

*“Fiction has a truth exceeding that of history”*

–Aristotle

### **Year 4.05**

***He surprised himself by playing the entirety*** of *Ruby, My Dear* through his auditory cortex. The bell-like clarity of Coltrane hitting that note, that part sampled at will. Caught by Coltrane’s clean coloration but held by Monk’s invention. One of his favorite things, the tap of the foot as a hand rolls over the keys before the rest of the band kicks in. Jazz is an authentic musical form. Its complexity increases as standardization spreads from its origins. It represents an integration of diverse musical cultures that has, in turn, produced a unique creative relationship that could easily serve as a model for human behavior. That was one of his little joys, a piece of jazz, just a piece, among some fading memories with a side of great sorrow.

Lost touch with a vitality of language that I used to take for granted, he mused. Now it’s like trying to squeeze a tube of old glue. I can’t even come up with nonsense. Real life has its hooks in me and it’s reeling me in. Chalk it up to the unintended consequence of fame and fortune. The fantasy world I once pursued in search of fame, money, power even, sent skittering like shadows in bright light, left alone with the naked horror that is me. There in the lull of the traffic flow while the air thickened with heat.

The blinking *led* sign in the window of the convenience store across the highway had finally hypnotized him into believing he needed to purchase something, some kind of liquid refreshment, maybe a pack of smokes. He was about to step across the pavement when he noticed a cloud of smoke or dust emerge from the green haze at the top of the hillside and make its way slowly down the unpaved access road on the right of the store. Since it was the only sign of activity besides the blinking advertisement, he watched, vaguely entranced, as the dust got closer and finally made out a beat-up green Chevy pickup truck of a shade barely distinguishable from its surroundings. The driver shifted to a stop at the highway before trundling onto the blacktop.

He held out his thumb convinced of the gesture’s futility. To his surprise the truck pulled over into the rutted turnout and stopped. He hobbled to the passenger door with a large russet primer circle painted on the panel to obscure the symbol that had once indicated its use as an official company or government fleet vehicle and yanked on the pitted chrome handle. Hoisting himself up onto the bench seat, he dropped his satchel in the foot well and nodded to the driver, an older man with long graying hair tied back in a pony tail, a bush of gray beard, and a large, wide brimmed leather sombrero. “Thanks for stopping.”

“Spaceship break down?” A pungent cannabis bouquet permeated the cab.

“Excuse me?”

“You look like the man who fell to earth in that outfit. Lose your space helmet along the way?” Then a big hearty guffaw.

“I’m not sure I get what you’re saying.”

The driver glanced over his left shoulder and then steered back onto the roadway. “Ever see the movie, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* with David Bowie?”

“Ok, now I get it.” He shook his head. “It’s been a long day. But no, I’ve never seen the movie.” He didn’t think he needed to add that most Hollywood movies made him impatient, the plots so predictable they weren’t worth sitting through. “I did read the book, though.”

“Really, a book? I thought the director, Nicolas Roeg, wrote it.”

“No, it was published in the late 50’s, I think. The author was Walter Tevis who also wrote *The Hustler*, another of his books that was made into a movie, with Paul Newman, and which I did see though I never read the book.” He never tired of pointing out certain ironies. It was the modernist in him, and his stock and trade, irony and analogy.

“Oh, yeah? I didn’t know that. I guess you can’t compare the book to the movie since you never saw it. Was the novel any good? The movie is a cult classic.”

“It’s one of the most heartbreaking books I’ve ever read, a true lament on terrible ambition and great failure, an evocation of man’s absolute, unbridgeable aloneness. You might say it’s existential in the only true sense.”

“Whoa, sounds like a bummer.” And then apropos to nothing, “I named one of my boys after him, that’s how impressed I was by the movie.”

“After the character in the movie?”

“No, the actor, Bowie.”

“You named your kid Bowie?”

“Actually Ziggy, Ziggy Stardust.”

He felt like saying “that’s unique” but in this neck of the woods it probably wasn’t.

“Wheryaheaded?” The driver reached into the ashtray on the dash and retrieved a lumpy cheroot, setting fire to it with a flick of his Bic.

“Elk.”

“You’re in luck, I’m going right by there, on my way down to Manchester for a co-op meeting.” He handed over the smoking cigarillo-sized spliff. “Here try some of this, one of my hybrids, an indica sativa blend of Blueberry and Haze. You get the rich fruity spice of indica and a strong psychoactive sativa component that promotes an insightful clarity while not inducing a lot of unnecessary anxiety. I call it *Satori In Paris Blues*.”

Of course, someone else living Kerouac’s dream of a little place in Northern California with a wife and kids and living off the land, not so much raising cattle as growing dope. “Uh, man, that’s ok. After I smoke that shit I’m useless, I can only putter around, you know, like do housework.”

“Not into smoking dope? The first one’s free,” and coughing up a laugh of aromatic smoke.

“No, yeah, I mean, it’s been almost forty years.”

“Dope’s changed a lot since then, both in the variety of its psychotropic properties as well as in the popular perception.”

He shook his head at the proffered joint. “I prefer the ingestion of liquid refreshment for my buzz and bite.”

“I can tell. You’ve got a boozier’s gut, enlarged liver. The Banlon shows it off nicely.” The driver held out the smoking reefer, “You sure?”

What the heck, it was a cigarette after all. The smoke, harsh yet sweet with hints of licorice, berry, and pepper piqued his nasal passages to the verge of sneezing until the lungs protested and expelled the smoke as an explosion making his eyes water. He stared at the tube of smoking herb in his hand as if it were an unfamiliar object. That quick.

“What do you do? Music biz, real estate, buyer, dealer, wine salesman?”

Distracted by the peripheral, it took him a while to process what had been asked and how to answer, “Um, no, I’m a writer, a poet.”

“I would never have guessed that. What’s your name?”

“Carl Wendt.”

“Ever hear of a poet by the name of Chuck Weedell?”

He handed the joint back to the driver. How often was he asked if he was acquainted with so and so who was also a poet because everyone assumed that the poetry world was infinitesimal enough that everyone was known to everyone else? If they only knew the extent of the demon horde they’d be appalled at the multitude of zombie poets oozing out of every nook and cranny of the literary landscape. But to be polite, the man was providing transportation after all, he admitted that the name did sound familiar. It didn’t.

“Great poet,” the driver offered. “Big name in these parts. He’s the poet lariat of the county.” Then, “Where you from? El Lay? The city? I’m guessing you’re not a native son. Not by the way you’re dressed.”

“You’re right. How about you? You from these parts?”

“Delaware. Dover. Just a name on the map between DC and New Jersey. There’s no there in Delaware.”

“Gertrude Stein said that about Oakland.”

“At one time that may have been true of Oakland. Now it’s true of Delaware.” He passed the joint back. “Never imagined I’d end up living in the middle of nowhere where, surprisingly, there’s more than enough *there*. I was going to U Penn, you know to avoid the draft, but I ended up dropping out, got sucked in. You get called up?”

He took another tentative toke and shook his head. “I had a student deferment, too, for a while. Got lucky, I guess. My number never came up.” His uncles had assured him that the fix was in with the local Draft Board and he didn’t have anything to sweat. Not that he had been anything but ambivalent about it. Mainly they had done it to please their big sister, ease his mother’s worried mind.

“Yeah, I got lucky, too, you might say. Instead of being shipped off to Nam, I got sent to the Defense Language School down in Monterey, taught me Korean and sent me to a radio listening post in the Aleutians where I eavesdropped on North Korean MIG pilots talking Rusky. After my discharge, I hung out on the coast, you know, Seattle, Portland, Frisco. Lived in the Haight for a while. Ended up joining a commune with land up this way. The

social dynamic inevitably wobbled out of control. It only takes a few bad eggs. But I liked life in the country so I stuck around.”

“I grew up on a commune.”

“Then you probably know what I’m talking about. They’re magnets for sociopaths.”

Remembering his summers in the Dublin commune, he could think of a few. Control freaks, almost always the chairman of some communal council or committee, a few visibly armed even though they were all supposed to be pacifists, rationalizing that they had the right to protect themselves from those who didn’t share their beliefs. Not a few sharing wives other than their own, creating oppressive hostile atmospheres. And those who exuded a cloyingly sweet non-confrontational façade, they were the most predatory snakes in the grass of all.

Mind numbingly blasted he watched the greenery flit by. He had smoked some hash many years ago and it had erased his memory tapes of everything from that point on until, blissfully hazy, he’d come to. But he hated that feeling of loss, generally avoiding psychotropic substances from then on, sticking to tobacco and its twin addiction, alcohol. So yes, if his case were any example, pot in some ways could be considered a gateway drug, a gateway to alcoholism. But maybe he was just an old fashioned stick-in the mud, a reprobate. He fell into that crease known as the generation gap, too young to be a beatnik, too cynical to be a hippie. He preferred jazz over rock, R&B over country, and was intimidated by classical and opera. Besides, they were hostage to class pretention.

“So are you someone I should know about? A famous poet?”

“I’d hesitate to say famous but well-known and published is more like it. Enough to garner respect for my writing and win a few prizes.” He balked at mentioning the Pillsbury. Was it the something he hardly ever experienced or admitted, embarrassment? The dope was making him unnecessarily self-conscious. Another reason to dislike it. “I wouldn’t want to be a famous poet because by then you’re already considered dead, literally or figuratively. It encourages a smugness detrimental to creativity. In fact, success is a step backwards, to my mind, at best a standing in place that a creative artist has to rise above.”

“Yeah, I guess I can get that. It’s being in the moment, the moment of being. Kind of a Zen thing. Everything is an illusion. Be in the now, not in the what-could-be or what-should-be.” The driver took a long draw on the joint and held the smoke a few breaths. “Had a lot of time to read when I was stationed up in the Aleutians,” he rasped. “Got hooked on Asian philosophy, you know, Buddhism, Taoism, the like, stepping out of the Judeo-Christian irreversible time mind set.” And finally exhaling the potent cloud, “That’s probably why I ended up joining that commune in the Haight. I fell in with a bunch of utopian intellectuals who were interested in making the same life choices that I was. And it was great for a while until we had to make practical decisions and then suddenly not everything was an illusion. You know what I mean?”

He nodded but hadn't really been listening, caught up on why now mentioning that he'd been awarded the Pillsbury Prize stuck in his craw. Everything about it just seemed wrong. It smelled, it stank, of patronism, of cronyism, of favoritism, all perfectly acceptable in the arts as it is in politics. Still it rankled, as if he were innocent to the hustle and con of the everyday business of literature. Maybe it was because it was so obvious this time, and he so preferred to be subtle about his charlatanism. He'd often indulged his fantasy of what he would do if he ever won the lottery. It never got much more elaborate than a nice apartment and an endless supply of good whiskey.

The Pillsbury Prize was the literary lottery, his good luck and connections riding on the hopes of others. The moment Hugh Klidian shook his hand and presented him with the debit card for the quarter million dollars replayed itself as a tape loop, alternating in his memory of the reception hosted by the Hollbrooke Foundation in recognition of his being the first awarded the prize, and how uncomfortable and disappointing that had been.

He'd gone totally off script, the script that he'd rehearsed beforehand, and started to babble. It might have been that one glass of bubbly he'd allowed himself in celebration and the medicine interacting. He'd been warned by his doctor and by the label on the prescription bottle.

"The myths we breathe, the airs we put on for others, that a community can be bound by our poems and become whole by the knowledge of itself, entranced by the dance of language and the ways it can mean."

Of course no rant could be complete without broaching his favorite topic. "Poetry is a language technology for managing and exploiting the benefits of reputation and the cooperation it enables. Poetry has suffered the destiny of primary objective manipulation by a system of standardized means, and consequently, this language art and what it can do, has become a good deal less significant." Thus, he'd concluded, poets originally were purveyors of reputation with their praise songs, genealogies, and associated lists of famous names. That had gone over like the memorable lead balloon.

He was struck by all the serious and unfriendly faces, many of whom he knew or knew of, and who were frequenters of such affairs and which, in his estimation, were really just concessions to the losers, that not a few in the milling cocktail toting crowd were the also-rans shadowed by their natty society swells and sycophants.

There were many among them who thought they knew but knew not, whose judgment faulted what they couldn't understand, and in ignorance proved their justification with dismissal. They inhabited a special kind of hell, a landscape of private doubts that barely concealed their uncertainty. Generosity of spirit was a bane to them. It was in their make-up to be small and belittle the great. Thus the conclusion he'd come to many years ago: You try to never step in the same poetry scene twice.

Nora White had clucked on his arm like a proud agent. He was the best advertisement of her management skills she had at the moment even if she were only peripherally involved in his selection for the prize. She looked naked without her three Maltese mutts and that was about as naked as he'd ever wanted to see her. Maybe she'd sensed his unease. As with many

diminutive persons, she was succinct and to the point: “Face it, Carl, you’re uncomfortable with success. Maybe it’s unconscious but you’ll do everything to undermine any opportunity.”

She was right, he was always shooting his mouth off, and the hot air of his celebrity lifted him above the fray, privileging him to sound off with the noblesse oblige of his bon mots.

“We deal with fears daily, fear that we’ve made the wrong turn, taken the wrong path, chosen the wrong appetizers for the party, the wrong shoes, the wrong word when we know we’re wrong to think so, that there is no wrong, only clockwise and counter-clockwise, yet every manuscript page contains lists of fears and how to deal with them—writing them down one way of dealing with these fears because actualized as language they can appear foolish, even comic, and sometimes even redemptive.”

It could also have been the company he’d found himself in, representatives of the anecdotal, watery-eyed, watercolor, metaphysical cat’s cradle style of much of current American poetry, the snobs and asshats of the Sauerkraut Hot Dog School, all part of a greater crowd of elbows, assholes, and bellybuttons, all the same, no one different, just some louder than others, and when the crowd thinned out, in the immortal words of the bard, he owned his own accomplishments, much to everyone’s surprise and, in some cases, resentment.

Individually, like his old pal, Ed Settera, whose envy was palpable, they might not be so bad, but a banquet hall packed with posturing, perceived slights, dagger stares, false smiles, limp handshakes, and faux congratulations was nearly unbearable. Along with the preconceptions of celebrity, some people were disappointed when somehow he wasn’t how they thought he should be.

Most of them comprised what he considered *The Oxymoron Movement*, an umbrella designation for multiple coteries and schools with academic or government funded connections who subscribed to an oxymoron as their esthetic ground: modern tradition. It was a different shirt and tie world, a superficial formality that was a signal to others trapped in that stratum as well as a designation of class. The working class poet, ball cap, Levi’s, tee shirt, was out of place among pressed suits and ties, color coordinated collared shirts and blouses. In these situations language use carried along assumptions of social division, an embedded hierarchy of appropriateness and propriety. The distinguishing characteristic of this class conflict and its self-perpetuating upper middle class dynamic was a kind of neurotic exclusiveness that could never quite be pinned down, but, if breached, subtle alarms went off, doors closed and faces became blank.

“You don’t have to be a plumber to know shit floats,” he’d reminded himself.

He’d been on panels at writer’s conferences with some of them, all of them working the writer’s retreat/workshop con. Burt Hardwasher, Paula Knitterknife, Jasmine Cake, Jackie Place, Nick Bare, Mary Window, Norm Niceleaf.

Some of them were writers represented by Nora White or authors associated with Dorian Pillsbury and his publishing house, Gelett Porter, among them Vivian Blackout, Kate Twaddle, Liz Ardd, Cher Annville, Brian Swore, Lisa Knicawteau.

No wonder Dorian was so appreciative of his acerbic irascible company with such a collection of ass kissers and back stabbers. Lee Grette, Mike Onanoff, Ari Goodrock, Lorraine Sinner, Jenny Pinewater to name just a few. The envy of others was as obvious as the food stains on their shirt fronts, napkin deniers, as if every morsel never missed its mark.

“Poetry allows us to talk to our surroundings,” he’d pontificated. “Poems are created as go-betweens for us and the world as such, and allow us, intermittently, to see relationships which enhance our understanding of ourselves. It is self-reflective, which may explain why the whole scene is overrun with narcissists. The danger is in hearing only what you want to hear, or see, or perceive, surrounded as we are by sycophants. Comfort is shameless.” On that subject he was pretty much an expert.

“Then the demands of our surroundings are pushed further out of sight, out of mind. The complexity of the symbols fold back like a fan. The breath of a phrase, a murmur among the branches of trees. That’s real luxury. The self-importance of pop, the profound familiarity of everything. People, the folk, are symbols of themselves and what they are is what they’ve been sold, either from atop a ziggurat in Ur or a hundred floors up on Madison Avenue.” If he’d had a hat he’d have used it as a megaphone.

Jared Lebeau known to everyone as Jarred Elbow, author of *Spilled, The Beans and What They Reveal; A Pythagorean Meditation, I Knew That*, the Shaman poems, and *Reciprocity, Poems of Give and Take*, was very much in evidence, a wild man, wild eyed and wild haired, hang jowled like Droopy Dog, among the contingent from The Old Farts Poetry Society.

He’d been made an honorary member but he never read their newsletter—the worst kind of junk mail, poetry junk mail. They were responsible for the most egregious platitudes: *Poetry is all poems collectively, good, bad, and indifferent. Poetry cannot compete with street traffic. To cling to the idea of poetry is poetic but not necessarily poetry.*

Vera Owley, poet, author of *Sometimes Why*, had rubbed his elbow in passing with a nod and a smile. She belonged to a vague history of single nights. Raylene Demantis, he knew to steer clear of. AKA Goldilocks, AKA Preying Mantis, she was known for her incessant urge to copulate followed by publicly humiliating her sex partners. A textbook author psychopath.

He’d been surprised to see Ann O’Molie, author of *The Math Of My Being Doesn’t Add Up*, in with that crowd. She was on the arm of the startlingly bald, Jack Yulatian. Sue Anne Howe, author of the runaway best seller, *Apter Words*, a collection of words that might have been better, was typical of the social butterflies who graced these affairs so it wasn’t surprising to see her flitting around the banquet room. She settled for having a very serious conversation with the sensibly stylish poet Irina Yvoinskya Nualainokova, author of a collection of poems entitled *I Vent To Be Alone*.

“Know what I resent is being confronted by a closed shop, a magazine or a small press that professes to want to publish everyone: new, young, experimental, as well as established traditional poets, and then publishes only a select group of the editors’ university pals. On a small scale this is unavoidable, and for magazines with limited circulation as well as appeal, it’s almost understandable. But for more ambitious magazines or presses to solicit subscriptions and manuscripts and then continually publish the same tired blather by the in-crowd is not at all excusable.” He’d noticed that some in the audience squirmed uncomfortably in their seats and he’d ascribed it to his words and not the cold metal ledge of the folding chairs.

“Magazines or presses such as these, and they are more common than you might think, purposely set up an exclusionary policy because they believe it will extend interest and desirability in their literary product if it remains the goal of those who continue to hope for acceptance of their work or manuscripts. As a result, it has the effect of keeping those excluded on a string, vulnerable to pleas for emergency cash infusions or continued subscriptions at an increasingly higher rate in the belief that their continued support will one day insure the acceptance of their work by that particular magazine or press. The wise and sly editors will accept the work of authors outside of their circle in the form of innocuous filler merely to string those writers along.”

May Allovre and her old maid’s moustache, Al Mutant-Abbey, bookstore owner and poet, Simone Lacra, author of *Let There Be Another Me*, and Paul Upps, a low level psychopath poet, all seemed to have congregated near the head table as if that was where they belonged. The open bar off to one side was watched over by the maniacs of love and grace Archie Bishop, a Brit poet, Justin Toime, the Irish balladeer, and Paul Glee known to everyone as “the happy painter.” Their drinks were always on the verge of half full or half empty.

China Gordon, another writer from his past, author of *Seamen At The Prow Of Ourselves* and *Fear of Landing*, adventures in the psycho-sexual, glared stilettos at him from across the room. He couldn’t remember why. She was in a cocktail cluster with Fred Atatwa, the Indonesian author of *Meta-Hypnosis Theory*, and Dark Gonzales, author of *Viaja en el plano astral*, looking like Jackie Chan with a scowl, part of the cultural seepage from Latin America. Charlie Big Elk, author of *We Are Brothers of The Land*, lived up to his name but stood out like a sprained finger in that handful.

In attendance as well were the poets of the comic book crowd whose heroes were often only pen and ink but with a predictable urgency to save the world, their ideals protecting them from crushing reality, and inhabiting a shadowy nondescript underground as a narrative spanning panels and framed close-ups in the legendary landscape of their lives where they got to act out their heroics. Anne Shovy, author of *Holy Mackerel*, was one of them. Floyd Eberhard, too, a pencil neck geek known to his friends as “eraserhead” and not so kindly by certain ex-girlfriends as “neverhard.”

Richard Grappler, LGBT poet, and his twin brother Peter Grappler, urologist art collector and big fan of Andres Serrano, cruised the crowd joined

at the hip, gravitating toward a clot consisting of Dr. Victoria Ulva, author of *The Gash and The Why Chromosome*, and Simon Simone, author of *Les Raisens de Raison*. He'd recognized them from their jacket photos. They were among the authors of books Nora had given him to review and make some cash a few years back. He couldn't remember what he'd said about them, good or bad. Ray Harmon-Minnows, the British poet, author of *I Say* and recipient of the 2008 *Penumbran Award*, known as the 'other PEN', attended the fringe of that mix.

"I've spent countless years studying the art of poetry, practicing the art of poetry, and what have I learned? I've learned to be bitter. I've learned that notice goes just as easily to the pretenders as it does to the talented and ignores as well a good portion of both. That's a given. But, you might ask, what of work and application, devotion and passion? All the wannabes are closer to that notion of notice than I'll ever be. C'est le fad."

That also might have been the occasion he'd had the run-in with Elaine Trupanazi, the blogger who had condemned him over *Procreation*, or had that been at some other elbow jostling cocktail klatch? It was all one vast undifferentiated blur of poseurs and wannabes, especially after the award. He didn't understand why he still made the rounds. He didn't need them anymore, now that he had all that money. But there had been an exchange, words. At least he hadn't lost his touch for sarcasm.

"You're not going to let me in your club because my spelling's not perfect and my grammar errs as common usage? Let me ask you something. When was the last time anyone told you to fuck off?"

"Well, I don't. . . ."

"Can't remember? Let me refresh your memory. Fuck off!"

And then there was the doe-eyed grad student who'd gushed, "You're practically an institution!"

"Let me know when they lay the corner stone and I'll put a bullet through my head."

Followed by the inevitable question of was he writing anything new? Or now?

His answer, startlingly frank: "I'm so constipated, my ass is like a coin return. I'm shitting one copper at a time."

And he had no idea who had invited Roman Ackley and his throng of haughty young poets. Maybe that was it, haughty young poets. He'd been there, done that, and had gone through many tee shirts commemorating the fact that he had. They'd formed up in a phalanx he was forced to skirt.

Ackley had taunted with "Look, we're in the presence of celebrity." When he hadn't reacted, Lon Murphy's former number two, apparently now *numero uno* with that crowd, tried a little harder. "I heard that it was a pity award. The man is a cripple."

He'd smiled. Slowly he'd turned. "Right, right, now I remember who you are, I saw you on TV."

"Oh really? On Charlie Rose?" Ackley had flashed a smug mug to his acolytes.

"Uh, I think it was on the cartoon network."

Haughty'd turned to mortified as if someone had just given him a cerebral wedgie.

"You're Lemony Snicket, right?"

And to the red faced bluster building to explode, "Oh, my bad, man, I meant to say, Percy Dovetonsils."

Then when all Ackley could do was gape and gasp like a goldfish flipped out of the bowl by a curious cat, he'd hit him with the coup de grace: "You require much more attention than I could ever give you."

He was following advice that had been passed down through generations. "Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you are or might have been was otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise."

As if an aspect of a parallel universe, the shadowed landscape of regimented redwoods flickered hypnotically by the windshield, and the drone of the driver's voice was saying "The problem with the morality in this country is that it frowns on the sensations: pain doesn't hurt and nothing should feel good. That's why we have addicts—they categorize our dilemma in experiencing a pain that feels good. They are the largest implication of societal hypocrisy. The social mores are rigid and brittle—they cannot keep up with natural creativity, our innate mutability. And, of course, denial of mortality."

He wanted to ask him to repeat himself but was way too stoned and could only manage the international cross lingual interrogative "hunh?"

"Oh, shit!" the driver muttered and stood on the brakes, the pick-up fishtailing to a stop. "I almost missed her," he said throwing the truck into reverse and steering over his shoulder, "It's bad luck not to pick her up." And to the questioning look, "The road hag," as if it wasn't obvious.

In the side view mirror he watched an older woman in a large orange floppy hat and long multi-colored gypsy skirt holding up the hem exposing tall western boots and running toward the truck now positioned on the road shoulder. As she reached for the door handle he noticed multiple rings on every finger and one on the thumb, her forearms sheathed in an eclectic mix of bangles and bracelets of every variety and material, silver and plastic, leather and wood, beaded or engraved. She looked up at him with snapdragon eyes and flashed her Hollywood whites. She had a girlish doll's face that had not aged well framed by tousled dirty blonde dreds spun with grey.

She clambered over him, saying, "I have to sit next to the pilot."

He caught the distinct whiff of unwashed coo.

Once crowded into the cab with little if any personal space, he experienced an overwhelming sensation of alignment so that everything was viewed in the light of that correctness. There could be no doubt that the driver was Enkidu, representative of wild and primitive innocence, and that he was Gilgamesh, the urban urbane sophisticate caught up in the agony of irony. Was she Erishkigal? But no, she introduced herself as Gina D'Entata.

He held his hand out to shake, but she turned the palm up and read it like the page of a book written on his soul. He pulled away but she held fast,

daring him with her glare. Besides he had no will to resist those pale blue irises like cut glass.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Do I have to be somebody?”

“Do I know you?” She glanced down at his palm. “Your life line has all but disappeared into a hole in the center of your palm. Stigmata, perhaps?”

“He’s a poet,” the driver spoke. “Carl Wendt.”

“Have you ever lived in the city?” He was trying to connect her with a hint of the familiar.

“Years ago, but I got friends.” She smiled with assurance. “Hey, now I remember! I read about it in the daily comical. You’re the poet who died.” And then “Eek, a ghost!” She leaned her ophidian do against the driver’s arm feigning a cringe and let out a raucous raspy laugh. “I heard you was shot. Or beat up. Something. I know I read it. Then you died.”

“Maybe it wasn’t me.” There was always that possibility, of that he was certain, although the veil of reality shimmered and glimmered as sunlight fraying the edges of the vintage windshield and allowed a subsonic veracity to whisper its alluring version.

“Someone’s stoned.”

The driver offered a hearty guffaw and what was left of the spliff to the hippie granny.

“No, thanks, but I can’t. I’m visiting my friend in Albion and she doesn’t like it when I show up stoned. Says she can sense a slight disturbance in the astroplosphere and it makes her uncomfortable.”

The driver nodded. “Depending on the level of energy and her sensitivity, I can see how that might affect some quantum psychic manifestations. At the sub-Planck length level, I mean.”

“My friend, Tina, is very sensitive. To scented products, laundry detergent. She makes her own soap. Anything petroleum based gives her a rash. Her walls are lined with cork and she only eats raw. Weaves her own cloth, makes her own clothes. Maybe you know her. She’s a poet, too. Tina Argent.”

He was surprised and impressed. Of course everyone knew who Tina Argent was, anyone who was tuned in to the radical side of modern American poetry, at any rate. Tim and Tina, originally Silverman, though older, were a poetry power couple, like Dotty Krandahl and Lynel Pauk, but with a more established charisma in the world of literary reputation. Tina was loved for her wisdom whereas Dotty, so far, was merely appreciated for her intelligence. The same dilemma applied to them both. They were better poets than the acclaimed males they shared their lives with. In Tina’s case, Tim had gone out to the bookstore one night and never came back.

“She lives around here?” He knew she’d chosen the sanctuary of the wilderness. They’d met a few times, many years ago, at various literary functions. Amusingly, they were always being reintroduced.

“Yep. Up at the top of Ridge Road. She’s got a little hut up there, no running water, no electricity. Candles, her books, and a well. All she needs she says.”

“I’m on my way to a meeting in Manchester and I can’t be late again. Ok I let you off at the head of the bridge? You shouldn’t have any problem getting a ride up the hill into Albion.” The driver spoke his plea sorrowfully.

“Not if they’re all like you, captain,” she said giving the driver’s arm an affable hug.

Of course his critical self wanted to offer the observation that one of Tina’s minimalist poetry selections was titled *Well, Books, and Candles*.

“Give her my regards,” he said instead.

The old woman searched his eyes. “Who, hon?”

“Tina Argent.”

His thoroughly stoned atman easily recognized the look she gave him, a look of concern verging on pity, one that said *Yes, of course, you poor deluded man, as if she’d even know who you are.*