

*Owl Man explains time-squirrels and feathers ...*

“Fex, my good man, how good to see you. Hey ho! Sal and Coo to boot. Wonderful timing, gentlemen, as I was just about to provide a picture of *what gives*, as Fex has queried. But first, Sal, go corral Charmayne and tell her to bring more of everything, including drinks, and make sure she puts it on my tab.”

Owl Man’s uncharacteristic outburst as a welcoming, bestowing host brought surprise looks from Jasmine and Heron Man. Fex lost no time in scooting another table up to the booth. He then made a patented Fex show of patting his oversize tummy in tom-tom fashion, as if to add gaiety to the evening and promise that further delights would find welcome.

“Never expected that from you, birdie chief, but I’ll take it.” Fex had stopped drumming and sat bolt upright as Sal returned, followed by Charmayne with a new round of drinks, fresh bibs, and the smiling anticipation of bringing an unending feast for the evening, and no doubt a handsome tip from Mr. Owl, as always.

Fex downed his drink in one go, wiped his puffy lips with the back of his hand, and announced, “I’m all ears.”

“It’s not the ears I’m worried about, Fex, it’s the space between them, the gray matter that matters, so to speak.”

“You makin’ fun of my noggin, Owl Man? No one gets away with that, you hear what I’m saying?” Fex stood up and leaned on the table, knocking over his empty glass, just as Charmayne came upon the group with two great platters of seafood treats.

“Owls have very good ears, Fex, and little appreciation for bellowing blubber. You are not here to give orders, or shout imprecations, but to listen. But first, stuff yourself with a sampling of these goodies our charming Charmayne has bestowed upon our table.”

Fex sat grumbling, but dug in as directed. Sal and Coo followed Fex’s lead.

For a time, all was quiet at the table excepting the sounds of crunching, munching, gnashing and pulling apart the table's proffered goodies like wolves at a deer-feast.

Heron Man swirled his finger round the edge of his water glass giving rise to a high-pitched hum that soon gathered everyone's attention. Eating stopped. Stillness prevailed. The strange sound and its odd source circled round and round. Heron stopped the circling motion, took up his knife, and clinked against the glass three times, the crystalline chime functioning as a call to order.

"Owl Man, this is a good time to tell everyone what gives."

Owl Man sat back closed his eyes, breathed in. No pin dropped, but it would have been heard.

"We all know what we are about to do. But we are not quite ready. I must leave for a time in order to gather up what I might call a missing piece, necessary to complete our access to the *time-squirrel*."

Fex interrupted Owl Man's soft-spoken words with an outburst that at first was a mouthful of shrimp spewed across the table followed shortly by a gaggle of words.

"Now I know, for sure. You all see, don't you? Bird-brain here has finally lost his last marble, totally nuts. What the fuck's a time-squirrel?" Fex was about to add to his tirade when Owl Man held his palm up and silenced him and everyone else as well.

"Fex, please, I know this may tax your limited comprehension of such matters, so please just be quiet until I am finished." Owl Man went on. "As a matter of fact, you have hit on a key point. Nuts. You know how squirrels will store nuts gathered in the summer and fall for their use in the winter. It is not generally known, even by those in advanced fields, that time as well can be gathered and stored thusly, and my term for this is *time-squirreling*. The problem is in controlling it—and that is what I must be away for, to add the final piece to my own understanding of it so that the success of our venture will be assured."

“But Owlie,” Jasmine shrieked. “You told us we must act urgently. So what’s with this delay? And what’s this about going away without even telling me?”

“Yes,” Owl man replied, “there is urgency, but it is of a special kind. It involves each and every one of you and all the others we have gathered together in our little troupe. There is something you must all learn and do while I am away. It is a special form of imaginative practice. I won’t bother you with the technical name, as it’s rather long and dense, but will rather call it by what I have nicknamed it for brevity—*feathers*. Heron is well-trained in feathers and he’s an extraordinary teacher. On Heron’s command, you will begin gathering for your first lesson soon enough, and will follow Heron’s instructions exactly. By the time I return, you will all be ready for the big event. And so shall I.”

Everyone was silenced by this news and sat staring into space.

“A toast, then, to our venture, and its success!”

Owl Man stood, followed in turn by everyone else, even Fex, with everyone clinking and clanking their glasses on Owl Man’s high-held goblet.

*At Captain Jack's, Heron Man takes command ...*

Owl Man was tickled by his clever abbreviation, feathers. It may have been funny to him, perhaps, but not so to Heron Man, who had the unenviable task of conveying the subtleties of this devilishly difficult matter to the entire troupe of unlikely players: Fex, Coo, Sal, Heather, Sally, Jasmine, Foxy and Mr. Moto. Good luck, Heron Man.

And who knows what madness Owl Man would bring back from the jungles of Yucatán, like a fever? Heron Man was Owl Man's most steadfast supporter and advocate, but even he was beginning to wonder if perhaps Fex wasn't right. Maybe Owl Man *had* lost his last marble after all. From the streets of Seattle to the tropic depths of Yucatán? On the virtual eve of the heist? Risking all, and for what? For a piece of arcane knowledge with which to crown his towering edifice? For all his brilliance, Heron Man wondered, is this the best Owl Man can come up with? Feathers? Is Owl Man losing his own feathers, his marbles, in a fantasy world of quantum-physics tinker-toys, building nothing more than one more monument to delusion?

But these were private thoughts, and they came and went in a flash. For the moment, Heron Man would have to keep his doubts to himself. But he resolved to keep a close eye on Owl Man, suppressing an image of Owl Man riding in a broken down Mexican bus with a banner on the side reading: "Yucatán or bust!" And if the trip did turn out to be a bust, he would have a serious talk with Owl Man. Perhaps he and Jasmine could stage an intervention on Owl Man's behalf ...

Meanwhile, the business at hand was pressing. If the entire "troupe" was to meet soon, as Owl Man had directed, a quick mobilization would be necessary. So Heron Man clinked his water glass a second time.

"Ahem! Quiet, please! Thank you, Sal. Thank you, Coo, Fex. While I have the shreds of your attention, and before we leave Captain Jack's, I insist that we send out word of our upcoming "seminar" tonight. Owl Man has explained to you as much as he can for the time being. When next we meet we will go more deeply into the "feathers" concept, and you'll all have a chance to grasp at feathers yourselves, so to

speak, and time enough to practice on one another.”

Fex stirred restlessly, his stained and rumpled bib still spattered with bits of crab shell, sauce and salad. For a change he remained strangely silent.

“So take out your cell phones, people, and start calling.” Heron Man sounded like the shift manager of a telemarketing firm.

There was something about Heron Man’s manner that brooked no opposition. Even Fex directed Coo to call Heather, Foxy and Mr. Moto. And Sal began punching buttons, to notify Sally of the big day coming up soon. Even as he did so, he found himself wondering what Jolene was doing at that exact moment, wondered what she was wearing ...

Thus began a brief but intense volley of cell phone calls that created a surge in the electro-magnetic field surrounding the restaurant. There were logistics to be arranged, arrangements to be made, pressure to be applied and, in Foxy’s case, direct threats to be issued. When told of the meeting, she declared that, instead of spending the day jabbering like an idiot, she would go to Ling Bank directly and just “start blasting.” Those were her exact words. Coo put his hand over the device and relayed Foxy’s response, but Fex jerked the phone away from him and proceeded to lay down the law to Foxy. She finally relented, but only after promises of ice cream. Fex shoved the phone back at Coo.

After all the arrangements had been made and the last cell phone pocketed, the party finally began to wind down. Charmayne presented the bill, and Owl Man was true to his word. Charmayne shivered when she saw the lavish tip Owl had added to the bill.

“My goodness, Owl Man, this is way too much!” she cried.

“Not at all, my dear, just a small token of appreciation for your superb service.”

“Well, you just be sure to come back to Captain Jack’s anytime you want, and we’ll be sure to take good care of you! And thank you *sooo* much, Owl Man! And thank youuu, everyone!”

Charmayne took a deep breath, as if preparing to loose a fresh volley of courtesies, but Heron and Owl both stood at the same moment, releasing Charmayne,

who walked straight to the back office, pumping her fist.

The front entrance of Captain Jack's was tricked out in the shape of a ship's wooden hull, and customers came and went by way of a heavy gang-plank with thick rope railings, crossing a small pond ringed by plastic palms. The dinner party left the restaurant single-file, clomping down the gang-plank like tourists disembarking from Noah's Ark. Then they diverged along separate trajectories—Owl Man and Jasmine veering left, while Fex, Sal and Coo veered to the right. Heron Man remained behind for a few moments. He was concerned about Owl Man. He was also concerned about Owl Man and Jasmine. And with good reason, apparently, for he could hear enough of their conversation to justify his alarm. The last thing he needed at this point was a lovers' quarrel.

"You bastard, Owlie! You're going all the way to fucking Yucatán without telling me? That's crazy!" Jasmine was not one to hold back, and the glistening, mist-soaked parking lot resounded with her shouts.

Owl Man lost his normally tranquil demeanor, and stood gesticulating under a sodium vapor lamp, trying to find some way to mollify or humor Jasmine. She gave him no quarter and pressed him about his blunder. Cornered, he admitted that he had simply forgotten, so engrossed was he with the presentation he was to give at the conference in Yucatán.

By her stiff-neck posture and tone of voice, Heron could tell that Jasmine wasn't buying the story.

"Bullshit!" she screamed.

Then both combatants suddenly lowered their voices. Heron Man heard laughter. And when he saw Jasmine reach up, pull Owl Man's head down and kiss him, he knew that, whatever the secret formula was, it had worked.

The overhead Mercury-vapor lamp hissed and sizzled in the mist.

Heron Man left the reconciled lovers locked in their embrace and slipped away into the damp Seattle darkness.

Heron Man meets Helen ...

That same night, Heron Man woke to a flickering play of light and shadow across his face. The moon behind the clouds was full, but obscured by their churning, save for the intermittent shaft of light piercing his window. He looked at the clock. It was 3:15 AM.

Did the moon wake him, or was it the dream?

He reached for the spiral notebook with sharpened pencil that lay on his nightstand. Using his thumb as a guide at the margin, he closed his eyes and began scribbling. A dream, yes; a fragment, at least. *An unknown woman, elusive—a strong attraction. Something about writing. The image of the woman fading as the dream ended.* He scribbled down what he could remember.

“Wait a minute,” said Heron Man aloud. “She had a name. What was her name?” He leaned back into the pillow and went back into the dream. “Helen!” he nearly shouted. “Her name was Helen! Yes! Helen! Remember that, Heron Man!” he admonished himself, and resumed his sleep.

On his way to Tully’s that morning, he stopped at the post office for stamps, for he had not given up entirely on the antique craft of longhand letter writing—though nowadays he rarely sent more than post cards. This morning’s card was of the humorous variety: a picture of the Space Needle in the middle of a cactus-strewn desert. Emblazoned across the card was the caption, “Greetings from Sunny Seattle!” An insider’s joke for Seattle residents and visitors.

Heron Man wrote the note and dropped the card in the outgoing mail slot. By the time he reached Tully’s he was thirsty and hungry.

“Hey, Heron Man, good morning,” Jasmine fairly sang out. She was on counter-duty this morning; Jimmy was busy with the bussing tubs and swabbing down the empty tables.

“Hi, Jasmine. Good to see you. Uh, how is ... Owl Man ... this morning?” said Heron Man tentatively, testing the waters. He was worried about Jasmine’s argument with Owl Man in the parking lot last night.

“Oh, he’s wonderful, Heron. You know Owl Man. It’s like he drank from the

Fountain of Youth or something. Now, what can I get you?”

“Regular coffee, please,” replied Heron man, relieved. “Do you have a breakfast burrito with green chile this morning?”

“You know I order them just for you, Heron, but they’re getting popular. You like the *hot* green chile, no?”

“Yes! The hot! Thanks, Jasmine.” Heron Man paid, returned to his seat and opened his computer. He immediately began transcribing the dream and his associations to it. Next he Googled the etymology of the name “Helen,” coming up with variations of it in practically every language, though he wasn’t sure about Chinese. “Hmmm—lots of Helens,” he said.

He was reading about Helen of Troy, her parents Zeus and Leda, when Jimmy arrived with the burrito. “There you go, Heron. Enjoy! Need a refill?”

“Thanks, Jimmy. Yes, please.”

Flourishing knife and fork like a swordsman, Heron Man addressed himself to the breakfast burrito. As he gauged the potency of the chile—adequately hot, but not excessive—he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

“Heron?” It was Jasmine. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’m dying for you to meet a friend of mine.”

“Oh, hi, Jasmine.” Heron Man swallowed quickly and dabbed at his lips with a napkin. Jasmine spoke again, this time with formality.

“Heron Man, I’d like you to meet my friend Helen. Helen, this is Heron Man.”

Heron Man, wide-eyed, turned to see who it was. Two and a half awkward seconds ticked before he managed to croak, “Helen?”

“Hello, Heron Man. It’s so good to meet you. Jasmine has been telling me all about you,” said Helen, forthrightly holding out her hand.

“She has?” said Heron Man, nearly kissing the proffered hand, but he caught himself in time and clasped it in a handshake instead.

“Yes. She tells me that you and Owl Man are writing a book. I haven’t met Owl Man yet.”

“Oh, you’ll love Owl Man when you meet him. Well, the book, yes, it’s true. Kind of a meandering work in progress—aren’t they all? Heh, heh.” Heron Man was



jabbering, unusually nervous. He told himself to shut up, but kept running on. “Hard to describe the process, really. Basically winging it.” Finally, he caught up with himself. “Would you like to join me, Helen?” He pulled out a chair for Helen and flashed a signal to Jimmy, miming the pouring of a cup of coffee and pointing at his guest. Jimmy nodded, then winked.

“Are you a writer yourself, Helen?”

“A writer? No, not exactly, Heron Man. It may sound funny, but I suppose you could say I’m more of a ... muse.”

“Amused?”

Now, it’s true that the coffee shop was noisy and Heron Man might not have heard the final consonant, the “d”—had there been one. And who knows? Maybe Jimmy was clattering cups at that precise moment. But, really, it’s pretty certain there was no “d” at the end of the word, and Heron Man knew it. The fact is he was flustered and was stalling for time. He keyed Save on the laptop and quietly closed the cover.

Jasmine, seeing that Helen and Heron Man were engaged in conversation, slipped away, back to the counter.

Meanwhile, Helen proceeded, unruffled. “No, Heron Man, not amused. A *muse*. You know, someone who inspires. It’s simple: You do the writing, I do the inspiring.” And she fixed Heron Man with her gaze.

“That simple, eh?” said Heron Man. “Well, how do you—I mean—how do you get into my head, if you know what I mean?”

“Well, of course I know what you mean, Heron Man. And, really, I’m already there.”

“Already there?”

“Yes. For example, I’ll bet I know what you’re thinking right now.”

“Alright, tell me. What am I thinking right now?”

Helen looked into Heron Man’s eyes. She was breathing slowly and deeply, and her dark pupils seemed wide open. She resembled a prophetic bird.

“Well, you’re thinking of many things at once. For example, on one level you’re calculating how many paces between here and the exit and how many seconds

it would take to get to the door.”

“OK,” said Heron slowly, then repeating, “OK. What else?”

“You’re wondering who I am and where I came from.”

“Go on.”

“And it’s also pretty obvious that you’re wondering whether or not you and Owl Man can use me in your novel, or whatever it is you’re writing.”

“We haven’t decided *what* it is yet,” said Heron Man, staring at Helen. “And Owl Man doesn’t even *know* you. *I* don’t even know you, though I’m very pleased to meet you,” he added quickly. “But yes, it’s true—I *was* wondering whether there was a place for you in the book. Anything else?”

Helen was quiet for a moment, then she said, “Well, there’s more, but first I think we should get to know one another a little better, don’t you?”

“Yes, you’re probably right, Elena.” Heron stopped abruptly, a puzzled look flashing across his face as he realized his slip. “I mean, Helen. Sorry.”

“That’s OK, Heron Man. People call me lots of things. How about you? Is Heron Man your real name?”

This was an unexpected tack she was taking and Heron Man wasn’t sure how to handle it, so he shifted into low gear.

“Let’s ... just ... say,” he said slowly, “that ‘Heron Man’ is my true name, Helen. Like yours, I imagine.”

“Like mine, you imagine? Helen laughed. “I like that, Heron Man, I like that a lot—you, imagining my true name. Yes, that’s really what this is all about, isn’t it? Imagining? Finding the truth in images, even if they’re fictions?”

Heron Man wasn’t sure where she was going with all this. He had the feeling that she was way ahead of him, and that if she turned a corner she would disappear, only to pop up in some other place, at some other time—like a pixy, or a nymph, he was thinking, one of those sylvan sprites dancing among the dust motes, in and out of visibility, the kind Romantic poets were always rhapsodizing about.

And yet here she sat, directly before him, her thick hair silky and black, eyes hazel, complexion shading toward the olive but with a slight blush to it, a couple of beauty marks on her left cheek, a starlet’s eyebrows arched in that permanent

expression of astonishment—yet calm and self-assured withal. Not vain. Not egotistical. She certainly seems to know what she is about, Heron thought. And how does she know so much about me, as if she knows me better than I know myself? As if she's *leading* me somewhere?

This line of thought sounded in Heron Man's mind like the background trickling of a mountain stream. At the coffee-shop level, he and Helen continued their conversation. But it was beginning to dawn on Heron, though he was barely aware of it, that the trickle was being *echoed* by another trickle, as if across an Alpine valley. Something was matching, or following, or anticipating, his thoughts.

Jimmy stood watch, half-hidden behind the donut display. "Psst, Jasmine," he whispered. "Do you think they're going to hook up? Like you said?"

"Too soon to tell, Jimbo," said Jasmine. "But I'd say—so far, so good." She glanced over to catch Heron Man and Helen with their heads together.

"Who's the new skirt, Jazz?" Tully practically shouting in Jasmine's ear.

"Shhhh! Quiet, Tully, you're busting my eardrums. First of all, Tulls, she's not a skirt, her name's Helen. Second, she's not "new," she's a good friend of mine, I've known her for years and she's been away a long time. Third, she just returned to Seattle and I thought she should meet Heron Man. Don't you think they make a darling couple?"

"Darlin' couple now, is it? Where do ye get yer vocabulary, missie? If it's a darlin' couple yer wantin', why, then, maybe you and me should be doin' the couplin'." Tully finished with a quick little two-step.

Feigning insult, Jasmine shoved him back and said with Elizabethan haughtiness, "Away, thou tallow-faced contriver. Thou knowest my lord Owl Man has pledged me his troth. He and he alone holds the key to unlock my heart." And with an exaggerated curtsy Jasmine swept away, leaving Tully run full aground and keel-struck behind the pastry cabinet. He peered after her, a mermaid vanishing in the waves. Slowly he shook his weathered head and began to hum his mournful piper's song.

That was when Owl Man walked in.

*Owl Man Meets Helen ...*

It was the same old door-mat, but it could be imagined as a branch holding the swaying Owl Man as he peered over the scene at Tully's, as he always did before moving on to his table.

Ah, and there was Heron. As he stepped toward his writing partner, Owl Man stumbled. It was disbelief at what he was seeing that nearly tripped him, catching himself at the last moment on the counter near the door. A woman! A woman with Heron Man! And what a woman she was, his eyes informed him at once. Who was this obvious love interest with Heron Man? Heron was taken up with her, that much was clear. But Owl hadn't written any such turn of events, certainly not up to now. Heron Man, the most responsible man Owl Man had ever known, could not be distracted by a woman at such a critical moment. Owl Man would need all his skill to handle this development before he approached the others to begin setting up. He needed to free Heron from this trap, but from the look of the looks he was giving this woman it was not going to be easy.

He approached Heron Man and the woman as if nothing was wrong.

"Good morning, Heron," giving a nod of greeting to the woman. "May I speak to you privately, please?"

"And a very good morning it is, Owl. May I present Helen ... "

"Hello, Helen, I'm pleased to meet you, but I must insist on speaking with Heron Man now, without delay. It is quite urgent."

"Oh, that's not necessary, Owl. You see, Helen is the woman of my dreams."

"Yes, yes, of course, Heron, and I will gladly look forward to exiting developments with your lady friend, but I must—"

"What you must do Owl Man, is to *listen* to me. Helen is the woman of my dreams."

"Heron, I heard you the first time. I don't think this is the time or place. Now please, let's step over there so we can—"

"Anything you have to say, Owl Man, you may say in front of Helen. She is

the woman of my dreams.”

“I am not hard of hearing, Heron Man. I've heard you. But we have urgent matters to attend to, unless you have forgotten or, worse yet, been distracted utterly from the project at hand.”

This was not going the way Owl Man expected at all. The spell must be worse than he thought. A new approach was necessary.

“Heron, unless you come with me this instant, I'm calling off the whole project, and I mean the *whole* project, not just the business across the street, but the story itself, as well as the purpose of our whole... ”

“Owl, listen to me. Helen is the woman of my dreams, but you are not listening to what I mean by that. Now shut up while I tell you.”

Owl Man, stunned by Heron's blunt order, started to turn away, but then turned back, pulled out a chair, and sat, staring at the now standing Heron Man, looking at least a foot taller. Owl gestured for Heron to go ahead with his explanation.

“Last night, Helen here was in my dream. I've never seen her before in my life. And now here she is! Synchronicity, right? Even more, Owl. She is Jasmine's friend, has been for years, and Jasmine never had a thought to introduce her to us—to me—until this very morning—*after* my dream. Don't you see, Owl Man, it is a perfect example of your theory of centrifugal attraction as the basis for synchronicity, and Helen here will be a perfect, synchronistic addition to our enterprise.”

Owl Man was caught by Helen's gaze and felt the full weight of what Heron had said. Heron was right.

*Owl Man's Helen Vision ...*

With some difficulty, Owl Man tore himself away from what he later called Helen's "gravitational field effect" on Heron Man, and retired to the men's room where he splashed cold water on his face. He was well familiar with the dangers of *psychological gravity waves* and, as he towed his face dry, he made a decision. Returning to the coffee shop, he sidled along the wall behind the tables, and out the door. He tried flashing a few hand signals to Heron Man, but it was useless, so he gave up and left.

Jasmine's shift ended at four, and she had been wondering about Owl Man all day. He was long gone, of course. That's strange, she kept thinking. Normally, he would have winked, or raised an eyebrow, on his way out the door. Uncharacteristic of Mr. Owl.

When she finally got home, Owl Man was slouched in a chair, drumming his fingers on the table. He sat up straighter when she walked in, feigning levity.

"You feel like Chinese tonight, Jazz? How about the Dragon Palace?"

"Well, sure, Owlie, if that's where your taste buds are dragging you."

"Maybe it's the image that's dragging me, more than my taste buds."

"What image?"

"The image of sitting with you, my darling, beneath those tasseled plastic palace lanterns, feeding you bamboo shoots with my chop sticks."

"Mmmmm, sounds lovely. Let's go!"

Jasmine dressed informally, in a silk kimono over tights and leotard, and clogs. At the last moment she took a magnolia blossom from the crystal water bowl by the door, and stuck it in her hair. Owl Man, in a fashion frenzy, wore black jeans and a black turtleneck under his well-worn *gi*, his white canvas karate coat with the black belt. He tied a white dragon headband around his forehead.

Madame Lee greeted the couple effusively and showed them to their booth near the koi pond.

"Nice to see you, Mistah Owr-l. Very beautiful r-lady, Miss Jasmine. Very nice. Yes. You l-lucky man, Mistah Owl-l." Madame Lee was close to conquering the

difficult English “I,” and was proud of it.

Once they were seated, Jasmine zeroed in on Owl Man.

“Are you all right, Owlie? You seem different tonight. What’s going on?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Jaz, just fine.” Then, abruptly, “Listen, did you see who Heron Man was with this morning?”

“Did I see? You mean Helen? Of course I saw her, Owlie. I *introduced* her to Heron. She’s an old friend of mine.”

“Oh, yes, of course, that’s right.” Owl Man paused. “Ahh, Jaz, *when* did you meet Helen, exactly?”

“Why, I met Helen, let’s see now, it was—hmmmm, you know, I can’t recall exactly when that was. We’re like sisters, you know—I’ve known her *forever*. I’m kinda fuzzy on dates, Mr. Owlie. Let’s just say I met Helen many moons ago, after an eclipse, when she rode out of a cloud on a moonbeam, her hair was flying with the wind—”

“In other words, she popped off the page of your imagination.”

“Come on, Owlie, spill the beans. Why are you grilling me about Helen like this? She’s a dream-boat! Don’t you like her or something?”

“Oh no, it’s not that at all. I found Helen to be, well, entrancing. And Heron Man certainly was entranced. Did you notice? No, there’s something else. It’s just that I got this funny feeling at Tully’s.”

“Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?”

“Mmm, funny peculiar, I’d say.”

“Like?”

“Like I was in a dream-boat and there was Helen at the prow.”

“You mean you were dreaming?”

“No, of course not. I was drinking coffee at Tully’s. At least I *think* I was. It was very strange.”

“But what were you *doing* in the boat?”

“Sailing, I suppose, though I don’t remember any sails. There weren’t any other people on board, just Helen. And I, of course.”

“And she was at the prow, you say?”

“Yes, almost like a figurehead. You know how the Polynesians always carve or paint an eye on the bow of their canoes, so the craft can ‘see’ where it’s going? Figureheads are the same thing. I suppose you’d call it the ship’s *good luck charm*. But it was as if she’d been carved out of wood, like the eye of a canoe or the ship’s figurehead, yet she was as real as you are now, sitting across the booth from me.”

“Mmmm.”

“But it kept changing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we were in the boat, on the water, then the boat was gone and it was just Helen in the mist, disappearing ahead of me, almost like she was part of the mist. I can’t really explain it. I know it doesn’t make sense. Heron Man kept saying that she was the woman of his dreams. I wonder if this was what he was talking about?”

A slender young woman appeared with a pot of tea and took their order without writing anything down. She gave her name as “Jennie,” though she was born in Taiwan. Jennie left and Jasmine did the honors with the tea, pouring both cups and holding hers up to Owl, as if in a toast.

“What shall we toast tonight, Owlie?”

“How about a toast to you?”

“No,” said Jasmine firmly. “Not to me. Not tonight. Tonight, I propose a toast—to Helen!”

And so they clicked their cups without spilling a drop, and sipped the fragrance of jasmine blossoms.

“Now. Back to your dream,” said Jasmine.

“See, that’s the thing, Jaz. It wasn’t a dream. But it might as well have been. I can’t really tell the difference. But I can tell you this. When we get home tonight I’m going to get out the Agatha Christie and give her free rein. Even now, I feel like I’m riding the moon.”

“Well, I’ve known Helen a long time, Owlie. And she does have that effect on people. That’s why she calls herself a muse.”

“So, she wasn’t kidding.”

“No, not at all.”



That night, while Jasmine was taking a bath, Owl Man took the Agatha Christie out of her case, as promised, and scarcely had time to lay out the bonded paper before the pen began swirling across the page. Once, Jasmine peered out with a towel wrapped around her head, like a turban. She saw Owlie at work, then went quietly to the bedroom and softly closed the door.

Owl Man sat at the writing table, scribbling furiously. Tonight, he felt, he was a real scrivener—or, as it strangely occurred to him while turning over a page, a *calligraphus*.

The words stopped flowing when the moon went down.

*Owl Man departs for Yucatán ...*

Helen had swooped like an exotic bird into the story that Owl Man and Heron Man were narrating, and she set their minds to spinning. It was a sea-change for Heron Man, altering his life's course for better or worse. To gauge the impact on Owl Man, think of an owl. Now think of someone sprinkling luminescent glitter over the field-mice in that owl's night-watch domain. Sure, the owl had seen the mice clearly enough before, but with Helen at large, the mice fairly flew right into the owl's talons.

Helen's appearance in the story was quite fortuitous, as it turned out. For example, Owl Man's present preoccupations were mounting: He needed to mollify Jasmine's injured feelings over his sudden trip to Yucatán; organize the material for his presentation at the conference there; and prepare for the inevitable surprises lurking in the tropical jungles of the steaming peninsula, always mindful of the physical hardships of any long journey. But hovering over all these concerns was Helen's presence, imparting a strange, anticipatory sense of calm, an eerie confidence, that buoyed him up and fortified his determination. Owl Man was keenly aware of the effect, pondering it as he prepared for the trip.

Since Jasmine had to cover a morning shift for Jimmy, the farewell between her and Owl Man was brief—pleasant enough on the surface, but shot through with brief jolts of anxiety, visible in the contorted expressions that periodically swept over Jasmine's face, and in Owl Man's stiff-legged, luggage-bearing gait. The deeper currents of feeling between the two lovers were strong, however, and remained undisturbed. And soon enough the inexorable pull of travel, excitement and danger drew Owl Man into the uncertainty of its gaping maw.

For his part, Heron Man may as well have spent the day lashed to a mast—Odysseus in Seattle—exposed as he was to the enchanting music of the mantic bird-woman, Helen, though he never forgot that he was on a “voyage.” One part of his mind was focused on the upcoming training task—a daunting challenge under the best of circumstances. A deeper part of his mind, however, was totally imbued with the presence of Helen, who had taken up residence there in some non-corporeal way.

The image of a pair of enormous, outspread wings directly overhead, kept coming to mind—a bird-woman, indeed. And any obstacle in Heron Man's planning simply required toggling into the background process, re-connecting with Helen, and the problem would evaporate.

At long last, the first day of trans-portal training—*feathers*—had arrived, and Heron Man set out for the *Come Ye Heather*, eager to begin at the scheduled hour.

*Training Day #1—Sally's picnic ...*

Heron Man pounded on the heavy door of the *Come Ye Heather*.

“Fex, wake up! Fex!”

More pounding. No answer.

Two fishermen walking along the floating dock in yellow slickers and rubber boots grinned at Heron Man as they passed. One carried a reeking bucket of chum.

“Good luck, mister. That fat bastard is never awake this early!”

“Early? It’s eleven o’clock already!” And Heron Man kept hammering at the door, alternating between a thumping sound and a sharper rap.

The door opened slowly.

“Who the hell’s breakin’ down the door?” Fex stood in a plaid bathrobe and bare feet, unshaven, with dark smudges under his eyes. His face looked like it had come from the Halloween section of a dime store.

“It’s me, Fex,” Heron Man shouted. “Open the damn door! Everybody is supposed to be here in fifteen minutes and I’ve got to get ready!” And Heron Man pushed his way past Fex, who was busy glaring at the grinning fishermen. He flipped off his nose at them, Italian style.

“Your mother eats raw sardines!” Fex jeered.

“Up yours, fatso!” The fishermen, accustomed to tavern brawls in Alaska, were enjoying the sparks, but Fex wisely turned his back on them and closed the door.

Before Heron Man could unpack the bulging briefcase he’d brought, there was more knocking at the door.

“Jesus! What is this? A friggin’ train station? Come in!” he yelled.

“What’s all the racket?” complained Heather, sticking her head out of the tiny hallway as she slouched from the bedroom to the head.

“Heather, you knew we were meeting this morning! Get a move on, will you?” Heron Man was getting irritated. This would not do. He did some deep-breathing exercises while Fex loomed over the stove, brewing up a pot of coffee.

The knocking continued. Fex was pre-occupied coffee-wise and slightly

behind the curve, so Heron Man opened the door. Sally teetered in, her arms full of large shopping bags; she was followed by Sal, who lugged a jumbo picnic basket and a five-gallon thermos jug.

“Morning, everyone,” chirped Sally. “Brought some potato salad and chips and relish and mustard and ketchup. Sal, put the hot dogs in the fridge and start the barbecue. Put the paper plates over here.”

Sally had spent last night organizing the day’s festivities, and was particularly proud of the menu.

“I got some popcorn too. Anybody like popcorn?”

“Uh, Sally,” Heron Man began, “this is not supposed to be a party.”

“Well, I know that, Heron Man, but can’t a girl have a little fun? Besides, we have to eat, don’t we? Sal, we forgot the ice chest! Would you run and get it, hon?” And she bustled around the galley, moving Fex aside in order to start rinsing carrots.

“Hey, Sally, I ain’t had my coffee yet. What the hell are you doin’?”

“Don’t worry, Fex, go ahead and drink your coffee. Sal and I are just gonna get a few things ready here.”

Just then the door crashed open and Mr. Moto stepped inside, in his menacing way. He looked suspiciously around the room, folded his arms across his chest and nodded to Foxy that it was safe to enter. Foxy walked in with a red fox stole around her shoulders. For dress she had selected a military-cut jumpsuit with a wide black belt and lots of pockets. Her pants-legs were tucked into high-topped Army boots one size too large. Mr. Moto had brought Foxy’s Tommy gun, packed in its violin case.

Foxy looked around as if expecting applause, but no one seemed to notice her except Heron Man. He waved her into the room with a courtly bow. Foxy curtsied. Heron Man nodded to Mr. Moto, but Moto did not respond.

As Heron tried to put Foxy at ease with small talk, asking politely about the Tommy gun, Jasmine entered. Normally she was perky and lively, definitely a “looker,” but this morning she moved with the élan of a Brazilian sloth.

“Good morning, Jasmine,” said Heron cheerfully, applying metaphorical grease to Jasmine’s metaphorical squeaky wheel.

“Morning,” said Jasmine glumly. She slid over to the galley, took the coffee

pot from Fex's hands and poured herself a cup.

"Make some more, Fex. I'm going to need it," she ordered.

Fex started to protest, but, in a rare fit of discretion, throttled the impulse.

"Yeah, sure, Jaz. No problem. Comin' right up."

"Fexie, honey, you got any coffee yet?" Heather wasn't in much better shape than Jasmine, though for different reasons.

By now it was clear that the day's "seminar and workshop" had gotten away from Heron Man, to his dismay. How was he supposed to explain the complexities of "Feathers" and TPR to such a rattle-taggle group? After a couple of half-hearted attempts to bring the group to order, he finally gave in to the inevitable and suggested it was time for Sally's picnic lunch.

Everyone jumped at the chance to postpone Heron Man's seminar. On the scale of values, it seems, hot dogs and mustard outranked demonstrations of transportal repositioning. The deciding factor was the half-gallon of vodka Fex had been surreptitiously pouring into the lemonade jug all day. The spiked punch became more popular as the party progressed. By two o'clock, Coe had fallen asleep on the couch. Heather, Jasmine and Sally were discussing hairstyles of the rich and famous. Fex had broken out the poker chips and had bluffed and bullied Sal into betting all his chips on a miserable pair of twos.

Heron Man doggedly went over his notes, hoping for a lull in the festivities. It was 3:15 PM when he finally began his presentation, and it was 3:16 PM when he finished. His opening remarks amounted to an announcement that the meeting was over and the group would re-convene the next morning.

Fex smugly put the cards away, having emptied Sal's pockets with the last poker hand. Chuckling to himself, he patted his pocketful of cash. Then he got up, drew a jumbo paper cup of spiked lemonade and took it to Heron Man, slapping him on the shoulder and thrusting the drink into his hand.

"Nice try, bird brain. Next time maybe you should read up on your Norman Vincent Peale. I been readin' that shit for years. You ain't gonna get this bunch of nincompoops to do nothin' without puttin' a gun to their heads. Now *that's* positive thinking!"

Heron took a sip, and then another. He held up the paper cup appraisingly, as if noting the bouquet and finish of the lemonade.

“Maybe I should borrow Foxy’s Tommy gun and just mow them down,” said a dispirited Heron Man. “Or hire Mr. Moto to do it. Yeah, that might work.”

Heron Man was clearly off his game, like a cowpoke wondering how he was going to drive his herd to Dodge, knowing they’d all been grazing on locoweed.

“Smart, bird brain, real smart,” said Fex. “Blow ‘em away, huh? Yeah, you and Foxy.”

Still feeling flush at Sal’s expense, Fex took pity on Heron. By way of consolation, Fex set out to demonstrate some new steps he’d made up for the upcoming Golden Oldies Dance Contest.

*Training Day #2—A band of hunters ...*

The next day, morning broke with all the glory of a sopping blanket. A dense cloud draped itself over the tallest buildings and dripped incessantly. The Space Needle plunged upward into the muck that passed for sky, and the vile precipitation was whipped back and forth by wind that couldn't make up its mind. Prevailing weather patterns, of course, pushed everything toward the mountains. But it seemed that half of Elliott Bay had merged with the clouds, that the rain was nothing more than salty scud and foam, falling back to ground and draining into the sea.

As it happened, the weather was perfect for Heron Man's seminar, if you discount all the grumbling, the shaking out of wet coats, rattling of umbrellas and stomping of boots.

Under the lash of Heather's direction, Fex had built a fire in the small corner wood-stove. In the gloom hovering over the marina, the twisted plume of smoke that emerged from the stovepipe on the *Come Ye Heather*, hinted at a cozy refuge from the elements.

Heron Man had brought a 24-cup coffee maker to brew up the dark roast blend that Jasmine had thoughtfully brought from Tully's. Several bags of the rich coffee sat on the counter, betokening the group's intent to stay awake.

"Well, it's good to see all of you again, so bright and early!" began Heron Man.

"All right, bird brain, skip the bullshit. Get on with it," said Fex, though without his usual edge.

"Hang on, Fex. Yes, I'll cut to the chase, in just a second." Heron Man drank the remains of his coffee and set down the cup.

"I know you're all excited to learn more about 'Feathers,' Owl Man's abbreviation for a *very* complex theory," he continued. "But after today you'll be more familiar with the concept. And by the time Owl Man returns from his trip, you'll all be experts. Then, at long last, we'll be in a position to carry out the most unusual heist in banking history."

There was a spatter of applause, most of it from Sally and Heather, who



giggled and high-fived one another.

“Let’s begin. I want you to close your eyes for a moment, and imagine that you’re in a dark forest of giant oaks, let’s say, thirty thousand years ago.”

“How long is that?” asked Heather.

“It’s thirty thousand years, Heather.”

“Wow,” said Heather. “That’s a long time.”

“Yes,” said Heron Man, “it is a long time, but not so long ago if you think about it.”

“Do I have to?” ask Heather.

“Heather, you really don’t have to think at all. For the moment, just close your eyes.”

Heather squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

“Now I want you all to imagine that you’re watching a band of Neanderthal hunters slowly walking among the oaks. Except that you are looking *down* on the hunters from above, because you’re sitting high up in the trees. You’re looking down from above because you are ... birds.”

Heron Man was ready for someone to chortle or guffaw, or for Fex to cut loose with his usual bluster. But to Heron Man’s amazement, no one stirred. It seemed that, already, the opening gambit was working! The entire group sat entranced, even Foxy and Mr. Moto. Heron Man lowered his voice a notch and slowed his delivery.

“Now, because you are birds, you don’t say a word. You just watch as the hunters pass by, single file. Each carries a long sharpened stick, like a spear. There are eight hunters in this band, all men. Most are young, in their teens or twenties. One of them—the one in front—is wearing a necklace of some sort and he has a leather hat. He is obviously the leader. In his hat he has placed a feather.”

Heron Man paused again and looked out. All were still silent, eyes still closed. *Amazing*, he thought.

“The leader cups his hands around his mouth and makes a sharp bird call, the piercing shriek of a wild bird. You all freeze. Not one of you flies away in alarm. Instead, you all fluff your feathers, for suddenly you feel a chill. As your feathers

increase your warmth you begin to murmur—a low, throaty warble. Not a cry or call. Not bird-speech, but bird ‘humming.’ You’re all humming in response to the man with the feather.”

Without having issued a specific order, everyone in the room is humming and warbling. The sound is uncanny, like the lowest register of a pipe organ. Heron Man can feel the vibrations. A cup in the sink rattles faintly.

“As you warble, the hunter’s warbling soon matches your own and you feel the heat in your bodies increase, trapped by your fluffed-out feathers. Your claws grip the branches tighter. You feel the bark. Now all throats are vibrating in unison, all at the same pitch.”

Heron Man realized that the volume of the enchanted group’s warbling was increasing, and he was concerned they were not ready for the *TPR crossover point*, so he decided to bring them back for a break.

“Now, gradually soften your warbling, let your feathers relax, and slowly, very gently, come back to the present moment. Now—slowly, slowly open your eyes.”

And the group began to stir, diffidently.

“Man, I was sweatin’,” said Sal.

“Jesus, it’s hot in here,” added Fex.

“I’d take off my sweater,” said Sally, “only I got nothin’ but a bra underneath.”

“Go ahead, Sally, take it off!” said Coo, who was always ready to lower the level.

Soon everyone was chattering animatedly.

Heron Man stood and watched. *So far, so good*, he thought. As he picked up his notes to prepare for the next segment, his cell phone rang. It was Owl Man.

“Owl Man! Where are you?”

“I’m at the Conference Center in Yucatán. I just arrived.”

Owl Man’s voice sounded like it was coming through a taut string tied between two empty soup cans.

“How’s your trip going, so far?” Heron Man shouted into the phone.

“So far too long, and it’s just begun! Listen, is Jasmine there? If she is, would you please put her on the phone? Her cell phone is turned off or something.”

“Sure, Owl Man, she’s right over there. But you’re OK? So far?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Good to hear it, Owl! Here’s Jasmine!” Heron Man had been waving Jasmine over, pointing at the cell phone. She crossed the room and as she approached Heron Man he mouthed the words, “It’s Owl Man.” Jasmine snatched the phone from his hands and rushed out the door so she could talk to Owlie in private. It was a good while before she returned to the room, her phone conversation over. Her face was flushed, but in a good way—soft and glowing. *Well, let’s admit it*, thought Heron Man. *Jasmine was absolutely radiant!*

To Heron Man’s surprise, Jasmine called the meeting back to order.

“OK, people, let’s resume our focus!” The group seemed stunned at Jasmine’s unexpected surge of leadership. Everyone obeyed.

“Heron Man, do you mind if I lead this next segment?”

“Well, of course I don’t mind, Jasmine. Be my guest. Would you like to see my notes?”

“I don’t need them, Heron. I’m pretty sure I know what to do.”

And so Jasmine led the group, Heron Man included, back into the imaginal forest—without the Neanderthals this time, but with the birds. Like the leader of a migrating flock she guided everyone, first with simple melodies, a sort of plain-song. Then she overlaid simple harmonies on top of the melodies, then proceeded to hold long, sustained intervals in fifths, fourths and thirds. These intervals she further resolved “downward,” so to speak, dropping down into sounds resembling ancient chants. Finally she recovered the animal warble, deep in the throat, all bodies reverberant and resonating. Once she had reached that lowest point, where animal utterance dissolves into something like a primordial, oceanic hiss, she held the group on the same note—if we can give the name of “note” to something as diffuse as the background “noise” left over from the Big Bang.

Every person present was carried as if on a wave or a bed of quantum foam. As the group held this final note, Jasmine quietly took a deep breath, and spoke. Her

voice had dropped one, perhaps two, octaves.

“Now. This is where we must be. We must be able to return to this place again, and again. We must return to it at will, and together. This is the basis of what Owl Man wants us to do. This is the Secret of the Feather, and it will lead us to the greater mystery: Gathering time the way squirrels gather nuts!”

The meeting ended with very few words. Noticeably absent was the usual haranguing and bickering. The group would practice each day until Owl Man’s return, and each day a greater challenge would be added. At the end they would be ... time-squirrels.

Jasmine had played her role flawlessly. As soon as she was alone she turned her attention back to Owlie, like a ham radio operator tuning in to a radio station half-way around the world. She felt like she was *with* her Owl Man, and the experience was so vivid, she could smell the fragrances of exotic flowers and hear the sounds of pelting rain and chattering birds.

### *Training Day #3—Hoard of the Time Squirrels ...*

After the “birds” had undergone several days of training, the esprit de corps at the *Come Ye Heather* was surprisingly high—falling somewhere between the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a team of Navy Seals, and the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Leonard Bernstein.

Whistles and birdcalls were improvised at odd hours and in unlikely situations, the practitioners taking secret pleasure in exercising an esoteric skill while unsuspecting bystanders thought someone was just in a “chirpy” mood.

Two days before Owl Man’s scheduled return, Coo announced that *he* wanted to lead the practice session. And lead it he did—with aplomb. It was truly a transformation for Coo, who had suffered countless indignities under Fex’s boot heel. But here was Coo— mellow-throated and confident Coo, the relaxed and self-assured one—leading the group through their exercises as if he were Robert Goulet on stage in Vegas.

On the last day, Heron Man resumed command, for this was the “Day of the

Time-Squirrels.” Today they would practice laying hold of the very nuggets of time itself, a task only to be attempted under the most exacting conditions. Time-nuggets were only accessible to those who were able to dive through the tunnel of the bird’s throat and deeper still, into the background noise left over from the Big Bang, there to hover above the creative matrix of the quantum foam—though not in bodily fashion, of course.

Then, like Polynesians in their outriggers snatching silver fish from the sea, Fex and Coo, Sally and the rest, would all “reach” into the fundamental dimensions of time-space, where super-strings lie coiled and brooding like eels in a tub—something elemental, utterly Other.

“The trick, of course, is to hang onto the time-nuggets, the eels of time-space, as they wiggle and squirm,” said Heron Man to the rapt group. “For, as we all know, time in its essence is slippery. How many noble philosophers have despairingly watched time slip through their hour-glass fingers?”

Heron Man paused dramatically, fixing the listeners with his gaze.

“And what is it that surrounds everything? Death, the sublime portal to the creative.”

No one spoke. Heron Man’s words rolled over the assembly like swells over the briny deep. Finally, Sally raised her hand.

“Yes, Sally?” said Heron Man.

“Yeah, uh, Heron Man, uh, do you mean we’re gonna die?” Sally seemed perplexed and more than a little anxious.

“Well, of course, Sally, eventually,” said Heron Man.

“Do we have to? I mean, I don’t think I’d like it.” It was as if Sally was confronting death for the first time in her life. Heron Man caught the gleam of a tear in her eye.

“Well, think of it this way, Sally. A great historian once dreamed that he was in a boat, and another boat was tied up alongside his. He realized that dying was a matter of stepping from one boat into the other. It was that simple.”

“Or, or,” Sally was having an idea. “Or maybe it’s like stepping from one bird’s nest into another nest right next to it!”

“Excellent comparison, Sally. Very vivid,” said Heron Man, as Sally beamed proudly.

“Does anyone else want to add anything?” said Heron Man.

“Yeah,” said Fex. “Sally don’t get it. We just died and went to heaven already. We already done that. Now we’re back.”

“I’m not sure how you mean that, Fex,” said Heron Man.

“I mean, when we all went to that bird-brain place, it was, like, it was *real*, right? And we was really there. And, where we was, ain’t where we are now. They’re really different places. So, we were dead then, but now we’re alive; ‘cept *now* we’re dead, because *then* we were alive. See what I’m sayin’, Sally?”

“I think so, Fex,” said Sally. “I think I do. No, I guess I don’t.”

“Yeah,” piped up Sal. “Fex is right, Sally. In both places we’re dead *and* alive—both. Get it? And the only thing is, we can’t be in both *places* at the same time, even though in some weird way, we *are* in both places, all the time! Boy, that’s weird.” Sal had spent himself on the mental effort to grasp the paradox. Lapsing into everyday banking parlance, he said, “It just don’t add up, ‘cept it’s always even. The books always balance.” Then he added, “Hey, I need a drink of water!”

“Well, I think you all have a feeling for what we’re talking about, even though no one has ever been able to nail it down, once and for all.”

“Nobody’s gonna nail me down!” said Foxy combatively, in one of her trademark non sequiturs. Mr. Moto stirred next to Foxy, but otherwise did nothing.

Then everybody laughed good-naturedly at Foxy’s retort.

The last exercise—culminating the entire week’s work—was accomplished with surprising speed. They expertly resumed the trance, plummeted down the bird’s throat and briskly made their way to the quantum foam. It only took a few minutes of Heron Man’s guidance before they had gathered up enough time-nuggets to validate Owl Man’s theory and to serve as practice for the heist.

At one point during the trance, Fex nearly broke the spell when he twitched violently, as if from electric shock. “Hey! Something’s wigglin’!” he whispered. Fortunately, the spell was deep enough that no one lost focus at this critical point.

“Now,” said Heron Man calmly. “Look in the direction of the buzzing super-

strings and carefully—very carefully—touch one until it stops wiggling. That will be your time-nugget. It won't start wiggling until you touch it again. And remember, you can get to it from anywhere at all, any time you want. You only have to drop down the bird's throat and go through the different regions, just as we've been doing all week. When you reach the level of the quantum foam and the super-strings, your static time-nugget will present itself to you. Don't look for it: It will come to you. You're bonded with it on a quantum level. Then, when you touch it again, it will re-dynamicize itself, and time—within that nugget at least—will resume.”

There was a murmur of awe in the room. The *Come Ye Heather* creaked at her moorings as a shaft of sunlight beamed through the windows. Jasmine moaned softly.

“One last thing, and then we're done,” said Heron Man. “You must remember that it is absolutely impossible to reach the quantum foam or the super-strings from “here,” that is, from your normal consciousness. You *must* go there by way of the portal and the trance. This is the essence of *transportal repositioning*, what Owl Man has been explaining and demonstrating for some time now. It's a secret no one would believe if you told them, yet it's plain as day—for those who have *eyes to see*.”

After his dramatic emphasis on this last phrase, Heron Man felt it was time to wrap it up.

“OK. Now, Owl Man returns tomorrow. We're going to take a break for a couple of days, while he recuperates from his trip. We'll meet again soon. I think he just might be impressed with the progress we've made on his abbreviated notion of ‘feathers.’ What do you think, people? Will Owl Man be impressed?”

A chorus of shouts and cheers rose like a clap of thunder, and Lake Union seemed to swell with pride beneath the *Come Ye Heather*. The happy time-squirrels bustled around, hugging and whistling. Fex flapped his arms like a goose standing on the water. Coo crowed and swatted Sal who, after imitating a shrill macaw cry, mock-punched him back while feigning a strike with his “beak.” Mr. Moto, in a demonstration of avian joy, picked up the couch and lifted it to the ceiling before setting it gently back in place. General jollity reigned aboard the *Come Ye Heather*.

That night, every member of the team slept more soundly than they ever had before. Remarkably, the next morning each person reported having had lucid

dreams—five out of eight being dreams of flying. And as if to crown the whole experience, the sun chose that morning to bestow its diamantine light on the sparkling city. It was one of those crystalline Seattle days.

For her part, Jasmine awoke in a calm and wistful mood. She too had had a lucid dream. She was with Owl Man in Yucatán, deep in the jungle, on a trek, and a shadowy figure was leading them into the darkness. She felt a strong pull into the bird's throat, but didn't want to leave Owl Man. As the dream faded she realized she was voicing his name aloud.

After writing down her dream on the computer—the Agatha Christie was just too powerful for now—she moved through the day in a trance, waiting for her Owlie.



*Owl Man arrives at Sea-Tac ...*

Heron Man was waiting at the arrivals gate at Sea-Tac when Owl Man disembarked, Jasmine having stayed home to make things ready for Owlie. Feathers ruffled from travel, the weary Owl nevertheless seemed curiously alert, eyes glowing with an inner light.

The trip had been designed around his role as keynote speaker for a conference devoted to what were popularly known as “shamanic” perspectives on world events. It was called “The Conference of the Birds,” in deference to the old Persian text of the same name.

Owl Man’s literary achievements went well beyond the current project involving Fex and Coo and the Hasty Heisters, for he also enjoyed a measure of renown as an expert in *trans-portal repositioning*. It was this TPR phenomenon, the very one he proposed to induce for the heist, that was the cause of so much excitement in various circles, leading to the invitation to deliver the keynote conference speech in Yucatán. As they drove away from the airport, Heron Man got a brief report on Owl’s trip.

“Your talk was well-received, I take it?”

“Oh yes, apparently it was a big hit. The question-answer period extended well into the late hours.”

“Anybody ask for autographs?”

“Too many, as a matter of fact. I was worried about developing carpal tunnel syndrome, with so many signatures.”

“Did your thesis seem outlandish to the audience?”

“No, not at all. In fact, I was able to confirm some of my most tenuous intuitions, and made contact with several European colleagues. In particular, a Scottish shaman by the name of Angus McDonald has invited me to conduct a TPR workshop on the Isle of Skye next summer.”

“Wonderful, Owl.”

“You see, ideas like TPR and TTM, though dressed up in modern scientific garb, are actually very ancient, hence their appeal to so many moderns in search of the elixir.”

“Ah, yes, the elixir—and let’s not forget, of course, *l’elisir d’amore*.” Heron Man slowly drew out the phrase for a touch of operatic drama.

“Well, yes, that too!” said Owl Man, chuckling, “though I’m not sure Donizetti would have appreciated the notion of TPRs.”

“Yes,” said Heron, “but we’re not talking about Donizetti, are we? We’re talking now about Jasmine.”

“Ah yes, well,” said the Owl, “Jasmine is a blossom of another order entirely. How about you, Heron? Everything going well?”

“Yes, Owl—quite well. We have a lot to show you, after you’ve had a chance to rest. I think you’ll be impressed. And we’ll get your full report on Yucatán tomorrow night. By the way,” said Heron Man, “ah, Helen has asked for a little gathering at some point. It’s about Fex.”

“It’s *always* about Fex, isn’t it? Well, I’m looking forward to that,” said Owl Man. “She seems like quite a remarkable person, Helen.”

“Yes, she is, Owl, she certainly is.”

Heron stopped in front of Jasmine’s apartment building, helped Owl Man carry his luggage upstairs, and watched him disappear into the arms of his waiting and fragrant Jasmine.

*Owl Man tells stories about Yucatán ...*

The next evening Heron Man, Owl Man and Jasmine convened for a private reunion at Jasmine's apartment—a merry event indeed. Owl Man had begun to recuperate from the trip. And since he and Jasmine were fussing as much with each other as with the dinner preparations, Heron Man gave up trying to help, took a seat and discreetly busied himself with an old copy of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* on Jasmine's coffee table.

Soon the sumptuous meal was served and devoured with gusto. Afterwards, French brandy in large snifters helped shift the tone of the gathering to a more serious key.

“Thank you so much for the feast, my dear,” Owl Man said warmly. “Now I want to tell both of you about an extraordinary experience I had in the jungles of Yucatán.”

“Brave bwana big-game hunter, you bet!” said Jasmine teasingly.

“No, of course not. More like: Owl Man big-time prey of something bigger.”

“Sounds—” Jasmine began, “spooky,” she and Heron Man said in unison.

“Believe me, it was very spooky,” said Owl Man, setting out to describe his adventure in the jungles of Yucatán.

“One of the invitations I received after my lecture was from a Mayan shapeshifter, Don Carlos Mayaguil. He wanted to take me—that night—to an obscure Mayan ruin in the jungle, one that few people knew about, unspoiled by tourists or shamanic conference-goers. He said it would require a strenuous hike to reach the ruin from the nearest road—about six hours.”

“Did you have your jodhpurs and your pith helmet, Owlie?” Jasmine poked Owl Man in the ribs. She was not going to let the Owl get away with being *too* serious.

“Well, fortunately, I did have some sturdy hiking boots and other gear,” Owl Man replied seriously, “so I told him I'd love to see his ruins. When I said that, however, old Mayaguil—he must have been in his seventies, hard to say—started laughing, clapping his hands and vigorously nodding his head. At least he's a good-

humored chap, I thought, though I really didn't know what to expect."

"That's a curious beginning to the story, Owl Man," interjected Heron. "This old Mayan shapeshifter invites you on a six-hour hike into the jungle, at night, to a place nobody knows about, and he starts yucking it up as soon as you say you'll go. Already it's strange."

"Agreed. But it gets better. We met that afternoon at four. He insisted that we start the journey in the afternoon. At the time I didn't know why, though I have a better idea now."

"He wanted you to arrive in the dark," said Jasmine.

"Yes, I think you're right, Jaz," said Owl Man. "By the time we parked his old truck in an overgrown spot, hardly visible from the road, it must have been around six. The jungle itself was dark enough, even in broad daylight, so it seemed as though the entire trek took place in darkness. As we penetrated deeper into the jungle, I could barely see where I was going, so I had to do two things: I had to trust this unknown old man, Mayaguil, leading me into a remote, savage wilderness, and I had to resort to *owl-vision*. It's a meditative technique I often use, a form of relaxation that enables all sorts of interesting effects."

"So, you were like two birds with night vision," said Heron Man.

"Exactly," said the Owl.

"Two *old* birds," corrected Jasmine.

"Well, old enough, apparently. The trip, though strenuous, took place as if in a dream. Time became progressively more compressed, or dilated, or stopped—I'm not sure which. It's difficult to describe. But by the time we reached his 'ruin,' which seemed like little more than a pile of rocks near a hidden *cenote*—"

"You mean a natural cavern?" asked Jasmine.

"Yes, a kind of sunken limestone formation very common in Yucatán."

"Oh, yes, where human sacrifices were carried out," said Jasmine.

"At one time I suppose they were."

"I didn't mean to interrupt your story, Owlie. Keep going."

Owl Man resumed.

"It was around midnight, then, when we arrived. After a brief rest, the old

Mayan sat on the ground, went into a trance and started chanting—slow moaning sounds, interspersed with chirps, clicks and whistles. Gradually he became more agitated.”

“You were still in darkness, correct? No lanterns or flashlights?”

“Total darkness. It was the strangest thing. Yet somehow I felt I could see.”

Owl Man paused for a sip of water.

“The next part is what is most difficult to explain, or even describe. It was as if the entire jungle came alive in response to the old Mayan’s chanting, as if there were eyes and throats and claws everywhere. Pitch black, to be sure, yet somehow ... the darkness became visible, if that’s possible—animate.”

“What was it, Owlie?” Jasmine squeezed Owl Man’s hand.

“Well, I would swear that we were surrounded by hundreds, even thousands, of ... birds. They seemed to be murmuring all at once, and created a humming sound that modulated perfectly with the Mayan chant. For a brief moment, I would have sworn it was not a human sitting before me, but a large green parrot, murmuring and warbling from deep in its throat. The whole thing was mesmerizing. Finally, after I don’t know how much time had elapsed, the whole symphony slowly faded and the jungle was quiet again. Old Mayaguil sat there, still as a stone carving. He seemed to be soaking up the night, absorbing the thick vegetation and the dwindling reverberations of the departed birds.”

Owl Man paused, and for a moment the three companions also sat stone-like, as old Mayaguil had done.

“Then the old Mayan began shaking and shivering. I put my extra shirt around his shoulders and held him for a moment. When he had calmed down he began chattering excitedly, telling me what he had heard when the birds were at their most urgent, most intense.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” said Jasmine.

“I know,” said Owl Man. “And it’s not easy to put into English, rather like translating poetry from a foreign language. But, basically, the birds were issuing a warning. And, if I understood the old shaman correctly, they were saying that everything is melting, that we should be preparing for a phase of total *liquifaction*—

that's my word, not the birds'—of everything that's familiar.”

“Sounds like Salvador Dalí's melting watches—dreamlike and surrealistic,” said Jasmine.

“Yes, that's true,” said Owl Man.

“The Bible,” continued Heron Man, “made its point about the Flood long ago, and preachers like to sermonize about ‘the fire next time.’ But shouldn't we assume that these apocalyptic phases and ordeals are to be taken symbolically, like dreams?”

“Yes, of course, and in biblical times the feeling for symbolic reality was probably more ... supple ... than it is today.”

“Literalism rules,” said Jasmine with a snort.

“So what you're essentially saying,” said Heron, “is that Mayaguil, in his trance, invoked the bird spirits and was able to communicate with them, through his chanting, clicking, whistling and so forth.”

“Yes. It's really an ancient art, communicating with the animal spirits. But I hadn't expected to be witness to something so profound, just a day after speaking into a wireless microphone for an hour, then taking coffee and cookies in the conference hall lobby.”

“How did you get back to the road?” asked Jasmine.

“That's another funny thing. We started hiking back through the jungle just as the sun was rising, and it seemed we were back at Mayaguil's truck in no time at all. Very strange—as if the six-hour trek took only about an hour. But I was in such an unusual state of mind, frankly, that I neglected to check my watch. So, after returning to the hotel, exchanging tokens and saying warm good-byes, old Mayaguil went his way, and I went to my room and slept. When I awoke a few hours later, I felt ... exuberant!”

“What were the tokens, Owl?”

“A final, strange detail. Mayaguil reached behind his head and “plucked” a green parrot's feather, as if from his head or neck, and gave it to me. In return, I gave him an owl feather, but I didn't “pluck” it, I had carried it with me, from Seattle.”

For a few minutes no one spoke. Rain pelted the windows, as if the sky was responding or putting the final touches on Owl Man's story.

Jasmine was the first to break the silence.

“I almost feel like these rain drops are just as alive as the animal spirits in your Yucatán jungle story. Each drop a pair of eyes, a throat, a voice. Water, with feathers and claws, Heaven speaking to us, in messages smeared across every window in the city, available to all.”

“Yes, I feel that too,” said Owl Man, who spontaneously began giving voice to a poem that formed as he spoke, nearly chanting:

Water old as stars  
 Moistened Pharaoh’s breath  
 In the green-glazed valleys  
 Of the Nile.  
 Now it drips on the glazed panes of  
 The rectangular city,  
 While the jaguar snaps  
 His jaws beneath the creeping  
 Vine where dark  
 Birds dip thirsty beaks  
 Into the green-leaved inkwells of  
 Night.  
 Yucatán, Seattle, Karnak: Listen!  
 Awaken!  
 Time is running away!  
 Fools! Stop time!  
 Stop time!  
 Now!  
 See!

Embarrassed, Owl Man took another drink of water. So entranced was he, as the words came to him, that he did not notice Jasmine standing up to move—dancing as the coiled images unrolled from Owl Man’s throat like distant thunder from a

cloud.

Heron Man said nothing, but held out a sheet of paper on which he had just sketched what appeared to be a constellation of stars, except that each star was an eye, and all were connected by lines—filaments of a web in which three human figures floated in attitudes of prayer. Everything took place against a background of dense, dark, yet strangely luminous, foliage. Seen together, the interconnected eyes suggested the larger face of an animal—a mythical bird—as in antique star-maps of the constellations.

There was not much more to say. A feeling of profound satisfaction had settled over the three friends. After a few cursory comments, the party broke up. Heron Man left, and the Owl and his “Poet’s Jasmine” soon retired to their chamber.

The night disappeared like water into a *cenote* where floated countless feathered dreams.