

## Emergence

He awakes exhausted and out of sorts, for hours having wrestled with a mighty angel, at dawn letting it slip away, but only after having extracted its confession as to who had sent it. It was as first he had suspected: the Old Man Himself, double bastard that He is, of neither father nor of mother, which is, one might suppose, what makes Him so mean, so independent of humanlike concerns, an immaculate non-conception with no proper beginning and no proper end, no generational precedence or proper upbringing, making it up as He goes. The man thought to send a rude message back with the winged miscreant that had robbed him of his rest but thought better of it—no point inviting thunderbolts. Please, I'll be respectful and polite. No more boils, no more dung heaps, thank you. Give me back my wives and servants.

The Old Man is a hard master but as a concept a useful, perhaps a necessary, fulcrum to the birth of consciousness, He creating he-man and she-man, in his own image, as a foil to the purpose of his own awareness, not knowable of himself in the absence of reflection; and we making Him to the purpose of our own emergence—a fraught but reciprocal arrangement, like mirrors juxtaposed to create a reflection of a reflection of a reflection, repeating down a long hallway to a vanishing point. He made our world from curiosity of how first principals might work out through Time. He too is but guessing, but on a larger scale. The end of the world is perhaps a race as to whether we blow it up, or burn it down, or if He, curiosity satiated, may cancel the experiment, wipe the apparatus clean, return the universe to the way it was. In the meantime, He creates by chaos.

The man begins at daylight a conversation with his muse, she a comely woman of no certain age, some days quite young, others quite mature. But well turned in all her parts with a delicate breath that binds him to her purpose, wounds him to the heart. Sometimes at morning she comes all in a rage, a stern Diana loosing arrows without error to their mark, or mailed and girded as a youthful Joan of Arc against all calumny or injustice, or in the evening in gossamer gowns of finest silk that flow about her form, or in nothing at all, her skin a pale sheen in lamplight, her raven hair framing a face of both unbounded joy and equal sorrow and eyes that see the end of time. She's very soft and very stern, his preference somewhere between. He would go to her, overtop her stern reserve, take her in his arms, bury his face within her bosom, taste her very essence, drive with her to a soul releasing climax—but she holds him at arm's length, intimacy not the same as inspiration, not the function of a muse. She comes but to draw from him the long, contemplative emergence of himself.

A new ream of white paper is a daunting challenge and an accusation: why so long beginning? Hesitating to mar the perfect surface with anything less than perfect vision—some have waited all their lives for a place to start. Or to know what would be the ending. But best not to be consumed by what are essentially existential questions, those of beginnings and of endings, but to start somewhere not too close to either boundary, with a phrase or germ of thought or juxtaposition that has some possibility of exploitation. One can always put things later in their proper order. To know the beginning before the story's grown is but presumption, and the ending, if predetermined, a dogmatic encumbrance. Maybe the big bang was a starting in the middle, that on the other side time runs the other way. And virtual paper's cheap if things just

don't work out: time in contemplation usually better spent in composition, the idea forming with the written word, and even in failure there's often much to be recycled. Let your fingers do the thinking. Best to keep regular hours and make some new words every day. Some stories actually do start at the beginning, marching dutifully to their appointed ends, stories about things and people having a driving, journalistic narrative. Others are meandering things, like children's visions in a magic forest, or where bits and pieces, phrases, thoughts, and images lean against each other like drunken sailors, until associations lead to stronger relationships with the slow emergence of the whole.

The sun is finally risen over the hills. Wet with dew, the unmown lawn is a meadow of wildflowers, the names of which that if he knew he does not remember. The leaves of the Russian olives are gray green but silver in the sunlight. The lesser goldfinches, of black and an ever-startling intensity of yellow, swarm the hanging sock of thistle seed. The white breasted nuthatch goes downward along the branch picking insects one by one. A robin at her morning ablution, half empties the bowl with her explosive shimmy and beating of wings, while a blue jay gliding through dappled sunlight displays a cloak of purest color. The hummingbirds, winged jewels of emerald and azure, are incessantly disputive, aerial knights with lances, place as dear as life. A lizard scurries across the warming bricks with no knowledge of time as a wasting asset. The Buddha, who sits on a stone in the bird bath, was once a living man, but so inward turning is now much reduced in size and turned to bronze.

The rabbits are on the mowing and fertilizing crew, a gang of insatiable appetites, only stopping their eating for breeding, torn at every moment by the angst of which they'd rather be doing. He makes weak efforts to run them off, does his imitation of menace, barks like a dog, tosses pebbles at them. They are so stupid. If one meant them harm one could kill them with a stick. Not hard to see why coyotes prefer them as a staple—hunting rabbits could make a lean and cunning predator more like a fat and lazy dog.

The close relationship of coyotes and rabbits is obvious even to the casual observer, without accumulation of statistical data. When the coyotes haven't been heard for a while, the rabbits grow in numbers to the proportions of a horticultural disaster well beyond mere nuisances tolerated for their native cuteness. At first the predators are distant voices in the night, lone sentinels calling to each other in high, clear tones, gathering themselves for common purpose, the voices combining as if in conversation coming closer—sometimes quite close—working to a climatic frenzy of staccato yipping with the high screams of the dying rabbits. After a while you don't see so many rabbits and don't hear so many coyotes—don't see them occasionally walking brazenly in broad daylight across the drive. But inevitably the rabbits return, or rather one should say approximate replicas of those consumed, and after a while one begins to hear again the special sound of coyotes in the night speaking across broad spaces one to another.

A house finch, his mating red in full display against soft grey, lies dead on the porch beside the rocking chair, a victim of a broken neck, mid-air arrestment by, an invisible windowpane, reminds him that it's time to run his traps—two mice, a pack rat and a gopher.

Living out of town has its pleasures and rewards, draws the poet more closely to nature's bounteous source, but the perimeters must be maintained and, between the rabbits and the deer, having a garden would seem to necessitate almost a fortified encampment, or certainly require an effort beyond his more pressing commitment. The other morning he looked up to see a young buck, its antlers in velvet, up on the porch, its head close by the window, not four feet from where he sat at his desk, through large bright eyes investigating the two-dimensional patterns on the windowpane, having no sense they signaled a world beyond that plane.

Sometimes, when the raccoons invade or when the bears come for the fruit, the charms of nature fade. Wouldn't it be nice to live in a small maintenance free condominium within a cluster bound on four sides by asphalt borders, within easy walking distance of a familiar tavern? A short walk there and a long crawl back.

It's really hot, in the mid 90's, which is warm for here. The humidity is the low normal of the high desert so the heat's not bad if there are clouds or you're in the shade, but at 7,000 feet the air is thin and the sun of shocking intensity. He went out intending to pull weeds for an hour or so but lasted fifteen minutes, maybe. He'll go out early tomorrow while it's still cool. He said the same thing yesterday. And perhaps the day before. Yesterday evening the clouds came up and distant thunder rumbled working closer, a spectacular show of lightning over the Jemez range, too dry to rain. He remembers as a boy in the Texas Panhandle stopped on a dirt road with an older cousin in a dilapidated pickup in the very middle of nowhere on a late afternoon, watching a thunderstorm develop.

*Dark clouds that grow against the sun,*

*the eerie light of dusk while day,  
crack and rumble roll across the plain,  
stretching flat to seam of earth and sky  
--the electric air!*

*Yucca plumes the highest points,  
struck and burst to flame,  
stand as torches, five hundred to  
a thousand yards in all directions.  
Locus of a wheel of awe and terror.*

In the afternoon the clouds again begin to build, easing the heat. It looks like rain but it's just a tease; the monsoon effect is building over a couple of weeks, the sky and air pregnant with possibility, but the time for rain not ripe. When the rains come, they come, after a daily buildup of clouds against the mountains, as violent afternoon downpours that fill arroyos with thunderous torrents, that break the heat and clean the air of summer dust, leaving clear, humid aftermaths, gorgeous sunsets, and beautiful starlit evenings.

He walks through the cloud shaded wood along a path where he often finds words and phrases not yet formed to full ideas, sometimes finds a useful hook with which to later draw a larger fish.

*Words collected from the wind  
or stolen from a spider's web,*

*a few from fallen leaves  
swept against a granite outcrop,  
others seined from tumbling stream,  
or dropped by one unseen beside a path,  
so recently as to still have warmth;  
all wrapped together in damp moss,  
brought to a private place drawn close about  
with familiar things that slowly gather dust—  
globe in wooden cradle, brass tubed kaleidoscope,  
a picture in a silver frame—  
to be examined there more closely,  
with quieter mind than in the day.*

On a knoll stands a large ponderosa pine, three feet at its base, cleaved long ago by lightning, now forming two separate spires, each angled from the perpendicular as a mirrored image of the other. From this prominent point he can look out over the sea of pinion and juniper, houses and outbuildings scattered in no regular pattern, to the plain below and the Ortiz and Sandia ranges in the distance, and in the middle ground the Cerrillos Hills where Indians came for at least a thousand years to dig turquoise with tools of stone and hardened wood, and cracked the mother rock with fire to release the veins of blue and green. Fashioned beads and pendants and eardrops traded down to Mexico for macaw feathers from the Aztec jungles, or to the Pacific

ocean for shells to inlay with the stones that held the sky, becoming ever more precious as the distance grew from the place of their birth.

He follows the path to the old woman's house from whom he buys his eggs. Her yard is an oasis of raised vegetable beds, flowers in bloom and new mown grass with a shed and chicken coop behind the house. A man comes once a week to help her with the heavy work, and sometimes a grandson, but mostly she keeps the place herself, puttering about in her smock and wide straw hat, humming popular songs from her youth, and talking to herself, mixing memories with the moment so as to occasionally pause to reorient herself in time and space. On the porch is her old black and greying lab, who in his youth was a great retriever and the stalwart companion of her late husband, but is now half blind, fat, and lazy. He'll still bark for a bear or a stranger, but not bother for much less. The rabbits, mice and squirrels are safe. He is absolutely worthless, not counting companionship, yet still held in high esteem and given special place. For the approaching neighbor, who he knows will scratch his ears, he does not rise but slowly thumps his tail against the floorboards of the porch. The stooped and withered woman blends with the clutter of her kitchen, not so much of bric-a-brack, though some of that, but one or more of every useful object, in a pattern that belies a planned arrangement. He pays her for the eggs. She insists he take a complimentary jar of soup that certainly cost her more in time and effort than the profit of the eggs.

Helen, called from Detroit. She's stuck there with her slowly dying mother, who hangs tenaciously to life, ready to fall but twisting slowly on a thread that will not break. Helen has a



PhD. Her mother cleaned bathrooms in a corporate tower. Helen had been a friend and/or a lover for many years. Sometimes being lovers can strain friendship, or friendship spoil a perfectly good relationship. Now they are just friends. Their love, once quite passionate, had slowly cooled, whether satiated by long familiarity, or whether slowly starved by an insufficiency of regularity by reason of long, work related absences, or of an independence by neither quite surrendered. She had a child, now a beautiful young man with mocha colored skin, who still loosely stays in touch with him. He wished he'd been his father, but that was from before they met. Or maybe they might have had a daughter with her mother's long limbs and a face of serious brow and sudden smile, who would come to visit when near or remember to write when far away.

Diana's calls are random, not too frequent, but most often well timed, like she knows it's time to call, coming like an unexpected package in the mail from a caring person. No particular reason to call how are you fine I hope. Her voice has a warmth and confidence that barely betrays a hint of her own need, the missing element of an otherwise fulfilling life. They often talk for an hour or more. She tells him of her work which she can mostly do at distance, on leave from teaching to care for her mother. She can do her research online. He reads her a passage of an essay he's working on. Shares his trepidation about its reception, his fear that his intentions, in broaching the subject, will be misconstrued, or that his argument, admittedly controversial, will be rejected out of hand. She says remember ideas long held take root so deeply they can come to seem one's very self and their defense the stuff of final stands. She says remember that considerable intelligence is often employed in the rationalization of positions the loss of which would be that on which one's intellectual identity and career are built; the acceptance of the

contradictory premise a mortal blow, one's edifice collapsed by the removal of a stone. Do not expect those long accustomed to prestige and the comfort of their assumptions to quietly quit the field. You may judge the strength of your argument, in part, by the extent to which objections are of an ad hominem flavor, she says. Be courageous and, as they say, let the chips fall where they may.

It's good to have a friend.

After they hang up, he sits remembering the times they had together, of her infectious laughter that he spent considerable effort to evoke, and especially of holding her close in the night, the feeling of her warmth against his own. Things taken for granted, values only measured by their loss. How untended gardens do not thrive.

*She said, come in, take your hat and coat off, and your pants while you're at it; it's been way too long—I got wet when I heard the doorbell. He said that sounds a bit crude coming from such a refined lady, but I'm here to be of service. She dropped her gown and stood before him, as shameless as Eve before the fall. Her skin was the color of dusk and shown in the lamplight with the dew of a warm summer evening. They made wet, slow, and joyous love. Sometime afterwards they had dinner on her terrace. She was a great cook and a master of organization, had, anticipating their reunion, prepared everything to stand ready for completion at a moment to be determined by the unfolding of the visit. They shared a bottle of very good French wine that he had brought, listening to Boz Skaggs, watching the sky wheel turn. Sometime after midnight they showered together, changed the still damp sheets, and started over.*

That was long ago. The last time they slept together was several years ago. They had an argument that seemed trivial, more about being out of sync, getting on each other's nerves. They made an uninspired attempt at making up, going through the motions of making love, blowing on embers that would not come to life. She left at four in the morning for a conference in Toronto to deliver a paper on *The Socio-Economic Drivers of Estrangement*.

This *Covid* thing, he largely takes in stride; it's just a continuation of a life within the walls of loneliness. It just means he's not the exception. More easy to hide his malady within the sea of normalcy. But it's stripped away the last vestiges of sociality: a regular meeting with a likeminded group, an occasional lunch with an old friend. A dinner with wine and spirited conversation. The solitude grows ever more complete, reinforced by a real fear of the consequences of catching the virus. He's old enough that if it didn't kill him, it certainly could put a serious hitch in his get-along.

*Shipshape here,  
in my cocoon,  
everything in easy reach,  
two ports incoming:  
one for sustenance, one for information;  
two for export: one for excrement,  
the other for return communication-  
all clearly labeled to avoid confusion.*

*Headphones, headlamp, laptop,  
climate controlled and all quite cozy.  
Safe for now in my chrysalis phase  
yet hoping to emerge on new made wings anon.*

By in large he's come to terms with the Old Man. With notable exceptions, like the other morning with the angel of discomfort, they don't bother each other that much anymore. The more he thinks about it, the more he thinks the angel had the wrong address. The prophets now, at least the ones that make the news, are younger. He's pretty much content within his routine. One never quite gets used to solitude, but learns to live with it, concentrates upon the tasks that must be done and on the work one makes for oneself, the work one hopes will somehow transcend isolation and the absence of the absolute. To grow old perfecting one's routines, avoiding ladders or taking special care of every step in rough terrain, doing everything just so, until a thoughtless misstep or a random virus or an errant asteroid brings the story to a close.