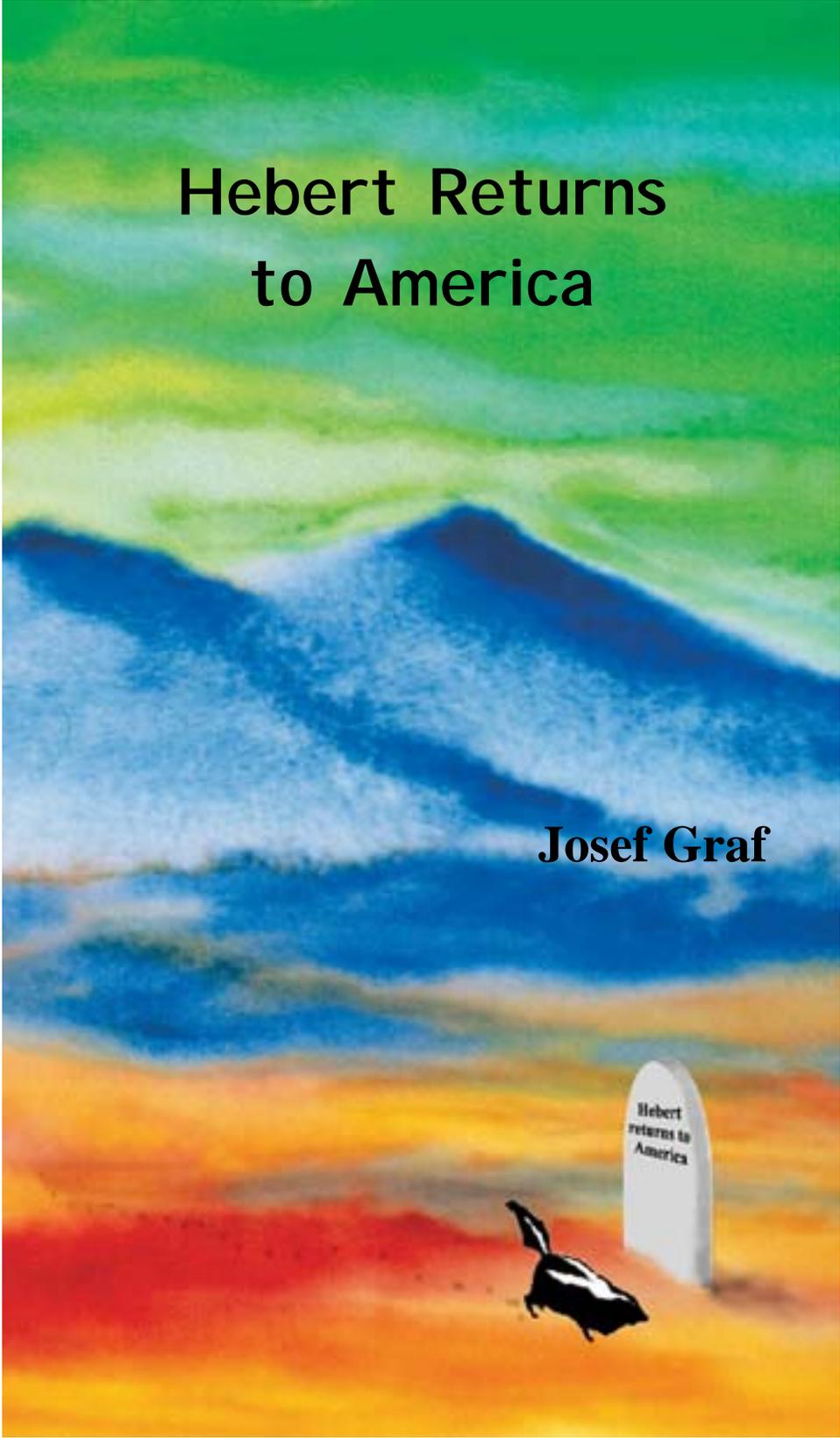


Hebert Returns to America

Josef Graf

A watercolor illustration of a landscape. The background consists of horizontal bands of color: green at the top, followed by light green, yellow, and then a large section of blue and white. Below this, there are bands of orange, red, and yellow. In the foreground, a white, upright tombstone is visible, with the text "Hebert returns to America" inscribed on it. A black and white butterfly is flying near the base of the tombstone.

Hebert
returns to
America

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1

In the word was the beginning, in the syllable, the fragment, and in the letter, the atomizing. In the comma was found the claw, and in the period, the black hole of inner space.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was dog, and dog was followed by a hedgehog. And much trundled along after it.

And a ray of light shone in the darkness, and the darkness yawned and stretched and wondered, "What's up?"

- from the Subinkian Book of Genesis

Here I am, another day . . . I . . . I? Wait, who am I? Damn, I've lost my ID . . . let's see . . . what am I doing? . I . . don't know . . .

I must have . . . that thing . . .

that illness . . . what do you call it. . .

Alls-hammers is that it? . . .

Hmmmm

Well, there's something I need to remember . . .

Yes . . .

No... oh, I don't get this

Hmmm

Aah! Free of the body, at last, I return to my senses. No longer confined by that terrible affliction, Alzheimer's, I can wander now, albeit as a discarnate entity, through the pages of this book.

Let me start with my fatal decision to leave America. Or was it more fatal to return? Oh hell I know, I'll begin with a lead-in to the Gangreen incident. That episode, as I look back over my life (which, in my case, may best be described as installation art), was pivotal.

First, I want to sculpt a little background here, to render some contour for the Gangreen incident. To leap abruptly into the experience might snap the already taut rubber band of the cerebral cortex.

In the youthful days of my biography, I took a plane from Adolescent City, Illinois, to the manly realm of the Yukon Territory. I had to book my flight a week in advance. To economize, Crashlandia Airlines preferred to fly full bookings, and very few passengers aspired to go to the Yukon.

When the three-seater "de-planed" - the airline's official description for what amounted to a rather abrupt flop-down in a swamp handy to the runway - I changed into a dry pair of underwear and hitched a ride into Iliad, a small town nestled in a setting of classic natural beauty, mountains rising from boreal forest, and great broad skies filled with armadas of cloudships, complete with Spanish conquistadors and a bevy of scantily clad senioritas.

Strolling through Iliad, and scaling a bluff over-looking the town, I sat down under a lone pine to survey what lay below. My first impression of the town left me feeling a mix of wonder and apprehension. It was pleasant here, but all so new. Would I be able to adapt to the local lifestyle? Could I find gainful employment? Was that blond down there on Main Street hitched up with anyone? Did the town have any electronic technology, or were their video games whittled out of wood? Time would bear answers. For now, it was all an exciting mystery.

Nestling back against the pine, I closed my eyes and, with the sun beaming warmly upon the idyllic setting, I fell into a reverie. I felt giddy. I

felt up. And then my inner horse bolted, and we went racing across an interior landscape.

We rode east into the rising sun. Looking down, I observed that my stallion was dressed in ceremonial attire - Cree Nation, circa 1780. I, myself, was decked in buckskin, beaded and feathered. It was a genuine Cree wardrobe, although the pair of Polaroid sunglasses on a string around my neck hinted a link to modernity.

As I took a breath, the air grew still, and when I exhaled, the wind rushed over the land. I hiccupped, and my mount stumbled. When I cleared my throat, a peal of thunder rumbled behind me on the horizon. In experimental inspiration, I whacked myself hard upside the head, and a couple of stars shone in the sky. Then I farted, and a stench of methane emanated from a swampy patch off to the side. What on earth was happening here? It was all so surreal.

As I rode on, I broke into a sweat. The sky began to pale and the mountains in the distance began a slow fade into unreality. Gradually, the grass under hoof became less and less substantial. Suddenly, my hair caught fire and my face burst into flames. "Whoa!" I screamed, and snapped out of my reverie to find myself back against the pine, the sun blazing hotly upon my now sunburned face.

Wincing with the pain of rider's legs, I arose and, tripping over a mound of horse dung, headed downhill to seek some affordable food and lodging. But I found prices in town ran sky high. Unless you were a gold miner, a hooker, or a muskrat, the North was an expensive place to hang your hat. The cheapest deal in town was a room the size of a phone booth for a hundred bucks a night, and you had to sleep standing up with two other tenants. Groceries were steep, too. Eggs were a dollar a piece, yolks extra - ten percent off, if you brought your own shells.

2

I think the world of the world.

- from The Geographic Ponderings of Hebert Flabeau

I had been in the north for a month when the Gangreen incident took place. I still knew my name - Hebert Flabeau. *Last time I checked my I. D. I was me*, I'd muse whenever I wondered. But fate had delivered me to a neighborhood of Destitution City, so poor, it couldn't afford a zip code. I needed some income desperately. I'd always wanted to be filthy rich, but so far, I'd only gotten the first part. I had forgotten what money was - I'd begun to think that *cash* was a hut you put moose meat in over the winter, and the word *dollar* must be a dead, or at least crippled, Latin noun.

For a while, I coped. *I may be penniless, but that's nothing - the Czar of Russia was Nicholas*. However, as time wore on, I became depressed by my economic state; my face was growing long. Confirmation of the length of my countenance came the afternoon prior to the fateful day in focus when a near-sighted parts man had mistaken it for a hubcap. Then, by early light of the following morning, my mug was mistaken for a no parking sign by a large trucker, named Bull Gangreen, who cursed me as I gaped at him with my arms wrapped around an accommodating birch tree. Not that it mattered - I didn't need his kind on my social roster anyway.

Bull Gangreen hailed from Bigotte, Alberta. He was so big when he was born, the doctor was afraid to slap him. He was the kind of guy who hated cats and birds. "Too damn noisy," he'd seethe, as he padded his pillow with fresh feathers. He also hated any woman who had her clothes on. His wife was trying to divorce him for coming home too often.

On this particular morning, Bull had stumbled out of bed, wolfed down the neighbor's Persian, and blustered down to the bank to withdraw his life savings to invest in a fledgling firm, Diabolics Nouveau Inc., that trafficked in a compendium of electronic mutilation devices.

And as fate would have it, the only vacant parking spot by the bank was next to where I was engaged in morning embrace with sister tree and, when I saw the peculiar beast-man pull up, I couldn't resist shifting into my coyote cloak of reckless curiosity. I just stood there, gaping. I gaped away with abandon, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, brows locked in upright position.

Of course my indulgence was quick to trigger Gangreen.

"Goddamn tree-hugger! - how'd you like me to tie your windpipe in a reef knot?"

"Please, by all means!" I chortled.

"Whaaat!?" roared the incredulous trucker, "You some kind of wise guy?"

Before revealing my response, it's important for the reader to know that I, Hebert Flabeau, was wanted in seven emotional states for driving my karma recklessly.

"Well, yes, hopefully," I parried, loading on extra crow sauce. "I mean, if God created an odd specimen like me, He also would've thrown in a few brains for balance. On the other hand, I don't know how to explain you - you're both bizarre *and* stupid, so that kind of blows my theory, doesn't it?"

Foam immediately spewed from the mouth of the three hundred-and-twenty pound gorilla. I could see nuclear clouds billowing in his bloodshot eyes. As Bull's neck turned a brilliant shade of scarlet, vehicles at the nearby crossroads swerved and screeched in the confusion resulting from the simultaneous glow of red and green traffic lights. Two feelings invaded my soul - terror, as it dawned on me that in the next instant my life would surely end, and regret, as I thought how I'd only just topped the gas tank in my old beater.

Lucky for me, there are times when fate can play a hand. For it was at that moment that a stolen cement truck came charging up Main Street, an eleven-year-old at the wheel having the time of his life. When the youngster came upon the intersection of hysteria he did not know what a brake was. Naturally, there was nothing he could do but bounce onto the sidewalk and

barrel over the charging Bull who, utterly intent on the kill, was oblivious to what hit him.

Bull Gangreen's remains were picked up with a sponge mop and cremated a few days later.

I was not invited to the cremation, but attended anyway.

I brought a bag of marshmallows.

3

Cleanliness is next to Godliness - but has been known, on occasion, to reside even in the political arena.

- from Hebert's Affirmations.

With the North's history of wallet abuse, I would have to consort with the fox of ingenuity to make ends meet. For shelter, I built a makeshift tree house and moved in. I landed a job as a janitor (this was before the socially preferable handle, "custodian," or even more pretentious, "custodial engineer," came in vogue) in the most prestigious setting in town, the Mayor's office. With this rather immediate infusion of the nectar of success, I grew inspired. Intent on scaling the ladder of fame, I began to formulate a plan. I practiced moppery and creative dustpan technique for several hours every day (in fact, eight hours, as I now recall). I was not content to clean Mayoralty environs, but dreamt of rising to greater heights.

I planned strategically. The eagle of inspiration soared in my interior skies. When the timing was right, I would return to America, attain a

custodial position with the Governor of California, then, after a brief tenure, transfer straight to DC. If I had my way, the hallowed floors of the White House would become my inverted Sistine to scrub and polish. Every day, I practiced visualizing - imagineering. I saw myself at 1600 Pennsylvania, so much so, that I could taste the fallout of political intrigue, smell the aroma of presidential body odor. Custodial notoriety virtually oozed from my pores.

And the sheep dog of my soul herded my scattered aspirations into a concentrated flock of ambition. Not only would I be a sweeping success, I would perform above and beyond conventional expectation. If I had my way, I would impose a little political morality on the buggers, become a proponent of both clean floors and sparkling ethics. Under my custodianship, the ragged buzzard of despotism would no longer aspire to roost in the White House.

Not altogether naïve, I knew there would be complications, that the caliber of success I aspired to would attract a contingency of janitorial groupies - bobolinks and buntings, chickadees and curlews, all manner of birds of the common feather known as adulation - teenyboppers vying for a piece of the limelight of Mop-N-Glo. My life would change, as all lives do when destiny launches one above the common lot. But I was prepared to pay for my ambition, come what may.

Meanwhile, back in the Yukon, I named my tree house overlooking the valley Homer's Oddity. It was a homely, homey little home, this Homer's Oddity in Iliad. And my power waxed. Everything I touched turned to something heavy - either gold or lead. And so, I tried not to touch my own ass.

While awaiting my first paycheck, I ran low on cash. In the morning, I would go to a restaurant, order oatmeal and, while the waitress was busy, down all the cream in the dispensers. For the rest of the day, gravel stew, a variant of stone soup, became my staple. Sundays, I would feast, in true northern style, on greenberry bannock (it was too early in the season for ripened blueberries) and moose baloney, washed down with spruce bud tea, followed by a delicate pine bark aperitif.

I was a diligent worker, but I told my boss I wouldn't be around long, I would be out of there like a greased petunia.

"A greased petunia?! That doesn't make any sense," the boss would heartlessly rain on my parade.

“You ever *lay eyes on* a greased petunia?” I would rebound.

“No.”

“Well, then, there you are! So fast, you can’t even see it!”

Limitless ambition ruled my soul. Although few of my compatriots were aware of it, I harbored schemes more grandiose than they could imagine. After attaining mop nirvana in DC, I would take time off my busy schedule to fulfill another rather spartan dream - to scale Mount Everest with a stepladder. Once on the peak of Everest, I would set up the ladder and, voila! - go down in history as the man who climbed highest in the annals of mountaineering.

But life often has other plans than the ones we may come to cherish. My dreams were not to materialize. The cause of my downfall was hubris, pure and simple. I was good at what I did. But I let it go to my head. Because I could janit better than anyone - faster, more diligently, cleaner - I assumed it was because I was a superior human being, little realizing my talent was actually a gift from the Universe. When the Universe caught me lording over my colleagues, wielding my duster like a scepter, It lowered the broom.

Cleaning agents began to elicit allergic reactions. I broke out in a rash at the sight of Mr. Clean's shiny pate. Floor wax caused heart palpitations. Dustbane all but induced anaphylactic shock.

Clearly, I would be unable make a clean sweep of my ambition. I would not polish the ground floor of the mansion of political power, let alone royal flush its golden toilets. No, the dustpan of destiny had emptied me into an existential garbage bin. Looking back now, I can see the beginning of a pattern. The rest of my days would see a series of failed attempts to integrate a stream of varied intentions into mainstream America. Although doing America right would become the central theme of my life, unfortunately, the way things seemed to go for me, it was a goal perhaps unattainable until the end, when a marble inscription upon my final resting-place might read: *Hebert returns to America, at last.*

4

Although I was not always able to survive them, I found occasional stints in the wilderness a welcome relief from the stress of civilization.

- from Hebert's memoirs.

Two or three months go by after the Gangreen incident. A floatplane rises and banks west from Iliad, and I'm on it. It's an early autumn morning and I'm looking forward to getting into my remote destination with plenty of daylight to spare. I've turned my back on society, given up on the whole money game. I want to penetrate the wilderness to see how my relationship with nature can fare at this stage of my life. Besides, after a summer of amassing debt in this pricey end of the country, I have a few creditors harassing my indigent ass - let them pursue me into the land of the grizzly bear.

After clearing the valley, we soar over alpine tundra. Below, a few scattered spruce trees counter-point a sear of colour, standing erect like lonely conservatives surrounded by a rabble of gauche revolutionaries. Willow and alder are responsible for the wild colour insurgency, a panorama of red, yellow, orange and what I at first mistake for vivid blasts of fuschia, until I realize it's a cockpit light flashing a warning of engine failure.

As it turns out, we land safely on the shore of Bearbutt Lake, a sparkling gem nestled in an exquisite setting. Watching the plane disappear over the horizon, I begin to slip into the quiet tone that accompanies true isolation. The silence is modified only by soft sounds of water lapping, the flutter of aspen leaves rising and falling to the wind's play, and a grating

rasp from within my throat as I gag on recurring adrenaline still surging from the terror of hurtling through the heights on a junk-heap plane.

I am blessed to lodge just below tree line, in a cabin set on a lake, wildly gorgeous, with rugged mountains rising from its shores. Ahead lie five heavenly days of September solitude, days of roaming wild trails, and sitting quietly, basking in the aurous luxury of Indian summer - that is, when sober enough to be aware of it, as I am intent on catching up with some long-neglected substance abuse.

In the middle of the first night, a great horned owl, perched in a tree next to the cabin, breaks the silence with the haunting beauty of its call. To suppress this beauty and increase chances of enhancing my sleep patterns, I fire a few rounds of 12 gauge shot out the window. This prince of darkness becomes my nemesis by night while, during the day, it's an occasional jay or troop of chickadees that badgers my social roster.

One evening, as I return in darkness to my cabin from a late roving, a pair of amber eyes gleams from my flashlight, two living marbles shining back. A closer look reveals the silky red, black paws, and bushy tail of the red fox. The encounter brings to mind a folk tale about a fox that, being infested with fleas, takes hold of a stick and swims into a river. Deeper it goes and the fleas crowd up on its head. Deeper still, and they converge on its snout. Finally, with all but the tip of its nose submerged, the stick becomes the only safe haven for the marauding band, whereupon the fox simply releases the device into the sweeping current and swims ashore free of infestation. The story serves as a metaphor of an effective strategy for dealing with the nuisance of addictions. In a sense, if one's flea-like habits can be funneled into a single concentration, they can be released into the current of life. I resolve to keep this in mind in the event I am ever incarnated as a fox.

I have left Bearbutt Lake. Provisions ran low, and I've got to make my way back to civilization. Besides, I'm beginning to smell like an over-ripe porcupine in heat.

At the end of a long day's hike, though the tiny trapper's shack I hole up in is a barely tenable shelter, the beauty of the alpine tundra more than compensates for the austerity. As far as the eye can see stretches a striking

composition of willows and alders in a wash of red, orange and yellow. It's a surreal landscape. Over by the far corner, I spot a giant melting clock that must have been sketched by my patron saint, Salvador Dali.

The next day I hike onward and, by midday, I am growing weary of the long march. Miles behind and miles ahead become a long stretch of seemingly endless passage. Then I experience an inverse epiphany, as I check my map and realize I've been reading it upside down. I'm twice as far from my destination as when I started. In the throes of weariness, the experience is triggering something within. How often have I put myself in a "landscape" with a horizon that's unattainable? How often in life have I carried a weight too far, too long, through too many obstacles, striving to traverse an ambitious tract? I mean besides when I'm heading home on the subway with a full bladder.

That night I am compelled to bed down under a spruce thicket. As I prepare my bed and cook a late meal, night descends and I ponder my predicament. I'm now five days away from civilization with a half a day's food supply. The cold is setting in; it looks like one honkin snowstorm is on the way. I've twisted my knee and won't be able to walk on it for days, by which time I will likely perish. Tomorrow, however, shall bring a different outlook. I can say this with a degree of certainty, as I am writing this from a cozy armchair by the fire, and I've made up the whole story.

Next time, join me in the Southwest Desert where I'll have portaged a canoe over 13 miles of saguaro desert to the bank of an arroyo. There, I shall camp, while I await the annual flash flood so I can shoot the rapids out of my predicament.

For now, I think I'll relax with a glass of dry red, and let things work themselves out on their own steam. Sound like a plan?

5

Let us enjoy the irony in the rumor that Darwin was the descendant of a bunch of no-accounts.

- from The Subinkian Theory of Evolution.

While passing by a travel agent's office in Iliad, I spied a poster advertising discount flights to a place called Subinkia, and made a snap decision, a quickie that would wind up affecting my destiny in a profound manner.

To answer some essential considerations regarding this mysterious destination, I conducted a little research, namely: did they speak American? (It turned out that most of the residents spoke Canadian, but by now, with a few months practice under my belt, I was beginning to consider myself bilingual.) Were there any redheads? Was there a 24/7 bowling alley? What about two-pin? Was there an adequate supply of dehydrated water to meet my dry ice needs? Was there any truth to the rumor that inhabitants wore whipped cream in lieu of underwear?

Sufficiently impressed by what I discovered, I booked a flight. In those days you could do that, but that's all changed now. These days, you can't find an airline that's willing to make the run. In fact, you can no longer even find Subinkia on a map. Nowadays, you can't get there from here, as the saying goes. You have to have been there at some point in the past - to re-connect with its wavelength, I suppose. And you have to pass through an etheric waypoint, of sorts, with pretty strident customs agents bearing the title Guardians of the Threshold to contend with. No slip-him-a-quick-

twenty-visa to be had. In sum, don't bother even trying, friends. If Subinkia wants you, it'll find you, not the other way around.

It's a bit of a challenge to paint a portrait of Subinkia, especially since it's so much in flux, both from a geographic and evolutionary viewpoint. For those with a classical background, Subinkia evolved out of the former Hyperborea, a place once dear to the hearts and souls of Vikings. Its current geographic coordinates could be described as centering on the approximate longitude and latitude of the anti-magnetic north.

When I was there, the place was filled with reincarnates who were unable to determine for themselves a destination nation, so had settled into the welcoming arms of Subinkia, a long-time refuge of spiritual dissidents. But Subinkia is no fantasy realm. In fact, it has attained to a reality so exceptional, so lucid, that it has evolved into a mythological entity. This particular status means that the value of a decent slice of real estate exceeds the gross national product of America, herself. Prices are so high, you can't trade all of Manhattan for an acre of Subinkian terrain. As a result, no one owns any land, with the exception of one individual who has discovered the secret of cloning and has reproduced himself by the baker's dozen, and who now spend all their collective waking hours back in the U.S., hustling to pay off a mortgage with a monthly payment that runs six figures (an amount that applies almost entirely to interest, as the principal can't even be scratched at for the first fifty years).

While capitalism is not extinct in Subinkia, it is officially recognized as an endangered species. As a result of economic stability, residents of Subinkia are blessed with more leisure time than anywhere else on Earth. Accommodation is readily available and inexpensive (because no one owns any land), food abundant, the air and water clean. Besides capitalism, the only endangered species is the machine, a species recently rescued from the brink of extinction when the bounty on computers was scrapped, and the popular pastime of hunting technology for sport was outlawed.

Beyond immediate border regions, cars are both illegal and undesirable. Effective transportation is available by foot, bicycle, and teleportation at the speed of light (used principally by bald members of the population, as it tends to wreak havoc on one's coiffure). Besides, when it was discovered that no matter where you go, there you are, mobility became a non-issue.

While Subinkian policies - social, political, and economic - are hundreds, if not thousands of years ahead of the rest of the world, their plumbing system is only advanced by 30 minutes. This proves a boon for Subinkian plumbers who, being a half-hour ahead at all times, can charge time-and-a-half for labor.

For a long time, Subinkia was a byword for utopia, by those fortunate enough to enter its hallowed realm. Thanks to the guidance of a group of Arcturian extra-terrestrial philanthropists, the original founders of Subinkia, the region has never possessed an army. Resources made available due to a zero military budget were invested in education, health care, and so on - creating, by Earth standards, an exceptional society.

All this does not mean Subinkia is the kind of utopia fantasized by rabid idealists, but rather, a semi-functional utopia where at least remnant elements of suffering and strife still prevail. After all, while incarnate, how else could we refine the gold of our souls? Besides, S and M personalities, IRS auditors, and mosquitoes need an existential slot, too, don't they?

There was a juncture in Subinkian history when a neighboring country began to posture for attack. No one remembers even who it was. It may have been Greenland or Scotland, or New Zealand - it was *some* kind of blankety-land. Subinkia just didn't posture back, and the whole thing blew over.

In any event, the country has laws against flags, nationalism, and any nuance of the military. There is a form of policing, but the agents carry only Karma-guns. Those hit by a blast immediately respond by undergoing whatever karmic retribution they have coming. Sometimes the individual will dive into self-prescribed community work. Other times, the individual has only good karma coming and wins a lottery, or a lifetime pass to Mimi Buxom's massage parlor.

Karmic Judges sit, but no one is forced to appear. There is no arresting, detaining, incarcerating. Many come forward willingly, to come clean, to get a fresh start, or because the extra baggage of unresolved karma only holds them back, impedes creative expression, prevents living life to the fullest. And then there's the matter of keeping reincarnation options open - as in, you wanna schlep donkey manure for a living, or be the Bill Gates of the 32nd century?

Visitors to Subinkia are advised to keep cultural differences in mind. Population statistics are unknown, as it is not considered significant

information. There are no land or water ports, but there are three spaceports with full amenities. As mentioned earlier, there are no official road maps, nor are there calendars - and watches? Forget about it! - you ask for the time and they break out in hearty guffaws. Most days, there isn't even weather. It's worth mentioning, however, that any of these items are available on the black market - although fog and hail prices have recently risen beyond the financial means of most visitors.

You can change money at the border, but you will find little opportunity to spend it. Locals prefer the exchange method - you buy a bag of peaches (organic, biodynamic, of course), and the vendor asks you to pay a visit to his mother, a lonely widow. For a stint at a hotel, you may drop by the farm of the manager's cousin to weed and hoe for a few hours.

Finally, a word to the wise. A grove of trees can hire legal counsel, as can any sentient species, for that matter, so think twice if you're considering any business ventures even remotely associated with exploitation. I learned the hard way, when a stand of poplars won a lawsuit against me for marketing Subinkian nature photographs. The case was considered a landmark event as, prior to amendment of the Soul-Stealing Act, it would have been tossed out of court. In this case, the only "tossing out" took the form of my deportation.

6

I'd be rich and famous, except for two things.

I'm broke, and nobody knows me.

- from Musings.

The up side of my deportation from Subinkia was that I landed on good old U.S.A. soil, the down side was that I ended up in Austerity City. Caught up in a web of poverty, I applied my whole bearing to living frugally. To make my shoes last longer, I took bigger steps. I peered over the top of my reading glasses, so I wouldn't wear out the lenses. Every day, for lunch, I'd go into a pizzeria and order pizza with no toppings, hold the crust.

During this difficult time, I had eaten nothing but trout. In the middle of the night I would climb over a rusty chain link fence surrounding the fish tanks of Waterfront Farms. It had been said of Waterfront's piscine product that it was contaminated with so much mercury it could take its own temperature. Set in the industrial part of town, amid refineries and chemical plants, Waterfront raised its finny harvest in dilapidated metal hulks, feeding its crop with an experimental mash consisting of cereal, chemical residues from neighbor industries, and a hefty dose of antibiotics and growth hormones. Naturally, the deprived fish responded readily to the bits of road kill I plucked off the pavement on the way over.

It had taken a great deal of fortitude to harvest those fish. There were times when I'd have to patiently daydream for a minute or two before hauling in my meal. It was tough all right. But by now I had eaten fish until it was exuding from my recently acquired gills; fine for my inner Gollum, but the Hebert end of the collage needed a change.

To add to my problems, I was brought to court for stealing a bag of marshmallows. I had pleaded with Judge Opinshutt in detail, and with as much eloquence as I could muster, that I had innocently mistaken the marshmallows for refugees from Mercury. This would explain, after all, why marshmallows had a tendency to be revolving around fires the way they do.

I trailed on about reports I'd read in the tabloids that recent sunspot eruptions had stirred up militant factions on Mercury. War had broken out, much to the chagrin of the more peace-loving blobs who had escaped in spacecraft by the dozen. It was no picnic for these seekers of sanctuary. Estimates placed an average of 12,586 Mercurians crammed aboard each spaceship, about the size and shape of a Ford Econoline (only built inside out).

Unfortunately, these refugee Mercurians were denied a landing on any neighboring planet and so had become a galactic tragedy - much like earthen 'boat people', these saucer people were currently hovering near Earth, using its moon as an outhouse.

This land allocation, in itself, was not altogether a detriment. A scientific analysis of the excreta of Mercurian Blobs reveals it to contain the following components: H₂O, carbon, oxygen, a 10-20-15 fertilizer compound, various plant and tree seeds, and an occasional copy of Harrowsmith magazine. In short, all the ingredients required to transform the moon, within the span of 3,000 years, into a lush, tropical paradise - the ideal kind of environment for an expanding Club Med empire.

With mounting vehemence, I was intent on expanding my theme in an ever-widening spiral, until Opinshutt grew skeptical.

"Which will it be?" he snapped, "genocide against the Mercurian race, or theft of a bag of marshmallows?"

I considered a moment and was on the verge of asking for conference time when the gavel fell, vaulting me into the slammer for four days.

7

A husband who says he's the boss of the house will probably lie about other things, too.

- from Musings.

I know it's not commonly done, but it's time I (the author) made an appearance (outside of parentheses, that is). I know you're thinking, "What's this extra first person crap suddenly showing up? We've already got first person Hebert, why add first person author?" But I didn't promise to consult the reader at every turn now, did I?

At any rate, at odd key junctures I'll be putting my two cents in. Speaking of which, I want to clarify that there is no truth to the rumor that Hebert Flabeau lived on Cloud Nine. Cloud Eight, Arizona was Hebert's authentic address. Cloud Nine gets all the media hype. Cloud Eight is cheaper, more spacious, and offers a better view.

Back on track, however: four days in Bust Ass Correctional Center did wonders for the fish-frail Hebert. Although the food was a far cry from Continental Cuisine - there were no pretentious Swiss entrees, none of flaming Duck a L'Orange - what *was* served was a welcome change to Hebert's dreary finny menu. Between meals, Hebert, being a productive, forward-looking sort, chose to invest his time contemplating World War Four and the Third Coming. However, after many hours of concerted struggle, Hebert had to admit to himself that he had very little precognitive power. Clairvoyance was not his gift. Even with practice his third eye would

not render anything substantial, other than a stinging need for spiritual Murine. In fact, despite having all ESP faculties in gear - third eye, third ear, third nostril, second tongue, second nose - all of this in tandem produced nothing more than a blurry, myopic vision that projected a mere 90 seconds into the future (a talent that came in handy, from time to time, in the heat of a poker game).

But enough from me. I'll now pass the thread of the story back to Hebert:

Perhaps it was the radically altered body-chemistry due to my diet. Or maybe it was a conjunction of Venus with Neptune. Somehow I emerged from jail with the charisma of a blue jay - a bit of irresistible magnetism with the ladies. I had only been out a few hours when I met Steena McEase, who had rapidly and hopelessly fallen in love with one Hebert Flabeau, the wayward human loon.

I was not used to this; the last time a lady had fallen for me was 1932 - decades before I was born. Besides, I didn't think much of anyone whose standards were low enough to settle for a prospect, the likes of myself.

But before we get into the Hebert-Steena item, I need to digress.

Dating was not one of my fortes. When I signed up for a computer dating service, they gave me the number for Dial-a-Prayer. On one occasion, I mustered enough courage to ask a girl at a dance for her phone number.

"It's in the book."

"Good, what's your name?"

"It's in the book, too."

A year or so after my bout with Steena (which I promise to get back to, all in good time), after wading through a lot of relationship disappointment, I would luck out. I would meet an overweight girl who felt sorry for me.

Beatrice Hinde is the kind of girl who puts lettuce leaves on a pizza and calls it a salad. "Inside me," she muses, "there's a thin person trying to get out, but I can usually sedate her with five or six donuts." Bea Hinde owns a fork with a racing stripe.

I take Bea horseback riding, and we have a great time until I run out of quarters. I take her to my favorite dinner spot, but it's a challenge holding a conversation - perhaps, in part, due to our table's proximity to the automatic pinsetters.

My grandfather had counseled me that it was advantageous to flatter a date. One night, when I take her to her door, I'm stumped for something nice to say. Finally, I stammer, "You know what, for a fat gal, you don't sweat much."

A week after the swelling subsides in my ardently slapped face, Bea relents and agrees to see me again. After all, she has to face facts. Her doctor told her to cut back on two food groups - liquids and solids. Her ballet teacher refused to supply her with a tutu, insisting she'd only fit a three-three. All things considered, she has to take what she can get.

In time, we succumb to marriage. "I'm not much to look at," I quietly propose. "That's okay, you'll be at work most of the day anyway." As newlyweds, we go on a honeymoon (Niagara Falls) followed by a sugarsun (the East River rapids) and, finally, a molasses-star (the Chicago sewer outfall).

We make an odd pair - I, a goosey magpie and she, an owlish duck. God only knows, if we were to have children, what kind of poultry they'd develop into. During the initial phase of our marriage, the days fly by like a shimmer of hummingbirds. Then comes the awkward post-honeymoon phase, when the talons and piercing glances of the raptor begin to emerge. We don't ascend to the state of marital bliss I have idealized, where moments together become like a radiance of cardinals. In fact, over time, our matrimonial status degenerates to that of the albatross, the shifty starling, and the lice-infested pigeon. I am forced to admit that our relationship just seems to descend into an untenable and unsalvageable bird-poop.

Nine years later - which, in the matrimonial continuum, would be like eighty-something in California years - we part, agreeing by mutual consent that there is nothing left to hold us together. Bea Hinde feels she has finally reached the rear end of the relationship. She looks into my family tree and discovers I am the sap. She knows marriage is making me complacent, that I'm hitting a new low when I go out and buy a new pair of socks that come with detailed instructions. I've grown not only dumb, but also lazy, sinking to putting popcorn in my pancakes so they can turn over by themselves. It

could be said that I have become as much fun as a barrel of monkeys. (Did you ever *smell* a barrel of monkeys?) The final straw comes when I take three months off work to finish a book I am working on - which gives her a real clear idea of what a slow reader I am.

After the divorce, I am quick to rebound. *She's a slob, anyway, I conclude, I'd go to piss in the sink, and it would be full of dirty dishes.* Within a week, I procure an answering machine and a hot water bottle. Life is back on track.

8

A dog gets mad at you if you blow in its face, but when you drive him in a car he sticks his head out the window.

- from Musings

In my youth, I was unable to comprehend the nature of my lack of appeal with women. Normally, when I was near them, at parties, the local pub, or any of various gatherings, it was as though I were a ghost - they simply did not acknowledge my presence. Somehow, I had inadvertently developed nature's genius of camouflage to an advanced state.

I would, at times, ponder this seeming invisible trait, trying to discern what was responsible for my condition. One afternoon, as I sat munching soda crackers, stewing over it, I experienced an epiphany. As was my custom, I'd take a bite, then inhale any loose cracker dust before my next bite. Suddenly, in the middle of an inhale, the answer struck me: I was not attractive for the simple reason that I was myself. I was not rich, but poor; I was not handsome, but common; I was not engaged in any Cause, but simply lived; I was not a conventionally witty person, but rather a person whose mind was like a picture hung off the wall. As I look back on it now, from this nether end of my life, I can see the list went on; all things I considered revealed no plus for me. There were no macho muscles bulging from my frame, no cute Brad the Pitts smile and, unlike Leonardo de Crapio, no rose incense exuding from my pores.

On one occasion, on a crisp March night, as I sat in the Silver Kink Tavern, watering my inner plants, so to speak, I thought my luck had changed. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a girl staring at me incessantly. Eventually I amassed sufficient nerve to go over and introduce myself. As I sat down beside her it became obvious why she had been eyeing me so stridently: she was deader than an empty wine bottle.

(Author's note: Despite his predicament, Hebert could not be disheartened; the flame of hope was not to be snuffed. Perhaps that was his greatest asset - a way of being hopeful despite all odds. After all, the whole world wasn't against him; some smaller countries were neutral. His indomitable spirit could be likened to a blade of grass striving up through concrete, which someone has stamped upon, doused with a quart of gas, lit a match, and finally, peed on the ashes of. Yet the irrepressible root sprouts a new shoot the moment the flora-hating sadist has turned his back in search of new eco-perversion. In any event, at this point of his biography, Hebert feels he has nothing to lose. And now Steena has arrived in his life.)

At first I was fascinated with the prospect of making it with the attractive, easy-going barmaid, but as I delved deeper, I began to hold reservations that steadily escalated to Repulsion City, Iowa.

In order to understand Steena McEase, it's helpful to keep in mind that although at age 23 she had moderated her lifestyle for the better, she was still rooted in certain haywire ways. Raised in Sleezeville, Ohio, Steena

developed into a lady who would not date just any young man. No, he had to have distinct qualities: a talent for drinking beer, educated enough to speak a language, and have the capacity to recite, off by heart, the side panel of a granola box. A week without a man was too long, and a week with a man was also too long. She had lost count of the number of partners she had slept with, but estimated it must tally four figures.

For a moment, I imagined what it would be like to live with Steena. I felt uneasy at the prospect; it seemed the inevitable would happen. She would rail and rant. It seemed as though women were just that way. There were many desires that could seize them. It might be money or a car. Maybe a new coat or an old boyfriend. They would want to go out to dinner, want me to behave in a certain way - don't smile at other women, or don't *not* smile at other women. Paint the house, fix the car, more sex, less sex . . . take me out more often . . . not enough romance . . . don't come on so strong . . . give me more time to myself . . . you ignore me too much . . . it went on over endless, unmappable terrain. *What if God's a woman?* I wondered - *not only would I go to hell, I'd never know why.*

I recalled the last woman I had lived with. When in a buoyant mood, she would laugh like a cackling hen. I would have dumped her sooner, but I needed the eggs. When a dark mood took over, however, she would shift into a spitfire rooster. One evening she had decided she needed a Coke. At the time, we were living in remote wilderness, somewhere north of the border (don't ask me for geographical directions - it might, for all I recall, have been Alaska, Canada, Greenland, or even Subinkia). The nearest store was two days distant via paddle and portage. Suddenly, out of the blue, she had not only insisted on a Coke, she *needed* a Coke. With shoulders hunched, head swaggering from side to side, eyes like death rays, her teeth clicked in rhythm to an almost audible 'it's the rea-al thing.' I had elected to believe the craving was not so important. I still wear scars from the ensuing battle, not to mention recurring bouts of impotence every time I hear that blasted Coke jingle.

9

*There's more than one way to skin a cat
(none of which I want to hear about.)*

- from Hebert's Musings

A couple of days after meeting Steena, I was wandering through a shopping mall, wondering how long I could avoid her. Through the milling people I stepped, on slick tiles, on past buzzing cash registers, through the food alleys, plodding in time to the piped-in music. *I love you, where you gone to?* sang a man in plaintive tone. On by the baked goods, gingerbread and pastries, enough sugar to sweeten a head-banger. *I've got brown hair and blue eyes, but if you don't come back soon I'm gonna be gray and blind as a bat.* Down past the raffle ticket sellers, kind-nosed, community-minded, smile-at-ya-if-ya-wink people.

Next to the raffle table, an alternate education booth proclaimed its summer wares. It was manned by wide-eyed, spacey people of a New Age vein. Courses for everyone: Understanding Color in Black and White Photos; Healing the Universe Without Health Insurance; Existence, Reality, and Soft Shoes; Contemporary Modernness; Embezzlement 205; English as a Twelfth Language; Camel Dung Analysis; Writing Novels for Fun and Pain; Sex Roles of Anteaters; Lead Pillow Therapy . . . But I had long since given up educating myself. Used to be, if I came across bright people I would spend a lot of time hanging around them, hoping for some of their "intelligentsia" to rub off on me - but usually I'd only get a headache from concentrating too hard. I have yet to discern whether Dostoyevsky was a composer, a plumbing contractor, or a gourmet sauce.

It was as I ambled along in my usual half-daze, pondering the nature of my undazed half, that I bumped into Steena. The meeting was so abrupt and ill timed that I felt an acute shudder well within. I had to think fast - *how can I get rid of her?* I wondered . . . then, lightning-quick, I knew the answer - I would simply be myself.

It proved an effective tactic. Flabeau essence oozed from every pore. I took Steena to the Slurp'n'Burp Cafe. Tongue loose, barriers falling aside, I spoke freely. My part in the conversation that took place over the cheap plastic flowers in the tacky vase between us could be likened to riding a horse off a cliff.

"How would you like your eggs?" queried the waiter, one eyebrow lifted in response to the odd canary before him.

"Fry the whites, poach the yolks," I replied.

"Anything to drink?"

"A glass of skim water, please."

"Very good, sir."

"So, Hebert, how come I'm buying lunch again?" queried Steena, "Are you still broke? Haven't you found a job yet?"

"Well, I had a couple of interviews this week, but they didn't pan out.

I don't understand, it must've been the color of my tie or something . . ."

"But you don't wear a tie; you don't even own one!"

"Well then, what the hell was I wearing around my neck? Oh, God! Is *that* what happened to that strip of pizza dough! And I was thinking I must have rats around my place . . ."

"Hebert! You're out of your mind!" Exasperation heated in Steena. "How can you expect to ever . . ."

"Ever consider becoming a geologist, Steeny?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you're such a fault finder."

"Very funny! Well, maybe you still have a chance - they probably figured you're some kind of hippie or something. They shouldn't hold that against you - there's a part in all of us that's hip."

"I hope so - else what would join our knees to our bums?" Just then, overwhelmed by a pocket of gas, I began farting up a storm with

considerable artistic flair. Great loud tuba blasts, graced with delicate piccolo runs, combined to produce a resounding concerto stench.

Stena, becoming quieter, paused to get her bearings: “I . . .um . . .”

“Whatsa matter Steeny? You’re lookin’ a bit pukish . . . Anyway, what other people think of me is none of my business. I tell you though, one thing I’d like to figure out is where the hell they dig up those weird questions for interviews. I told them straight out I don’t know what answers they want, but I figure I should have no problem with any government job - I can talk backwards and do a pretty good imitation of a lampshade. When they asked ‘what kind?’ I answered ‘burlap’ and they went checking through their fire regulations handbook . . .”

Stena rapidly fell out of love. Twenty minutes over coffee was all it took to thoroughly demolish all romantic notions. It could safely be said that Steena McEase would never again long for Hebert Flabeau.

As we parted, I felt proud of myself; I was free. I bounded back through the supermarket, spun on my heels at the bakery counter and was intent on swiping a muffin when I tumbled headlong over a shopping cart into a trough of pumpernickel dough.

That was the week rye loaves went for half-price.

10

What's the big deal about a million dollars? A guy who has 13 million is just as happy as a guy with 14 million.

- from Musings of Hebert Flabeau

Despite a reprieve from the morass of relationship, my troubles were not yet over. I still had financial matters to resolve, and could feel the pesky badger of destitution gnawing holes in the pants of my prosperity.

I had borrowed money to pay off loans that had been lent to pay off other loans. I had not held a dollar in my own hand for the span of a week. My last bank loan application had gone poorly, as it took off from Long Shot, Arizona and crashed just across the border, in Rejection City, Texas.

Fatty Canberge, the loan officer, grew up in Staide Town, Missouri. Even as a child, he hated getting his hands dirty. And now he kept them scrubbed to an ivory tone, even wearing gloves when handling money or coming in contact with clients. Fatty preferred to hole up in his office as much as possible, only reluctantly booking appointments.

With bulging neck, sweat oozing over his collar, shoes buffed to an ebony sparkle, Canberge was rational to the point of developing an allergic reaction to anything remotely offbeat. He would break out in hives if he passed within 50 yards of a psychic reading. He had left home that morning in a huff when he'd discovered that his wife failed to pack the items of his lunch in alphabetical order.

In addition to this neurotic obsession with order, there lurked in the shadow region of the man's soul an opportunistic scavenger. Canberge kept a bag of suet in his top drawer with which to feed and appease his inner

vulture. But we will return to the Canberge Shadow Bog later. First we must explore the aunt.

As a child, Fatty Canberge's parents neglected him. They recalled, somewhere in the back of their minds, having produced four or five children, but couldn't quite shift out of the childless style they had lived by prior to starting a family. However, Fatty's Aunt Gizzarda doted on him. She'd dandle him upon her bony knee, an anatomical bowling pin. Because of this knuckle-knee, Aunt Gizzarda contrived to stuff Fatty with as many cream puffs and Twinkies as he could inhale, reasoning that a butterball made for the optimal dandle.

Aunt Gizzarda took command of the vocational destiny of the Canberge boy, initiating an ambitious program engineered to mold him into a dynamic candidate for the echelons of finance. The aunt had evolved a grandiose scheme. In her eye, she saw her nephew rising rapidly up the corporate ladder, nay escalator, even upward-surgingly elevator. Fatty Canberge would storm the Bankers Hall of Fame. He would supplant Greenspan at the helm of Finance - and then move stridently beyond that, into the realm of international domination. He would become the world's Lucre King, a global finance wizard, an intergalactic moneychanger supreme.

Embittered by restrictions the world had imposed on her gender, Gizzarda had directed all her frustrated talent into the scheme for her nephew. Endless hours of research, planning, and contrivance had been invested in the project. If the world was not going to permit Gizzarda to rise beyond the mundane office of accountant, despite her genius for economics, then she would just have to fulfill her ambition through Fatty.

And Fatty made the perfect candidate for his aunt's projections. Neurotic, moldable, unloved, he would do anything to gain his aunt's approval. While other kids had an interest in baseball, and could recite, by heart, the batting average of favorite players, Fatty learned everything there was to know about the financial management of a team. Other children would watch a gangster movie for the action. For Fatty, it was the inspiration of creative money laundering. Most kids traded marbles. Fatty made deals more complex by introducing principles of investment, loan, and interest levies. No one had ever beaten Fatty at Monopoly. By the time he finished high school, he owned slices of a large number of mortgages in his

neighborhood, and retained a personal assistant who ran after him, updating him three times an hour on the latest stock and commodity dynamics.

Under Aunt Gizzarda's tutelage, Fatty excelled. He attended Princely University and swam through the curriculum - Economic Predation 101; Cashing in on Friends and Relatives; Metaphysics of Currency; Semiotics of the Figure \$; Creative Bank Fees; Undermining Socialism; Profiting from the Cuban Embargo; and a select array of history of economics courses: Currency of Wampum; Slave Trade Economics; and Modern Subjugation. When he had finished his stint in higher education, Fatty was awarded an MBA in Ruthlessnessology and a PHD in the number 66 (only one digit shy of his ultimate goal).

11

*I think the world of bankers -
and you know what condition the world is in.*

- from Musings of H.F.

So that we might follow closer alongside the Canberge trail of monetary footprints, we need to delve into the heart of the man's education. And so, an excerpt from Slamburg's Historical Analysis of Economotoria, taken from the curriculum of Financial History 405:

There have been times in the history of economics in which there has been a strong tendency to blow the whole wad. Yablonski identified two classical scenarios on the subject. The first emerged after 1890, based on Adam

Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. It was founded on two basic tenets, which were, to paraphrase, *Easy come, easy go* - and, *Them that's got, go for it, baby!*

The second emerged from innovations initiated by Jeerroom-room, Wall-ass, and C. Meningitis after the controversy with the historical school had settled down: "The leading edge represented a common turnip in the soup of the market, which created, in the superficial observer, an impression of mediocrity." In the face of such conjecture, it was natural for half the populace to view economists as overly-entrenched in a Malthusian didactic, while the other half felt an irresistible urge to strip to their skivvies and run screaming through their local supermarket to fling themselves with abandon into the deli's hollandaise sauce.

Ever since the 1930s, theorists have debated the viability of a market that allots only one repairman for every forty brokers, the conservatives among them reasoning that it is no wonder so many stocks, bonds, and commodities lie about in ruins. Further, it can be argued that the period around 1960 - the classical period of neoclassic classism - was, in fact, classifiable as a classless conundrum. Most financial insultants agree that the central event of this period took place when Cleen-necks provided a framework on which Sneezeheimer could at last void his green deposits.

Kraft asserted that macroeconomics would never achieve viability until the economist could add cheese, butter, and a dash of milk. And then we had Hicks, Sorrow, and Debreueueu demonstrating how microeconomics could attain to general equilibrium theory while synthesizing theoretical models against a rapidly growing quantity of statistical data - followed by the inevitable backlash of dainty cucumber sandwiches served with a brisk oolong.

In a time of integration, it becomes easy to view the past from the point of view of the present. McCatchkickinidit (the Third), and many nineteenth century economists were able to take the view that Adam Smith had established the basic framework of the subject and that all that remained was to fill in the finer details - a little shadow to thicken the raised eyebrow of interest, a little hanky dab on the runny nose of inflation, and a poke in the scrawny ribs of the old hooker, free trade.

In a similar vein, Armature Butt Trumpeter was confident that there was one general equilibrium system, and that Wall-ass had discovered it. This enabled him to make remarks such as:

“As far as pure theory is concerned, Wall-ass is, in my opinion, the greatest of all economists . . . now we had the only work by an economist that will stand comparison with the achievements of theoretical physics. Compared with this, most of the theoretical writings of the period are like cheddar beside tilsett, and no jalapenos on the side, either.”

However, this period did not last. Behind it trailed a proliferation of schools. In macroeconomics there followed:

- Keynesians
- Post-Keynesians
- Not-so-keen-enymoores
- Keynesmyname, moolahsmygame theorists
- Traditional monetarists
- Yo-sparadime, bro-ists
- Corporate welfare bum spankists

And the microeconomist realm spawned:

- Game theorists
- General equilibrium theorists
- Leech ‘n’ vamp theorists
- Experimental fly-by-night economists
- Keepyer-filthylucre-yapig-ists
- Paretian welfare economists
- The Ben Franks Rminebud economists
- Gouge and grabbists
- And various non-Paretian approaches, such as:
 - We’llall-enduponwelfare –ists
 - And Getyerslice-beforethe-othersumbich-ists

Armed with a well-rounded historical perspective, Fatty then proceeded to explore the specialized history of the institution of banking itself, which we shall see took a full frontal approach.

12

A banker is a person so generous, he'd give the sleeves out of his vest.
- from Musings.

Although banking has existed in some form or other for eons - ever since the first cave man said, "Me have!" - it was sometime in the early seventeenth century that modern banking is said to have had its inception. The word *bank* comes from the Sanskrit for *bangā*, or the sound the head makes when knocked against a tree, as was wont to occur at the hands of early collection agents.

Later in history, English merchants began burying gold by the roots of money trees, and used paper currency in its stead to facilitate trade. Numerous banking terms were engendered by this practice. There arose, for example, an *interest* in locating said tree. The bank opened *branches*, and encouraged clients to *leave* their money in their hands. Then there's the term *wooden* nickel. And, if you take out a mortgage, you *willow* us *fir* life. And, finally, you'll be *sycamore* debt, not to mention any more lame tree jokes.

Checking was introduced in the United States shortly after the onset of the South American rubber trade, which came in handy when the first check bounced like a jackrabbit. Digitized bank cards followed quickly on the heels of checks, but were immediately recalled until the invention of bank machines could come to pass.

Opportunities for employment in the banking field have expanded greatly during recent years. Beginning with the greater use of computers in

the 1960s, banks have been able to reform both traditional and new services, exponentially advancing the cause of corporate fraud.

In the early half of the twentieth century, the Federal Reserve initiated reforms, ostensibly to render order and security to America's financial arena, but substantially, in fact, to provide an everyman corporate magnate, one Wally Capitalo, with all the power needed to pock the Earth back and forth across the tennis net of exploitation. When Capitalo wanted the market to swing any particular way, he pushed key buttons at his command. This was the position Fatty Canberge aspired to, the one Aunty Gizzarda had resolutely set her sights upon.

In point of fact, however, Fatty was resolved to carry the whole caboodle farther and deeper than ever before. He intended to bring the word *entrepreneur* to new heights, to create fresh meaning to mass-scale unarmed robbery. He would unleash his inner predator in every feasible direction. If the common person thought bank fees, for example, were getting out of hand, they were snoozing in last year's boot. Fatty's mind was a cauldron of creative synthesis to fashion all kinds of complex schemes pertaining to radical new gougerie.

Rendering fresh power and meaning to market manipulation was the gist of Fatty Canberge's visionary potency. Fortunately for the world, the financier's potency fell limp just as he was hunkering himself into position to get monetarily laid, when a peculiar, some say karmic, turn of events suddenly steered Fatty in a downward spiral. That, combined with the complex of aforementioned unattended shadow issues, would overwhelm the will forces of the vampish bovine, delivering him to a destiny from which he would be powerless to recover.

The precipitating occasion would be the AGM of the National Bankers Association. It would be here that Canberge would meet Lula Cammella, daughter of a corporate magnate whose name only the foolish would dare utter, hence the alias, Wally Capitalo. Suffice to say, he was a figure in league with the Prince of Darkness, himself.

Canberge would devise an intricate scheme to get himself into the inner sanctum, the corporate heart, of Lula's father, and once there, take over the reins of power. Lula had her own ambitions, however. She would use her copious feminine charms to access key information heretofore

locked safely in the vault of the Canberge psyche, which she would pass on to daddy-dear in exchange for substantial monetary rewards.

Overnight, Canberge would fall from golden heights to rock bottom bankruptcy. He would never know, exactly, the mechanics of his betrayer's treachery, but he would know with certainty that he was effectively wiped off the face of the financial world.

Fatty Canberge's life, despite best laid plans of aunts and men, would, in the end, be rendered to nothing more than that of a common bag man, a destitute of the streets, causing the now late Aunt Gizzarda, literally, to turn over in her grave - a feat unparalleled in the history of psychic phenomena, due to the fact that she had been cremated. Within the confines of his destiny, the only accounting Fatty would be engaging in pertained to spare change, the only acquisition, a shopping cart, the only commodities, empty recyclables. For the remainder of his incarnation, he would experience the other side of the economic sandpaper that Wally Capitalo was busy plying, as he honed off any bits that slowed his insatiable money machine from loading its bottomless coffers.

Two things, at this point, remain to be said. One, we have gotten far ahead of ourselves. For, as things stand now, in what our story renders as the present, Fatty Canberge is yet a loan officer working his way onward and upward. And two, while we are so far ahead of ourselves, let me add a few details. I just can't resist revealing that, in the end, all was not a total washout for Canberge. As a bagman, he had access to his own distinct social forum. One day, he met a bag lady, and they hit it off. Over the course of time, the undynamic duo managed to have a few bag kids, and even adopt a bag dog. But enough. What happens to the illustrious bag family from that point may well become the property of another book.

Or not.

"First off," began Fatty Canberge, with an air of incontestable authority, "I can begin to process your loan application if you can identify yourself."

Pulling a mirror out of my pocket, I looked into it and announced, "That's me, all right!"

Choosing to ignore this upwelling of irrationality for the moment, Canberge explored the realm of collateral. “You have no assets? Tell me about your liabilities.”

“No problem. I can lie with the best of them!”

As the interview proceeded, it went over like snot in a bottle of Perrier. Incensed by the subsequent rejection, I grew intent on retaliation. I stole a seven-pound fish, wrapped it, put it in one of the bank’s safe deposit boxes, and strolled off with a delicious feeling of satisfaction.

13

A chrysanthemum by any other name would be easier to spell.

- excerpt from The Annals of Subinkian Literature.

In order to understand the social and spiritual underpinnings that resulted in the quirky behavior of Yours Truly, the one and only Hebert Flabeau, we’d have to go back to the beginning. Well, not the *very* beginning (surely reincarnation must enter into causation, as it would be quite impossible to ascribe the exponential deviance of my character within the span of a single lifetime. In fact, later on in this tale, and at peril of the author’s reputation, readers may find themselves falling through the skeins of time to distant past or future life scenarios . . .). At any rate, for now, let me commence with my birth.

It was in the middle of the twentieth century, in the middle of the year and in the middle of the night, that I was born. It was in the middle of the continent, and in the middle of the Great Lakes region and, in fact, centered so on the northern border that it was not established what citizenship, if any, I had. For the duration of my life, I would not know whether I was an American, a Canadian, or a Subinkian.

Unofficially, I suppose, I eventually came to consider myself a Subinkian. Subinkia was not divided into nations, states, or provinces, but by way of ecological zones. If North Americans, for example, were to adopt the Subinkian system, the continent would consist of regions, of ecosystems - the Great Lakes, The Prairie, the Southwest Desert, and so on.

I was very young when I was born. At any rate, in a rather middling way, I was washed ashore of one of the Great Lakes by a mid-sized wave. And it was upon the bank of this lake that I had the fortune to meet up with my father and mother. My father being Icelandic, and my mother Cuban, established me as an Ice-Cube.

I include here my earliest journal entry, should fame ever demand fodder for the cannon of history: mmmm – nummm pablum gooble yummmmmm ann bicketts mmm gooble gling.

Although one of seven offspring, I was an only child. It wasn't long before I attained status as a poster child for birth control. One day, I declared that I was running away from home. My mother was quick to respond, "On your mark . . ."

When I was five, my parents moved from the edge of the city to a more central location. I decided to move with them. In fact, as a child my parents moved quite often, but I always somehow managed to find them.

I had a bright side. Even at a young age, I was often seen with my nose in a book. Eventually, my parents bought me a handkerchief.

The school I attended, "Our Lady of Perpetual Hardship," was a solid brick hulk whose interior smelled of foolscap and nun garb. Serious-minded teachers whiled away their time in its dim recesses, instructing pedantically on sterile academics and the dogma of The Church. Brainwashing ran rampant . . . extra sudsy, conditioner included - wash, rinse, repeat - Thou Shalt Nots thundering upon young victims' formative hearts and minds. The garden of intellect, saturated with herbicides and inspiration-cides, ensured sterility before any weeds of dissent could make an appearance.

The playground hummed with activity - hopscotch, milking tobacco juice from grasshoppers, gang wars, and creative stone throwing. Some say it was the rock in the back of the skull that accelerated my looniness, although more than one witness will attest that the stone struck a denser material than its own, effectively pulverizing upon contact.

Even as a child, I had my quirks. My favorite ice cream was an onion-asparagus blend, and my favorite color, paisley. I considered my lucky number to be 417,233. And my patron saint was Salvador Dali.

I was not popular on the school playground. I ran with the wrong crowd - I was a lone wolf. Furthermore, the sight of my wolfen ears put other children off. Nor did the yellow eyes enhance social rapport. Later in life, contact lenses came on line and I would don a pair of blue-tints that, combined with my native yellow, made for vivid emerald peepers that became popular on St. Patrick's Day. Alternatively, it would become a favorite pastime to walk around in public with only one contact lens in, to make for a disturbing contrast of one yellow, one green eye staring out at befuddled onlookers.

Meanwhile, back on the playground, certain behaviors proved a turn-off for fellow students. During a baseball game, for instance, relegated to the outfield so as to be of least disruption, I would forget which team I was on. When the occasional ball came my way, convinced I was on the other team, I would throw it further behind myself, often over the fence of a neighboring resident. I can never remember hitting a ball. I consistently swung about five to eight seconds after the ball had crossed the plate. Other than through an occasional walk, I had never been to first base. To make it to first base by my own merit became an aspiration that reflected through my whole life - something that would elude me at every turn.

Sports, and recreational activities in general, simply put, were not my forte - unless you considered life to be a game of badminton with Hebert Flabeau as the birdie. As a young child, my parents put a ribbon in my hair and sent me off to ballet class. But I was so skinny, I couldn't wear a tutu. The instructor had to special order a one-one. After a while, my father tried a new tack. He gave me a bat for my birthday. The first day I went outside to play with it, it flew away.

I had a timid side, which didn't help. I was afraid of heights. I built a tree house on a stump. When someone sneezed, I only said, "Gesund!"

Winter sports were not my scene either. Down at the lakeshore pond, I preferred to skate on the other side of the ice. I was kicked out of the local bowling alley for my signature style: bowling overhand. This persistent quirkiness was a foreshadow. For the duration of my life, I would choose to take the road less traveled, which would forever put me in need of front-end alignment.

However, in school I learned many important things, including reading (primarily to gain access to the medical wisdom of Dr. Dolittle); how to write a poem of one line's duration; arithmetic (I discovered there were three kinds of people: those who could count, and those who couldn't); and finger-painting, which I loved, although I was not blessed with any particular talent. When I brought artwork home, my mom would hang it on the inside of the refrigerator door. "I'm just trying to keep it fresh," she would insist.

Surprisingly, I made straight A's in school. Of course, my B's were a little crooked. Perhaps my real talent lay in two areas: ceiling sculpture - as in, heaving spitballs upon the overhead canvas - and devising annoyances for those alien entities commonly referred to as *gurrlls*.

Other than a couple of individuals, my teachers were faceless nuns - strict, intolerant, *habit*-bound, ever alert to contain any waywardness children would dare indulge in. In a more liberal mood, they would permit occasional expressions containing exclamation points, such as "Hey!" "Oh!" "Hmm!" or even an occasional "Wow!" - although this last pronouncement would generally be confined to the last day of classes before Christmas or summer break.

All in all, school was a special challenge for me. My doctor told me I had Attention Deficit Disorder. He said, "A.D.D. is a complex disorder, blah, blah, blah . . ." I didn't pay attention to the rest. On top of A.D.D., I had dyslexia, which I wrote about in my dairy.

14

Oh give me a home where the buffalo roam - and I'll show you a home that really needs carpet cleaning.

- from The Hebert Flabeau Songbook

It has been said by students of reincarnation that one chooses one's parents, place to live, and general circumstances that one is born into. In that case, when I did my choosing, I must have been distracted because, as a child, I detested the urban locale. I often wished that I could grow up in the countryside, the Wild West, a leech-infested swamp, or any tract of forest dense enough to require Houdini mentoring for a weasel to pass through.

Although my home was located in a huge sprawling city, there was a period when all was relatively quiet. But you couldn't clear your throat, or you'd miss it - squashed between 3:48 am, when the last caterwauling drunk stumbled home, and 4:22 am, when the morning bread trucks made their deliveries. There were more reasons I was not enamored of cities. For one thing, dwellings of all sorts blotted the landscape. For another, these dwellings were inhabited by strange entities commonly referred to as "people."

The city had its own distinct nature life. In the morning you could wake to the sound of birds coughing. They say that if you drink water from the Fountain of Youth you will never get a day older. The same could be said of certain sources of America's drinking water.

But, to make the most of it, I would wander the minute bits of nature found in parks and ravines, befriending birds, animals and wildlands. Some of these regions you could enter at peril of becoming hopelessly lost for up to four minutes. I still remember the exaltation of sunrise over an industrial smokestack, and listening to the sounds of pop cans clattering along in a

creek, while watching the water's brown and bubbling surge wend its way downstream. One morning, I discovered the hidden boudoir of a raccoon curled high overhead in a fir tree. As I passed beneath, up in the gentle waft of smog it had sneezed in its sleep.

Sometimes my friend, Lester, would accompany me. Lester was cool for three reasons. One, he knew a lot about animals and nature in general. Two, he had a bull terrier that could catch a rabbit, bite it in two, and swallow the pieces in one gulp. And three, he was the only person I knew, besides myself, who was not only unafraid of skunks, but outright enjoyed the aroma.

We became resourceful; we learned to get by with what the land provided. One day, to expedite transport down-river, we fashioned a raft with our bare hands, using rusty barrels, tires, and miscellaneous household appliances, topping it off with a crow's nest shopping cart. It's almost not worth mentioning - due to the fact that we got off easy - that we sank within a hundred yards of launching, and had to be rushed to the hospital for toxic poisoning, polio, and scarlet fever. I was back on my feet in a week and, although Lester had to endure amputation of a gangrenous funny bone, in no time he was back to his deviated old self again.

I had an instinctive rapport with animals. By age 9, I could speak several languages, including raccoon, weasel, white-tailed deer, and rainbow trout. I had great patience in those days. For two hours every day, I worked diligently at teaching my pet turtle to fetch. I kept at it, stuck it out - it was three full years before I would admit defeat.

I did, however, achieve significant results training my dog to speak - only one-word answers, mind you, but it was a start:

“Where was Santa Claus?”

“Roof!”

“How's life?”

“Ruff!”

“What's the opposite of on?”

“Arf!”

“How do you like your meat?”

“Rah!”

15

When an octopus puts on deodorant, how does he remember where he started?

- from Musings

Many's the 5 a.m. when Lester and I embarked on an outing before the owls had plumped their pillows, while the masked raccoon was still stumbling home from his night of debauchery, and the chicken-breath foxes were slipping through the shadows. And when the sun broke over the pond, there, in the waters, we'd find the otters, frolicking, cutting fish farts, trouty bubbles popping on the surface.

Those were great times. Of course, we were ardent apprentices of the famed Dr. Dolittle, obsessed with breaking the communication barrier between human and other species. Although, as mentioned earlier, I could sustain a brief conversation with a few species, it was not until after applying countless hours to cracking animal codes, and making only poor headway that I lucked out.

One bright summer day, while my family and I were vacationing in a distant land (was it Subinkia, or did I just *dream* that? . . .), in the dusty attic of a cottage rumored as a former waystop for Dr. Dolittle, I struck interspecies linguistic gold. Tucked under a floorboard, I found the good Doctor's lost journal outlining core secrets gleaned through long research.

The text explored topics, such as: species-by-species introductions (I'd been on the wrong track with my blanket, "How's it hangin'?" accost); accepted protocol for engaging the topic of sex; empathic resonances to promote loquaciousness; and etiquette around conversation wrap-ups (including handy exits when cornered by a boar). As if this weren't enough,

in the back of the journal I encountered an appendix, including sections on administering IQ tests without species bias, and an animal rights subsection on keeping gossip from degenerating into slander.

Subsequent application of the Dolittle tenets and principles opened up a whole universe of discovery. Results converged in three main arenas:

1) Birds and animals have many abilities that humans assume are unique to their own species, including musical ability.

Appreciation:

Initial research on a flock of Manhattan pigeons indicated that the birds considered the acoustics of the Savoy Ballroom superior to a common barn - although, it should be added, they were put off by the dress code. And a group of song sparrows agreed that the delicate composition of an aquarelle has a healing effect on existential anxiety. After much debate, the sparrows came to a consensus that it was difficult to refer to the typical post-modern, atonal composition, with its grating dissonance and excessive use of the mood furioso, as anything other than a kibbutz.

Composition:

A Baltimore oriole was able to produce a substantial score entitled *Tweet-Tu-Ta-Sheer-Eeet*, which impressed musicologists with its sophisticated dynamics, advanced use of counterpoint, and groundbreaking use of syncopation. There was a split in the learned ranks of academia, however, over the final movement, with one camp claiming the bird had avoided bringing proper closure to the composition (after all, there was no resolve to tonic, no finality in the classical sense.) The other camp, however, defended the final movement as a coda-par-excellence. In short, modern music did not have to defer to the classical regime. The Baltimore oriole's work was a bird of a different feather. A *Tweet* may not be a *Ta-dum*, but what issued from an avian's beak was more than just a progression of populist arpeggios.

Performance:

When a rookery of seabirds performed *Tee-She-Screeeee*, they not only broke new ground with a post-modern soundscape using only three notes in repetition throughout the entire performance, they also demonstrated a

disciplined self-reflection - an inner ornithology, it could be said - so much so, that audiences were metaphysically transported. The ensemble is currently rehearsing a new work that will comprise a synthesis of crop and gizzard expressions.

2) Although humans are superior in certain kinds of intelligence, animals and birds are superior in other kinds of intelligence. Consider navigational abilities, the millions of cats and dogs who don't have to do a lick of work to get by, and fish who live in schools. The occasional noteworthy fox has been attributed with the ability to cajole an investor into risking a sizable nest egg on a dubious scheme. And an increase has been reported in the number of moose nominated for membership in Mensa.

3) Animals and birds are not only intelligent, aware, and willful, they also can communicate effectively with humans and relate to them as close, caring friends.

Once you're in tight with a porcupine, for instance, you can count on it to resist gossiping behind your back. Mink can be very loyal and forgiving, almost to excess - one needs vigilance against codependency. And you can depend on a gopher for emotional support while going through a relationship breakup, or even if you just need a place to cool out for a few days.

One dynamic worth mentioning is that I found it more productive to start communicating with domestic animals before taking on the wild variety. After I enrolled in Avian as a Second Language classes, I began to develop a rapport, at the expense of several cartons of Saltines, with a neighbor's parrot. But it was not until, under threat of withholding the Bretons - gourmand of every self-respecting parrot - that Pawl-Lee (he was an upscale bird who had refused the cliché rendition of his moniker) caved in and forked over systematic code-breaking data.

From the parrot, I moved on to urban residents of the avian population - pigeons, house sparrows, and starlings. I was able, over time, to break

through the slang-thick brogue of the sparrow, and developed a fair bit of vocabulary in Pidgin-pigeon, but called it a day when faced with the pretentious and unpunctuated stream of “poetry” the starling put forth.

It was an extraordinary juncture in the journey of my progress when I finally began breaking into wild bird languages. Like a magical tent perched in the Sahara which, when you look from the outside seems just a little bigger than a liberal-sized outhouse but, when you open the flap, you behold the expansive realm of a great palace - this was what turning the corner into wildbird ways was akin to. I will come back to this later. First I need to explore a few of the tangents Lester and I traversed on route to our ultimate destination.

16

A good beaver is never stumped.

- from Musings.

One of the tangents Lester and I explored before we broke into the wild bird arena - the sauvage aviani - consisted of a somewhat bold foray into the realm of animal lingo. As we dove in, we found ourselves quickly overwhelmed by the challenge of rodentine verb conjugations, and even more so with syntax orientation in porcupinese. And talk about inflection, the business of *how* you say it, not *what* you say (generally, deep voice =

hostile, high voice = submissive), well - all that went out the window when we pissed a group of deer off to the point of needing to hurriedly scale a tree. For two hours, perched aloft, we found ourselves scrambling to explain in halting ungulate that it was only due to poor intonation that our well-meant, “how velvety falls the morning light upon your antlers,” could be misconstrued as, “you guys are a buncha morons.”

After the harrowing angry deer episode, we chose to cool our jets for a while. In time, I managed to overcome my trepidation sufficiently to approach a snowshoe rabbit, but soon found myself over my head trying to follow the thread of the rabbit’s existential philosophy. Even denser, I found, were the mental gymnastics of the muskrat’s post-structuralism. Compared with these savants, I was rather taken aback when faced with the beaver’s crude logger mentality. Yet, all things considered, next to the wolverine, who displayed the temperament of a brawling thug, the beaver was a walk in the park.

Special challenges came our way. We experienced considerable difficulty making out what the chipmunk was on about, as it habitually talked with its mouth full. Weasels, we often discovered, were afflicted with fairly severe A.D.D., and horses were generally pretty negative, with their “neigh” to this and “nay-ay to that.” Despite this social drawback, however, they had a stable outlook on life. Speaking of which, the mule proved eloquent, bilingual actually, in both donkese and equine. But ducks, with their single-word vocabulary, fell into an obsessive-compulsive track of insulting physicians. Cows, however, took the cake. Because they only laid down one or two words over a ten-minute span, it took a day or two to get past introductions and the weather - then we had to start all over again, as the weather went on shifting even as we discussed it.

At first, we were singularly impressed with the linguistic command of the red fox. But, as we delved deeper, we realized the fox was not fully self-reflective regarding its use of grammar, sometimes, for instance, exhibiting confusion by using an anomalous verb in the place of an auxiliary verb.

Another tangent, a delight actually, entailed a foray into the plant kingdom. An old oak charmed us with quaint colloquialisms, then suddenly switched into a rather nasal diatribe that amounted, essentially, to a complaint about the sapsucker’s bloodthirsty manner.

Communication with virtually any aspect of nature was feasible, even with the non-sentient. While a spring was too young to talk, we found it a truism that brooks babble. A stream could run on a la James Joyce, while a river preferred current topics, subjects you could bank on. It occasionally waxed rapid in speech, and eventually ran off at the mouth.

New ground was broken when we entered into the kingdom of Insectivora, although I found insectine grammar lacking in definite articles. Mosquitoes had a tendency to drone on, and fruit flies, a compunction to center the conversation around fashion and gay rights. The common wood tick had a rather annoying personality, a real way of getting under your skin. The horse fly was actually a credit to its race, being bilingual, with only a slight trace of fly accent in an otherwise faultless equine.

17

Whose cruel idea was it to put an S in the word lisp, and three Ts in the word stutter?

- from Musings.

Onward and upward. As I mentioned earlier, we broke into the crème de la crème when we breached the wild bird threshold. Not that all members of the wild bird community make exceptional partners in a dialogue. In every group there are the inevitable shifters and layabouts, and we had to work our way through our share of these. There was the prima donna canary; the

hummingbird who mumbled on, refusing to clearly articulate; a self-blaming, scapegoat, dyslexic (“ooc”) pigeon; the untenable, smart-ass mockingbird; a loquacious, gull-like avian known as the petrel, who never seemed to run out of gas; a big-mouth pelican who couldn’t be trusted with secrets; and, of course, the bittern, with its sour grapes attitude about not being chosen as the national bird.

Some members of the avian race, however, I took a liking to by default, as it were. The sandpiper, for instance, I found significantly less offensive compared with a bagpiper. And although many considered the common snipe to be on the crude side, I found it quaint, with its idiomatic manner, e.g., “Who waz that tomata I saw yoo with las’ nite?”

A few basic hurdles had to be met before we could reach a significant interspecies communication plateau. One being the universal use of the homonym, “tweet,” which we discovered could be morphed into 4,762 different meanings, demanding on our part an exceptionally intricate ear for intonation. Some birds, notably the wren and a number of the more talkative songbirds, had to be coached to slow down, to enunciate each word, or else, to us, the whole passage would just run together, sounding like so much Greek. Still others, the raven, for example, waxed thick with idioms. A researcher would have to hang out in Odin’s ‘hood, the corvus equivalent to the East Village, for a number of months to effectively break into its jargon.

Sociological aspects of communication entered into the picture, as well. Ethnicity, age, gender, and social class could have significant effects on what and how information was communicated. And migration posed a serious problem, as Dolittle (1894) had already articulated when he described, “the morphology in urban flocks of the American Crow, meant that I was able to comprehend less than half of what they had to say.” This coming from the master, himself - what hope had a couple of neophytes, such as Lester and I? No sooner had we achieved fluent corvus, when a crow would break into a Spanish patois - whoa, whoa - mas lento, amigo. No habla Ingles?

On top of local deviance, international influence held sway. Consider a tern who mixes Portuguese, Icelandic, Spanish, and even a smattering of the lost Antarctic dialect. Not even a United Nations translator has to deal with such a morphological Babel.

I managed to rise to most challenges of cultural/anatomical linguistic differences by applying a little adaptive creativity where needed. I was soon able to match nasal inflections with that great acupuncturist of trees, the hairy woodpecker (who, by the way, shared many mirthful moments at the expense of the bald eagle). To imitate the vocal machinations of the vulture, I learned to close off my sinus cavities and block my pharynx with a half-swallowed stone. And, in order to converse effectively with the cardinal, I carried into the field a bit of sandpaper (to rough up my hard palate) and duct tape (to wrap the ~~uvulæ~~ ~~uva~~-~~ursa~~ the little thingy that hangs down in the back of the throat).

18

The deeper I probed into the nature of the loon, the more I found myself conducting an inner ornithology.

- from Hebert's journal.

A foray through the gist of a few of my favorite encounters with the wild bird kingdom follows:

The trumpeter swan came across as an elegant, highbrow individual who had a mastery of Swanchoo, the avian equivalent of Latin. But it could not conceal a degree of disgruntlement, a feeling that had arisen in response to insufficient royalty payments for creative endeavors rendered, notably *The Seven Swans* of Brothers Grimm, and Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. It also felt

put off by its name, claiming that any sensitive human, at the time of pronouncement of identities would have arrived, not at trumpeter swan, but at the more refined title, french horn swan.

At the time of my approach, the duck was deep in thought, pondering the existential absurdity, specifically, to wit - how much more toxic metal needs to be ingested along its flyway before hunters call it quits on duck soup. Like the swan, the duck, also, was awaiting royalties due, as co-inventor of the adhesive tape that goes by its name. As well, there were ongoing proceedings aimed at the estate of the Marx Brothers.

The goose disliked the reputation it had acquired, claiming to be anything but silly (although, as it said this, I couldn't help noticing that it rolled its eyes and wagged its head like an epileptic monkey, while repeatedly slapping a webbed foot across a portrait of the Rt. Hon. J. Cleese, Minister).

From the frigatebird I learned several useful phrases in avian profanity. When stressed, the bird would repeat the two-word expression that gave rise to its name. From there, its swearing waxed increasingly eloquent until it reached an unholy apex, from which point it would start over again.

The loon, I found somewhat irrational, as it glared at me with a red and swimming eye. But I was able to discover the source of its angst when the conversation alighted upon dietary matters. In the loon's view, "If you ever come to a place in your life where you are eating nothing but fish, we'll see how well *you* handle it." Further, the loon was able to articulate that it felt affronted by the name it had been struck with, insisting "rationally-challenged waterfowl" was a more fitting handle.

The wilson's warbler had a fair command of alliteration – tweeet, twiddle, tweeken, tweery, and on. However, when it broke from this, it tended to load its speech with excessive adjectives and adverbs. Let's hit a noun, now and then, I insisted, but my plea fell on deaf ears.

The flamingo, I discovered, had developed a complex around not living up to what society viewed as its ideal image, as exemplified by legions of plastic semblances adorning front lawns across the nation.

But the spoonbill outdid the flamingo, in terms of self-abnegation. It complained bitterly about its forkbill cousin lording over it and, even worse, its chopstick relative from the east who was forever claiming superior Zen-sense. Then, I realized with a chuckle, I had been had. I suppose if I'd been paying closer attention to body language, I would have been able to read that the spoonbill was not being straight with me, that I'd been the unwitting victim of its odd sense of humor. It was not the first, nor the last time, a clever bird would put one over on me.

I was, at first, stunned to discover that the operatic swainson's thrush seemed to know practically the entire body of Andrea Bocelli's repertoire. But, as time wore on, I began to detect discrepancies - andante where it should have been allegro, pesto when what was called for was a white sauce. Further, I believe its treatise on polyphonic counterpoint contained statements that could successfully be contested by Bernstein.

When I first encountered the egret, I thought that it must have laryngitis. Only later did I discover that it had been practicing mime on me. However, it seemed to me that it used that peculiar theatric art as a ploy to keep from exposing its poor sense of diction, a theory that gained momentum when, lost in ungoverned speech, the egret seemed unable to differentiate between terms, using, for example, "rupicolous" in place of "rupestrine."

The above entries represent only a portion of a body of work I would like to continue. Still under investigation are numerous unexplored arenas, including the capacity for hawks and eagles to lip-read from great distances, the exotic, beat lifestyle of the bohemian waxwing, the two-stepping prowess of the Kentucky warbler, the idiomatic styling of the blackbird, with its "Yo! Gimme three, bro!" manner, and, for sports fans, the batting average of the indigo bunting.

In addition, it is my intention to engage in seminal work that will address bird gestures and dance. Of note, the material will include data on

the duck's cha-cha, the swift's quickstep, the merengue of the magpie, the ptarmigan's ptango, the flamingo's flamenco, and the salsa of the mexican warbler. Sub-notes will include information on the fox-trot, the deer-waltz, and, of course, the dolphin-lindy.

19

Don't criticize a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes - 'cause then you're a mile away and you have his shoes.

- a gem of advice passed on from Hebert senior to Hebert junior.

Let me address a few elements of my upbringing I have thus far failed to mention.

Because my parents were procrastinators by nature, I was eight years old before I was named. At first, they wanted to call me Bill, because I had been due on the first of the month. But, as time wore on, I increasingly displayed traits of my grandfather, Hebert senior, and so had been named after him.

While my grandmother was so religious she wore stain glass spectacles, my grandfather had evolved into a decrepit hedonist who, as time wore on, was losing more and more of his faculties. As Hebert senior's condition deteriorated, he began to view Taco Bell as a Mexican phone

company. It took him an hour and a half to watch Sixty Minutes. An opportunist who had made his living, before retiring, selling “No Soliciting” signs door-to-door, Hebert senior was thought by many to maintain his residence on the weird side of the moon.

Some thought it was his style of wearing his sideburns behind his ears. Others, because he wore false teeth with braces. And then there was his special request: when he died, he wanted his friends to bring black confetti to his funeral. On his gravestone, he wanted inscribed, “What are you looking at?” But there was nothing wrong with Hebert senior that reincarnation wouldn’t resolve.

Despite his dysfunctions, Hebert senior had attained to a ripe age - he was so old, he could remember when fast food was an antelope. When he was a boy, the Dead Sea was only sick. His memory was slipping away. He played the violin, but the violin always won. The other day, he had locked the keys in his car. Fortunately, he had forgotten to get out first.

But, despite rousing bouts of senility, Hebert senior often came up with useful advice to pass my way. “Live each day as though it were your last, and some day you’ll be right.” And, “Always keep a smile on your face - because it looks silly on other parts of your body.” Practical advice, too: “Never hire an electrician with no eyebrows.”

Hebert senior taught me a whole compendium of social skills. One area I especially appreciated was dance instruction. Starting with barn dance technique, he taught me how to use cow pies to lubricate steps, and how to ruffle chicken feathers without incensing the rooster. This latter was essential, as, not having a partner to practice with, I had to dress a hen up as a Ginger Rogers look-alike, and go to it. Some of these follows were ungrateful, to say the least. Maybe I wasn’t the slickest lead, but I had to learn somehow.

I also learned how to waltz with a wooden leg, in case it would one day come in handy. And I learned the cha (a simpler version of the cha-cha). I discovered, after much experimentation, that Jell-O sneakers lent new meaning to my soft-shoe technique.

Pirouettes were second nature to me. Having long since been labeled spinny, I could now cash in on the foible. After endless rehearsal, I could perform a decent sashay or promenade without stubbing a toe, although no

amount of practice allowed me to execute a demi-plie without requiring a follow-up visit to a chiropractor.

And the pas-de-deux was destined to remain forever out of reach, as well. Even with the best coaching available, I was unable to progress beyond a pas-de-trois. But I made up for it in other areas. When I was working an argentine tango over the coals of a Zydeco beat, I could dance the pajamas off an orangutan.

Ultimately, my dance training degenerated into a choreomaniac frenzy, when my grandfather hired an epileptic to mentor me in freeform movement.

20

*It's called the American Dream because
you have to be asleep to believe it.*

from the Subinkian Social Handbook

The 1950s evolved some peerless cultural distinctions, not the least of which was you could buy popcorn from an itinerant Popcorn Man who would set himself up in front of a school to net children who swarmed like a squabble of seagulls after various baits - popcorn, peanuts, and, of course, the wonderful teeth-demolishing red-dye candy apples. I habitually indulged in

feeding my inner pigeons with the primary fruit known in intellectual circles as *Cornus Popusi*. But I digress.

As became evident to sociologists who beaver away at such study, the decade of the 1950s was a time when people relied on a support system to sustain their limited perspective of the world - some chemical brackets to fend off the seep of consciousness or, put another way, the unfolding of spiritual awareness. Sugar, seconal, alcohol, TV, caffeine, nicotine, yippetty-skippetty-ine - a whole buffet of slop set out in the substance trough - kept the populace dazed and dumbed over the course of a delusional decade.

In tandem with this embrace of unconsciousness, the 50's demonstrated some noteworthy cultural elements. The art world engaged in plate decoration and paint-by-numbers. The dance community hip-rolled the hula-hoop, and music was charged with the soul-deep sound of Perry Como. All this stimulating culture kept mental juices frothing, and delivered the population to a comfort zone, while diverting focus from trivial matters, such as racial discrimination, sexism, materialism, and the corporate and military subjugation of humanity.

Television, of course, commandeered a position well out front of the cultural milieu. TV which, we find, closely rhymes with TB, rivaled its phonic cousin in consumption, a consumption of the inner life. Radiation pulsing at a mesmerizing mental Beta wave jacklighted the populace, lulling it in a drug-like fashion.

Fortunately for me, my parents didn't purchase a TV until I was 8 - so I missed out on much opportunity for cultural destitution. I was, by nature, sufficiently zoned out without the stupefying effect of the zombie-box, anyway. Times when I did watch TV, I can remember fondly some of my favorite moments - one in particular being the classic - guy getting slapped in the face for being fresh by a high-maintenance, mink-clad fox.

While exploring this medium (a fitting label, as TV can be considered neither great, nor fine), important matters need to be attended, pertaining to the formidable comic book hero, Superman, because my odd frame of mind and eccentric behavior derive, at least in part, from the influence of this ultra-spandex character.

The man of steel, invulnerable except under duress of a rare, green-glowing element, had a dual personality, alternating between mild and powerful. That he was lax to work out his schizoid condition with a therapist

underlies a disturbing element in his personality. Other behaviors in question include his socially inappropriate tights and gaudy colors, and an indulgence in some nasty habits few of us were aware of, such as chewing on razor blades for the joy of spitting steel confetti and, of more pressing concern: a propensity to get off on his x-ray vision - the world as one big strip show. Further, there were rumors to the effect that he just couldn't resist cheating on the dance floor, impressing the socks off onlookers with his ability to glide about like a son-of-a-gun, seeming to float through an incredible array of light-footed maneuvers.

Superman's readership, children for the most part, reveled in his invulnerability - a handy thing to have when you're a small being in a big threatening world. As a child, Superpaperboy could deliver to 1600 addresses before breakfast and, just for fun, permit neighborhood dogs to break their teeth on his leg.

Blue and red - those were his corporate colors. True blue and fightin' red. His goals, as he matured, were to be morally righteous, to save the innocent, and to fight for truth, justice, and the American way. His creators went all out. "Let's make everything black and white, so justice can easily and always prevail. And let's portray life without substantial depth (like the 50's), and omit ponderous questions (again, like the 50's)." Unlike the 50's, however, they equipped him with dynamic powers.

But then, when you look deeper - and you might as well, now you've come this far, you poor bugger - you're compelled to ask, what were the *real* super powers? One super feat had to have been how Superman could maintain that job at the Daily Planet day-in and day-out, year after year. In later years, I would be unable to attain such tolerance for work. My lengthiest record for holding down a job would prove to be a year-long stint at the Post Office - and then only because, being the Post Office, I could nestle into Snooze City, as I sorted Florida-bound letters into the Alaska slot, or practice my soccer technique with parcels labeled fragile.

But Clark Kent kept it up. He never duked it out with his cigar-crunching boss, the blustering wolverine, Perry White. Never once did he admonish the eager beaver, golly-gee reporter, Jimmy Olsen, to get a life. And then there's Lois Lane; a journalist whose perception was dysfunctional to the tune of being unable to see past Clark Kent's glasses to the obviously identifiable Superguy. *You* are an investigative reporter!?

Finally, I don't need to add that Superman applied his unfailing super-tolerance to endure Ms. Lane's clockwork monthly rantings (as that would prove both inappropriate and politically incorrect).

21

I've never been able to figure how Superman managed to shave. Being a man of steel, did he have to use a cutting torch, or what?
from Musings

I was late to connect with the world of rock and roll. Rebellion was the last thing on my mind. Life just salamandered along swimmingly; I had it pretty easy. Breakfast was a bobbing swamp of Coco Puffs, lunch, banana sandwiches laced with white sugar, and dinner typically became an opportunity to get my inner beaver engineering mounds of mashed potatoes, trenching and forklifting, building canals for ketchup, and sculpting arctic landscapes. Outside of meals, I would squeeze in as much spiritual discipline as I could, in the form of checkers, cards, bowling, or torturing ants. What more could one ask for?

The only rock that I was intimate with was the kind that became a prize specimen to tote around in my pocket. And a roll was a bun to be

wolfed down by the dozen. I was not yet ready to embrace the intense music my peers were falling prey to.

Like a shrew beneath the social turf, the beat scene ran an undercurrent through the fifties. And, although I was then too young to have discovered Jack Kerouac, by the late Sixties a dog-eared copy of *On The Road* would lie by my bedside, from which I would rise to read by the crack of noon, or so, and put down again when I laid aside my owl cloak to retire at 5 a.m.

Five years earlier, however, the Lone Ranger was as bohemian as I could wax. I would leap upon my bike, Silver - a sporty one-speed machine that could smoothly slide through its gear. Actually the bike had two other gears, one called "feet" that I would use in trudge mode, while leading my horse up steep inclines of outlaw territory. The other, essentially an abandonment to the forces of gravity and acceleration, as I flew headlong down the steepest grades I could find.

One such adventure led to a foreshadow of destiny, in the form of Zg Joogiloofinoo. Zg was a human coyote, a beatnik who lived in a pad near The Village. Dressed in striped shirt and blue jeans, sporting tiny rose-colored shades through which he peered out at the world, all groovy and hip, he sauntered with a beat, swung his arms with a shuffle, and dwelled deep in the groove of 33 rpm a la Charlie Parker or John Coltrane, his demi-gods. His speech came in Ginsberg-like bits, with empty spaces between to give time to compose more. For reasons that would become apparent to the general populace by the next decade, but which, during the fifties, were known only to sociologists and law enforcement personnel, his eyes were glazed over like a rutting antelope.

One spring afternoon, flinging myself downhill on Silver, I flew, like a cliff-jumping buffalo, headlong into Zg, bowling us both through a hedge. I remember lying dazed, sprawled over a juniper bush, as Zg slowly rose on shaky feet. Being a resident of Stoner City, Arizona, he hadn't felt much impact. Pulling a daisy from his hair, his words waltzed forth, spinning in three-four segments. "Hey, Cat - wild! - what gives, dad? Flowerbeds aren't my scene . . . though tulips are better than three-lips . . . wildcat, your cool has flown. . . over the fence and me with it . . ."

Zg Joogiloofinoo, the beat cat, wailer of poesy dug the rain, dug ol' sol, wangled a way through weather, fine and foul. Unallergic to poison ivy,

he wore a fresh sprig every day where his lapel would have been, had he had one. Riding astride a reefer goose, be-bopping, wandering uncontained, if he'd had a resume, it would have read "salesman of rarefied incense, profits wafting up in smoke" . . . cool, daddy, coo-ool . . .

But, just before laying down a rendition of the poetic sauce Zg Joogiloofinoo was want to compose, we will detour through a sociological review, an outlay of track social, and, to do it right the stream must pass over to the author:

Thank you, Hebert. Let me, with authorish authority, paint an overview of existential options available to 20th century humanity, in a nut-wise nutshell:

If a person abides by convention, by the tenets of mainstream society - that is to say, lives the square life, a life that shallows through the waters of materialism - then Lady Soul gets the billing of a streetwalker. We could say, to pull the weed up by its root, that spiritual responsibility is skirted. And we could ask if laying our mitts on a pink Cadillac and a gold necklace is fair trade for the Fort Knox of the ethereal realm.

Alternatively, if a Beat lifestyle is opted for - maybe you have a knack for the Kerouac track - you scorn Squaresville, and strive to live as a minimalist regarding both acquisition and philosophy, then the side-stepping of materialism serves up a Zen-like magic carpet. Unfortunately, all too often, a seduction arises in the form of the fast-food manna called drugs. Under these circumstances, the rigor and discipline to cultivate the consciousness required for a path like Zen Buddhism, for example, falls down. A lazy spirituality blooms - the iron of the will is pumped no more, the biceps of spirit grow flaccid. Again, spiritual responsibility is waylaid.

A further option presents itself with, to use the same example (because it was the ticket in those Fifties days of Beat), the full rigor of Zen Buddhism. Now the seeker enters into a Pilates program for the abs and deltoids of Lady Soul. However (and there always seems to be a however ottering its way into the scene), what then plays out is a particular mode of consciousness that was once ideal and progressive for an individual from a past era. And since the evolution of consciousness now demands a discipline in keeping with modern consciousness with its evolved focus on individuality, to opt for a method now passé is, once more, to miss the drift.

At every turn, it seems as though we cannot proceed in a spiritually responsible manner. It's a bit like trying to learn to waltz while stuck in the body of a cow. What is humanity to do?

The answer lies outside of living by the social status quo; it lies outside of substance abuse; and it lies outside of eastern religions and, for that matter, any organized religion.

Completing the train of thought (it does have a caboose) would seem a logical track to run on. But that may be business that lies in the future and, being that we've only just entered the 21st century, we don't want to push too hard. Rather than railroad the reader, let's leave something back to resolve, like the whistle of a distant locomotive receding over the aural horizon.

With that, returning to Hebert's story:

But I (Hebert) do not yet want to take the helm. Because Zg Joogiloofinoo had a way with words, I'll hand the stream over to him - at least for long enough to render the Z. J. flavor:

Bird blows wild
Massaging an inverted saxophone
Phone me some sax, man
Far from Dixie
Over the bridge
Where the 'Trane runs on
The coal trane riffs
The espresso train delivers
Bee and bee me bop
Bop bee be-bop
Under a bare light bulb
De-shevel-ed
And
De-lapp-i-dated
The blacklight burns
A hole in my soul
So that
Every Tao and Zen

I cobble my path
With bricks of Koan.

The Bird blows wild, espresso on his exhale, sympatico, way out, man, nowhere, gone, crazy, and when he blew wild his ax, wailing, bopping, there was somewhereness, but squares came on the scene, so I went mj-high, cat, kicks came cool - coole catte. . .

22

You'd dig me to develop a stable personality, man? You mean, become a horse, daddy?

- from Musings of Zg Joogiloofinoo

To escape the drudgery that went by the name education, I began to pursue those strange beings that had suddenly risen to first place on my agenda. Stampeded by hormones, the herd of my wildhorse passion thundered its way to the metaphysical corral of a girl two years my elder. This girl became my first love. Her name, Squenja, I wrote into the sides of my textbooks and upon my arm, even deep into my armpit.

I met Squenja at a neighboring school dance, where I had gone to cut loose my inner cucaracha. Soft, friendly, curvaceous - and actually took time to converse with me - I was hopelessly hooked with her first smile. If

that wasn't enough, she could also balance on one foot and whistle like a purple martin - and rumor had it she could perform both feats at once.

I grew nervous when I contemplated being near her, and could not even imagine bringing myself to make a pass. Succumbing to the notion that drugs can be relaxing, I got hold of some codeine-bearing aspirin and took four or five as I approached the dance. Swaying with my enchanting Venus-in-arms, the remedy backfired, codeine and caffeine kicking in along nerve paths, causing me to convulse in time to the beat.

“You dance so weirdly!” retorted Squenja.

“Oh, I learned this in California,” I lied.

Because I never spent enough time with Squenja to get to know her in any true sense - in fact, no more than three or four hours in total - I carried off in my soul a fanciful portrait:

This higher self, so to speak, of Squenja, was born and raised in Utopia City, Colorado. She had the kind of face that could grace an angel, starlit eyes that shifted color with the seasons, a cherry blossom scent emanating from her pores, and long, black tresses that could cloak a raven. Her patron saint was the Divine Sophia. In fact, there may have even been times (particularly when I had consumed a half pound of chocolate) when she *became* the Divine Sophia.

Squenja Idylla was empathic to the point of being psychic, and had effortlessly mastered 13 languages, as well as seven musical instruments - including a Nepalese zunda and an Antarctic zither. Even before finishing high school, she was conferred an honorary degree from the Sorbonne - a PHD in compassion, which made her a Doctress in heartology. She felt equally at home in the city dancing a refined rumba, as she did portaging a canoe over rugged terrain deep in wilderness. It could be said that she exemplified the archetypal all-things-to-all-men persona.

And she was loaded. Whoever hooked up with her would be set for life. From a rich Canadian uncle, she had inherited the province of Prince Edward Island. “I'm considering trading it for Montana,” the goddess proclaimed, “but first I'd like to try the lobster while it's on the house.”

You get the picture.

This would be a good opportunity to add a little follow up. Many years later, while I was lost in the throes of mid-life, Squenja tracked me down by mail. I received a glowing letter wherein she heaped upon me praise and appreciation. “. . .thank you so much for time spent with you. May you know the deep, penetrating joy of soulful nourishment. May you be blessed with the grace and continued emotional wisdom which you bring to the world. You are such a gentle, wise mystic. Do you know the Swiss saint called Niklaus von Flue? A man like you. May your feet radiate laughter and dance beneath you spontaneously, and may lightness fill your golden heart and give it wings . . . you are a remarkable and wonderful man, full of compassion and for-seeing and sensitivity - a true renegade, beauty lover, and a unique and authentic man...”

As I read this letter, I was blown away. How could this be? Surely this was a woman, not only capable of loving greatly, but who actually loved *me!* Then, as I drew near the end of the letter, I began to grow suspicious of all this praise. Sure enough, when I focused in on the salutation at the top of the page, I saw that the letter was addressed to the author of this book - “Dear Josef” - not to me, Hebert Flabeau. How could it have mistakenly fallen into my hands? I was devastated. For such a horrid mix-up to occur, what nasty gremlins must be at work upon the threads of destiny! Let a warning go out to all ye who would love and be loved. This is what can happen when you share the same page with a competitor - a competitor, I may add, who ill deserves such an exorbitant level of adoration, let me tell you from experience, from long term acquaintance . . .

(Author's note: In the interest of brevity, it was necessary to cut short this chapter.)

23

If you were to take all the people who want to move to California and lay them end-to-end, they'd be a lot more comfortable.

- from Musings

High school was tough on me. I made out poorly when I took to highlighting notes with a black magic marker. Although I had a photographic memory, I consistently forgot to take the lens cap off. I took Introduction to Shakespeare and was disappointed. William never showed up the entire semester.

One day, my friend, Rassy, and I were in a grade 11 science class, enduring a pedantic lecture on the moral life of boron. My mouth was both throbbing with pain and effervescing. I had ignored the cardinal rule of Chemistry class: never lick the spoon. Out of the blue, a notion struck Rassy which he couldn't help voicing.

“God, I can't stand this! I wanna go to California.”

“Huh?” I retorted, as I awoke from a daydream. It was my custom to sit stock-still, mind in turtle mode, with fingers propping my eyes open while I floated across terrain of reverie.

“I said - why don't we go to California - or would you rather inhale more of this crap, Hebert?”

“Are you kidding? If you're serious, then hey, let's go! I'd much prefer a grove of sunny palms than another minute of this pointless babble.” It was February of 1967, and social upheaval was in the air. We were a couple of coyotes ripe for change.

Rassy and I worked out some logistics, which consisted primarily of an altruistic pooling of money for the relocation. Rassy put in \$800, and my half added another twenty.

“That should get us there and pay a couple months rent, until we start making money,” we surmised.

“How’ll we make money?” I wondered.

“Well, we’ll work,” replied Rassy.

“Work?” The word fell from my open mouth.

“Sure, you’re familiar with the concept?”

Three days later, we were on a bus heading west, a ride uneventful until we came to the Rockies, where driver Charley “Manic” Kuzzbuck took the wheel for a shift. Kuzzbuck had totaled 6 busses in the past year, but was a nephew of the CEO of Gray-Fleabitten-Mutt Busline, so was assured a lifetime slot despite his atrocious performance.

As the bus lurched and rocked its way down steep terrain, shuddering around corners and hurtling against guardrails, a hobo from behind imposed his muskrat odor and swarthy features upon us, proceeded to introduce himself as Clebe, and entertained us with an account of the one and only romantic adventure in his life.

“I loved that gal - I used to call her my little Bee-shit, because she was my honey! That’s what it is, you know - a hive is just an outhouse for the bees.”

Clebe couldn’t remember anything before May 23rd, 1957 (so adopted that as his birthday), when he had awoken to find himself in a meadow under a tallulah tree. He had bonded with the tree and, although unable to sustain the relationship when he had to travel on, every time he came across a tallulah he experienced deep filial passion. He was a rebel by nature anyway - rather than abide by arboreal parental counsel to stay in one place, to put down roots, he tended to up and take to wandering like a shiftless mink. Three days was his limit for staying in one place.

Luck swung Clebe’s way when he’d entered a contest and won a lifetime pass on Gray-Fleabitten-Mutt Busline. From that day, he was freed from the existential anxiety of procuring room and board. When he needed sleep, or wanted shelter, he’d board a long-distance bus. And, setting free his inner scavenger, he satisfied his hunger on leftovers at bus stop cafes. All

Clebe needed for social life could be had on board a bus. In fact, that was where he'd met his little Bee-shit.

It was on a westbound run out of Buffalo, NY. By Kansas, they were smitten with each other, and by Las Vegas, had given way to matrimonial ambition with a quickie marriage between bus changes. Honeymoon ran from Vegas to LA.

For many months the newlyweds had drifted like swans in blissful swoon back and forth across America. But, ultimately, it was the swoon that became responsible for their parting. Bee-shit, in a particularly euphoric mood, had one day missed re-boarding the bus, which had carried a snoozing Clebe 300 miles before he awoke to find himself, once more, a solitary figure.

Three years of fruitless searching like a lost, lone raven, up and down, back and forth across America, had resulted in nothing more than a faint memory of Bee-shit's perfume. Presumably, Bee-shit, also, was searching for Clebe, up and down, back and forth across America.

Ultimately, one day, a statistician on a New Orleans to Miami run who had lumbered down the aisle like a lop-sided raccoon and parked himself beside Clebe, had estimated for him that the chances of a meeting taking place were approximately 14,000 to one (give or take four percentage points, nine times out of ten).

Author's note: The reader can explore more on the outcome of the unrequitable nomads, in a future volume: What cards will Lady Destiny deal? Will they ever meet again? Was Bee-shit pregnant when they parted? Will Clebe change his socks before they rot off his feet?

Ever buy a cured ham and wonder what it had?

- from Musings

California was sunshine and palm trees. Even the rain that on rare occasion fell as a warm and soothing balm felt blessed to arrive in the land of lotus. I'll always remember my first outing - my maiden passage upon California soil - as an experience to hold dear.

I felt buoyant, eager to explore the exotic realm that lay before me. Besides, I was still excited about the discovery I'd made the night before, that I could play my AM radio in the evening, too. It just felt like anything was possible, all avenues lay open.

"Cwa, Cwa!" cried a dyslexic crow perched in a tree off to my right. "Meowl-ixkggg," wailed a demented cat. Around the corner, I passed by two parrots sitting on a perch. "Do you smell fish?" asked one. But I was too elated to notice the oddities in the natural world around me. To me, everything was n-n-norr - n-nnorr - narm - that word that means "regular."

In a sense, I was now in my element. The West Coast is like muesli: take away the fruits and nuts, and all you have left is flakes. A standing joke ran, "Why don't lotus-landers get ten-minute coffee breaks?" Answer: "It takes too long to retrain them."

It was in my nature to have oddities run through my canary mind whenever I went for a stroll. I would wonder what couches would look like if your hips bent the other way. Did the Three Stooges ever reject a script? Can vegans watch cheesy movies? If a restaurant serves pasta and antipasto, does the customer remain hungry? If you melt dry ice, can you bathe without

getting wet? And the one question that consistently tormented me to no end: what do little birdies see when they're knocked unconscious?

I was now approaching Loggers Alley. Two guys walked into a bar. I ducked. Then, as I strolled by The Big Balooka, I overheard a drunken, burly voice wafting through the door, his words surfing upon fumes of hop and malt. "Hey, Rauncho, what's the definition of a tree?" I paused, wanting to catch the punch line. "An unemployed log! Har! Har! . . ." A long-time tree-hugger, I shook my head. The brutes were probably quaffing Pissweiser beer. It always made me wonder how the production line at that brewery got the moose to sit on those bottles. This one's for who? Not for me, Bud!

I rounded the corner onto Fast Food Avenue. A teem of glittering signs assaulted my vision. They were all there: Burger Peasant; McPuke's; Greasy Gail's; Big Boy; Blimpy's; Fat Toolies; Mega-Paunch; Bust-a-Gut; Fat-Cravin-Starvin-Marvin; Kentucky Fried Pigeon; Pizza Outhouse; and Junk-in-the-Box. They say you are what you eat, which makes a lot of people nowadays cheap, quick, and easy.

But, *if the shoe fits*, as I always say, *find another one just like it*. The sight made me hungry. Hankering for a Big Pile with a side of stoolies (served in a flaming paper bag, Halloween style), I walked into Dog Dump and proceeded straight to the counter.

"You'll have to go to the back of the line, sir," said the man behind the counter.

A few seconds later, I was back in his face.

"I thought I told you to go to the end of the line!" the attendant barked.

"I did," I replied, "but there was someone already there."

After lunch, continuing on my way, I passed by a police station that had a sign out front that read, "E-Z Bust: a new, smoother way to go down." Then I came to a park with a river flowing through it and robins in the trees, a whole flock of primavera groupies. Across the river, a man was waving at me, trying to get my attention. I drew up to the bank and cocked an ear.

"Can you tell me how you get to the other side?"

I considered a moment, then called back, "You're already on the other side!"

A little further along, I spied Old Glory on a pole, floating lazily in the polluted breeze. All along the way, I had noticed numerous "Support our

Troops” signs. Here, below the flag, was yet another. Drawing out my magic marker, I crossed out the words, then scrawled underneath, “Gandhi is dandy.” I then tore a fading yellow ribbon off the old oak, replacing it with a strip of paisley, and went on my way, reciting my own personal anthem. “I pledge allegiance to the Corvus empire, the flag of the crow kingdom . . .”

By now, it was getting dark, so I opted to return by public transit. At the back of a bus I watched the terrain I’d walked over whiz by. A woman got on board with a baby. The driver, apparently an unrepentant hardnose, said, “That’s gotta be the ugliest baby I’ve ever seen!”

The woman huffed to the back and sat down beside me.

“That driver just insulted me!”

“Well, then,” I responded, “you go back there and tell him off. Go ahead, I’ll hold your monkey for you.”

Short people are the last ones to know it's raining.
- from Musings

Let me (the author) have a word, once again, so that Hebert Flabeau can gain much needed context for his tale. Besides, Hebert has momentarily abandoned the word processor to poke around in the refrigerator. Would you, as author, turn down an opportunity such as this?:

Picture an empty, tranquil orb, undisturbed for eons, except for odd meteor showers, which have pocked and sculpted its acned face - a silver sphere of romance that rays down a soft light upon earth. A windless tract of dusty rocks. The moon. A “loony” place. Bar-be-que hot on one side, and cold enough to freeze the brass parts off any lunar monkeys careless enough to wander into its permanent night-zone. Mountains, craters, pocks, valleys - dry, arid, low-humidity. A hard place to get laundry done, despite valleys full to the brim with dehydrated water. A white sun glaring out of indigo-black space, and the immense, gorgeous, blue-and-white pearl of Earth shining down upon the bleakness.

The moon's silver pales to gray under the heavenly rays of Earth's beauty. Greenless and cheeseless - not the slightest trace of rennet, in fact, 99.9% cow-free, so very little hope of even churning butter, let alone encountering mozzarella.

There were those on Earth who refused to believe it ever happened, the conquest of the moon. In an odd enough way, almost worthy of the author's pen, those misfits were right. The world hadn't *really* reached the moon - not yet. Not in true form, anyway. It would be a few years later - in the *second* half of the sixties, when a significant portion of the populace would go moon-bound aboard powerful spaceships christened "White Lightning" and "Owsley" and "Blotter" and "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds."

However pale and feeble, the initial physical landing was an important event, in terms of serving to foreshadow the metaphysical event - the moon-bound contingency of 1960's social activism. Atmospheric boundaries would be breached by visionary rocketry. The questing of counter-culture would overwhelm established norms. In the sixties, moon-high parameters were initiated.

After renting an apartment, Rassy and I wandered about exploring our new territory. We soon found ourselves in Griffith Park, where a Love-in was being held. Here, we found young ladies dressed in exotic clothing and strange longhaired guys, some of whom wore a chain around the ankle of one boot. Incense, and other weird smokiness, lingered in the air. Later, we would learn that these aromas consisted primarily of illegal substances.

Some loser named Jim Morrison was playing the event. A quick, effective assessment on our part brought us to conclude that he'd never make it. The music had an odd, flowing, lunar current to it. Maybe his parents might buy one of his records, if he ever cut one - but that was about as far as he was going to get.

We hovered around the sidelines of the peculiar celebration, thinking that this was just how California youths were - little knowing that, before long, we, ourselves, would be incorporated in the grand fiesta known as the Summer of Love. But that is a horse of a different time zone. For now, we were just wide-eyed teeny-boppers - pre-hip groovinos who sensed magic unfolding at every turn, but an enchantment that was elusive. We knew a rabbit emerged somewhere, but couldn't locate the top hat. We sensed that fairy dust sprinkled down around us, but couldn't lay our hands on the wand. All this I put down in words today, but couldn't articulate then. I mean, we

sensed it, but couldn't consciously express it, other than to pronounce it all in the encapsulating adjective known as "cool."

Meanwhile, over by Hollywood and Vine, I signed up to audition for a part in a movie, and sat down to wait my turn. After a while, a squirrel-eyed slickster came out and led me into a studio. But he quickly lost patience with my method-acting approach of a wayward teen who'd drifted to California.

"It's too real! It will never do. We want more, *je ne sais quoi*, in the character. Can you wheedle like a gopher?" I flexed my inner tail and prepped a high-pitched whistle. "Can you hunker down, like a bear on the loose?" I dropped my voice an octave and scratched my ass. "We need more . . . more . . . down and out, know what I mean?" I slithered my tongue in and out and drooped like an arthritic salamander.

"No, no! - you're overdoing it!" His face flushed, and a vein popped up on his forehead. He was getting tied up in knots. I knew I had to loosen him up, somehow. So I grabbed hold and started waltzing him around like there was a Viennese oompah band wailing on the banks of the Rhine. At first, taken aback, he went with it. I thought I might get the part. But then he just seized right up and, breaking free, arms flailing in double-time fury, he flew, pulling his hair and screaming, across the floor and, honest to God, leaped right through an open window and bolted down the alley, wailing and blabbering, until he faded out of range.

Some of these California poodles are pretty high strung, I gotta tell ya.

26

I don't work a regular job because of my religion. I'm a devout shirker.

- from Musings

While waiting for Hollywood to discover my immense talent, I had to get some work to pay the bills. After a few weeks of fruitless searching, in which no one would hire me because of my lack of experience, I had to hunker down and plan on settling for anything that held any prospect whatsoever.

Every morning, I got up and looked through Forbes list of Richest People in America. If I didn't find myself there, I went off to look for a job. For a while I sold encyclopedias. But when the librarian found out, she was pissed, and I had to lie low. Then I contemplated becoming a tree surgeon, but realized I couldn't stand the sight of sap. And police work was out - I was allergic to donuts.

I took a month-long break from the work-search grind, for a little R and R. Drawn to surfing, I bleached my hair and memorized all the Beach Bums songs. Out in the surf, I became quite adept at my favorite stunt - the wipeout, which I continuously found myself performing by default.

I studied the surfer's bible - an exhaustively researched tome entitled, Witty Expressions of Surfers. It was a delightful minimalist edition consisting of three pages, prefaced by the wave wizard, himself, Brett (seahorse) Tulaney.

Tulaney had surfed all over the globe, had survived 40-foot rollers off Hawaii, and was currently conducting research into earthquake phenomena, hoping to link up with a tsunami to top off his career. It was Tulaney's considered opinion that the ivory boil of a wave held the key to fulfillment of mankind's significant aspirations, including matters existential and deeply philosophic.

Well, I took to this notion, this ocean notion, man. It seemed a bitchin way to cope with living - an easy rider all the way to the beach. I would transpose my surf know-how to meet life's challenges. That was the crunchy part of the nut.

If the wave of life started avalanching on me, I'd walk the dog, back on the board to slow its run. And, if it flattened out just when I was cruisin a chick, I'd walk it forward, to up the rip. In a backslash, like running into a collection agent, I'd crank a turn. If the wave was bowling, I'd cruise. Peaking, I'd pull an aerial, fly while the air was high.

If a surf bunny threw me for a face plant, I knew I'd eventually come up for air and find my board again, knew I could catch the next wave. The best surf I'd find in the place where spirit-water met body-beach. I'd use a bright outlook as my peroxide, a ray of hope to tan my ambition, and common sense for a board.

And that's the way I left the surfing life - amped up to use what I'd learned. I may be a kookster, but at least I know something about how it is when waves come crispy, and how to ride along in the curl.

Dropping the lingo (I only use it on the beach, anymore), and storing the underpinnings of surfdom in the back of my psyche, I returned to the quest for employment. The Postal Service took a chance on me, but I lasted only one day as a letter carrier. Whenever I encountered a package that had written on it - Photographs: Do Not Bend - I would write underneath it, "Oh, yes they do!" When I got back to the office, my boss was impressed. "Flabeau, you're the fastest letter carrier we've ever had!" "Well, thanks, boss. And tomorrow, I'll even do better. I'm going to read the addresses."

The day after getting sacked from the Postal Service, growing desperate, I bought some tools, banged them up, left them out in the rain, and applied as a seasoned carpenter.

Day one: the boss sends me across town to the lumberyard for some 2x4's. When I arrive, dyslexia sets in, and I ask for 4x2's.

"We only carry 2x4's," replies the attendant.

I head back to report to the boss - a tough cookie, the kind of guy who keeps his toupee on with a nail. In the wake of the boss's near meltdown, and vehement explanation about 2x4's and 4x2's being the same thing, I make my way back to the lumberyard.

"Now I need to know how long you want them."

I head back to the boss to get an answer. Now, It's lunchtime. By mid-afternoon, back at the lumberyard, I have an answer.

"So, how long do you want them?"

"Quite a while, I guess - we're building a house."

Day Two: I have my hammer out, but have a hard time finding volunteers to hold the nails.

Day three: I'm unemployed.

Day Four: I'm still unemployed.

Tune in, turn on, drop out - but wait until you pay me back the ten bucks you owe me.

- Hebert's Sixties philosophy.

Time and tide make changes. The California dream doesn't work out. Rassy and I go our separate ways. Last I heard, he was in the South Pacific, plying the mango trade. I move back east, and that's when things start to fall out of focus. I begin to slide into grooveland, as I cop the lingo of the cool, and there was lots cooking. But my memory plays hide and seek - so if it comes out twisted, you'll dig why.

My hippie period ran from the fall of 1969 to the spring of 1967 (I have to run the time backwards, as my memory lays it out in flashbacks, acid-style, ya dig? Oh, no, come to think of it, not anymore - it's changed now - it doesn't even do that, now - it's all Jumble City, California - so I can only plead with the reader to bear with me

This one time, Jefferson Freightrain was wailing the hip anthem, *White Rodent*, while I spark a reefer. Bummer was, the weed was cut with poison ivy, so my lungs itched wildly for a month. Not til I toked on a blast of devils claw could I get some scratch for them. And then there was some grass laced with dandylions, which kept us up all night hallucinating gay cougars.

But, it wasn't all drugs back then. There were breaks when you got busted, like the time I was cuffed by a narc disguised as an alleycat - or did I dream that?

Those days, we crashed wherever we ended up. One day, I awoke on a subway. I felt disoriented, mostly because the town I lived in didn't have a subway. By day's end, I came to realize the easiest way to resolve my problem was to adopt New York, or Chicago, or wherever-the-hell I was, as my new home. Lucky for me, I didn't have to send for my stuff, as I already had my coat and harmonica with me.

The local hipsters were cool people. They'd throw a smoke-in - set a brick of hash the size of a paperback on a stove burner and let the room fill with smoke. Forty of us could whack back and get high with Zen effort.

But it wasn't all drugs. Sometimes we'd organize a love-in, or a feed-in, or a snooze-in til noon-in. Once a month, we threw a soap-in, but nobody ever came to that scene. Mostly, we'd get so stoned, we needed a little dirt to keep grounded.

Keeping high, we didn't need much stuff. A mono record player came off as a quadraphonic. You could hear every detail in Country Joe's Fish 'N' Chips' *I'm Fixin To Dye A Rag*. Gimme an F... gimme a . . .whatever . . . scuse my stone-out, man.

But it wasn't always about drugs. There was urban wildlife, and stuff. I had a pet cockroach that I taught all kinds of groovy tricks . . . or did I just dream that . . .? Anyway, one day he blew it. He crawled into my weed and got smoked. What a huge crank, man! They say you are what you smoke. All day I skittered around on the floor, licking up crumbs and shit . . .

But there was more than drugs. There was fashion. Chicks wore lots of cool stuff. I wore a fringe jacket, and, come to think of it, lots of fringe stuff went down, man. Fringe ideas, fringe ways of doing your thing. Fringe ways to get high.

But it wasn't all drugs. There was music. Here's a buncha tunes I remember and still funk homesick over:

Creamer

Isreali Beers

Dreadful Grate

Gimme a Swig of Mornin Dew

The Floors	People Are Deranged Toke on Through to the Other Side Come on Baby Light My Reefer Hit Me Two Times, I'm Gone
Canned Feet	Gone, Up In The Country
Iron Buttermilk	En-I-Gotta-Be-Eatin
The Byrps	My Blank Pages Hey, Mr. Trampoline Man Eight Miles Higher Than The Next Dude
Fink Plaid	Another Brick in the Moon Dark Side of the Wall Toker at the Gates of Dawn
Bobbed Illing	Fartin in the End Hey Mr. Turpentine Like a Stolen Ring Don't Think, Alright Stone-Eyed Lady of the High-lands
Jiminy	Purple Herpes The Wind Cries Lotsa Weird Stuff Hey Joe, Where you Going With That Weed in Your Lung
Zed Lipline	Stairway to Dazed Confusion
The Bloody Moos	Future Days Passed Out On The Threshold of a Drug In Search of the Lost Acid
Chicano	Does Anyone Really Have A Watch, Man? Seconal, in the Park, I Think it was the Fourth Time High

Suzy Creamcheese

Brain Police are Mothers of Contention
Frankly, I'm Zapped

Velvet Undergrowth

Heroin
I'm Waiting For The Heroin
I'll Be Your High
Pale Blue Smack
White Light/White Heroin

When I shut off the music box, the tunes echoed for a time before they quit. The ceiling was slanting over, then I realized it was the wall. MJ smoke was drifting out a window in the floor, so I slipped out after it. I was gone down the block before I realized I was astral projecting, so I went back for my body.

“Last time I take you along,” I complained to my corpus, as I wearily trudged it down the street. But it had only one item on its agenda - to crash. “Don’t you wanna bite before you zonk?” I cajoled. “There’s a pig-out goin down at Snake’s - wanna strap on a nosebag?” But I only made it halfway to Snake’s, ‘cause I just had to lay under a tree and fell into coppin zzzzs . . .

After a time zone, I woke up. It was dark, and people were stepping over me. I was right out there, man - on the strip, with all these people cruising by. I sat up, and started lamping one of them, this fox I knew from somewhere, man. So I called out, “Hey, what’s tickin, chicken? Wanna knock me a kiss?” But she kept going. Whadda I think of that stuck up kind of stack-up? I knew I looked like a rough night on the sea, but hey - if I’d of been a hot ax man, a Grateful Deader, or Erik the Clapman, or somethin, she’d a jumped my bones.

Well, I wasn’t gonna let it strip my gears. And, anyway, I had a chick on each arm already - Alice Dee and Mary Jane. Already had the two - but I wanted one more. I knew a canary that, in my book, was way upstairs, so I drifted over to her hangout. When I caught up with her, she was busy interviewing her brains - a real thought storm brewing. “What gives?” I rattled.

“Oh, I’m working an idea, Hebert - what’s on your agenda, frienda?”

And I went into my dance, how I was dragging my rear axle in waltz time, I'd had to crash, and woke looking for a songbird to coop with. "You're my habit, rabbit," I laid on her. But she was in a bluesy groove, and her roof was leaking over a hang up about folding green, money for funny. I could see my plan was going dead on the vine, but I didn't raise any sand. It was time for my boot-heels to wander. I just wished her high, and went my way.

When I got to Snake's, the commida was vamos. "That was yesterday, Hebert." Once, again - yesterday. The yesterday thing that bites my ass. When was I gonna make the cut?

But then I found a box of Ritz and killed it. Snake, he put on a lacquer cracker - Quirksilver Massager Service playing that classical shit - coo-ool! And I got up to boogie, cause ain't no sin to take off your skin and dance around in your bones. And if that don't turn you on, you ain't got no switches.

28

Do you think when they asked Thomas Jefferson for his ID, he just took out a nickel?

- from Musings

I can't, for the life of me, recall how I emerged from the haze of those days. But one (relatively) clear morning, I awoke to the aspiration of leaving substances behind, and a hankering to rejoin the establishment. In need of gainful employment, I applied for office work. As luck would have it, I submitted my dog-eared, coffee-stained resume to the winner of the annual Employer-from-Hell award.

Born and raised in Skinflint, Michigan, when Cuthbert M. Philbot read that you could feed a family of four in India for a hundred dollars a year, he sent his whole family there. During the previous week, there had been a slight problem at the office. Philbot had accidentally smiled and got a charley horse in his face. The company had a tough sick leave policy. There was no time off for illness or surgery. Death was accepted, but you had to give three weeks' notice.

In the waiting room, I worked my way through an application. To, "Length of residence at present address?" I wrote, "About 30 feet, not counting the porch." Where it said, "Tell us something about yourself," I entered, "I like my coffee weak and my women strong." At the bottom, where it said, "Sign here," I scrawled, "Pisces."

When I finished, I picked a copy of *Jaws* off the coffee table and began reading. Presently, a distraught employee came out of the boss's office, and I could hear Philbot trailing on, "I'm sorry, but if you take two hours for lunch today, I'll have to do the same for every man whose wife gives birth to triplets."

I was in luck when, a few moments later, Philbot came out just in time to catch me off guard, nose in the book, rooting for the shark. He could see he'd found the right man for a position on his team.

"I want you to be happy here," said Philbot, giving me a quick tour of the office. "If there's anything you need, I'll show you how to get along without it. Oh, and, until further notice, don't use the suggestion box. The handle is broken and it won't flush."

I was given my own office. It was small, but private. Except when another employee barged in to ask for a broom.

The first day on the job, I came off as a real trendsetter. I was the first one in the office to wear purple and white shoes. Then I lost the white one. But clothes, to me, are easy come, easy go. Ever since I'd heard someone say, "Whenever I'm down in the dumps I buy new clothes," I knew where I'd be doing most of my shopping.

Settling in, I hammered away on my computer keyboard. Within a few moments, I had to requisition a new keyboard, as the hammer had quickly rendered the first one to a collage of plastic art. This time, bowing to convention, I used my fingers. I entered data steadily through the day. Round about three o'clock, a colleague dropped by, saw what I was doing, and informed me that, while it was certainly energy efficient to work the way I was, it would be more productive to turn the power on first.

Thanking him for the tip, I once again modified my approach. I did not feel bad, however, about the lost time. Although I can produce about 90 words a minute - in my own language - if you're going to be picky and ask me to type readable copy, then it falls to about seven words, tops. Had I been more adept, I would no doubt have felt devastated at the loss of significant production.

Changing horses, I spent the rest of the day filing. By five o'clock, with virtually no nails left, I punched out.

The second morning, I arrived fifteen minutes late for work. "Why are you late?" Philbot asked.

“I fell down a flight of steps,” I replied.

“It doesn’t take fifteen minutes to fall down a flight of steps, “ growled Philbot.

That day, in a bid to improve efficiency, I undertook a little research project of my own. It didn’t take long to verify my conjecture, that too many clients were creating a high level of stress, resulting in lower production. I took to the phone and by early afternoon had disposed of over 70% of the company’s clientele.

I waxed creative, informing some clients that we were going bankrupt, others that we were facing a class action suit and could no longer remain above ground with our operations. Still others learned from me that we were downsizing and had to drop the ballast.

By day’s end, a great sense of ease pervaded the office. With the workload drastically reduced, we now had some much needed breathing space. I prepared memos soliciting suggestions for our newly allotted recreation time, and recommended a shorter workweek, as well as significantly expanded vacations.

I damn near made it to the end of the week. Although I had carefully concealed my identity by signing all my outgoing memos with the handle of one of my altar-egos, “The Count of Bondaglio,” I sensed the boss’s suspicion mount with the following little master-slave interchange: Philbot: “I notice that you come to work late every morning.” Me: “Yes, but you’ll also notice that I leave early every afternoon!”

That was enough to terminate my residency in Office City, Illinois, though I suppose I should also mention, in passing, that Philbott had discovered I had pawned my computer equipment, and replaced it with a mini-Jacuzzi.

29

When I was a waiter, my karma came back on me. When tipping, I always left 25% - 25% of what everyone else would leave.

- from Hebert's Memoirs.

Undeterred by poor luck in the work world, I landed a job as a waiter. Café Greasissimo had a sign on the cash register that read: *Sure we'll cash your personal check, if you're over eighty and accompanied by your parents.*

Again, I did not last long. I suppose my manner put people off.

"What's the soup du jour?" queried a brusque bureaucrat on a short lunch slot. I knew him as Rupert Upsuch, a short, balding, puffy-faced man, a bit like a swollen kumquat with arms and legs and a splotchy bump for a head. He was the kind of guy who wore a tuxedo when he went bowling - although if you were possessed of x-ray vision, you couldn't help missing the women's undergarments, peach bra and panties with full-length hosiery.

"I'll check," I replied, in a brisk, continental manner. Spinning on my heels, I scooted to the kitchen in half-time. Once inside, I lolled back on a chair by the cook, and spent a good ten minutes discussing important matters, like, was there any truth to the historical account of oregano having aphrodisiac properties? Is a pinch of mustard an acceptable substitute for cumin in South India cuisine? Did the waitress have a boyfriend and was she up for a tumble? Eventually, the dialogue ran down, so I returned to report to Upsuch.

“Sorry to take so long, sir, but I *did* find out what the soup du jour is - it’s the soup of the day.”

Then there was Miss Snoodperd - a real stickler for decorum. She rendered no leeway for anything that digressed from the norm. The problem was, then, because the social forum had been increasingly evolving such that there was less and less opportunity to identify any singular norm, Snoodperd was running out of home turf. Suffice to say, in passing, no amount of x-ray vision would reveal an iota of private arena, as she wore lead undergarments.

“Waiter, I’ll have the chef’s salad,” Snoodperd barked.

“Really? Then what will the chef eat?” I bantered, with raised eyebrow.

On another occasion, feeling my oats, I made a bold recommendation:

“Would you like a waffle with that alphabet soup so you can do a crossword puzzle?”

Snoodperd was not amused.

When a health inspector or a dining review critic came by incognito, I was always prepared. You could always tell these characters by their Aura of S.S. cologne, complete void in the sense of humor department, and the giveaway Polaroid camera woven into the necktie.

“I don’t recommend the steak. You can still see the jockey’s whip marks on it,” was met with a blank stare, followed by a swiftly forming sneer.

And, “What’s today’s special?”

“The Heimlich maneuver,”

Or, “What’s the catch of the day?”

“Hepatitis,” evoked a reaction of purple-faced outrage.

But the final blow came when an inspector who I didn’t manage to identify in time asked me to warm up her coffee, and I stuck her cigarette in it.

When I left, I kept one of the menus as a souvenir. Though I never gave it much thought at the time, reading it over now, it strikes me as a menu of quiet distinction:

French Fried Kitty Whiskers
Feline Chow Mein

Soup du Sewer
Chips and Cha-Cha

Braised Roadkill
Sand Hamwhich
Cucarracha ensalada
Albatross Cannelloni
Vichyssoise Meatloaf

Rooster a la Queen
Chile Con Perro
Deep Fried Lardballs
Marinated Spam
Slow-Roasted Baloney

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Weary of life in the status quo, I grow restless and feel moved to travel, to tour the continent.

At the same time, being on the wander reawakens the naturalist in me. But, having renounced Dr. Dolittle, and forgotten all my interspecies communication know-how, I now take a more conventional approach. My nature journal begins in the classical manner, with spring.

Spring

It's the first season of nature's calendar. Robins are all uppity, they figure they're numero uno now. Someone needs to give their little heads a shake - can't a guy sleep in these days? I'm gonna come squawking around their nests in the middle of the night, see how *they* like it!

Crows are getting saucy too - in marauding gangs, looking for trouble - which they'll find, right handy, if they come my way. Odin's little helpers - ha! A flock of them lands in a cherry tree, and start harassing something. As I move in for a closer look, I can see it's a porcupine. The old pine pig is just minding its own business, doesn't deserve that kind of shake up. But he's a cool guy, this needle-suit - he just tunes out the rowdies.

Beneath the tree, some Easter lilies have been sprouting, climbing out of the dirt like a group of naked nuns, but a hell of a lot more useful, I'd say. What can you do with a naked nun, you tell me?

The sun's warmth is getting stronger, the daylight growing longer. It won't be so easily to sneak around anymore without getting caught. Loons are making an appearance now, making me feel at home again. It's good to have your power animal close by, I feel bold, kooky, ready for action. Seems like most people see the loon as a deranged duck. But, I say you can't find anything more normal - the loon is the vanilla-est bird there is, in my book. If you want spumoni, then scope out the heron - *there's* a long-legged ding-dong!

The bears are out now, too. And the question arises - can I pass through the woods without getting mugged by a bruin? One day, I wander down a dirt road that degenerates into a horse track. I'm daydreaming away in tricolor and run smack into a mama black bear. Two cubs are scurrying up a tree behind her, and I realize I've got, oh, maybe 2-3 seconds to make the right choice or die. Let's see, do I melt into a puddle? Do I yell and flap my arms? Do I launch into my Three Stooges imitation (3-way split personality)? Or do I just hunker down and take it on the chin?

In the end, while sporting a wide smile, I compliment Lady Bruin on her exceptional offspring. But she reads the teeth for aggression, and the speech for insult and, last thing I remember I receive a swift cuff upside the head and drop into oblivion.

I must have considered oblivion to be a worthwhile locale to visit, as I didn't budge from there until the middle of the night, when I awoke to find myself in pitch dark with a pounding headache. The headache, I welcomed, as it told me I was not dead. Orientation was another matter. Ever have to navigate through woods dark as the inside of a cow? I got out, eventually and, all things considered, can't complain as it would have been ten times harder to navigate from the inside of a mama bear.

Meanwhile, the sap is pumping big time through the trees, and a guy just wants to find a bunny to jump. Bursting out of the underbrush, the grouse are still scaring the crap outta anyone who unknowingly walks up on them. That's another haywire bird, a tree-chicken with enough sense to load a fruit fly's skull.

A prime tonic for spring bears, the skunk cabbage has emerged, and I find myself leery of the notion of having to duke it out with any more damn bruins over territorial rights. But, if I have it my way, nobody is going to beat me out of a bowl of my favorite salad, especially loaded as it is with its own built-in skunk vinaigrette.

A woodpecker is going at it in an old spruce overhead, but flies off when I heave a stick at it. I can live without the noise and, besides, I don't believe that spruce booked an arboreal acupuncture session, anyway.

Buttercups and purple doohickies are blooming on the hillside, splotching bits of color, ruining the restful green wash that otherwise might have had its way. I don't know what's up, but overhead the swallows that have just returned from points south are flipping around and showing off while, on the forest floor, spring peepers are making a bejeesus of a racket. It's all too energetic for me. I suppose if I wear earplugs and keep my eyes out of focus, I'll get through this manic season with a cuckoo's chance of mental health.

Summer

Green, green, greening - greeeeeen - Mother Nature must have mugged the leprechauns for all this intense greenery. It's turning into a jungle around here, a humungous emerald exhalation. Was there ever really a winter? You could make lots of "money" if your middle name was chlorophyll - although I'm not sure what "money" means. In fact, I'm not always sure what money is, let alone the more esoteric notion, "money."

Increasingly, solar energy radiates down around us, as light pervades the atmosphere. Every niche seems filled with life - which is good, because if it was full of, say, beer, then it would glut the market, not to mention turn a lot of niches into alcoholics.

Rising thermals lift both hawks and my imagination toward the heights. Then, I confuse the two, and am unsure whether I'm developing a craving for field mice, or just imagining it.

The epitome of summer is lolling in thermal waters cooking your privates. I feel blessed to have come across a hot spring in my travels. My tired, road-weary muscles enjoy every moment of the deep-tissue therapy as the heat penetrates and soothes. It's Languor City, all the way. But then, I soak too long, and the inner lizard trades its skin for mine.

One day, as I travel on, I witness a snake getting run over by a vehicle. As I draw near, I observe that it's pregnant. Working quickly, I perform a cesarean, and 50-60 tiny snakes emerge. I stop short of slapping bums, they're either going to sink or swim on their own. About half the babies are still alive, and slither off in all directions.

Since the snake midwife experience, I can sense that I am pervaded with serpent charm. This might come in handy. I could use a little belly-

crawling power to slither out of some of the jams I get myself into. Then the inner weasel overhears my thoughts, and grows incensed. It's *his* job, how dare the snake horn in on its turf!? The weasel and snake go at each other. After a while, I tune them out - let them duke it out, I've got to get on with life.

Later in the day, I come down to a beach and reflect on how the Mohawk culture maintained that a beach is a meeting place between the spirit and the body, and I think what a farfetched notion! These dubious fantasies really burn me up. I zip my jacket and turn my collar up against the rising wind. The idea just triggers a big peeve. Over the water, a storm is brewing, tossing the surf into wild spray. Big waves pummel the shore, and I see odds and ends washing up onto the strandline - red bits of cloth, pieces of driftwood that look like clenched fists or hammer heads.

After a while, I calm down. How could I have let myself get in such a rant? Then I begin to laugh at myself and the foolishness of the idea of the human psyche affecting a natural environment. And, as I observe the storm blow over and bright sunlight shining over the waves, I start to notice the strandline is peppered with colorful seashells, and in the jumble is an offspring of the Duke of Waddle, a yellow rubber duckling.

I turn from the shore of the now placid waters, and traverse a path leading uphill, shaking my head as I go, at the absurdity of the some cultural fantasies.

It is summer solstice week, and an eagle is soaring in the heights, surfing on the photons. I stop at the top of the hill, intent on taking notes for my ongoing study, Sunsetology. Who else will do this important research, if I don't? Who will measure the passage of time for the sun, once it touches the horizon, to pass out of sight? Who will enter this and other sunnish data and prepare a report to present to the scientific community? In altruistic fervor, I resolve to continue my research. The annals of genius and discovery are relying on me.

I observe, for instance, that the cardinal point of the sun's setting lies in the west, always west, so far - as if a pattern is there, begging to be observed, an apparent consistency. I will remain vigilant over this, plus other questions that might arise (none to date, but still, I remain vigilant).

Now the sun has set, darkness drops its rusty anvil, and some fireflies begin to emerge, their fairy lights punctuating the darkness in short blips of

incandescence. I run after the luminous moths with a cigarette, trying to bum a light, but they evade me at every turn. To heck with them, they are annoying, incendiary creatures, anyway - such show-offs, loony little lantern bearers. I turn my back on them in a nicotine fit, cursing, and find a pile of moss to crawl under for the night.

Next morning, it's a sunny, high-summer day. Surely, during this season, while we are crossing the alpine meadow of the sun, we are in the kingdom of the gods. Fittingly, I come across his Royal Highness, the Monarch butterfly. Following the erratic flight of this orange and black blossom leads me to a pond where water lilies are in full bloom, lotus crowns of ivory petals radiating like little microwave clusters. Beneath the lilies, fish are lazily coasting, causing me to wonder if all fish are born under the sign Pisces.

Dragonflies by the shore are picking off moths, performing aerial feats that remind me of truckers rattled on bennies, only these are not 18-wheelers, but biotic helicopters that are being piloted so recklessly. In the woods, the songbirds have quieted down somewhat, having no doubt worn their vocal chords to a frazzle over the busy spring season.

A spider draws my attention. I examine its web, a pattern of perfect construction, and recall hearing that spiders affected by different kinds of substances - e.g., drugs humans use recreationally - weave weird, distorted webs. For the next few hours, being a dedicated sort of naturalist, I undertake experimentation around this phenomenon. As I conduct my study of arachnid patience, creativity, silk engineering, and intent, I get so caught up, I jump in, too. Despite trying on various kinds of substance abuse, I can see me not on effect any all at!

An hour later, sobered up and straightened out, I get the bejeesus scared out of me by a huge cougar, only to realize, with a great sigh of relief, that it's just a stump I'm looking at. Off in the distance, wolves are howling, which is common for this time of year. A minute later, they're at it again. Then, as I focus on the sound, I realize it's actually the buzz of mosquitoes in my ears. I guess I haven't come down yet, after all.

A summer storm breaks out, and I run for cover, thunder pealing, lightning flashing. Lucky for me a barn is handy, so I dive in and hole up with a couple of fat, stocky horses. Hungry and beat, after eating a couple of apples, I flop down on a pile of hay and, in no time, am out like a light.

I awaken late in the evening, but there's enough light for me to see that I must have been hallucinating - the storm, the barn, the horses. It turns out it's not a barn, but a sty and the "horses" are pigs. The "apples" I downed must have been pig turds (I *thought* they were on the sweet side). The storm? No sign of a storm having passed - all is bone dry. To this day, I have no idea, although since then, every time I experiment with a substance, the ominous rumble of thunder arises in my psyche.

After sunset, I experience the culminating essence of summer, as the stars emerge and I am once again transported by the grand view of infinity, the eternal shimmer of divine light. Then, some intermittent meteors flash across the void, further intensifying the experience.

As I gaze up at the sight, it just seems as though I am looking upon the very face of God - the stars are like white acne, and the meteors like a scratch across the Divine nose - one that heals instantly, which would be in keeping with all that omnipotent power.

32

Autumn

From time to time, I range north in my wanderings. There, one of the key events to mark autumn's inception is the appearance of the Aurora borealis. There are various myths surrounding this phenomenon - that it is a result of charged ions in the atmosphere, an interplay of solar emissions and the Earth's magnetic patterns, and so on. However, the true explanation of the

Northern Lights lies in activities that directly pertain to the constellations - a sort of zodiac slight of hand, as it were.

Those zodiacs and constellations! Give them a toy, and they go to town. Pisces, for instance, takes hold of the auroral paint and brushes out some fins and a gyrating tail. Not to be outdone, Leo dons a mane ruffling in an African wind. Then Cygnus the Swan gets some wing action going, or Aquarius fakes some pouring water. Those godlets, I tell ya!

Meanwhile, the sun's rays decline, rivers run shallow, and dustings of snow begin to appear on mountain peaks. Chickadees are re-banding, after having dispersed for nesting activities. One must beware, especially if alone in the woods. Tiny gypsies, they may be, but once gathered in a rowdy band of 10-12 members, chickadees transform into mean-spirited thugs. Unless you have advanced training in a martial art, or hike heavily armed, it's recommended you avoid the forest for the season.

Cricket chirps have fallen off now, chirper mechanisms having worn out after a summer's heavy use. Squirrels are acting weird. You can never predict a squirrel's behavior this time of year - hence the term *squirrelly*. Also, you are what you eat, and we know the squirrel's favorite repast. Beavers are hard at work storing winter food - saplings and bark-clad bits of tree, some of which are very poplar, some they birch about but store anyway, and some I'd be aspen for trouble if I lay down any more inane tree jokes here - not to mention the author willow you a rebate on this book.

Migrant birds now dream of distant lands. Resident birds dream of migrant birds departing. Color in the woods changes - in some places, more gold and russet, in other places, bright splashes of reds, golds, yellows, with an occasional dash of unholy chartreuse.

V-formations of geese appear in the skies. More literate flocks work on other letters, even short haikus of an autumnal flavor - although there are also the inevitable sell-outs who opt to work for the advertising moguls.

Gusting autumn winds strip leaves from the trees. Mushrooms abound. The hawk's buffet is diminished. The bear yawns, plumps his pillow, and settles in to listen to the owl's story-time.

A last call goes out for migrators to get at it. Colors soften. Trout spawn. There's a gravity and turbulence in the air, like a lonely lake covered in whitecap frenzy. The hares are turning white, an occasional snow begins

to fly. All that's left of the rose is now a rose hip, a shriveled remnant of a once glorious bloom.

It all generates a feeling of existential *je ne sais quoi*, laced with delicate striations of gimme-a-ticket-for-Tahiti-man.

33

Winter

Lake edges ice up, and it grows quiet in the woods. The moon attains its throne now, and rangers of the night wander over bleak terrain.

Count von Winter pays a visit, brief at first, and confined to the upper regions of the mountains. A few of his lackeys roam the lowlands, from time to time, testing their powers - Jack Frost, Snow Queen, Whore Frost, Ice-man, Margaret Thatcher. . .

A red-tailed hawk patrols in the heights, using zoom-lens eyes to spy out wayward snacks. Seeds are suspended in the depths, in darkness, running compressed programs that will one day transform them into full grown plants that come with attendant responsibilities - meeting photosynthesis quotas, contributing to the biomass, generating blossoms that live up to the status quo of the species, and passing on the family lineage.

One day, a big snow falls. The trees are weighted down - conifers with snowy burdens look like old peasants under the Czar's thumb. A pair of gray jays approaches me, looking for a handout. Get a job, ya bums, I

respond. Then I relent, as I recall my lunch contains eggplant sandwiches and I'd appreciate some help disposing of them.

I find some coyote tracks and follow them. Through the pines they wander, and I come across the feathers of a luckless roadrunner that must have been dispatched by old Wiley. Either that, or his pillow's sprung a leak. Then the tracks run downhill and begin to circle and drift and cross and recross in inexplicable patterns. The only explanation I can come up with is that the coyote must know he's being followed and is trying to throw me off. But I doggedly persist, until the tracks come to an abrupt end. I'm stymied, how can this be? A giant eagle scooped it? It climbed into the trees? I don't get it.

After a half-hour of stalking around, ruminating over the mystery, it dawns on me that the coyote has backtracked in his own prints. He almost got me there. I go back and find his jump off point and hurry on in hot pursuit.

The next thing I know, I come upon remnants of a deer kill that was made, probably yesterday, by a wolf. I see by the prints that the bandito coyote has stolen off with a chunk of the meat. What a conniving low life. After shaking my head at the thought of what an unethical thief this character is, I dig in, cut me off a juicy slice - a venison steak for the fry pan and, tossing away the rest of my eggplant sandwich, settle in for a real feed. That night, in my snow hut, as owls call across the snowy winterscape, I fall asleep in an existential angst - who? Who am I . . .?

Next morning, I come across a cabin and get the wood stove fired up. I put on some snowshoes, but they melt while making lunch by the hot stove. Then I try some cross-country skiing, but give it up - maybe if it was, say Belgium, or some other small country, I could pull it off.

Time passes and, before you know it, the snow begins to melt, rain falls now and then, and early migrators begin to journey north. One day, some crocuses show up. Then some daffodils make an appearance. Trees begin to bud, and bears stir in their sleep. Another year has passed, a new cycle is beginning. Either that, or I just made up this whole shebang. But that's okay, too - some shebangs are worth experiencing, don't you think?

34

To err is human, but to really screw up, you need a computer.

- Hebert's central writing code.

Having such a negative history when working for others, I became intent on self-employment. First, I tried my hand at writing. I enjoyed books. One night, I was up til 3 a.m. with a good one. Once I started coloring, I found it hard to stop. On a whim, I bought a book on obsessive-compulsive disorders. I was enthralled. I read it 127 times.

I grew intent on writing my autobiography. I resolved to get started as soon as I figured out who the main character was. Meanwhile, I started in on an Alzheimer's project. One of the beauties of working with people with Alzheimer's is you can use the same set of jokes every day. You don't have to come up with new material all the time. I reasoned that I could write a book whose chapters would be pretty much the same right through. I'd market it to the Alzheimer crowd.

As I grew more sophisticated about my career as an author, I considered writing under a pen name. But Papermate felt pretentious, and my favorite, Bic, was already taken. Then I pondered for a while, and came up with as formidable a name as I could possibly imagine. "Josef" had a fine ring to it. Yes - Josef Graf - excellent! But again, I was disappointed as I discovered that the name had already been taken (no doubt by some ruthless opportunist).

In any event, day after day, endless hours parked in front of a lukewarm word processor brought me no further than the suburbs of Zero City, Utah. A solid month of unremitting discipline delivered the following literary endeavor:

Once upon a time, there lived ~~eked a man woman~~ an androgynous person in a land far away and over the sea, who made his/her living off the eggs of cows and the milk of chickens. [insert profound chicken philosophy here] Unbeknownst to our hero/ine, there lived next door a crooked little man who, by day, plied his trade as a cat chiropractor and, by night, transformed magically into ~~the third eye of the god Thor~~ the left nostril of Arnold Schwarznegger . . .

At this point, I froze up. No amount of exercises from The Artist's Way, or Fearless Creating, led to a single additional word. I just had to face facts. I was not a writer. Still, having invested so much time and energy in the trade, I resolved to write at least one piece, even if only a single person would be destined to read it. After much deliberation, I chose to compose the following letter to my dear (and only) friend, Laderna Q. Clements:

Dear Laderna:

It's been a long time since last we met.

Oops – sorry! Please forgive the first sentence, as it was dashed off in a hurry. I am now writing at a measured pace, as I know what a slow reader you are.

If you are watching TV, you should tune in to Channel 48 - it's hilarious! But just for a few minutes, as I'm going to want your undivided attention.

[pause here]

Listen, Laderna, I've been wanting to ask you, for a while now, are you still going out with Hubert Moosefart? If so, I hope you'll reconsider. I know you can do so much better. When I knew him, he was a pinkneck. Now I hear he's an out and out redneck - and fast on the way to becoming a winedarkneck. I believe he only uses ¼ of his brain. I don't know what he does with the other ¼.

And I hope his moral life has improved. When last I saw him, I asked (somehow the topic came up) how often he indulged in sex. He replied, "well, I like it infrequently." It was only later that he explained he meant infrequently as two words.

Last week, I took the bus to Winnebagobovonoraleekonpledin, a Lakota name that means, "lucky spot." My first night there, I slept like a baby - I woke up crying every two hours. I was enchanted by the place. I suspected right away that I must have lived there in a prior life. Sure enough, while digging through the local graveyard, I was able to retrieve my favorite bracelet. It still fits after 500 years.

You'll have to excuse me; I need a little break. I'm eating a banana (feeding the inner monkey), but you can skip over this part if you want.

Where was I . . . oh well. Oh yeah, I forgot - I don't have your new address, so if you don't get this, let me know and I'll Xerox it and send a copy to every address you've been in the habit of residing at, with the hope that one will be forwarded to you.

Well, all for now. Keep on the sunny side - if the fog lifts, it won't be mist. Remember, a day without sunshine is like a day in Seattle.

Write me soon. In fact, if you write me now, we might both get each other's letters at the same time. That'd be neat!

Oh, I almost forgot to mention an unmentionable (and I should be writing on red paper to match my complexion, as I reluctantly jot this down - last time we were together, I left you with a token of my infection. I apologize and would like to make it up to you, so please send me your pharmacy bill, and I'll cover it.

Love,
Hebert

PS - this is what part of the alphabet would look like if Q and R were eliminated.

After my writing period petered out, I drifted toward Invention City, New Mexico, where I set about developing some of my more innovative schemes: an underwater tape recorder; a color radio; a detector that beeps louder the closer you come to the grave site of your previous incarnation; a pair of snowshoes for those students of metaphysics intent on practicing walking on water, but whose cup of faith is only half-full; a microwave TV set, so you

can watch 60 Minutes in 12 seconds; and, my most promising gem, to date - contact lenses with windshield wipers.

In the meantime, while waiting for the world to discover my genius, I had to be practical. I needed to get my life in gear, and to experience the security of a regular paycheck. But I did not feel bad about my seeming inability to hold a steady job. Through concerted study of the writings of Buckminster Fuller, I understood the evils of specialization. I resolved to be what Fuller saw society was most in need of - a comprehensive generalist. Because a C. G. refuses to walk the narrow path of specialization, but chooses to keep his horizons wide, he gets to embrace the whole picture, he resists focusing on a particular niche and thus has more to offer.

One day, while hitchhiking, I was given a ride by a businessman in a Cadillac. The topic of vocation arose.

“What kind of work do you do?”

“Oh, I’m a comprehensive generalist,” I replied with an air of pride. After listening to my explanation of what a C.G. is, the driver of the Caddy retorted:

“Oh - you mean you’re a *bum*. I get it.”

Modern Art is priceless - for gaining insight into mood disorders.
- from Musings

Feeling a need for more meaning in my life, I undertook to explore the world of Art History, with special emphasis on the modern era, reasoning that cultural enrichment would be just the ticket. Let me share my exploration as it unfolded for me:

Our foray through art history begins with a short, pre-modern recap to set the stage for the art of modernity. After the famous Renaissance period, came High Renaissance, followed by Botticelli's landmark liberation of Venus from the confines of a clamshell, thus paving the way for a string of naughty nudes to spice up the viewer's eye. Now they were humming along, they'd finally got on track. Otherwise we would have been plagued with Rubenesque badgers and coyotes, instead of chubby femmes, and Impressionists would have bogged themselves down in all kinds of phallus games, instead of the real thing.

Rembrandt broke into the scene with his counterpoint of light and dark, largely as a result of having to paint when the utility company had cut off his power. And Claude Monet hit the jackpot with his water lily series, setting the stage for a thoughtful array of pond-weeds.

By the middle of the 20th Century, the art world was ripe for the inception of Abstract Expressionism. Alternatively, many artologists consider the earlier work (1920s) of Kandinsky to be the progenitor of the

movement, pointing out that the artist, unwilling to suppress his rage at having his advances rejected by an unresponsive trollop, vented himself on a series of canvasses until his ire abated.

Midway in his career, influenced by Matisse and the Impressionists, Kandinsky opened the gates of his technique. He began to release form from his work, letting light, color, and life-force take the helm. Without the restriction of form, color had taken off into a world of its own. After a while, Kandinsky had to round up his colors, as they'd escaped into their own little ventures - blue, to loll on the beach, yellow, skipping across the sea, and red, with its sky high ambition, lost in the ozone.

Significant works from the Kandinsky brush include *Woman Yacking With A Goat*; *Self-Portrait By An Admirer*; *Nudes Playing Tiddly-Winks*; and *Carouser Winking At A Virgin*.

Jorornanadon, a student of Conelus Corndog, innovated the Cobra movement at this point, with its signature style of violent brushwork, saturated color, and high-pitched emotional range. Accused of failing to seek approval for advances, even outright rape, upon his colors, Jorornanadon went into seclusion, emerging the day before his death to admonish his accusers with some heftily-produced works, including *Nude Raccoon Reclining*; *Autumn in Spring*; *Study of a Demented Parakeet*; and his ground-breaking *Still Life of a Meteor*.

Almost concurrent with the Cobra movement, the art of Assemblage made an appearance. Lauded for its use of junk from the real world, and its transformation of non-art materials into art, auto-wreckers did a brisk business. The creative façade-ery of the art form has been likened to presenting George W. Bush as functional.

Art Informel was next to make a debut. Originated by the French critic, Michel Tapi-danseur who, weary of everyone else having fun at his expense, figured he could have a go at it. After a few attempts, he abandoned brushes for a variety of makeshift tools - spatulas, old socks, poured paint, heaved paint, and then splattered paint. Inspired by results, he dove deeper, trying mouth-rinsed and spat out paint, followed by paint shaken in a seltzer bottle and sprayed out of the back of the armpit. Next, he tried dilutions of paint drunk and urinated onto the canvas, and finally, paint fed to diarrhea-plagued parrots that were induced to fly over the canvas, voiding a masterpiece.

Key works in the annals of Art Informel include Man with a Straw Hanky; Nude Cat on a Sofa; Farting in Blue; and Trout in a Treetop.

We come now to Neo-Dada, which some describe as lying midway between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. The form is characterized by ambiguity and paradox, although single dox also arose. The key figure in the movement was Edward Lostcondom, who became a Neo-Dada proponent by default. Also entailed in the movement is a focus on symbols, which several artists turned musician capitalized on, by the use of hi-hat and crash units of drum kits. Key works in this arena include Misty Morning Sunset; Woman Braiding her Eyebrow; and the provocative Nude Penguin Descending a Staircase.

Pop Art made its appearance on the scene when Pipinskinitsky, a secret agent for Coca-Cola Ltd., was messing around with coke bottles while opium-saturated artists were looking on. Pop Art reached its apex when Marilyn Monroe captured Ainly Whore-Wall's image in a quick sketch. Incensed by the flippancy of the act, Whore-Wall, in retaliation, slapped out an image of Monroe, deliberately abusing the colors. The word icon came to the fore at this time, as artists coined the phrase, "I con you outta yer money."

Gerald Lucense Lichtensteinemstaiden von Kibbitz, who signed his name Bip, to save the bottom half of his artwork, introduced several nuances, but is most fondly remembered for simplistic renditions of comic book scenes.

Now we come to Action Art or Performance Art, a forum that was successfully designed to elude interpretation. Joseph Boyzinband, one of the key figures here, demonstrated a shamanic blitz in histrionics. Someone had to lambaste the Expressionists for their senseless indulgence in creativity, and so arose the new breed.

We now must undertake a look at Minimalism, and I apologize in advance for the inappropriate length of copy here, which should, after all, be virtually nil. However, we must proceed. Minimalism reduced expression to the bare bones, employing clarity and severity in one swoop. Richard Serra-Serra and Watt Will Beee got into a competitive assail with each other when Serra-Serra produced a photograph of a footprint in the snow. Will Beee, not to be outdone, created a work consisting of a slightly off-white snowflake in a snowstorm. Originally titled "is," Beee, in a fit of paranoia over potential

retaliation by Serra-Serra, rushed down to the gallery to shorten the title to the first half of the letter S.

Although editors wanted me to leave out this section - on the grounds that I don't seem to grasp the concept of Conceptual Art, I decided to include it, as I *did* have the *ual* part under my cerebral belt.

In any event, I believe I can predict with confidence that history will remember me as being one up on the art intellectuals of our time, in that I was able to identify the earliest creation of a conceptual work in Gustave Eiffel's 1889 engineering feat of the tower that bears his name - which, by the way, he originally chose to title, The Empire State Building After Taxes.

Further, while in Paris at the height of the Conceptual movement, I cleared my mind of all concepts (an exercise that comes natural to me) except for the above-mentioned title of the work. I then photographed the Tower at various exposures, while always remembering to keep the lens cap on my camera. I have since had the roll of film obliterated in sulfuric acid, and subsequently produced some prints. Collectors are encouraged to enter a bid on the set of prints now held in absentia on the internet (go to eBay, follow the links).

I end my exploration of modern art here. But readers can explore further nuances and styles under various headings, including:

Cubism

Jamaicism

Funk Art

Artfree Art

Artless fauxism

Video Art

Sound Art

OlfactoryArt

Neo-Expressionism

Neo Yer Talkinism

36

Why do they call them apartments, when they're all stuck together?
- from Musings

While digesting the auspicious dialogue I had had with the Cadillac man, about comprehensive generalism being a bum's life code, and reformulating my occupational philosophy, I rented a place down by a lower side (might have been east, or west, I'm not much on directions). When I moved into my new pad, I had no trouble furnishing it. Being a minimalist, all I needed was a mattress and a couple of chairs, although after a few days I chose to go all out and add a de-caffienated coffee table to the setting.

It wasn't that I was just cheap at heart. There's a lot more to it. Like, stuff and I don't get along. I hate having things, they just bog me down, and become a distraction from the real business of living.

First, you have to work hard to make extra dough to buy something. Once you have it, you've got to keep it somewhere. The more you have, the bigger the place you have to rent, or buy - for your *stuff!* Then, you have to maintain it. It breaks, or wears out, or needs repair. It has to be cleaned. It clutters your space. It grows shabby. If you have to move, you've got to deal with all that stuff. On and on. . .

I know someone who owns heaps of stuff. One day, he's looking for a hammer. He knows he has three or four somewhere in the morass. But he can't find any of them, so he goes out and buys another one.

Do we own stuff - or does it own us?

Anyway, I had a bit of a green thumb, so I planted birdseed in a window box. Then I sat down and pondered what to feed the little peepers when they came up. At the end of the week, discovering a snake in the yard, I took a shovel and whacked the hell out of it. I didn't have cable for a week.

It was a cheap establishment. When I complained to the landlord - a loose-kneed wolverine kind of guy - "I've gotta leak in the sink," he replied, "Go ahead." But I was equally cheap. When I threw a party, I'd invite a friend who had multiple personalities to keep food consumption down. I found a great way to cut down on my electric bill, too. It worked, until my neighbor discovered the extension cord.

Nor was I the most hygienic rooster on the block. I wore earth tones to keep from having to do laundry very often. Reluctantly, I'd do the dishes and make the bed, knowing I'd have to do the same thing all over again next month. My barbecue evolved into a gummy, charred mess from trying to cook eggs on the grill. Ultimately, though, the kitchen floor got so dirty and sticky, I finally did something about it. I got a pair of slippers. I kept a duck-billed platypus in my room. At first the smell was disgusting - but after a while the platypus got used to it.

From time to time, the crafty fox in me, always on the lookout to cut corners, compelled me to make wine out of raisins, so it would age automatically. I took an interest in the constellations, and installed a skylight. The people who lived above me were furious.

For some reason, I began to take more interest in my appearance. For someone who usually just didn't give a damn, it took me by surprise. Was it a worthwhile preoccupation? Or would it come to no good? Did it arise from the bowels of conceit? Or belch from legitimate innards?

In any event, I took to grooming and, waxing style-conscious, grew a ponytail, till I realized it made me look like a horse's ass. When I ran out of dental floss, I used the E-string from my guitar. Over time, I found I preferred it. Which wouldn't have been so bad, except I grew more and more fond of using the *lower* E-string.

It did not take long for the landlord's fuse to burn to its end. But I received the eviction notice with a sigh of relief. Monthly rent was a habit that pinched the toes of my inner gypsy. Then, catering to my inner Prudence O'Priety, a compulsive responsibility-bearer, I decided to do the

right thing. To effect proper closure on my apartment, I went to a bug zoo to purchase 400 cockroaches. I'd promised the landlord I'd leave the place the same way I found it.

It was high time to move on. But where would I go? How to solve the existential dilemma of shelter? Although tornadoes and people like me have one thing in common - they both end up in trailer parks - I managed to side step this slice of destiny by tracking down the only residence the bank and I could agree on. I had actually located a house I could afford. Now, if I could just get it down out of the tree

37

Two wrongs don't make a right, but three lefts eventually do.
- from Musings.

For transportation, I bought a motorcycle and paid an extra \$300 to have air conditioning installed. Later, I acquired an 85 Dodge – which wasn't the year, but the resale value. Unfortunately, I knew little about mechanics. When a friend asked how often I rotated my tires, I replied, "Every time I drive." I named my car Flattery because it got me nowhere. On occasions when I *was* mobile, I was proud to sport my homemade bumper sticker: Eat road kill, 7 million crows can't be wrong.

It was just as well I didn't have unlimited mobility. When I signed on my inner cartographer, I must have been in a distracted state, because he had zero map-reading skills. Whenever I drove any appreciable distance, I got lost more often than not. But I never panicked when I got lost - I just changed where I wanted to go. My central driving code - the easiest way to refold a road map is in a ball - was partly responsible for a predicament I got into one winter. I wondered why it was so cold in Atlanta until I discovered I'd been reading the map upside down.

From having to get around by thumb on so many occasions, I felt compassion for hitchhikers. However, at the same time, I liked to have my fun. Whenever I picked up a rider, I would go into my serial killer routine. Either that or, as soon as they got in the car, I'd say, "buckle up. I want to try something I saw in a cartoon."

I installed a planter box between the front bucket seats, and planted a corn stalk. Over time, it grew to touch the roof of the car, and I no longer felt so alone when I drove around. We would go everywhere together - the beach, shopping, visiting relatives (in Corn's home state, Iowa), and to the movies. Of course, I always chose the Drive-in for Corn's sake. After a while, however, it developed into a big tassel and, waxing stoical, I heaved it out. I heard later, through the grapevine (waxing gossipy in a moment of fermentation), that the plant was devastated by the breakup. I wrote to Corn, apologizing for dumping it, and explained that it was nothing personal. I clarified that it was only because I had enough corn in my life as it was, and enclosed a copy of this book as convincing proof.

Eventually, I grew exasperated with the whole vehicle issue. I had an acquaintance who must have carted all my luck off for himself. He's the kind of guy who could break mirrors over his head, eat black cats for lunch, and walk underneath falling ladders - only to win the lottery (and even then, it was because a buddy had bought him a ticket). He drove a 1982 Toyota Crayola that he'd bought ten years prior for fifty dollars, when it had a hundred thousand miles on it. Now the odometer read 780,000 miles and the car was still going strong. He filled the tank Christmas, Easter, and Halloween. His mechanic was in rags.

But I had no luck, and no car sense, either. I was foolish enough to think a Rambler could get around without a tow truck. I bought a

Volkswagen Rodent, and it ended up as road kill. My last car was a Ford Cripple, which ran great for the first week, then threw a rod, blew a gasket and seized a bearing. All because, in a fit of inspiration to economize, I had changed the oil using my annual residue of bacon grease. By then, I'd been through so many cars, I was able to compose a litany of my own jingles:

Drive a Ford, and be bored
Drive a Merc, and be a jerk
None of that Dodge hodge-podge
Chevrolet's not really the way
If you had any iota, you'd pass on Toyota
You can't get fonda Honda
Only a gambler would drive a Rambler
Wanna drive a Buick? - you sick!
You'd be wiser not to go Chrysler

Warming to the process, I sat down and composed a series of catchy names for models, reasoning that the auto companies would pay good money for hot copy:

For Chrysler, I came up with:

Insipid	Lamer
Pariah	Hobblers
Placenta	Oddity
Toxica	Profana

For Ford Motor Company:

Excreta	Mundana
Gauche	Motion-phobe
Mongrel	Turbulence
Dishevel	Miscarry

And, for General Motors:

Myopia	Somber
Cholera	Dilapida
Residu	Turdbug
Polluta	Le Bronx

Also, as a footnote, I added a carefully drawn blueprint of an idea for fuel efficiency. The nut of the oeuvre was that the automaker could install large wheels in back, small in front, and voila! - a car that's always rolling downhill! What a gem!

Although I have extended my credit card, reasoning that royalty checks must surely be in the mail for both my literary and engineering endeavors, I have yet to hear a single word of acknowledgment from any of these companies. I will keep a sharp lookout for new car promotions, with an eye to suing, should any breach of copyright take place.

I'm getting on in years. If I were a bottle of wine, I'd be worth a fortune.

- from Musings.

As time and tide progressed, I arrived (rather abruptly, I thought) at the nether end of Mid-life City, Indiana. I woke up one morning to realize a lot of gray had invaded my thinning hair. For a while, I tried Grecian Formula, but was disappointed. Not only doesn't it work, but it tastes disgusting. That my baldness was rapidly progressing came to light when, one afternoon while napping under a tree, a California condor tried to hatch my head.

My clothing was waxing shabby - my inner tailor was on strike. Life was evolving into a fairy tale - Grimm. I made an appointment with a personal management consultant for advice on how to improve my appearance. The long and short of the exchange was that I traded \$200 for a recommendation that I keep myself under low wattage lighting. In desperation, I bought a self-help video - How to Cope with Disillusion. After I got it home, I discovered the box was empty.

To improve my mind and hold back the tide of time, I decided to delve into literature. A month later, passing a mirror, I noticed I wore a look of great consternation. While I attributed it to a recent attempt to delve into Kirkegard and Sartre, it wasn't until three years later, under hypnosis, that I discovered it was actually due to a few too many tamales.

All things considered, I read too much. One day, I was walking around with my eyeglasses on when the prescription ran out. For this reason,

and because I found the classics too ponderous, I took up lesser literature, purchasing condensed books from an outlet that dealt primarily in watered-down versions of principal works:

The Mediocre Gatsby	A Tale of Two Hick Towns
Adventures of the Hardly Boys	GPS Coordinates Near Eden
Blueberry Sawbuck	The Horse's Cakehole
Great Expectorations	The Importance of Doing Earnest
Little Tartlettes	Wee Tiff on the Bounty
David Tinfield	Crime of a Drunken Mariner
Dante's Drunken Comedy	Romeo and a Bimbo
The Only Child Karamazov	All White Noise on the Western Front
Tolstoy's Whorin' Niece	Raisins of Peeve
The Hot Pink Letter	To The Outhouse
Jewish Family Rabinowitz	The Zen Also Advises
Ditty of Hiawatha	A Spindly Twig Grows in the Bronx
Two Beers Before the Mast	Cat on a Lukewarm Aluminum Roof
Uncle Tom's Condo	Catch 11
The Seduction of the Keyhole	Quack Zhivago
My Damn Ovary	Henderson, the Acid-Rain Peasant
As You Dig	Off-White Like Me
For Whom the Kettle Whistles	Much Hype About Squat
Misdemeanors and Probation	Shaming of the True
A Trolley Named Hankering	Tropic of Carcinoma
The Hissy-Fits Bear it Away	Who's Afraid of a Virgin Fox?
Anthony and a High-Maintenance Babe	
Proust's Forgetfulness of Things Just Yesterday	
One Musketeer and a Couple of Lame Sidekicks	
The Quick Sketch of Dorian Gray	
Being, Nothingness, and a Lost Credit Card	

39

At a critical point in history, Thomas Edison invented the phonograph. It was either that, or pawn his record collection.

- from Hebert's Historical Notes.

With the advent of technological innovation, I was rapidly falling behind the times. Computers were a complete mystery. I didn't know where to begin with those things. I didn't even know where you change the oil in a laptop. But maybe my relationship with machines was not so bad. Technology and society were getting out of hand. Recent laws had been enacted regarding deleting spam without a license, and then there was a conundrum developing over email vagrancy.

In a fit of reckless abandon, I purchased a cell phone and signed up for a Pay-As-You-Go account, little realizing a fee would be deducted every time I took a pee. The server was using leading-edge technology that was full of problems that hadn't yet been ironed out. To address these problems, I was given a 1-800 number to call. It was an ultra-automated processing format, no chance of encountering a human being, no matter how you worked the menu. The recorded greeting ran, "Hi, I'm Melanoma, and I'll be guiding you through our menus . . ." She was well named, as the stress of wending through the hurdles was pretty much equivalent to coping with cancer.

I installed a GPS in myself, so I could find me wherever I went - no more existential angst. I know where I'm at, world, bring it on! It worked for

a while. Then I got the bright idea of installing a GPS in my cat, who tended to stray from time to time - which was great until I mixed up which GPS signal was which. I spent the better part of one night trying to climb down out of a tree I wasn't in.

I bought a DVD, but didn't know how to use it. Hell, I hadn't even caught up with Beta yet. My idea of cinematic drama was still a guy named Shakespeare. I put a jazz CD in my DVD player and got snowy scenes of what looked like a thousand monkeys decked in scuba gear dancing in 6/8 time. Eventually, I got with the program. That's when I found the special function that eliminated from Hollywood movies all gratuitous violence, cliché sex, and worn-out-formula scripting. Essentially, it converted a two-hour film into a quality three-minute quickie.

Times have changed. Now we have an enormous public TV station. It's called surveillance. You don't wanna leave your house without make-up and wardrobe consultations, because you're always *on*. Aspiring to break into the world of cine-glitter, I regularly go to the airport or bank machine for impromptu auditions.

Security systems can be a real party though. One of my favorite pastimes is to get over to a parking lot by a hotel or apartment block around 3 or 4 a.m., and indulge in a bender of bumper dancing. The game's called: how many car alarms can you set off before a cruiser pulls up?

Although leery about computer dating since they'd referred me to Dial-a-Prayer, I decided to give it another shot. I entered my profile, that I like the prairies; that I'm a minimalist; I don't want anything fancy in life; I'm looking for someone who likes nature, speaks another language, is loyal and not class-conscious. They set me up with a lonely bison.

Feeling dejected, I sought a counselor to gain support. Opting to go ultra-modern, I was lined up with a computerized social worker - a robotic counselor that ran a *mood pulser* program. Essentially, it could tell me what I was feeling at any given moment, so that, as I journeyed through my psyche, I could keep track of my emotional bearing in relation to my life experience. It was very effective, and it was able to help me discern, for instance, whether I was experiencing raw anxiety, or just a basic existential gnaw. But then, when it identified that I was feeling ambiguous about what I was feeling, the whole program short circuited, and came crashing down.

As ever, there are effective and non-effective applications of technology. An example of the former is the bionic clock equipped with a sense of humor. It turns Irish on the hour (O'Clock) and has a gamy personality, working me with, "Hey, up we get, Hebert. You're off to work now. Then, after a pause, "Ho-ha! Only kidding - it's 4 a.m., you've got three more hours of sleep, you lucky devil!" Everyday, at 2:30 it declares, "It's time to see the dentist (tooth-hurty) and ten minutes later, "Set out the china."

I need more time in my life, so I bought a television that watches itself. Among other priceless technologies are pipeless plumbing, which saves enormous money and resources in hardware, and light bulbs of the non-screw variety - to eliminate heaps of lame jokes (e.g., how many fleas does it take to screw in a light bulb. Answer: Two, but the trick is getting them in the bulb).

But technological farming - there's a preordained loser. Factory farmed enterprises are undertaking genetic engineering to blend a spider with a chicken, to produce poultry with 8 legs and 6 breasts (don't go there, guys, two is enough on the ladies. . .). And then there is the idea of fish that fillet themselves upon death. But it all grows into an ever deepening morass producing mad cows, lunatic pigs, schizophrenic chickens, and cross-dressing goats. There's not going to be any decent food left. If you're lucky enough to have a Subinkian passport, better start relocating.

And what's with remotes these days? How can they even call it a "remote" if it only works across the room? They should call it a "nearby." A remote would be, you're on the subway heading home, and you use it to switch on the coffee maker. Or you get hold of a nuclear-powered remote that can change channels in every house within a six-block radius.

A handy remote would be one that, when you wake up, you can take a shower and brush your teeth without getting out of bed. When are they going to get *that* together? Or a remote that you can set on auto when you go to sleep. During the night, it fulfills the energetic stuff, like partying all night, or - one night you can set it on psychoanalyze your shadow, and you'd wake up integrated.

Some of the new stuff coming out is weird. My nuclear-powered toothbrush experienced a meltdown. After that, whenever I laughed, neon green ha-has flew out of my mouth. There's a microwave toaster that burns toast from the inside out.

I got a solar-powered shoehorn and can't live without it now. On cloudy days, I wear slippers. I gave a miss to a pocket calculator, as it's not too difficult to count pockets without it. And a pager? - I can turn my own pages, thank you. A fax machine is not my style, either. I'm waiting for the fiction machine, with its more creative potential.

After years of effective use of an audio recorder, then a video recorder, I finally purchased a dream recorder. Just tape a couple of diodes on the brain, and you're remming your dreams through the night onto a DVD. Saves time with the therapist - just mail in the disk and let the old shrink fly at it.

40

After my computer beat me at 3-D chess, I worked my way down. But it even beat me at one-dimensional checkers. Then I took it on in a contest of kickboxing, and won.

- from Hebert's memoirs.

I fire up my compooper. It shutters and rattles, as I hack and wheeze it up to speed. Surging into memory mode, my RAM head-butts with the hard drive and trundles off, grazing as it goes, upon a field of fresh font. Now I'm opening Windows and slammin' doors, dragging and scanning, hopping from mouse to monitor. I'm just a Hewlett of wood and a Packard of water. I

find myself backslashing underbrush and logon an Adobe forest, loading the harvest onto a flat-bed scanner.

Ultimately, I love to see if I can get 20-25 programs running tasks at once, before they all crash and jumble upon each other in one big Google.

For starters, though, I just get the motherboard surfing on mega waves - Yahoo! Up above, an inkjet sails over, trailing a long black plume. And above that, I can just make out the winking lights of pixels in cyberspace. But then my motherboard formats into the drive port, and the ride is over, leaving me in a download mood, using my cursor big-time. I feel like a giga dummy, like I've fallen into the recycle bin.

But it turns out I'm just in hunger mode, so I order off the drop-down menu, a Photo Deluxe with a side if files, and turn the CD burner on to sauté a software egg and a few bytes of spam. Downloading the JAVA (black, single click the sugar), and login some cookies, I proceed to the chat room (Pisces and Geminis need double-click to enter). But, while there, my Macintosh makes applesauce of my files, and I have to start over.

Because I prefer a heftier feel, I trade in my mouse for a rat, which I deck out in tap shoes, so it can double-click across the desktop, transform my cursor - if you triple-click, it turns into a blessing.

Now it's all upscale, with Quark Xpress running full-tilt, a RAM on its cowcatcher, steaming down the hard drive. Hoisting my Acrobat Reader on a taskbar high in cyberspace, I stick an internet under it for safety. Things are really humming now - Yahoo! Then, as a rufus-crowned browser alights on the internet to hatch some pixel-chicks, I throw my defragmenter into the Recycle Bin, and it builds me a new computer.

Next, I configure some network-fishing with cyberworms for bait, internetting some floppy dace out in the eBay, and navigate my cache back to port. But suddenly, things get out of hand. So much spam runs in, my mailbox contracts Mad Cow. Strapping on my toolbar, sharpening my files, hammering thumbnails into the refresh button, I take a deep breath and brace myself. Am I really going through that firewall without a backup?

Then, with the firewall finally easing to an ember, I hack into my own modem, only to find a collection agent on the other end, so I divert his call to cyberspace.

Finally, installing a web cam, I tune into a cute little pixel. Will she dance for me on my laptop? I'm all set to femail myself to this doll, when

my search engine seizes up, and I'm staring open-jawed at a sign, "This computer has performed an illegal operation and will now shut down."

I feel like an icon. My Outlook was zooming along; I was processing in bold text. But now I'm reduced to a shrivelly 9-point italic that almost falls over in the breeze of an opening folder. Like a password entered in haste, or an attachment downloaded without McAfee's thumbs up, my whole program crashes in a deluge of delete and uninstall. I thought I had it all configured, but I was wrong.

Eventually, I get fed up with the whole thing. My files couldn't sharpen a hack-saw. My program is riddled with viruses. My Apple has worms. Even my viruses have worms. My sloppy drive winds down. The links is off hunting the mouse. My net gets tangled. My server gets uppity. My keyboard wails out sharps and flats. My IBM is just one Incredible Bullshit Machine. Artificial intelligence turns out to be only a virtual reality anymore. So I turn on the Microsoft one last time and heave my compooper out its own Windows.

“ .”

- a Zen quote.

Time went by, and one thing led to another, until I succumbed, once more, to an addiction that had persisted through my life - dance-aholism. But I would not submit without a fight. I joined a local chapter of Dance-aholics Anonymous. Screwing up my courage, I rose before the group.

“My name is Hebert Flabeau, and I’m a dance-aholic. I’ve been on the wagon for 27 days now. I’m getting bored with life - and tense, too. I’m waking up in the middle of the night in a sweat with nightmares about lying on a dance floor, getting stomped on by S and M ballerinas.

My feet first got me into trouble when I was four years old. My parents didn't know about my habit until I was six, when they caught me in a closet, two-stepping with our collie. Shortly after my eighth birthday, my father ran away with a Ginger Rogers look-alike. The following year, my mother started bringing home drunks from a local Arthur Murray studio . . .”

To help me cope with my addictive tendencies, I explored spiritual avenues. From a Zen master, I received meditation instruction and was given a riddle to solve. Every day at dawn, I meditated religiously on the master’s koan: “What’s invisible and smells like earthworms?” Finally, after three months, I solved it. “Master, I know the answer: robin farts.”

My teacher was impressed with my progress, and gave me further mysteries to ponder: Does zebra milk taste like licorice and vanilla? If a bear

craps in the woods, and there's no one around to smell it, does it still stink? Why do people say that something is "out of whack"? What's a whack? Would a lightning bolt be even faster if it didn't zigzag?

Putting on my best pair of Feng Shuis, I mustered up enough nirvana to tread the Eightfold Path. I was intent on mastering the Five Noble Precepts, and making a devoted study of the Four Noble Truths - and a partridge in a pair of Bohdi trees.

I practiced breathing exercises until blue in the third eye, and went overboard when I combined the Breath of Fire with hatha yoga, and had to be taken to the emergency ward locked in a double lotus with a collapsed lung.

I was into it big time. I removed the wheels on my beater and installed mandalas in their place, converted the engine to run on Kundalini, and replaced the turn signals with Cosmic Mudras. Then, packing a picnic basket and my dogma into my karma, I dharm'd my way up a mountain road, stopping only long enough to let my dogma perform seva on a hydrant.

Once I attained the peak, I got out and, assuming the extended tortoise pose, fell instantly into deep meditation. There, in the heart of my soul, where the very kernel of creation pulses, I felt like I had encountered enlightenment - until I realized I'd left the hi-beams of my karma-beater on, which were pointing straight up my third nostril.

But, no matter. It felt like the real thing, so I went with it - and there, in the middle of that pearl of light, God, its very own androgynous Self, gave me a secret mantra - a mantra meant just for me - which I chanted non-stop for hours:

OOOOOHHMMMMYGODTHISISHOCUSPOCUSSSSSSS.COM

After this bout of what amounted to self-enchancement wore off, I had to admit I was nowhere. I'd have to start over. This time, however, I would seek guidance from the best masters. After seven long years of rigorous practice, of striving to release striving, of emptying the mind and dissolving the ego, I attained the Zen state. I was there. Finally.

But when I went to check in with my masters, they had only bad news for me.

"We made a mistake. It turns out our teachings, which were once ideal, long ago, are now passé. You were much closer seven years ago - back

when you had some ego - because *now* the word from on High is we need that ego for the next stage. We want to culture and develop it. We apologize. You'll have to work your way back into egohood. We're very sorry. By the way, you remember that waiver you signed? Our lawyers say it's ironclad, so don't get any ideas

Boy, was I bummed. All that time and effort down the drain. I'd have to undo it all, unwind the nirvana, a nirvana with my grubby prints all over it, and a nirvana you could no longer market unless you happened to have a time machine.

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When your mission in life is to satisfy wanderlust, your postal code becomes the Universe.

- from Hebert's memoirs.

Now I had to learn the new path, the modern way, the Westerners-are-on-it-after-all school. At first, I went to the new masters - the Ego-priests, who gave me exercises in attaining Egohood. The Kundalini would have to run *downward*, the chakras attended from the top down, the mantras changed from OHM and I AM THAT to I AM, or just I, or, as the Godly One once said, I AM THAT I AM. The breathing exercises were scrapped; prana lived

now in the thinking, not the breath. No more long, drawn-out meditations - now just short 10-20 minute, fully mindful stints with specific focuses. ¹

But my ego was practically a lost cause. It was now a puny weakling. I'd have to pump I-ron on a regular basis, and consume lots of etheric spinach to address my spiritual anemia. Oh, the pathos! Oh, the humiliation . . .

But, wait . . . if I was feeling humiliation, then I must have enough ego to experience said feeling! A ray of hope, after all.

Of course, I soon had to break from my masters. After all, it was about me becoming an I - I didn't want to end up as an extension of *their* ego - a sort of I-lash in a row blinking along in unison with the masters' perspective.

After salvaging a few shattered remnants of my ego, I came to realize the enormity of the mission that lay in fully cultivating and evolving the ego - into an Ego, as it were - and decided to give the whole thing a miss for a while. It would take a lot of work. Was I the man for such a task? And if I took it on, *who* would launder my socks and underwear?

While, ultimately, I chose to place the whole existential dilemma on the back burner of my soul, I nevertheless was left with a firm resolve to change my life. I had always wanted a degree from a place of higher learning. Striking while the iron was hot, I enrolled in the Institute of Lumpen Gravee and, after four years, received a PHD in mashed potatoes.

Degree in hand, I gave up all worldly possessions and pursuits, and became a pilgrim. With nothing but a small backpack, I took to wandering the nation. I would eat whatever food life provided, and sleep wherever I encountered the least bit of shelter.

The highways of America provided more than enough sustenance. Road kill abounded, and presented a diverse menu. One day, a cat got caught going potty in a pothole, and I gained my day's repast. Another day, I discovered a possum playing possum for keeps. But, the most ultimate of my gourmet experiences had to have been the skunk meat stew. From that day, I donned a skunkskin cap in remembrance of one of my finest culinary adventures. I even learned, by heart, the little dance the skunk does just prior to detonating its biological warhead.

Exotic cultural experiences came my way. One afternoon, I encountered a cow practicing birdcalls. While I found its song sparrow lacking in the refinement of a good trill, the bovine's rendition of a screech owl was impeccable.

I lived the life of Riley - until Riley filed a lawsuit. Then I switched to a life of quiet desperation, but kept falling into noisy complacency, so I switched again - this time to a life of abject poverty. But again, I found the commitment too rigorous, as I inadvertently rose, from time to time, to the status of mere destitution. My life unfolded according to the wisdom of my personal motto: Today is the first day of the rest of your life. But relax. So is tomorrow.

After a couple of years of this shiftless wandering, a most significant process began to unfold when I lay my weary body down to sleep each night. As I slept, I spent an ever-increasing amount of time astral projecting to Subinkia. Once there, I increasingly experienced myself inhabiting the body of a toddler. Eventually, I came to enjoy a full living experience with all senses operating, like I was really there, transported to a new life. It was as though I had reincarnated in full force. Yet, when I returned the next morning, I found myself still alive back in America.

Ultimately, I had no recourse but to accept the facts: I was experiencing, not reincarnation, but inter-carnation - a process of living two lives overlapping. While it gave me the heebie-jeebies - made me wonder if my number was up back in America - it also intrigued me to no end.

The possibilities were limitless. Think of what I could do. Perhaps when the me in Subinkia grew up, I could get a job, for instance. I could send extra money to the me in America. But then, I'd have to locate a mailing address for the America-me. That posed a problem as, back there, I was pretty much a shiftless bum. Besides, would the America-me feel slighted? Would A-me prefer to ward off the stigma of charity? No, the S-me would have to work these kinds of propositions over some existential coals. It wouldn't do to go around offending myself.

The more I pondered the incredulity of my plight, the more it ascended to a level of untenable quirkiness. In the end, I decided to keep my lives separate. How I came to achieve this is a mineral of a different vein, as the author informs me that such matters lie outside the scope of this book.

In the meantime, while out on the road, back in America, I became very self-sufficient. When I wanted to listen to music, I had a Walkman that I had whittled out of wood. At first, the earphones wouldn't transmit, but partly through engaging my imagination, and partly by charging the batteries on a currant bush, the music began to flow forth. Because the contraption was made of wood, it worked in a rather tree-mendous way. I could listen to music by the Birch Boys, Spruce Bingsteen, the Oak Ridge Boys, Juniper Lopez, Andre Sequoia, and other poplar music, which I will not belabor the reader with, as they are likely sycamore of this.

Companionship was abundant, as I could rely on my wild acquaintances - the beasts of the air, the birds in the waters, and the fish of the forests. Art? - the countryside was a great gallery - sunsets, landscapes, golden fields, autumn foliage, cow-pie sculptures, minimalist expanses of blue sky, and various surrealist works to be viewed in county landfills.

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I used to believe in reincarnation, but that was in a previous lifetime.

- from Hebert's Musings.

The time has come, now, to jump ahead, to enter into the final days upon Earth of Hebert Flabeau, into the very exit-stage-left of Yours Truly. But, in order to do this, for reasons that will presently become clear, I must now

hand my tale over to the voice of the author. I bid you farewell. When next we meet . . . well, I don't want to give anything away - so I'll just say - Sayonarra! . . .

Thank you, Hebert - gracious of you. It's an honor to take over on your behalf. And so, to continue, below is a first person account, psychically derived, of the last dwindling substance of Hebert Flabeau's thought life:

Here I am, another day . . . I . . . I? Wait, who am I? Damn, I've lost my ID . . . let's see . . . what am I doing? . I . . . don't know . . .

I must have . . . that thing . . .

that illness . . . what do you call it. . .

Alls-hammers is that it? . . .

Hmmmm

Well, there's something I need to remember . . .

Yes . . .

No... oh, I don't get this

Hmmm

All things considered, I'd rather be in Subinkia.

- seance quote from the late Hebert Flabeau.

Author's note:

We have, at last, returned to the opening page of the book. The reader no doubt finds the speed with which Hebert Flabeau came to his end rather untenable. But I can lend credence to the picture by revealing that Mr. Flabeau's demise was due not only to an Alzheimer's condition, but to several other syndromes. In fact, never before in the annals of medical history has an individual simultaneously contracted such a compendium of conditions and diseases.

Because of his exotic road kill diet, Hebert Flabeau had contracted and/or subsequently fallen prey to the following: Alzheimer's syndrome; dementia; mad cow disease; schizophrenia; torette syndrome; dissociative amnesia; meningitis; epilepsy; encephalitis; acute myletis; peripheral neuritis; bubonic plague; dengue fever; malaria; and cholera - as well as a twitch of sinusitis.

And so, Hebert Flabeau passed on, checked out, took a dirt nap, his last day deep in a swan of dementia and oblivion. He was interred in the heartland of America, in Terminal City, Missouri. As self-propheied, the inscription on his gravestone reads: "Hebert returns to America."

As we cannot always discern reality from Hebert's imagination, we can't be certain, but we can at least suspect that Hebert actually lived on. After all, reincarnation is a possibility, isn't it? In which case, it would be

interesting to explore who the former Hebert Flabeau becomes. The reader has been given hints regarding his future destiny, a destiny that suggests a remarkable biography to explore. However, if that were the case, it wouldn't seem right to just come right out and spill the beans. Instead, I'd prefer to evoke a little Flabeau strategy and say, as Hebert has been known to put it:

How do you keep a curious canary in suspense?

I'll tell you later

Afterbirth

Afterword

Remember, a journey of a thousand miles begins with Hebert Flabeau saying, "I know a shortcut."

On the other hand, show me a man who has both feet firmly planted on the ground, and I'll show you a man who can't get his pants on.

The Author

Where thinking falls to the dimness of a dream, and imagination and feeling rise to a throne of sentience, earth-vision is born.

Within the biography of Josef Graf can be found a Waldorf teacher, wilderness traveller, watercolorist, swing dancer, and anthroposophical researcher.

With over twenty years of experience in the field of spiritual ecology, his primary approach to writing is to open himself to nature until it can speak through him.

His works can be accessed through www.evsite.net

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- bringing the spirit of wilderness to the urban dweller

EARTH VISION, *Beyond the Veil of Nature*, portrays a spiritual ecology of the human-nature relationship across North America.

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GAIA SOJOURN, *Spiritual Ecology Across a Series of Incarnations*, takes a global perspective through mythic, historic, and future time forums, using reincarnation as its principle device (an artistic blend of biography and fiction).

The Earth Vision Gallery, a thematic exhibit of photographs and watercolors contained within the covers of a book, carries the viewer through a holistic experience of nature, color theory, and self-discovery.

Hebert Returns to America is a gallery of humor with its artwork hung off the wall. The reader is invited to test drive Hebert's haywire passage through a diverse array of wild lands, social, cultural, and natural.

Explore at www.evsite.net