ROUND EARTH: OPEN SKY

by Kirpal Gordon
ROUND EARTH: OPEN SKY
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This edition is dedicated to
Scott Key Shelton, Jr., celebrant of the hunter's spirit.

ROUND EARTH: OPEN SKY is the second installment of Kirpal Gordon's TRIBE TRILOGY for OP. The other two are last year's edition, JAZZ TALES FROM THE GHOST REALMS, and the forthcoming TRACES OF LOVE.


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"Watch Out for Obscure Publications"
ROUND EARTH:
OPEN SKY

by
Kirpal Gordon

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BOOK ONE: THE DESERT

The memory of the nights I had drunk blood and eaten flesh under the full moon became firmly lodged in me: a compulsion, a menace always waiting there, a grief and a fear too ancient for me, a sorrow bred into the essence of the race, a lodestone too old for any individual to fight away from, or even to know and place accurately.

---Doris Lessing, Briefing for a Descent into Hell
A ghost town of abandoned boxcars sat under a setting sun. Looking down from above, the collection of rusted metal and broken track was nothing more than an old train wreck smashed and then smoothed into the shape of a horseshoe, dead center in the desert's graveyard. But from the point of view of the hunter who had just hiked up the side of an arroyo, taken his breath and looked to the west, there it was: a few drops of precious blood from a dying sun, an atoll risen up out of some ancient ocean, an oasis spilling out sounds and smells in the middle of nowhere, a magnet of unknown medicine drawing him closer.

The hunter crouched low on the rocky shelf.

Many things had appeared to him just like this. Popping up from under the ground, materializing from out of the wind or descending from the sky. Some were just the sun's shimmering sirens. But other apparitions sang his name, changed form in front of him, revealed to him their secrets, compelled his participation in their rituals.

He closed his eyes. When he looked again, the boxcars did not dissolve or burn up or fly away. They only remained, lit from behind by a crimson disk slipping below the horizon. Looking back over the ground he had traversed, he could detect neither marker nor trail. Only the same emptiness—inscrutable, ubiquitous, infinite.
He hid beneath an outcrop of rock and waited for a sign.

When the wind changed, he rescued the scent of meat frying. Deep within him a memory unlatched wide as a boxcar door: there he sits in a necktie and dress shirt at a table of maple wood eating Christmas dinner! He might have cried out for such a life, but he did not recognize himself or anyone else in that picture which danced as quickly as the last sliver of sun on his empty canteen and faded just as fast.

He knew that hunger and thirst were not the best hunting companions. But with the food’s powerful aroma turning his caution, like his stomach, inside out, he abandoned his hiding place and crawled closer.

“I found Mr. Spidee when I got you some water.”

The hunter swung around, set to pounce.

Above him, a brown-skinned boy with a clump of dark hair stood with his arms out, offering him a tin bowl from an old mess kit. The boy smiled.

“It didn’t die, see?”

The boy put one hand in the tin pot and pulled the daddy long legs out. He blew on his hand to get the insect into the air.

The hunter followed the downward flight of the spider with eyes awe-struck, for it seemed to him that it was he falling from the sky. As the ground come up on him, velocity gaining rapidly, his awe deepened because the earth proved to be no ground at all, only a mirror reflecting his own body dropping! And now upon impact, instead of breaking into pieces, he fell through the glass which was not mirror and death and gravity but still water, cool and delicious, ready to embrace him.
A hot stream of tears trickled down his cheeks. Stars began to dot the desert sky. He took the water to drink.

Later he imagined he drank about the same amount of water as he cried out. But now, moved by the bold little boy and the flight of the spider, he was grateful.

Such was his humble baptism.

In the morning he inched closer on his ledge.

He spotted someone hanging laundry between two boxcars. Still too far away to note any details on the human figure, he could make out the shapes spread across the clothesline. Tube socks, tee shirts, pants, bed sheets: were they ghosts of the desert inviting him to wear them? What would it take to impersonate the life of those clothes, to masquerade as human, to let love call him to the things of this world?

He stood up. He walked toward the clothesline, but seeing a bra hung out to dry, he crouched back down. Push/pull. He was exactly deadlocked.

He watched and waited.

All day long the sun moved across the cloudless blue sky.

When it was high overhead, he made out faded white letters on the side of a tarnished red-brown door no longer on its hinges. What the words Santa Fe could mean or why the sunlight made the letters flicker flame-like, he had no idea. Then he heard a weary tune whistled from inside the shaded space of the open door, but this, too, was beyond recognition.
Even the boxcars were a conundrum.

Could the rails they sat on simply have erupted out of the earth, spread their parallel lines a ways to make a secret, impromptu depot before getting swallowed again? And what had they brought up from the underworld? And of the other boxcars which sat on no tracks at all but only lay on their side crippled and half buried below that cruel sun?

Later their enigmatic arrangement would haunt him. But now, like the desert had taught him, he accepted what he saw without question. He watched the children play.

“Ring-a-leario: one, two, three.”

“You’re IT!”

“I declare war on ... Mike-y.”

The words were incomprehensible grunts to him. He felt the vowels bursting free of their consonant clusters like fireworks exploding over the boxcars, like the kids themselves insisting on a life of their own, only to burn up and wither in the sun. And only when the sounds were burned up and withered away did the soul hiding in those sounds come to life. For when the sun finally set at one end of the horizon, the moon rose at the other. He knew many spirits wandered the desert in moonlight so in a circle he spread carefully the bones and shells and talismans which would keep him safe.

He also knew throughout his discovery of these humans that he had been unable to control his mind, that his thought forms would be picked up by beings more powerful than he. So he made his obeisance to the four directions, stepped inside the circle, stretched out his poncho and lay down, ready for
sacrifice. He hoped the moon might absorb his fears and drown his uncertainties. Burrowing into the contorted place inside his rib cage, he curled himself up there, a place only lunar rays could reach. He grimaced, exposing his crooked teeth to the moon whose white carnation burst its petals within him.

Looking over at the boxcars from inside the ring of his gris-gris, he saw how enormous was the shape of the woman projected onto the sheet stretched over the broken door by the kerosene lamp behind her. But he didn’t notice the lamp go out, nor her arrival on the ridge where he camped.

“Don’t look so nervous,” she said nervously.

Standing over him in the moonlight she was skinny, neither pretty nor plain, but her face was fierce and her brown eyes big. She might have had thirty-five years of struggle etched in the lines on that face, which would make her older than him. But the hunter did not calculate her age or even his own, only that she now wore clean white sneakers with no laces and a clean white dress with no tears in it.

“I’ve been praying you,” she said, “and now you’re here.”

He looked at her with permanent eyes that did not blink.

She tried to appear nonchalant at his silence. She wondered if she should address him in Spanish or in the few words she knew in local indigenous dialect. She looked around, and when she discovered she had accidentally entered his enclosure of cositas, she made the sign of the cross and stepped back.

Not expecting it to go like this, she grew uncertain.
She took her long black hair, beautiful and just combed, out of its rubber band. It fell to well below her shoulders. She watched him closely and said, "You look like you might know your way round the desert."

It was a comment which neither added nor subtracted from the possibilities their situation already suggested. When he stood to his full height and her eyes focused straight up at him, he saw himself the way she was seeing him: a tall, bearded, spear-carrying drifter in a floppy hat, origin unknown, wearing a necklace of odd amulets, slightly malodorous, raggedly dressed, strong cheekbones, handsome, undernourished, green-eyed, possibly some kind of warrior from another time, certainly a hunter, probably dangerous, reaching now into his medicine bag of death to grab what: a gun, a knife, a tomahawk?

Instead, he put it into her palm a small engraved ju-ju stone as a sign of welcome. As he brushed her arm he saw the pictures forming in her brain: Maybe he's not from my prayer. Maybe he's lost his way. Maybe something terrible has happened to him. Maybe he's seen one of them UFOs. Or maybe he is a UFO. Or a lunatic. Or an escaped convict, a rapist killer!

When she realized he understood the picture of her thoughts better than her words, she smiled and said, "I could use a hand around here for a couple days."

He said nothing.

So she kissed the stone, put it in her dress pocket and raised her hands up in the air in a gesture she hoped would indicate a sign of peace and not fear or defeat.

He did likewise.
They stood there, two creatures from different worlds, mirroring one another as if together they held the passageway to a common world, their fingers almost touching.

She took her eyes off his face and studied the palms of his raised hands, palms with crusted puss and blood in their center, surrounded by a desert of dead skin.

"Madre de Dios," she whispered and ran back the way she came.
She returned with food, a book bound in old newspaper and her youngest child, the one who hadn’t played in any of the games with the other children, the one who had brought him water yesterday upon his arrival.

"Bless my Bible and heal my sickly boy," she said.

Unaware what her words meant, the hunter looked from her to the boy, not sure what to do. But the boy’s withered arm reached forward, and the tiny fingers, webbed into a fist from birth, touched the hunter’s cheek. The boy’s sad, enlarged eyes now shot through the hunter’s skin.

As he had done in many full moon ceremonies, the hunter held his hands over the heart of the little boy, and the disease deep in the boy slowly seeped into him. Directed by beings neither the woman nor the boy could see, the hunter made sucking sounds near the child’s lungs.

Unbeknownst to his onlookers, shapes began to emerge in the hunter’s still and focused body. Like images coming to life on photographic paper in a dark room, the hunter watched as picture after picture floated up out his bloodstream and swirled in his lungs and guts. And when the circuitry was complete and each picture ran like a movie into the next, the boy’s ailment sang its sorrow down to the marrow of the hunter’s bones. Though neither mother nor child could see the beings carrying away the disease, the boy began to fill with health.
Exhausted, the hunter let the child go and the child said, "Mommy, I'm hungry." Because the boy never had much appetite, she took this as a sign her child was healed.

She sat man and boy down and served them food ladled onto tin plates. Under the moonlight they ate it all.

Then the woman opened the Bible at random and read aloud: "The Song of Solomon, Chapter 8: 'Who is this who cometh from the wilderness, leaning upon his beloved. O that thou were my brother, who sucked the breasts of my mother! When I should find thee without, I would kiss thee; yea, I should not be despised.'"

She sent the child back to the boxcars.

Struck by the significance of the Bible passage, she sat next to him, this time inside his circle of shells.

"I don't know if you can understand me or not, but thanks for fixing my boy," she said in a new voice, one that admitted something more than gratitude. She smiled. His response in kind dissolved her image of him as a creature from outer space.

They watched the moon, which seemed almost close enough to touch, as it swung lower in the sky. Loneliness emboldened her, and after awhile she reached out and held his little finger in hers.

The hunter found the boy easier to deal with than this.

Her sensations charged through her finger into his in scary waves. Instead of flying in the sky as he had done during the tube sucking cure with the boy, the hunter remained in his body. And instead of taking his instructions from the
beings who revealed themselves during those healing ceremonies, he was now on his own. He wanted to get down on his knees and kiss her delicate shrine opening. But she reached forward and grabbed his ruined hands, her thumbnail accidentally piercing the wound in his palm. She turned his hand over and saw the scab-encrusted skin crack open and trickle out a tear of blood.

“Hey-sus, la sangre de mi señor, Hey-sus.”

Though she felt this dribble of red to be the stigmata of her Lord, it did not stop her tongue from licking the wound clean. Nor did it stop her tongue from sending the sexual charge of her being into him. Nor did it stop her lips from whispering her prayer over and over, equally incomprehensible to him in English or Spanish.

“Hey-sus,” he repeated with her, watching the way the word formed from her lips. Then he tried it on his own.

He didn’t know why or even how he had said it.

He felt betrayed by his own tongue, which was nothing more than a foolish piece of flesh in his mouth with a mind of its own, perhaps with no mind at all, like that other piece of flesh sticking absurdly out from his pants.

As she moved closer to him and kissed his trembling lips, he knew he was broadcasting his location to all who would hunt him. That was bad medicine. And through all the bad medicine, only his understanding had sustained him. And his understanding told him nothing is at rest. Everything is hungry but cannot eat itself. Each unit of life and spirit spun free at door of death is always hunting, eating all it can in preparation to be eaten by something bigger and hungrier and worthier than itself.
And in all his hunting, though no animal or plant or insect had eaten him, the desert herself shot through him, pitched her tent in his bloodstream, sang her joy and wept her lament in his chest cave, took over the image-making machinery in his brain and revealed her ancient traces of rock and earth and bone and sky and tribes in pictures so powerful that he ripped out of his skin and skull every trace of his old way of knowing.

And only when he had eaten it all—pulp of saguaro, growl of bobcat, bloom of agave, smoke of mesquite; button of peyote, howl of coyote, rattle of snake, fragrance of the purple sage on the wind after the rain—when finally all the mysteries of the desert had broken through him, only then did they wash away the root of his resistance and extinguish the fear of his own death. And then he walked into a new desert already within him. He had swallowed every sensation and color and taste, and nothing was outside of him. It was then he became infused with the spirit of the desert, more real than anything he had ever known.

And now as she held him close, he found himself becoming infused in her. And when she undressed him and laid him on his back, he felt no longer as if he were giving away his position but that he had actually been lost, trapped under the ground for a very long time. The touch of her tongue tip felt like moonlight herself calling up everything dead and buried within him to come and dance in her luminous glow.

And when she stretched her naked and shuddering body over his and took him inside of her, instead of merely dying in sacrifice, he felt born into a new
world, one without separation between the things of the human and the secrets of the desert.

His ministry had begun.
The hunter woke at sunrise and surveyed the desert from his ledge. What he saw was less vivid than the dream of the same vista he had just awoken from, but this was not unusual.

Dream eyes saw more than waking eyes.

He kissed each charm and packed it into his pouch. Then he rolled up his poncho, slung it over one shoulder and his canteen over the other, grabbed his knife and spear and walked in deliberate, ever-widening circles away from his ledge, just as he had in dream. So he was not surprised when he came upon a lone gray wolf’s lair. It had been there all along, a small cave no larger than a crag in the rock face, downwind of the boxcars.

He first sensed the creature last night when she had mumbled the phrase about needing a man around here for a couple of days. The words had meant nothing to him, but a picture of her children terrified by the wolf had appeared to him. In the dream he had asked the wolf why it was alone, separated from the pack and not pursuing a mate. It told him it was making itself ready for sacrifice. Now, just as he had done in the dream, he sat downwind of the lair and waited in ambush.

He had a new taste in his mouth from the night before, and his nose picked up a new smell: coffee brewing. Though he had no idea what that was, in
a vision he saw himself waving to a barefooted woman with red toenails in a black and silver snakeskin dress who poured him a glass of white wine.

He knew this augured auspiciously.

Time passed.

Finally the gray wolf approached. The hunter knew how lucky he was to get this close to such a sharp-nosed creature. Thanks to the element of surprise, he got a good look. And being higher on the ledge gave the throw of his spear additional force. It pierced the wolf’s ribcage, and the hunter took out his knife, jumped down and finished the job. He field dressed the animal and ate the heart.

He mounted the carcass on his free shoulder and continued walking in circles until he found himself upwind, all the way around to the other side of the boxcar settlement’s open U-shape. Up ahead in the distance, in between clusters of organ pipe cactus, he could make out the brood of woman and kids sitting on stones having breakfast next to a small fire.

He was pleased not just to see them but to remember them. Beyond marking trail and following certain patterns of hunting and gathering, he used little memory. He kept moving. He had no particular sense of a past. Nor did he feel a kinship with the odd remembrances that sometimes flashed before him. Had some powerful sorcerer cursed him with the strange fate of re-living other people’s memories, he could not say. Yes, there was life in the sky and on earth voices sang out of the bodies of reptiles. But there was no claim to any of it.

In his silent world of witness, that-which-is-born was small and easy to locate for it remained surrounded in circles of the vast Unborn, the untold dead
and the eerie Undying. Every little something emerged out of a fathomless nothing to pass through en-flesh-ment before returning to a nothing more mysterious than before. In that place where the distinction between manifested and unmanifested burned up, the past and the future ceased to exist. Where he was, all was nothing but everlastingly now and present and true; reality and imagination were not either/or but one and the same, a continuum.

He walked toward them, smiling. When the little boy called out, "Hey," the hunter waved. Then the woman stood up from where she was tending fire, and he recognized her and whispered, "Hey-sus." Whatever coffee was, it smelled good.

But twenty yards from their fire, he stopped. He was met by a snake of pock-marked asphalt winding along the floor of the wilderness thick with palo verde and saguaro. He hadn't seen the deserted road until now. And there it was. Just within reach. Right on schedule.

He paused, bent down, smelled the blacktop. He stood up and looked across to the other side of the road as the boxcar kids ran toward him.

An old Toyota appeared in the distance. Was this just another trick of the desert? He stood still and watched as the automobile passed him by. The car traveled slow enough that he had a chance to study the driver's face. Something told him he had seen that face before.

He wanted a second look.

He loped toward the blue car idling up ahead by the side of the road. Wolf carcass on one shoulder, poncho and canteen bouncing on the other in time with his long strides, spear in one hand, ju-ju pouch tight against his rib cage, the run
lasted less than a half-minute. But he found himself between worlds, neither among the things of the living desert nor the phantasmagoria of its dead. So he was unprepared for his biggest surprise of the morning.

Arriving out of breath at the passenger-side door, it opened just as he reached for the handle. The coincidence triggered a fragment of last night’s dream: he had been lost, running frantically for miles when he came upon a boxcar. Just as he reached for the handle, the door slid open from the inside. “Welcome, stranger, to the House of the Dead,” the fierce and skinny woman said to him. She lay there naked in white lace and sneakers, curled seductively on a purple divan which partially covered, in the center of the boxcar, a path down into the earth. Looking past her he saw what appeared to be a passageway whose candle-lit walls hinted at the ceremony waiting to begin. He was set to enter when he noticed he was carrying a shovel dripping with blood.

There was more to the dream, but his memory of it was interrupted by an insect-like clicking sound. He looked straight into the car at the driver who was shooting him with a high speed camera.

The hunter reached into the open window, removed the camera from the driver’s hands and touched the man’s face, feeling around the lips and cheeks and eyes for vital impressions. Meanwhile, on the other side of the highway, the woman and her children looked on, holding their hands over their foreheads to block the sun, already merciless, at this early hour.

The driver wondered how smart an idea it had been to photograph this motley-looking character. When he first spotted him on one side of the road and
that odd collection of boxcars on the other, he thought his luck was changing. He thought he had stumbled onto something he could use.

Although it was mid-July, he had decided to take the back roads through the Southwest instead of leaving his car at his friends' house and just flying home to New York from Los Angeles last week. So far the idea had been a bust. It had not been necessary for him to hand-deliver copies of the documentary film to all the concerned parties in Arizona, many of whom were old contacts of his. It had been his friends' project—he was only the cameraman—and they were funded well enough to hire a whole cast of professionals including press agents and go-fers. For that matter, he could have just written a note of thanks and sent each a tape via Fed Ex. But he wanted to do more. After looking over the edits, discussing international distribution and hating everything about Los Angeles, he convinced himself he felt a kinship with the native people whose plight he had filmed three months earlier.

But yesterday he wondered how much kinship had to do with it for at the inter-tribal council that met in Gila Bend no one recognized him. He wondered if they weren't stonewalling him on purpose. He didn't wait to find out. He dropped off their copy and left the conference on Who Speaks for Wolf.

Last night, over his own favorite firewater, hurt but thoughtful, sitting in yet another motel, surfing through the few channels on the television set, he decided he didn't know who spoke for wolf. He admitted to himself he was just another outsider disguised as these people's voice to the world. He had wanted to believe he was helping them save their land, but it might be just as likely he was only unconsciously exploiting their misfortune, another wolf in sheep's
clothing. And driving through the Papago Nation on this abandoned highway this morning, he had laughed to himself at his own pretensions: and what had I expected? To get reservation pussy on a platter just because I filmed Native American women talking about our federal government betraying them over mineral rights and border disputes?

So when, out of the blue, a ragged-looking medicine man appeared by the side of the road and interrupted these thoughts, he had slowed down. Then when he stopped, pulled out his camera and looked out the rear-view mirror, he saw that the hunter’s face was obscured by the lolling head of a gray wolf. As the hunter ran toward the car he looked more wolf than man. The driver thought this image might be worth pursuing. And having managed to shoot a roll of film of this wild character and his spear and his carcass, he thought he might have a photograph or two worth his detour. And though the bloody and dirty hand examining his face now was gentle, he wondered if he weren’t getting into deeper trouble.

"Do you speak for wolf, brother?" The driver’s tone was calm, though it wasn’t clear the hunter understood the question.

"Hey-sus," the hunter said.

The words shocked the both of them. The driver was surprised, but the hunter even more so.

"You speak for Hey-sus—like in Hey-sus Christay?"

"Hey-sus."

"You? You’re Hey-sus? Hey-sus of the Highway?"

"Hey-sus," the hunter insisted and pointed.
“Me? I don’t think so. Right tribe, wrong rebbi.”

“Hey-sus.”

“What’s up with the one note, chief?”

“Hey-sus.”

“Okay. Hey-sus. Whatever. Listen, let me take your picture. I mean if you don’t mind taking your fingers out of my face, awright? Thank you. See, this is a camera, watch.”

The driver clicked away.

“See that? Steal your face, lose your soul.”

“See that?” the hunter managed to say.

“Just press that little button there. Nothin’ to it.”

“Nothin’ to it,” the hunter said emphatically.

The driver smiled, and the hunter smiled in return.

“You from New York, dude? You sound like Brooklyn.”


“Okay, now we’re makin’ real progress, know what I’m sayin’?”

The driver concluded this guy had no idea what was going on. He might have let it go at that, driven away slowly from this voo-doo ventriloquist, but he had that feeling he often got when he entered an unexpected opportunity, beyond what a roll of film might reveal later in the dark room. A former photojournalist and now a freelance photographer, he had been in the business long enough to know, eyeing that boxcar crew on the roadside, he had a story.

He shut off the ignition. He stifled his fear by telling himself that he had been in heavy scenes before. And maybe this hunter/gatherer/echo chamber,
given time, might prove less spooky.
The driver studied the face studying his. His first thought was that he had stumbled on a Native American on a vision quest. But the details didn't add up. There was too much beard for a red man. And the facial features didn't resemble any tribes he knew. He was familiar with young people from New Age America who went in for appropriations of native spiritual practices, but they had the look of the First World to them, even the crazy ones: clean, well fed, scared to be alone in the desert. But this hunter looked quite like he belonged out here. He must have been wandering around for some time, possibly months, maybe years. Furthermore, one doesn't just happen to kill a gray wolf without some knowledge of its habitat. The driver knew the species to be shy of humans, their most feared enemy, having practically extinguished them. And he knew the gray wolf to be cagey; no human matched its extraordinary sense of smell to get close enough to use a spear. And except for a few desert tribes in northern Mexico, he knew no native peoples who hunted with spears.

The hunter seemed more like a throw-back to another time. And though he had spoken to the driver, he gave away no trace of a dialect. In fact, he pronounced the words exactly as they had been spoken to him. The driver was no expert in artifacts, but he guessed the amulet around the hunter's neck was Hohokam, which made it at least eleven hundred years old!
The driver scolded himself for his wild imagination and decided on the obvious: "Hey-sus" was probably just the deadbeat dad in some dumb-ass family melodrama going down at those boxcars. Whether white, brown or red, a nuclear family crisis came to the same thing. This guy wanted out. That was a pretty old story.

Nevertheless, nothing was certain, and he hadn't taken his eyes off him the whole time. Had he realized the hunter was already inside the thoughts in his head, he might have thought different thoughts. But now as he swung himself out of the car in one motion, he was relieved.

"See that? Nothin' to it," the hunter said in Brooklyn-ese.

"There you go," the driver responded while pulling another camera and a tripod out of the back seat. He had to laugh to himself: at least this golem speaks English! But his smile was wiped away the next instant.

"At least this golem speaks English," the hunter said, pleased for the first time to be able to duplicate the actual words that were dancing around inside this human's head.

Had the driver another moment to think on this, he might have realized "Hey-sus" spoke neither English, Spanish or Yiddish. Only other people's thoughts.

But right now another voice spoke.

"Mister, are you here to take my mommy away?"

The driver turned to see a little boy with a webbed hand pointing at him from the other side of the highway. He reached into his pocket, walked over and bent down to be eye level with the boy and said, "No, son, I'm not here to take
your mommy away. Go and tell her I’m here to take a photograph. Ask her if it’s worth this twenty dollars to her,” he said and made the child take the money.

The boy walked along the road toward what the driver saw as an incongruous collection of old boxcars sitting in a broken circle like a wagon train massacre in the cemetery of the desert. Then the driver turned and walked back across the road to confront this golem who had put down his bundle of belongings and was opening the tripod.

“What do you think you’re doing, Mr. Hey-sus?”

The hunter stopped. He knew this driver was integral to his journey. He just didn’t know what to do about it. Earlier, when he had been studying the driver’s face, the rest of his dream returned: While he kissed the fierce and reclining woman, the secret entrance inside the boxcars slid open. He descended the steps, lit by candles, and when he could go no further, the driver stepped out of the shadows and guided him past snakes and bone yards to the cave of dead waters. There the driver ferried him across to an island in the sky where an initiation of some kind waited.

So with the driver staring back at him in disbelief, new words came to the hunter’s lips.

“You need assistant.”

For the hunter it was a breakthrough moment. He was no longer just repeating the sounds of humans; he was translating their pictures into new and original words! It was real progress indeed. Though this game of human dialogue was a much slower method of communicating than he was accustomed to, he was adapting. He felt hopeful.
But the driver looked him over dubiously. Then he looked out across the road where the woman was arranging her children for a photograph. He realized there was no point in denying that he needed an assistant—it had been his own thought after all—but he wasn’t sure he needed this kind of assistance. Had the woman not let out a wolf whistle and waved him over to the boxcars, the driver might have just gotten back in the car and bolted.

The hunter carried the tripod and followed behind the driver. “That’s far enough,” she told him, “for twenty bucks.”

The driver pulled out a light meter and began fidgeting with the camera lens as the grimy children rubbed smoke from the breakfast fire out of their eyes and tried to smile.

“You want your husband in the photograph?” he asked her.

“It’s your photograph, señor,” she said authoritatively, “but for twenty more dollars I’ll tell you who I think he is.”

“In that case I want him and the wolf in the picture,” he said and motioned the hunter to join the group, “and I’ve got twenty more for you so go ahead and tell me all you know.”

The driver was working it. He loved this kind of patter, hated the posed shot and was adept at catching his subjects off guard. Unbeknownst to the mother and her brood, he already had shot half a roll. But when the hunter put his arm around the woman, the scene changed dramatically. Instead of squalor and desolation—tarnished boxcars rising behind this lone, brown, stranded, world-weary woman and her tribe of kids in rag-a-muffin tatters—an element of tenderness now entered the picture.
The driver was thrilled to get such powerful material, and he kept shooting even when the photo session ended.

"He ain't no husband to no one," the woman said, watching the hunter cut up the wolf carcass and place each piece on the fire, "cept the desert herself. And she just pushed him out of her womb yesterday. Seen it up close. And I heard her tell him to take his healing powers out to repair the tear in the world through acts of kindness and goodness. And I wouldn't be surprised if you're the guy who's gonna help him."

The driver, incredulous at such a suggestion, chuckled.

"All right then," he said, handing the boy another twenty dollar bill, "what makes you say that?"

"Ain't my business one way or the other, mister," she said after she pocketed the bill in her bra, "but I been a squatter with these kids in them boxcars for over six months. You're the first driver to come up or down this abandoned highway in all that time. So you must be pretty fuckin' lost. And he's the first person I've seen come out of the wilderness. And that was less than two nights ago. I reckon you're about a day late—and I thank you for that. If you know what I mean. And the money don't hurt none neither."

Walking back across the road the driver thought about what she said. Pushed out of the womb of the desert—what a referral!—but healer of the tear in the world? The driver wasn't so sure.

He noticed that the hunter's palms were scarred up and wondered if "Hey-sus" might not be some latter-day Jacob who scorched his palms wrestling with
an angel or ascending the ladder up into the heavens. Was he bound for the Promised Land?

"Go ahead and put that tripod in the back seat real nice and easy like," the driver said when they returned to the car. "There, you're okay, you know that?"

"You're okay," the hunter repeated, phonetically exact.

"Well, if you say so."

"You say so."

"Hey, listen, pardner, I got to put a move on, if you know what I mean."

"Breakfast. Tall woman. Long fingered. Itchy for mating."

"What is that, telepathy? How did you know that?"

"Your skin send signal. She up ahead, receive signal. Like you," the hunter said, pleased that his power to see and feel and intuit, which was vast, was now something he could express in human language, which was restrictive and contrary.

The driver, however, had a distinctly different response. He found all this mind-reading disconcerting. But he decided that whatever hustle this luftmensch was running, it was damned good. He had been thinking of that beautiful waitress who he hoped was still at that cantina up this highway. That was why he had taken this route!

Now he wasn't so sure.

While he considered what to do, he took a quick look around. The kids had followed them. They didn't know how to pretend they weren't looking, so they just stared open faced at the two men the whole time from the other side of the highway. Such innocence made the driver even more uncomfortable.
“All right, Hey-sus. What do you mean, 'like me'?"


Though the hunter uttered each word as if it were a world unto itself, with neither judgment nor forethought, the driver was not accustomed to having his feelings read back to him, especially ones he was trying not to acknowledge to himself. Later on, in the enclosure of sympathetic arms and the afterglow of love, the driver would agree with this assessment. But right now he was too ashamed, too revealed, too defensive not to break on the wild man.

“Yo, man, what the fuck is wrong with you? I ain’t none of that shit,” the driver said, “and I don’t know why I’m even talking to your hungry, sad, scared, lonely and shy ass myself. You come out of the desert looking like some dybbuk-driven casualty, and you ain’t told me jack and I’m supposed to drive you? Get a life, awright?"

Then he got in his car and pulled away.
MISSING TOOTH

Only when the car had disappeared in the distance did the hunter realize what was happening to him. He was living the dream he had been having for some time out in the desert. Although he didn't have the power to wake himself up, he knew none of these events had any finality to them. Like hunting or healing, it was all a matter of breathing deeply and not succumbing to panic or despair.

Sure enough, coming back out of the same mirage of heat and asphalt up ahead, there was the old Toyota speeding back in reverse. The driver turned his head out the window and spoke to him very quietly: "Hey, maybe I overreacted, awright? Maybe you're telling me something I need to know about myself or that gal. In any case, who cares? You need a ride? Get in the car. But after breakfast I'm taking you to the bus depot. And then you're on your own."

The hunter walked around to the passenger side door, opened it, swung his gear onto his lap and slammed the door. A candle from his poncho fell onto the blacktop. It was all that was left of his flame-sky meditations, a training that had helped him bury disturbing eruptions from a past than might not be his. The candle was his only reminder that a past of any kind existed at all, but it was a reminder he was accidentally leaving behind.

The old Toyota fishtailed in the dirt, straightened out and sped down the road. The hunter turned to watch the children and the boxcars disappear in the distance.
When they were gone for good, the boy with the webbed hand crossed the road and put the candle, melting in the sun, into his pocket.

The hunter studied the driver's face and realized he needed more tact, that simply representing what-is around humans could be met with incredulity and denial. He felt exhausted with this out-loud communication where one word produced so many different meanings and images. He was pleased to stare out the window. He had no memory of having ever been in an automobile, but watching the world go by a mile a minute was easier than speaking.

Everything they passed compelled his interest: the rise and fall of the land, the height and color of the vegetation, the patterns of shadows on rock and the smell of the creosote bushes. Each alteration in the scenery's seamlessness---an old mile marker, the play of tumbleweed over the blacktop, a right hand turn onto a wider road, a grotto under the shade of a clump of mesquite---required his attention. It all went into the grid.

Nonetheless, in the hypnosis of car wheels turning beneath him, the locomotion lulling him sleepy, images from his desert wandering came back to him in strange bits and pieces. He saw again his descent from the sky with mountains of lava flowing through him, their fire eating his flesh followed by rains which washed his skeleton clean enough that he grew back his body. Warriors from unknown tribes gathered in circles in the sand while women gave birth to wild animals. He saw himself simply sing along with the choir of glorious sounds within him, elevating in the harmonies only desert music can make, taking

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the potions the shamans gave him, dancing the snake dances the people in his bloodstream danced and sleeping in the caves the night provided.

The driver, meanwhile, had decided to say nothing for a change. He willed himself to look straight ahead. And it wasn't until he heard his passenger snore that he felt safe to think again. And his first thoughts were that he was hungry, sad, scared, lonely and shy. And okay, big deal, he laughed to himself, the kid needn't be a mind reader to figure that out! I'm not fooling anybody with my middle-aged world-weariness. And of course I'm itchy: I'm hornier than a hellcat. And nothing would please me more than to get lucky right now.

Pulling into an unpaved parking lot in a tiny outpost that the highway ran through, he said to his passenger, “Wake up. We're here. Let's get a bite to eat.”

It was as if they had driven into a bomb site where something ugly and nuclear had been dropped, and in the cavity the explosion created, everything America had thrown away had found a home. Old tires burned. Greasy garbage blew in the breeze. Jalopies cruised the little avenue that connected the few stores. The hunter, however, had no frame of reference for quality of life issues and didn't think about it one way or the other.

The driver had already entered the cantina whose windows were so dirty it was impossible to see inside, and so the hunter followed. It was just as hot inside as out there under the sun. Like the clay-rich soil exposed on both sides of the road---a sore in the earth that would sooner erode than heal---the faces that watched him enter the place were red and wasted. The hunter had no dictionary for the bloodshot, poverty and alcohol craziness that marked them as
defeated, nor did the fact that it wasn’t yet nine o’clock in the morning mean anything to him. The history of their struggle was unknown to him. He just stood in the doorway and flashed those permanent green eyes on each of the diners and soaked them up until they nodded or looked away. Then he spotted the woman who had been in the driver’s thoughts.

“Hey, Moses,” she said to the driver, “it’s been a long time. What’ll it be,” she paused and smiled and put her hand on her hip, “breakfast?”

“It’ll be you, baby girl,” the driver said and thought: I’d love some of that! But instead of demonstrating it, he only grabbed her hand, gave it a squeeze and then slipped her the manila envelope which contained a copy of the documentary film.

Had the hunter more of a human mind available to him, he would have realized that this tall and shy waitress avoiding his eyes was closer to his own age than to Moses. But like with the boxcar woman, the hunter had no way to calculate her age or even the driver’s, let alone his own. To add to his lack of a human command of the situation, he couldn’t put together the disparate clues of her person. Despite her attractive copper complexion and long raven hair and the silver and turquoise jewelry adorning her neck and wrists and long fingers, she was no born-and-raised reservation female. Her manner of dress was not traditional but big city all the way. And she was a crossbreed, half Navajo and half Papago, at home in neither nation, and like Moses, stuck between a past that no longer existed and a future that had no certainty. But he knew none of these details yet. Only that she was beautiful and afraid.
She left two steaming cups of coffee at their table and disappeared into the back with the envelope whose contents she would share with her Talking Circle, a group of women who met at her home every Monday night, many of whom were in the documentary. She returned with menus and plastic glasses of ice water and stood over the driver, almost touching.

Eye level with her exposed and silver-looped belly button, Moses looked up at her white halter top which revealed the shapely outline of her breasts, nipples protruding from the thin cotton. Moses swallowed and smiled, gave his order and added, “Uhm, put whatever he wants on the check as well.”

But the hunter had no idea how or what to order. He studied the patterns the words and the grease stains made on the menu’s page.

In the absence that followed, she allowed herself a look at his confused countenance. She had seen plenty of wanderers come out of the desert and into this cantina, but this guy had something going for him, something unique, even familiar, though she couldn’t say what it was. He looked up at her, and the lines on his face were like a treasure map that secretly told her, “Don’t worry, being lost is the whole story and it contains all the smaller stories of getting found the same way that—which—is—not surrounds this little world we call that—which-is.”

So when his permanent green eyes met hers brown and sorrowful, she decided that he was a* beerdash* and her heart went out to him. Later he would wonder if it weren’t this warmth in her glance that caused the magic to manifest that changed forever the course of events in her life. But right now it was she who spoke up first.

“So aren’t you going to introduce me to your friend, Mo?”
“Beverly Hungry Moon, meet Hey-sus of the Highway.”

The hunter stood and reached for the hand she held out to him, and when her long fingers slipped into his callused and useless palm, all her hopes and betrayals and feelings for Moses made themselves alive in his skin.

“Why don’t you just bring us two orders of the same?” Moses said, and then the hunter smiled and repeated, “Same.”

Both men watched her firm ass, shaped well inside a tight pair of Levi’s, as she returned to the kitchen to deliver their order. Then Moses watched the hunter drink his coffee. He noted how nervous the kid looked. Is this mashugge afraid of women, he wondered, is that what it’s all about?

Like he often had done, the hunter willed himself to disappear. But unlike his success in the desert, there he remained in his chair, getting moist at the arm pits, flushed in his face and pin-prickly all over. Inside his bones violent pictures were taking shape. Someone with a rifle was coming toward this cantina in waves of anger. He wanted to warn the waitress, but this business with words had already gotten the better of him. The last thing he wanted was for her to join them with her own cup of coffee.

And that’s exactly what she now did.

“So how did you two meet?” she asked, her eyes on the hunter.

Moses told her the story and concluded with: “So this boxcar mama told me I was sent by the desert to pick him up.”

“No kidding,” she said noncommittally.

“I thought he was runnin’ away, but I had it all wrong.”

“You certainly did, Moses,” she said.
"Oh yeah? Why do you say that?"

"Well, no woman in her right mind would let such a gentle and attractive man go. And like the gals in my Talking Circle always say, it's women, not men, Moses, who decide who goes and who stays," she said and winked.

"Order up," the short order cook interrupted.

Beverly carried the hot plates of huevos rancheros and refritos and tortillas and set them down. She bussed a table, wrote a check to the last remaining customer, returned with more coffee and water and then asked, "Where were we?"

The hunter, sensing doom approaching, knew he had to do something fast. After a mouthful of food, he reached for the driver's hand. Moses let his hand be held and tried to smile away his discomfort. But when the hunter grabbed the waitress's hand, the sexual desire Moses had for Beverly met the desire Beverly had for Moses, and the three of them became very still. Holding both their hands in his, the hunter saw a bridge stretch across the wilderness that separated them. He watched them run, meeting in the middle of the bridge which held their weight so that their impulses deepened and the connection seamed complete. Not knowing any better, the hunter spoke aloud the thoughts in the driver's mind.

"Unlike boxcar mama praying to her Mexican lord in heaven to see if Mr. Weirdness here really could be her Hey-sus jehovah meatloaf daddy burst out of the wilds to satisfy urges nothing else will quench, all alone in the desert herself, maybe get nice behind a bottle of wine and whatnot, I don't deserve a woman as beautiful or as kind and caring and thoughtful as you, Beverly. I don't know what I'm doin' here. I want to hold you and kiss you and make love to you, but I'm all
wrong inside, confused about my place in the world and what I'm doing with my life. You're not yet thirty and I'm almost fifty, too lost to do anyone like you any good. You need someone who is not as hungry, sad, scared, lonely and shy as me, you know what I'm sayin'?

Though the words came out of the hunter's mouth, Beverly knew only too well what Moses's thoughts were saying.

...Now the hunter spoke Beverly's mind: "You crazy, insecure New York Jew! You know there's something between us, something powerful we can't fathom or know how to act on, and you're too proud to admit you've brought along a beerdash to help us better understand this sexy feeling we have for each other."

To prove her point Beverly reached across the table and pulled the floppy hat off the hunter's head. Out it tumbled, just as she suspected, the long hair of the beerdash.

The hunter looked at them both and smiled. He put Beverly's hand in Moses's hand and resumed eating.

...Now it was she who spoke her own thoughts: "When you're done eating, Moses, I'd like you to help me with something I can't quite reach in the walk-in cooler."

She rubbed her fingernail along his chest and stood up. So did he. At five foot, six inches, he was more than a head shorter. But he followed her all the same out of the dining room.

The hunter was relieved. He finished the rest of his meal.

...No sooner did he step outdoors then he met the angry ex-boyfriend, shotgun in hand, walking across the parking lot from his beat-up truck...
hunter didn’t know what to do, so he simply stood his ground in front of the door and put his hands up in the air like he had done with the boxcar woman.

But the ex-boyfriend did not join hands.

"Get the fuck outta my way, stranger."

"Not stranger," the hunter said, pleased to find words.

"What the fuck did you say?"

"Not stranger. Friend."

"You ain’t even Indian, let alone Papago."

"I not from now."

"What is that, a riddle? Get out of my way if you know what’s good for your forked-tongued white ass."

"I know what good for your forky ass."

The hunter felt he was making incredible progress at this exchange of words and sounds, but the ex-boyfriend didn’t think his pun was very funny. He released the safety and aimed the rifle to show he was serious.

"Listen, White Ass, I don’t know who put you up to this."

"You and your angry thoughts, awright?"

"I don’t even know you."

"Particle and wave, dude. All related."

"I’m not related to you. Unless you’re related to those bitches who are trying to come between me and my woman."

The hunter saw the pictures in this hard-luck lover’s head and tried to change tactics.

"You look wrong place."
“How would you like to die, you lyin’ sack of shit?”

“Me die many times. Always return. Nothin’ to it.”

“Oh yeah?” The heavy-set ex-boyfriend lifted the tall, thin hunter off the ground with one hand, threw him down and smashed the butt of his rifle against his jaw. He walked into the cantina, ready to fire his weapon, but all he saw was a frightened short order cook who ducked behind the counter.

When he came back out, the hunter was still on the ground, tongue rolling around the space where he just lost a tooth. The ex-boyfriend pointed the rifle at him. Looking down the long barrel, he said to the hunter, “You got some explaining to do, White Ass.”

“You hurt from powerful love for Beverly Hungry Moon.”

“Oh, so you do know her after all?”

“Me know not possible possess woman.”

“She’s taken up with the likes of you?”

“Taken up with confusion and sorrow.”

“Where the fuck is she then?”

“Uhm, she cooling out.”

“What does that mean?”

“Need to learn how to recover love. Just like you. Need time away. Violence, blame: stupid cycle, no good trap.”

The ex-boyfriend studied the hunter at his feet. Surely, he thought, such a devastated specimen must know something about rejection. He looked into those permanent eyes and wondered what kind of magic this skinny, bugged-out *malcreado* was onto.
“Love biggest magic,” the hunter said. “Transform even you with heart of
vengeance.”

“Oh yeah?” the ex said, unconvinced.

But the hunter saw the words forming in the ex-boyfriend’s mind and said,
“Is her dead body worth doin’ time over?”

The ex-boyfriend’s jaw dropped. He wasn’t accustomed to having his
thoughts expressed by someone else. Now he was sure this guy was some kind
of medicine man, the kind he wanted to stay away from. He backed up. It was
his turn to put his hands in the air.

“Maybe you’re right. Tell her I won’t bother her again.”

The hunter put his hands up in response and watched the ex-boyfriend
walk away across the bumpy parking lot, get in his truck, drive down the lonely
avenue and disappear into the dust of an unpaved road.

Then the hunter went in search of a bus depot.

Right on schedule.
Kirpal Gordon, a native New Yorker, makes his living as a journalist, ghostwriter, editor, literary consultant, poet and fiction writer.

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