



GAIA COYOTE

But then there's this coyote calling. Usually here in the middle of the night you hear whole packs barking and yelping, so this one out in the scrub howling all by himself is something.

It's not so unusual, however, that The Naturalist lying next to Maarja wonders much about what it means. Instead, the crazy yelping reminds him of that night in 1965 down on Cypress Creek Bridge when Ronnie Thurman got drunk and announced he was now going to start dog-barking, but do it in a new way so that people might understand and appreciate and see the profundity and beauty of everything. But he was too drunk and his barking had no structure, no rhythm, no emotional content, so it was just a drunk's loud barking and yelping, and when he tried to pirouette he fell on the gravel and got a bloody elbow. Then he lay there holding his elbow looking up at everybody not saying anything, not until Daryl said it was time to get up and go.

But, Ronnie, beautiful dreamboat Ronnie, that night driving home from the mines just two or three years later, the car turning over and over, while The Naturalist was off in college; they'd never been much friends anyway, so in The Naturalist's mind Ronnie never got beyond that image of him lying on the gravel, and now half a century later here is The Naturalist in this dingy little trailer in southwestern Texas, balding, white-bearded, getting cataracts, not even remembering getting out of bed just now, but here he is, looking through the screen wire into the night and thinking how he hasn't thought of Ronnie for years now.

Horizon-to-horizon, Earth-moving rumble or growl or belch, floor moving and a quick wave of motion sickness, a base sound so deep it's more feeling than something heard and then it dies away slowly

like long thunder but it's not thunder because it left behind a fog with a stink so sharp and rank and full of oily bile and sulfurous fumes that clearly this part of the country has just been blasted with some kind of monstrous flatulence; but The Naturalist's circuits are too jammed to feel offended or scared or anything, just farted-on, big time.

"Ommmmmmmmmm... " the voice says from out in the scrub, with a certain tone of playful mockery. The Naturalist is outside now, wondering why all the rumbling and stink hasn't woken up Maarja. All he can figure out to do is just stand there looking around, and then he hears someone plainly say "Ommmmmmmmmm."

"I said, 'Ommmmmmmmmm... '" the voice continues, a little too aggressively for the whole thing to be considered somebody's lighthearted joke, but it's not a joke anyway, because nobody could pull off such special effects.

At times like this it's hard to say how fast time is passing but however long it is, at first there's nothing but the usual starry sky and the standard silhouettes of low scrubby junipers and gnarly liveoaks, but then somehow right in front of The Naturalist there's somebody looking back. The visitor hasn't walked up from anywhere; The Naturalist's mind simply hadn't registered anything there, and now it does.

We're calling this entity out of nowhere a "he," but it's small for a man and the voice doing the ommmmmmmmmming could've been male or female, hard to say. Whatever the gender, now the speaker, knowing he or she or it is being looked at, slowly turns his head (we'll say "he" here because English requires a gender, but keep in mind that we're not sure) to the side, revealing a profile silhouetted against the ground's pale, drought-scorched grass. The head is neither human nor any known creature; maybe half human, but with a snout. He opens his mouth revealing canine teeth and a long tongue that's snaking around exactly like once The Naturalist saw a gay guy do to

another gay guy at a Greyhound bus station in Memphis, Tennessee.

"Seen enough?" the form asks, snapping his head back so that it's facing straight at The Naturalist, who now notices two short, pointy ears atop the head. This time the voice is softer, maybe even with a little sympathy in it, as if aware that all this can be upsetting to a person.

About now The Naturalist's brain starts working, and normally it's a serviceable brain, one that for decades has digested research papers, conducted studies and published, so now The Naturalist thinks: "Either this is a deformed human or somebody in a very convincing costume and able to pull off almost impossible-to-produce special effects, or else this is a product of my own mind, maybe a dream or a hallucination."

Thinking more about it, it occurs to The Naturalist that maybe the yelping coyote had had something to do with this. For one thing, when the coyote had first began calling, it'd seemed that the yelps weren't really originating from outside, but rather from all around, or maybe even from inside The Naturalist himself, just coming there inside his head with no way to explain it, and if that's true, that supports the hypothesis that this is all...

"You're getting there," the voice interrupts, snickering.

By far the most brilliant fireball, or meteor, witnessed during 66 years of The Naturalist's life now shoots across the sky leaving a trail of sparkles cascading earthward like a descending curtain. In the light produced by the fireball and its descending drapery now The Naturalist sees the visitor clearly, the white teeth, the black, wet nose, the body totally covered with fur, a body lacking shoulders and with legs curiously bent, but the hands and feet almost like normal human hands and feet, and the creature stands there smiling at The Naturalist as the fireball's last falling sparkles die away and darkness

returns, plus now there's a new eruption of stink, but this time it's the odor of mildew so strong it's like ammonia from a bottle, stinging the eyes, convulsing nasal sinuses, and The Naturalist gasps and falls backward as if slapped in the face.

Still, The Naturalist keeps thinking: The fireball also supports the notion that all this is mind-play. For, the chances of such a fireball passing overhead exactly at this moment when it's needed to reveal the visitor's appearance are astronomically small.

"The coincidence is possible," the dark figure chuckles in a W.C. Field's voice, "but not very likely... "

And the creature reads minds, too, it seems.

"And I read minds, too," the visitor says, this time in the voice of Marilyn Monroe. "At least, your mind... "

Maarja

Maarja is a fifty-year-old Estonian woman with a great figure, though her large breasts hang flat unless she uses the right brassiere. Her blond hair is startlingly bright, even for an eastern European, and she keeps her hair fluffed out so that it captures light, creating a glowing halo around her face. And her face, strangely round for such a tall body and long neck, centers on huge, very pale blue eyes, eyes like those of the most innocent, big-eyed baby imaginable.

Standing in front of Maarja looking into her eyes is like being before an angel's head with a halo, suspended in empty space. The angel effect is intensified by Maarja wearing white clothes. More than one citizen of the community has said that when she walks alone in the

sunbaked grasslands, she looks like some kind of forlorn wandering ghost.

However, when Maarja turns her head, her eyes lose their power and her nose emerges as a feature. It's hooked in a way some stereotypes equate with avarice, and the tip is rounded and fleshy, suggesting crude sensuality.

So, with Maarja, you never know what's being thought or felt. Nothing makes much sense about her, at least not southwestern Texan sense. She comes and goes as she pleases, and The Naturalist knows she's only a temporary and undefinable fixture, but he's OK with that, surprised that someone like her is staying with him this late in his life.

"What happen today morning, you," Maarja asks after The Naturalist hasn't said anything for a long time, staring into the morning campfire.

"Thinking about the website," he lies, not wanting to talk about last night.

And then it begins:

Bamboo flute, zither, other instruments few Westerners can identify, Chinese-type music, maybe pentatonic, simple and emotional and full of chimes and sliding notes, horizon-to-horizon gauzy tones in this land where the few long-distance radio stations play nothing but country and Mexican ranchero music.

"What do you hear right now?" The Naturalist asks Maarja. Maarja smiles her usual broad, U-shaped smile that in her round face looks just like the smiley-face smile, and it's broader than usual now because she thinks it's The Naturalist's morning gift to her, his offer of a mental exercise to help her feel and experience all she can while she's here.

"I hear sky energy hit Earth today morning," she replies, her voice taking on that trancelike tone of hers, and maybe she really is going into a trance. "I hear fire pop and shhhhhhh, and little bug peep-peep-peep in bush. I hear life-blood mine ears, life-stream. Energy everywhere, come, go, up, down, you, me. I hear love!"

"Nothing else?"

Standing on her head naked while leaning against a fencepost, her long nose sticking between her split curtain of dangling breasts, she knocks a breast to the side with her nose and with one eye looks hard at The Naturalist, projecting the thought that she'd done a good job describing what she heard, and that she'd heard plenty, and it would be nice if The Naturalist said he was hearing love, too.

"I think I heard a Chihuahuan Raven," The Naturalist lies some more. "That'd be nice to see. They're a lot like Common Ravens, but their call is a little higher pitched. Better take a look. I'll be back in a minute."

Stalking aimlessly through scrub, the sky orchestra playing flute and zither sounds, the tones lotusing runty Ashe Junipers and gnarly Texas Liveoaks, gauzing fractured white Cretaceous limestone rocks jutting from the ground, plum-blossom-odoring the whole Texas Hill Country landscape, until The Naturalist stops and waits.

"It's as good a place as any," the voice says, the creature in plain view where an instant earlier there'd been nothing. The Naturalist thinks:

"All this has to be a hallucination. That means that if I talk to this thing, it's just one part of my brain communicating with another."

Moreover, it occurs to The Naturalist that this moment could be handled like a Turing Test, in which you exchange words with an unknown other, who may be either human or a computer programmed

to respond like a human, and you try to figure out which it is. The idea, then, is to probe this voice, to see what it reveals of itself, to help figure out if it's just a feature of his own malfunctioning mind or something else.

"Who or what are you?" The Naturalist asks, disappointed that despite his Turing-Test insight he's come up with such a prosaic question.

The voice replies: "I am Gaiacoyote."

Placebo

Gaiacoyote gazes expressionless into The Naturalist's eyes as an overwhelming fragrance of ripe strawberries adds itself to the bamboo flute and zither music .

"Gaia is the whole Earth regarded as a single biological organism, with trees, butterflies, microbes and humans functioning as interdependent organelles sustaining the Earth-organism..."

Gaiacoyote says, and The Naturalist recognizes this as something he already knows, so until now there's no evidence of this being more than a mind going crazy. "And you know what a coyote is, so I'm Gaiacoyote."

Now Gaiacoyote says nothing, does nothing, stands there like a figure in a wax museum.

"'Coyote,' I would guess," The Naturalist ventures, "because lately I've been reading about the Coyote figure of old Apache traditions, the 'trickster' who sometimes helps people but other times makes trouble for them, sometimes even gets them killed from recklessness. The Coyote never stays for long, but always returns."

"And it seems I am returning right now," Gaiacoyote chuckles, now tilting his head as a very attentive dog might, opening wide his already too-large, yellow eyes, and jiggling his eyebrows up and down like Groucho Marx used to do on TV. Groucho also resides in The Naturalist's memory, so The Naturalist sees a pattern emerging.

"I think I understand what you are now," The Naturalist says, "but I'm not absolutely sure. Would you please say or do something to confirm that you are an artifact of my own mind... ?"

"No," Gaiacoyote replies. At the same moment he says no, in a rapid, theatrical move, his hand rises and furry fingers snap, causing the Chinese bamboo flute and zither music instantly to end in mid-note, leaving the whole Texas Hill Country and all its scrub and dust and white Cretaceous limestone outcroppings silent and posed as in suspended animation, like interrupted thoughts, and the smells are gone, too, now just the usual odor of juniper and dust.

"But, for today's lesson," Gaiacoyote says with dignified, even professorial mien, and with a BBC-English accent, "I will bestow upon you a single word on which you may meditate until next meeting."

Now it is The Naturalist with raised eyebrows, tilted head and suspended breath.

"Placebo!" Gaiacoyote almost shouts, then belches gigantically, pokes his snout skyward, brings his arms flush with his skinny ribs and like a rocket with a deafening roar shoots into the sky leaving a trail of multicolored sparks and the odor of dill pickles.

Tarot

A black, dusty Hummer H2 pulls up outside the trailer door. A little blond woman of around fifty wearing a green plaid shirt and blue jeans opens the door and daintily steps onto the gravel. She slams the door the way people do in these parts to make sure their arrival has been noticed, brushes off her jeans and just as she turns toward the trailer Maarja appears at the door.

"Maarja, honey, I bet you never thought I'd be here so soon," she says with a tight smile and a high-pitched, little-girl voice.

Maarja doesn't understand exactly what she says because she speaks too fast and with an accent she's unfamiliar with, so she smiles broadly and says nothing while trying to remember the appropriate English welcoming phrase. The visitor interprets her silence as a sign of profound understanding appropriate for a mystic, and steps forward, saying that ever since they met the other night at the community picnic she's been ever so curious about what she calls Maarja's fortune-telling doings, though that's a term Maarja doesn't understand and doesn't employ, it just the term the neighbors use when gossiping about her.

Inside, Maarja invites the woman to sit at the card table top set atop stacked cinderblocks. The woman is to shuffle the cards, "so energy of you go to cards," Maarja explains. The little blond woman's perfume smells of overripe pears.

"While mix cards, you think question. Also, I tell you, Tarot cards not give answer. Cards only help mind see path. Answer in you all time. Cards not magic. But wisdoms of centuries, cards have."

The woman hadn't really come with a question, just had wanted her fortune told, but gamely in her mind now she quickly formulates in

succinct words the smothering question that has hovered over her life hour after hour, week after week, for several years now and she concentrates on this question as she shuffles the deck.

With utmost earnestness as she shuffles she visualizes the mood of her own home life, a feeling somehow sick and sad, a kind of dark purple sensation all through the house, draining into the swimming pool, clinging to the trees around it, the barking-complaining dog and burnt-out husband, the husband who might be cheating, all that dark energy in the fights they've had, the fake making-ups, the long nights alone, all that at this moment still haunting her house across the hill, but now starting to rise upward, blossoming out of and over the house into the sky, flowing toward her. Going far beyond Maarja's simple instructions, she visualizes the energy gathering in the sky above her and now with all her might she summons that bruised presence down onto her, imagines it focusing on the little trailer, penetrating the thin, shiny, aluminum walls, surging through the back of her head, gathering force as it arrives purified in her mind and finally shoots down through her eyes into those cards, all the essence of her pathetic, broken life right there into those cards in her hands.

"Call me JoAnn," the somewhat emotional, imaginative and obsessive little woman in jeans says, and Maarja understands that, smiles and shakes her head yes.

"JoAnn," Maarja repeats, glad to show she's understood. "JoAnn," JoAnn says, happy that when Maarja speaks she does so with a kind of soft but husky, vibrating whisper and maybe with some kind of lisp, sounding so otherworldly, like someone who really ought to know how to do this sort of thing.

Now Maarja asks for the cards and spreads them on the table.

"Many ways spread cards," she explains. "We use Celtic Cross way today."

Cards in the Celtic Cross are positioned like this:

		10	
	5		9
6	1-2	3	8
	4		7

In the 1-2 position at the center of the cross, Card 2 lies atop Card 1. Each position has a meaning, but the meaning depends on which authority you ask. Maarja takes her meanings from the "Angel Paths Tarot and Healing Website," which instructs that Position 1 is "Present"; Position 2 is "Immediate Challenge"; Position 3 is "Distant Past"; and so on, through "Recent Past," "Best Outcome," "Immediate Future," "Factors Affecting Situation," "External Influences," "Hopes and Fears," and "Final Outcome."

"What say every card important," Maarja explains. "Also, message of next-to card important. We think what all mean. Now we look first six cards make cross on left. That help tell what your life like now. Card 1 and 2 help us know exact why you come. Card 3, that tell what not see, us, what not think, us."

The session goes on for almost an hour, with JoAnn taking it more and more seriously, hoping ever more fervently for insights that might save her. She's a nervous and timid person and with every minute her anxieties about having something awful revealed intensifying. When she picks the card called The Fool in Position 1, she guffaws and snorts, then blushes, then tears come into her eyes. When Position 2 reveals Death she gasps but Maarja quickly explains that instead of death usually it signifies some kind of ending or transition, or forces that cannot be altered; it can be good news, or bad.

In an ever-mounting sense of crises, merely seeing arrayed before her cards representing such powerful and dangerous-seeming agents as

The High Priestess, The Lovers, The Magician and The Hanged Man, JoAnn's tension mounts. Before any discussion of what the cards are saying, she starts sweating and feeling weak. She thinks she's going to faint, or throw up. She visualizes vomiting over Maarja's only deck of cards, on the room's only piece of furniture. She feels that, like always, she's gotten into something over her head and, also like always, now at the last moment she's going to prove too weak, ruin things for herself and others, continue to be the laughingstock she's always been.

Hardly able to breathe and her vision narrowing to a dizzily bending tunnel, she scoots back her chair, can't speak but reaches into her purse and hands Maarja \$50, tries to smile but grimaces instead, and knows it's a grimace and feels foolish. She's crying as she bursts from the door moaning and trying to keep from vomiting but able to say, "Maarja, you are my God..." and hearing how her words hadn't been at all what she'd wanted to say, and knowing how absurd they sound and how horrible she must seem, she sobs so deeply she chokes and only with Maarja's help reaches the black, dusty Hummer H2, swings the door open, crab-climbs inside, slams the door and drives away, Maggie the dog running behind, not barking but watching the right, rear tire very closely.

"Energy river JoAnn hit big rocks," Maarja says to The Naturalist, who hadn't noticed the visit as he wrote in the shadows beneath the pie-pan Mesquite. Maarja's declaration makes no sense to him, but a lot of what she says he finds unintelligible, so he smiles and nods his head, and she smiles back, sits, and for awhile the two watch harvester ants methodically gather grass seeds and carry them to their nest hole entrance in the middle of a hippopotamus-size clearing at the edge of a field of invasive King Ranch Bluestem grass.

Maggie

Eventually Maarja asks: "Why you not like Maggie?"

Maggie, the neighbor's abandoned, purebred Jack Russell Terrier, who had chased JoAnn's departing Hummer down the lane, had returned wagging her stub of a tail, looking satisfied and expecting a pat. However, The Naturalist had just stared at her. Maarja had pat the dog and while watching the ants had decided to ask about The Naturalist's reaction.

"Too high-strung, too pure-bred," The Naturalist replies. "Not much real dog there, mostly a machine."

"She dog, need pat. Not nothing, is dog."

"A dog programmed by human selective breeding to be exactly what she is. She only does what her breeding, her genes, instruct her to do. Interacting with her is like responding to a mechanical mouse. If she were a mongrel she'd not be so single-minded, but she's been strictly bred to be a hunter, her ancestors inbred again and again to bring out instincts to go into burrows, kill and remove whatever lives there, whether rabbit or ground squirrel. You've seen how she carries in one dead rabbit after another. I don't like it. I want to watch our rabbits, but she kills them. And she's bred for loyalty, so she stays right under my feet when I'm out wandering, chasing away things I want to see. Tie her up, and you know how she freaks out."

"Maggie love you, want be good dog, need pat."

Silence. Just a light breeze and rustling in the Mesquite's diffuse, feathery leaves. Long silence. Heat, but it's dry, not so bad in the shade.

"You think too much," she observes. "You keep away dog, keep away dog love. Dog love OK. What you think about Maarja love?"

A little more silence.

"You're not like Maggie," The Naturalist says. "You're trying to figure out things far beyond what your genetic programming predisposes you for. Even when you're using your cards and the pendulum, and meditating and doing yoga, you're expressing your curiosity and your need to reach higher levels of awareness. You have incredible intuition about things, and more emotion than I can handle. There's a lot there beyond genetic programming, a lot worth loving, Maarja. Maybe I don't do a good job expressing it. I don't have it all figured out, but I know that Maarja love is very different from Maggie love."

"You think you more than programming?"

And to that question, all that comes to The Naturalist's mind is the word "placebo."

Universe

About 14 billion years ago the Universe blossomed from nothing, and eventually coagulated into about a hundred billion galaxies, each with their billions of stars. Over time galaxies came and went, some falling into Black Holes, some colliding with one another, and others still existing. In a certain commonplace corner of the Universe in a run-of-the-mill Galaxy, the Earth unceremoniously formed about 4.6 billion years ago, fairly recently in terms of the Universe's history.

Life arose on Earth soon thereafter, about as soon as the planet was cool enough for life's organic molecules to not break apart from the

heat attending the formation of the planet, the same heat that still keeps the Earth's core molten. It seems that the Universe had been in no hurry to produce Earth, but once Earth existed, having it encrusted with Life became a top priority for... something.

First, life had to figure out its basic biochemistry -- for example, how to combine organic carbon and polymers in which energy could be stored and moved about, and how to construct RNA molecules on which information about basic life processes could be encoded and passed from one generation to another.

The first definite fossil organisms humans have recognized from those times are of cyanobacteria known as Stromatolites, which lived about 3.8 billion years ago.

Billions of more years of passed, with species of living things fracturing into subspecies who eventually developed into new species, which either went extinct or engendered new species, with more recently emerged species in general being more complex and better adapted to the Earth's environments than their ancestors.

About a billion years ago, certain sea-living, one-celled organisms arose capable of the almost magical feat of capturing and storing sunlight energy in the process of photosynthesis. These were the cyanobacteria, a kind of bacteria.

So, it took billions of years to develop processes a highschool science textbook might deal with in a single paragraph. Keeping in mind this slow but inexorable slogging forward of the evolution of Life on Earth, let us here pay homage to the suffering and death experienced by billions of innocent individuals and communities who did not discover, say, a quicker way to get a certain ion from one side of a cell membrane to another, and thus perished by being "out-competed" for resources by species who did discover that quicker way. Let us remember here the incomprehensibly vast numbers of relatively slow-

to-adapt and unlucky who paved the way for today's Life on Earth.

Ages passed, more complex chemical pathways conjured quicker, more efficient behavior of living things; through sudden mutations and gradual evolutionary drift organisms arose with ever more astounding appearances and adaptations; single cells combined to form multicellular organisms; marine plants and animals (land life had not yet developed) arose producing beings larger than mere specks. As the Earth's oceans grew crowded with living things, those things co-evolved, predators evolving with their prey, organisms producing carbon dioxide as waste evolving alongside organisms needing carbon dioxide to stay alive, and Earth's Web of Life arose, its interconnected species like neurons forming in a baby's brain, like spiritual impulses flickering into existence to form the soul of Gaia.

Around 542 million years ago, during the "Cambrian Explosion," evolution of ocean organisms sped up and the explosion of marine life brought about life forms from which today's major groups of plants and animals are descended.

But about 439 million years ago a great ice age caused the Earth's First Mass Extinction. Remembering that life had not yet moved onto land, about a quarter of all marine families were killed off, including about 60% of marine genera.

Some 430 million year ago, life moved onto land, with spore-producing plants resembling today's liverworts, and also there were scorpions and wingless insects, and in the oceans the first jawed fishes appeared. About 385 million years ago the Earth's first forests developed, populated with fern-like plants of the genus *Wattieza*. Soon afterward, 370 years ago, the earliest amphibian, *Ichthyostega*, arose from lobe-finned fishes.

About 364 million years ago something unknown killed off about a quarter of marine families and over half of all marine genera during

Earth's Second Mass Extinction.

Between 286-249 million years ago, as droughts beset the planet, amphibians begin leaving marshes for dry uplands, among them Cacops, a squat, cat-sized lizard-like being possessing stubby legs, a short tail, and covered with light armor. Some species eventually became as large as ponies.

Between about 286-248 million years ago the Earth's Third and biggest of all mass extinctions took place. Oxygen levels in the oceans plummeted, possibly caused by a volcanic event that ignited a continental-size layer of coal, the burning of which released carbon dioxide, or maybe it was a large meteor hitting Earth. Whatever the case, it killed off between 75 and 95 percent of the Earth's species, including nearly all, but not quite all, animals.

About 220 million years ago the first mammals arose from warm-blooded, reptilian Therapsids. These first mammals were shrew-like creatures living in trees and largely eating insects. At this same time dinosaurs arose from cold-blooded Thecodonts.

Between 199-214 million years ago the Earth's Fourth Mass Extinction took place, possibly caused by massive lava eruptions associated with the rift forming the Atlantic Ocean. This may have produced global warming resulting in the extinction of about 22% of all marine families.

About 150 million years ago both the first flowering plants and the part-reptile, part bird Archaeopteryx arose.

100 million years ago dinosaurs were the dominant land animals while mammals occupied a small-body niche ecologically similar to that frogs inhabit today.

About 65 million years ago, the Earth's Fifth Mass Extinction probably was caused by a six-mile-wide object (10 km) striking Earth near

present-day Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. This killed off dinosaurs, about 16% of marine families and nearly half of all marine genera.

About 40 million years ago the first primates arose. These "Prosimians" looked like a cross between a squirrel and a cat.

About 25 million years ago apes arose from Prosimians.

About six million years ago hominids -- humans and their immediate direct ancestors -- split from the ape branch of the primate tree of evolution.

About four million years ago hominids of the genus *Australopithecus* arose, the ancestral genus for the human genus *Homo*.

About half a million years ago modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, arose.

Beginning maybe as early as 50,000 years ago, several waves of human immigration from Eurasia onto the American continent took place. The most recent, around 12,000 years ago, was via Beringia, a land bridge connecting Eurasia with America across what now is known as the Bering Strait. During thousands of years these first Americans evolved socially and physically into a rainbow of indigenous groups.

In earlier times the Apaches had been farmers who, once their crops were harvested, switched to hunting and gathering. One way they killed buffalo was by running them over cliffs. Modern horses aren't native to the Americas, but in the 1600s the Apaches stole horses from Spanish settlers, and large numbers of horses were acquired during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when Spanish settlements were abandoned. Horses soon profoundly changed Apache culture. During the 1700s, small bands of Apaches with horses roamed the area that someday would become southwestern Texas. Spanish missions were established in the area. Comanches from the north, also with horses,

were penetrating the area, pushing the Apaches farther south.

On January 9, 1790, the Spaniard Juan de Ugalde, Commanding General of Mexico's Eastern Internal Provinces, with 600 men of whom more than a hundred were indigenous allies, surprised, killed, took captive and enslaved or caused to run away 300 Lipan, Lipiyan, and Mescalero Apache men, women and children at the Arroyo de la Soledad, presently known as the Sabinal River Canyon in northern Uvalde County, Texas. In honor of this encounter, which some would call a massacre, the canyon was thereafter called Cañon de Ugalde. The name "Ugalde" eventually was corrupted into the current name for Uvalde County, Texas.

Coyotes, *Canis latrans*, belong to the same genus as the domestic dog, *Canis lupus familiaris*, but they are a different species.

The Coyote of the American indigenous belief system, the Coyote that for centuries haunted, teased, and tormented indigenous American minds, is a trickster, part human, part *Canis latrans*. Fur, pointed ears, yellow eyes, a tail and claws, but also human. Usually Coyote is represented as male, but, is that so?

Coyote is funny, wise, sad, and very sexual. Coyote is inventive, mischievous, and evasive.

No one sees Coyote or hears what Coyote says more than one with Peyote in the stomach. Peyote is a kind of cactus, *Lophophora williamsii*, occurring naturally in desert scrub on or near limestone hills in Mexico's northern states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas, and in the US, southwestern Texas.

With Peyote in the stomach, then, blossom! Eruption of spirit and yearning and orgasm. Purify then tell lies, cheat and work hard and sing and poetize but don't get drunk. To live more vividly, Coyote

might say, die for it! Float in the clouds and dream of things other than what can be, for imagining makes things real, and The Great Spirit loves diversity! Is that true?

Coyote spirit flowing through the Universe, fogging like plum-blossom fragrance and stink of buffalo dung around little Earth and its little history -- the Earth as one living thing-being, and that's Gaia. Coyote up through Apaches and Comanches, up through Peyote into geometry and color and music and sex, Coyote up through Gaia and all the Universe, all the way chasing a good joke as if it were Coyote's own tail.

Here's part of the joke:

University of Chicago paleontologist David Raup estimates the average background rate of extinction on Earth throughout biological history as one species lost every four years. Today, human-caused extinction may be 120,000 times that level. These years of the Gaia-coyote are the years of the beginning of Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction!

Here's the other part of the joke:

Let's pay homage to all those suffering and dying around us right here and now at the beginning of this Sixth Mass Extinction.

Laughing

"Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote...
 Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote...
 Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote...
 Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote... Gaiacoyote...
 "

But Gaiacoyote does not come, is not represented by the mental impression of a stink or a meteor streaking across the sky.

But then The Naturalist notices this: That his hands are growing fur.

The Naturalist laughs because it makes such excellent sense: For, if Gaiacoyote is merely an invention of The Naturalist's own mind, why wouldn't Gaiacoyote play tricks with the body that he or she also occupies? Wouldn't tricks like this be needed so Gaiacoyote could assert his or her own identity where once there was at least the illusion of only one being occupying this mental space?

But, how does the one who used to think he was the only one in this body speak with Gaiacoyote in a way that is not merely talking with oneself?

Now The Naturalist is dumbfounded by this insight:

The question he's just asked himself suggests an answer to why the Great Single Nothingness twitched Herself into the Big Bang. For, once a Unity splits, or at least conjures the illusion of a split, as in the case of human schizophrenia, then there's someone to talk to, or at least the opportunity to indulge the illusion of having a talk...

And that insight, as modest and evanescent as it is, is accompanied by a distant Coyote call, this time the classic long howl heard in old cowboy movies, in fact so stereotypical and obviously staged that it means Gaiacoyote is laughing.

Om

"So how'd you and Maarja meet, Naturalist?"

The road is straight and the scrubby woods isn't much to look at. Fred asks his question after turning on the AC full blast and settling his bald, white-hair-fringed head into his upholstered headrest, giving every impression that he expects a good story and he plans to enjoy it. The Naturalist is willing to oblige.

"I was living in an exhibition thatch-roof Maya hut at an eco-resort adjacent to Chichén Itzá ruin in the Yucatan," he begins. "I'd give nature walks, help the Maya staff with their English, solve the Office's computer problems, do whatever they needed. One day Maarja came through wanting to experience the ruins' 'pyramid energy,' and to have a nature walk. One thing led to another."

"But she just got here from Estonia, right?"

"Yep. After a few days of us together she had to return to Estonia, but we kept in touch and later I returned north to tie up some loose ends. Then I met you and when she learned that you'd invited me to stay on your property she came over without asking. You saw how she just walked up to your house that day all dusty and sweating."

Fred looks out the window. At seventy years old he's had his share of experiences with women, but this Naturalist is sixty-six himself. Fred asks himself what he'd been doing at sixty-six? Not living in a thatch-roof hut in the Yucatan and snagging fifty-year-old, big-boobed blonds like this Maarja. He'd worked hard earning money for his old age but this Naturalist seems to have gotten through life walking around in the woods and moving his wrist around writing. And now he sleeps at night with Maarja, gets this free trip into town, a place to return to at the end of the day, all because he, Fred, is lonely and bored, and

because this evening he'll return to a room full of cats where he'll idly surf the web and nurse his diabetes and hemorrhoids, but at least now he'll have something else to think about.

"Where were you headed that day I picked you up," after a long silence.

"Back to Mexico."

Fred waits for more but The Naturalist has gone dry.

"Wrong way for the Yucatan."

"I was headed for Chihuahua."

"What the hell's in Chihuahua?"

"Desert."

"You doing a study there?"

"Did one a while back. You might say I was returning for a follow-up."

There's a strange sound in The Naturalist's voice, Fred thinks. But this Naturalist isn't the kind to be into drug running, not this guy spending no more than a dollar or two a day living in that rundown trailer. Long, long silence.

"The desert is interesting, is it?"

The Naturalist looks out his side window and isn't quick to answer. When he does speak, his words come slowly, with long breaks.

"There's a pretty wild sand-dune area not far south of Tijuana near the little town of Salamayuca... It's powerful out in the dunes... In late

afternoon when the temperature starts dropping a bit and you can breathe easier, it's like the mountains all around start making a sound... The mountains are just gray rock, no vegetation, and you can't say whether they're five miles away or a hundred, but there's this deep, hollow kind of echoic sound that goes right through you... At first you think maybe it's the sound of your own blood in your ears, but it gets louder and you feel it inside... After the day's heat, you're weak and trembly, so you don't know whether what you're feeling is from that or from this sound... Then somehow the sound starts feeling familiar though you know you've never heard anything like it... "

The Naturalist turns and looks at Fred, who feels the look but keeps staring straight ahead, not sure how to react.

"It's the om sound... om unending... the sound yoga masters describe as the all-connecting sound of the Universe... and when you hear it in this place... you know it's true... "

Then The Naturalist says in a soft voice of the kind you'd use to tell a little kid that his dog has run away.

"I was going there to die," The Naturalist says. "I was going to walk into the desert... and die when the om came."

Bedroom Talk

The Naturalist lies holding Maarja, her odors and tastes all over him, inside and out.

"Why not hold breast, you?" she asks.

Right, usually afterwards they lie spooning together, he holding a

breast, and he's not doing that.

"Thinking too much. Sorry"

"Yes, think too much. What happen, you? I see in scrub, you, Gaiacoyote, Gaiacoyote, Gaiacoyote hundred times, say, you. Make crazy, you?"

Actually The Naturalist isn't sure whether he's crazy. Normally when a brain generates voices and hallucinations it's considered a kind of craziness... But these sensations are so real... And they fit in with not-crazy thoughts he's been formulating his whole life, fit in with insights just beginning to crystallize in his mind, insights based on what people have seen with their own eyes and deduced through rational, scientific procedures... But, of course, the hallucinations, if that's what they are, would concern what he's been thinking about, since they're generated by the same brain that's been thinking about these things for years.

The Naturalist thinks to himself: "Well, she's right: It might help to talk things out, and who's better for the job than she? Her brain may be short-circuited with this energy-flow obsession, pyramid power, card reading... but nobody is more open minded on spiritual matters than she. And though she hardly knows me, she knows me better than anyone else on the planet."

For over an hour, without Maarja saying a word and without The Naturalist pausing, he describes his concept of the Universal Creative Impulse blossoming forth the Universe, step by step evolving first dead matter, then evolving life, then evolving thought, and how right now certain humans sometimes can go beyond programmed or genetically predisposed thinking, but that kind of thinking is just flickering into existence at this stage of the development of human mentality...

"Like, the same way that instinctual behavior arises from the mere

positions of atoms in our genes -- and that's miraculous because how else can the position of things translate to behavior -- now sometimes we can think thoughts not rooted in instinctual motives such as those dealing with sex, status, power and the rest... and that's miraculous. When people get deep insights or experience something aesthetically... when they're meditating, or in love, or looking into the starry sky at night and feeling currents of something utterly powerful and transformative flowing around them, and that feeling changes them, elevates them to a higher state of awareness, understanding and love... at least for an instant, a little while... that's when this miracle is coming into existence. I'd like to help people recognize what's happening to them, how they can enable themselves to experience this higher level of existence more often, but people's minds are so stuck in the old ways... "

The Naturalist stops, his train of thought sabotaged by a rush of memories, memories from of all those years in forests and fields, the classes and books, decades of clumsily being hurt and hurting others, of the mind year after year becoming more disciplined but losing something along the way, thoughts clearer but senses deadened, old mental programming falling away leaving painful voids but also new insights taking the voids' places often causing pain, for it hurts seeing how vulnerable we all are, how stuck humanity is in unsustainable, ecosystem-destroying habits, and it hurts seeing all the suffering and killing of things The Naturalist loves...

"Gaiacoyote," she says, to get him back on track.

And then he tells about the coyote call that first night, the stink, the Ommmmmmmmmm spoken in the darkness, the Chinese music, the first meeting with Gaiacoyote, the fireball, his own furry skin, the thoughts he'd had that seem to have brought forth the most recent coyote call.

Then they lie together for a long time, neither saying anything. The

Naturalist is about to drift off when Maarja speaks:

"Placebo," she says. "You not say 'bout placebo."

Thought Make Real

"How'd you know about 'placebo'?"

"Sometimes do sleep say 'placebo,' you. I think it big word, you."

"It's what Gaiacoyote said as he rocketed into the sky that night."

"What mean 'placebo'?"

"Sometimes doctors give people fake medicine, maybe pills made of sugar, thinking the people's sickness may be only imaginary. The fake pills are called placebos, and sometimes placebos seem to actually heal."

"Oh, *platseebo*, I know, I know. Word Estonian."

The Naturalist asks: "Why did Gaiacoyoto say 'placebo' as he shot into the sky?"

"Number one, I may tell you, Gaiacoyote no just sick brain thing. Gaiacoyote come spirit world, bring message you. But message hard understand, maybe... Estonian *metafoor*..."

"Yeah, metaphor, same in English. Gaiacoyote has to be interpreted, like a poem that seems to be talking about one thing, but really is commenting on something else."

"Right. I good, this. I help."

More silence as they lie thinking.

"Number two: *Platseebo* definition: 'You think, so is true.' Gaiacoyote want say you: 'Thought make real.'"

Fred's Furniture Store

"Tonight I want to talk to you about the Six Miracles of Nature. But before I get into them, I need to say that the notion of the Six Miracles serves mainly to help us structure our own thoughts about the biggest questions a human can have: What's going on here...? Why am I here and what am I supposed to be doing? What's real and what's illusion...? Admittedly, maybe more than six miracles exist, or maybe there's only one or three instead of six. But six miracles seemed to be something my mind could handle, so I settled on six."

The Naturalist shrugs, grins crookedly, Maarja looks on smilingly and slightly trancelike, and all eight elderly, male members of the Uvalde Theosophical Society chuckle and grin back. They're relieved that The Naturalist isn't sounding like the usual fundamentalist pedant invited to their bi-monthly meetings in the sofa section of Fred's Furniture Warehouse, where each member sprawls across the most overstuffed and ostentatious sofa he can find.

Each Tuesday and Thursday evening in Fred's store Carla Fussganger from down at the bank offers English classes to local Spanish speakers so tonight a chalkboard on an easel is handy, and The Naturalist walks up to it and writes this: "First Miracle of Nature."

"The First Miracle of Nature is the most miraculous of all, yet of it

there's the least to say. Each person either intuitively recognizes its miraculous nature, or not. But I have to say that if it isn't a miracle, then surely nothing the human mind can fathom is a miracle. Here's the miracle: That something arose out of nothing."

The Naturalist looks around, letting the import of what he's written sink in. He's standing sniffing a glass of cold V8 juice with fragrances of celery and tomato, studying the face of each aging man.

"If you don't accept that 'something arising out of nothing' is miraculous, then all the rest of what I'm about to say won't mean anything to you, and you might as well leave now. On the other hand, if you're willing to admit that something from nothing qualifies as a miracle, using the standard definition of the word, then there's an interesting consequence. The consequence is that it means that you are, after all, a believer in miracles."

Norman Kline the highschool janitor barks a laugh and self-consciously throws his arm over the rounded back of an astringent-smelling \$2,799.00 Chesterfield Leather Sofa described in Fred's catalog as "With sheltering arms and deep button tufting, thickly padded back and arms, and lofty, foam-core seat cushions covered with top-grain, weathered and antiqued leather carefully dyed to accentuate natural surface markings, nuances in texture and variations in color unique to each hide." The other men grin from their own extravagant perches, sniffing their own cold V8s and appreciating the nice mental trick of getting a group of old, tired men to at least consider the notion that they might, after all, be believers in miracles.

"Once we admit the miraculous nature of merely being, then we're in position to regard this:

Second miracle of Nature:

That once there was something, it began evolving.

"You see," The Naturalist begins, a furrow of sincerity creasing his brow, "it was quite a trick just making something out of nothing, and we can imagine the agency responsible for it... this Universal Creative Impulse, we can call it, or maybe Creator for short... being content just to see what had been done and leave it. Or maybe toggle the Universe back and forth between being and not being, like a kid playing with turning on and off lights in his or her room. But, the Creator wasn't content with the mere act of creation, and instead set forth the creation evolving. And the moment of setting things going -- the Big Bang as it's called -- was not at all like a simple explosion of inert matter being slung into space."

The Naturalist draws index cards from a pocket and quickly scans his notes: On the chalkboard he writes a fraction, the number 1 with a / below it, and below that 43 zeros, each three zeros separated by a comma. As Maarja focuses on space far beyond the chalkboard he points to that fraction and says:

"In this unthinkable small fraction of a single second after the creation of the Universe, the Universe's four fundamental forces came into being: electromagnetism; gravitation, and; weak and strong nuclear interactions. Changes just as profound and hard for us to grasp then took place during subsequent similarly small fractions of the first second, until finally, after the Universe had existed a whole second, protons, neutrons and neutrinos appeared. After about ten seconds, photons -- packages of light energy -- flooded forth, and there was light, more light than our minds can imagine. Between three and twenty minutes after the formation of the Universe, things had cooled off enough for atomic nuclei to form."

The Naturalist pauses, himself dazzled by what he's reporting.

"I'm leaving out so much, so much, but there's just too much for the mind to grasp so we skip to about 377,000 years after the Big Bang and find hydrogen and helium atoms forming. Once the Universe was

between 150 million and one billion years of age, the first stars and quasars coalesced from what was seething, raging plasma. Eventually there were galaxies composed of untold numbers of stars and now today it's estimated that the Universe may contain up to 500 billion galaxies, and it's thought that in all those galaxies there are about 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars -- the number 1 followed by 24 zeros... And it's reckoned that just in our own galaxy, the Milky Way -- which is only one of those 500 billion galaxies -- there may exist tens of billions of planets habitable for life as we know it on Earth..."

The Naturalist, hearing in his voice a little too much excitement, consciously relaxes his tense posture and slackens his tight facial muscles. The old men look a little befuddled. He can't tell whether they're stunned or embarrassed. No change in Maarja. Norman Kline sits upright, crosses his legs and frowns professorially.

Now The Naturalist writes this on the chalkboard:

Third Miracle of Nature:
That life arose.

"In May of 2010 Dr. Craig Venter and his lab team in La Jolla, California created DNA from test-tube chemicals. They inserted this synthesized DNA into a bacterium cell from which its own DNA had been removed, and was therefore technically dead. The bacterium then, with this newly synthesized, manmade DNA, went on living, reproducing the artificial DNA, creating generation after generation of bacteria carrying and using the human-made DNA exactly as if the DNA had been inherited from billions of years of bacterial ancestors. I mention this to highlight the fact that there is a gray zone between what is living and what is not. In fact, most biologists don't consider viruses to be living organisms, though some do. Often viruses are regarded as gigantic, non-living molecules that must be inside the cell of a host organism so that they can use the host cell's contents to

reproduce..."

The Naturalist looks apologetic, knowing he's talking biology to a small-town grocer, a mortician, a history teacher...

"The implication of Dr. Venter's success is that possibly life's appearance is not miraculous, but rather a natural consequence of the right chemical soup being in the right place at the right time. That exactly as certain molecules combine in certain ways to create salt or protein, other molecules join in certain ways to create living things."

The men's faces don't look convinced, though Maarja's face is a broad, round smiley-face with round, blue eyes focused on the beyond.

"Intuitively I sense that you and I are 'more alive' than not only Dr. Venter's bacterium with synthesized DNA and more alive than any virus that might come along, but also we are 'more alive' than mushrooms, fleas, maple trees, horses and even chimpanzees. And I will guess that someday here on Earth there may be sentient beings, maybe computer-augmented humans, 'more alive' than even us. Whatever the case, there are two points to notice here: First, a miracle can be gradual instead of coming into force all in a flash, and; second, the emergence of life from dead matter, no matter what caused it or how long it took, is a miracle."

"Spiritual energy like bouquet make open in hand," Maarja says quietly, surprising everyone with her soft, strange accent, and the even stranger look in her exultant, smiley face.

Fred gives Maarja a worried look but says nothing while getting up and exchanging his sofa for a \$318.52 Beige Microfiber Dutailier Multiposition Modern Glider, some kind of rocking chair. By the time he's comfortably situated, leaning to one side with his canine tail curling around and resting on his lap, The Naturalist has written:

Fourth Miracle of Nature:
That life immediately began evolving.

"Each of us has a general impression of how Life on Earth has evolved these last four and half billion years. Very slow at first, as basic chemical pathways for dealing with the problems of life were worked out, then faster, and faster, always new species arising from species before them, constantly new innovations coming along such as being able to use oxygen, to live on land, bear flowers, fly, be warm-blooded, to walk upright. Today on Earth the best estimate is that around 8.7 million species may exist -- about 6.5 million living on land and some 2.2 million in the seas."

The Naturalist takes another quick look at Fred's tail resting on his lap, flinches, and wishes he hadn't.

"Not only has this evolution been rambunctious, it's also been structured in a mysterious, almost poetic and maybe even humorous manner... "

The tip of Fred's tail has begun snaking around but only The Naturalist seems to notice. Of course, if the tail is only in The Naturalist's mind, then the others wouldn't notice, so at least that makes sense.

"For, when the Universe was conjured from nothing, it came to be ordered so that its forces and matter consistently ordered themselves in pairings that at first seemed opposite or antagonistic to one another, but with deeper understanding revealed themselves to be complementary, even essential to one another; maybe even different faces of a single thing. This principle was discovered by Chinese philosophers centuries ago, and today is known as yin and yang. In terms of the evolution of the Universe, a profoundly important insight is that as tension between the opposite/complementary poles defining these yin/yang situations ripens -- and just about everything seems to

be part of a yin/yang situation -- inevitably whole new realities are engendered."

Fred's eyes yellow and his lips darken, slowly developing a coyote smile.

"In our Universe the first yin-yang experience arose when from yin nothingness there arose yang something. Soon thereafter yin antimatter and yang matter appeared, and yin electrons and yang protons. On and on reality evolved until eventually higher organisms were paired as yin female and yang male. The yin/yang principle now courses through the minds of people who conceive of the world in terms of yin bad and yang good, yin weakness and yang strength, and thousands of other real and illusory pairings of complementary mental opposites... "

Fred's skin, as expected, slowly sprouts fur.

"The Fourth Miracle is not merely that life evolved, then, but that this exquisite, utterly fertile yin-yang system was made the template for reality. Moreover, with what we know of yin and yang, we can guess that beyond the yin-yang lights and shadows of our present minds there lie realms populated by even more marvelous and terrible, creative and destructive, real and illusory monstrosities and angels than today we can bare to come face-to-face with... "

Fifth Miracle of Nature:

That thought associated with innate behavior arose.

The Naturalists voice had trailed off, time had passed, and he had hardly noticed that a hairy paw had written his next Miracle on the chalkboard. He hardly wondered how the hairy paw knew what the Fifth Miracle was.

"Consider this," he says, attempting eye contact with each member of

his group. "When a female Canvasback duck builds her first nest, she builds a nest exactly like all other Canvasbacks, even if she has been kept in isolation, and couldn't have learned Canvasback nest-building from any other duck. The Canvasback instinctively knows how to build her nest, and that instinct is encoded in the Canvasback's DNA. By "encoding" is meant information spelled out on the DNA molecule in terms of the position of its atoms. Morse Code uses dits and dahs; information on the DNA molecule is expressed in terms of whether the atoms align to form the base pairs guanine-cytosine or adenine-thymine... "

Fred stands, no longer Fred at all, but pure Gaiacoyote, the yellow eyes and black, wet lips, the coyote wariness, and aggression, the coyote smile, his humanity defined in terms of what is not coyote. The Naturalist's voice is hoarse and pleading.

"The leap of that information from mere position of atoms on a molecule into something real like a duck's nest is miraculous... "

Gaiacoyote dances to The Naturalist's words, dances with Maarja. The Naturalist had not known that Maarja could dance or even that his words were danceable, yet tonight for the first time he's hearing the music in his words and now Gaiacoyote and Maarja dance to it, a formal dance, like a Viennese waltz, and The Naturalist had not known that Maarja had a dress that would swirl out so beautifully when she spun, nor that a coyote could dance with such grace. Now the chalkboard bears these words:

Sixth Miracle of Nature:

That thought escaped its genetic programming.

Apparently no one had written those words; they just appeared. The waltz speeds up and the dancers spin faster, and the look on Gaiacoyote's face step by step changes from one of courtly, gentlemanly detachment to leering, slobbering fixation on Maarja's

ample bosom, deep blue eyes, her lips and throat...

"The Sixth Miracle is, that programmed thought and reflexive behavior escaped its influences of genetic programming and blossomed into the consciousness we're experiencing right now, consciousness attended by flights of inspiration, of aesthetic awareness, of spirituality and all kinds of feelings... "

Maarja is on her knees, her dress draped over her back, her panties around one ankle and Gaiacoyote on his knees behind her, his head thrown back as he howls and yelps, his arms like a revved-up machine jerking her hips back and forth.

Time

There's a certain opinion going around that time isn't necessarily a sequential thing, or maybe that viewpoint doesn't arise until later, hard to say. Anyway, let it be known that the following words are spoken on January 12, 1790, a date on which in Vienna, Austria the libretto for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera *Così fan tutte* is being printed. In New York, four days ago President George Washington presented the United States of America's first State of the Union Address, and three days ago the Spanish general Juan de Ugalde, with 600 men, of whom over a hundred were indigenous Americans helping the Europeans, surprised an encampment of 300 Lipan, Lipiyan, and Mescalero Apaches at the Arroyo de la Soledad, where they killed thirty men, twenty-eight women and a child, and captured thirty women and children and 800 horses. In the 21st Century, Arroyo de la Soledad is known as the Sabinal River Canyon in Uvalde County, Texas. Uvalde County itself is named to honor Juan de Ugalde, even though they got his name wrong. So...

I, Bimisi, am an Apache warrior whose name means "slippery." I am following the river you know as the Sabinal southward toward the great dry barrens. I was in charge of minding the horses when the attack came. It is I who lost the horses. The horses, gifts to us from our ancestors and trophies from raids upon our enemies, made us Apaches. I lost them. They who attacked us thought they had killed me but, see, it is I, Bimisi, "Slippery," slipping away toward the great barrens of the south, to die.

The Coyote has followed me all the way. At first, seeing him was like watching a distant storm's first lightning, so quick and slight I wasn't sure I was seeing him at all. As the pain within me has grown, I have come to see him all the time, lightning that never stops, unending thunder inside me. Now this Coyote follows just a few steps behind, grinning, but I never turn to look at him.

I understand, and I thank Yusr, Great Mystery, for thinking me worthy of the Coyote's presence. If my people still existed, among them, now that I have lost all our horses, I would not be worthy of carrying a woman's shoes. Yet Yusr judges that I am worthy to know the Coyote. Blessed be Yusr.

I walk and burn beneath the sun. I spoil harmony wherever I go, causing all around me to spin out of balance, and the Coyote follows. The Coyote, being my opposite, restores balance in his mysterious ways. Without this gift from Yusr, I would utterly desecrate this land, the sky and beyond, with my mere presence. And see how the Coyote smiles, see how he walks so easily as I stumble and bleed with cactus spines in my feet, and see how he sings even as I myself am a vomiting curse. Blessed be Yusr.

I think... I think that Yusr gave us, the Apaches, three great gifts that were denied to unbelievers. There was the communion of Peyote, which allowed even common men like me to see with clarity and know the true nature of Yusr, his colors and geometry, and to see that this

world of dust and sweat and horse shit all is illusion reflected into our minds from the perfect crystal, which is Yusr. Blessed be Yusr.

The second great gift was the horse, which made us Apaches Apaches. I have known what it is to be an Apache on a horse galloping through tall grass, to feel the wind, the sun on my face, the grass switching against my legs, to smell the horse's lather, hear his hooves on the Earth, and feel the pounding of the earth in my own body. I will say no more. I have lost our people's horses. Blessed be Yusr.

The third great gift was knowledge of Coyote. For, if horses made us Apaches, Coyote made us people. Before receiving my first bow, my mother told me about Coyote -- too funny, too crazy, too wise and smart, too much of everything. If something bad happened, we'd laugh and say the Coyote did it. If something good but unimportant happened, we'd thank Coyote for that, too, and have another good laugh. Coyote made us lovesick, tricked us into every kind of stupidity, scared us in the night, but then led us home before the fire died out. Some said that Coyote was Yusr Himself, just in a form regular people with regular minds could talk about, and maybe that's true. Blessed be Yusr.

And now, on this last day of my life, I am not sure how to handle this good joke. This Coyote that follows me... Is that Coyote? As I walk toward the great, searing light to the south, is that Yusr? The closer Coyote comes, and the closer I draw to the light in the south, are things at last reaching their proper balance? Am I being drawn into the heart of Yusr? Blessed be Yusr.

I fall onto the ground, but I have not reached the great light in the south. Coyote rests on his haunches beside me, grinning. I am too dumb to know what happens now.

Blessed be Yusr.

Imagining

DECLAIMED IN AN ACCENT MANY HINDUS MIGHT RECOGNIZE AS ORIGINATING IN OR NEAR THE CITY OF VARANASI, UTTAR PRADESH:

It was I who one Tuesday at tea-time during the merry month of May a jolly two million years ago or thereabouts scratched with my right front paw the little gash that set forth eroding until it became the pretty little gem beside which the Spanish gentleman and his little band of lackeys killed, captured and set to running for their lives all those bad old Apaches. I mean to say, then, that it was I who prepared the stage on which the afore-mentioned massacre took place, the famous Arroyo de la Soledad, later to be graced with the name Sabinal River Canyon, and I knew all along that something like the massacre would occur, though not exactly what the details would be, but those details really aren't important, are they, unless you happen to be one of those details, snark snark snark.

So, for two million years I have watched the whole thing come together, and in fact even before that it was I who seventeen million years earlier summoned from the Earth the little rumblings that raised the perched plains to the north, what now you call the Edwards Plateau, so that someday it'd make good sense to have a little river flowing off it and I did that plateau raising with no more ceremony than to issue a kingly belch and a fart, my doings, my doings, it was I, though I must admit I can't do these sorts of things everywhere, only where in the minds of future humans there'd be this certain mental framework needed to explain things, and you know which mental framework I mean. Or, has that knowing not come yet? Hard to say.

Whatever, and now let it be known that I was busy even back before that, even before right here there was a great inland sea connecting what is now the Arctic with the present Gulf of Mexico, with mollusks

and brachiopods dying and leaving shells fossilized in the limestone poking from the ground around us right here and "now," and in fact even before that, for I helped the Earth pull itself together and take its place, and before that the Sun congeal from gas and dust...

Well, you get the picture, and bit by bit you're gaining an inkling as to how all this works, how who I am is possible only when you -- YOU! -- can imagine that I may be, and have done these things, but, of course, what's quite unclear at this moment -- or was it an earlier or later moment, hard to tell -- is whether you truly grasp that imagining can be creational.

In fact, here among all these fragrantly flowering words I'll embed this little daisy in the spirit of full disclosure and foreshadowing, or maybe as a kind of literary echo, hard to say which: I'm not so sure myself. Even though probably you already understand that I must have supervised the programming of your mind so that at least a few of you might be disposed to believe that imagining can be a step toward, or maybe even the last step itself, to having something real, and of course part of that programming is to have you overlook so much when you look straight at it, and misinterpret most of what you think you really do see, ha ha ha!

Egads, I do go on, but all this seems to have a momentum in which one becomes engaged.

Whatever. Now, a question: How can one so powerful and peripatetic as I ever take the time to follow a beat-up injun three days, then sit beside him as he sinks into delirium?

The answer is that I can do what I want when I want. If your mind permitted you to grasp that time is not a sequential thing, that time can be looped and twisted and turned inside itself in all ways imaginable -- and I mean imaginable with a mind like mine, not yours -- then you'd see the possibilities. One may sit next to a bleeding fellow for eternity,

and still have time for a three-o'clock cigar before striking off for home for supper.

But, I was about to say: I am here today to let you know that I manifest all these wondrous events for the esthetic pleasure I derive by experiencing firsthand certain harmonious and utterly disharmonious congruencies of events that occur over time, and remember if you can, please, please, please, despite your brain's programming, that time is not necessarily a sequential thing.

For example: This poor chap swooning on the ground, his right hand with that ugly disjointed thumb ever so purple, happens to lie atop an egg-sized little rock the shape of a turtle's head. See the rounded snout, the eye, the mouth, the loose skin sagging below the chin? I first noticed that stone's felicitous shape a thousand years ago today. Just for the aesthetic pleasure of a certain ironical kind, for a thousand years I've encouraged its increasing semblance to a turtle head by causing windblown sand to abrade it here, an antelope to step on it there, et cetera -- never touching it myself, just to make it sporting -- so here I am today, exactly a thousand years after that process began, to celebrate my artistry, with you as my guest. Did that sink in? All that... this ceremony... aesthetic resonance... ?

This poor entity all sprawled out fancies himself the player in a great tragedy but in fact I managed the whole thing, the injuns camping where they did, good ol' Juan de Ugalde with his 600 ignorant galoots stumbling upon the injuns where they did, this religion-besotted ignoramus escaping and stumbling to here...

Isn't it just too much? All those goings-on with so much weeping and bleeding and stumbling about, grief and downright blue funk... just so you and I at this precise moment, whenever and wherever that is, or was, or will be, can imagine it, and celebrate my anniversary with this little turtle head?

Mind Games

"No thing important, that. Tell me one day, have hypoglycemia you. Blood sugar low, fall down, you."

They're lying together in the darkness, hugging one another the way they do, his left arm over her side, his hand cupping her right breast. Long silence.

"There was more to it than that."

"More what?"

Coyotes yelp in the distance, but these are normal calls, several calling, not just one, their yelps filtered through the scrub.

"I'm trying to understand why my mind is doing this."

"Hear or see something that night?"

"As I spoke, Fred turned into Gaiacoyote. At first he just had a tail, but toward the end he was nothing but Gaiacoyote."

"Yes, all this make message, you. Anything other? I say what mean."

The Naturalist keeps his eyes open, and listens, and smells the night air, bracing himself for violins, the odor of onions or wet copper...

"He danced with you, then you both got onto your knees and he screwed you from behind. That's when I lost it."

The coyotes fall silent, and here on the stained mattress on the floor there are two aging, battered people breathing and alert.

"That powerful, beautiful," she says with that trance-entering voice of hers. "I may tell you, all movement, all happen in Universe, all spirit energy want make one thing in... tasakaal, don't know how to say it. This Gaiacoyote, he balance you. You think up, up, up, he come, he make down, down, down. This say to me you special, this one thing everything is part of, want balance where be you. I can't say it all right way, and no enough information. But I may tell you, this important. Understand, you? Too hard say it by English. Really meeletu!"

"Thank you Maarja," The Naturalist says softly. "I can think of interpretations much darker and less hopeful, so it means a lot to have your way of seeing it to think about. Thank you... "

Ley Lines

Along the ridge crest where Fred has bulldozed a firebreak through the junipers Maarja walks slowly enough to absorb all the energy she can reasonably expect at that exact spot on Earth, sense the energy's messages, have its attractive and repelling forces guide her right or left, its varying voltage levels slow her down or speed her up, to be profoundly receptive to the ever-increasing state of excitement of energy particles that all day have cascaded from the sky onto the Earth, nurturing Earthly spirits, spirits of things abandoned by their living forms, spirits of abstractions that humans perceive as emotions, mathematical formulations, conditions that evoke a certain feeling that can't be expressed in words, and an infinity of equilibrium-seeking yin-yang couples all flowing through the Universe without regard to distance and time, and all day long this energy has mingled and harmonized with sunlight falling onto Earth, then charged with so many awakenings, surgings, blossomings and eruptions, pooling on

and near the Earth's surface, but now with dusk the energies prepare to flow back outward, to gush in invisible streams from out of the Earth, carrying with it Earth spirits ready to depart, eager to soar into the sky, to diffuse into the heavens, sing with the stars, once more join the broader Universe's spiritual, mystical and metaphysical rivers, and there flow and stay ready to join again this or that ebb or flow somewhere, somewhere, somewhere...

For, now she knows that the Great Unity is showing unusual interest in The Naturalist, and there's potential here, for also the Great Unity has brought The Naturalist into her life, and what can this mean but that she also has been chosen, that her uniqueness and powers are being recognized, and that worthy events are in store for her.

But, at the moment, Maarja feels abandoned by her guiding powers. She doesn't know which way to go, or whether to proceed or turn back. She's lost that feeling of energy surging through the soles of her feet directing her every step. She takes from a pocket in her short shorts a pendulum, a sparkling quartz crystal the size of a cherry and tied with thread, and as she silently asks the pendulum whether she should proceed forward, she dangles the crystal before her. It swings in circles of indecision but as minutes pass and Maarja waits for the answer gradually it starts swinging back and forth, right and left, and this is a definite no.

A little confused, Maarja turns around and begins walking back, now sensing energy flowing again. The energy grows but then levels off, and maybe begins diminishing. She asks the pendulum if she should continue in this return direction. Once again the answer is no, so the message is clear, that she has found the point of maximum energy. Backtracking a little to a point that feels exactly right to her, she pauses and looks around.

It seems to her that as the day's light fails certain silvery nebulosities gather in a straight line, one atop a peak in the distance, one over The

Naturalist's trailer across the valley, and a third vague, shimmering illumination right next to her, and she turns and sees that also one is forming, just barely visible but definitely, surely, there, in line with the others, on another ridge crest behind her...

A thought takes Maarja's breath. She runs back down the trail, runs with her heart racing and her mind a caldron of mystical insights and soaring feelings of beatitude and memories of other lives and visions of lives to come.

Back at the trailer she stands looking around until she sees what she seeks. Another line of vague, silvery glowings, surely that's what she's seeing, exactly what she's seeing, one nebulosity atop a distant peak, or maybe there's a peak there, another atop a ridge between the peak and here, and other glowings behind her, and the thing is that surely they're all in a straight line but she's too excited to make sure, but what else could they be but parts of two lines of shining clouds intersecting exactly here, exactly where The Naturalist's trailer stands... ?

These are Ley Lines, lines of mystical energy associated with Feng Shui, lines that she can see even when others can't, and nothing could better confirm that her urge to come to Texas to be with The Naturalist was part of the Unity's plan to have her in this special place at this special time, to be ready to deploy her unique powers and understandings when the right time comes, and be ready to be elevated to even more exalted levels of spiritual advancement, to receive even greater powers...

Now every message The Naturalist reports, every dream and every coyote call from out in the scrub, every vague shadow and luminosity, all must be noted and understood. Now everything depends on being totally alert, and ready.

Memories of Chiapas

The Naturalist rides in a pickup truck rattling down Ranch Road 1051 toward Uvalde. He and Fred's hired Mexican José are returning a borrowed table to Fred's store. The Naturalist doesn't talk much but José does, telling about his life on the rancho back in Chiapas, a little village called Ejido Calido, how his dad still works the milpa growing corn, beans and squash all mixed in the same weedy field, not really worth the effort, but the old man is too proud to give up traditions.

"He's cool," José laughs in his lazy way, his thick fingers on the steering wheel tapping to norteño music blasting from the dashboard, emanating from the local La Raza radio station. "To you he'd look like just any other ignorant, poor old man wearing worn-out clothes, but he's a real shaman, OK. People come see him, mostly mothers with sick kids, and he always gives them a little package of herbs and they give him a few pesos or maybe some eggs or a papaya. Sometimes his herbs help, sometimes they don't, and if they don't it's because there's been a viento malo, a 'bad air' blowing through, or maybe someone putting the ojo malo, the 'evil eye,' on the kid and if that's the case, then the old man just says that somebody with more powerful cures has to handle it, that he's just a little *curandero* who knows something about herbs, and everyone is OK with that, and they keep coming with their sick kids and old hens, not a bad life."

José waits for The Naturalist to comment, but he doesn't.

"He wanted me to learn, and I did study awhile. I know how to make a necklace of Oxó seeds to protect against the *ojo malo*. Down there, that *ojo malo* is serious stuff. When you work out in the sun all day getting hot and thirsty and go home, you have to be careful because if you look at a baby, it might get sick. Diarrhea, vomiting, whatever. The problem is that out in the fields the sun's energy builds up in you and

when you go home that energy stays in you, and can be bad in the home if you let it out the wrong way or too fast. You can hurt a kid just by looking at it. Drunks also give the *ojo malo* without meaning to. So, just imagine, a little village like that full of old men coming in from the *milpa* after working all morning, and the rest of the men half drunk, and you get plenty of *ojo malo*!

José laughs his lazy, wheezy laugh and waits for The Naturalist to say something, but he doesn't.

"So, my old man taught me, when you have a kid you think might be suffering from the *ojo malo*, you take the leaves, not the fruits that look like little bloodshot eyeballs, combine them with leaves of *Ruda* and tobacco and brew a tea, add some alcohol, and bathe the kid in it. It'll undo the evil eye."

José is silent a minute or two, the old green truck rattling down the asphalt road silvery with heat. He's remembering the odor of that tea, the medicinal tang of *Ruda*, the tobacco's brown juice coloring the alcohol and how that mixture of tobacco and alcohol smelled, all mingling with woodfire smoke and the homey odor of cooking black beans, and tortillas baking on the *comal* even as the sick kid cries in a little thatch-roof hut lit by a single bare lightbulb dangling from a crossbeam, and he wonders how he got from there to here, and why.

The Unity

The Naturalist hadn't heard of Axis Deer, *Cervus axix*, before Fred told him. They're from the Indian subcontinent, introduced into Texas in 1932, now forming self-sustaining herds on the Edwards Plateau and thereabouts. Right now over a hundred graze short grass in the floodplain below. The Naturalist hunkers in a Mesquite's shadows.

The deer have reddish-brown coats with irregular lines of small white spots along their sides. Some males bear large antlers.

"Ommmmmmmm... ?" he asks invitingly into the air's juniper smell.
"Have a seat... if mental aberrations like to sit."

Gaiacoyote in his fully formed, black-lipped, yellow-eyed edition sits down beside The Naturalist, gravel crunching beneath him as he shifts into a comfortable position, and it is remarkable to The Naturalist that an illusion can be accompanied by such convincing sound effects. An eight-pointed dominant male Axis bugles, then looks around.

"And if you think about it, she's kinda right, you know," Gaiacoyote begins, now in a Texas drawl. "Things get along best when all those yins and yangs even out. Take this example: There you were headed to Chihuahua to walk into the desert and croak, and from a certain perspective that's a downright extreme way of handling things. So now here I am to nudge you a little back toward the center, at least for the time being. I'm here because in your mind there's a certain insight needing help to come out, the thing about everything being just one thing; and it's hankering to be thought about more, and passed on."

Gaiacoyote seems to wait for The Naturalist to say something, but he doesn't.

"It's rarer than hen's teeth for this-here One Thing to get involved with humans," Gaiacoyote continues, "but it happens from time to time, a little nudge here, a tiny adjustment there. Of course at the end of the day it's of no great concern how things turn out, just that it's kind of fun play around with. Really, in this particular dimension we're stuck in we have time on our hands, if time exists at all, so we might as well be doing something like this, maybe something that'll at least turn out as a good joke..."

Gaiacoyote laughs at his own apparent sincerity and the laugh comes

out sounding enough like a sharp bark that it causes the deer to spook, sending several running a few steps until they figure out that nothing is chasing them, then they stand still, ears high and eyes wide open, looking around. Then they graze short grass again, their tails switching biting flies off their flanks. Tears of merriment moisten and blacken the gray fur in Gaiacoyote's eye corners as he scratches his crotch.

The Naturalist says nothing.

"So, you're not going to ask help in this insight-nudging I'm talking about. It's just as well. If you thought about it too much you'd screw things up. Anyway, this particular visit isn't to help you get your act together, just to touch base so you know you're not being forgotten, to let you know that in a way it all fits the scheme of things. Also, since you haven't anything better to do, you might as well just play along and see how things work out. But if all that's too tiresome for you, then go ahead and go to Chihuahua and make your dramatic walk into the desert because in the end, you might say, it's all not worth more than a dry fart anyway."

There's a long silence as The Naturalist runs through what he knows. He knows that for a long time he's believed that he has an important insight worth sharing with others, the insight that because the Six Miracles of Nature occurred in sequence, like footpaths along a trail, they show direction, pointing toward what the Universe is evolving toward, such as ever greater diversity, ever greater interrelatedness among parts of the Creation, ever greater mentality among the most highly evolved beings, ever more intense feelings, and spiritual engagement with the ultimate Unity that seems to be coming into focus... "

When the Naturalist looks around and see what Gaiacoyote is doing, he's no longer is there. Like someone who scratches his head or spits when he's frustrated, all he can do is to pick up a rock from the ground

his right hand had been cupped around during the visit and before he tosses it away he notices the rock's peculiar shape, definitely like a turtle head -- eyes, mouth and all.

The Web

"Howdy, Maarja, didn't see you there!"

Fred comes around the house's corner squinting and shading his eyes with his hand as if he's saluting. Maarja sits at a white, circular, wrought-iron picnic table with a big umbrella rising from the center, and she's similarly squinting into her laptop screen.

"Hi, Fred, wireless signal good here."

"Writing your kids in Estonia?"

"Already. Now make web page."

"You know how to put together stuff so it gets on the Internet?"

"Make too little money in Estonia as art teacher, me, so study web design. Now nobody want make website. Do this cause make happy, me"

"Can I look? I've never seen what a website looks like when it's being put together."

Over Maarja's shoulder Fred sees a webpage with the title reading, "The Six Miracles of Nature."

"Ha! So that's what you're doing! I figured nobody would pay much

attention to all that but I guess out on the Internet there's people who'll look at anything."

"Six Miracles good," Maarja says a little coolly, not understanding everything Fred says, but hearing what's in his tone of voice. "Know Six Miracles, understand. Better than church."

"Honey I think you may be right, but around here you better not say things like that too loud or folks'll run you out of town. Religion is big in these parts, right up there with the flag and Republican barbecues. You put our address on a page talking about six miracles that aren't Jesus miracles and you'll have the good folks at First Baptist out here with their Bibles and pitchforks screaming at us, and Kate Brandt at the Courthouse reassessing our property value sky high."

"In Soviet time, my country, Russian soldiers all place. All talk Lenin, communism some kind of religion, talk, talk, talk, do bad things. I know people, this. I not like this people. I tell world, Six Miracles good."

"Well, I figured if I brought The Naturalist here things'd get livened up," Fred laughs, patting Maarja on the shoulder. "You go ahead and say what you want, and we'll just pop a beer and watch things unfold."

Black Eye

The black, dusty Hummer H2 parks outside the trailer. JoAnn in her green plaid shirt and bluejeans opens the door and daintily steps onto the gravel. Maarja doesn't know how to react to JoAnn's unannounced arrival, crooked smile and bruised-black eye so she just makes her happy-face smile and opens the screen door. JoAnn interprets this as the sophisticated silence of one who sees all, and she already feels

better.

"Honey, I just don't know what happened that last time, those Tarot cards with their crazy pictures all mixing together, that fellow hanging upside-down on the Cross, the mad looking one with ram's horns, stars, moons, people in black robes and white, it just made my head swirl and I started getting sick... But the thing is, I still would like a reading and they tell me you can do it without Tarot cards, so... "

"Runes," Maarja says softly, taking up a folded white cloth and a small leather pouch from the shelves. "Old way of people in north countries, Scandinavia, Estonia. Runes good. You make in head question, think question hard, then ask Runes help."

As she speaks she leads JoAnn outside to beneath the pie-pan Mesquite. There she spreads the cloth on the ground, sits and invites JoAnn to sit beside her.

"Face north. Old time, believe gods there. Tradition maybe help. In head have question, you?"

JoAnn nods, her brow wrinkled with what looks like worry. Maarja opens her pouch, reaches in and stirs things around, then withdraws a handful of similar-sized white pebbles on which she has inscribed twiggy, straight lines in India ink. She casts the pebbles onto the white sheet.

"Many rune kind, many ways put runes on cloth," Maarja says. "I use Scandinavian runes. Today make simple put-out, us, simple but powerful. You pick up pebble. That your past. Next pebble make your now. Pebble three make your... your... *tulevikus*, time not come already... "

"Future?" suggests JoAnn.

"Future, yes, *tulevikus*."

JoAnn already feels better just thinking that in her life now there's something other than her empty house and her black eye. Now she has something to think about as exotic and innocent sounding as a *tulevikus*. She picks a pebble and hands it to Maarja, who studies it nodding her head gravely, her eyes unfocused on anything in this world.

"*Úr*, little rain," Maarja interprets. "Clouds cry. Straw-fields made bad. Sheep go hungry."

"Oh yes, yes, yes... !" JoAnn gurgles. Maarja had been prepared to produce a complex interpretation but maybe there's no need.

"You see, runes know. Pick rune number two, the now."

JoAnn's hands are shaking and she doesn't know why, but seeing them shake upsets her. She starts worrying that what happened the last time will repeat, so she breathes deeply, grits her teeth, picks up a rune and hands it to Maarja.

"*Reið*, men on many horse, happy. Travel fast. Horse work hard... "

JoAnn is confused, This seems to have nothing to do with anything. Maarja sees that this rune means work.

"You come me, you travel, you not stay home, you change road, hard work. This rune say this do now, us, make important, make happy. Hard work but happy... "

JoAnn looks at the little rune wide-eyed, wondering how much of the interpretation Maarja made up on the spot and how much is real, but just hearing something positive makes her feel better. She reaches for the third rune, hardly able to breathe despite her skepticism, for she

knows how she might react if it's bad news.

"Oh, *Týr*," Maarja says trying to avoid grimacing, for this is a hard one. "God with one hand. What wolf leave when no more hungry, and go. Prince of church-buildings... "

JoAnn feels suffocated, sensing all her hopes threatened with such an unintelligible, unexpected reading.

"Good, this good," Maarja says looking up, smiling. "*Týr* say future full, like belly of wolf after eat, happy like prince, you. Great Spirit give many gift. God take hand give help, you, take up... "

JoAnn doesn't find the interpretation convincing but at least it doesn't sound bad, and Maarja smiles and looks into her eyes, the first smile JoAnn has seen in a long time, the first eyes that look at her without immediately glancing away. She reaches into her shirt pocket, hands Maarja a hundred dollar bill, rises with a smile on her own face and walks to the black, dusty Hummer H2, climbs up much more gracefully than the last time, and drives away, Maggie following along looking hard at the back, right tire, but not bothering to bark.

"*Platseebo*." Maarja whispers to herself. "Believe, so is it."

Fire

"Of course the easiest way to make a fire is the way you see your folks doing it when they're barbecuing," The Naturalist begins, eyeing the eight Boy Scouts Fred has brought from the big Sahawe Indian Dancers Ceremonial in Uvalde, which he co-sponsors. "I know that you all already know how to make a fire, but Fred says you want to hear about my special way of doing it, so here we are."

A couple of boys still wear war paint.

"The main thing about my approach is that I see making a fire as a mystical, even a spiritual experience. Well, you have to tiptoe into that kind of talk so let's go at it from different directions, do some mind exercises to get used to thinking about it in a flexible way... "

The boys haven't heard this kind of talk. They're not sure what it means. They want to say something funny about it but can't think of anything.

"For example, one way to look at making a fire is that it's managing a chemical reaction. I'll explain that in a minute. On another level, building a fire is creating a kind of door through which energy present in one form and place can pass to become energy in another form and location. On yet another level, making a fire is nothing less than being part of a blossoming that began with the Big Bang, and by consciously being part of that blossoming, the firemaker becomes a blossoming within that blossoming... "

At this point the boys start shifting around, looking worried.

"OK, let's get back to that part about managing a chemical reaction."

The Naturalist has the chalkboard and easel that Carla Fussganger from down at the bank uses to give English classes to local Mexicans in Fred's furniture showroom so now he writes this:



"This is the chemical equation for burning methane. I'm choosing methane because it's the simplest of all molecules known as organic compounds. The Methane molecule is composed of just one atom of carbon and four atoms of hydrogen. Paper and wood also are mostly

organic compounds, similarly made up of carbon and hydrogen atoms, but the molecules of paper and wood are very, very much more complex. Still, they're composed of the same kinds of atoms, and when they burn, essentially the same chemical reaction takes place with them as it does with methane."

He's lost them already, he sees, but he needs to say just a little more before getting to the more interesting part.

"So, the formula says that when you burn an organic compound such as methane, or paper or wood, you need oxygen -- this O_2 here in the equation -- and once it's burned you get not only heat but also the invisible, odorless gas known as carbon dioxide -- this CO_2 -- and water, which you already know as H_2O ..."

Most of the boys actually look as if they're in pain.

"The thing is, the energy we release when we burn methane, or paper, or wood, comes from the sun," The Naturalist says, his voice raising in hope of building dramatic tension. "Energy is only stored in the methane, the paper or wood momentarily. Here's how the energy came from the sun and got into the methane, the same as it would wood: It flowed across 93 billion miles of space as sunlight and that sunlight fell onto plants. Then the plants, through the complex and amazing process of photosynthesis, captured the sunlight's energy and stored it in bonds connecting the wood's carbon and hydrogen atoms. When we 'burn' the bonds away with oxygen, that energy is released. Energy came from the sun, we release it in fire, and now we use that sunlight energy we've just released from the wood to cook our meals in the campfire."

"Where'd the Sun get its energy?" a boy who hadn't seemed to be listening asks, the one with the most war paint.

"The Sun is a star. Energy escaping from the Sun is released when

unimaginable gravity in the Sun's center squeezes hydrogen molecules together so violently that a process called nuclear fusion happens. When nuclear fusion takes place, energy explodes outward like a bomb bigger than anything you can imagine. That energy erupts from the sun as sunlight and other forms of energy, and travels through space to Earth..."

"My daddy says that everything we need comes from Jesus, and we need energy to cook our meals, so where does Jesus fit into this," the war-paint boy interrupts, straight faced. It takes a moment for The Naturalist to rally.

"Most of the atoms of the Sun, of Earth and all living things were created in giant stars that exploded, spreading material composed of those atoms throughout the Universe, matter that we can rightfully call stardust. We living things are literally recycled stardust. Jesus was stardust, too, and..."

Fred walks around the corner carrying a cold glass of homemade root beer.

"Where's the fire we're learning to make?" he asks.

"We didn't get that far yet," The Naturalist replies.

"Well, Joe's mother here calls and wants him back in Uvalde on the double, something about medicine for his allergies, so we'll have to finish this up another time."

As Fred and the boys politely thank The Naturalist for his talk and turn away The Naturalist sees the coyote tail hanging over the back of Fred's trousers.

Turtlehead Rock

{They're speaking Apache here, a jerky, stuttery member of the Athabascan family of languages. To the ears of English speakers, Apache is full of hard sounds and nasalized vowels. Here's a sample text of the Apache language:

'lłk'ídą, k ọọ yá'édjíná'a.

That means, "Long ago, there was no fire." It's the first line of the traditional Apache story, 'Coyote Obtains Fire.'" What follows is English conveying both the thoughts expressed and the idiosyncrasies of the speakers.}

"Eh, Bimisi, stop it with that 'Blessed be Yusrn' crap. I didn't scrape blow-flies off you, wash you off and wrap up that broken thumb so I could go nuts hearing that stuff."

"María, you bring disharmony and sadden Bimisi when you talk like that."

"Your whole family and all your friends get wiped out by those lickens of snake guts and you talk about your imaginary buddy Yusrn being sad? You get your thoughts from vulture crap or something?"

"Yusrn not imaginary. Yusrn gave us life."

"Yusrn, Smoozn, there's no more Yusrn than there is that joker those white-faced vermin nail on a cross and kneel in front of. I've had to live with that crap all my life and since I've gotten away from those people every time I dump my *excremento*, as the padres called it, I imagine it's on the head of that weepy-eyed statue on the cross and my life has only gotten better since I've been thinking that way. And unlike you yokels who've spent your life starving out in the sticks 'living the

old way' I never was taught that Yusrn stuff to begin with, so there you are, just ignore all those stories people teach you and if you want my advice listen to the trees and rocks, that's my idea, just listen to those trees and rocks and you get along, know what I mean?"

Bimisi says nothing.

The woman María switches green, egg-shaped, egg-sized tunas, or cactus fruits, with a handful of soft-leafed Castilleja, removing tiny, sharp, honey-colored spines that can stick into fingers and lips. María is proud of her find, something moist and sweet in a land where nothing is moist except blood, and nothing is sweet at all. María is happy to share with this man, happy to have someone to be with, even someone who moans and weeps all night and keeps going on about Yusrn the life-giver.

"Naw, I spent my whole life there next to The Mission, never knew anything else. Up before sunrise, work for the white-faced snakes all day, get treated worse than their pigs, then the next day get up and do it all again. My grandparents, they said it was better than being out where Comanches could get to us, but I would've chosen anyplace other than that Mission, those stinking white-faces in their black rags and what they did to us girls. They made us all slaves and gave us babies and said they were doing us a favor telling us their stories. They gave me a Cross to wear around my neck but I beat it with a rock and pissed on the pieces and felt good about it."

"Why do you wear that rock around your neck?"

"Ha! That's my good-luck rock, you know? When I found you, your hand was tight around it. When I picked you up, it fell at my feet and when I saw how it looked like a turtle head I figured it must be a special rock, had to mean something, you know? Never saw a rock so much like a perfect little turtle head, and this hole straight through it, you hold the rock up a certain way and light from the other side shoots

out the eye. Hah, this is my good-luck rock, came into my life the very moment you did, so if one day you see me throwing away my little turtle head you better start worrying old man, you better start worrying... Now you calm down and see if you like this sweet little tuna... "

Cornbread

"You must be The Naturalist," she says, walking toward The Naturalist and his solar cooker just the other side of the pie-pan Mesquite. She's a short, chubby woman with curly, brown hair, thick glasses and a camera slung on her shoulder. "I'm Doddie Gross from the Uvalde Republican, and this must be the solar cooker I've come to learn about."

"Yep. Glad you're interested. As you see, it's built from one of those big satellite dishes people used for getting TV signals back in the 90s. A fellow gave me this one just to get it out of his backyard. I removed the electronic parts and replaced the metal webbing that served as a concave reflective surface for the microwave signal with narrow wedges of shiny sheet aluminum. The aluminum sheeting focuses the Sun's radiant energy to a point here about one and a half meters above the dish's face... where I've fixed a platform for this skillet, in which right now cornbread is baking."

"Oh, it does smell good," Doddie says, recovering fast from the surprise of The Naturalist getting right to business so fast. "Where did you get the idea?"

"It just seemed that it would work, so I fixed it up. It's so simple and obvious I don't think it's anything that needed figuring out, just needed to be done."

"Are you going into production and sell satellite cookers to the public?"

"I don't think people would buy it. It's easier to prepare food on a gas or electric oven in your kitchen. This takes longer and every twenty minutes or so you need to reposition the dish because the Sun moves in the sky, causing the focus to drift off the skillet."

"Hmmm, right. So, if that's the case, why did you do this and why aren't you baking your cornbread in your kitchen?"

"One answer is that I don't have a stove, and the other answer is that I've decided to use solar on an ethical basis. I don't want to participate in producing greenhouse gases and the waste of natural resources that occurs during the usual way of cooking things."

"What do you mean?"

"When you use electricity you're sending an order to a grid system where the electricity is produced by burning coal or petroleum, or with nuclear power. You know that burning coal and petroleum puts all kinds of contaminants into the air, as well as enormous amounts of global-warming carbon dioxide, and nuclear power plants produce radioactive wastes. The half-life of Plutonium-239, one particularly lethal component of nuclear waste, is 24,000 years, and it'll remain lethal for ten half-lives, or 240,000 years. I don't want to be responsible for contributing to the production of that."

"But, you can't be serious, right? I mean, you're not going to change anything baking your cornbread on an old satellite dish, right? I mean, surely you're not saying that all the rest of us are living immorally if we use a regular stove in a regular kitchen?"

But The Naturalist isn't hearing Doddie's question. Instead he's hearing Domenico Zipoli's slow andante Aria from the Suite in F

Major, violins and cellos like sunlight becoming sweet, golden, pollen-like mist cascading from the sky and he smells the sun-baked cornbread, and says nothing in reply to Doddie Gross from the Uvalde Republican, just looks back and forth between the blue-golden sky ablaze with the sun and the baking, sizzling cornbread turning brown in its black skillet, little white wisps of smoke curling from between the cornbread and the skillet side indicating it's about ready with its pretty brown crust on top, violins and cellos and sunlight and golden mist and white wisps of smoke and the cornmeal's wholesome odor in the still-moist mid-morning air.

Doddie with a worried look on her face returns to her car, having said things to The Naturalist that went unremarked, having seen The Naturalist gaze through her, through the mesquites and junipers, into the musical sky.

Doddie's car departs down the lane, Maggie running along behind watching the right rear tire very closely but not barking. Maarja, having smelled the baking cornbread and having seen Doddie depart arrives with peanut butter to smear on the hot cornbread, and glasses of cool mint tea.

"Smell good," she says. The Naturalist hears this, sees the sense in it, finds value and beauty in the simple words, smiles, and takes the skillet down so they can have a mid-morning snack of cornbread with peanut butter, mint tea, violins and cellos.

"He's crazy"

"What do you mean 'He's crazy?'" Fred laughs into the phone, so surprised he puts the phone in front of his face and looks at it as if it were Doddie's face. "He's the most intelligent, level-headed person I've ever met. That's why I invited him here and why I suggested you

go see him."

"I'm just saying I tried to engage him in a discussion on the moral issues of normal energy use and he just sort of fogged out, started looking into the sky and didn't say anything. And he didn't say anything as I walked away and got out of there. I even forgot to take a picture of his satellite cooker."

"Well you're not the first who's said he goes silent sometimes. I have a Mexican driver who says being with him is like talking to a stone wall. Maybe he just didn't want to say anything critical about people's lifestyles, but at the same time didn't want to lie or gloss over matters important to him. He can be pretty convincing when he talks about what he calls 'the manmade collapse of the planetary biosphere.' If I believed what he says, and so far everything I've heard him say has checked out when I looked it up on the Internet, I might act funny, too. Scary stuff."

A pause.

"Internet. You told me that he has a website. You remember its name or address?"

Dashboard Rock

"José, that rock, where get, you?"

This time it's Maarja in the old pickup truck heading down Ranch Road 1051 with José. She does this once a week, going to buy food supplies in Uvalde.

"That's my special rock," José laughs as he lifts it from the dashboard

and hands it to Maarja. "Tell me, what does that little rock look like?"

Maarja hasn't been paying attention to the rock's features. Rather, she'd been sitting there feeling a vague disturbance nearby, so she held her hands so that fingertips of opposing hands just barely touched, enabling energies in her body to equalize, bring about more tranquility and less emotional and spiritual "static," so she could more clearly survey the horizons of her consciousness. Now it's clear that what's causing the disturbance is this rock, a finger-sized, brownish chert pebble. José has been talking on and on about an uncle in Chiapas who hears snakes singing in trees, but it's this rock singing to Maarja, and now that she feels it in her hand she's sure that José is right about it being a special rock. Now to answer José's question she examines it more closely.

"Turtle head," she says with her broad smiley-face smile. "Eye here, mouth here, nose hole here, all part perfect, turtle head."

"Yep, I figure any rock looking that much like a turtle head has to be special, so I've been carrying it since The Naturalist gave it to me. Don't know why he didn't keep it. Back in Chiapas, my people say anything unusual like that has a certain power, maybe good, maybe bad, who knows? But I never heard of a turtle causing anyone any problems, have you? If it were a snake head it'd be different, but a snake's head is flat, not rounded on top like this, and snakes don't have that droopy skin below the chin. That rock's an old turtle and I'm tickled to have him on my side."

Maarja cradles the rock, consulting her feelings about turtles, thinking of their longevity, their deliberateness, her belief that they are vegetarians, their manner of simply retreating into their shells when they don't like what's around them, their silence, their closeness to the earth, their gangling gait beneath shells that so often bear elegant and colorful designs.

But, it's not the appearance that's important; it's the feeling emanating from it, a kind of familiar feeling, but old, like warmth radiating from something solid that has gathered sunlight heat all day for centuries, now radiating its energy outward, quietly, unexpectedly, low levels that feel good, constant, dependable energy that doesn't waver or trick, energy like an old turtle pulling itself across the ground...

"When The Naturalist gave it to me he didn't say anything about it looking like a turtle head," José continues. "But you know how he is, just gave it to me. I thanked him and put it in my pocket to humor him, then a few days later I was feeling around for some change to buy a Coke with and came up with that rock. 'What's with that rock?' I asked myself. Felt funny about it, didn't want to keep carrying it around but somehow didn't want to throw it away. I started looking at it and then I saw it looked like a turtle's head. Well that's not a big thing. You take a million, million rocks like we have around here, walk among them a few years like I have, and it makes sense that eventually there'll be one someplace looking like a turtle's head. I came out to the truck, tossed it onto the dashboard, and that's where you find it. So that's what life is like, Maarja, ain't it? You grow old and keep doing things and piddling around, and some day you can't believe you've seen so much and done so much. Like right now, me, I got started out in that little hut in Chiapas and now here I am sitting with a lady from across the waters talking about a rock that looks like a turtle's head, ha ha ha... !"

"José, I may tell you, I like this rock. How much sell, you?"

A little pause.

"Maarja, I figure that if that rock means something to you then that must be the reason it got passed to me, so that I'd give it to you. I don't know why The Naturalist just didn't give it to you himself. For some reason that didn't happen, but you end up having the rock anyway. You take that rock and maybe good things will happen.

Somehow I'm thinking of what my papa in Chiapas told me: Everything comes and goes in cycles. One cycle ends and another begins. If that's what I'm thinking, then it must be that my giving you this is beginning and ending something, because that's how it works. You take this rock and let's see what happens."

"José, thank you, thank you, *tānan teid väga!* I keep this rock all time. This rock important, me. This rock say something, me."

The GOP

"Issand juma!"

"What's up."

"Website hits very up. Normal only maybe one hundred every day but yesterday hits 1,738."

"Probably one of these homeschooling operations featuring the site as a resource for learning about nature. Happens sometimes. The hits will get back to normal in a day or two."

"No, plant, animal pages not get hits. Page get hits, see here, Six Miracles of Nature."

"What did you put on that page?"

"Notes from talk at place of Fred."

"Well, I can't explain it. Let's see if anyone visits the page tomorrow."

"Oh, look. Can see where visitors come from, use link to your site. Yesterday 1,578 visitors come from link on page at www.uibapc.org..."

Before finishing the sentence Maarja has opened a new window and is typing the address into her browser's address window. She hits enter and waits a few seconds.

"Uvalde Infinite Bread Apostolic Pentecostal Church... 'As a charismatic church, we are determined to live according to God's teachings... ' What mean 'ap-os-tolic?' And 'char-is-matic?'"

"Not sure. Think some of them speak tongues, maybe handle rattlesnakes."

Maarja opens another window and brings up her bookmarked English-Estonian dictionary. She copies and pastes into the search box "apostolic."

"*Apostellik*,' not understand in Estonian also."

Now she pastes "charismatic."

"*Karismatiline*...' That also not understand."

"I've never understood it in English, either," The Naturalist says. "But what about this church? Why are they linking to our website?"

Maarja does a quick Google advanced-search for the mention of The Naturalist's website domain name appearing on pages at uibapc.org. A page comes up with the heading "Welcome to the GOP: God's Opinion Page." She reads aloud:

"We have heard of a visitor to our community who may be better known to the outside world than in our own. By nature we are people

who make visitors feel welcome, and help them adjust to their new lives. Let us keep in mind Hebrews 13:2: 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'

"This visitor speaks to the world through a website we have visited. Most of it is a delightful and informative account of the world of nature, with descriptions of plants and animals the visitor has encountered and photographed while traveling in many parts of the world. Also there is one page the title of which caught our eye. It was: 'The Six Miracles of Nature.' And of course, when it comes to miracles, that's getting into our field. For in 1 Chronicles 16:12 we read, 'Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced'"

"On this webpage this world-traveling visitor to our little community surveys the entire history of the universe, and comes up with this observation: That during the universe's history six miracles have taken place."

"This is well and good, but something about it troubles us. While relating the entire history of the universe, the visitor never once mentions Jesus, or even Our Father who art in Heaven."

"Our community welcomes this visitor, in accordance with Hebrews 13:2. And yet, how does one receive someone who claims to know the universe's miracles, but fails to acknowledge the source and meaning of it all? Perhaps the visitor can teach us much about the outside world, but also maybe we have a few bits of wisdom to offer him in exchange."

"I invite you to see for yourself this visitor's words, and on our Facebook page, God's Opinion Page, I invite you to share your thoughts about the matter. The visitor's 'Six Miracles of Nature' page is at... "

Pecan Shortbread Cookies

Doddie Gross gets excited easily, and when she's excited she eats cookies. She's at her desk at the *Uvalde Republican* with an open package of Sandies Pecan Shortbread cookies beside her. Brown crumbs speckle her black blouse and keyboard as she types furiously.

"Way you're eating you must have a big story, Doddie."

"Don't start it, Bubba, I got work to do."

"What's it this time?"

"You know how Roger Noffsinger was talking about the ruckus Brother Weisskopf has stirred up on his GOP page, how some folks are getting hysterical about there being a godless heathen in town and others are saying it's kind of nice what that Naturalist is saying, and everyone is fighting, posting tirades on the forum, and getting upset with one another? Well down at the HEB I just bumped into that spacey blond Estonian bombshell Maarja who lives with him and she told me stuff with that dreamy communist accent of hers that I've got to get down before I forget it because it's just too delicious, some of the best stuff this county has seen since the Sheriff ran off with Lula May."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. It's all so fantastic that when you're standing there in front of her with all that blond hair and baby-blue eyes and heaving breasts and sincere looks and weird talk it's like you're in some kind of

seance or a Disney Movie with leprechauns on Mars... I don't know! What she said short-circuited my brain, can't think straight, can't figure out what I heard, have to write it down."

"Like what?"

"Hell, Bubba, about energy and balance, yin and yang, New Age stuff but right here in Uvalde County, Texas, right in front of me in the flour, cornmeal and oatmeal aisle at the HEB, talking about evolving to a higher level, of getting in touch with reality that's inside you if you can learn to see past what you're programmed to see. See? It's all so nutty that I'm not sure I can do anything with it because it'd all sound made-up. And even if I do figure out what to say, do I really want to set things off? From what I hear about what's being said on that forum of Brother Weisskopf's, anything from a lynching to The Rapture is possible, and I gotta figure out how to handle this."

Doddie is hyperventilating. She inhales and holds for a second, pokes two cookies into her mouth and stares at the computer screen.

"Paraphrasing Maarja's pig's-ear English, she says that the Six Miracles of Nature show direction, one miracle after another in an evolving universe, on an evolving Earth, in an evolving biological species, in evolving human mentality, the sequential Miracles being like footsteps along a path. The Creator has provided humans with mind enabling us to recognize that path, see its direction, and harmonize our behaviors to follow that path. Good Lord, see what I mean?"

"She says that The Six Miracles tell us that everything in the Universe is evolving toward ever increasing diversity, ever greater sensitivity, ever purer forms of feeling, of love... Oh, hell, Bubba, it sounded so crazy when she said it with that accent and mixed up word order but now that I've put it in my own words it's starting to make sense in a screwy way, makes my skin tingle, but Brother Weisskopf is right,

there's not a word in there about Jesus. It's like I've been hypnotized or bewitched by that woman. I just don't know who these people are or what they're trying to do but it scares me! This thing is driving me crazy!"

Nothingness

The crash of a gong, one of those gongs used to announce the start of a performance or play of magic, a Pasi gong, crashy timbre, tones and overtones hanging in the west Texas air, blue sky, heat shimmering above dark green scrub in the sun-parched valley. The Naturalist lifts his right eyebrow and crooks his head. He's been looking for interesting cacti.

"Been wondering when you'd return."

"I've never been away, you know."

"Right, I forget. What's the occasion this time?"

"I come with a gift."

The Naturalist looks around to see his visitor but there's no one there.

"Just a voice this time. Don't want to distract from the gift."

"OK, I suppose there's no getting around it. I'm ready."

"A thought out of nowhere:" Gaiacoyote begins: "As the Universe evolves toward Unity, maybe the Creative Impulse encouraging the evolution finds less value in evolving things themselves, than in the sensations the things experience as they evolve."

The Naturalist remains silent.

"Already you've almost come to see that, but have you ever really let it sink in that as such, it explains how it's possible that innocent little kids sometimes suffer horrible deaths? Maybe sentient beings are like the Creator of the Universe's nerve endings. Maybe the Universe with humans as ephemeral manifestations within It knows Herself by means of the sensations all sentient beings everywhere and in all dimensions experience."

Silence

"In a way, humans on Earth have that relationship with their own nerve endings. How would you know where you are, what you're doing, how you're feeling -- all the things that define to yourself who, what and where you are -- without sensations, whether they're "good," "bad" or "neutral," sent to you from your nerve endings?"

More silence

"OK, OK, you have it, but it's important to keep reviewing these basics in preparation for what's to come. So maybe you're ready for this second part of our visit. Look at the Mesquite beside you."

The Naturalist looks. At first he sees no more than the Mesquite's usual low, scraggly form, its grayish-green compound leaves on branching and rebranching stems, leaflets casually tossing in the afternoon breeze, their soft rustling sounds, sun-glints and shadows, odors of juniper and dust, but then the mind is drawn to between narrow furrows of the Mesquite's bark, and then deeper, deep through dead bark into the living cambium layer where currents of sap move through xylem and phloem, and deeper into the sweet phloem sap, deeper still into the sap's microbubbles, too small for surfaces to form between a bubble and the water around it, just evanescent, flowing

packets of near-nothingness amid molecules and atoms of many kinds reacting with other another only through electromagnetic and other kinds of fields and the particles themselves are as relatively distant from one another as stars in outer space, and beyond that the emptiness enlarges indefinitely, until deeper and deeper inside that Mesquite there are only mutually entangling force fields of many kinds, all invisible, nothing at all to touch or hold on to, nothing becoming anything other than nothing, and seeing conclusively the hard meaning of this The Naturalist moans where most people would scream, for this understanding comes too quickly, cuts too deeply, says too much.

"Calm down," advises Gaiacoyote. "You already knew that neutrinos can pass through the whole Earth without touching anything. Didn't that information mean anything to you? Didn't that knowledge at least hint at how things really are?"

The Naturalist barely hears this. The insight is like a high-voltage shock and now he's tingling, struggling for breath, trying to forget what he's seen, and in fact there no longer is emptiness because all around in the shimmering Southwest Texas air there comes dainty Mozart *Flute Concerto in G major*, the flute butterflying amid violins, never soaring, never alighting, circling here and there but never repeating itself, and these notes fill the voids, burst the microbubbles, echoe among Mesquite leaflet mesophyll cells, surge through xylem and phloem and explode into sunlight itself glowing among leaves, sweet, wet sunlight inside trees, sunlight and nothing but sunlight illuminating The Naturalist and the scrub forest and the whole valley and Southwest Texas and the Earth and the Solar System and the Universe...

The gong chimes, and long The Naturalist stands waiting for the last overtones to fade away.

Sit in morning sunlight

In Fred's old pickup truck Maarja and Jose pull up to the trailer, where JoAnn stands next to her black, dusty Hummer H2.

"Well the gods or whoever does this are on our side because I was just getting ready to leave," JoAnn laughs. Her bruises are hardly visible. Green plaid shirt and bluejeans. She drapes her arm around Maarja's shoulder like a close friend and walks with her toward the trailer, helping carry in groceries in plastic bags.

"Maarja, honey, not fifteen minutes ago Doddie Gross of the Uvalde Republican called me saying she'd heard I sometimes visit you and she was asking all kinds of questions about who you and The Naturalist are and what you're doing here, but I wouldn't say a thing to her, told her you all are the finest people I've ever met, and she told me about a local preacher, a Brother Weisskopf, stirring things up with his Facebook page. Well I went online and it's true, half the people in town writing the craziest things, some calling you all atheists and communists, others saying you should be welcomed, others saying you're a danger to the community, it just goes on and on, and I figured I'd better let you know... "

Maarja stands holding bags of cornmeal and flour smiling broadly at JoAnn. She'd understood very little of what JoAnn said, but halfway gets the gist. José looks worried.

"What's behind all this, Maarja?" José asks. "This can be serious. Sometimes I have a hard time just because I'm a little brown Mexican. If people start saying you're atheists and communists, who knows what'll happen."

"All OK," Maarja says with her smile. "Here things no balance, good people sometime get hurt. Now energy flow between all yin and yang around us, now things start even out. Is good."

"What should we do?" JoAnn asks.

"I meditate. Sit in morning sunlight, gather energy, become strong spirit, I, be ready when yin yang energy come near, be ready give help, send heal all place."

Neither José nor JoAnn regard this as a practical response but they can't think of anything better to do.

"My papa back in Chiapas, he talks like that," José says with his usual grin while rolling up the front of his T-shirt so his belly can get air. "I've heard him say that all day the Sun rains energy down onto the Earth, then when night comes and we go to sleep, that energy comes up from the ground, passes along the walls and up the hut's sloped roof where it concentrates at the top and finally leaps out into space. That's when our sleeping selves latch onto the upward flowing energy and our souls get carried far away. We think we're just dreaming but actually we're in those places, in entirely different worlds, sometimes in worlds that are almost like our own, but different is some little way..."

JoAnn looks at José, then at Maarja, disappointed that she's never thought these kinds of thoughts, or talked about energies and balance. But now it seems obvious that energy is flowing everywhere, and that of course for any place, or thing, or community or family or person to function properly, energies must be balanced. But now she feels like she's with two teachers, one carrying inside the wisdom of thousands of years of evolution of indigenous American culture, the other a pure mystic, a profoundly good and innocent person, someone she doesn't understand at all but someone she knows she can utterly trust. Maarja is the sister she never had, the mother she wished she'd

had, the person she would like to be so bad that now she embraces Maarja and pulls her so close that it's as if she wants to pull Maarja inside her, but something is in the way, something that's starting to hurt... "

Through teary eyes JoAnn sees around Maarja's neck a string with an oddly shaped, orangish-brown rock dangling from it. Something about the rock seems familiar, so she rubs her eyes and looks harder.

"A rock turtlehead! Where'd you get that?"

But before Maarja can answer, in JoAnn's head the wondrous compassion she'd felt just moments before mingles with happy feelings associated with turtles since childhood, her turtle pets, the way she used to read Old Turtle to her kids at night, and when she'd do Old Turtle's voice the kids would squeal with delight and then later the whole Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle thing, and when the kids left sometimes she'd drive all the way to the San Antonio Zoo to stand before big turtles, feeling kinship with their slow, ponderous, homely ways, then the famous Thelmaandlouse Two-headed Turtle was born and how she'd wished that right now she could be there looking at Thelmaandlouis with her kids as they'd been when everyone was happy, and now all those feelings seem so honest, so pure, and somehow of the same order as how she'd felt just seconds earlier about Maarja and about the promise of flowing energy and the possibility of some kind of future perfect state of equilibrium and inside JoAnn there arises some kind of soaring affection, of good will, of a nurturing feeling and a need to be nurtured herself, and loved, and she begins crying and patting both Maarja and José on their backs using both hands, and realizing how silly she must look she sobs deeply and barely hobbles into the cab of the black, dusty Hummer H2, where she rolls down the window and calls, "You all make the energy good love!" and when she hears her words she knows how unintelligible and ridiculous they are so she just shakes her head, sobs more and drives away, Maggie running along just behind not

barking but keeping a close eye on the right, rear tire.

Messages from Dung Beetles

"I have to go," María hears Bimisi say on this hot, dusty morning in what someday will be southwestern Texas.

"You're still half dead and you're alive only because I've been bringing you food and you decide you have to go? Bimisi, tell me, where do your thoughts come from, from messages dung beetles write in the dust with their feet?"

"You don't know. I have an important job to do. I can't sit here doing nothing. I can't be babied by a woman when man's work must be done, work sacred to Yushn."

"Ah, Bimisi, I told you that all that is buffalo crap. You let me tell you what the trees and rocks and the river say: They say, 'sit quietly little people, sit in the shade and eat what you can find, and someday you'll be strong enough to move on.' That's what the Earth Herself says, Bimisi, and I ask you what good this Yushn business has done you."

"You don't understand. The night before our camp was attacked, we'd had a meeting. Our shaman told us he sensed a message needing to be delivered. We ate Peyote and the message came, came stronger than I'd ever experienced any message. We heard that we needed to move away from there, head southward. My brother Quanah was chosen to scout the route south. But he needed to wait two days so the signs would be auspicious. Then that night, the night when I lost the horses, Quanah was killed. Now it's my duty to scout the route... "

"Dung beetles in snake crap! Can't you get it through your head that

they're all gone? Everybody killed or made slaves! There's nobody to take a scouting report back to, no one to be lead south along any trail. Bimisi, listen, you just stay there and listen to the wind in the Mesquite, listen to that wind because there's good things said there. The trees and rocks and the river can heal you, give you new strength, and then when you're ready we can go together. I'll help you. We'll find others. I've heard of a group just a few days west of here. We'll find them, join them, and you can become a leader among them, Bimisi, you hear me? But first, just sit here and heal, listen to the wind in the Mesquite. There's the Mother Spirit to be heard, She's in the Earth, and She speaks softly, in many ways, and wind in the Mesquite is one of them. Help me listen to Her, Bimisi, help me... "

Confused

"I really appreciate you all talking with me," Doddie says. She's perched on a wobbly kitchen chair beside the pie-pan Mesquite while The Naturalist and Maarja sit on the ground. There are only two chairs on the premises and Maarja wants to sit on the ground beside The Naturalist.

"Usually when I interview people I have all the questions thought out, but with you all really I don't know where to start," she says, flicking cooky crumbs off her blouse. "Of course, what's at the root of my coming here is the ruckus Brother Weisskopf has stirred up on his GOP webpage, asking people to comment on you all coming here talking about the miracles of nature and the yin and yang of things but never mentioning Jesus. Of course, you're not really preaching anything. You've just put your thoughts on the Internet and don't even tell people to go there. But people do go there and some people get upset. I've gone there and I admit that the thoughts are strange and a little... uncomfortable, because my whole family and all my community

have always been good Christian people, and to us that's spirituality. But you all don't mention Christianity. Well, that wouldn't be so unsettling because there are Jews and Moslems and lots of people who aren't Christians, yet they're good people, and people here understand that, but you all don't mention any faith at all. And when I read your webpage, it all sounds good. So easy and so good, but it's too simple, maybe, too obvious. I think that that's what's stirring up people. People are used to the Word of God being written in a holy book, preached in big churches and doing what preachers say. Maybe what I need to ask you is, "How are we supposed to react to what you're both saying?"

Both The Naturalist and Maarja look as if the question doesn't register. Moments pass.

"One thing is that Maarja and I are on very different paths," The Naturalist finally volunteers. "Her spiritual framework is different from mine. In many ways, her beliefs are opposite to mine. I'm into the moral responsibility thinking humans have to live harmoniously with natural paradigms observable in Nature. Maarja is into energy flow, pyramids, tarot cards and the like. Our answers to you must be very different for any question you ask."

The Naturalist waits a few seconds in case Maarja wants to add something, but she just sits smiling her happy-face smile, sweat glistening on her forehead and in the clearly visible valley between her breasts.

"For my part, I'm not expecting anything," The Naturalist continues. "I began sharing my insights because I felt that certain people might appreciate hearing about them. Maarja put them on the Internet because she likes to post things, and she seems to like what I say about the Six Miracles. Beyond that, there's nothing going on here. I'm wanting nothing, and expecting nothing at all."

The answer doesn't put Doddie at ease. She turns to Maarja with a hopeful frown on her face.

"I come here, sometimes feel no balance in things," Maarja says slowly, struggling with English grammar. "See good people hurt, therefore. Can't balance all energy here and there. But inside me, can make good balance, be strong. Is fact: Where balance, everything all around become balance. I balance me, so help other person, help all town. So, also for me, this: Expect nothing at all. Me I work on. You come need balance, need help with energy, I am here. Only that."

Doddie's face is both a bit grim, but with a touch of softness, the look of a person who sees a baby pup in all innocence joyfully tearing up a favorite pillow. She takes a big breath, turns to The Naturalist, and says with a look on her face suggesting she's sorry that right now she's hitting him, she asks:

"Naturalist, on your webpage you give as an example of something that 'Nature teaches' a reverence for diversity. Well, you know, around here there's always been a little tension between the English and Spanish speakers, the Protestants and the Catholics, but we all get along by just not talking about it. But when you speak of diversity, people think you are talking about it, like poking at a sore. Why are you doing this?"

The Naturalist thinks awhile, his forehead furrowed, before replying.

"There's no doing anything here other than passing on the insight that the Universe's evolution shows direction, and that one direction it shows, especially here on Earth, is the path toward ever greater diversity. Life on Earth began with one species. Now there are millions. I'm too dumb to explain why the Creator has chosen to do this, but just look around at the results of this obsession with diversity, from bees and Mesquites to grains of sand, and just among the oaks within walking distance we have Texas Liveoaks, Texas Red Oaks,

Lacey Oaks, Sandpaper Oaks and Shin Oaks -- all where, really, there doesn't have to be any oaks at all. To me, diversity is here because The Creator wants it. Behaving in ways that reduce diversity, that diminish the Earth's ability to sustain diverse species is, therefore, sinful. I'm using the word 'sinful' the way religious people use it, sin being the act of going against the will of The Creator... "

A pause.

"If you're looking for me to say something provocative, then let me say this: If you accept that The Creator appears to have a passion for diversity and that your personal behavior endangers diversity, then that behavior is 'sinful' in the religious sense. And based on that insight, the following must be true."

The Naturalist holds up one finger and says,

"Wasting electricity, which encourages coal mining that destroys the landscape and pollutes streams, is sinful."

The second finger goes up:

"Unnecessarily using fuel obtained by fracking old oil fields, in the process destroying aquifers that future generations of living things need for living, and further resulting in more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, causing climate change leading to mass extinctions, is sinful."

The third finger goes up:

"Permitting power companies to continue accepting energy produced by nuclear power plants, which produce radioactive waste that stays radioactive for thousands of years, rays of which can jumble genetic code upon which life itself is based, is sinful."

The Naturalist, wondering when Giacoyote will turn up, keeps glancing at Doddie, looking for a bushy tail to snake from between her legs or for sharp teeth and black lips to form on her face, but she remains herself. He listens for gongs and flutes, but there's just wind in the Mesquite tree.

Doddie looks at Maarja, not knowing what to expect.

"In Estonia, I little girl of Soviet time. No religion talk then. Also, I city girl, like trees, birds, but never think much, them. But, Estonia has old wisdom. I learn help friends, use old ways. Cards, pendulum. I read book about energy. I like, believe. Help me understand. I glad help many people understand."

Now Doddie is seeing something. These people are like children who haven't yet learned to think like grown-up people, or maybe they've lost that ability. They're both older than she and they've seen much more of the world than she, but there's something missing in their minds. They must be damaged, people hurt so badly by something that their brains have been short-circuited, like soldiers with post traumatic stress disorder, or sick people with parts of their brains removed.

Understanding this, she's not sure what she needs to do, but she's clear that there's no point in continuing the interview, because, really, there's nothing going on here worth reporting and there's no need to get involved with such childish fantasies as motivate these people.

Understanding that the usual polite making of excuses for ending an interview would be wasted on such socially adrift people, she simply smiles sadly and sagely, thanks The Naturalist and Maarja for their time, gets up and leaves.

Back on Ranch Road 1051 heading south to Uvalde, it feels good not having to make excuses for getting up and leaving such a silly mess.

However, by the time she's on US 83 leading into Uvalde she's thinking about what normally she'd consider her own very rude behavior of simply breaking off an interview and leaving. She grows troubled, and this psychic discomfort confuses her.

Closer to town, passing by huge circular fields of wheat and cotton irrigated with water pumped from the slowly drying-up aquifer that in a few years will leave Uvalde and other places without a local source of drinkable water, it occurs to her that maybe she should ask the fields' owners, people honored as community leaders, if they ever feel bad about using thousand-year-old aquifer water to grow wheat and cotton -- crops that grow in rainier areas without irrigation -- and water that in a few years will be needed for people to drink?

And, what would Jesus think about this kind of irrigation? And, would Jesus bake his cornbread on a solar dish needing to be moved ever so often, or just turn on the gas and contribute his part of the carbon dioxide causing the greenhouse effect, global warming, and all the pain and death to living things global warming is starting to cause? And, why doesn't Brother Sanchez ever bring up questions like this in his sermons?

By the time Doddie pulls into the Uvalde Republican's parking lot she's experiencing the same state of confusion she was in when she left that morning, and feeling that somehow she'd wasted what could have been an important interview.

Preacher Weisskopf

"Hello. Is this The Naturalist? Hello... ?"

"Yes."

"Howdy, Naturalist. This is Brother Weisskopf in Uvalde. I apologize for not coming out to meet you al personally, to make you feel welcome in our community, but I'm awfully busy right now, just accepted the ministry of hosting a weekly interview segment on JCB Radio Network that includes several stations in the Texas Hill Country and a couple of stations over in Louisiana and Mississippi, and that's taking up an awful amount of time, but of course I do it to help people know the will of Jesus, and, well, uh, well, actually that's something I'd like to talk to you about, because, well, I guess you've heard that on our little GOP Webpage, God's Opinion Page, there's been a little discussion going on about your opinions, and I'd say that this has a lot of people thinking about things that need to be thought about, and for that I'd say that your presence here already has been a blessing... You understand me? Uh, you there, Naturalist?"

"Yes."

"So, I'm wondering if Thursday morning I could invite you into town to our studio here and you and I could have a little sit-down and talk about things? Have a taping session to be broadcast on the radio. Be a good way for people to get to know you and your ideas better. Would you be able to do that, sir?"

"I don't want to," The Naturalist says.

"What?"

"I don't want to."

"Well, I mean, you put up a webpage so you must want people to hear about your beliefs, or you wouldn't have put it up. Here I'm giving you the opportunity to speak to thousands of people who are very eager to hear from you. Why, I've already told them that for my first interview I'll

have someone with ideas guaranteed to get people thinking, get discussions going, the way they've been going on there on the GOP."

"My webpage," The Naturalist says, "just passes along an insight I blundered into. People can view the page or not. It's a very simple insight. It's all stated on that page. There's nothing else to say about it."

"Well, I mean, sir, you're stirring things up here, and that's good, and things should be stirred up more. How's it going to seem to people if you're not willing to come out and defend your position?"

"It's not a position and it doesn't need to be defended. I just see something, I feel obligated to describe what I see, and I've done that. I don't need to do or say more."

"Well, Naturalist, sir, I'm not sure how people are going to take this. Listen, can I come out and see you and us talk a little more on this matter? This is important."

"I appreciate your interest but really there is nothing more to say. I want to go now. Please don't call Fred's phone number again asking to talk to me because I don't want him to be bothered. I'm asking Fred to from now on not pass along any phone messages to me. All communication with me should be done via email, and I don't check my email too often. I wish you well with your weekly interview program and I thank you for your welcome to the community. I feel very lucky to be here. Goodbye."

Triangulation

"Bonggg... !"

"I'd expected you during the interview with Doddie."

"Wasn't needed then, things going well, only come when there's a reason," Gaiacoyote says, this time his very proper and educated-sounding English heavily inflected with a Mexican accent, and he's standing there in buckskin and coonskin cap, a Kentucky long rifle leaning against what would be his shoulder if coyotes had shoulders.

"So what's the reason this time?"

"Hard to say. I mean, it's one of those things language has a problem facilitating because adequate verbalized concepts haven't been invented, and even more fundamentally because human brain circuitry hasn't evolved effectively to deal with such thinking processes. So, it's hard to say, but we're going to try anyway. I say 'try' because now we've progressed to the point where our theatrics are becoming 'experimental,' as the literati are wont to say, and experiments by definition deal with the unknown... See what I'm getting at? We're into something here that can only be hinted at from different directions, hoping that the mind or minds involved are quick enough to fill in the gaps, grasp abstractions, get a fix on positions by triangulating between points a little. Well, I'm floundering a bit there but maybe you'll grasp what I'm getting at despite it."

Gaiacoyote, who had been saying all this standing sideways and seemingly speaking toward some point on the horizon, abruptly spins on his heels and looks cocking his head at The Naturalist:

"Eh, hombre, you with me?"

"If I understand this right, you're an illusion generated by my own malfunctioning brain, so I suppose the answer is that in fact you are with me."

"Quite true, quite true, so at least you're paying attention. But, see, the point of what we're doing at this moment is to elevate the association to a higher level, so do listen to this quite closely."

Gaiacoyote with his Kentucky long rifle stands at parade rest, his snout pointed so directly at The Naturalist's face that his own face seems snoutless, almost like a human's, but furry and with pointy ears atop his head. With eyes riveted on The Naturalist's eyes he says:

"This awareness we're participating in is more than just you and your mental aberration, which is me. In your Six Miracles of Nature, you celebrate things happening beyond explanation, things seeming to be carried forward by outside forces, perhaps the Creator. In an earlier talk when I evoked The Unity I spoke of 'a little nudge here, a tiny adjustment there,' and maybe you thought I was exaggerating or speaking in a literary sense, but now I want to emphasize that this nudging and adjusting of tiny details is exactly what we're all about. Exactly as for millennia I nudged and adjusted the turtlehead rock worn around Maarja's neck, now I am nudging and adjusting you like I did that rock. And it's not just you, because, if you recall, we're in an ambiance where 'time is not a sequential thing' and where there are others, maybe even a little fellow with long black hair and a busted thumb holed up with a sharp-tongued woman wearing Maarja's turtle rock around her neck as she de-spines cactus fruit, but also... but also... "

Gaiacoyote gazes into the sky. The sky is flat like a sheet of paper. Gaiacoyote sees through the sheet of paper as you, you person the other side of these words, look down into the flatness of these words, flat on paper or flat on a screen, just flat. You are looking down at Gaiacoyote looking back up at you...

"But also there is a presence beyond us, a presence needed for triangulating an understanding being sought. I mean, here we need to recognize the possibility that there might be triangulation points with

each point occupying its own dimension, and the dimensions according to normal human ways of thinking are not in communication with one another, or maybe they're in contact only through lies and illusion. You and I are one point, I've just set in your mind the notion of the point with the thumb and cactus-fruit people, and, beyond them, there's the third point, which I can't say much about other than that it exists."

As if confronting for the first time the possibility that maybe there's a problem with his own grasp of the situation, a frown of doubt crosses Gaiacoyote's face. He leans his head against the Kentucky long rifle's barrel like Charlie Brown with his head against a wall.

"The idea is that once we have a triangle, we can triangulate, which is a process enabling one to fix his or her relative position, and that works OK on a flat surface, but what if one or more of the points are lies or illusion... ?"

Long pause.

"Bonggg... !"

Gaiacoyote vanishes, leaving behind the unmistakable impression of a comedian who has been precipitously ushered offstage after his routine suddenly and utterly crashed.

Loops and Twists

The night before, they'd lain as always, her back nestled into his chest, his left arm over her side, the hand cupping her right breast. He had told her of the visit, the coonskin cap and rifle, the triangulation, the man with the broken thumb and the woman wearing the turtlehead

rock, and Gaiacoyote's visit having ended with a sense of confusion, or failure. Now Maarja walks along a deer trail between two little hills, trying to figure out what this last visit was all about. She's thinking Estonian to herself but this is the meaning in good English:

"There was a man with a broken thumb and a woman wearing this turtlehead rock... Gaiacoyote always says that time is not sequential, that it loops and twists... Now I'm wearing the rock found by the man I'm with, but who has never said anything about my wearing it, and that man I'm with also somehow is broken, but not in a way as simple as a broken thumb. Those observers who are part of all this... observers maybe seeing me right now, maybe knowing what I'm thinking... "

Maarja looks into the sky as had Gaiacoyote and she wonders who they are and what they mean, why they are needed, and what she should do in response to their being there. She senses their presence, but knows there's no point to speak to them, for as soon as she would think of what to say, already they'd know, through these words. Does it work like that, she wonders?

"The observers beyond the words are too hard to understand, but the woman who wore this rock before me, I feel her presence in this rock, and I have this rock in my hand, and always keep it near my heart. This woman of long ago I think I can communicate with, and maybe she'll help me understand what is going on here, and what I must do."

Closing her eyes, Maarja presses the rock against her forehead, against where her third eye must be, and tries to see with that eye in wavelengths of flowing spiritual energy.

"Who was that woman with this rock and man with a broken thumb... " she asks herself again and again, wordlessly, focusing the question into the rock.

She hears small rocks tumbling down the slope above her, reflexively opens her eyes and looks toward the ridge's crest... the very instant two small, hunched-over human forms looking over their shoulders disappear among drought-stunted, gnarly junipers, retreating beyond the ridge's crest. Or, at least that's what she thinks she sees. She's pretty sure she sees it.

Maarja is overwhelmed by the power of the moment, the vividness with which the two forms appeared exactly here where a Ley Line runs up the valley, beneath a heaven of observers beyond words, and she was even holding this rock which one of the escaping, small people also must have held at another time... Everything coming together in such a rush of energy and revelation that the everyday physical Maarja cannot endure the intensity, and falls onto the ground, hitting her head on a rock, and for awhile Maarja lies unconscious.

White-Painted Woman

"That's alright, Bimisi, at least the packrats will be happy tonight when they are safe and snug in our empty little shelter, at least the crows will have a good laugh when they see how stupidly we leave our protection to go wandering in search of those who probably are worse off than we are. Yes, only the lizards... "

"María... "

"What? Yes, only the lizards will be sorry... "

"María!"

"What? What? The lizards who feast on flies where we go shit, at least they will be sorry... "

"María, look... "

Bimisi leans on María's shoulder as they top the juniper-covered ridge, heading west, hoping to meet those other Apaches María says she's heard of. Bimisi is still weak but now he braces his legs to hold María back as he points downslope. María doesn't see anything and keeps talking, but Bimisi jerks her back and holds his hand over her mouth. He says that down there he sees a white-haired, white-skinned woman. Juniper branches obscure the view so the two travelers bend their bodies one way then another and crane their necks. María says the woman seems to be praying with her hands pressed together at her forehead.

"White-Painted Woman," Bimisi whispers. "White-Painted Woman... "

"Who's that?"

"Spirit. I've heard my grandparents speak of her. Powerful. I don't remember what they said about her. Has to be her."

"None of the white-faces at the mission were ever this white..."

"I don't know what it means. If she wanted to tell us something or do something to us it'd already have happened or at least she'd know we're here and look up at us. Maybe she's just a vision. That's what it must be, just a vision. But I don't know what it means... "

"Let's get back to the shelter and..."

Already Bimisi is turning around, and María follows him. As they rush back down the slope they keep watching over their shoulders. To Bimisi it seems that the very moment they escape out of sight the vision-woman looks up at them, but does nothing.

Deadline to Meet

The Naturalist and Maarja are watching army ants tear a grasshopper apart when a van comes bumping up the trail and stops right beside them. The Naturalist doesn't like people stomping around in the grass killing things so he doesn't look pleased.

"You must be The Naturalist," a woman says sliding from the van's sidedoor, "and you're Maarja. I'm Pooky Sturnbull from KJTP TV... "

Pooky is a tiny, black-haired woman, wiry and with penetrating dark eyes, thin lips and a mouth like a razor's slit. She extends her hand while The Naturalist reads on the van's side KJTP: King Jesus' True Preachings.

"Gracious, Maarja! What happened to your poor eye?"

"Fall, hit rock with head, I."

Pooky glances at The Naturalist accusingly and feels annoyed that no one expresses the excitement due to a TV personality, especially a good Christian one. In fact, suddenly she feels herself in the presence of evil, where a good Christian soldier is needed to find the truth. A TV cameraman steps from the other side of the van and begins filming as yet a second man extends a microphone on a boom toward the group.

"Do you all even know what's going on in the outside world?"

"What go on?" Maarja asks, rubbing the bump on her head, eliciting a grimace from Pooky.

"Why, half of Texas and a quarter of Louisiana and Mississippi are

talking about you!"

"Why?" Maarja asks, suddenly sensing great energies stirring, and thinking that maybe this is the moment all the earlier events were leading up to, the moment when she can publicly facilitate the equilibration of untold numbers of unbalanced situations.

"Well, I suppose you might not really know," Pooky says dryly in fast, metallic tones, her dark eyes fixed squarely on The Naturalist's face, not blinking, boring into what she sees. "Brother Weisskopf, whom surely you all will know of since he's from this area, initiated his much awaited talk program on JCB Radio Network, and for his first interviewee he invited Dr. Percy Steinpuss from the Evangelical University of Abundant Bread to discourse on the subject of 'The Devil Among Us.' The main theme was that nearly always, at least at first, it's very hard to know who's the angel and who's the Devil. The Devil is a fallen angel, after all, so of course the Devil's path and an angel's might coincide to a certain point. Anyway, just to bring up a real-world situation on which Dr. Steinpuss might demonstrate his methods for distinguishing the Devil from an angel, Brother Weisskopf told his audience about you all. About your webpage and your Six Miracles of Nature, and I must say that it was regarded as highly indicative that The Naturalist refused to come discuss his ideas face-to-face with the experts. Dr. Steinpuss then showed everyone how to rationally analyze the situation, how to scientifically distinguish the Devil from an angel, and he invited the public to visit your website, study what you say, take into account your refusal to defend your preachings in public, and then next week there'll be a call-in during which people will decide... well... to what extent the goings-on out here might or might not be the workings of the Devil."

Neither The Naturalist nor Maarja say anything, nor does The Naturalist's face reflect any comprehension or feeling. Maarja beams with the wide-eyed, happy-face she always wears when she doesn't understand most of what's being said.

"So, I've come to see for myself... if I can get you all to comment, and give us some evidence as to the true nature of what's going on here..."

Nothing.

"I mean, will you say something... ?"

"I have nothing to say," The Naturalist says.

"When I little girl, Estonia part of Soviet Union," Maarja begins to everyone's surprise, directing her words directly toward the microphone at the end of the boom above her head. "We not learn about devils and angels, but I read them. I think they interesting idea, help people organize thoughts. Yin and yang more good, more smart, but devil and angel OK. But wrong idea is, something all devil, something all angel. I not understand all you say, but maybe good I say, here Middle Path. Here we want balance."

"Then it's true that you belong to a heathen religion and that you're communists?"

"What 'heathen'?"

"That you're godless people."

"Six Miracle of Nature like sign pointing way Creator go, creating Universe."

"But there's no mention of Jesus."

"No, no mention," Maarja says with her broadest smile into the television camera.

"Let's go boys," Pooky says, clapping together her notebook. "We got a deadline to meet."

Talk Radio

"Well, good, here we have JoAnn on the line from Uvalde County, Texas itself, back in my own home territory in the very heart of where all these unsettling developments are taking place. Hello, JoAnn, go ahead, you're on the air... "

"Hello... ?"

"Good afternoon JoAnn, this is Brother Weisskopf and we're hearing you, what can you tell us about this crisis?"

"Oh, thank you. I'm... well, first of all, there is no crisis. I mean, all this talking about The Naturalist and Maarja being bad people isn't true. I... "

"JoAnn, nobody is saying anybody is bad here. This is important. We're just asking questions, and trying to figure out how to get through this situation in accordance with God's wishes."

"But there is no situation! This is what I'm saying. These are wonderful people, maybe the best people I've ever met in my life!"

"Well, this is so good to hear JoAnn. Please tell us how you came to this conclusion."

"I, uh, well, not even talking about all the wonderful things The Naturalist can tell you about Nature, and show you how beautiful the

world really is... Well, I had problems, family problems, and nobody would help me or even have anything to do with me. You know how these small towns are. But Maarja, she helped me. She's such a... "

"How did she help you, JoAnn?"

"She... She... helped me see the powers that are working in my life, where things were out of balance. She told me that the answers were already inside me, but the cards... I mean... "

"Cards? What cards, JoAnn?"

"Ah, oh. No, the point is, answers were in me and I just had to recognize them, see. You can't know what it means to realize that... I mean, when you're really down and out and your spirit is broken, to find out that deep inside you, things are still in order. There's still something there worth something, you know?"

"This is very interesting, JoAnn, but please tell us more about those cards."

"Well, I mean, you see, all the information you need is already inside you, but sometimes you need help identifying the information, in organizing it. So, it's just a little trick people have been using for centuries to help themselves sort out that information. They're cards where each one has a name and a meaning, and when that card comes up, in your mind, things fall in place. It's amazing. You can be all confused, but then that card makes you think, and suddenly you understand. Maybe even Maarja doesn't know how the card helps. No, she doesn't really know what's going on inside you. She just brings up the cards and tells what they are and what they usually mean, and as one card after another comes, gradually you start understanding, and it's so beautiful."

"JoAnn, do you know what kind of cards these are?"

"Well, uh. They're just cards with symbols on them, cards that have been used for hundreds of years. They... "

"JoAnn, surely Maarja told you what kind of cards they were. If you know, you should tell us, because we need to know more about this process you have been undergoing with Maarja."

"They, well, some people, I guess, they call them Tarot."

"Tarot! I should have guessed! JoAnn, hold on a second... Yes, I just needed to call up a page on the Internet here. Let me read you this. It's Deuteronomy 18:9-12. 'When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.'"

"But... "

"Did you hear that, JoAnn? It is forbidden to practice divination, tell fortune or interpret omens."

"But... "

"And what is more, the basic information our Maarja has given you is patently false, JoAnn. For, it is not true that answers lie within us, JoAnn. JoAnn, have you forgotten the most beautiful verse in the whole Bible, the one verse in which the whole concept of Christianity is fully embodied? 'For God so loved the world,' JoAnn, 'that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not

perish, but have everlasting life.' That's John 3:16, JoAnn. Have you forgotten that? The answers lie not within ourselves, but in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, JoAnn, is the One you should have sought for your problems, not this Maarja with her demonic Tarot cards. JoAnn, what you are telling us is very deeply troubling. Now we know beyond all doubt that we do have among us a dark influence. And now, ladies and gentlemen, while we digest the information that has just come before us, lets listen to this announcement about how you can participate in today's love offering."

"JoAnn, we're off the air now, I'd like to talk more with you, is that possible?"

"... "

"JoAnn, you there?"

"... "

More than Coyote, Less than Yusn

"Yusn, forgive me, Yusn. No sweat lodge, I come impure. No drumbeat, I speak so low, the woman can't hear. No sacred fire and none of the four sacred songs, and none of the elders' prayers, I just come. Just come with Peyote inside my guts. You've seen what's happened, Yusn, and I guess you had something to do with White Painted Woman being there, not saying anything, not doing anything. Yusn, forgive me. Not possible to do this right. But you put the Peyote there before me, so that was saying it's OK that I come, right? Huh, I don't even know why I come. To see it all clearly, maybe, but, nah. What good would it do? Everything lost... Yusn... "

"Nothing lost."

"Eh? Ah. Yusn. You honor me. I'm not used to having you speak with words. Maybe this is the way you speak to fools, but you honor me. Thank you Yusn."

"Not Yusn. Open your eyes."

"No light, but I see you. Only Yusn can do this, but you say you're not Yusn. I am too stupid to understand."

"What do I look like?"

"... "

"Bimisi, tell me what I look like."

"You look like you are half man, half coyote."

"You have not heard of Coyote?"

"Coyote, the Trickster. So Yusn sends the Coyote again?"

"I am more than Coyote, but less than Yusn, and that's why I've come. I need a man pure of heart, one whose mind stays fixed on Yusn. I need to know what such a man thinks when the distractions of family, community and society are torn away. You understand, Bimisi? No, of course not. Well, just tell me. Tell me this, Bimisi: You know that there is you, and you know that there is the world around you, and that there is the spiritual world, so, tell me: Bimisi, what world do I belong to?"

"Coyote. Coyote saying you're more than Coyote but less than Yusn. You come when my belly is full of Peyote. And you ask me this?"

"Tell me, Bimisi. Don't think too much about it. Just say what comes to your mind first, not thinking about it."

"Coyote is the Trickster. That's what my mother told me, and her mother told her. Coyote isn't really of this world, nor of the world of Yusn. All that's left is what's not supposed to be there. And what's not supposed to be there, but is there, is the trick, and Coyote is he Trickster. Is that what you want me to say? You ask me what world you come from so I tell you, the Trick World, and now that I'm saying it, and I guess it's the Peyote saying it, it sort of makes sense."

"Bimisi... "

"Before the trick, you expect something to happen the normal way, but it doesn't, something else happens, and that's the trick. I see it all so clearly. Blessed Peyote, blessed Peyote, blessed Peyote. But tell me, Coyote more than Coyote but less than Yusn, why didn't you know that? My mother told me. Didn't your mother ever tell you?"

"Mother... ?"

"Didn't you have a mother?"

"Ha ha ha! I've been around ever since you humans got brains enough to hallucinate, and you ask me if I have a mother? Ha! What you said gets me thinking though, thinking about how this whole moment is structured, and it's all more twisty than I'd imagined... "

"I don't understand anything you say, so if you are planning a trick you need to clarify yourself so I'll at least know when the trick comes. Ah, how I think and speak! What a wonder this Peyote is. But, anyway, Coyote, if you're motherless, where did you come from?"

"Look, man, the notion of 'coming from' roots in the assumption that time is something straight, and it's not. This whole question of what

mothered me is therefore a waste of time."

"I understand less and less. Yet, somehow it seems right that a trick doesn't need a mother, it just is, and I think that that's the wisdom Peyote gives me. But what's crooked here is that the Trickster wonders about this matter instead of just pulling off a good trick. Is there something wrong with you Coyote, so wrong that you've lost your way, lost your bag of tricks somewhere? Ah, dear Coyote, dear Coyote. The Peyote vanishes in my poor stomach. I can feel it, feel the emptiness returning. That means that you are about to disappear. Eh, Coyote, hear this: I've been so good as to pass on the message to you from Peyote, so now here's my question to you, Big Brother: Coyote, What am I to do? Coyote, don't let me down, don't leave me here like this. Coyote, what am I to do? Coyote...! Coyote... ? Eh, Coyote, where'd you go? Coyote... !"

Find Balance, Gather Energy, Be Ready

Lying in the darkness, her back into his front, his left arm over her side, her right breast cupped in his hand, she says:

"The website, every day, 50,000, 100,000 visitors. What do, us?"

"Nothing."

"My insight, some persons mix up ideas on pages, not understand, not like."

"Probably."

"Some persons not like us."

"Yep."

Long silence.

"You right. Job for us, find balance, gather energy, be ready."

"Yep."

The Biker

A man with a shaved head, maybe in his late 50s, even in this heat wearing a black leather jacket, and in his right earlobe a gold ring, bumps up the trail on a motorcycle. He pulls up next to our people squatting beside the afternoon campfire and flicks off his engine.

"I'm Eric Merida and I guess you're The Naturalist and you're Maarja."

"Howdy."

"Hi."

"You make it hard for a man to find you. I've come a long way. Mind if we go inside to talk?"

"Too hot in there. You can sit here beside us."

"You don't have air conditioning?"

"The air seems OK as it is."

The man laughs in a way that says it's all classic, that these people are following their scripts, and he's enjoying the whole thing.

"What you're trying to do is great, people! That Six Miracles of Nature business is beautiful, a whole new way to put a finger in the eye of the world's Bible thumpers."

"Not trying to do anything," The Naturalist replies. "Here at the end of my life I just finally got something straight in my mind, so I'm sharing the insight with anyone who wants it. Don't want to put my finger into anybody's eye."

"Ha ha ha! Well, you can come at it anyway you like, but in the end what we have here is a fine way to get more people thinking for themselves. Those Six Miracles sum up the whole Universe and they do it without mentioning Jesus, Mohammad, Abraham or any of those people. So, here's the deal..."

"Don't want any deal."

"By extraordinary coincidence, next month several thousand of the most enlightened and engaged members of UANA -- United Atheists of North America -- are meeting just down the road in San Antonio, and we'd like for you to come and talk to us about the Six Miracles."

"Thank you for the offer but I don't want to."

"What... ? Why, this is your chance to go big-time with this Six Miracles thing, not just stir up a few thousand hicks in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi listening to that Weisskopf show. We'll have reporters from all the big news outlets there, have coast-to-coast coverage, and all our top stars will be onstage. This is going to be big, and we're offering you the chance to get out there and tell the whole world about the Six Miracles of Nature."

"I don't think of myself as an atheist, a theist or anything else. It doesn't really matter whether people get excited about the Six

Miracles of Nature. I just felt morally obligated to make the concept available."

"Look, Naturalist, don't you think the world would be a better place if more people followed the teachings of the Six Miracles of Nature?"

"The Earth's biosphere is collapsing. Soon social infrastructure will break down, the vast majority of humanity will die in wars, famines and plagues, and every kind of religious belief will come into being, as they always do when human groups are under stress. Soon what's left of humanity will be focused on surviving day-to-day and building social structures from scratch. There'll be no memory of anything we do now. I feel like my time is best spent here watching birds, nibbling cornbread and massaging Maarja's sore hip joint when she needs it."

Eric gives Maarja in her short-shorts and low-cut T-shirt a good look as he digests what's been said, then finally smiles.

"I can live with that," he says. "Maybe you're of more use to us as the sage speaking profound truths in the desert, instead of just one more huckster on the podium. Yeah, man, that's good. Everything turning out just fine."

Eric stands up, straps on his helmet, and glances one more time at Maarja's cleavage. In an ironic, slightly condescending manner he asks:

"Can the Master give me one last word to meditate on as I head back to corrupt old civilization?"

"Sure can."

"What's that?"

"Placebo!" The Naturalist and Maarja say at the same time, causing

Maarja to giggle and The Naturalist to glance at her with a raised eyebrow.

Without asking for clarification, Eric Merida gives his engine a kick-start and heads back down the grass trail, Maggie chasing along behind not barking but watching closely the rear wheel.

Peyote in Moonlight

Maggie barking in the night, the slammed pickup-truck door, the shadow at the open screen door.

"Who's that?" The Naturalist calls, pulling on his shorts.

There's no answer but the silhouette against the moonlit background is short and fat, with round little ears poking straight from the head.

"That you José?"

No answer, but it's clear that it's José.

"You drunk?"

"I... Listen... I... "

"What do you need José? You in trouble?"

"I... You know... my friend Manuel, Garciasville down in the Valley... on a hillside, found this... little patch of Peyote... He brought me some. Always wanted... You know? Chewed a few buttons... Got sick. Now it's like this. Like this... "

"You still sick, need help?"

"I'm OK. But things are so... Things hard... just sitting there... heavy...
"

"Take it easy, José. No problem here. This is how it works. You're just seeing things that can be a little scary. It'll wear off in a few hours. Just sit down and let it happen. Don't worry."

"Things hard... The Moon... Can't hardly walk through what's it's doing... Can't hardly bear to look at things..."

"Just sit down and close your eyes. Peyote needs you to be with somebody to guide you, so when you do it like this, it can be rough. But it's not going to hurt you. Just sit down and close your eyes. Think about back home in Chiapas, let the Peyote take you there."

"Not home... Peyote sends me... here. Can't get out of my head... The moonlight... Had to come here... the turtlehead... "

"My rock?" asks Maarja who has come up behind The Naturalist with a towel around her.

"Rock turtlehead... can't get it out of my head... a circle... me, you and Maarja, the turtlehead... and something else... can't stop thinking... what's the something else... the circle, round and round... always coming to the something else... terrible... drowning in moonlight... falling into something not there... round and round and getting stuck in the something else and drowning there, drowning on moonlight... !"

"Oi!" Maarja's towel has dropped and she's standing there looking at the turtlehead on her necklace. She can't see it but she's running her fingers over and over it.

"Turtlehead feel live!" she whispers with a trembling voice. For a

second The Naturalist sees himself standing between a man drowning on moonlight and a naked woman afraid her rock is coming to life, and he himself hosting a mental aberration known as Gaiacoyote, and caught between a burst of laughter and the notion that he should be doing or saying something, he ends up doing nothing, just watches Maarja finger her turtlehead rock as José slumps into a cross-legged position on the ground outside the trailer holding his face in his hands, covering his eyes.

"Rock sing! Rock sing us all together. Energy circle round and round, in, out, in, out... Rock sing the something other... out there... words other side... man and woman like us but look like José persons... all in circle... "

The Naturalist thinks that maybe Gaiacoyote is experimenting with his triangulations, trying to get answers by stirring things up, but what do you do in this kind of situation? He does nothing.

And nothing more happens.

A few minutes later Maarja returns to bed. José doesn't move from his position just outside the door. The Naturalist stands there a long time, maybe an hour, trying to figure things out, and when nothing changes he also returns to bed and lies down. Maarja seems to be asleep. A little snore comes from José. For another hour The Naturalist lies there wondering, and then he sleeps, too.

What are We to Think?

Ho! You! "The other side of these words," as we're saying here...

Well, sorry, but I need your attention, and this kind of talking has to be

done a certain way. I mean, there's no point to this conversation if we're going to use the same masks and codes people normally do... OK, "masks," alluding to the fact that during conversations people speak different ways to different people, so upon beginning any talk a speaker puts on a certain "mask" and speaks from that assumed identity, see? And "codes," reminding us that words really only mean what the listener thinks they mean, and often that doesn't coincide with the speaker's definition and how others might define the word, so this whole conversation business is tricky and only an approximate and inefficient manner of transferring thoughts between brains. In "real life," body language and context help define words, you know, but here we don't have that, and the context is me addressing you from here "the other side of the words.... "

So, let's be clear that I who speak to you from this other side of something am that entity whom so far we've identified as Gaiacoyote, half human, half Coyote. And, by the way, we never did resolve that matter as to whether I might be male or female. In fact, to help set the tone for this conversation, let me say that this omission concerning my sexual persuasion hasn't just been sloppy word-crafting. It was mentioned earlier to start flexing your brain, readying it for otherworldly insights. Nothing to it other than that. Illusions don't have gender.

Anyway, see, the present challenge is that your thinking and understanding is rooted in the assumption that time is sequential, that things begin and progress or "blossom" as we so poetically say here from time to time, but now we need to face more directly the proposition that time is not like a straight line. So, if it's not like that, what it is?

OK, here it's not really necessary to answer that question, for one thing because it can't be answered, not with your brain circuitry and programming, anyway. I'm just massaging your brain, still, hoping to get you ready for what's to come.

OK, now we have to address this matter: The entity we are recognizing as Gaiacoyote has been fairly securely identified as an illusion of The Naturalist's malfunctioning brain, so how is that I'm here addressing you with The Naturalist nowhere around?

Well, hee hee hee, have you really come to believe that The Naturalist really exists? Ha ha ha! He's here among the words, but you're there... get it?

But, see, maybe you also recognize that this Six Miracles of Nature business is something real, at least in certain limited contexts. Maybe you even see that it's a profound truth that somehow throughout all of humanity's history the Six Miracles concept, or something like, has been ignored and effectively unidentified, despite it standing before the eyes of billions of earlier humans. Are you beginning to glimpse the possibilities of the mental dynamic we're working toward here, the tricky connection between lies and illusion, and "real" things that when you really see them, turn out as intangible, inconceivable and illusionary as known lies and illusions? And vice versa?

But, the Six Miracles of Nature business is not the topic that brings me here.

So, here's the deal: I'm about to dissolve once again, but before I do I'd like for you to think about something awhile, and we'll take up the issue later. Or maybe we already did that. Hard to say.

Specifically -- or at least as specifically as these words and your brain circuitry can manage in our non-sequential time system where certain things are out of balance but energy of a Maarja kind flows, and where there's yin and yang, and mythologies and histories, and religions and spirituality, and Mesquite scrub with introduced Axis Deer in places like the Texas Hill Country... all this evolving in an ecosystem-like theater... there's that, there's me, there's you there "beyond the

words... " and, what exactly have I left out here?

That's the question: What have I left out in all those words we just went through?

Well, that's not the question. That's the question asked when we want to avoid the real question. Let me make another stab at it:

Well, to be honest we have to be crass. The question is, Why has the Creator been indulging in all these theatrics? In all this Universe-evolving business, what's in it for Her?

And, could it be that the Creator truly wants or, better yet, actually needs something to come of all this? Maybe even needs us... needs us in all this mishmash of evolving stuff?

What about the idea that we're like nerve endings for the Creator? Maybe She can't know what She is or what She's doing without things being born, living, crashing into one another, dying, suffering, hallucinating, dreaming, imagining, getting all confused, having orgasms and getting depressed, doing all that in endless, seemingly pointless cycles? If we're nerve endings of a self-absorbed, self-gratifying One Thing, wouldn't that explain why innocent little kids get run over by drunks?

Let me put it like this: Maybe the reason the Creator has been evolving the Universe toward beings with feelings in a system where there's bound to be lots of hurt feelings is that feelings are basically what the Creator is made of, and the Creator wants to be more, and more, or something like that. See?

Maybe when little kids get run over by drunks it's because when people feel the tragedy, the Creator experiences the feeling and it's like in the old Johnny Cash song where he sings " I hurt myself today to see if I still feel... " Maybe from our perspective the Creator is

screwed up enough that She needs this hurt as well as all other feelings, just to know how She's doing... ?

Now let me ask you: Just what are we to think and do about a Creator who treats us like that, if that's so?

...

OK, here's the gong:

Bongggg!...

Getting Famous

On Fred's front porch The Naturalist is two steps up an aluminum stepladder painting the ceiling white, the sunburned red skin of his mostly bald head spattered with paint, paint caking his gray beard, paint running down his brush's handle to his elbow. Fred steps from his door, sees the mess and chuckles, having days earlier figured out that The Naturalist isn't a particularly good house painter.

"Doddie Gross down at the Uvalde Republican tells me you all really are getting famous," Fred says, sitting in the swing with one leg sprawled on the seat beside him and the other on the floor pushing him back and forth."

"How's that?"

"She says a news outfit in New York called asking what she knew about you and Maarja. Said they'd gotten a news release from an atheist TV news channel announcing a big convention in San Antonio next month. That was enough of an eye opener itself, having a bunch

of atheists meeting in the Bible Belt, but then they read that the convention planned to introduce your Six Miracles of Nature. They're hyping it as a new insight promoting ethical living in a world where religions mostly cause wars and other troubles. Said you're a Nature-guru out in the wilderness living with a spiritualist who understands the Universe's flow of energy. You tell them all that?"

"Told the fellow who came out here that I didn't want to have anything to do with his meeting. I'm conscious that you don't want to turn this into a destination for protesters and religious fanatics. Didn't tell him anything."

"Well I'm not accusing you of anything, Naturalist. I think it's kind of fun. You sure have Doddie in a fluster. I was told she's gained ten pounds since she met you all, can't stop hyperventilating about having such a big story in town and not being able to figure out how to deal with it, just sits looking at her computer screen poking chocolate chip cookies into her face."

"Maarja tells me my web server has increased my hosting fee because of the website's increased traffic. Some days it gets over a million hits."

"Good God, man, you could be making a pile of dough with that kind of audience, giving talks or something, maybe selling signed copies of little booklets outlining the Six Miracles, instead of doing stuff like painting my porch."

"Don't want to fool with it. I passed along my insight and that's all I want to do. Painting porches is as good a way as any to pass the time."

"Over a million hits a day... "

Fred pulls out his pocket calculator and starts hitting keys.

"If just one million people each gave us one penny, that'd be \$10,000. Do that 20 days in a month, we'd have \$200,000. Keep it up for a year and we'd have \$2,400,000... And the way this thing is growing that could be just a drop in the bucket... "

"We? You want to get into the Six Miracles business?"

"Well, you know I'm about ready to leave all this money-making behind, but I've always dreamed of having a completely different kind of idea, something just the opposite of selling furniture, some kind of idea I could run with and make something big out of. When you talk about the eyeballs of millions people... well, I find that very exciting."

"If you can figure out a way to make money out of it, you're welcome to try. It's in the public domain, meant to be for everyone, and that includes you."

"Naturalist," Fred says turning in his swing so both feet are planted on the floor, "do you have any ideas, even a hint of an idea of something I could do with this?"

The Naturalist paints his ceiling, not saying anything for a couple of minutes.

"I knew a lady out in the Sierra Nevadas in California," The Naturalist recalls. "She was an herbalist. Started her own religion based on herbalism. Each weekend folks came up from San Francisco, Sacramento and beyond to hang out in her yurts and hear her sermons on the goodness of herbs, and they paid handsomely for the experience. She got tax-exempt status from the government. She didn't get rich, but her church paid her to be a priestess for the religion and took care of her maintenance and preaching expenses."

Fred stands next to The Naturalist looking up at the bald and paint-

splattered head as The Naturalist continues:

"You could declare the unsold part of your development here sacred ground for acolytes of the Religion of the Six Miracles of Nature."

Love for A Feather

José and The Naturalist are going to town in Fred's old pickup truck. For a man usually wearing a sloppy, good-natured smile, José looks grim today. Usually as he drives this hot road he airs his Buddha-stomach beneath a pulled-up T-shirt, constantly rubbing it like a favorite old dog, but now his hands grip firmly the steering wheel and he stares straight down the road.

"I thought the Peyote might take me back to Chiapas, you know? I thought maybe I'd see my family, maybe even family before I came along, family way back, the old days when we were building pyramids and knew how to live among the spirits. I've read books about Peyote, you know, how people see things, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but they see things. I thought I'd see toucans high in *Chicozapote* trees, and generations and generations of *abuelas* grinding *masa* and patting out tortillas in smoky little huts with chickens and turkeys running around, and maybe there'd be really big snakes, singing snakes, snakes that could tell me things, and I was ready for all that. I was ready for anything a snake could tell me, a dead *abuelo* could tell me... "

José pauses, thinking maybe The Naturalist will say something, but he doesn't, so they just drive down the road silently awhile.

"I wasn't ready for what I saw."

José waits for The Naturalist to ask what he saw but then he remembers that The Naturalist isn't going to ask anything so he continues.

"What I saw was what I always see. Just that somehow it was like seeing it for the first time... No, not that. It was like seeing something absolutely the way it really is, you know? Seeing the absolute hardness of it. There was a turkey feather on the ground outside the door. I sat there looking at that feather in the moonlight, and somehow it became perfectly clear that that feather had to weigh as much as the whole Earth. No, I knew I could pick it up as easily as ever, so that's not true. But it's true that it seemed completely unmovable. Maybe because I had absolutely no desire to move it. The whole idea was that that feather was really lying there and that my reason for being there was just to behold it and let it alone. To be blown away by the fact that that feather was so perfectly... itself. That feather was so much a feather that I couldn't hardly bear it. I loved that feather, and wanted nothing else on Earth more than for that feather just to keep lying there, being itself. I mean, it was sort of sacred... "

José realizes that he's saying something beyond what he'd thought, deeper than he thought he could be deep. Then he thinks that maybe this was the gift of the Peyote, that he'd been wrong to expect visions and to see things with form, that maybe the gift of Peyote is to see things in a timeless way, see what's infinite in them, but he can't articulate this insight. Minutes pass.

"It's true," The Naturalist finally says, surprising José by saying anything at all. "You saw deeply. That's the Peyote's gift. You saw that not only are things exactly what they are, but also that what things are is infinitely meaningful. Infinitely beautiful. Infinitely deserving of reverence."

"So what's the point of it all? What am I supposed to do with what I saw, Naturalist?"

"Who knows? Sometimes I've seen deeply, not with drugs but just by paying attention to things. What interests me is that when I'm in that highly receptive state, I feel the same as you describe, and I feel the same whether I'm looking at a feather, a rock, or whatever. Maybe it's because when we're in that deep-feeling state it's always the same part of the brain reacting the same way, so of course we'd feel the same whether we're looking at a feather or a rock. But another thought is that maybe the different things we're looking at create the same feeling in us because in all of them we're seeing the same thing. Everything, just One Thing."

A few minutes pass with hot, dry wind streaming through the pickup truck's windows, the old truck variously rattling and squeaking as they roll down potholed, winding Ranch Road 1051.

"Maybe another way of saying it is that all us feathers, rocks, Mesquite trees, the Moon in the sky, you and me... Maybe we're The Unity's thoughts... or even The Unity's hallucinations."

Tarot of the Cat People

The black, dusty Hummer H2 parked outside the trailer, JoAnn now in an old T-shirt and Wal-Mart shorts, talking so fast that Maarja only registers a little of what's being said.

"So, I went onto the Internet and studied all about Tarot Cards, Maarja. Did you know that the rise of Tarot coincides with the spread of the Inquisition during the 1100s, when the Church was killing and torturing people they thought weren't good Christians? But people didn't really start thinking of the cards as mystical or magical until the late 1700s, when books were written saying things that later were

proven wrong or just inventions of the writers. But by then people already had gotten excited about them, and interest in them just grew, and over time all kinds of Tarot decks were created with all manners of interpreting them. There's even a 'Tarot of the Cat People,' with cats on every card... "

JoAnn looks at Maarja to see if what she's saying is sinking in, and Maarja's blank look possibly indicates that it is.

"So, what I'm saying is, I know you said from the beginning that the cards don't supply us the answers, that they just help us find answers already inside us, but now that I know the history of Tarot and what a laugh all the different decks are and how they're interpreted, I got to asking myself why I needed all that in order to find answers that were, exactly as you always said, always inside myself... "

Maarja, trying to remember what "decks" are, looks fixedly into JoAnn's eyes and JoAnn understands this as an urging to continue.

"I mean, I might as well look at the stars and let the patterns there stir up associations, evoke new thoughts that otherwise wouldn't have risen to the surface. Or walk in the woods, the same thing there. And in fact everything that happens everywhere all the time... and this is what I'm getting at... everything if you're paying attention and thinking can call forth these answers that are always inside you, maybe hidden, maybe just waiting for some kind of little catalyst to bring them to the surface... "

"Catalyst?," Maarja wonders. "*Katalüsaator* maybe? What... ?"

"So, you see Maarja? You see what a liberating thing this is for me? I was such a mess when I started seeing you but you've guided me into this understanding, let me discover for myself that the answers really are inside myself! I can't believe how subtly you did it, how artfully! But for the first time in so many, many years, I'm feeling strong again,

feeling that I'm in control of my own life and that so much is possible."

Maarja is only dimly aware of the conversation's thread but she sees JoAnn's enthusiasm and understands that things are going well for her and that she is grateful for her help, so Maarja smiles her most radiant smiley-face smile but says nothing.

"And it's the same with the pendulum. What a laugh! Now I understand that you showed me the pendulum just to give me courage, and it worked! I really went out with my pendulum, feeling like it was leading and protecting me, but now I understand that I could have done the same thing without a pendulum. I just needed to get out and start moving!"

"Pendulum knows," Maarja finally is able to say. "Pendulum powerful."

JoAnn hears but the meaning of the words doesn't register. She assumes something deep is being said but really it's not important to dwell on the matter, other things needing to be said.

"And those Ley Lines! By the time I got around to studying them I was already figuring out what was going on. I mean, you find shiny places here, shadowy places there, something too regular or too irregular here, something the wrong color or shape there, and then when you see enough of them, of course you can put them together into a line! When you first told me, I actually went out looking for them and I found them, too, but then when I started coming to my senses I went back to the same places, looked around, and almost fell on the ground laughing at myself. Laughing at myself, Maarja. You know, for twenty years I haven't been able to laugh at myself, and you helped me do that!"

Maarja is very confused, can't fit all the scraps of speech she's understood into the narrative she thinks is being spoken. She keeps beaming her smiley-face smile and says...

"Ley Lines very good, show power spots."

JoAnn looks into Maarja's eyes, then at her mouth, then her eyes. A certain thought is forming so quickly that she is stunned into silence.

"The turtlehead rock... " JoAnn says, not as a question, though that's what it is.

Maarja nods enthusiastically, glad the conversation is returning to something she understands.

"Turtlehead rock much power. Hold here, me, see past, future."

JoAnn looks as if she has been shot but tries to keep smiling. Tears form in her eyes. Maarja senses a complete change in her mood, but she's seen JoAnn's erratic behavior before so this is no surprise.

JoAnn hugs Maarja, rubbing her back as she used to rub her kids' backs when she was feeling sorry for them, wanting them to know how much she loved them even though they were disappointing her.

"Thank you, Maarja," she says, turning to go. "You are a wonderful friend, but I must go now."

"Kingfisher-Misses-His-Fish... "

"Why are you dragging me into the heat and thorns, crazy man? Our little overhang may be so small a piss-ant can't turn around in it but at least it's shady and cool, where we can think straight. Why do we have to... "

"Quite, woman, for the sake of Yushn, just honor this moment with silence!"

"Silence? This heat and this glare, and I'm so hungry and tired my poor head roars with winds and waterfalls and.... "

"Stop it! The time has come!"

"Time come... ?"

"That hill," Bimisi says, his voice august with reverence, his hand motioning toward a barren, white, limestone hill with only a few mostly-dead junipers on it.

"By the grace of Yushn, I name you 'Dead-Juniper-Hill-beside-River... '"

María is speechless. She looks back and forth between the hill and Bimisi and then she starts laughing, and the laughter builds and then degenerates into coughing, wheezing, eye-tearing and nose running. When she's come to herself she looks at Bimisi, this time with admiration, even awe in her face.

"It's good, Bimisi," she says, her voice hoarse from coughing and choking. "The laughing... I wasn't laughing at you. I was laughing from surprise, and then I was laughing to think that two wretched souls like ourselves could take it upon themselves to go giving names, and then I felt myself wanting to cry and that made me laugh more, and in the end I really don't know whether I was laughing or crying. But, I tell you now, it's good. I see it. I see it. Now that that hill has a good Apache name, when we see it, we can greet it by its name, and then maybe we'll feel less like motherless coyotes. My grandfather always said that the land of our ancestors to the north had given us meaning when we were there, taught us what was right and wrong, and when we came into this land we couldn't understand its teachings. That's why we lost our way, so it's easy for the white faces to break our spirit,

make us their slaves and kill us... "

Bimisi turns toward the river, for the first time since the massacre his face showing something other than confusion and grief. At that very moment a green kingfisher plunges into the water causing a great silvery splash, then rises from the water having caught nothing, in midair shakes sparkling waterdrops from his body, and flies on down the river. Bimisi raises his arm toward the river and speaks:

"Kingfisher-Misses-His-Fish... "

"Good, good, Bimisi. Already this river is speaking to me, saying things I understand very well. It tells me about the pain of a lost meal and reminds me how nice it'd be to just get up, shake myself off and fly away, and now I'll always think that when I pass by this river... "

Bimisi opens his arms widely, his gaze taking in the whole valley of Kingfisher-Misses-His-Fish River and in a voice hinting of real majesty announces:

"Valley-of-Remembering-How-to-Sing-One's-Song!"

María falls to her feet weeping, and Bimisi kneels, putting his arm around her, and also cries.

United Atheists of North America

Doddie Gross, cookie-eating reporter for the *Uvalde Republican*, JoAnn who no longer believes in Tarot cards, and José the hired man from Chiapas, all lean against big pillows on JoAnn's living room floor, each nursing a third or fourth beer. They're watching the United Atheists of North America Convention in San Antonio. The TV screen

shows shaved-headed Eric Merida, with stage lights glinting off the ring in his left ear, speaking into the cameras with a dazzling smile.

"All these years," he's saying, "the most ridiculous but the hardest to refute charge made against our great community of free-thinking, progressive-behaving, humanity-loving atheists has been that without religion there is no basis for morality and ethical living. Therefore, religious people have told us, we atheists are doomed to live unstructured, degenerate lives. We have replied that as rational thinkers with minds unclouded by primitive and downright silly religious dogmas we could see more clearly than any religious person the advantages of sober living, of hard work, of building healthy, happy families and contributing to our communities. Unfortunately, to the religious mind, unfamiliar with rational, critical thought, such reasoning has been indigestible. My friends, the religious mind needs a simple structure upon which to hang its thoughts. Abstract reasoning is simply beyond it."

Giggles of agreement ripple throughout the vast audience.

"But, as of today, not only do we have rational thought with which to make our case for atheism, but also we have a simple mental structure upon which to array our arguments for moral principles in a beautiful, majestically functioning, godless Universe. My friends, The Six Miracles of Nature concept is exactly what we need to attract the attention of the world's most perceptive young people, even those with minds muddled by religion."

Lengthy applause.

"My friends, the Six Miracles of Nature concept enables us all to think more clearly about the splendor, majesty and mystery of the Universe, from the Big Bang to Bach, Shakespeare and Einstein, and to a walk in the forest. The Six Miracles concept helps us focus on the vivid paradigm of the Universe evolving from the first handful of atoms and

subatomic particles to the present evolving, unspeakably complex, interconnected and mystifying natural world around us. And the direction of the evolution producing all this is clear: The evolution of the Universe is from small to great, from simple to complex, from dead to alive, from non-thinking to thinking, from sterile, gene-dictated, instinctual thought to empathetic feeling and doing... "

Lengthy applause.

"Let me say it again: Because the Universe's evolution is directional, to the open mind it points toward what the cornerstones of an enlightened society's morality and ethical behavior should be: Cornerstones we can all see expressed in the evolution of the Universe itself, cornerstones such as sustainability, hard work to maintain interconnectedness, reverence for diversity, empathy among all living things... My friends, are these principles worthy of serving as cornerstones of an enlightened, atheist system of morality and ethical behavior?"

"Yes, yes," the thousands reply.

"And all these beautiful, loving teachings are absolutely without reference to Jesus or The Virgin. Or Mohammed. Or Abraham or Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, or even Apollo, Osiris, Mami Wata, Amaterasu, Baldaeg or Babalu Aye... !"

The crowd screams its approval, applauds and stomps feet, reveling in the bald man's theatrics.

"Better than the Bible, which in Leviticus 25:44-46 sets down the rules whereby we may purchase and sell slaves, including children, the Six Miracles of Nature tells us that the Flow of the Universe is toward diverse, mutually nurturing communities... "

Thousands in the audience cheer as they see the potential of it all.

"The world of Islam teaches that men are the 'maintainers' of women and that a man may beat his wife, as set out in Qur'an 4:34, but the Six Miracles of Nature suggest nothing so heartless or hurtful. The Six Miracles of Nature teaches that the Universe evolves toward thinking, feeling, empathetic life. My friends, is it not just like a religion to say that a man shall beat his wife? Is not the Six Miracles of Nature concept a more worthy guide to ethical living?"

The audience hall explodes with agreement.

"The Jews' Devarim 22:23-24 instructs that if a man has sex with a woman engaged to another man, both parties shall be stoned to death. In a similar vein, Vayikra 20:27 says that necromancers and wizards similarly shall be stoned to death. My friends, I say this to you: That the Six Miracles of Nature says, 'You humans who are the peak of Earthly evolution, you have brains with which to think, to feel, to be inspired, to exult in art, to feel compassion, empathy and love. Within the whole framework of the Six Miracles of Nature, never is there a single mention of one human having the right to stone to death another. And such silly subjects as necromancy and wizardry just don't come up!"

As Eric Merida jabs his finger into the air and sweat glistens on his bald head the audience goes wild. With a dramatic face Merida waits for the commotion to subside, the thousands to sit back down, to be quiet and look up at him.

"In the southwestern Texas scrub country a man whom people call The Naturalist lives his life simply and humbly. He doesn't even have a cell phone. I sought him out and asked him to come here and present these ideas himself but he did not want to leave his splendid isolation. He told me that Nature had given the concept to him, and now he was giving it to anyone willing to accept it. He would not preach, would not print and sell books about it, would not even come

here to receive the hospitality we were eager to offer. So, tonight, this fine man sits in the desert beneath the stars meditating on the Universe's godless grandeur while we in this vast auditorium gratefully embrace his concept of the Six Miracles of Nature."

Merida looks around, to build suspense.

"My friends, shall we accept his offer?"

Thousands of awed voices call out yes.

"My friends, shall we do our best to harmonize our own thoughts and behavior with the general and righteous and absolutely godless flow of the Universe as revealed by the Six Miracles of Nature?"

"Yes, yes, yes... !"

"My friends, shall we carry this clear-eyed, godless wisdom forth to all humanity in the hope that it will neutralize and blot away ugly superstitions, especially the religions that during all of man's history have plagued and troubled humanity's mind, engendering untold numbers of wars and genocides?"

A thundering chorus of yeses.

"I thought... " Doddie says turning her eyes, glassy from beer, to JoAnn, "I thought I heard The Naturalist speak of the Creation... "

"Yeah," JoAnn agrees, emptying her can. "That sounds like there ought to be a Creator someplace. I never got the impression that The Naturalist was an atheist."

"He's no more an atheist than I am," José agrees, holding his cold beer can against his naked belly beneath his rolled up T-shirt. "He believes that something created everything, but he just doesn't believe

in organized religions."

"Maybe that's what Maarja means when she says they follow the Middle Path," JoAnn suggests.

"Middle Path... " repeats Doddie, struggling to keep the thread of conversation straight. "Not religious, not godless. Just a Creator, and the Creation... Middle Path... "

"But that's not what that bald guy on TV is saying... " decides José, too fuzzy-minded to carry the thought further.

"I'll talk"

"What do you mean you don't want another interview with Doddie Gross to clear things up?" Fred practically yells as The Naturalist paints the porch swing leaning against a Live Oak's trunk in Fred's front yard. "First you get me thinking about setting up some kind of tax-exempt sacred ground for acolytes of the Religion of the Six Miracles of Nature and now half the country has seen clips from this atheist convention in San Antonio where they call you the guru of the 'absolutely godless flow of the Universe as revealed by the Six Miracles of Nature!' So where does that leave our sacred ground for the religion of the Six Miracles, and I tell you what, once this area's good Bible-thumping fanatics get their act together they'll be streaming in here with pitchforks and shotguns."

It annoys Fred that The Naturalist just keeps painting.

"Listen, people who bought my lots out here came because they wanted peace and to be left alone. If the wrong kind of people start showing up here I'll get hell from everybody. This is killing me,

Naturalist. I didn't invite you and Maarja here so you could ruin me!"

The argument seems to strike home with The Naturalist.

"I'm sorry," The Naturalist says. "It'll do no good to say anything because both sides just want to fight the other."

The Naturalist looks a little grim as he begins cleaning his paintbrush.

"I'll talk to Doddie. I'll do my best, then afterwards if you want us to leave we'll leave."

Doddie's Interview

"Do you believe in God, Naturalist?" Doddie Gross of the *Uvalde Republican* begins.

In the freshly painted porch swing The Naturalist sits in silence gazing into the distance while Doddie on a white-painted wicker chair leans forward pointing her recorder like a gun.

"If to you God is a judgmental entity who has set up the Universe to be a stage on which humans will determine from their behavior whether they spend eternity in Heaven or Hell, no, I do not believe that such a God exists. However, if to you God is the Creator of the Universe with its enormity, complexity and beauty, then, yes, I believe in that God."

Now Doddie is silent, feeling that somehow she's been tricked, and that The Naturalist is being evasive.

"What about Jesus? Do you believe in Jesus?"

"If Jesus existed, he was created by the Creator like everything else in the Universe. I personally don't know if Jesus existed, but I suspect that someone called Jesus probably did, and from the general tenor of what he's reported to have said, it seems like he might have been a wise, compassionate person. However, the religion claiming to derive from him has evolved so much during the last two thousands years that I suspect that if he could visit us today he'd be very upset to see how his religion has turned out."

"OK," Doddie says, thinking that she needs to be more pointed with her questioning. "Jesus taught the difference between good and bad. If you don't believe that Jesus is God, how do you know what's good and what's bad? By not believing in Jesus, doesn't that leave you without guidance, open to leading an amoral life?"

"That's precisely the most important point about the Six Miracles of Nature concept," The Naturalist says without expression in his voice. "Maybe the most amazing of all the gifts the Creator has bestowed upon humans is our ability to think and feel. With our minds we can discover patterns in Nature, which -- remembering that Jesus taught with many parables in which metaphors were used -- you might describe metaphorically as 'God's own Bible.' By thinking about Nature's parable-like patterns, and assuming that the Creator has created these patterns because that's what She wants, we can see in them lessons on how we should live."

"Hold it! Hold it! Two things here, but, first, 'She?'

"It's ridiculous to ascribe any gender to the Creator. However, in English, as in most but not all languages, we have to do so. The Creator creates, bestows life, nurtures us by enmeshing us in a self sustaining ecosystem, and by giving us minds, enables us to learn. In our culture these are thought of as attributes of a loving mother, not particularly of the father. I feel awkward referring to the Creator as a She, but thinking of the Creator as a He is simply impossible for me."

Doddie likes this, thinks it'll make a fine sidebar.

"OK, morality... "

"Here's an example of how the Six Miracles guides us: In the natural world we see that everything is recycled at every level. This pattern or paradigm can be thought of as a moral teaching because everywhere in the Universe recycling is so plainly apparent. Therefore, recycling is moral behavior, but wasting is immoral. Wasting resources, to use religious terminology, is sinful."

"I don't know... What's something else?"

"The part of Nature we humans have most experience with is what's here on Earth. On Earth the most spectacular creation of the Creator seems to be life. The Creator began evolving life from a very tiny, simple state, but now after billions of years life on Earth is more complex and diverse than our minds can grasp. The Creator seems to want diversity. Therefore, the teaching here is that we humans should protect and encourage natural diversity. To do so is moral, but to endanger or destroy natural diversity, as by destroying entire ecosystems with tree removal, mining, or urban sprawl, is immoral -- is a sin."

"So you believe that in order to increase diversity we need to bring every kind of person from every nation on Earth into every county of America so we can all live next to as many kinds of people as possible?" Doddie says with delight, for she sees no way The Naturalist can answer without either contradicting his theory about diversity, or else reveal what a crank he is.

"If you bring people from every nation on Earth into every county of America, you'll be creating a single cultural type from coast to coast, the culture of every nation being represented in every county. It'd be

like a vegetable soup with the vegetables pureed into such tiny pieces that every sip of the soup has the exact same taste and texture as every other sip. In such a mixture there is no diversity. To resolve this paradox you must follow the Middle Path. The Middle Path is a path that only the sensitized, clear-thinking mind can visualize. A good soup has fair-sized, harmoniously balanced chunks of various, discreet ingredients. At human society level, we can respect diversity by working toward a mosaic of harmoniously interacting, interdependent societies. And while we're talking about human populations I have to bring up the problem of human overpopulation. We have too many people on Earth, so speaking of inviting new people to come into our communities, no matter who they are, raises other very important issues."

"This is all too new for me. I can't get it straight, though you seem to be saying very simple things. I'll go over the recordings later and figure it out. What's something else Nature teaches?"

"As the Creator began developing the Earth, She went from having nothing but inert, dead material to having living things. At first the living things could only consume and reproduce. Eventually they became capable of expressing complex, innate, genetically fixed behaviors. Eventually we humans arose capable of thinking in ways not dictated by our genes. At the peak of evolution, we humans find ourselves able to think and feel, have emotions, have a sense of aesthetics... It's clear that the Creator wants thinking and feeling in Her creation. Therefore, it can be said that it is immoral to be part of a religion that requires you to simply think and do what words anciently written in a book say. Nature teaches us to stay alert, to be curious, to doubt, to explore and experiment, to try new things, to learn from our failures as well as from our successes, and to evolve and feel, feel, feel... !"

This way of thinking is so disorienting that Doddie doesn't know what to say or do.

"I think I have enough," finally she almost whispers, her voice trembling for reasons she can't explain. "I have it all recorded. It's all here. I heard it all spoken by you as I sat here. I have to go, and thank you."

Paltry Fictions

Oooooooooooooohhhmmmmmm? Me again. You know, more than Coyote, less than... Well. And you're "the other side of these words," if you'll remember. I love that expression.

Thing is, it's time for a little fine-tuning, and I hope you don't mind.

So, remember that we're in the process of developing something here, of revealing it, of maybe doing a little experiment, and maybe even maybier, not knowing how it'll turn out.

Also, that your cooperation truly is needed. That's why we have these sessions. You can't just be an observer here.

So, the first item is for you to realize that you are already involved. You're there, we're here in our various states of being, and you're participating. And, I mean, participating in a very big way. It's your brain circuitry actualizing the current moment for you, and that's where we all are, right?

Now, you think that what I'm saying is that words are helping your brain imagine our presences, and here and there we've sometimes suggested but not really said that if a brain visualizes something, then in a sense that thing "is." And a thought orbiting that one is that maybe we're all, the whole shebang here in this Universe, merely are the

mental musings of that which we can call the Creator, or whatever.

Well, here's another angle I've been thinking about and which I need to run through your brain circuitry:

You've been reminded that there's so much empty space at the subatomic level that a neutrino can pass through the entire Earth without hitting anything solid, so just imagine how little of that item bearing these words before you really is there -- be it book or screen. Whatever the thing these words are written on, it's nearly entirely emptiness cut through with interacting electromagnetic fields.

Yet, these fields reflect photons that your brain interprets as form and color. The screen's electromagnetic fields repel other electromagnetic fields in your skin, so your brain interprets signals from your nerve endings that something solid is there, though being so entirely empty, there's really hardly anything there at all. Similar observations for whatever you hear, smell or taste of the world around you can be made. Everything you think really is real, really is illusion conjured by our minds to help us do and feel things for the One Thing's own reasons, right?

And while we're on the subject, let me remind you that your body is completely oblivious to many other stimuli that your senses are unable to detect. You can't see the infrared rays things around you right now are emitting because the cones in your eyes aren't sensitive to them. Your body can't detect the whole spectrum of radio waves flooding through you, whether from the local country music station or outer space. Well, on and on like that. And remember that about 70% of the Universe is dark energy humanity hasn't even detected with all its instruments, so you can guess that there is a whole universe of presence, activity and evolution going on around you at this moment that not only you are unable to detect, but also your mind isn't capable of asking questions about, much less understanding if someone were to explain it to you.

What I mean to say here is that the world you perceive around you is very much a paltry fiction based on very limited information, and very limited computing power. What you believe, my dear human, is a farcically, even tragically and ultimately lethally uninformed, uninspired notion of what you really "are," and just flat wrong.

Oh, my, I do fear I'm carrying on a bit too much, but how else am I to make the point?

Because, the point must be taken, in order for me to suggest the next point:

In this world where you nonetheless do imagine with your very limited set of sensory receptors and do form opinions with your practically nonexistent capacity for mental analysis... am I, here this other side of these words, really so much less to be trusted than what you've always assumed to be good old honest reality? Against the grand scheme of things, am I really any less illusionary than, say, the thing you're reading these words on?

If I this side of these words describe to you the southwest Texas desert with its heat and dust, the feather before Jose, the slightly silvery, wind-suffused Mesquite trees, the hills topped with outcroppings of horizontal strata of white limestone and the slopes of those hills mantled with scattered clumps of dark green junipers... are these things you know only because I tell you of them demonstrably more or less "real" than the moon of Saturn known by humans as Enceladus? Is there any good reason to trust more what you've heard that side of these words about Enceladus than to trust what I say this side of the words about The Naturalist and The Six Miracles of Nature? And myself?

At least, can you accept that there may be some value in entertaining the notion that we here this side of the words may under certain

circumstances interact in significant ways with you there the other side... ?

Please keep all this in mind as now we continue.

Aunt Ekta

"Mesquite. It's me, María."

"Mesquite. Before he came, I talked to you more. But then he came. I talked to him, then."

"I'm not sure why. You always accepted my words, and then I'd feel better. But all my words to him always felt wrong. Like he wasn't listening, or couldn't bear to hear. I don't think my words were wanted. But I talked to him, and forgot to talk to you."

"So, after he thought he saw White-Painted Woman he just stopped eating. Stopped talking to me, even looking at me. I did what I could. I begged him to stop it. But he wouldn't listen. And now I'm back with you, just have you to talk to."

"This time, there's no more talking to people again. This time it's you and me, from here on out. Just you and me."

"But, Mesquite, please tell me this: Where do they all go? Where did Bimisi go? Where will I go? There were so many of them, and they all went, and now there's just me, and I need to know where they all went."

"They didn't go anywhere, María."

It takes a few moments for the words to register. María has been looking at the Mesquite not really seeing it but now she focuses into the low tree with feathery leaves quaking in hot afternoon breezes and sees a very distinct kind of face, a face half human, half coyote, a smiling face with sparkling black eyes and wet, black lips, this on a smallish, half-human body, the torso framed by a fork in the Mesquite's trunk, the chin resting on a horizontal branch, the effect somehow coquettish, somehow disarming, almost funny.

"You..."

"You've heard me spoken of as Coyote."

"Trickster... "

"Well, that's just part of it. Don't forget the great deeds I've done, the things I've created and destroyed, and all the good folks I've screwed hardy-har-harrrrrrrr.... "

Coyote snorts and chuckles, and scratches his crotch.

"OK," he says, and remember that they're speaking Apache here, and we're just doing our best representing the moment in English. "You've asked some questions and you're a smart lady who deserves to know some answers, so I'm at your service. But, first things first. And the first thing is to come at your question from a different direction. So, let's talk about, say, your father. You were thinking of him among others when you asked where 'they'd' gone, so we'll work with him."

Coyote squats in the Mesquite's shade and motions for María to squat beside him, which she does.

"You remember that when your father died they wrapped him in his best skins and buried him with his weapons, for the afterlife. So, let me ask you: What do you think your father will be like in this eternal

afterlife? Will he be like he was the very moment his spirit left him -- so weak he could only lie on his skins barely breathing? Or will he be like he was the day before, feverish and so sick he could hardly lift a hand? Or maybe the week before, when he wasn't sick, but, if you'll remember, so angry about Bodaway's horse kicking him that he was making life miserable for everyone? Or the month before that when the plantings had died from the drought and he refused to eat the white-faces' food, getting so weak that really that was the beginning of his dying time?"

María's mind reels, hearing her most private memories recalled by a stranger.

"Or a year before he died, when he was still thinking that maybe he could live in that concentration camp around the church, and went around telling others that the community should cooperate with the white-faces, learn their powerful secrets and be more like them? Is that the father you visualize being in the eternal afterlife now, María?"

As María gathers her senses she can only shake her head no.

"Well, we can keep playing this game until we realize that, in fact, every moment in a person's life isn't quite right, if that's the way we have to be for eternity."

Coyote looks hard at María.

"Usually at this point when people grasp what I'm saying they decide that instead of the body and soul passing to the afterlife exactly as it was at some precise moment in life, actually it's the 'pure essence' of that person making the passage. You'll recall that Aunt Ekta was famous for her easy laugh but she was a little stingy, so what went into the afterlife of her probably was a package including essences of laughingness and stinginess. Of course Aunt Ekta was much more than that, but you see what we're saying."

A pause, with María just staring at Coyote, saying nothing.

"Well, even if we assign a thousand traits to Aunt Ekta, and send her off to the afterlife as a soul comprising the essences of those thousand traits, the fact arises that with all the people who have ever lived and gone to the afterlife, who live now and soon will go, and will go in the future, the afterlife will end up with very many souls with traits identical to very many others... "

A pause to let the thought be digested.

"And, if you think about it some more, if all those different 'essences' are distilled so that they are rid of the impurities such as Aunt Ekta's tendency to fart loudly in the night, and your father's unfortunate weakness for firewater, then basically for each person departed to the other world you end up with the same set of essences, each essence distilled to a perfection exactly like every other essence in the set."

A longer pause.

"And if all the essences that make it into the other world are exactly alike, then where are the people you know as Aunt Ekta and your father?"

...

"Get my drift, María? See where this is leading us, María? See how easy it is to figure out that in fact the differences between us are only illusions in minds that interpret the illusions in different ways, so when it all evens out, we're all the same thing at the same time... ?"

María says slowly, her voice whispery and monotonal: "You want to tell me that all those people didn't really go to any afterlife?"

"That's good, María," Coyote says softly as if speaking with a child. "But we're talking about more than that, aren't we? You understand the point I've been making, María?"

"I understand nothing, Coyote. I only mourn for those I miss."

"A hard one, María. You're a hard one, but I like you, a real little trooper you are, yes yes."

Coyote raises a paw into the air, a yellow butterfly magically lights on the paw, and Coyote transfers the butterfly to his upper lip beneath his black, wet nostrils, so that the butterfly becomes a yellow mustache. Coyote smiles, and continues.

"Let's review: The eternal thing in each of the people you have known is the same thing in each. The eternal thing in Bimisi is exactly the eternal thing in you, me, Aunt Ekta, and all the rest. This One Thing puts on little costumes from time to time, and that's what our minds deal with, illusions of the fleeting moment. The One Thing removes the costume, and we die. The One Thing puts on the costume again, this time speaking a different language, or maybe it's the costume of a tree beside the river, and in fact everything happening all the time is just the One Thing toying with costumes."

"So what good does hearing this do me, Coyote?"

Coyote now looks at María just as she has been looking at him.

"Right," he says. "To be honest, that's why I'm here, because I've been wondering that myself and I thought that maybe running it through your brain circuitry might somehow clarify things."

There's a moment of silence as Gaiacoyote considers the curious condition of being a brain aberration seeking help from an old woman squatting inside a Mesquite tree.

"But back to your question," he continues. "Maybe the answer is that our talking doesn't do any good at all, other than that you and I, both of us being the One Thing in different costumes, enable the One thing to play with Herself in a tricky, mind-bending way."

"Go away Coyote."

"Yes, the show is over," says Coyote, the yellow butterfly flitting from his upper lip, and his body slowly dissolving into widely spaced, shimmering particles until they vanish completely.

Libra Man, Aries Woman

They're lying together in the darkness the usual way, his left arm over her side, his hand cupping her right breast, and he's thinking that tonight she's not the same, tense and somehow closed up.

"What's the problem?" he asks.

Long silence.

"You Libra man, Aries woman, me. Laws of astrology say this can't work. Aries woman, I say to you, see problem, talk about it, fight it. Libra man opposite. Libra man not fight, only accept, or retreat. Between Aries woman, Libra man, no one mind on how make against problem, no communication."

"I thought we deal with our problems and communicate pretty well."

"Yes. True... But stars always right, time come, no communication."

The Naturalist recognizes that nothing he can say can undo her solid belief that the stars are always right. Illogical thinking and superstitious beliefs can't be dealt with by rational thinking. Just let it pass, he thinks, and he almost chuckles aloud, realizing that this is exactly how she says the Libra man reacts.

He kisses her neck and squeezes her breast, which leads to the whole process, of which during the later part a hairy, snaky presence forms between his belly and her lower back, a long, slender finger of flesh stiffened with interior jointed bone and thickly covered with long hairs, and her body itself is changing, her breasts shriveling so that now he's holding not a breast but a bony ridge with too-slender, too-close together ribs just below the skin and the legs that had been soft and warm now also are long-hairy and bent there are coarse foot-pads and claws, claws scratching and hurting his legs. He lies there clutching the bony keel of a chest, his penis shriveling, the odor of beast in his nostrils, the tail now curled across his own hip and its bony tip probing into the lower reaches of his own ass, the tail now a probing, phallus-like.

"A more quick-witted man would have something interesting to say now, but you just lie there with your dick drawing up," says the voice.

"All the appropriate thoughts are being thought," The Naturalist replies, "but there's no point in expressing them in words. You are, after all, just a figment of my imagination, so I'd just be talking to myself."

"Does this mean that you're screwing yourself, even as yourself screws you?"

"That's the insight I was just coming to when you interrupted me."

"So let's look at this matter together," Gaiacoyote snickers, smacking his black lips in the darkness. I hope you appreciate the symmetry of it

all, and the genius in bringing it about. Don't you think it's brilliant, even beautiful?"

"I think that if I can no longer find comfort with a woman I love it's time to get back on the road to the desert."

"Ho! Let's not be so dramatic. You know that I just come and go, and that at your next awakening sweet Maarja still will be Maarja and you can continue with your stimulating repartee on the nature of Libra man with Aries woman."

Silence.

"Moreover, you know that I come only to advance matters when it's necessary, and the occasions I choose are only those appropriate to the message. So... Aren't you curious about what the message is now?"

"Gaiacoyote, at this point there's no message that can be more important than simply having one last interlude of something like love in my life."

"Good!" Gaiacoyote laughs a little too maniacally. "Now you've got it! You've reached exactly the degree of clarity required if I'm going to share the conclusion that's been dawning on me. And that is that maybe what we've been hinting at during this story is actually true, and not merely some kind of romantic theory that's fun to play with... "

Gaiacoyote seems to wait for encouragement to continue, but it doesn't come.

"Right. Well, the theory that we've been playing with and now seems to be turning out to be absolutely true is that the Unity or One Thing plays with our identities and our senses of having identities with precisely the same detachment and self indulgence that we've been

playing with our own ideas 'this side of the words'... "

A kind of gurgle issues from Gaiacoyote's throat and he catches his breath, preparing for his next thought.

"I mean, here you are screwing her who is me who is you as I screw you who is screwing her... Don't you see what a particularly elucidating moment this is, a slapstick parody of a whole Universe of entities gloriously ever-repeating their cycles of everything screwing one another and themselves! Can't you see the aesthetic value, if nothing else, in one of your 'Universal paradigms' coming back to bite you right in your own ass? Ain't it all just an awful lot of fun?"

And, indeed, when The Naturalist next awakens, it's the soft, warm Maarja in his arms, her breathing regular, and only a little sour, as is normal for the dawning of a bright new day.

PukieDog

The Naturalist looks up from the computer screen to see Maarja ushering in JoAnn looking nervous and tense, Doddie Gross with cookie crumbs on her blouse and her usual confused look, and the Boy Scout of some time back, the one wearing the most war paint at the how-to-make-a-fire talk and the one who asked how Jesus fit into it all.

"It's like this..." JoAnn begins tensely, "We know you all haven't been paying attention but we have, and we've seen what's going on out there, the right-wing Christian shows not really accusing you of anything but sort of suggesting that you're not good people, sinners, un-American, even communists, atheists... on the radio, on those tele-evangelist shows, and all over the Internet. And the atheists..."

"The atheists are claiming your Six Miracles idea supports their atheistic views," Doddie almost yells, her flabby jowls rippling with indignation, "and they're saying that Nature itself teaches atheism, and Eric Merida is going on every talk show he can find saying all kinds of hateful things about religious people, and using your Six Miracles to support his reasoning... "

"So I thought I'd help you," the Boy Scout adds, looking worried. "I liked what you said that day. It got me thinking. Anyway, I sent a link for your Six Miracles page to my cousin. He's out in Los Angeles, handles lighting and stage props and stuff like that on movie sets, and he knows people. And one night he was out with some friends and they got to talking, and he told them about your Six Miracles and how funny it was that such an idea should come out of someplace like southwestern Texas, and one of those friends was some kind of producer or something, and one night he told PukieDog BlingDick.. you know, that big hiphop star... "

"PukieDog... really big," JoAnn affirms, shaking her head fast in agreement.

"He's sort of foulmouthed," Doddie admits, "but you have to be these days to get kids' attention, and he's really active trying to save the rainforests, says his African ancestors came out of the rainforests and the rainforest had been good to them so he's trying to be good to the rainforests... My little Sally listens to his 'Humping with Monkeys' day and night... "

"And PukieDog got all excited," the Scout says, pleadingly, as if begging for mercy. "PukieDog went on the Tonight's Crazy Planet Show... maybe you all haven't even heard of it, but everybody watches it, late at night... And PukieDog told all about you being a wise man out in the desert, even though this isn't exactly a desert here, and how the Six Miracles of Nature shows the way, but the

Religious Right and the atheists both can't see that when you talk about the Creator you can't possibly be an atheist, that you're talking about the Creator of the Universe and the world and the rainforests and all the wonderful living things in the rainforest... "

"And if he'd left it there, that'd been fine, but then... " JoAnne inserts with panic in her voice, "But then he called for all people with ancestors who came from the rainforests, and all people who just love the rainforest for what it is, and for poor people who dream of living a rainforest kind of life, and minorities and gays and vegetarians and people with Turret's Syndrome and missing limbs... to rise up! To rise up and put down what he called the blue-eyed, military, right-wing-Christian, industrial establishment. Destroy it! 'Plant trees in the ashes of... of what he calls the fascist capitalist's dominant paradigm...!"

"In San Francisco they're burning pizza joints and turning over police cars and waving flags they say represent the Six Miracles Movement," the Boy Scout almost whispers, as if he's hearing a bomb's detonator clicking into position.

Everybody looks at The Naturalist and The Naturalist looks back.

"I wonder what the flag looks like?" finally he says.

There's silence, while everybody keeps looking at everybody else, and then Doddie says that she thinks it's a black flag representing the emptiness of space, with the Earth the way it's shown in those pictures sent back from the Moon, with all the swirling, white clouds and mostly blue ocean but a surprising amount of brown desert, and really only a little green, and surrounding the planet, suspended in the blackness, are six white stars, one each for the Six Miracles.

"How about that?" The Naturalist says, "That's sort of what I'd envisaged."

"Think already this gonna happen, you?" Maarja in her low-cut T-shirt and short-shorts asks bigger-eyed than usual.

"I didn't imagine anything like PukieDog and the attacks on pizza joints, but all the rest was bound to happen one way or another, if not with the Six Miracles then something else. I'm surprised that it was the Six Miracles that set it off but it's OK with me that it was. And, yeah, sometimes I've thought about a flag. Not so much for the Six Miracles, but for whatever it is that causes people to rally around the idea of defending the Earth for spiritual reasons."

"You think that that's what PukieDog is doing?" the Boy Scout asks?

"I think he's doing what he can to get publicity and sell records," The Naturalist chuckles.

"And what are you going to do?" asks Doddie, not entirely just for her reading audience in the Uvalde Republican.

"Nothing," The Naturalist replies.

"Nothing?!" they all say more or less in unison.

"Half country think we communist atheists making destroy America, other half say same thing, and PukieDog persons firing San Francisco with Six Miracle flag, and nothing do, you?" asks Maarja. "We explain! We say we good!"

"People are programmed to split up ideas and fight for extreme interpretations," The Naturalist says in a calm voice. "It's exactly the same pattern as in Nature, where species if they're successful eventually acquire large distribution areas over which various parts of their population begin adapting and evolving to local conditions. If conditions remain constant, eventually those local populations evolve into new species, possibly competing with the old one. To the original,

widely distributed species, it looks as if the new species are in rebellion, taking extreme positions, but in fact it's all just evolution. What's going on now is evolution and I trust evolution more than I trust my own ability to say or do anything to help matters. All along I've said nothing more than that patterns in Nature can teach humanity wisdom, and I really believe that. Also I'm willing to say that if the rioters get to the point that they're destroying parts of the ecosystem we all need to stay alive, I'll do what I can to stop that. Otherwise, I don't see that there's anything we can say or do more than that... "

Maarja is swinging her pendulum back and forth, watching its oscillations in horror.

The other three step outside the cabin, speak awhile, the car doors slam and they can be heard driving away. The Naturalist knows without looking that Maggie the Dog is right behind them, not barking, but watching very hard the rear, right wheel.

Ledge sitting

The Naturalist dangles his legs over a limestone ledge overlooking Dry Frio Canyon.

"Somebody down in the valley pointed you out to me," an unfamiliar voice from behind says. "You're easy to see from down there. I didn't have any trouble following the trail up here. I know you'd rather be left alone, but talking to you is important to me, so I'm hoping you'll spend a few minutes with me, maybe like you would with a turtle needing to be taken from the middle of the road before somebody runs over it just to hear it splat."

When The Naturalist looks over, the visitor already has sat down next

to him. Maybe seventy years old, bald, pudgy, ordinary but intelligent-looking face, red-faced and breathing hard from the hike up the hill. He could be a hardware store owner in a small town, or a preacher. He looks so uncomfortable with his uninvited visit that a silent, invisible chuckle ripples through The Naturalist's belly.

"What can I do for you?"

"I can't remember a figure in all of history whose words have stirred up so many people, but who's so utterly stayed in the background the whole time, even throwing potential visitors off by having the fellow who answers the phone say you're out of the country. So, that's enough to make me wonder who you are and what you're up to. But the real reason I came is that your Six Miracles of Nature got to me, you know. Really all you've done is to point out the obvious, what's so clearly the truth. Yet all this has happened. The riots, the church burnings. Well, that's like a lot of big ideas in history, and I can deal with that. But what I can't digest is that so soon, just a couple of weeks later, it's all just blowing over, people forgetting the whole thing, like nothing ever happened, and here you are sitting alone on this ledge just as if nothing really did happen... "

Long silence.

"I guess that all this is important to me," the visitor continues, "because in my life also there've been so many ups and downs, so many lies and so much self deception... though probably my life is fairly average... and now when I've gotten this old, I just need to confirm to myself that, really, I've been doing OK. I think I've been on a guilt trip my whole life, always feeling bad because of mistakes I made, the people I hurt, the good parts of myself I wasted, but now, looking at things from a Six-Miracle perspective, I see that all that was really just an ordinary struggle, the entity I think of as myself evolving as it ought to, with setbacks, delays, leaps forward, more setbacks, but in the end having muddled through and maybe advanced a little,

just the way Nature evolves. I like to think that sometimes, just by keeping at it all those years, and usually making genuine efforts to do things right, I've even helped the Sixth Miracle come flickering into existence, as you express it, doing at least a few things I wasn't compelled to do by my genes. And thinking like that, now I think I know that it's all been OK..."

"Yep," The Naturalist agrees. "It was all just fine."

Long silence.

"So, what's the point of continuing being alive? I mean, when you can see all this, and you've lost your drive to struggle for the things you're programmed to struggle for -- for wealth, status, security, sex and all the rest... When you don't have stomach for any of that anymore, what's the point of going on... ?"

"We're nerve endings," The Naturalist says. "The Creator does the Universe so She can feel Herself being Herself. All these feelings you've had, and you're having now, the feeling of being up here right now with me... those are Her feelings. That's what She wants."

"So if I kill myself, I'm cheating Her of future feelings?"

"No, not cheating Her of anything, since even the feeling of killing oneself is a feeling She needs."

"So, back to the original question... "

"Lots of people have killed themselves." The Naturalist says. "The Creator must regard that as a fairly mediocre feeling. As you can see from the exuberance with which She makes weird new orchid species, for instance, She has an affinity for the new idea, the exquisite expression. The urge for suicide is so commonplace that for those of us who see a little more than others, it's disrespectful to the Creator to

indulge in such an unimaginative ending."

Long silence.

"So just sitting here looking into the valley is a more refined manner of handling it?"

"I'm not just sitting here looking; I'm nursing some kind of low-grade vexation." The Naturalist says. "All my adult life I've sought spiritual insight thinking that when I had it, it'd be good. Now when finally I've glimpsed a good bid of what seems to be the Truth, I see that I'm little more than a puppet not only governed mostly by genetic and social programming and random events, but also a body slowly falling apart, with a brain each day becoming more glitchy and less capable. And humanity in general, while making amazing technical advances, remains as childish as the first Homo sapiens. I'm so sad that after spending my life falling in love with so many beautiful living things on this planet, I'm seeing them suffer and die as the biosphere collapses worldwide at an accelerating rate. So, it's this feeling that right now I'm offering up to this Creator who toys with us not worrying about our feelings, just so She can feel. I'm sitting here imagining ways to spit in this Creator's eye, to slap Her face, to curse Her so effectively that maybe for a billionth of a second, if seconds exist, my flash of white-hot resentment here on little Earth will catch her attention as a novel and therefore at least interesting sensation emanating from this tiny zone within Herself... It's my gift to Her!"

A few minutes pass.

"But, also, it's a fine view up here, and I'm enjoying a nice day sitting on this rock; my pleasure in being here is my gift to Her, too," The Naturalist chuckles.

The visitor sits awhile longer, then gets up and leaves without saying a word.

Gloomy

Inside the trailer Maarja sits staring at her cards, looking gloomy.

"Sounded like you had a good session with JoAnn," The Naturalist ventures.

"Good for her, no good for me," Maarja replies. The Naturalist recognizes a moment when he's supposed to ask certain questions delicately, but he's fearful of saying the wrong thing.

"Well, maybe your next reading will bring better news," The Naturalist finally says, hoping it'll do.

"The problem, that," she replies. "Sometime good news, sometime bad news, all mixed up, I not understand, but now I understand, see all it, see how work it."

"I don't understand."

"One day good news, next day bad news, and that is true. When come here, me, all thing look good, happy time. Now nothing, all good thing done, nobody visit website, nobody care. That exactly what say cards, one day good news, next day bad news. They know, they tell, but dumb to see clear, me. One day see Ley Lines all meet exactly here, now not see nothing. Pendulum sometime go here, sometime go there, Maybe think pendulum not work, me, but now know, it work OK, also say one day good news, next day bad news, but too dumb understand, me. Now nothing good, only I make JoAnn happy, but JoAnn, not me."

Maarja ends with a sob. The Naturalist knows she needs comforting, needs to be reminded of good times they've had, of good times that are bound to come, but suddenly he feels very weary, emotionally so, and, besides, maybe it's best that she leave. He decides to say something having nothing to do with the crises before him:

"Where's the turtlehead rock you've been wearing around your neck?"

"Turklred what?"

"That rock shaped like a turtle's head, the one you've been wearing around your neck the last few weeks... "

"Not wear rock around neck, me, never."

"The rock José gave you that day you hitched to town with him."

"José not give rock me, never."

The Naturalist has seen Maarja's ups and downs but he's never seen her forget something like this, or lie, or to be so confused by the language problem. Something is going on here beyond Maarja being in a bad mood.

"I want to go watch the bats leave their cave for the night. Want to come along?"

"No. I try understand energy flowing, understand what do... "

Good Mood

"I tell you again," José says emphatically. "I never had no rock shaped

like a turtlehead and I never gave Maarja any kind of rock at all. I may have given her some chewing gum or candy but I don't remember it. I sure didn't give her a rock... "

"OK, OK, I believe you. But how come you're in such a good mood today? Lately you've looked awfully down."

"Yeah, Naturalist, you know, you know man, you're about the smartest fellow I ever met and I think you have lots of things figured out. But, I tell you, that stuff you been telling me and showing me lately, the 'Creator's nerve endings' stuff, what I saw with the Peyote, all that shit... Man, I just decided I can do without it, you know? Like, before I met you, I just went up and down the road thinking about good times I've had and planning more good times. I wanted to know the kinds of things you been showing me, but now that I've gotten a glimpse at it, I don't want no more, you understand?"

The Naturalist says nothing.

"I just decided that what I want is what I have right now, not trying for more, not feeling bad about missing so much in life, not feeling bad knowing that the rest of my life probably won't even be as good as what I've had so far. And, what's best about this life is all those memories from back in Chiapas. Right here... "

José thumps himself over his heart...

"Right here I have the old hut with its dirt floor, the chickens scratching around outside, the *calabaza* vines under the orange and banana trees and the neighbor's radio on real loud, happy music, nobody worrying about whether it's right for somebody to play such loud music because everybody likes it, you know. But I'm getting off track. What I want to say is that all this I been thinking about lately is just head stuff, you know? Maybe it's all true, OK, I think it's true. But what good does it do you? Right! Naturalist, what good does it do you?"

José looks at The Naturalist who just looks out the window saying nothing.

"What I understood with Peyote, deep shit. Made that little hut in Chiapas look like nothing more than a kid's drawing on paper blowing down the street, you know?"

Long silence.

"So I'm not thinking about deep stuff anymore. Not talking about it. Maybe in the old days my people knew how to handle what Peyote shows, what it teaches, but my people already forgot all that, and I'm not with my people anymore anyway. I got this old pickup truck and a road to go down, and a little money at the end of the week and some friends I can drink beer with and listen to happy music with, and that's all I want."

Long silence.

"And I really don't know about any rock shaped like a turtle head, and I didn't give anything like it to Maarja."

Goodbye

Dear Naturalist.

Thank you for let stay here these days me. I go now. When come, I think you know a lot, but all these days, nothing new, sit and look. I want man with plan, man go someplace.

This Six Miracle thing, let me ask, how it help? Pendulum and cards

always have answer, I only need be smart.

And you not believe what I know, the wisdom of Tarot, of pendulum. They always show how to go, never have sit and look, day after day. Tarot has great power, everybody knows it, not you.

Good by.

Kind of Pretty

Seeing that The Naturalist was leaving and not wanting a complicated good-bye, Fred has given The Naturalist a junk bicycle from his garage and told him he's enjoyed the visit. Now on US 83 well south of Uvalde The Naturalist peddles southward toward the junction with US 57, which ends at Eagle Pass, Texas. There, across the Rio Grande River, lies Piedras Negras, Mexico. From Piedras Negras Mexico 57 continues southward through the Chihuahuan Desert to just north of Sabinas, where Highway 53 shoots westward into mountains that on Google Earth look like endless broken gray ridges and valleys with sparse vegetation and no roads or buildings. It's that image of broken, unpopulated grayness drawing him forward.

"Not precipitous, this?" the Liverpudlian accent asks clearly audible through sounds of wind beating in his ears and the occasional passing truck.

"Been waiting for you," The Naturalist says. "So, what do you think?"

"I suppose you have a point about not hanging around once Maarja has evacuated the scene, kind of a dead-end situation there, but what about options other than heading south to meet your demise in the desert? I mean, you do have offers to go other places where you can

do your naturalist thing."

"Just nothing left to say, nothing left needing to be done, no point thinking about it all anymore," The Naturalist whispers into the wind streaming past his face.

The last truck to pass was a diesel and its fumes hang in the air. Minutes pass. The bike's rear wheel has a loose spoke that clicks with each rotation. Somebody in Piedras Negras will have a bike shop, if the wheel holds out that far, and somebody there can fix it. The Naturalist could handle it himself, but he wants to pay somebody for the service, to get rid of money that won't be useful where he's going.

"This is a bit of a sticky wicket," the Liverpudlian accent says. "There's some truth in the notion that this voice you're hearing is your own subconsciousness, but, I think you've seen that it might be a wee bit more than that. Certain warpings of time and space are at work here, and might that not be something worth wondering about and playing with, and maybe something worthy of keeping you around?"

"How's it worth anything?"

"Well, riding a bike isn't the best place to discuss these things, but we'll try. Fine. So, during our association something we've been doing is nudging along human acceptance of insights oozing from the Six Miracles of Nature concept. I mean, it's something similar to how we kicked off all this with the word 'placebo,' you know."

"Been meaning to ask about that," The Naturalist chuckles, and in recent days he's been chuckling more than he has for years.

"The literary word for it is 'foreshadowing,' Gaiacoyote continues, drifting into his Texas drawl. "To the human mind it makes no sense that placebos do often cure, just because people believe in them. But it seems that the human being has simply evolved so that somehow

'believing' accomplishes something that in the real world we expect only 'things' to accomplish. By beginning our relationship by focusing you on the word 'placebo,' it was intended to nudge your mind at least a teeny bit from your usual mechanistic way of seeing things into a more flexible ambiance, to make matters easier later when we'd be dealing with more abstruse issues."

"Bring up 'placebo' at the beginning, and maybe later I wouldn't choke on 'time not necessarily being a sequential thing,'" The Naturalist ventures.

"Precisely! You got it! That, and other things."

"Which brings up the question of why it's important that I admit that time might be other than sequential."

"Same as with 'placebo,'" Gaiacoyote says, his voice becoming a little thin, like the semi-desert air itself, thin and with something of a surprisingly fragile tone to it. "Simply mentioning the idea that time might not be a sequential thing nudges you in the same direction as 'placebo.' If eventually we're going to talk about "The Unity," it just sets the wrong mood to be assuming that time consists of 'long ago' moments, the 'present,' and 'the future,' each inaccessibly isolated from the others in a long, sequential line. In 'The Unity,' everything is in the same place..."

To The Naturalist this smells like wordplay but he's lost interest in parsing such statements.

"And the next question is, of course, 'Why is it important to recognize The Unity?'"

Gaiacoyote sighs audibly and replies:

"The whole spiritual history of humankind has been to understand the

nature of reality, and to find who or what is responsible for it. Once one beholds The Unity, that goal is accomplished."

"And why should it be accomplished if we can't really do anything with the insight?"

"Feels good... ?" Gaiacoyote replies and asks at the same time.

The Naturalist hmphs! to himself, stays silent awhile, and then says as if he's just remembering something:

"And what about that turtlehead rock?"

"What turtlehead rock," Gaiacoyote replies.

"Right... "

The Naturalist pedals on awhile and then in a thoughtful way says into the dry wind and diesel fumes:

"We've been referring a bit to the yin and yang of things, and we've noted how the human's two brain hemispheres interpret sensory input differently from one another, but end up projecting just the one consciousness we think of as ourselves. This apparent two-sidedness of things has got me thinking about our own relationship, Gaiacoyote..."

The Naturalist halfway waits for Gaiacoyote to say something, but then remembers that this is his own brain he's dealing with, so a reply isn't necessarily forthcoming.

"Anyway, so far in this story the side of my brain you occupy has been determining the narrative, but now I'm thinking that my side has at least a little to contribute."

Long silence as neurons in The Naturalist's brain discharge and interconnect in patterns not experienced there before.

"You've encouraged the concept that The Unity uses us living, thinking and feeling things as nerve endings for gathering Her sensations, for Her own purposes. Human experience is just a theater where The Unity can put on and take off costumes, play different roles, stir up emotions and feelings in which She, The Unity, is both actor and audience."

Another long silence.

"From this part of my brain I'm speaking to you from, I think the nerve ending insight is pretty good, and I accept that. However, instead of the impulses being received from humans enabling The Creator to enjoy a never-ending seriocomic opera at human expense, I'm visualizing The Unity as a kind of Universe-size brain, a brain growing like a baby's brain with its neurons developing like crazy and forming all kinds of connections, understanding more and more all the time, with each understanding enabling glimpses into new, ever more sophisticated possibilities for thinking and feeling... Gaia Coyote, I think The Unity's goal is understanding, not theatrics."

He pauses awhile and pedals and thinks before continuing:

"Whatever the case, it no longer seems so important to me to pin it all down. What's relevant to me these days is that brains burn out just like computers, and sometimes they do funny things before they completely close down."

The Naturalist almost chuckles at this thought, but not quite.

"And even if from the Unity's point of view I should hang around a bit longer providing a few more dramas and laughs for Her, for whatever Her purpose, something in my guts just sort of cramps up at the idea."

Long silence, lots of hot, dry wind passing by smelling of diesel.

"Screw The Unity," finally The Naturalist says, and at first he feels better having said it, but then he thinks that maybe such an adolescent reaction is just another sign of his own mental and spiritual degeneration. But after more pedaling southward, thinking about it some more, in light of his experience with Maarja the last time they made love, it occurs to him that maybe the Unity somehow would be pleased with his sentiment. In fact, maybe being able to think about it as loopily as he is right now means that, at least spiritually, he's doing OK.

A while later The Naturalist pedals through a tiny settlement at a crossroads consisting of little more than a gas station with some shelves of junk food. Not until he's a few miles south of there does Gaiacoyote's voice return, this time somehow distant and echoic, almost like chilly mist in this hot desert air.

"Just think of how talking like this makes me feel," the voice says.

The Naturalist reflects on a mental aberration having its own feelings needing to be cared for, thinks that it's all too complicated for the stage of life he's reached, but halfway feels sorry for Gaiacoyote, and manages a full-fledged chuckle. Almost as a reply, a whispering thought from nowhere chimes in, "Listen to what the trees and rocks and the river say," and to The Naturalist this advice sounds good, but he wonders what river is being referred to, and reflects for a moment on the pleasing notion that trees and rocks and rivers apparently have no mental aberrations themselves, much less aberrations with feelings needing to be dealt with.

A flicker of insight at this moment: That as The Naturalist's own brain/computer projects Gaiacoyote with those feelings needing attention, so the Unity projects The Naturalist with his feelings. And as

The Naturalist hardly cares about Gaiacoyote's feelings, it seems the Unity feels the same about The Naturalist's.

But The Naturalist doesn't pursue this line of thinking long, just concentrates on the hot, dry air streaming by, the sound the wind beating in his ears, the rhythm of his own breathing, the pleasing feeling of his legs pumping up and down, and a couple of hours later he realizes that Gaiacoyte hasn't said another word, nor has he himself thought much about anything. A certain silvery haze is forming on the distant horizon, which might be Mexico. And now the wind hears The Naturalist say to himself:

"So, The Unity brings onstage such characters as Maarja, José, Fred, JoAnn, Doddie, me and the rest, and Gaiacoyote to boot, and we're Her nerve endings for one reason or another. That's as good an explanation as any I've heard, and in fact it's kind of pretty when you think about it."

And at this thought, it's as if Gaiacoyote, like the turtle-head rock, never existed, or the Six Miracles of Nature. The Naturalist chuckles and keeps peddling down the road toward the silvery haze that maybe or maybe not signifies the great Chihuahuan Desert of Mexico, some places in which the days may end with a deep-bellied, soul-pleasing "Ommmmmmmmmm..."