

Hugh Fox

“The Coils of Eternity (part 6)”

VI.

IN the morning, got dropped off at L.A.X. Waved goodbye to Maurey, tears in all eyes, Eve whispering to him, as he got on the plane, “It’s true, at this point you never know which goodbye is going to be the last,” sitting next to him in the aisle on the flight up the coast, San Francisco International, the shuttle down to the Fisherman’s Wharf Holiday Inn. Horse Morse waiting for him/them as he/they checked in at the main desk. He/they gave Horse a warm hug.

Horse Morse’s father had been a cowboy and he’d been raised in Montana, used to kid about how, when he’d come to San Francisco to be a hippie poet in the early sixties, it took him over a year to “dehorsify” himself.

“Good to see you.”

Horse the hippie poet by night, executive director by day, all his hair and beard trimmed for the annual publishing industry convention, almost all white now. In spite of himself he looked distinguished, Abraham Lincolnish, maybe even a little like the original Abraham, gaunt and patriarchal, already much older than Lincoln was when shot.

“You mean ‘us’,” said Richard, pointing to the air next to him.

“Whose ghost is it this time?” smiled Horse.

“What do you mean ‘this time’? I’ve never been haunted before.”

“What’s her name?”

“Eve.”

“That old girlfriend of yours, from L.A.? She’s been haunting you for thirty years!”

Richard realized just how much she had been haunting him for thirty years. “I got her phone number, left a message, gave her my address...”

“You’re nuts! You’ve got it made right now, why rock the boat? Between the two of you you’re pulling down two-hundred-grand a year....”

“If man lived by bread alone....”

“Pan-pan y vino-vino,” Horse answered, the Cosmopolitan now, you’d never guess the origins of his nickname, night classes all the time in French, German, Italian.... “Listen, why don’t you register and meet me in the bar. We can talk awhile. The rest of the Board of Directors will be coming in later this afternoon. But you’re free....today and tomorrow.... I’ve put you down as M.C. for the day’s activities on Wednesday. That’s Lantz’s day....you know his routine.”

“Dinner tonight?”

“Seven o’clock. I’ve got this Thai place lined up....”

“Great.”

Horse pausing for a moment. The Great Ruminator, the Master of Second, Third, Fourth, Ad Infinitum Thoughts.

“What happens if Eve returns your call and wants you back, like the thirty years of separation are....,” he snapped his fingers.

“Let me ask her,” said Richard. To the shimmering ghostly presence hovering next to him, “What do you say to that?”

She snapped her fingers, smiled.

“What are thirty years in the infinite mind of Vishnu who dreams us into existence....?”

Richard simply repeating, “What are thirty years in the infinite mind of Vishnu who dreams us into existence....?”

“...as he sleeps on the coils of Ananta, the Serpent of Eternity,” Horse finishing out the line. Then getting executive-director-like, abrupt and bustling, “So, sign in, have them put your bags in your room for you, I’ll see you in the bar....”

“OK, pal.”

The desk clerk young, bright, blonde hair pulled into a sleek pony tail, flawless complexion.

As he signed in, Richard softly guessing, drawing on forty years of teaching, matching faces, bodies and careers, “So you’re studying modern dance at San Francisco State....”

“Close,” she said, “Berkeley. But I couldn’t find a job over there, so....”

“Originally from....?”

“You guess!”

“Nebraska!”

“Wow! What are you, some kind of swami or something. I’m from Iowa City. That’s pretty close.”

“You ought to see me do it with Turks, Egyptians, Uros, Aymaras, Kogis, Cunas....I’m in the comparative anthropology business.”

“Ahhhhh,” she purred, as if that explained it all.

Handing a bellhop five bucks to take his bags up to his room for him, feeling, somehow, very much at home here, back to his kind of air and sunlight, the cold slapping of the year-round wind.

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INTO the woody, old English-type bar, Horse over in the corner, as usual nursing a big, inverted bell-shaped glass of deepest red port.

“So what’s doing, pal?” asked Richard as he sat down. The waiter came over and he ordered a gin and tonic, the same thing he’d been ordering in bars for the last forty years.

“The usual pre-conference jitters. And the ‘gang’ that’s taken over the publishing group is a thousand times more needlessly picky than any of us have ever been before. Trying to prove something....”

“To prove what, exactly?”

“That they exist, I suppose.” Horse smiled.

Especially Penny, in the new Chair One, a moon-faced middle-aged woman from rural Connecticut whose New York big-shot lawyer husband had just run off with his Chinese-American secretary. She’d taken a stack of courses on business administration at NYCC and now seemed to want to prove that she was some kind of M.B.A. Zen Master....

Richard had been Chair One for a year, but at the last meeting she very adroitly called for a re-vote and got him pushed him out of the chairmanship slot, back to ordinary Board Member again. OK. Not that he wanted to be Chair anyhow. He didn’t. Only when

he was in the Chair One slot, it was great for Horse. Richard let Horse run the show. No interference.

“I think Penny wants your job,” said Richard. “You’re not supposed to be able to adapt to her ‘corporate’ restructuring, and you’re supposed to quit, and she’s supposed to step in and take over. She’s moving to Oakland, you know that...”

“I don’t want to think evil of the woman,” smiled Horse, shaking his head. “I like to think of her as naive and foolish.”

Eve’s voice purring through Richard as the waiter brought his drink. He started to sip it, letting his tongue dwell on the exotic fuzziness of the gin.

“I hate this corporate nonsense-talk.”

“OK,” Richard said aloud, not to Horse but to Eve, looking like he was talking to a spot somewhere off his right shoulder.

“OK what?” asked Horse.

“Eve says that it’s all Out There, somewhere, waiting for us.... Let’s drink up and Go.”

Horse immensely amused. “It’s that bad with Lorna, huh?”

“Well,” said Richard, “she’s always on call, it’s all biopsies and autopsies and frozen sections, courses in cytopathology or tumor markers, immunohematology, hematopathology. I try to go down to the hospital as often as possible to have lunch with her -- but you sit down with your tuna-fish salad sandwich and cole slaw, and she starts in about cervical cones and uteri and colons, the four breasts she’s examined that morning....”

“Come on, let’s go!” Eve insisting.

Said Horse, “I sympathize. You know how it is with me and Jackie....”

Horse actually “in love” for a change, a Chinese-American girl with an M.B.A who’d been in Cafe Puccini looking for exactly what she found -- him, in all the glory of his bohemian romanticism. A bohemian romantic veteran of the bohemian-romantic wars, wounded veteran at that, a wounded, aging veteran, ready for a permanent rest in the sun on the terrace of the bohemian romantic home for bohemian-romantic war veterans.

“What’s the latest with her?”

“Well, Richard, she wants to get married, in September.”

“And....?”

“Why not? If I’m edged out as executive director I’ll have something to fall back on.”

“I don’t like mercenary motivations,” said Richard.

“Just don’t say anything to her about it when you meet her tomorrow for dinner.”

“How are we going to escape The Board?”

“We will! Don’t worry, we will! Or if worse comes to worse we can all have dinner together.”

Richard smiling now. “What an irony, that Penny’s husband ran off with a Chinese-American too.”

“And, yes, I have suspected a little extra acrimony in her attitude toward me because of my Chinese-American connection....”

Nos regards a l’éclat changeant son verts et bleus comme les ondes/Our shimmering glances are green and blue like the waves....

The music playing on.

Waves, foam, sunlight.

Horse and Richard were like brothers, had been like brothers almost thirty years, but sometimes Horse, under his romantic bohemian teakwood veneer, was plain old boring pine.

“You know, Eve would be, say, sixty-five now....no idea if she’s married, married and divorced five times, ten kids...if she’d even be interested in me any more. I’m such an old carcass....”

“Oh, you’re not so bad,” said Horse, finishing his glass of port, the waiter automatically bringing him another, already obviously an “understanding” between them.

“Well...., ” Richard patting his slight paunch.

“Genotypes,” answered Horse, “why fight it?”

“I suppose.... Hey.... Do you know the work of Lili Boulanger?”

“Sure,” said Horse, whose apartment was wall-to-wall covered with CDs. “‘Pour Les Funérailles d’un Soldat’ is one of my all-time favorites.” And he recited the lyrics:

Qu’on voile les tambours que le pretre s’avance, a genous compagnons, tet nue et silence....

“I’m amazed!” said Richard. Maybe he wasn’t teakwood veneer at all but teakwood all the way through.

“Don’t be! It was you who first mentioned her to me....decades ago....although I’m sure I would have gotten to her eventually. I’ve got this on-going love affair with forgotten women composers -- Germaine Tailleferre, Mrs. H.H.A. Beaches, Cécile Chaminade....even Clara Schumann....It’s like, did F. Scott Fitzgerald influence Zelda’s work, or did F. Scott learn everything he knew from Zelda, who was the ‘real’ innovator?”

Richard saying, “You’re a funny guy, you know that. I’m always all set to write you off as this hopeless old rummy, and then....”

“I still am a hopeless old rummy, but you don’t have to write me off,” smiled Horse. Everyone in his family alcoholic, father, mother, two brothers. For years keeping alcoholism at bay by strictly rationing himself to one small bottle of port every night after dinner, but since the new Board had been putting the screws into him (and the organization), he’d been slowly allowing the heavy, gooey port to start to spill over his entire day.

Richard finished his drink, feeling an irresistible urge (not needing Eve’s voice/presence, having plenty of his own) to get up and move..... “You won’t be pissed if I take off for awhile...?”

“I expected you to! I just have to stick around to be here when the rest of the gang gets in. Penny -- predictably -- has all sorts of last minute changes to the agenda that she wants to confer with me about....so go ahead....I’ve always got this to play with....”

Pulling a little chess computer out of his pocket.

“OK, pal,” said Richard, going into his wallet for money.

Horse waving his hand, nodding his head, half-closed eyes, “I’ll take care of it.”

“See you.”

Horse already absorbed in his game.

And out Richard went into the arms of day.

“This is more like it,” Eve, soothing, “my kind of place, my kind of day....,” Richard starting to walk down toward North Beach, through the warehouse district, all kinds of fancy new places in old historic warehouses. Renovation, resurrection. That’s what they should have done with Kansas City and Chicago and Cleveland and everywhere else where urban age weighed down heavily on whole areas made slowly more and more anachronistic in the post-modern, electronic age.

Post-modern, then what...?

Finding a little square facing the ocean. Mimosa trees, is that what they were? Boats out in the bay. An old bum who looked very much like a beat-up, lost-soul version of Horse, sitting a couple of benches down from where Richard sat. For a moment Richard thought it might be one of Horse's brothers. Probably not. Always afraid that Horse would fall over that edge.

Taking out one of the little spiral notebooks he always carried with him. One of his favorite rollerball pens. A new page, starting to write:

The Coils of Eternity

Ferret-faced Lili Boulanger.
The fusion-furnace of the sun.
Vishnu on the coils of Eternity
as valid as St. Thomas or Big
Bangs, First Movers themselves
unmoved, or self-generating
somethingness out of nothingness,
always feeling the pull in ourselves
back toward the nothingness of
our beginnings, then one step back
before we were, one step forward
to where we no longer are.....

Something overtaking him then, almost a vision, more like a knowing....

Aging platinum-blond Eve, driving. Pulling into the drive of her house, unbolting her titanium alloy bike from its rack on her white 1993 Mercedes 4,000, each twist of the butterfly bolt onerous and painful, her hands revolting against her....

"Stupid hands!"

Actually slapping her left hand as she untwisted the last bolt and lifted her featherweight bike down to the newly asphalted drive.

She stood there absorbing The Night and everything it meant to her. She knew the neighboring houses were there, on either side of her, through the eucalyptus and pine groves that covered the slopes of the Palos Verdes peninsula, yet there were no lights, no sounds.

It was as if the houses out there in the darkness weren't there at all, as if Orange County didn't exist, or Manhattan Beach, Long Beach, Los Angeles itself....

Richard's voice there suddenly, talking about ancient Indians, "Sure, they were doing some excavations for foundations down in San Diego and suddenly they started coming

across charred Mastadon bones from sixty-thousand B.C....all kinds of lithic pieces....arrowheads, choppers, scrapers....skulls....”

Back sixty-, seventy-thousand years, and the forests were full of Mastadons and little furry men with long, stone-tipped spears. Man interfaced with Nature, the wild, wild himself, trying to tame it all with spells and incantations, drugs that brought him into a spirit-world and enabled him to step over the line between “human” and “animal” and become a kind of animal himself. Nagual.

Eve wondering if there really were Yetis in the forests of Northern California who had escaped the curse of evolution, interfacing with the divine-world instead of having moved into some sort of grotesque separation between the “I” and the divine “Thou” that she felt surrounding her everywhere there in the divine darkness.

Didn't want to go inside. Really wanted to walk out into that darkness and somehow merge with that force, power, vibrating “presence” that spoke through the sounds of the trees and waves against the rocks in the distance and in the vague, moving mists that slithered across the moon beyond the trees. The smells of the pines and eucalyptus were pungent....

She walked off the drive into the edge of the forest, reached down and picked up a long, curled eucalyptus leaf that she could suddenly see, as if her eyes were turning into bat- or jaguar- (Nagual) eyes, and put it in her mouth and started to chew it, its juices and vapors.

Aware of the snakes that could be there in the dark. Like the time they had uncovered an old Indian cemetery at the bottom of the cliffs near Loyola university, and Richard had gone down there with a shovel and a big black one had slithered out of the ground and Richard whispering, “Maybe there's a message here, that this graveyard shouldn't be disturbed....”

Smiled to herself at all the abstruse and useless -- but somehow intensely ‘sexual’ -- information she used to hear from him. All his theory about the extensive migrations of ancient peoples across the Atlantic and Pacific to the New World, turning the New World into the sacred continent that later came down in myth as the Home of the Gods, the House of the Sun, world-center, the Tropics of Capricorn and Cancer where the sun turned/pivoted in the solstice year.

Everything he'd ever said was vaguely and inexplicably sacred to her, as if he'd come into her world trailing clouds of ancient truths that somehow got to the hearts of matters ignored by everything she'd ever been taught, learned....and mainly discarded....

“Ouch, something did bite me,” she said to the night.

Swooning then to the drive thinking that the asphalt was still new....five years old....five, thirty years, now, in limbo. Limbo!

She wondered fleetingly about Richard....the children he'd fathered, his marriage, his life....her shelf of his books, hidden, as if it were a crime to have them. The shelf was a Himalayan shrine to some local, private god....

Buzzing open the garage door. Stumbling now, she thought to leave the car out. Was it really as bad in L.A., she asked herself as she opened the "unarmed" kitchen door. Wasn't it -- at least out here -- practically the safest place possible on a globe that, after all, was spinning around in space, spinning around other things that themselves were spinning, the whole thing spinning, spinning, spinning....?

The message-light blinking on her phone. Clutching the phone to her chest, she pushed PLAY and, heaving, heardnothing.

Richard understood. Eve's caress.

A moment before he could weep. Feeling that there had been but one climax in his life, one coupling that had really "meant" for him in all possible ways. And all the rest as substitutes, samples, glints. One time bonding whole, the others flawed, ill-fitting attempts at achieving. Like, being in a shady pawn shop and here's the diamonds, and there's the glass, and you know the difference and you buy the glass anyhow; it's the choice of the moment that you live with for eternity.
