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Interregnum: Fourteenth Week's Summary

In my entire scientific life, extending over forty-five years, the most shattering experience has been the realization that an exact solution of Einstein's equations of general relativity, discovered by the New Zealand mathematician Roy Kerr, provides the absolutely exact representation of untold numbers of massive black holes that populate the universe. This "shuddering before the beautiful," this incredible fact that a discovery motivated by a search after the beautiful in mathematics should find its exact replica in Nature, persuades me to say that beauty is that to which the human mind responds in its deepest and most profound level.

Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar
Quoted in Hienz Pagels, *Perfect Symmetry: the Search for the Beginning of Time*

Named after a primitive Country-Western dance, whose chief virtue, is not its exposition of grace, but that it can be performed by even the most obese danseur or danseuse while roaring drunk, the Texas-Two-Step is a sucker-tax. It is designed, like all lottery games, to lure the cupiditous citizen into uncomplainingly swelling the state's cavernous coffers. The skill is hooked by the glamorous promise of large cash winnings, but odds are decidedly against this, to wit, there are 5 numbers drawn — 4 "white" regular and 1 "red" bonus number. Match all 5, and the player might win the jackpot, which could be as much as \$2,000,000. The chances of this happening, however, are roughly equivalent to having the rattlesnake that is about to bite you miraculously struck by lightning, specifically, 1:1,832,600. Well, as they say in Wapping about the possibility of fornicating with the Queen of England: "Not bloody likely." Even the meagerest \$5 return on a \$1 "investment" is a pretty steep climb, there being 1 chance that you will match the "red" bonus number against 58 that you will not. Not many bettors would plunk down a buck to only win a sawbuck, if the pony running were a 58 to 1 shot. But such are the vagaries of the human "rational" animal's predilection for hope that the state mesmerizes tens of millions of sheep into this shell game every Tuesday and Friday for their bi-weekly fleecing. Need I mention that the most assiduous players are also the poorest, the most copious losers, those least insulated against the sting of loss? The lowliest beggar will trade his or her last dollar of cigarette or fast-food money for a chance to contribute to the state's massive slush fund. (Oh, yes, I know the money's for "education." But since at the time of this writing, most Texas school children have a hard time making it through 12 years of public indoctrination and honing the skill, as one wag put it, "to write a simple declarative sentence without the word "shit" in it," I fail to see how that glosses over the matter.) Naturally, many of these poor bastards and

bastardettes, who cannot put together a successful strategy for garnering regular rent money, have nevertheless cunningly contrived some method (usually involving a considerable intervention by the fickle fingers of fate) for a sure-fire way to debunk the government. Of course, all these people are utter, pitiable fools. But I, I, Roy Doughty, the most destitute of the destitute, had (have) a system.

As previously explicated, my infantile new hair growth, when properly spruced, is capable of receiving minute, but very specific signals from the oceanic envelope that we mistakenly refer to as the unknown. As such, by posing exacting questions about coming events, I have been able to pinpoint, in the immense swirl of possibilities, those most likely to actually intersect the current space/time continuum. That's my theory any who, and gol'durn it, it's a theory I'm stickin' with until Uni (remember her?) proves me wrong, or my hair grows out to a sufficient enough degree to lay down quietly in the mysterious valley of the present. My scheme, to be successful, did (does) involve some rather elaborate preparations. *Ergo*, the hair and beard must be properly fluffed, floating actually, in a kind of silken aureole, with each strand standing perpendicularly and un-entangled from all the others, drifting freely in the medium of air as seaweed might drift freely in the medium of water. The weather in Houston was a definite hazard on the two days that I was given to play, namely, Friday, January 26th, and Tuesday, January 30th, both these days being rather drippy and humid, with Friday actually producing rain. To nullify this meteorological interference, I was compelled to make two trips to the Hep-U-Sef to visit my old friend, Mohammed — the first, to pick up a blank Texas Two-Step game card, and the second, to return with the same article marked with the properly chosen numbers. The key, of course, to that proper choice lay in what I did with the card in the interim between those two visits to the prophet. This mystery, dear Diary, my only reader, I will reveal to you, but you must swear, never, not ever, under pain of erasure or immolation, to divulge my mystic machinations. (A hooded, heavily breathing figure, about the size of a standing Kodiak Bear, places a leathery hand on a Guttenberg Bible and breathes menacingly, like Hamlet confronted by his father's ghost: "I swear.") Well, Diary, it's like this. I come home. I carefully secure the doors against any accidental intruders. I retire to the porcelain throne room and turn on the overhead heat lamp. (Long-time Houstonians will understand that the house has no real need for central heat and these kinds of local warmer-uppers are situated in strategic places throughout the older home.) Then, with hand-held hair dryer on the gentle setting, I carefully blow-dry my coif to the appropriate fluffiness. This feat meticulously accomplished, I sit on the commode — seat down, thank you very much, we don't want your sewer water sprites to interfere with this angelic procedure with their nefarious pranks or breath. "Shall we bite him on the arse, then, Nimrod." And Nimrod, giggling, "Naw, let's swizzle-stick 'em." Then — do not breathe a word of this to anybody — I take the quartz crystal out of its little pot where Esclarmonde had planted it, and repeating each number two or three times into the crystal (think of a radio announcer speaking into a mic.), I then gently sweep the number-impregnated crystal around my head, just at the tip, but not touching, the floating aureole. If a certain critical mass of follicles tingle, I judge the number to be a "live" possibility and write it down. I do this with all the possible numbers, gradually narrowing my choices down to the five available on the playing card. The procedure may take up to two hours, the chief danger being the gradual de-fluffing of the hair, which,

disables the antennae. Thus I have to check frequently in the cracked vanity cabinet mirror to verify that the equipment is in appropriate working order. When the card is completed, I return to the Hep-U-Sef and pay Mohammed his dollar, trying to act nonchalantly, making small talk, *etc.*, for the benefit mostly of the humorless security camera, so as not to tip him (Mohammed, that is) off concerning my sure-fire coming good fortune. The reader (Oh Diary, you morose logician) may find this procedure ludicrous, but on Saturday, I learned that my original play had matched 2 of the 4 “white” numbers (step one) and also the 1 “red” bonus number (step two). Winnings: \$20. Odds of accomplishing this by chance alone: 1:657. I collected my booty and returned home, closing the door quickly behind me, and crouching down and rubbing my hands together, Uriah Heap-like, while laughing in my best mad-scientist horror-show fashion. “Yes, yes, now my pretty little Lotty, you shall have me as your wedded husband, whether you will or no.” Little did I know at that moment that my fooling around with Esclarmonde’s crystal was beaming out a signal to another crystal, not so far from me, in that instant, geographically, but metaphysically inhabiting an immensely distant galaxy of awareness. But of that, more, if you’ll excuse the time-term, “later.”

Lest the reader scoff at my magi-like ritual to bend the laws of chance in my direction, and attribute my initial success to mere luck, I hasten to inform said skeptic that my second shot at hair-prognostication was even more spectacularly successful than my first. On Tuesday’s drawing, I matched all 4 white numbers, beating 1:53,900 odds and absconding for my efforts with \$1501. This was real dough, enough to keep me minimally financially afloat for nearly a month, and also enough to spike my previously colorless emotional punch with a drop of that super-intoxicant: hope. A possibly fatal turn of events, as I quickly realized, *vis-à-vis* any future winnings, in so far as my own fantasies definitely interfered with the objective stance that was necessary to read the hair signals. Plus, Mohammed, his interest dangerously piqued by my double-stroke of escalating good fortune, looked at me with his gentle, but probing eye, with what I perhaps imagined to be a minute spark of suspicion and maybe even sorrow. Had I violated some code of the poor by rigging the lotto in my favor, and was Mohammed some true prophet sent to offer my benighted soul a mild, but effective rebuke? I feared that this might be true, and resolved to frequent other convenience stores in the area — the Kwik King, the U-tote-Um, even the noisome FasGas — in short, any place where I could spread my purchases around. But a sudden fear struck me. While it was true that I might thus deceive various weary or indifferent graveyardshift clerks, I would not long fool the State Lottery Board. They would surely become suspicious of any run of good fortune that gyrated so wildly from the laws of pure chance and come ‘a callin’ on their suitor with less than congratulations. What to do? Go for one big jackpot and call it quits? Play only intermittently and try not to be too accurate in my prognostications? Considering my intense need for income, and the inevitability of hair growth, the dilemma was critical, and one that my ordinary brain-functioning — such as it was (is) after all my misadventures as a Scientist of Awareness, was (is) far too meager to resolve. Then it hit me — why not consult the hair-oracle for answers? I would have to pose my questions in a binary “yes or no” format, since neither hair nor crystal condescended to actually speak — at least not yet — but I was sure I could, through cunning linguistic

permutations, force the hand of the infinite to withdraw its shadowy veil. I retired to the throne room for consultations with the Divine. What happened next surprised me.

Now I am not, I think the reader will agree from a brief survey of my attire and hair-do, a particularly vain person. But in order to establish just the right relationship between my elongated protein strands and the infinite, I was compelled (repelled?) to spend a fair amount of time gazing into the bathroom vanity cabinet mirror. Perhaps the image of Me preparing Myself as a cosmic antenna or the sustained heat of the blow dryer had a mesmerizing effect on my still-supposedly diseased, or perhaps by now, non-existent brain. But this intense gazing on my decidedly weird noggin began to manifest some rather wacky, one might even say down-right scary, images in the reverse-duplicating glass. I began to notice that the faint burn-scar from Lamar's barbecue grill, that part of it not hidden by my fluffy beard, was something more than just a grid. It was a grid with some kind of writing on it! No letters or glyphs that I could interpret, but like those strange symbols that I had painted on and painted out on my walls, they were marks definitely denoting an originating intelligence. What the cosmic point of this dermatographia might be, I could hardly guess. But one thing I did determine was that its appearance and disappearance had some connection with the weather. Houston's weather is often a monotonous affair on a day to day basis. Throughout a summer of 6 or 8 months duration, every day there are highs in the mid-nineties, humidity in the mid-nineties, with some fair chance of showers or thundershowers in the afternoon. Winter offered fogs, mists, rain, intermittent seeps of hazy sun, or sometimes whole weeks of one or the other of these phenomenon dominating the climatological envelope. Yet on an hour to hour basis, prediction was far more dicey. I mean, it could be raining on one side of the street while the sun was beating down on the other. I quickly discovered that my little face-grid was a very precise local meteorological barometer, with an about a quarter of an hour lead time between face-script and cloud drip. Interesting. But how useful is this? And do I really want my face to become intermittently externally tattooed with strange writing. I mean, Texans are xenophobic enough, and it might not be all that safe to show up among them with some diabolic scripture on my face that forecasts the weather. As I stared at this phenomenon, for two or three hours at a stretch, I am ashamed to admit, running back and forth from the bathroom to the living room to check the weather, and occasionally making use of the shattered armoire mirror to match face to sky, something even stranger began to occur. Oh God, I do long again for normalcy — to go to work, to bitch about the climate, to grouse about politics, to gab about them Astros or them Rockets, even to rage about the constant traffic snarls and smog — anything at all to stop the spate of these hyper-natural doublings, which have long since lost the luster of wonder and now are beginning to make me pine for my days of cosmic separation. But it was not to be. The Rock Gazing exercises had turned me into a friggin' freakshow, and this new outbreak of bizarreness added another brick to my load of mental misery, a brick that nearly broke my already much-swayed back. As I looked into the mirror, trying to figure out the implications of this new outrage, staring intently at the indecipherable, but definitely intriguing writing on my face-grid, the skin beneath this scripture began to seem more and more — how can I say this without invoking an image that it is so utterly grotesque, so positively Gray's Anatomish — well, out with it: TRANSPARENT! Layer after layer of derma, muscle, connective tissue, nerves, blood

vessels began to crystallize, as it were, and eventually dissolve completely, leaving only the image of a skull. My head appeared in the mirrors (the shattered armoire one or the cracked vanity cabinet one) as a crystal skull. And this was not an image only, but something that I could check with my hands — a hairless, eyeless, fleshless thing that was a clearish quartz-like substance, which nevertheless had inclusions buried within it: stars, bubbles, fissured planes, the most fascinating internal features capturing the external light and reflecting it about its luminous depths in the most hypnotic and lavish displays. It was beautiful! Utterly beautiful! And the jaw was perfectly movable, so that I wondered if it might talk, and if the voice that issued forth would sound anything like my own. And then “Methought it lifted up its head, and did address itself to motion, like as it would speak,” so I ran to the rumpus room, fetched a mini-cassette recorder that I still had from my old consulting days. Then I dashed back into the bathroom (clearer viewing here, than in the spider-cracked armoire glass) and watched and listened in — I must admit — delighted awe, as the skull began its exposition.

The Exposition of the Crystal Skull

The Severance Experiment has been adjudicated by those whose authority is sovereign to your local Monad and determined to be a dangerous failure. We distant progenitors of this planet's life and intelligence have therefore already set events irrevocably into motion to end the S.E. To most, these words will serve as warning, to others, though very many fewer, they will harken the arrival of cosmogenesis, and be received with thanksgiving. The fiat cannot now be rescinded, although the harshness of its effects can be mitigated by proper attunement or atonement to the galactic resonance. The crystal skulls, according to the prophecies, are now being activated to speak, and further, their family, long-scattered across the Earth's now decimated surface, are being reassembled, so that their collective wisdom can begin the final irradiation. The wayward scientists, politicians and business moguls have gouged the body of the Mother for the ooze of her sacred descendents and punctured the sheathes of atomic particles to release terrible apostates. And now the extinctions and wholesale slaughter of agents and adepts have tipped the scale of compassion in the direction of retribution. Mankind has incurred a debt that can no longer be paid except through self-immolation, and the very oil squeezed from the planet's womb and the particles torn from the vaporous envelope of the aether will be the instruments of reprisal. To him who has fomented death, death now will come. There will be a great splitting from inside the earth as a new signal is received by the crystal icosahedron of the planet's core, and the magnetic spirals that orient the globe to her galactic masters will realign the poles. The icecaps will melt and the seas rise over the land. The atmosphere, now shredded by a sick civilization's radiations will no longer shield the surface from cosmic ones. The disfigurement of humankind will be excised with a terrible scalpel and the agents and the adepts will rejoice to see their sufferings, humiliations and sacrifices brought to a blissful conclusion.

But as the cleansing fires are unleashed, some will be given protection from the final communal psychosis. Those stripped by the culture of resources will find riches. Those emptied of knowledge will be poured full. Those shorn of hope will be the beacons of new light. To those who were least will be given the keys to the deeps and the heights and they who accepted sorrow as their meat shall be without sorrow in the era of sorrow.

For truly, to them has come the ultimate gift. For they shall be masters of words and of time . . .

At this juncture, there came a furious and incessant ringing of the front door bell, so that the skull not only ceased its recitation, but rescinded its presence beneath the veils of my ordinary, ridiculous flesh. Diva was scratching furiously at the bathroom door, and I deemed from this conjunction of events that I should go and see who was pestering me with such insistence. I should add, before exterior events get the better of this narration, that all through the Skull's exposition, I could skry, in its light-infected depths, the most amazing, wonderful and apocalyptic visions. I saw rivers of borealis-like light streaming from a dark mouth at the heart of the Milky Way. I saw great mirrored towers fall in billows of smoke and flame. I saw two men in antique dress destroying a magical pentagram on an alabaster table and heard one of them cry out in a tongue that could not have been human. And I saw a Mesoamerican pyramid whose stone steps suddenly came alive with a shadow serpent, which slowly crawled down from its crown and disappeared into the receptive ground, while thousands watched in awe. Catastrophes of unspeakable scope and variety: wars, floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, volcanoes, famine, drought, epidemic disease — the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse becoming a virtual cavalry charge — erupted across the planet, and I, in minute and excruciating detail, saw and heard and felt them all. And at last, I saw, in the midst of this holocaust, poor, ol' G. Dubya's idiot face, twisted at first in smirking pride, and then in rage and then in destitute grief, his head splitting between the eyebrows and sprouting a cornstalk that blossomed into a mushroom cloud. And all these visions, although taking place inside the skull had the characteristic of utter timelessness, so that I could mentally enter into them, stroll around inside them, study their every nuance of wonder, strangeness or agony. And this timeless skrying, even though the skull had withdrawn and my fretful body was rushing to quell the rapidly ringing door bell, continued unabated, drifting in the most leisurely fashion in a mental cloud that seemed never to have suffered the ignominy of birth nor would ever submit to the fate of dissolution. This cloud, this vision, was simply there, and would always be there, whenever I felt prompted to direct my attention to it. But at this moment, I had reached the door, and opening it, was greeted by a box of fruit and vegetables, which suddenly was thrust into my midsection, and which caused me to stagger back, and tripping over Diva, who let out an angry yowl, I fell on my butt in a torrent of bananas, mangos, spinach, carrots, parsnips, grapes and cabbage. I had been bowled over by a cornucopia, and peering up from my supine position, I viewed the cause of my descent: a wiry middle-aged woman in black stretch-pants and a hot-pink faux-mohair over-sized turtleneck, her platinum blond hair pouffed out from her head and filled with the in-streaming afternoon winter sunlight. This stranger had been holding the box against the door while furiously ringing the bell, and my sudden opening sprung the fruit and vegetable springe and caught me in its springing. I was flabbergasted, and breathless, but my attacker/benefactor was not. She looked down on my fruited planes and said: "My name is 'Star' Johnson-Moser, and Max says, 'Hi.' Your presence is requested at the home of Joann and Carl Parks, time, place and directions are in the box." And with that, she turned on her running-shoe heal and proceeded to depart. I scrambled to my feet and chased her down the sidewalk, but she would reveal no more. Except that, when I pleaded my total ignorance, she just laughed and said, you were talking to one of

them when I rang the doorbell, so don't play dumb." Then, before she jumped in her car and sped away, she pointed at my get-up — still the ashen-black sweatpants and bubblegum-hued sweatshirt, and said: "Look, we're twins." And that was that, except for when I protested the gift of the food, and proffered, rather weakly, I am afraid, to recompense her, she said: "Don't be silly, it's a sacrifice to the Skull." A new door was about to open in my life, and like the others that I had unwittingly strolled through in pursuit of God-knows-what state of awareness, it promised to bury me in far more questions than answers.

I retreated to the house, gathered my bounty, and appropriately stowed it. When I returned to the living room, I looked at myself again in the armoire mirror. My hair had fallen. My face was the face that anyone might have. No crystal skull. And even the grid-scar had faded into temporary oblivion. I did notice, however, that there seemed to be fewer cracks in the armoire mirror. Could it be that it was somehow "healing?" I was too tired to care what that might mean. I sat on the floor of the living room, breathing quietly and stroking Diva as darkness and a dull rain fell in tandem. After a while, I went to the rumpus room and commenced writing on the Rock Gazing Exercises. It was 9:36 p.m. and I had just finished penning the words "And she patted me on the head, as if I were I long-lost pet returned at last from a dark and perilous journey. And she said that now I was ready to learn the first of the rules" when I heard the furtive, but distinct sound of scratching, this time coming from the back door. Finally, I went to answer it, with Diva, tail-up and attentive, leading me through the darkened house. When I opened the door, the scratching stopped and a desultory whining commenced. There, in the dim light and cold drizzle, fawning forlornly at my feet, was Lamar's Rott Weiler, John Wayne, scrawny and scarred and scared. Diva sneered her disgusted approval, and I let him in. I knew it was part of the plan. It was the 29th, and he had been 40 days in the urban wilderness and had now returned, not with a bang nor a bark, but a dismal whimper.

Interregnum: Eighteenth Week's Summary

They saw, and could see instantly far, they succeeded in knowing all that there is in the World. When they looked, instantly they saw all around them and they contemplated in turn the arch of heaven and the round face of the Earth. The things hidden (in the distance) they saw all, without first having to move; at once they saw the World . . .

Popol Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life

For close to two weeks I have been only marginally enjoying — as an out-patient (interesting term) — the rather abrasive hospitality of Herman Hospital, and enduring the dubious distinction of lab rat, a.k.a. 'rodent model', in an extensive battery of neurological tests. I have been officially questioned, prodded, and threaded through a number of infernal machines at a cost to the County of I don't know how much revenue, and with a zeal and alacrity which seems to me to be exaggerated out of all proportion to my piddling court case. As the days rolled on, the number of professionals involved in

my humiliation snowballed to the size of a small army, and their treatment of me evolved from perfunctory to what might modestly be referred to as “awe,” if not downright veneration. As I was wheeled from one degradation to another, I had the distinct, perhaps paranoid, impression that shadowy clouds of curiosity seekers were hovering discreetly in my wake. And when I left Doctor Guerney’s office after my final interview, a number of doctors, technicians, nurses, and even clergy scattered suddenly along the corridor as if they had been pressed against the door, eavesdropping. I thought I heard someone whisper “It’s him,” but everyone turned tail and pretended to be busy when my nervous eye roved the vicinity. There was a lot of sudden and pointless animation and although furtive glances stole a gander at my person, no gaze was bold enough to linger and touch my own. It was curious, but then, I have grown accustomed to the curious, and I attributed these weirdnesses to the multitude of other weirdnesses, which now constituted my Rock Gazing self. The texts, which in the evenings, kept pouring out of me in surprising fashion, were saturated with inanities, and I was having more and more trouble sorting fact from fiction as my own life spiraled off the map of consensus reality. I wondered, somewhat alarmed, if the tests had revealed the presence of the crystal skull, and if my hallucination had some basis in physiological fact, but that notion was too absurd even for me to entertain. As I departed the hospital, leaving herds of not very discreet gawkers in my scent trail, I reviewed my interaction with Dr. Guerney and tried to put a positive spin on it. I was more than a little tuckered out by all this medical attention and I may be imperfectly remembering what he said, but I am pretty sure that he told me: “Pineoblastoma. Tests negative.” “Does this mean,” I asked, “that the cancer is gone?” He hemmed and hawed a bit, but said that I could assure myself on that point. Then, I grew a bit fretful, and asked how this would affect my court case? He answered that even though my MSE (Medical Status Exam) was normal, he believed that there would be no trouble — “from a physiological standpoint” — in arguing for my incapacity. He even offered to testify in person, “in light,” he said, ‘of certain non-standard PET and CAT scan readings.” Ignoring what the term “non-standard” might mean, I was touched by his very gracious offer — considering the insignificant nature of the charges still pending against me. I had developed a distaste for doctors in my first go-round with them, but this man’s personal involvement was beginning to elevate the entire profession in my esteem.

I had a whole personal history that coded “being the center of attention” as something synonymous with “target”, or “bullseye”. So I cannot honestly say that I enjoy the role, and therefore I slink from sight as often as possible whenever the spotlight exposes me. My money, legal and health problems all followed this pattern, and since every professional group in the culture had drawn a bead on my outcast person and had made their mark too, I was beginning to feel pretty well ventilated. Plus, as an additional insult, now I was a County charity case, and had to have the taxpayers stand for the pecuniary part of my riddling. I did not require nor desire any further such veneration. However, there was still the issue of the Crystal Skull Coven, which had actually been “sacrificing” to me by bringing me vittles, and now the time had arrived for me to make my scheduled appearance at JoAnn Parks’ parlor and there to partake in what Star Johnsen-Moser called “The Ritual.” She said that I was being honored. But I could not

help but feel oppressed. Why was I being garlanded and fattened, unless it was for the vates' knife?

“The Ritual” was scheduled to begin at sunset, and I pulled up to the Parks' place in the mossy waning late of a late Houston afternoon, which was muggy, in spite of the season, and steaming in the mists of a pause between week-long intermittent rains. The house was in one of those older suburban neighborhoods where the street numbers spiral into the thousands, as if they were running to the end of the world. It was hard to see at first, as it was set far back on a lot forested with tall, southern pines, and shielded on either side by thick walls of some kind of hybrid sanguinedblossomed oleander. The lawn, sprucely clipped and green as emerald, was subtly littered with orange pine needles and the last purple petals of shedding Redbuds. One of those low-set, rambling, ranch-style affairs, the Parks' domicile was built of venerable tan brick, then pressed flat by a knobby roof of thick wooden shakes. Everything around it, except for the oleanders and the pink and white splashes of blooming azaleas, wore the same mossy patina as the dying day. The other strange thing about the place, was that the roof of its enormous three-car attached garage — the cars were parked *outside*, in the driveway — was a thicket of TV antennae, which were out of place in a neighborhood where even the telephone cables were buried. The fact that these antique-looking armatures were also festooned with streamers of Spanish moss, did not add to my sense of comfort as I made my long, long walk up the black asphalt driveway, for it seemed to me that their spindly poles and cross-bars were the riggings for the tattered sails of a ghost-ship, whose eerie pirates must be lurking below deck and hatching out nefarious plots against the living. I did not like these antennae, they make me want to mix metaphors as I try to give at least a provisional account of my experience, grabbing words from different neurological levels to somehow capture both the look and feel of a place which evoked from me so many uneasy emotions. The ship, the house, the cave reminded me of those infernal landscapes depicted in the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch, where strange organic/inorganic structures protrude dreamily from some world of consciousness where things are neither fish nor fowl, alive nor dead, real nor unreal. I was struggling also with the sensation that I had seen all this before, but now the scale was all wrong. Madly, I remembered the place as being much bigger — or was it that I was so much smaller? — a fingerling of a person in a world of giants. Was I going to find hell or heaven here, and would I know the difference, both places or states of awareness being equally foreign and bizarre. I felt also like I must be entering a fairy forest, one inhabited by a family of immensely well-off trolls, who had gained their prosperity by guarding bridges and crossroads, and then fleecing and devouring those naïve passers-by who could not answer their infernal riddles.

In order to avoid the embarrassment of being seen emerging from such a dinky antiquity, I had parked my car a few houses away, and now I shuffled to the house and down it's long, wide driveway with the hampering gait dictated by my new, and florabundant attire. For I was transporting — in addition to my nebulous body — a tent of corduroys that Frank Miller had given me as hand-me-downs from his grown — very grown — son. I hadn't wanted to show up in my grubby sweat-pants and scalded-pig-pink sweatshirt, but I was feeling more than a little self-conscious in this get-up, which fit me like the

proverbial sugar sack on a match. With the short, sliding steps of one who was at least metaphorically manacled, I drug my leaden heart towards this crouching citadel, its windows unlit, its porch beetled in darkness. I was also singing, that is, my movements were making those zit-zit sounds which the corrugated fabric is so infamous for, and I felt like I was clumsily commandeering a voluminous brown cloud through the gathering green gloom. Above me, the limbs of the pines were alive with a spendthrift wealth of birdsong, but to me, these late-day squabbles for roost-space seemed more ominous than cheering. When I reached the door, I paused a moment to let my burgeoning garments settle around me and I took a few, deep “conscious” breaths before I rang the bell.

Green was the theme of Joann Parks’ attire, a once hip, but now outmoded, shiny chartreuse jump suit, with bellbottom pants and some sort of tassels stuck all over it like those which go-go girls in the 60’s might have worn to emphasize their sexual exuberance. “Furred with foins,” I was thinking, albeit worried and deflated foins. My hostess was small and svelte, and had a body and a quick, birdlike way of movement that seemed far younger than her face, although her face was pretty, delicately featured, and masked with an alabaster white skin. Her lips were fine, thin and red. Her coif was platinum blonde, a kind of hair-hat as tall as a shako, and flawlessly arranged in a spray-fixed bees’ nest above an intelligent forehead that was as smooth as moonstone. She did not turn on a light, but instead, raised a candle. I was warmly greeted, with a gracious southern accent, but with a warmth that was carefully confined to whispers, and before I could answer, my hostess gestured me to silence. She also asked that I remove my shoes. I winced inwardly at this, but swallowed my embarrassment and complied. There were six or seven other pairs already neatly aligned in the entryway, all belonging to women. My paint-dabbled, run-down oxfords intruded on them, like a brace of flabby belches barging into a genteel conversation. I was ashamed to display so many toes through the holes in my ancient argyles, which were more like spats, actually, than socks, but Joann, barefoot herself, and quite business-like, took no perceptible notice of my raggedness and merely stealthily led me through the house. Some natural light was still seeping around the heavily draped windows, and as we glided through a museum piece, un-sat-in, front parlor, its chairs and divan fortified against time by clear-plastic slip-covers, the zit-zit singing of my corduroy punctuated the sacred silence with its incongruent and ridiculous commentary. I smelled Lemon Pledge, Pinesol and incense, and I smelled something else, too, something that I had brought with me into this sanctuary, and which I hoped would go undetected by the other celebrants.

The house was dark, but I was keyed up enough to notice that in addition to Joann’s guttering candle, a faint increase in natural illumination pulsed round us as we moved down a long hallway lined with shadowy family photographs — faces, that in some nebulous way, I seemed to recognize. Then I saw, to my uneasy delight, that these were the signed publicity stills of old Television personalities — Uncle Milty, Dave Garroway, Buffalo Bob and others, slipping by me in the uncertain light as furtively and as familiarly as my own memories. At last, the hall opened into a built-on section at the back of the house, which was odder than any add-on den or rumpus room that I could ever have expected in suburban Texas! The source of natural light was apparent now, as this seemingly perfectly square room was enclosed on its west side with a wall of glass

and glass sliding doors, A verdant glow from the expiring sun crept through another pine forest in the deep back lot and filled the room with seagreen undulations. What a strange world had swallowed me! There was no furniture, no other windows, and the floor, carpeted with a lime-green shag, seemed not only to have been vacuumed, but combed, like those Japanese rock gardens attended by transcendent Zen monks. It made me feel self-conscious just to step on it, as if I were profaning a painstakingly preserved and cosmic book of souls. The walls of the room were hung with huge, colorful silks, each one portraying, as best as I could make out, those black deities spawned by the savage mysteries of ancient Tibetan Buddhism. I was surrounded by enormous monsters, who danced on human corpses, while copulating with their wild and skull-necklaced consorts. The silks wavered slightly as if these gods were inhaling, with enormous and terrifying breaths, the resinous incense that permeated the atmosphere. And stranger yet, in each of the room's four corners, huge circular columns were erected, floor to ceiling, but not, it was obvious, as architectural supports. No, these columns, armored with a dark red metal and inscribed with a feral oriental script, were balanced upon some kind of silent and unseen bearings, which caused them to continually spin, two clockwise, two counter-clockwise, as if each one were determined to negate the motion of its twin. From the ceiling, which was painted black, or an indigo so dark that it outblacked black, there dangled here and there what seemed to me to be the acoustical spiders of very sophisticated microphones or perhaps cameras. Finally, the whole room was centered around a kind of sunken omphalos, a step-down circular sink, whose sides were now serving as a carpeted bench for the celebrants of The Ritual. All turned their faces to me as we entered this sacred space. All smiled. None spoke. Feeling sheepish, I returned their silent greetings with a silly lamb-like innocuousness, trying to whitewash my face with an expression chosen to suppress my maleness, and to inoffensively supplicate their favor. I tried to look bland, and, if possible, even inert, but I was suffocating in a welter of anxiety. And yet, as practiced as I am in the arts of self-consciousness, as addicted as I am to nursing my own emotions, I quickly had to abandon all attention to any private feeling, save that of wonder, as I viewed, for the first time, those woman circled round their little thelos.

What a spectacle was here! Like my hostess, each woman in the circle was dressed in one of those same, tight-fitting, retro jumpsuits, each suit, shiny and tasseled with foins. Yet each celebrant was attired in a different color: red, orange, yellow, blue, indigo, violet — taken together — a rainbow. And more amazing yet — and far, far more weird — was that each celebrant was also coifed with the same platinum bouffant as their queen. Like those odd stylizations of Egyptian princesses or space aliens, it seemed as if these plasticized dos were somehow constructed to create a hair-bathysphere for some supernumerary intelligence that was not wholly of this world. My own feathery, whitish locks and beard ascended in eerie amazement. In the center of the circle gleamed a crystal skull and a pair of articulated crystal wands. The skull was slightly larger than human size, inscrutably, but forcefully fashioned, magnetic as all get out, and composed, almost as if from two materials, some parts rather milky and opaque, while others were clear, except for a multitude of dazzling and volcanically active inclusions. This room and its denizens left me not only stupefied, but quite literally paralyzed. Yet in a moment, I was jolted back into pulse-ripping sensitivity by a touch on my shoulder. The

touch was light, but to me, as I was sinking in my ocean of hyperawareness, it packed the electrifying wallop of a cattle-prod. When I wheeled round to see what or who this might be, I suddenly found myself tumbling into the clear gaze of Star Johnsen-Moser, her light brown eyes twinkling and swimming with golden highlights, which seemed to me to be more heavenly than earthly, and imbued with an almost articulate message. Star was wearing a cape, wide as a tent and as enveloping as a poncho, its satin surface a gleaming bridal gown white. Before I could respond to any of this, Star had deftly removed this mantle and had draped it around my shoulders, and then, taking me by the hand, she led me down, down to the center of the circle. There I was seated like some exalted Llama, cross-legged within my moonwhite robe of office, and given the skull to cradle in my arms. In the same instant, JoAnn had assumed her place in the circle, while Star, vested now only in a tight faux leopard-skin leotard, snatched the two quartz crystals, one in each hand, and twirling and whip-snapping her pointed wands, activated in turn every color of the rainbow. Each woman had a drum, a rattle, a bell, or some little copper cylinder with a spool and a metal ball chained to it, and with these instruments, and their assembled voices, the seven women commenced the swirling and rhythmic furor of “The Ritual”.

The concert began softly at first — whispering drum beats, a quiet sandgrain-like tumbling of rattles, the subtle clacking of those odd-looking maces or spools. And the voices! Some guttural, as if from a single throat they mystically rumbled complete chords, and some as sweet as the high-pitched warblings of birds. The music, if music it could be called, had about it more of nature than artifice — the nature of round stones being rolled through finer gravel in the opulent current of a stream or of wind shaking tall trees with slightly metallic leaves or of seawaves, sequestered, sibilant, threading their way through baffles of waterworn caverns. And there were animal cries, too, distant, forlorn, joyous, like those of the roars of jaguars shrieking through midnight jungles, or of long-armed, amorous primates swinging howlingly through twilight forests, or of exotic parrots whistle-squawking as they ascended in showers of dazzling chromatics to greet a summer dawn. While this music rose in intensity and volume, Star Johnsen-Moser danced round me, the motions of her lithe, almost elastic, limbs imitating what seemed to be stylized stalking and pouncing gestures, her arms and hands, clawed with the articulated crystals, tearing at imaginary prey. Sometimes she stabbed, left and right, at one or another of the rainbow woman, who in that instant, lifted her voice, her drumming, rattling or winding out of the surrounding euphony. Then a new emotional barbarity endowed with the most gaudy genius unspooled from the collective brilliance, as if from the great maelstrom of the living sun a mighty storm had flared. As the dance continued, growing more elaborate and swift, and seeming to entrain the musicians into more entrancing exertions, Star began also to thrust her lightwands towards the heavens, and, as I looked up to the darkening ceiling, it seemed to open wide jaws to reveal a night sky alive with constellations. I was facing east towards the front of the house, the fading light of the misty dusk pulling away at my back with an almost visceral sensation, and my one thought, my one prayer — like a man stumbling through a jungle stalked by predators — was this: ‘stay conscious, stay conscious, for God’s sake, whatever you do, do not slip into trance.’ I tried to train my attention on particulars, on this or that movement of Star, on this or that face of one of the musicians, on my own pulse, on my

own hands, on the heavy skull I was cradling. But trance was as thick as syrup in this space and as deep as a deep ocean trench. I wanted to turn my head so that I could fasten my sight, at least tangentially, on the twilight gray-green forest of the deep back lot. I wanted to catch some glimpse of the departing day, or to see those rainbow women who were arranged out of my sight behind me. I wanted, I needed, somehow, to complete the scene. But I found, to my amazement and dismay, that I could not turn my head, and like a man in the throes of a nightmare, trying to flee a pursuing beast, my panicked intention to move only strengthened my paralysis. The anxiety that consumed me in this moment suddenly accelerated to an unbearable pitch. It was as if an executioner had begun the backswing of his ax, and in a moment its whistling decent would sever my head. And this was not a metaphor only, for the executioner's breath was on my back, and I could see his many bloodthirsty kinsmen ringed round me on the walls. All of those silken Tankas were rousing to life, their black deities chanting and dancing for my blood — another corpse, another skull, to add to their infernal collections. My panic had pushed me to a verge of terror wherein my consciousness was suspended, like a delicate fabric stretched to the utmost and about to be ripped to pieces. I, or whatever was still left of me, was stretched between my consciousness of the room — its chanting women, and the dancing Star — and some other world, the world which contained the executioner whose falling ax stroke would shortly end my life. I wanted to cry out, but I had no voice, and in a last moment of desperation, I drew a deep breath, in the manner of my practiced conscious breathing exercises, a breath, that seemed not only to be dredged forth from the pit of my lungs, but from the pit of the Earth itself. And in the steady, long exhale of this airy life, a marvelous mutation transpired. As the breath escaped me, its exfoliation transfigured, in passing, every cell of my body. Suddenly, I was no longer a being of flesh and blood, but a tumbling assemblage of coiling globules, entity-like crystalline forms that danced in the space that my body had just vacated. These forms, these beings, interacted with my surroundings like organs of perception, which could penetrate the hollow of the room, and even the adjacent neighborhood with a spherical sentience. It was as if I had suddenly become all eyes — but eyes that could feel, smell, taste and hear! The women behind me, the backyard falling away into the dying light — all these things that I had just a moment before been irrationally longing to perceive, now became perfectly pellucid. And not only these things, but the whole of the surrounding Houston neighborhood, stretching laterally in all directions, and completing its outwardly evolving sphere into the depths of earth and far into the sky. I was breathless. But also, somehow, I was completely lucid, and for the moment, as calm as a king, sitting upon a throne, and meditating on the passing of a parade of devoted and noble subjects. It seems strange to say, but everything that I perceived — excepting the manner of my perception, which was simultaneously spherical, microscopic and telescopic — was absolutely ordinary. But this ordinariness was etched as brilliantly in the fading dusk as diamonds arranged against a dark, velvet foil. I saw the birds settling down for the night in the branches of the pines, and I saw how nits and lice fled through their feathers as they preened. I saw a Rottweiler that reminded me of my own, lying in forlorn exile in the neighboring yard. Among the forest of hair fibers constituting the dog's fur, female fleas were laboriously squeezing out strings of translucent eggs. A ratfaced subteen boy, systematically keying all the expensive cars along the curb, stopped his bicycle and was looking at my antique Fiesta, peering into its ratty interior, as if there, he might discover something about its

occupant, and why he was invading this upscale, suburban neighborhood. The boy had a round, gray stone in his pocket that made my heart jump. In one house, I saw a black judge's robe haunting a closet, and in an inner pocket, I distinctly saw a Bible, with a curious cover of camouflage. A past-middle-aged couple sat on a couch in a sunken den, watching TV, he, stout, with his jowly face buried to his liver-spotted forehead and hairy ears in a brandy snifter, she white-haired and august, imperious even in the flickering cathode light. The bloodred veins of the out-of-place marble fireplace with its kitschy oil-derrick-shaped andiron set were so beautiful that they brought tears to my eyes. In a bedroom, far in the back of the house, their twenty-something daughter was making love with her shaggy bearded boyfriend. In that young passion, I saw the shape of delight that had spawned the whole shimmering world. Deer brouzed on prize hybrid roses in deep pine gloom. In other houses, I saw people eating, using the bathroom, reading, staring into computer screens. Everyone's intestines bulged with the chankings of undigested cows, pigs, lambs, fish and fowl. Here, I thought, was suffering, as intricate in its toils as leagues of hardening arteries or as hecatars of feedlots and slaughter houses. And I saw, too, boxes of books in attics, with roaches grazing on the sugary glue of their bindings. *The Poetical Works of Spenser, Remembrance of Things Past, A History of Costume, Mind and Madness in Ancient Greece* — and title after title of other volumes — all quietly, inhumanly, incessantly being consumed. In the triple garage attached to the Parker's house, amidst banks of what appeared to be antique televisions and computers, I saw a man at a console, like those found in recording studios, and before him, on a close-circuit astrolab, sat a miniature replica of my own house, complete with tiny nanorobotic effigies of myself, Diva and John Wayne! The effieges moving as if alive! All of these mysteries gripped me, but I could not hold my attention in one place long enough to decipher them, so compelling were the rhythms that drove me, sweeping me from one marvel to another, as if my perceptions were being spun in an ever-accelerating centrifuge. At the back of the Parker's lot, I saw a little cottage huddled under towering oleanders and crêpe myrtles, its eves and porch blanketed beneath cushions of honeysuckle. And in that house, I was astounded to see men in saffron robes with strange plumed hats, chanting the very chant and playing those very same wild instruments whose sounds were now lifting me out of the confines of my body. Near that little house, under a pile of pine needles and leaves, a diamondback rattler lay coiled, and below him, the moist soil seemed to hum with electrified life. It was as if the patterns of this serpent's scales were a script that spelled out the planet's dark future. In the earth, I saw the things of the earth, innumerable micro-organisms, the matted hair-like roots of the Saint Augustine lawns, pathways of the sun into the soil, which were as breathtaking in their intricate and delicate beauty as those exquisite veins of marble. In the sky, I saw the things of the sky. Mosquitoes, flies, gnats, weaving their airy ways through every knobby, foined, and tassled spore and pollengrain imaginable. The shapes of clouds and the water jewels comprising them, overwhelmed me with their swirling ecstasies, and above those clouds, the long, raking rays of the sun made rainbows hundreds of miles long as the Earth turned away from the light and into the blackness of deep space. And then from the east, the first stars spiked the iris-spangled upper atmosphere with messages from beyond time.

I had been so utterly enthralled by the prodigies of awareness that were blazing around me, that for some unknown space of time, I was oblivious to what had been gradually materializing right in front of me. But at last, this new intensity had drilled its way into my consciousness, and before I could really notice how it had happened, Star Johnsen-Moser's face was nose to nose with mine, the gaze of those fabulous gold-starred eyes penetrating my own, while her voice, now flying solo, but having gathered all the intensity of the groups' polyphonies and multiplied them a thousandfold, was chanting "Ol sonf vors g, gohó Iad Balt, lansh calz vonpho; Sobra zol ror i ta nazpsad, graa ta malprg . . ." and in my head a thunderous voice was booming: "I reign over you, says the God of Justice, in power exalted above the firmaments of wrath; in Whose hands the sun is as a sword, and the moon as a penetrating fire." I had little time to ponder what this might mean, because in a trice, Star had lifted me up by the hair, and the rainbow women had mobbed me, dragging me into the back yard with furious intent. All those globules of floating perception shrunk back to flesh and blood with a withering cry, and now, I was all too confined in my body's fragile physicality, and alive to every assault. Pain now tore, bit, crushed and scorched me from every angle at once. My bridal gown robe was torn from me, as well as my other clothes, and my naked shame was exposed to the most savage cruelties. My shoulders were dislocated, and pulled back violently as a thick, rough log was inserted in their bow across my back, while my wrists were pulled forward, wrenched from their sockets and bound. In the same instant, an obsidian knife was pulled across my forehead and my scalp was ripped back and left dangling down my shoulders, and when I screamed, my tongue was grabbed and pierced by such a long skewer that I could not retract it back into my mouth. My knees and ankles were twisted and broken, and women armed with stone hammers shattered my kneecaps, cracked my ribs, broke my jaw. My teeth were extracted with blows and smashed to powder. The log that pinioned my arms was set aflame, and I was held viciously to the ground, while one of the women sliced into my gut and unspooled my bowels. The stench of blood, feces, vomit, burning hair and flesh roiled nauseatingly around me, my every pore bellowing with agony, while my one cry, my one wish, was for Death. Now that ax which had been whistling towards my throat this whole time, suddenly found its mark.

As soon as the head was severed, the White-Flower-Thing blossomed forth, indeed, with such vehemence that it hovered above the ground like a terrestrial moon. There was some concern that this might alert the neighbors, insofar as the glow was intense enough to illuminate the underbranches of the pines and arouse the roosting birds into a burst of melodious vocalizations. But nothing could be done about this, and time was of the essence, so we quickly forgot these secondary considerations as we were consumed by the intensity of our sacred task. We welcomed the light rain that began to fall, as it quickly washed the copious spillage of blood into the accepting earth. We expeditiously bore both head and body back to the cottage at the rear of the lot, where the Tibetans had already made the necessary preparations to receive it. The crystal skull was brought from the house, and the Snake King was retrieved from his nest in the leaf pile. Norbu Chen immediately began his vibrational surgery, transmitting the kundalini energy from the Snake King into Self-Decapitating-Dead-Creating-Thing, while the rest of us chanted the appropriate linguistic reality manipulations. The usual complications of resetting the DNA and untangling the spool of past-life Samsaras occupied us for several hours. Then,

too, the body's previous neuronal transfigurations presented some unique difficulties. Finally, the demons of Dark House, Razor House, Cold House, Jaguar House, the House of Fire and Bat House were appeased, and First Father was resurrected, although, his breath was still quite thick, and we knew that his consciousness was sunk in the deepest of torpors. It was near midnight when we carried Him back into the house, re clothed Him, and awaited, as casually as we could, His awakening.

“Have you gone to see the azaleas at Miss Ima Hogg’s Bayou Bend, yit?”

“We had a mind to, but run smack-dab into all that rodeo traffic from the trail riders, and decided that our own azaleas were pretty enough.”

“Well, they are right comely, Joanna.”

“Obliged, Marge, sweet of you to take notice.”

“Why grown men and women — doctors and law-yers, too, for the most part, as I hear tell — want to sit on a gol’darned horse for two weeks and eat out of a chuckwagon is beyond me anywho. “

“Carl won’t take me to the rodeo anymore, cuz I read a book durin’ the E-vents.”

“Cathy, she’s worsn’ that. Cheers for the beeves, that girl. Thought she was gonna get us throwed out of the place last year when a youngin’ got spilled by a calf. The boy was hurt some, too. And she yellin’ ‘OOOwee’ for the heifer.’ Lots of ol’ Texas money turned their heads darkly in the direction of our party, if you get my drift . . .”

Well, I was just beginning to get her drift, rousing groggily from a stupor so deep that for all I knew, I might have been mortored in a tomb. I was curled up on the floor like a sleeping cat or baby, covered with the white satin thing. My mouth felt cottony and my head was as heavy as a stone. That smell I had brought with me was still there, too, and I knew what to call it now, but it was a word that I dared not whisper, even to myself. It took a long time after these snippets of conversation had penetrated my sleep-fog before I could actually place where I was and who these women were, assembled at a little buffet table at the back of the room, eating bon bons and making chit-chat. There was a man with them, too, now, who looked vaguely familiar to me, but I couldn’t place from where.

“Anywho, GaGa’s got a notion to go to Aree-zon-a. Got some bid’ness to attend to with the Doctor, so I reckon we’ll be skippin’ Bayou Bend.”

“That I-talian feller, you done met on vacation last year?”

“The same.”

“But look’yher, Star, our boy is just now stirrin’ to life, lookin’ none the worse for wear, and radiant as a pretty white flwr.”

All the women turned towards me, and laughed.

In spite of the closeness of the night, I was cold. My hair was all matted and wet, too, as if it had been washed. I was wondering how that might have happened. Finally, I sat up in the center of the omphalos, a soft recessed spotlight washing over my somewhat soiled white coverlet. Then looking over at the rainbow women, I smiled meekly, as if I had just arrived from another world.