magic because it is high art. In fact, by the moment when that verse's first word brushed out past my lips the artistic trance was present. My consciousness by then felt fascinated with things that are echoing in the infinite dimensions of reality of which my consciousness is only one.

... ..

{{ Are you serious?? You can't possibly be serious. We are on page 28 and you haven't finished describing (much less understandably describing!!!) a conversation that lasted **maybe 5 minutes**. This is astonishing. You'll never get this finished. You know what this is? This has degenerated to the level of self obsessed hyper analytic pompous navel gazing *crap*. This is **braggadocio**. This

is thin gruel. How long do you expect a reader to put up with this stuff????? This is twaddle.

{{ That is unkind.

{{ Unkind? **Unkind?** Really? You can't even open up this manuscript in the morning any more until you've had two cups of coffee. **Are you trying to stuff the whole book in here?** We're running out of time and space.

{{ Okay okay. Admittedly, to be honest with you, this manuscript is embarrassing. But it's definitely not finished yet, definitely not, not even close. There's so much more to tell.

{{ Oh well; look; why not just insert here a complete transcript of our little hero play?:

{{ Scene: A Dark Cave. Enter: Young Galahad followed by Old Sir Lancelot and Old Sir Guy.

{{ Young Galahad: Approaches Merlin who startles and awakes.

{{ Young Galahad: “Could a customer buy a gun in this store?”

{{ Old Lnclt: Smiles.

{{ Merlin: “No. You could not. For reasons that I do not fully understand, this store did not offer firearms. They did carry ammunition: shot and powder, and also some parts: flints and flintlock mechanisms, but not the arms as such. There is some discussion here at the museum about this issue. Perhaps it was because there were many firearm factories in this region. You could walk to a firearm factory.”

{{ Young Galahad: “What about percussion caps?”

{{ Old Lnclt & Guy: Grin and elbow each other.

{{ Merlin: “Well, not here in this region at this time. It was pretty much still all flintlocks here.”

{{ General murmurs of disappointment.

{{ Merlin: (pulling a jester's wand out of his pocket, complete with bells and ribbons and a grinning puppet head, and waving it so it jingles): “But it is interesting that you mention percussion caps ...”

{{ General amusement.

{{ Merlin: Steps up into a beam of light that has suddenly appeared and, having produced a magic harp, begins to pluck a stately Chopin polonaise.

{{ Old Lncit & Guy: Assume an attitude of judgmental assessment.

{{ Young Galahad: Assumes an attitude of readiness to gallop off.

{{ Merlin: "In our year, 1838, the year we are enacting here, Samuel Colt opened a factory in New Jersey, in Patterson New Jersey, to manufacture his new design revolver pistol, that used percussion cap technology, that would become ...”

{{ ... (On his harp, Merlin strikes the four notes that make the most famous passage in human music, Mozart's greatest coded byte of human mathematics, the famous four notes in which the fist of Death is beating on your door: *Dah dah dah daaah.*) ...

{{ ... “the first repeating firearm proved in combat ...”

{{ ... (Merlin's harp gallops suddenly into the overture from *William Tell.*) ...

{{ ... “by the Texas Rangers.”

{{ Young Galahad: “Mmmm.”

{{ Merlin: (shifting now to Mozart's Requiem and singing now directly to the boy with occasional choral harmonies): “The Republic of Texas ordered a few of the new pistols, a few dozen of the pistols, intended for the Texas Navy.” (There he weaves a little nautical hornpipe theme.) “But

then the Navy was disbanded and the Texas Rangers took them. One Ranger company trained with the pistols, the new design revolver pistols, and began defeating Comanche forces.” (A brief deep toned one-beat, the distant echo of a tribal drum.) “By then it was six years later, six years in our future, and Colt, Samuel Colt, was out of business bankrupt.” (Gentle ending stroke upon the strings and then the harp is let to settle into silence.)

{{ Merlin: “But when the news got out, he was back in business making money. Lots and lots and lots of money.”

{{ Old Guy: Angry laugh of accusation.

{{ Old Lncelt: Bitter laugh of weary disillusioned powerless acceptance.

{{ Young Galahad: (whispers): “Ah! I see!”

{{ Darkness: falls. Merlin: sleeps. **Guy, Lancelot & Galahad:** depart. }}



Pluto
Acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley



Two Of Coins
From Simple Tarot
Digital image
by Stone Riley

To Make A World a poem of the good new age, contemplating wisdom

Finally when we have won the fight – when we have won the struggle to decide the shape and contour of the New Age at its birth – when we have chosen freedom decisively and irreversibly – then certainly we will discover utter depths of grief that human souls have never known before, for we will then be free to mourn all that were murdered in the age when murder ruled supreme.

And in that holy sacrificial state of grief we can begin to heal the Goddess Earth.

But can a new age be different from the old? That is to say, can we be different human beings than before when we were deathly sick with loneliness? We can and will.

“Tintern Abbey” is a nature poem by William Wordsworth composed in Wales in 1798. It's often said to be his best loved work.

In the sweet touching rhythm of its verse the poet tells that he is visiting a very beautiful valley he last visited in youth. Now he is grown older. Now the hardness of the human world has changed him, quenched a sort of desperate delirium for beauty he felt then.

And now here this scene he sees is real. This is a real valley, not the land of sweet fair dreamy memory that kept his faith in gentle human life alive through coarser years.

And yet the poet reassures us finally – convinces us – that it is good and that it feeds the soul.

By the poem's end we are willing to hear and feel that reassurance because along the way he has proved extraordinary familiarity with spiritual affairs, by vividly describing some of our most profound sensations of the movements of our souls in quite realistic detail.

So we should listen to this Wordsworth person on our current pressing emergency question of what nourishment a normal healthy human soul requires. Will such food be available to our human race in coming times?

Well, in this poem Wordsworth tells us this:

First he recognizes now that human beings take part in the natural world and he now welcomes that duty and he says we can do it well.

Next he tells a joyful spiritual experience of our human presence in the soul of Nature, for he now sees that we are soul-deep in the mountains and the meadows and the vast blue sky and all.

But finally he rejoices that his beloved human mate is there, his soul mate sister – to reflect, share and then remember – so these internal things are real. And in their companionship, when they are together, that's when the poet sings the highest praises of the nourishment that Nature brings his soul.

That is to say, Nature sets a spiritual feast before us when our human company arrives together.

And that, I think, is brilliant wisdom.

And I'm starting to see a working program in it: How about you and I each find some beautiful small poetic quote, some very small but brilliant line, which tells the actual fact that "I am you and we are All entire." (That one is from William Blake.)

Now memorize the little bit you picked. Probably think up some slightly fuller way to say it too, 20 words or less, for when you're asked.

(If you prefer a currently living author and don't know where to look, my first suggestion would be “The Faraway Nearby” which is a recent book by Rebecca Solnit.)

Now every time you're in a meeting where people are pretending that the vitally important fact is not true – this would be a political, religious, government or business meeting maybe, or a book club or a barroom chat – where people are pretending that human beings, or some human beings, are separate and apart, or pretending like we're not all part of Earth – then let's you and me just stand up and just say our little bit as a reminder that actually “I am you and we are All entire”.

Since most anyone who just consciously thinks about it for a moment discovers they already know it's true and it is good and sacred, and since more and more people today are waking up from a hypnotic trance and starting to think consciously, then this action plan, or something like it, might have good results.

It would be like inviting people to a feast.

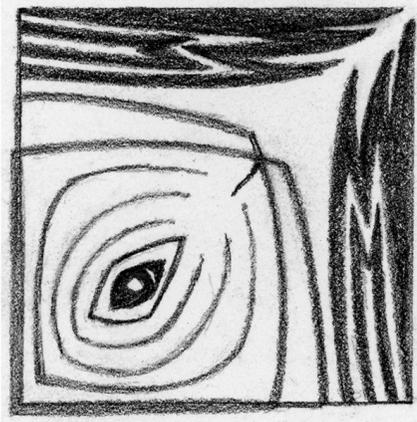
Perhaps, as our culture changes, that supremely lovely vision of sacred unified reality might even become instituted in our newly built culture as some kind of on-going permanent communal planetary celebration, as a feast of Nature's spiritual gifts.

And I guess that would be a key to open the reality of the Good New Age for all of Earth and for our human race.



**Beloved Little
Child Recovered
From Illness**

Wax crayon
on paper by
Stone Riley



Seven Of Wands
From Simple Tarot
Pencil on paper by
Stone Riley

Rebirth Of Courage **a poem contemplating work**

We have been struck by tragedy but here we stand. The mighty forces of this world with their astonishing demands have left us struggling for breath and for a solid place to put our feet and meanwhile time rolls on around us.

But we are here among the living where work is waiting to be done so “screw your courage to the sticking place” as Shakespeare said.

Once more into the breach dear friends; let a smile be your umbrella; let the sun shine in and damn the damn torpedoes, full speed ahead. There is a bluebird twerping merrily somewhere beyond the freaking blue horizon. As Lincoln said when everything seemed lost, “put the bottom back into the bucket” and go on.

One time a little boy I know was taken to his grandpa’s wake. It was a weekend afternoon, a funeral parlor, open casket, floral wreaths. More family and friends were gathered than the child had ever seen. Lifted in his father’s hands, he gazed on Grampy’s calm unmoving face and studied carefully. Coming back along the aisle the child for a moment threw his arms around my neck and gently wept.

Ten minutes more, the little boy was at his proper work, very quiet at the toys provided in a corner in the back, making the trucks go in deep contemplation.

Don't we have work to do? Aren't there worthy tasks waiting for our minds and hearts?

We may say that life is horrid. We may say that we are helpless in the hands of bad luck or cruel fate. We may choose to think that nothing we can take into our mortal hands will turn out well or be of any use. We may choose to see ourselves, in the final analysis, as little bugs with pointless lives. I say that is a load of rubbish.

I say life is magnificent. I stand in constant awe. I say our lives show endless courage in the face of fascinating mystery and that is who we are.



Five Art Projects

Acrylic / canvas

painting by

Stone Riley

New Modern Art, A Mission Statement a painting manifesto

Now in this perilous disjointed modern age, we need to do the main thing artists always strive to do if they are worthy of the name: Re-tell the great stories. We must offer reassurance, or even proof, that ancestral wisdom is available and useful. We must show that the creative source of life is always new. But we must have a language that is equal to this challenge in this difficult time.

Visual artists and their audience often share a powerful symbolic language.

Among Victorians, with their beloved ornamental gardens, there was a fine vocabulary of the flowers. So, by placing some specific flowering shrubbery in a wood, or some specific blossom in a figure's hair, Victorian canvas painters could convey their thoughts about their characters and plots. But for most of us today the crimson rose's bold erotic cry alone of that remains.

Among the Classic Greeks Athena always had her shield and helm. Ariadne had her bow. A husky male with club and lion skin was Heracles. Two solemn women with a happy boy

were Demeter, Persephone and Dionysos. Statuary, murals, painted pottery, jewelry, costumes for the stage, all took part in this visual mythology. Surely priceless holy copy books of sketches must have passed from hand to hand although no scraps of even one of them remain.

Among the folk of Western Europe in the last Ice Age, where many different creatures crossed the land, the painters of the caves took up the animals' gestural communication. The stories humans tell were painted on those cavern walls in the particular angle of a horse's ears or bison's tail, the blur of hooves and antlers, and all of that, for all of that was common coin to those folks then. And now to us the fluent handiwork on those cavern walls has all become mysterious marvel.

And countless other fine examples can be found across the world; times and places where visual artists and their viewers powerfully shared our human stories by means of some deep rich common tongue.

For our tumultuous age we have invented Modern Art. Now while so much around us constantly falls apart, here is a language with which visual artists strive to intimately address experience and knowledge humans have inside themselves. As the old bohemian Picasso said, "My pictures reach in through your eyes and grab your asshole!" Most viewers recognize this power as the yoga that it is and they respond appropriately, sometimes enthusiastically.

And yet a certain difficulty does exist: Those who have developed Modern Art, a hundred years ago and ever since, have followed their researches boldly into a multitude of different schemes. Cubism unfolds things; Expressionism ramifies them; Minimalism diagrams their force; etc. and so on. The power of the language, if we let it, might well dwindle out along these narrowing streams, these dialects each with its special purpose and its mode of operation in the humans.

And yet a student of this language is rich today. Museums today are stuffed with fine original pieces and they swap them all about on tours. Bookstore shelves are absolutely groaning

full of volumes chockablock on every page with magnificently printed photos of the whole world's masterpieces often with quite excellent analyses, biographies and histories. The internet is there to fill in any cranny where a student feels some hunger pang; just type in "guernica" and click on "search". Among the countless results you'll even find an essay by this author.

But surely our embarrassment of riches is the chance we need. I'll pose a case. Let's say: In light of certain insights that you found in Shakespeare's "Murder of Gonzago" now you feel compelled to talk about the murderer George Bush. You guess you'll do this with a painted canvas. So now on pondering at length, let's say you wish the painting could, inside the viewer's eyes, somehow unfold and ramify those insights and diagram their force. Great Gods! You need some specialized techniques. You need examples from the masters who preceded you. No problem. Visit a museum, thumb through some bookstore shelves and surf the web. Study, study, study, plot and scheme. Then after that all you need to do is slave before the easel.

But seriously, there is another quite essential step. Our purpose is communication. So now you take your painting to the public. Take it to some park, perhaps, and perch there with it on a bench, or something such, and chat with passersby. Yes, tell people what you tried to do, in detail if you may, and ask, in detail if you may, what aspects of the work succeeded.

True, to tell a story with a still and silent isolated artifact of painted canvas is not easy. But if approached with wit and boldness, then I think the task may cultivate in you some very fine poetic skills, for it is unavoidable that you must find the deepest strongest images imaginable and trick them out with all available technique.

So there's the deal with New Modern Art. Let's reconcile the disparate dialects of Modern Art into a fluent language. It will possess astonishing communicative power. And then let us re-tell the great abiding tales here in this present age.

Necessity **public service bulletin**

December 2016

One of us should tour our Dakota camps with a military eye, inspect the methods of supply, interview troops from both sides of the struggle there, and write a study. We need to understand the military aspects of our revolution.

For example, I have seen one single tantalizing photo said to show the main Sacred Stone Camp's perimeter, with one of our people standing inside of it and a policeman standing outside on a road beyond. This long barrier looks to be made carefully of heavy materials – showing hard labor and practical thought – so its form surely gives information on the parameters of a struggle like ours in these times. So I have studied the photo, considered experience personally at Occupy, and gained some understanding of the barrier's functioning.

Or is that kind of thinking obsolete already? I have also seen today's urgent news from scientists at the Arctic Ocean, news of overwhelming pivotal significance for our struggle and all others in this age on Earth.

Methane is now escaping in unmeasurably huge quantity from melting arctic tundra, the gas of rotting prairie sod that was instead frozen until now, has been trapped in hard frozen arctic ground ever since a year two million years ago when the last ice age began, but now observed released by global warming, observed now rising from the ground in uncountable huge columns lighter than our low levels of Earth's air, rising very high where it is spreading, not restrainable by any conceivable human effort, crossing all human boundaries, spreading now to add a pale pale sheen to the blue high sky, a worldwide mirror to hold sun heat in here even more.

This coming year will be a year of great disasters, like last year and like the next, but maybe this coming year will be

the first to land blow after brutal blow and stunning blow and blow decisively on the huge collapsing empire of America and so our revolution's current hopes will disappear like most all other current hopes. This year or soon, this is indeed when things will come down to a nub.

So then will we struggle on for the life and breath of our descendants? As best we can, we will. But how?

First, it is essential that we tell the story of these heroic times, and tell it beautiful and true, and to that end we must truly live our story too, and that legend is our only means of communicating with the future ones.

And second, we must each do any effective work toward sanity and love and beauty that we can, by any means applicable, under leadership of our own heart and soul, with whatever help and courage comes to hand, for that is our only available principle of organization.

And third, some other rule that will come clear undoubtedly to fill the desperate needs of mere survival. And some other rule for health and healthy children in a poisoned world. And some rule for living overwhelmed with grief. And some rule, at least some rules of thumb, for sheltering from drought and hurricane and ravaging armies and nuclear bombs.

Or maybe what we need to do is this:

Tell ourselves that while we live we ought to really live, and tell ourselves that when we die we die and may perhaps find better understanding there, but through it all remember who we were and what we strove for.

We are Earth's children
and our strivings are
for Her.



**Odysseus Before
The Gates Of Troy**
Subtitle: Self-Portrait
In Confusion, Acrylic /
canvas painting by
Stone Riley

**Shamanic
Vision Dance**
**spiritual memoir,
poem of beginnings**

Back some years ago, while the last glow of the great flowering of the 1960's was finally fading in the dust of the latter 1970's, I and several thousand others started the Pagan movement in America. I do remember it clearly. Basically, we asked a single question of the universe and of ourselves.

Our question was this: Given all the truths that anthropology, history, psychology, mythology, and all sorts of other traveler's tales now in this age of myriad books, and photographs and documentary film as well, can teach a serious student of the human race; and given all the teachers of the whole world's ancient ways then still alive; and given our own astonishing encounters with the infinite mysterious divine; and given our own weary thirst for understanding; and given all the particular and general evils we saw gathering – given all of this – what sort of good religion could be built up from whatever solid ground there is to find, up into that world in which we lived?

It turns out now that the answer is not surprising. Paganism in America has become a faith and practice similar in many ways to what most thoughtful people in most times and places choose.

I do recall a cool and breezy summer day in Boston. The Public Garden, a lovely sturdy well kept park in the city center. This was most likely 1975. This day was, for me, a threshold of a beginning of a start. I, a poor man of the city, working hard to find a living and full of worries, and with a suffering woman in ill health who would widow me, and yet a thinker, coming out alone to stroll amid a country recently released from war, had found here in this park the dappled sunlight and the shade and great green trees and brightly colored radiant erotic graceful flowers and strolling crowds.

At the Garden's center is a good sized pond where, of a summer, flocks of ducks quack very seriously. Wooden boats creak to and fro and lovers laugh with children. There where the center of the pond is built to narrow, where all paths of that very tame wood converge and simultaneously curve away, there a tall arched bridge of carved gray stone is built above the darkly gleaming rippling water, above among the surrounding skyscrapers' gleaming window lights glittering with Sun in countless multitude, this bridge across from grassy bank to bank. Lured by the open light, I climbed the gray granite span. There high on the zenith of the bridge I stood, seeming to be nearly among the rustling foliage of the trees and yet nearly among celestial glitterings, between a Sky and Earth suspended. My stroll had found its goal and halted. I stood there leaning on the smooth stone balustrade and breathed.

In those bright dark days the most intriguing most ingenious thought I'd had was this: We only need to look to see that all of this is one. This fundamental fact – that all is one and all is knowing living flesh, and that there is no need for proof of this because we only need to look to see this great reality which changes human attitude and therefore actions – this thought had lured me safe and sane through other troubles then already.

But now, gone as far as one might go into that level of life's maze, I wondered what else could be known, what further

true vision might lead farther on and find an exit from that place into some other. And then of course there came a dancing fool in jangle bells and flowing ribbons.

Yes, it was astounding and yet instinctively it was no surprise at all, for here he came, he himself, the holy fool in manifested living person.

Garbed in crazy printed billowing gauzy robe and flowing snaky sashes, tall forked walking stick in hand, it waving as he strode, the forked staff hung with colored ropes of bells and flashing mirrors, he quite seriously was dancing with his striding steps, dancing shamanic chanting prayer and prayer and prayer to unseen spirits. And he was a young man about my age. And his words echoed in a surrounding silence.

He was a Hari Krishna devotee. An American Hindu of a certain discipline. A fresh adherent to an ancient way but evidently trusted by his elders in that faith for he was a young man who firmly held that staff of office. He was about my size and race, and coming up the very same curving path where I had come. And he had set out alone, unusual in the extreme for those devotees. So here he was immersed in shady sunlit breeze and whirling to a cunning rhythm, jangling flashing twirling chanting through the strolling crowd that Saturday in 1975, amid a silence where all else listened, perhaps to demonstrate his movement's faith and practice to the city, or perhaps indeed exactly for an audience of one who stood up there so visibly on the apex of the bridge, or else for purely simple joy and easing of his pain.

Thus came he, the one, to me, the one, there at a center of a center of a center.

What new thing can we say of life? Surely here was something new but ancient in our oldest ancient times and ancient in our furthest future. What meaning was there in this meeting?

He did come to me as though we had been brothers. A rendezvous as though we had been somehow psychic lovers. But

more, it felt to me, as though two sparrows flew across the seas in opposite directions, east and west, and then at length had found themselves together here.

My ear was caught at first, of course, by the rhythm of all those small brass bells and breathless little chanting words. Then looking down the way that I had come, there was the crazy apparition whirling through the strolling folk who smiled and watched and gave him silent space. His manner was intent and yet aware of them and glad. For a moment as he mounted to the climbing span, his head alone was visible to me above the paving stones, a bobbing shining jack-o-lantern head, a singing severed head, the royal poet hero oracle, a token from my own Celtic lore of mysteries irrupting.



The Fool

From Spirit Hill Tarot - Acrylic / canvas
painting for the Tarot card - by Stone Riley

Then he rose to me directly up the bridge, dancing then unmistakably especially for me, until he finally simply stepped out of the whirl before me there, and became to my surprise simply a young man flushed with action and achievement, garbed as a sort of Gypsy dancing woman. He was leaning lightly on his staff of office, as though a sparrow had alighted on a branch. As though we were well known to one another.

My personal admiration was surely clear in my manner. Smiling with a nod for greeting, I think I told him quite sincerely, "Very nice." Just the thing I sometimes say to other worthy artists. But whatever thing exactly that we said for greeting, the conversation did go very easily and well. Though we never yet have met again, he is my brother.

I think he opened, as an opening move in chess or whist, with some statement quoting from his scripture. I can imagine that it spoke of holy joy and beauty manifesting in this world, for that is and was a central tenet of the Hari Krishna faith and quite appropriate to the efflorescent beauty there around us. I seem to have some memory that's what it was: holy joy and beauty manifesting in this world.



The Emperor

From Spirit Hill Tarot - Acrylic / canvas
painting for the Tarot card - by Stone Riley

Whatever quote it was, I found myself at once directly leading on quite naturally from there with a brief but apt synopsis of my favorite thought, agreeing that all here and elsewhere is one living blooming substance and that we only need to look to see and that this joyful sturdy lovely reassurance will then mold our thoughts and deeds. Offering this treasure of my own to him.

And yes, in turn, he quite agreed with that and found a perfectly fit quotation from his scripture fully apt and proper to the purpose, somewhat to my surprise and pleasure giving irrefutable proof that my thought was recognized and valued in the wider world. And then he very likely rounded out his turn by politely asking how my current life was manifesting holy oneness.

I'm sure his motivations were complex, such as perhaps a possibility of gaining a recruit. But still, his foremost motive, or so it seemed there in that moment, was an honest one I should respect. As was the frequent custom too of ancient Druids, whom I sometimes emulate, he was testing his own metal in a thinking match. Was the reasoning of his path in life sufficient to a skeptic's scrutiny? So I could not fault him for the purpose of a probing question which he must have asked himself. How was he manifesting holy oneness? For his sake, and for my own, and for the sake of honesty, I ought to answer. How was I manifesting holy oneness?

My problem, my slowness, my coy reluctance for the holy dance, the one and only reason why I did not take his hand and whirl a waltz upon that parapet, for honestly I would, of course was this: the nature of my discipline compared to his. However apt a scriptural quotation, and however well encyclopedically absorbed, I sought reality in actual experience. I wanted data raw. I wanted data shaped by a place and time which also might be analyzed by I who lived there. Not shaped by some purported genius in some other place and time who chanced to have on hand a pen and paper. I wanted wisdom that was mine and fairly won, hammered out of my own struggle with the world. I wanted wisdom that would not show flaws and gaps and cracks when molded to the uses of the world in which I lived. So I would follow life into its lair. Leaving my self aside abandoned, I would walk with those who walked with me along the winter shore.

Well, so, how was I manifesting holy oneness?

Now of course I see the day more clearly. Now I have the pictures: There I stood, an Emperor in thought, but hung suspended like the Hanged Man among bright Stars, beneath a Sun reflecting in a darkly gleaming Moon-like pool. There the World in all its love and laughter and its trembling fear was gathered around infinity's calming Temperate shore. So there with whirling feet on the up-turning Wheel danced he the Fool himself to me in breezy robe and bells and ribbons, there with steady hands to hold to me the overflowing Cup by asking me the sacred Lovers' question. Now of course I see it was a very brilliant spread of Tarot cards. And even then, by the effulgent shining brilliance of the scene, I seemed to read it rightly.

How was I manifesting holy oneness?

Of course, with thanks, I closed the deck; of course I answered that the journey is the goal. A clear eyed glance which seeks the truth is truth itself. A forward step that enters through a veil of real mystery is in fact a step to solid ground. We are the World, what some name God, as we become ourselves. Our participation in this world, whatever world this is, if done in consciousness and willingness and joy – which is to say in reverence and charity and honest yearning – which is to say in beauty – is our participation in the Universe. We are here now. And all of this was spoken quite politely in some summer day and in some modest form of words.

A look of satisfaction lit his face. His question had been answered. His clearest thoughts were known and honored in a wider world. And he had taught his teacher. And he was manifesting holy oneness satisfactorily today. My brother bowed. Our game was drawn.

So, like a sparrow on a neighboring twig of that broad tree where wisdom shimmers in the leaves, the instinctive ceremony of all living things, I smiled and bowed to him as well.

Given all such travelers' tales and all that they can say, what solid ground is there to find? Here. Now. Where we stand.

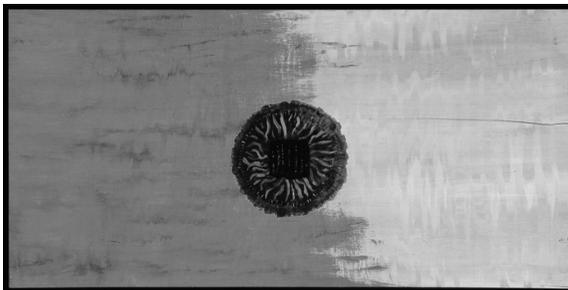
Given our own thirst for understanding, and our astonishing encounters with the infinite divine, and the evils that are gathering, what good religion might we root here now to grow into this world? A faith and practice of ourselves. A faith and practice of reverence and charity and honest yearning discovered in our nature which is Nature.

And what meaning is there in such meetings? What new thing can we say, but ancient old? That all we humans are all human. That when we truly seek to know of life, life does contrive to show itself.

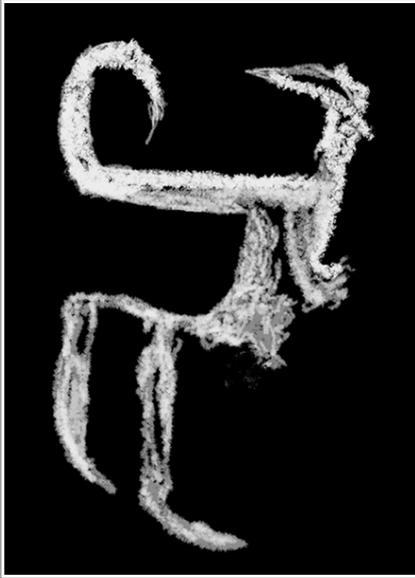
And so my brother took to wing again, whirling off along the way ahead, dancing chanting down to where the paths diverge and on the way which he would go.

And so I turned back to the way that I had come, down into that world again, and yet a different world that opened now to give my vision space, and trudged with lighter step toward whatever lay awaiting, toward whatever tiny part there was to play in the deep long history of these times.

A little later on,
the Pagan movement in America was born.



The Sun Door
Acrylic painting on wood by Stone Riley



J Is For Jack

From Alphabeticon
Digital image from
acrylic / canvas
painting by
Stone Riley

Songs Of Heroes a poem of endings

An old blind man up by the table's head
rises carefully to stand on wobbling legs.

Some good girls and boys assist this blind old gentleman
to find the chair that some have run to set in a shady spot
beneath a tree.

Our local champion poet brings the painted harp
and gives it, bowing by his knee.

And so he strikes the first note on the strings.
He begins to sing amid the ringing chime.

This reedy thinning voice cries out the tale
of great Odysseus
who came home.



The Author's Hand
In The Universal Human Peace Sign
Digital photo by Stone Riley

Tales Of Men And Women In A Pdf File
Back Cover Of The Paperback Book

How can you live a good human life?

That is a very ancient question, very urgent now when we must rebuild society on wiser passions. So here is one thinker's lifelong attempt to answer it deeply, a brilliant creative artist, an old free American Pagan.

- A few brief excerpts from this book -

The tambourines had come out of the basket first. One of the women stayed there in the cave on this side of infinity and sang a song so they would not be lost and then the rest flew off or swam or ran or climbed far off beyond our human realm onto a certain distant mountain peak or craggy island. There they set a camp and sang and danced and struck their little jangling drums.

An old blind man up by the table's head rises carefully to stand on wobbling legs. Some good girls and boys assist this blind old gentlemen to find the chair that some have run to set in a shady spot beneath a tree. Our local champion poet brings the painted harp and gives it, bowing by his knee. He begins to sing amid the ringing chime. This reedy thinning voice cries out the tale of great Odysseus who

came home. I cannot say, Oh one is mine and one not mine, for my one human heart strains to encompass both and strains to examine them with the fear and hope and joy and shame and trembling pity that are all alike the province of one heart.

Stone Riley's selected writings, with countless

fine art illustrations, enlarged and reissued constantly since 1992
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Tales Of Men & Women
7th Edition