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BY STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN

*Pictures of Nothing*
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APPARENTLY

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Ten months ago, at a Zen retreat, I stared at a blank wall for seven days. The technical term for this strange behavior was meditation, and the ultimate goal was to break down the boundaries that separated me from the underlying unity of all things. But the lotus position was painful, and the pain kept getting worse. I felt no special connection to the universe, no underlying unity, except in the suffering I shared with the other people in the meditation hall. We sat motionless for hours, wishing we could get up and shake the tension out of our bodies, wondering why we were sitting there in a silence that only emphasized how banal and disturbing most of our thoughts and feelings were.

Actually, I knew why I was there. The reason had been bluntly summed up in the headline of a British newspaper in response to the November 2004 Presidential election: **HOW CAN 59,054,087 PEOPLE BE SO STUPID?** Like millions of non-conservative Americans, I was in shock in the weeks following the election, overwhelmed with disgust, embarrassed that I lived in such an aggressively mindless nation. At the same time, I didn’t like the way I was wallowing in rage and contempt, hatching violent fantasies about punishing those who voted for Bush. I told myself that a more humane approach would
be to view their ignorance with compassion. But was there room for compassion with a monster like Bush in the White House? Wasn’t the nation badly in need of re-education camps? Shouldn’t progressive people have been taking definite steps to secede from the union? Or move to a more intelligent part of the world? Angry questions like these wouldn’t leave me alone, yet I wasn’t prepared to do anything about them, and the impotence of my rage was getting painful. I needed something to clear my thinking. Though I’d been avoiding Zen for more than a year, I felt it was time to get back to the meditation cushion, so I called the teacher I’d been working with for the past five years and asked him to make a place for me in the Zen center’s next retreat.

The term retreat is misleading. The Japanese word *sesshin* is closer to what really happens. I’m not sure what it literally means, but it refers to an induced crisis, a deliberate and concentrated assault on a person’s normal state of awareness, a process similar in function to the initiation rituals shamans undergo in preparing themselves to become magicians and healers. I’d always been intimidated by the physical demands of sitting in the lotus position for hours on end. Even during my daily thirty-minute meditation sessions, I was in pain. But my teacher repeatedly insisted that true Zen progress could only be made in *sesshins*, and many Zen writers had echoed this opinion, so I was glad that I was finally ready to put myself to the test. I reminded myself that in the past I’d always learned something valuable from challenging situations. But as the days passed and I sat in pain on my cushion watching my thoughts keep cycling through the same
frustrating patterns, I had to wonder if I hadn’t been right in keeping Zen at a distance.

Still, the experience wasn’t pointless. The silence I maintained throughout the sesshin gave me a new understanding of spoken communication. More than ever before, I saw how much mental energy is caught up in the process of talking, in our ongoing need to be prepared for whatever conversations come our way. As silence accumulated in my body over the seven days of the retreat, I understood why so many mystics become hermits, leaving the pressures of verbal interaction behind, releasing themselves from the need to perform in language, no longer trapped in the distorted mirrors people unavoidably hold up to each other. Since it was only my first retreat, I was still firmly trapped in my own distorted mirrors. Nor was I about to become a hermit. But I left the meditation hall with a strong desire to remain silent. So I got in my car and drove forty miles to the mountains east of San Diego, where after a strenuous climb I reached one of my favorite spots in the world, the summit of Garnet Peak.

I sat on a folded blanket resting my back on a smooth rock. North and south, there were mountains, as far as I could see. Behind me the sun was going down. At my feet was a cliff, a sheer drop of six thousand feet, looking out on a desert that ran east for thirty miles to a shallow inland sea, backdropped by another range of mountains. An unassuming silence rose from the desert into my body. Perhaps because of the hours I’d spent on my meditation cushion, the words that normally would have been narrating the passage of time faded into the twilight, and I was left with no thoughts and feelings about myself or
anything else, no response to the vanishing landscape or the stars coming out above the mountains. At some point I began to get cold, so I wrapped myself in my blanket. I remember how nice it felt to get warm. Then the eastern sky began paling ever so slightly, the vague silhouettes of the mountains became more distinct, and I knew that the sun would soon be coming up. Ten hours had passed in what seemed like no time at all.

Had I gone to sleep? Certainly that was the most obvious explanation. But I didn’t feel drowsy, had no sense of having opened my eyes to wake up. Besides, I find it impossible to sleep outside, even under the most pleasant conditions. Perhaps I’d been in a trance of some kind, an altered state induced by the retreat. If so, there was nothing hypnotic or ecstatic about it. The meditation technique I’d been practicing was not designed to put the mind in a trance. For the next few days I played with explanations. But finally I had to accept that I didn’t know where the missing hours had gone. I’d just been sitting there with no verbal awareness, no words to give time and space the shape I’d known since the day I was born.

When I told my Zen teacher about it a week later, I was disappointed with his response. He offered no explanation. Instead he nodded slightly and told me to keep meditating each morning and attending retreats whenever I could. I’d been hoping he would tell me that I’d taken a crucial step in my Zen practice, that I’d had a rare glimpse of the unconditioned reality that exists outside the verbal cage of perception. But even before I saw my teacher, I was skeptical of my desire to make what happened on the mountain seem more significant than it really was. If
anything, my years of practicing Zen had taught me to question the imagery of visionary experience, distancing myself not just from mainstream religious teachings, but also from those mystical and esoteric traditions that supposedly offer a more authentic approach to the unknowable.

But something told me that those ten missing hours were important, that I shouldn’t just dismiss them. I wanted to believe that if I could recover that gap in time, approach it without reducing it to conventional description, I might be making a serious contribution to a new kind of mystical practice, something which had nothing to do with religious doctrines of any kind. I had no intention of developing my own system of belief. I had long since outgrown the arrogant assumption that the universe can be systematically understood. In fact, I was convinced that far more harm than good had come from religious leaders who thought they knew what others ought to be thinking and doing. What appealed to me about Zen was its technique of destabilizing human arrogance, humbling its practitioners by leading them into radical uncertainty, relentlessly making them see that any assumption they might make about anything, no matter how logical or factual it seemed, was nothing more than a verbal house of cards.

But my own verbal house of cards collapsed when I got angry at my teacher’s reaction. I hated the smug little smile that accompanied what he said. I knew he was only doing his job, that a Zen teacher needs to keep forcing people to question their thoughts and perceptions, especially when they show signs of becoming attached to what they believe. But I thought his dismissal was too
formulaic, too automatic, that he should have explored what I said before he told me to forget it. Though at the time I tried to set my irritation aside, I found it increasingly difficult to meditate at the Zen center and attend the teacher's dharma talks.

Instead, I began taking long walks through a part of San Diego I didn’t normally visit, a neighborhood that was mostly abandoned brick factories and warehouses, with a few huge old houses on the verge of collapsing. On one of these walks, I bumped into someone standing on a corner. I quickly apologized, but before I could take another step I got the distinct impression that I would see him again twice, the first time by choice and the second time without knowing it. He was otherwise non-descript. He might have been over a hundred years old and might have been only twenty. He nodded at the book in my hand, Basho’s *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, a Zen classic which obliquely suggests that walking aimlessly can become a kind of meditative practice. We talked about the book for a few minutes. He seemed to know it quite well. He said he’d been doing Zen for thirty years, though he’d never been involved with an organized meditation group. I mentioned my experience on the mountain. He nodded eagerly, then looked at his watch and said he was late for work. I was turning to walk away when he asked me to come to his house the next day to talk further, pointing to a dirty white frame house wedged between brick factories at the end of the street. I told him nothing could keep me away.

But something almost did. Though I’d seen his house, written down his address, and walked up and down the street he lived on many times in the past few weeks, I lost
my way, convinced that all the streets in the neighborhood looked alike. I’d never had this impression before. In fact, the main reason I liked walking there was that it was one of the few areas in San Diego where each street had its own character. Nonetheless, I got so lost that I was about to give up and go home, cursing myself for not having gotten his phone number. Then suddenly I was in front of his house, and he was standing in the doorway smiling, assuring me that everyone who came to his house got lost.

The front door opened into a dark wood corridor about fifty feet long. My shoes were pleased that the floor was polished wood. At the end of this corridor, we turned right, moving down another dark wood corridor, this one filled with identical black and white photographs of a snow-capped mountain. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one filled with barely audible flute music that seemed to be the voice of the walls, or perhaps the sound the ceiling and floor would have made if they’d been mirrors. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one filled with whispered voices that might have been saying what I would have said if I’d known what I wanted to say. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, accompanied by the sudden sound of a pile of coins dropped on a glass countertop, replaced by the sound of a knife slowly spreading butter on a crust of bread. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one slightly shorter than the others, leading me toward a burst of barely suppressed idiotic laughter, as if I’d
suddenly seen myself in a microscopic future, in corridors built by people the size of amoebas. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one half as long as the one before it, with skylights on the floor and sky-blue carpeting on the ceiling. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one slightly shorter than the one before it, and I felt my mouth opening as if I were going to speak, but instead I shortened my stride, compensating for the distance we’d been losing. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one half as long as the one before it—so short, in fact, that it seemed to be twice as wide as the previous corridor, making it seem that the passage of time was on both sides of us, instead of behind and in front of us. At the end of this corridor, we turned right again, moving down yet another dark wood corridor, this one leading us back to the open front door.

He said: I’ve had a wonderful time. When can you come again?

I said: I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve been here less than five minutes.

He said: Actually, you’ve been here since noon—or maybe 12:15, since you were delayed. And now it’s almost time for dinner.

I looked at him in disbelief and said: I might have been confused when I got here, but I wasn’t *that* confused. I know I’ve been here five minutes at the most.

He smiled: Everyone gets that impression. But look at the sky if you don’t believe it’s almost time for dinner.
The sun was going down behind the factory smokestacks, and the late March sky was darkening. Clearly, it was almost time for dinner. I apologized and tried to look sheepish, but he just laughed and repeated that all his visitors left with the impression of having been there only five minutes.

I said: So how do you account for that? How do you—

He said: When can you come again?

I felt strange. But I didn’t want things to get even stranger, so I smiled and offered to come the following Friday.

He said: That’s what I thought you’d say. I’m looking forward to it.

He went inside and closed the door.

At first I tried to make light of what had just happened, telling myself that my sense of time had somehow become distorted. I got a cheap digital watch at the corner drugstore. But as I reviewed the experience, I became convinced that I was in the grip of something more ominous than temporal dislocation, that my sanity wouldn’t be safe unless I went back to doing Zen in a supervised way.

My teacher was pleased when I returned. But when I described my recent encounter, he simply asked me what I made of it. I asked him what he made of it. He asked me why I cared more about what he made of it than what I made of it. I told him that I assumed his interpretations carried more Zen authority than mine. He said that Zen authority was a contradiction in terms. He gave me a very faint smile that told me the interview was over. Again, it was all I could do to contain my annoyance.
I wanted to slam the door as I left, violating what felt at the time like a pseudo-sacred environment. But I almost never express anger in such outwardly hostile ways, and the rage I repressed became a series of imagined slamming doors that led me to wander. Soon I found myself in a canyon filled with tall trees and abundant vegetation, a rare environment for San Diego. I was thinking about recent events in Washington, how thrilled I’d been a few days before when BITE, a group of activist poets, tried to assassinate President Bush. There was something absurd about writers trying to manage the tactical complexities of an assassination, but there was also something appropriate about it, since Bush, by his very presence, represented the death of the progressive imagination. Even though their plan had backfired and all of them were now in jail, their efforts had been inspiring for billions of people all over the world.

BITE had also written an essay, emailing it to major newspapers across the country just a few minutes before their attempt to save the nation. The following day, right beside many front page accounts of the President’s narrow escape from death, BITE’s essay appeared in full, insisting quite convincingly that no U.S. President had ever been more deserving of assassination, claiming that their actions should not be classified as murder but as justifiable homicide. Predictably, millions of Americans were enraged. Talk of terrorist violence filled the airwaves. But a friend of mine who knew the editors of several radical magazines told me they were planning to publish lengthy reviews of BITE’s essay, calling it a marvelous piece of argumentation, a text whose authenticity was obvious in
every word, especially since in this case actions had spoken
much louder than words.

But Bush was still President, and Republicans still had
all the power. Something else had to be done. The BITE
poets had called for others to follow in their footsteps, in
the likely event that their plan failed. I’m sure I wasn’t the
only person who felt called upon to take action. My plans
would have gone beyond the removal of President Bush,
also targeting Chaney, Rumsfeld, and top-ranking
Republican Congressmen. But I knew I lacked the courage
to become the next assassin. Though I had many good
qualities, the ability to take decisive actions under pressure
wasn’t one of them.

Had I told my Zen teacher what I was thinking, he
would have praised me for being unable to construct a plan
and pull the trigger, insisting that violence was never the
way, that it always just led to more violence and never
solved anything. I would have said that extreme conditions
call for extreme measures. Killing abusive Republican
leaders was not just a sacred action but a sacred
responsibility. He would have looked down, shaken his
head slightly, looked up at me with a twinkle in his eyes
and sent me away with that condescending smile.

The thought of my teacher brought me back to the
present, the canyon of trees bending ever so slightly in the
breeze. I looked at my new watch and saw that it was three
o’clock on the dot. I heard the screech of a Cowper’s hawk,
gliding in circles fifty feet above me. I always love
watching these birds ride the updrafts and downdrafts,
searching for prey, though it occurred to me that if I were a
rabbit or mouse, that mesmerizing motion might mean
death. The circles were getting smaller and smaller, closer and closer. Then the hawk dove straight down, driving its flashing beak into my forehead, thrusting and thrashing its way into my head and neck and chest, replacing me in my body. I felt like the dot of an i released and climbing into the sky, riding the updrafts and downdrafts, scanning the ground for a meal, until I saw my body fifty feet below, looking up and watching me with my outspread wings in the circling sky, with each turn gliding lower and lower, then diving and driving a flashing beak into my forehead, thrusting and thrashing back into my body, stumbling at first, pausing to make sure everything was in place, then walking as quickly as possible, driven by a savage thirst. I took a short cut out of the canyon, stopped at the first convenience store I could find, bought a coke and drank it in thirty seconds. Then I went home and stared at the floor for several hours, until I felt normal. But for the next two weeks, at precisely 3 p.m., I felt wings in my head and blinding pain in my forehead, as if the universe were violently struggling to rip my third eye open.

I found this feeling especially unnerving when I tried to meditate. I felt like a blank piece of paper trying to stop someone from making an illustration. I had nothing in theory against illustrations, but the similarity between illustration in the sense of making a picture and illustration in the sense of presenting an example began to upset me. I didn’t want to be an example of anything. I didn’t want to be part of a pattern emerging, with connections forming themselves to turn recent events into a narrative or discussion, a schematic picture which would then be a means of making sense of future events, forcing them to
take the shape of meaning, domesticating the unknown. I remembered my teacher repeatedly asking me what I made of what was happening. I had taken his words in their customary sense, not examining the implications of the word making, not realizing that he was asking me to question my need to make anything, reminding me that all experience is unconsciously edited, arranged according to patterns built into our organs of perception. My goal in Zen meditation was to become aware of those patterns, to watch them as they came from the blank wall I was facing, and over time to make them less automatic, less unconscious. I knew that I would never leave them behind entirely. But it did seem possible to diminish my attachment to them, to become aware of them before they shaped my thought and behavior.

Indeed, this was already happening. Slowly over the past ten years, I'd been learning not to identify myself with the person I'd always told myself I was. From a Buddhist perspective, the right things were happening, even though I kept getting in my own way, falling back from time to time into predictable self-constructions. Progress was always unsteady, incremental. After all, I'd spent years developing an elaborate picture of myself, at times employing whatever professional help I could afford. Now that picture was being erased, and I felt like a crude enclosure made of cinder blocks and fake wood paneling, ten square feet of shade in a desert that kept getting hotter and larger. Of course, the figurative terms I was using were misleading, spatializing a transformation that had no spatial dimension. I needed to be patient, not so eager to put things into words.
But things without words were like the moon becoming an amoeba, a simile which lost an i to become a smile, a face which haunted my sleep for weeks. I wasn’t in the grip of recurring dreams. The details of the disjointed narratives the face appeared in were always quite different. But I saw the face each night, knew it wasn’t mine, and knew that when I woke up I wouldn’t know whose face it was. Over time, the face became less distinct, until one night it was only a set of teeth, gleaming and receding, making the dark seem deeper and darker, or maybe taller and wider, or maybe softer and warmer. The daily paper thumped at my neighbor’s door. I woke up in time to look out the window and see the paperboy rushing away, dropping the pile of papers under his arm, stopping to pick them up, then dashing around the corner, leaving his hat in the air behind him.

I often page through my neighbor’s paper because I don’t want to bother buying one myself. She sleeps until noon, and I get up at least an hour before dawn, so my habit of reading her paper outside her door, glancing at a few top news stories and getting the weather, never prevents her from finding her paper right where she expects it to be. But now, as I flipped through the pages, I noticed a small article about a group of standing stones discovered three days before on a Baja peninsula cliff, two hundred miles southeast of San Diego. According to the article, the stones were more than ten thousand years old, and similar in size and arrangement to Stonehenge, though at least five thousand years older. Since it seemed like an important discovery, I couldn’t see why it wasn’t front-page news. Had the archaeologists that discovered it made sure it was
downplayed in the papers, wanting to avoid the implications of publicity?

I’d been to that part of the Baja several times, and it’s essentially uninhabited, a great place to be by yourself and watch dolphins play in the waves. So I got in my car and drove south. Once I got past the noise and congestion of the northern Baja cities, the ocean views were spectacular. The sunrise behind the mountains, spreading its colors over the changing shapes of purple clouds, was so lovely that I almost drove off the road several times. I thought about how I seemed to be caught in a sequence of strange events leading me to some definite conclusion, as if the universe were trying to show me something. I remembered that one of my closest friends had been led to join a satanic cult through a similar sequence of events, all in some way involving the number ten. I’d always thought he’d gone mad. But when I heard that he’d secretly been one of BITE’s founding members and one of the chief architects of the plan to kill President Bush, I gained a new respect for devil worship.

The newspaper story had not disclosed the stones’ exact location, but once my odometer told me that I’d gone two hundred miles, I turned off onto a small dirt road that wound between coastal hills and finally ended up near a cliff overlooking the sea. I left my car and walked south along a narrow trail. Fifteen minutes later, the path cut between two hills and opened into a large clearing. There, about fifteen feet from the edge of a cliff, were the stones I was looking for.

The papers had mentioned Stonehenge, and the similarity was impossible to miss. I’d been to Stonehenge
thirty years before, in my early twenties, and though I’d been disappointed by the mob of tourists I’d had to contend with, the stones had made a strong impression on me. Now I had my own private Stonehenge. I knew of course that within a few months, the hills would be blasted away, the path would be enlarged and paved, a parking lot would be built, publicity campaigns would be launched, and the place would become just one more tourist attraction, complete with chartered busses, t-shirts, and colorful brochures. Any sacred or mysterious feeling about the place would be destroyed, absorbed into the busy noise of mainstream information. But for now the place was mine. The moment was perfect. The stones towered above me, transfigured by the morning light, which came in gold and silver bursts through cracks in surging clouds, flashing on the sea, the sound of waves one hundred feet below. I wanted to be in a trance, to feel myself dissolving into the stones, the solid pattern of energy in each individual stone and the patterns of energy all the stones made as a group, positioned in precise relation to each other and in relation to the place, the meeting point of land and sea.

I was familiar with the theories about Stonehenge—as a place where human sacrifices had been performed, as a cultural center, as an astronomical observatory, as a neolithic calendar, as a huge image visible to interplanetary beings approaching from the sky. But as I sifted through these possibilities, convinced that the best way to think about Stonehenge was as a repository of misconceptions, I remembered that I wasn’t at Stonehenge, that the place I was visiting had not yet been assimilated into the narratives of human understanding. Despite its
close resemblance to the famous stones in southern England, it may have served a very different purpose. I knew experts would speculate that the similarity between the two sites indicated that the same people had built them for the same reason, that southern England and the Baja peninsula had been populated by the same ancient culture, and the stones had been taken from the same sacred mountain, establishing sites of magic power on opposite sides of the world. I thought I could feel the sacred current passing through the center of the earth, connecting me with another version of myself standing in southern England, wondering why the present moment felt like it was somewhere else. But this possibility faded in the gathering suspicion that it was only the meditative embrace of my gaze that was keeping the scene together, that with any lapse in my attention the place would crumble, darting off like startled fish in a thousand different directions.

This feeling quickly passed. The flashing sea, the erratic brilliance of the sky, the stillness of the stones, the accumulation of uncertainties—all combined to give the scene the evocative power of a painting in a gallery being looked at by several people, a young man with a cowboy hat who had just returned from a hunting trip, having turned his back on the chance to kill five different animals, a woman wearing a tan trenchcoat who had wandered into the gallery by mistake, having just found out that her name spelled backwards was a word with magic powers, moving her mouth cautiously, afraid to pronounce the word by mistake, a jazz critic who only two minutes before, with grave difficulty, had extracted his face from a public restroom mirror, leaving the deep imprint of his face in the
glass as he turned away, a telemarketer wearing a Jefferson Starship t-shirt, still blinking from having remembered under hypnosis being a Japanese peasant in 1382, looking down with amusement from a hill as her overlord’s farm got massacred by a tsunami, an ex-nun who had just prematurely released a serpent of power from the base of her spine, and felt like a TV set with the sound turned off, or a conjuror having made the wrong demon appear, or like a number one pretending to be a third-person pronoun.

I knew it was time to leave. I was afraid that if I stayed any longer all the possible interpretations of my experience would replace the experience, so I turned and quickly walked back to my car, driving north. But apparently I’d already stayed too long. If my perception of the stones had been a picture framed in a gallery, the picture was now entirely a reflection of those who’d been observing it, and it was fading into a discussion they were having in a dim cafe, one topic among others, and as the conversation changed the picture was forgotten, leaving me with a blank space that was quickly filled with the impression of having taken a lovely drive up and down the Baja coastal road, looking in vain for a great restaurant a friend had recommended, a small place overlooking the sea, where the owner’s husband was a powerful shaman, as well as being a legendary cook of Mexican breakfasts.

During the late sixties, hippies and anthropologists began to hold shamans in great esteem, rejecting the Euro-western mindset that had made shamans appear to be psychotics, trapped in delusional states filled with hallucinated encounters with spirits and the underworld. With the New Age movement of the 1980s, shamanism
became fashionable. It was often assumed that all Native Americans were shamans, and people took weekend workshops at holistic centers, hoping to become shamans themselves. The New Age soon got old, but mainstream interest in shamanism continued. I knew this from my own professional experience, since the year before I’d made good money editing and producing a book called *Shamanism for Dummies*. In fact, I was still living off the sizeable sum I’d been paid for that assignment, the most I’d ever made in my fifteen years as a free-lance editor.

I don’t mean to make shamanism itself sound fake. But there’s something dubious about the assumption that an esoteric discipline like shamanism can be truly understood outside of its cultural context. I had similar questions about Zen, which may have been why I’d never been fully convinced by my own involvement with it, or even by my American teacher’s practice, despite the fact that he’d studied with well-known Japanese masters and had been meditating for more than forty years. The question was simple: What kind of spiritual authenticity was possible in a country dominated by shallow consumer ecstasies, a country in which monsters like Donald Trump and Bill Gates were called visionaries and sixty million people could decide that a dangerous clown like George W. Bush was not only a serious Christian but a good national leader? In such a degraded context, it seemed to me that sacred experience was possible only among individuals who had disciplined themselves to resist the contamination of mass imagery and information, people who had created media-free zones for themselves in their minds and hearts and
homes. How many people in America could even begin to fit this description?

Among my friends I could think of only two. One of them was now in jail, facing what I assumed would be a life sentence, since he proudly acknowledged his part in trying to cleanse the nation of President Bush. The other friend had called me from New York a week before, announcing that he not only wanted but needed to visit me, a guy who had reached the age of sixty without ever holding a full-time job. He’d gotten rid of his first name because he liked being called Moon, his family name, and most people who knew him would have agreed that he was driven by lunar tendencies. He’d spent most of his adult life writing one long poem, an endless series of juxtaposed fragments written in response to an ancient book he’d found in his grandfather’s attic. I’d seen the book several times. On each page was a woodcut featuring a mythic animal of some kind—a unicorn, manticore, gryphon, or one of many other strange creatures whose names I didn’t know. The book apparently did more for Moon than it did for me. My interest was mainly in its age and the role it had played in his grandfather’s life. But there was no publication information of any kind, no way to tell how old it was, and Moon had no recollection of his grandfather ever reading it. He didn’t know how it ended up in the attic.

But the book was indispensable for his poem. Each of Moon’s fragments was a response to one of the book’s pages, not a description or commentary, but rather an improvisation based on the energy Moon took from the image. Why did images that struck me as having only historical value generate such powerful verbal moments for
him? There was no way to know. But the evidence was incontestable. Moon’s poem was more than mere poetry. It was language in its most visionary sense, conjuring its own worlds, refusing to subordinate itself to the so-called realistic task of describing or addressing what people had been trained to call society or nature. Though Moon had made no careerist moves to keep in touch with any of the poetry scenes that surrounded him on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, anyone who’d seen fragments of his epic knew that it was as challenging and strange as any innovative text of the early twenty-first century. Yet in some ways it felt as old as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

I wanted to keep thinking about Gilgamesh, the incantatory depiction of his ten-day journey into the mountain at the end of the world. But people were honking at me. My driving was apparently worse than usual, and I told myself to concentrate on the road. Fortunately, I’d already crossed the border and wasn’t far from my apartment. As I parked in front of the small building I lived in, I noticed the newsboy’s hat, still suspended in the air where he’d left it behind ten hours before. This reminded me of the article I’d read that morning, and I was trapped between vague recollections—the standing stones and my failed attempts to find the shaman’s restaurant—memories that both seemed uncertain, precisely the feeling Moon claimed he received from the images in his magic book.

I went inside and looked at the calendar on my kitchen wall, where I’d made a note of Moon’s arrival later that week. It was more than a social visit, he’d assured me over the phone, claiming that his poem had led him to realize that there was someone he had to meet in the desert east of
San Diego. Part of me was amused by this cryptic mission. It sounded so theatrical, as if Moon thought of himself as a Biblical prophet responding to commands from the great beyond. But another part of me was moved by Moon's dedication. Here he was—a sixty-year-old man—hitchhiking three thousand miles from New York City, all because of what words on a page were telling him!

He arrived in the middle of the night and collapsed without a word on my living room sofa. I couldn't wake him until sundown the following day. When he finally got up his eyes were filled with fire, and he quickly explained that he'd needed the sleep not just because he was exhausted but because it would have been dangerous to open his eyes before his dreaming was completed. Without asking me how I was or what my plans were, he insisted that we had to leave at dawn the following day. I knew better than to argue with him. But when he told me I should meditate all night in preparation, I had to say something.

I tried to sound casual: Listen Moon, the meditation I do doesn't prepare me for anything. If anything, it's a way of making sure I'm not prepared.

He said: What good does it do you to be unprepared?

I said: What good does it do you to read poetry you're not prepared to understand? If you're not prepared, you can have a real reaction.

He said: Fine. But you need to do something to gather and focus your energy. You're going to need everything you've got in the desert tomorrow.

When I asked him why, he shrugged and asked me to get him a glass of water. Then he asked me about the book on shamanism someone had apparently told him I'd
written. I quickly explained that it was just an editing job I’d done for money. He gave me strange look, somewhere between contempt and amazement, then said he needed to take a walk by himself, and quickly left. At first, I was baffled. Was it really so terrible that I’d done some editing work to pay my bills? Then I remembered stories Moon’s ex-girlfriend had told me about the years he’d spent in Mexico in the early seventies, right before he moved to New York and began his poem. Apparently he’d had contact with a Huichol shaman in the central Mexican highlands, and had been clinically insane when he came to New York, lapsing into extended bouts of laughter for no apparent reason. The poem had been his way of putting his mind back together. Maybe that explained the look he’d given me. Maybe he’d been shocked that someone could calmly make money off something that had driven him out of his mind. But when he came back two hours later he showed no signs of hostility. Instead he asked me about my Zen practice, seemed interested in the answers I gave him, then said he felt tired and needed to go back to sleep.

When we woke before dawn the following day, I was eager to talk about the pattern of strange events I’d been caught up in. I figured if anyone could shed some light on what was going on, it was Moon. But he was clearly preoccupied, so we drove in silence into the desert. We stopped for food and water near the southern end of the Salton Sea, about seventy miles northeast of San Diego, then went south another twenty-five miles. We stopped at the end of a long dirt road and walked for perhaps an hour, following a rough trail through a rocky labyrinth of hills and canyons, finally arriving at a crude enclosure made of
cinder blocks and fake wood paneling. Its occupant was a man who might have been over a hundred years old and might have been only twenty. He seemed to know my face. His face was like a door standing all by itself in the middle of nowhere. After talking with Moon for a few minutes in a language I didn’t recognize, he went back inside. Moon told me to sit and wait. I rested my back on a smooth rock in the shadow of a mesa, looking west at Garnet Peak, wondering if the hawks that rode the winds at the summit were feasting on the ten hours I’d lost there.

I don’t know how long we waited, somewhere between ten minutes and ten hours. My teeth felt like they’d been gone for a long time but had somehow gotten back into my mouth before I knew they were missing. Then the man was standing outside his hut in a costume that made him look like a huge bird of prey, something between a hawk and an owl. I wanted to laugh but something stopped me. Moon made a fire in a pile of round white stones. The smell was delicious, as if the stones were the homes of secret aromas that could only be released by fire. Moon held up two flat wooden objects and told me we would be using them as drums. He showed me the beat and told me to keep it steady. The man began dancing, spinning in slow circles, each one part of a larger circle, chanting in a language I didn’t know.

At first I felt silly. I looked at Moon and shrugged. But the sharp look he gave me made me feel stupid, and soon the beat and the chant and the dance began to absorb my attention. The word “absorb” is not a figure of speech. The world slowly contracted into the dance, became the dance, and before too long I was nothing more than a vehicle of
the rhythm I was making with my drum, and the drum was
time itself but without human measurement, not gliding
across the surface of the world, but slowly beating its way
into the depth of space, dissolving into colors and shapes,
velocities and textures. The only way to describe the dance
was to say that it came from the sun, just as the chant was
coming from a hawk in the circling sky, gracefully riding
the updrafts and downdrafts, as if it might suddenly dive
and drive its beak deep into my forehead.

But then the hawk was gone. Our drumming stopped.
The man collapsed. He lay motionless by the fire, and
Moon knelt beside him, posing what seemed to be
questions, again in a language I’d never heard before. The
phrases felt like a system of corridors constructed only to
break down the distinction between arriving and departing,
as if each corridor were a missing interval of time, parts of
a house that existed only on the outside, a place that no one
approached without getting lost.

Moon finally nodded, stood and smiled at me with
burning eyes. I could feel my back leaning on a smooth
rock, cold at first then hot then made of circles. The pain
that had been mounting behind my eyes began to relax, like
music breaking out of a buried coffin. Moon went into the
hut and came out with a knife. He put the blade in the fire,
then kneeled and made a quick incision, pulling open the
man’s chest and stomach. He motioned for me to bring him
an old wicker basket beside the hut. One by one, Moon
pulled out the man’s internal organs, placing them carefully
in the basket, replacing them with the burning stones. He
motioned for me to close the basket and place it back inside
the hut. Then he pulled the man’s body back together, sealing it with the wave-like motions of his hands.

We started drumming again, and soon the man was up and dancing, this time shouting with ecstasy at the sun going down behind Garnet Peak. The words of his chant had such presence that they didn’t vanish right after they came from his mouth. Rather, they drifted up like vapors, shaping themselves into cumulo-nimbus clouds, disappearing over the mountains, as if they were crossing a threshold into another dimension. It occurred to me that in this other dimension, every place was the same place, and words were things and things were words. Then it occurred to me that this thought was foolish. Then it occurred to me that it was no more foolish than anything else people thought about other dimensions. Then it occurred to me that I didn’t really know what a dimension was, that probably no one else did either. Then it occurred to me that each thing that occurred to me occurred to me so that other things might occur me. Then it occurred to me that I was trapped in things that occurred to me. Then the word occur became five stones that marked the edge of the space the man made with his dance—but north was facing west, south was facing east, and the fifth direction, which I wanted to call the center, was never the same, changing with the dance and the beat and the chant and the heat of the sun, whose beams came raining down in spears and arrows, marking the dust, as if the desert had once been sequence of pages, and before that, an ocean of words on the verge of becoming a language, and before that, the collection of one-celled animals that became those words, and before that, a random set of chemical reactions, and
before that, the musical score those chemicals emerged from, and before that, the word that becoming before becoming and, as if there was nothing before that and, and the man was chanting louder, slicing the air with large white feathers, cutting the air into words that the gathering wind was whirling away. For a second I knew precisely what they meant, and then I knew nothing, like a bubble of air rising rapidly from the ocean floor, bursting once it reached the air on the surface.

Again the man collapsed and our drumming stopped. With his bare hands, Moon pulled open the man’s body, removed the burning stones, motioned for me to bring the basket, carefully putting the man’s internal organs back into his body. Then he closed him up, massaging his skin, again making wave-like motions with his hands, leaving no trace of the opening he’d made. A few minutes later the man slowly got up, gazed at the gash in the sky where the sun had down behind Garnet Peak, nodded to Moon and me, and disappeared into his hut.

Then Moon and I were stumbling and weaving our way back out through the desert night. As I drove toward San Diego, he sat gazing out the window, refusing to speak, as if he were there by himself, as if he were someone I no longer knew. When we got home, he aggressively steered the conversation toward things we’d done together thirty years before in New York City, and our laughing memories seemed to intrude on and transform what had just happened in the desert. It’s no secret that memory is more a reconstruction than it is an objective account of past events, but our conversation made my recollections even more unstable, and later that night, after Moon had gone to bed, I
was sure that what I remembered was quite different from what really took place. I knew that if I told my Zen teacher about it, he would give me that slightly condescending smile and tell me not to put so much emphasis on the paranormal side-effects of my practice. So I decided to keep the experience to myself.

Moon left the next day, resisting all my requests for an explanation, except to say that our work in the desert had been crucial in restoring the health of the nation. I'd always felt that to talk about restoring the nation's health was misguided, implying that the United States had at some point in its past been truly healthy. But a few days later, the nation was buzzing with what the media called a tragic disaster, even though it made me happier than I'd been in many years. In a marvelous coincidence—or perhaps as a result of a magical process I couldn't begin to understand—Bush, Chaney, Rumsfeld, and the nation's other Republican leaders had suddenly died in different accidental ways, all within the same ten-hour period, and the White House had been occupied by environmental activists, apparently with Pentagon approval.
Stephen-Paul Martin edited *Central Park* magazine in New York from 1980-1996. He is the author of numerous books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. He has two new books coming out this year.
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