

Hugh Fox

“The Coils of Eternity (part 4)”

IV.

EVE imagined Richard dreaming of gardens: He was on a gondola-like boat, lying back, passing under acres and acres of blooming fruit trees, in some sort of psychedelic trance, happy beyond happiness, feeling the flood and surge of the water underneath him, the boat itself drifting as if guided by divine hands....then slowly the whole tree-boat scene disintegrating, like a picture puzzle with the pieces being removed here and there at random...

He opened his eyes. “I can’t believe it,” he said.

The grass filled with red lacquer trays filled with red lacquer-covered containers of food, a feast in red lacquer, and on blue, gold dragon-rimmed dishes.

“All my grandmother’s things,” she said as she started filling a plate with lo mein and pea pods, some sort of black bean sauce, “she was actually born in China, her father had been in the diplomatic corps when it still meant something to be in the diplomatic corps. And, no,” smiling a delicious honey-blond self-mocking smile, “I’m not going to go into some sort of Daughters of the Mayflower routine,” handing him a heaping dish, a little bowl of rice on the side, a big pot of tea doled out in tiny little dragon-swirled cups. “She studied Chinese, always tried to teach me, no past, present, future tenses, everything present, WO BING, [I am, was, will, might be sick,] only you have to sing it, pitch the core of meaning....if I hadn’t had her, I don’t know....,” the Lo Mein all squiggly and difficult, the sun behind/beyond the clouds, going down, the big clock in the sky, ticking like kettle-drums, giant tam-tams.

“Amazing!” he said, “Really amazing....”

“All from scratch,” but not saying what she wanted to, something about having children. He already had three. When would she ever, if ever, have one, someone to pass the secrets on to, even the cooking, and....what....the secrets of movement and color, herbal arts, decorative arts, the zen of listening, thinking, coming back and forth out of The Nothing into the Everything, hiding the YOU under a rock at the bottom of your inner sea, as if selflessness was the first prerequisite for the true expansion of Self into the flowering Now.... “I don’t know what to do,” he said, putting his plate down on the grass and getting up, the massive shadows of the trees beginning, however fuzzily, to angle out across the grass. “Maybe I should....”

Angry at him for a moment, wanting to scream at him, “So go already, go back to your doom,” but the anger itself, even as it surfaced, evolving into pity, or even stronger than that, a lamentation. Then going over and waiting for him to embrace her, which he did.

“You’re so....perfect,” he said, “not just physically, but....,” smiling, laughing to himself, “I was going to say ‘operationally,’ everything you do, and the spirit behind and inside of it. It makes everything so ‘right,’ down to the most minute details. And there’s a ‘rightness’ in me that wants everything you are, no compromises, hesitations, like this total acceptance....which I can never have with....”

Eve in a way accepting the role he was casting her in, “together” as so few are, and seeing him exactly the same, wondering, is idolatry a necessary part of any sort of total love? Even seeing his need to go as more virtue than vice, following some sort of ancient “code” within himself regardless of its consequences, loyalty not to the flesh or the moment, but to The Law in all of its unbending absoluteness.

Wanting to just hang on and hang on, hang on through all eternity, but when he made the slightest pull out of her arms she released him as if it had been timed, three, two, one....split.

Back in through the music room. Him sitting down at the piano for a moment, just a couple chords, “large,” Schonbergian, dissonant, “You know, when I was fifteen, I was going to be a composer, period, and then in college I used to go over to the chapel, spend hours playing the organ, improvising, taping it all, Messién....,” out into the corridor, walking toward the front of the house, “I suppose there’s a thousand more secrets around here that I’ll never find out about....”

“Nine-hundred-and-sixty-three,” she smiled and he put his arm around her back and she put her arm around his as they came to the underside of the staircase, then flowed around it, stopping for a moment, looking at her mural.

“Vasari’s Lives of the Painters, Dr. Johnson’s Lives of the Poets, Verlaine and Renoir....all the secret lives lived and the secret energies and -- what’s her name, Paul Claudel’s sister, Camille --” snapping his fingers, “Rimbaud the slave-trader, Satie in his sordid little room painting ties on his neck....Fantin-Latour’s group portrait of Verlaine, Rimbaud, Bonnier, Valade....all of them standing there already like ghosts...all the millions of years of ‘input’ to arrive at this moment, and then....”

Her wanting to scream at him, “So don’t leave, then. Let’s vanish from the face of the earth. We can vanish together. I’d do it,” but not saying anything, not that they’d need to vanish anyhow, it was so simple nowadays. In some places more divorces than marriages. What kind of antiquated system were they carrying around repressing them, like Blessed Matt Talbot wearing chains around his body under his clothes, his life a perpetual fast, starvation, taming the body in order to, what, release the white dove of the spirit that never got released anyhow, not believing any more, for even a moment, that there was a winged spirit inside that flew up anywhere at death, but that this was the only moment she’d ever have, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Maybe she’d seen too

many mummies. What if one of the pharaohs would wake up in the Brooklyn Museum and look around....

But she still wouldn't protest, hold him back, as he moved toward the door, quietly saying, "I'd better drive you home...."

"I could get a...."

"I'll drive you home."

Decisive at least in this.

The day after the longest day of the year. Only subjectively, for her, the shortest day in her whole life.

Out the front door. Chilly. Richard gawking around at the house and the surrounding forest, the neighboring houses barely visible through the trees, in an overcrowded century, on the edge of an overcrowded city in an overcrowded state, his mouth agape at the luxury of such isolation....which, suddenly, she hated.

And the Lord said, Multiply and increase and fill the earth with your progeny....

Getting into the car, feeling the day contract around her/them, as she drove back to the coast and the Pacific Coast Highway, Richard still marvelling at the sense of the place. Which never left her either. Easy enough to imagine herself back in the Pleistocene, the last Mastadons (which Richard believed had been killed off by Man) still wandering through these same forests. And then the "negritos," the little black people, appearing. That was his theory, wasn't it, that the "negritos" had been the first trans-oceanic voyagers to the New World....

Big Foot and Tiny Foot. Giants and Pigmeys.

"I suppose if I kept applying to places out here, Long Beach State, Pepperdine, USC, UCLA....you know, I'm such an academic maverick. And if I'd gotten another degree in anthropology/archaeology. You know what Gustafson always said, 'If you get a degree in everything you're interested in, you'll never have time to get interested in anything. We don't have a thousand years. Besides, most of the stuff you're doing isn't set up as courses anyhow; it's all new.... You know, like the connections between Aymará in Bolivia, and Turkish, as evidence of ancient migratory patterns...."

On to the highway now, North. Thinking to herself, What about moving to Paris, sell all this and get a house out in Enghein....or even in the heart of things, Cité, the Isle San Louis. There was more than enough money, all that was lacking was....

"Why not just write, continue your research, go to Paris. Or London. You always loved London. 'So much to do, you can never do it all.' Remember?"

“I guess,” he said vaguely. “You seem to remember what I say better than I do....I was just thinking about the kids. I can’t just vanish.”

“I can!” she said a little cruelly, “both parents dead, my only brother killed in combat, cousins I haven’t heard from for decades, uncles and aunts almost all dead, friends I can count on one hand...”

Suddenly the emptiness of her life opening up for her like it had never opened up before, the sky exploding and the giant curtain across the cosmic stage snapping open on an infinite, eternal, starless, black NIGHT. For a panicky moment losing control of/interest in the car, a sudden swerve, a horn, and she was shocked back into reality. This was the end of the affair, OK, no miracles, miracle conversions into becoming Realists. He was fuzzy, would always be fuzzy, Gothic, Nuestra Señora de Sueños Vacios, Our Lady of Empty Dreams.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

“You’ll do what you have to do, Dick,” she said, not exactly cold. But something had turned off inside her.

It was as if they were moving out of her Sphere of Influence and Control into that of Maria del Carmen’s. Palos Verdes was Eve’s territory, but the closer they moved toward the L.A. International Airport, the weaker her territorial controls became; and there would be a line he’d walk over and he’d be completely free of Eve’s powers, whatever they may be, in exchange for those of his wife.

She was filled with a sudden solid sense of resignation. “You think you’re bonded forever, then a door closes....and it’s Business As Usual and it has nothing at all in the world to do with you.”

“Come on!” he objected, “be fair!”

Which got her mad, the words racing through her head, Fair? are you kidding, you come to me, ask for me, I give myself, you seduce me with words, I fill in with my body, there’s this whole world between us, dense and rich and meaningful, and there’s NOTHING between you and your wife but an immense con-game, her abortions, her age, the lies about her family, lie, lie, lie, lie, as if it’s going to do those kids any good to be raised in in the midst of an ongoing war, as if I’m an escape for you to keep your sanity, so that insanity becomes the cure for insanity, like getting drunk to cure a hangover, can’t you see the corridors you’re walking down, the doors that are still to be opened....and if you stayed with me, you’d be HOME in every sense of the word, the hunter home from the hill, the sailor home from the sea, really til death do us part, no fakes or sleight of hand, just simple truth and reality....

But no, not a word to him except, “Not much further now. I’ll let you off down the block a little, OK?”

“OK.”

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IMPLODING back in on himself, wondering how he could be such a coward, or not even that, simply rule- and routine-bound, predictable. The Ultimate Conservative, as if he had anything to conserve. Wondering if he really, really, really deep down had ties to Maria del Carmen that meant something, or was it just the tyranny of The System, no detours, a life-marriage/sentence, throw away the key....

Down Sepulveda, past the Broadway, Ralph's, Thirfty Drugs, suddenly thinking of the literally hundreds of ice cream cones he'd bought the kids there over the years, the best deal in town. You start a family, there's the Big Commitment, everything else is will o' the wisps, sirens luring you to the rocks of your doom. Already remorseful about this one break in his code that -- if he'd be honest with himself -- threatened to send it all, every last Thou Shalt Not, tumbling to the ground.

The irony being that he didn't really, really, really believe in it, believed instead that real divinity didn't come from Out There at all, but from the voices and the prods inside urging him to radically break with everything he'd ever been or believed. Going back feeling if not more doomed certainly galled with the prospect of more of the studied, distanced, punishing, sado-masochistic sameness that was the stock in trade of Maria del Carmen on a day-to-day basis.

Suddenly remembering the Lili Boulanger Eve had played on the piano.

“I didn't even know that Nadie Boulanger had a sister....”

His head filling with all kinds of names of avant-garde composers who had studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris during the 1920s, Roy Harris, Samuel Barber, Virgil Thompson.....the list went on and on....as if anyone who had become anything had somewhere along the line been touched by Nadia Boulanger.

“She died at twenty-four and after her death Nadia stopped writing music too, the homage of silence.”

“It seemed so ‘polished,’ ‘mature’....”

Past the Westchester branch of the L.A. library system, into his neighborhood of cuteish little houses, an unexpected lushness of trees and exotic plants and flowers, remembering ten years earlier when he'd first driven out here from Chicago, after the long ride through the desert southwest, the sudden green like some giant Land of Canaan oasis.

“It was almost as if she knew she that if she were ever going to flower, she’d have to flower fast....”

Down to Jenny, his corner. She pulled over to the curb, he opened the door. The airport just a few blocks over. Always planes thundering in or screaming their way out, twenty-four hours a day. Funny how you get used to things. Planes. A poisoned marriage. Or now Eve. Feeling that if he had any ties to this world, to life itself, they were to her and only to her, everything else forced, false, all fluff, no substance. This was IT. And now....?

Getting out, standing there.

“I’ll....ah.....”

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“I’M sure you will,” she said. Reaching over to pull the door closed, gunning the engine, up, up and away, that was it, hating herself for her sudden hatred, or was it hatred? There was only so much she could take, feeling like she was a fragile, iridescent vase of Phoenician glass that had been taken up to the top of Har Karkom, in the Israeli desert, taken up to the top of the mountain and held over the edge of a cliff, and dropped and was still falling, falling, falling....hit bottom, shattered into a thousand pieces.

Pulling over to the curb, Eve cried like she’d never cried before, not at the death of brother or her parents or her best friend in high school drowned off Nantucket, age seventeen, cried without any attempt at restraint, couldn’t have cared less who saw her as they drove or walked by. Death or worse than death, surviving without a WHY, feeling she should never have brought it to where she had, should have just left it Out There somewhere in the almost-complete twilight instead of into high midnight and the following morning, noon, afternoon, as if the one night and almost entire next day were a metaphor for her entire life to come.....

At the same time miserable that at least she had the memory, like Lili Boulanger....

At least the music that survived had survived, regardless of the whole worlds of might-have-beens that had never happened. Remembering the Roman ruins in North Africa, a ruin in a desert better than nothing at all, at least there had been voices and lives and....

Then it was over.

Moving to look at her face in the rear-view mirror, then deciding not to bother, there was no one to see her anyhow, no one but the gulls who, she was sure, would be all over the garden when she got back, attracted by what they’d left uneaten. There or already gone after a feast. Their uncanny ability to sight food. Streamlined haut couture vultures, that’s all gulls were. And she found herself smiling as she turned on to the Pacific Coast Highway south on the way home.

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RICHARD walking down the street seeing the van parked in the driveway: T. WEISS -- PACKERS AND MOVERS/ MOVERS AND PACKERS, WHICHEVER COMES FIRST. Which didn't make any sense. Like most of L.A. But it was funny in a dangling non-sequitur way.

The door open, Maria del Carmen in a white robe, bare white legs, her puffy little feet stuck into her favorite shabby flat black satin slippers that should have been tossed out years before, standing in the living room telling two small Chicanos what to do, "Ciudadano con mis vestidos, no hay porque arrugar todo. [Careful with my dresses, there's no reason to wrinkle up everything.]"

The kids playing in the backyard.

"Listen, I didn't....," intending to confess everything. He was The Big Confessor, wasn't he. You confessed it and it was either forgiven or unforgiven but either way you could live with it. He couldn't live with lies the way she did, twisting up your whole personality so you had to selectively censor everything you said, never could just BE, BE YOURSELF, unguarded and spontaneous.

Her breaking abruptly into his little speech, "Tu creas que a mi me importa lo que tu haces? [Do you think I care what you do?]" then in her strongly accented English, "I don't give a crap what you do....me entiendes, me entiendes?[Do you understand me, do you understand me?] It's just going to cost you, that's all. Ya te dije que iba contratar alguien para hacer el trabajo que que rehusas hacer.... [I told you already and I was going to hire someone to do the work that you refuse to do....] it's going to cost you!"

"Cost US!" he answered flatly, "I guess we still are an 'us.'"

"Que? [What?] Un 'que'? [A 'what?']"

"Nada, nada, nada, nada," he said, "nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing....," going past her and the movers, out through the kitchen, remembering the feast he had left behind on the grass at Eve's place, out through the kitchen where he had done the cooking for the last eight years since they bought the house, the cooking and the dishes and the shopping and....

Nada, nada, nada, Our Father who art in Nada....

Then out the back door into the garden where the kids were playing around, on the overly expensive but beautifully-made wooden jungle gym that he'd bought the year before.

"Hey, you guys!"

All three stopping, turning his way, smiling. The yard itself a veritable jungle, banana trees, papayas, guava, bamboo, oleanders, even a small chirimoya that he'd smuggled in from Bolivia. Eight years of green-thumbng in a patch of what was essentially coastal desert, and now he hardly understood exactly why he was leaving, except, maybe, to get away from Maria del Carmen. Only at the last minute she'd gotten a job in the Spanish department at the New York State University at Oneida, and he knew they'd end up living next to her job and he'd be forced to make the drive, through the damned snow and "real" seasons. In Southern California it's a veritable continuum of a little colder or a little hotter, so that the whole ten years he'd been there it seemed, honestly, like one not particularly long day.