

Cover Crop

Copyright ©2013 by Richard S. Platz
All rights reserved

Every night, Blind Mori accompanies me in song.
Under the covers, two mandarin ducks whisper to each other.
We promise to be together forever,
But right now this old fellow enjoys an eternal spring.
– Ikkyū (1394-1481) translated by John Stevens

1

I awaken to the tinkling of a bell as it is carried through the dimly-lit zendo. Without hesitation I arise, fold my mat and my blanket and stow them in the cabinet before me, set out my zafu, and remove my toothbrush, toothpaste, and threadbare towel. All about me I hear the rustling of other monks doing the same.

In the lavatory I await my turn for a sink and a toilet stall. There are no mirrors above the sinks. Harsh light glares from the bare fluorescent bulb in the center of the ceiling. The morning is cold. No one speaks. Aimless chit-chat is discouraged, and that suits me just fine, particularly on a morning when the divide between dream and wakefulness is so fragile. As I finish blotting the cold water from my face, I feel a tug on my sleeve.

I turn to find Roshi Koshin hovering beside me, his shaven head hidden by the hood of his cloak and his thin lips tinted blue from the cold. Half my stature, slender and slight, he bows in gasshō and whispers in his Irish brogue, “Can ye help bring in firewood?”

“Of course,” I reply. We bow to each other.

As I step outside, a cold breeze gusting from the north cuts through my robe. The brightening sky illuminates the looming western face of Mt. Shasta, all draped in snow down to timberline. For a moment, my eyes linger there. I love the mountain. In its lee to the south, haloed by the seminal pink glow where the sun will rise, floats one of those odd lenticular clouds, just beginning to form like a tiny seed that will mushroom into a saucer of swirling vapors as the day warms. *The mountain makes it own weather*, I think.

I find the roshi bending over one of the neat stacks of fragrant incense cedar that line the cloistered walkway and help him fill his arms with sticks split as fine as kindling. I fill my arms too, and silently we carry our burdens inside the warm kitchen, where breakfast preparation has already begun. The aroma of fresh-baked bread makes my stomach churn. After two more loads, he bows to me. I bow and return silently to the darkened zendo.

Beside my cabinet, barely visible in the dim light of the altar lanterns, I plump up my zafu, lift the skirts of my robe, and carefully settle cross-legged onto the cushion facing the wall, letting my robe drape over my legs and feet. Slowly I sway from side to side, back and forth, in a spiral of decreasing circles until I feel squarely grounded. I fold my hands in my lap to form the mudra of meditation, draw a slow, deep breath, and allow my eyes to half-close, unfocused on the thin baseboard of the wall before me. Around me I hear the purr of trainees reciting their

kesa verse. As a layman, I have no kesa. I wait. I breathe. It always begins with waiting. Breathing. In time, a bell rings, a chime struck purely, clearly, once, twice, a third time, and all is silence. I breathe. I allow my mind to quiet.

The most difficult part is the thoughts. They come unbidden. Unceasingly. The images. The thoughts. And I try to let them go as they come. Let them pass on without attachment. Each demands my attention. But I let it go. And another takes its place. Like the tide. Like the internal rhythm of an eternal surf. A surf that swirls around the ribs of a wrecked ship

I have been at the abbey for months, a refuge from a shipwrecked life. In my memory and in my mind's eye, the bare-boned ribs of a broken vessel emerge from the pounding surf while the jetsam and flotsam of a broken life and wasted years wash endlessly back and forth in the shallows. At the whim of the waves and the tide. The abbey is my island, my refuge, my shelter in the storm—

I return to the present. Begin again, breathing deeply, counting the breaths. One . . . Two . . . Three

I have been at the abbey for many months as a layman, between worlds, and I fear that they are beginning to wonder if I will ever make the commitment. Make the commitment that they have all made. The commitment to receive the ten precepts in the Jūkai ceremony, shave my head, vow celibacy, and become a priest-trainee on the road to ordination. How does one decide such a thing?

Again my mind has wandered. I draw another deep breath. Straighten my spine. Settle my shoulders. Relax my diaphragm. Breathe through my belly. Breathe again. Begin again to count my breaths. One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four

Like a dog chasing its tail. I picture the dog, circling one way and then the other. My thoughts are like a dog chasing its tail. I suppress a smile—

And I began again. Breathing. Counting

Yesterday a young laymen named Chris told me he had felt the presence of the Ancestors in the darkened zendo the night before. It had moved him deeply. He was ready to receive the precepts. Commit himself to following the Buddha's Way. Fifteen-years younger than I, he valued my opinion. I did not know what to say to him. I have never felt the presence of the Ancestors—

I draw myself back. Settle myself. Begin again. Breathe. Begin to count.

Suddenly I become aware of thoughts that are not my own. They scurry like inhuman things, like rodents through an alley, searching for something. They have always scurried, of course, my thoughts, but these don't belong here. There is something strange in them. In these alien thoughts. Things I never learned. Things I never experienced. Things not of this earth. Not voices. Mad men hear voices, and I am not mad. No, these are *someone else's thoughts* that have strayed into my mind. Thoughts I should not be seeing

The sky at night. A chart of unknown stars. But the unfamiliar chart seems familiar somehow. And I feel a longing to return to a place too alien to grasp or describe. Sand swirls across lifeless dunes. A sun blazes too yellow against a magenta sky. In the distance rises a crimson tower. It is a place I do not understand. A place that makes no sense to me. But I feel it anyway. I am drawn to it. And I long for it. I feel it and I perceive it and I long for it. But I do not understand it. My purpose here is—

A bell rings sharply, a single pure tone of release and loss, signaling the end of zazen. Monks shuffle about me, bowing to their cushions. Bowing to the fellowship. Bowing to the Buddha. They form ranks facing the altar in the open center of the zendo. Each has his place for the morning service. Shaken by the images I have seen, I am slow to join them. Slow to take my place. The disciplinarian waits for me, then intones, “The Scripture of Kanzeon Bosatsu.” A gong sounds, and the monks begin a mindful chant of the scripture amid the scent of incense and the soft glow of candle light.

But my mind is elsewhere. As I mouth the familiar verses, I wonder at the visions I have seen and the loneliness and longing I just felt. They seemed so real. They *are* real, I am convinced.

2

The abbey has plans to expand the dining hall so that all the priests and trainees can eat together. But for now, lay trainees and neophyte monks must wait for the second breakfast sitting. While we wait, temple cleanup follows the morning service for us. Chris and I have been assigned to clean the common room of the large stone building, where the senior monks stay. The abbey was once a motel, before the interstate rerouted traffic, and its dozen beautiful stone structures were the first to be inhabited for the monastery.

Chris sweeps the floor while I dust and tidy up the tables and chairs. A television set, rarely used, has been turned toward the wall and covered by a blanket. On top a local newspaper lies folded, and my eye catches a partial headline. I unfold the paper. “Lenticular Clouds Caused By Global Warming,” it reads. I scan snippets through the article. “Climate change is causing more frequent extreme weather phenomena . . . intensifying natural variances . . . not clear what is cause and effect . . . trend expected to continue . . .”

Chris is standing beside me, reading too. Though in his early twenties, his pale cheeks still show the scars of acne. His short reddish-brown hair is tightly curled. He looks away to blow his nose into a Kleenex, but I have already seen something in his eyes that wasn’t there yesterday.

“What is it, Chris?” I ask softly.

But Chris is unsure of himself. Perhaps a little unsettled. Unsettled just like me, I guess, and like me afraid to say anything that would sound too crazy. “Nothing,” he mutters, and resumes sweeping beneath the table.

I move the chairs for him and gaze out the window. The morning sun casts its orange-red glow on the bottom of the saucer-shaped cloud hovering beside Mt. Shasta. The lenticular phantasm. Crepuscular. Like a roused cat. On the sidewalk outside Roshi Koshin and another monk are staring up at the cloud’s pink glow.

“Something’s on your mind,” I press.

Chris snorts. Perhaps it was my choice of words. But he has nothing to say. He just watches my eyes. To see what might be coming next.

“You saw it, too,” I whisper. It was not a question. “The sand. The tower. The chart.”

Chris glances around to see if anybody is listening. No one is there. He turns back and nods. Just a slight dip of the head.

“What was it?” I ask.
He shakes his head.
I ponder for a moment, then assure him, “This is *not* the Ancestors, Chris.”
He nods, perhaps a little relieved, then resumes sweeping. I watch in silence for a long while before he says, “Those clouds, maybe?”

3

During breakfast I feel a hand touch my shoulder and a voice whispers my name. I turn and am startled to find the dark eyes of Suzanne, a striking young woman whom I have watched from across the room at classes morning and afternoon for the past few weeks. I feel like I know her, though we have never spoken. She bows in *gasshō*, her face inches from my own. In a glance I take in her face. The beauty of her pale, delicate features. Turned up nose. Black lashes. Straight black hair in a short pixie cut. As a layman trainee, she has not yet shaved her head. Two small birthmarks above her right cheekbone remind me of a snakebite. Her neck is a smooth white arc emerging from her dark robe. I breathe in the faint scent of soap. Her serious lips are pressed together in concentration on her task.

I swivel clumsily, scraping my chair, and return her bow. She raises those piercing eyes and hands me a note. I take it, and we bow to each other again. Then she rises and glides out of the dining hall.

My heart is thudding as I return to my oatmeal. With my knife I cut the seal and unfold the sheet of paper. It is a handwritten note from Roshi Koshin bidding me to come see him at his room as soon as breakfast is over. *Odd*, I think. *I'm not scheduled for a personal audience with him for another day. Something must have changed.* But I see it as an excellent chance to discuss with him the strange visions that Chris and I experienced this morning during *zazen*.

I follow the flagstone pathway and find his room in one of the old motel buildings. His door is closed. I knock once.

“Enter,” he says.

Roshi Koshin is seated on his cushion on a raised mat at the far end of the small chamber, facing the door, waiting for me. I step inside, close the door behind me, and kneel before him on the carpet. I bow in *gasshō*. He returns the bow, then gestures to a *zafu*. I pull the cushion over and settle myself facing him. Seated formally above me, he appears larger and more imposing than he did when I loaded his arms with firewood earlier that morning. His shaved head and sashed temple robe convey an austere gravity, but his face is soft and peaceful, his eyes gentle as they study me. I drop my gaze, and we are both silent for a long time.

“How is yer practice a'coming?” he asks at last.

I never know how to answer such a question. I shift a bit. “I keep trying,” I grin as lightheartedly as I can manage.

But this is not a lighthearted moment. He does not smile back. “Have ye given any more thought to receivin' the precepts? Takin' *Jūkai*? Becomin' a priest?”

“I've thought about it,” I mumble, lowering my eyes again. “It's just that . . .” I gaze up at him, “I don't think I'm ready . . . yet.”

He nods. Considers what he is going to say for a moment, then asks, “Why are ye here?”

There is no irony intended. It is not an accusation. He honestly wants to know.

The question touches something deep inside me. It is a question I myself would like an answer to. But I have none. I shake my head. "I don't know," I manage. We are both silent for a time, and then I add, "Maybe because I have no place else to be."

He smiles at last. Nods. "'Tis not a proper reason for ye t'be here," he says. "And ye know it."

It is my turn to nod. We are both silent for a long time, wondering what the consequences will be. What to do about the situation.

"I appreciate yer honesty," he says at last. "I think ye would make a foyne priest." Then he draws a sharp breath and says, "The Abbess spoke t'me this mornin'."

I wait for more.

"She asked me about ye."

"About me? I didn't think she knew I existed."

"She said we're going to have to ask ye to leave the abbey."

I am shocked. The foundations of my world are shaken. "Leave?" I manage. "Why?"

"T'make room. Room for those who seriously desire t'follow the path to priesthood."

I cannot speak.

"Her own words were, "'Tis not a country club.'"

I shake my head to clear it. It is of no use. "When?"

"Tomorrow. When ye can get yer things together. I'll have Suzanne give ye a lift into town after mornin' service." He falls silent.

I nod dumbly. My head spins.

"And when ye're ready t'take the vows, ye may return."

"I can come back?"

"Aye. Of course. When ye're ready. I would like that. We've become friends, don't ye think? And I believe with all my heart that ye would make a foyne priest."

I fight back tears.

"When ye're ready," he repeats reassuringly. "Ye can come back."

4

Everything has lost meaning. The morning dharma class drags past like an empty pantomime. I hear nothing. *Where will I go? What will I do? How will I pass the time?* I plod on through the day, seeing it all with different eyes. I split firewood. Eat a meal. Pound on a buried rock with an iron bar. Sit through another class. Chant sutras. Eat another meal. But the gestures have become hollow. The hall, the rock walls, the cloister are all cardboard stage flats. The monks are actors in a theater production without a plot. My mind is elsewhere. Empty. I do not understand.

At the evening meditation I settle myself woodenly on my cushion, expecting nothing. I wonder how I will endure these final vespers. I cross my legs. Straighten my back. Lower my abdomen. Relax my shoulders. I breathe . . . and I breathe . . . and suddenly, unexpectedly, peace comes upon me. It saturates my breathing. It is in my heartbeat. Calm infuses me. Without breathing, I breathe. There is no need to count. A joy springs up. Inwardly I smile. I

am free. As a man condemned to die is finally free. My mind is empty. There are no visions of star travelers. No thought for what tomorrow will bring. I breathe on my cushion and there is nothing more than this.

Too soon the bell rings. We stand and bow three times and form lines with our hands in *gasshō*. The disciplinarian intones, “The Litany of the Great Compassionate One,” and a gong sounds. I am fully awake, riding the crest of the black-robed wave as it begins to chant for the first and final time:

Adoration to the Triple Treasure!

Adoration to Kanzeon Who is the Great Compassionate One!

Om, to the One who leaps beyond all fear!

Having adored Him, may I enter into the heart of the Noble, Adored Kanzeon!

His life is the completion of meaning;

it is pure; it is that which makes all beings victorious

and cleanses the path of all existence

Something clicks inside my head. I stop chanting and repeat the phrase, “and cleanses the path of all existence.” The trainees on each side glance at me, but they go on chanting. It is like I have awakened. But not to enlightenment. No, not to *satori*. But to something far more sanguinary. *A blood red tower*. And suddenly the star charts and the blowing dunes and the red tower make a sort of crazy sense.

The moment passes, as all moments do. And then service is over. I am empty and alone. I store away my *zafu*. Spread out my sleeping mat. My feet find their way into the lavatory, where I speak to no one. I have not spoken since my meeting with the *roshi*. I am afraid. Ashamed. I dwell on what will happen tomorrow.

5

When the service is well underway the following morning, the visions are back

Home. A longing to return. A desert world of billowing sand. A red tower. A star map. A route. An emptiness—

The great hall grows restless. A chair squeaks. Someone coughs. Another blows her nose softly. Monks shift their positions. I abandon trying to meditate. Withdraw from the visions. Give up trying to understand them. *Where will I go?* I wonder instead.

After morning service I find my way into the storage room and pull down the cardboard box with my name printed on one end. I unfold the interlaced flaps and remove my flattened duffle bag. Carefully I remove my khaki trousers. My red-checked flannel shirt. My worn engineer’s boots. My wool jacket. A plastic freezer bag holds my wallet with twenty-two dollars in cash, my checkbook, small change, a chapstick, the keys to an automobile I no longer own, and the front door key to an apartment where I am no longer welcome. I pull out extra underwear, two T-shirts, a pair of wool socks, and a handkerchief. At the bottom lies a thin manila folder.

I remove my robe and pull on my civilian clothing. The robe I fold. It is not mine. It belongs to the abbey. But I like it and will take it. I lay the robe in the bottom of my duffle. By automatic funds transfer I have established a small monthly endowment designed to cover my

board and lodging at the abbey. The fund will pay for dozens of new robes. I examine the rest of my possessions as if they belong to someone else. They don't amount to much. None of it interests me. I stuff it all into the duffle.

Tossed back into the river of life, I think as I wind my way toward the front gate. *To see if I will sink or swim. To see if I will find my way.* I smile inwardly. *It's all a part of the training.* The front office is locked. There is no one to say goodbye to. I close the chain-link gate behind me.

Outside a white pickup idles, all dinged and battered and scraped, water vapor puffing from its tailpipe. I can see Suzanne's dark outline behind the wheel. I dump my duffle bag and zafu into the bed and wrench open the creaking door. I begin to bow, think better of it, and climb onto the worn passenger seat. It is warm inside. I rub my hands together over the heater vent. "Thanks for the ride," I say.

"Where can I take you?" she asks brusquely, grinding the floor shift into first and easing off the clutch. Like me, she is dressed in civilian clothes, a bulky orange down sweater over her denim dungarees.

"Is there a Denny's nearby?"

"I'll take you to the Black Bear Diner."

"That would be fine," I tell her. "Have you eaten?"

She shakes her head.

"Well, how about if I buy you breakfast?"

In low gear we wind down the access road in silence. Trying not to stare at her, I gaze through my fogging side window. The forest slips past. A farm field opens, green and damp. Beyond it a sign reads, "Cascade Growers Co-Op. Fertilizer. Hydroponic Supplies. Cover Crops." It gives an address. "Cover Crops" sticks in my mind as the forest curtain closes and the sign disappears.

The rattling truck accelerates up the freeway ramp heading south. Over the roar of the engine she says, "So you're leaving the monastery."

I turn to her. Think about how to put it. Then reply, "They asked me to leave."

"Why?"

Again I consider. "I told them I'm not ready to make the commitment," I say. "To receive the precepts." I consider how much to tell her. "The Abbess wants to make room for those who are."

She glances over, considers me silently. "I think I know where you're coming from."

That surprises me. "So you're having trouble making a commitment, too?" I ask.

She bobs her head. "I'm still testing the waters. How long have you been there?"

"Seems like forever."

In Mt. Shasta City she pulls into the half-filled lot of the Black Bear Diner. Our breaths steam in the gusts of cold, damp air. I hold the front door for her. The waitress leads us to a booth in the big front window. Suzanne tugs off her bright sweater before sliding in. Beneath it a formless gray fleece shirt covers her slim shoulders. I try not to stare. Neither of us look at the menu. She orders a fruit bowl, toast, and a cup of coffee. I order scrambled egg-whites, toast, and decaf. We sit there silently facing each other across the damp table. "Excuse me," she says and bounces out to the women's room.

Outside the window Mt. Shasta floats like an imposing white ghost. In its lee hovers the saucer shape of a new cloud, its puffy bottom glowing golden in the rising sunlight. *Lenticular*. I gaze around the restaurant. It's been a long time since I've been in the outside world. Everything is artificial. The orange naugahyde seats. The vinyl table tops. Plastic picture menus. It all seems so strange. The clatter of dishes and ceaseless chatter of the patrons are a corrosive surf pounding my ears. Unwelcome. Eroding my inner calm. Everyone is animated, talking and gesticulating, like tendrils of vetch dancing in the breeze. "Cover crop" pops into my head again. For some odd reason I see all of the patrons as a waving cover crop. I am not sure what that means.

My hands settle in my lap and form themselves into a circle. The mudra of meditation. I take a deep breath. Press the air deep into my belly. Let it out. Half close my eyes. Breathe

Lenticular clouds. A cover crop. Cleansing the path. A red tower—

Suzanne slides back into the booth just as the coffee and breakfast arrive. We eat in silence. My eyes are downcast, on my food, but I sense her gazing at me.

"You were watching me," she says causally. "During class."

I stir sweetener into my coffee. Take a sip. "Yes."

"Why?" Her dark eyes peer into my soul.

What can I say? "I thought you were pretty."

Her stern expression relaxes. She smiles. She leans back against the naugahyde. "You never said much in class."

"No," I reply. "I was there to listen." I take a bite of toast. Chew. "Neither did you."

She considers me, then says out of the blue, "You've seen them, haven't you?"

I look up into her eyes.

"During morning meditation," she adds.

I know what she means. "Yes," I say. "The tower."

She nods.

"The dunes."

She nods again.

"The . . . *longing*."

"To go home," she confirms. Sips her coffee. "What do you think it means?"

I shake my head. Take a bite of eggs. A bite of toast. Chew. Sip my decaf. "I think they're something . . . something we're not supposed to be seeing."

"A communication," she ponders. "A message. Maybe. But from whom?"

I sigh. She is drawing out a crazy notion that I have been keeping buried. "The Farmers."

She considers. "The *Farmers*?" She swallows a spoonful of fruit. "What is *that* supposed to mean?"

I smile at her directness. "Maybe 'farmers' is the wrong word. How about 'caretakers'? Or just 'observers'? I haven't really thought this through yet. I'm sorry. It's just a crazy notion."

Her eyes bore into me. "But it *feels right*, doesn't it? Go on. I'll tell you how crazy it sounds."

I shake my head. "I can't. I'm not ready yet."
She finishes her fruit bowl. Her toast. Drains her coffee cup and nests the dishes on the table. Dabs up a coffee spill with her napkin. "Where will you go?" she asks.
I take a breath. "I don't know." I think about it. "I guess I'll buy a bus ticket for Redding. After that . . . I don't know."
We gaze at our hands as the waitress gathers the plates and leaves the check.
"I have to tell you something," she says.
"What's that?"
"I was watching you, too."
I am pleasantly surprised. My grin feels a little lopsided. "Really?"
"Are you gay?" she asks suddenly.
"No!" I snort. "I've been married. Twice, as a matter of fact. It just didn't work out for me. Either time. Wrong person. Wrong time. Wrong place. But not because I was gay. Why do you ask?"
She considers. "I've got an extra bed at my place. A small apartment right here in Mt. Shasta. You're welcome to stay there for a few days while you sort things out."
"Are you?"
"What?"
"Are you . . . lesbian?"
"No. Heavens, no. Well, I mean, I *have* . . . you know—" She breaks off, flustered as a young girl. Redness creeps into the pale flesh around the bridge of her nose. Spreads into her cheeks. "I mean, no. I don't think I am, really. I mean, isn't that why I asked you . . . about—" "How old are you?" I interrupt mercifully.
"Twenty-nine. I'll be thirty next month." She is glad the subject has changed.
"Old enough to know better," I grin. I lean back to consider my options. Think them through. There really aren't any. I examine her intently. Her pretty face. Her short-cropped hair. The birthmark on her cheek. The curve of her pale neck. She is a lovely woman. She can do better than me. I take a deep breath. Let it out.
"What?" she demands.
"Did Roshi Koshin put you up to this?"
"No!" She protests, then reconsiders. "Well . . . he *did* ask me to do what I could for you. He thinks the world of you, you know. But, no, he . . . he didn't suggest that I do anything in particular."
"Then why are you inviting me into your home?" I ask.
She drops her eyes. Breathes. Recovers her poise. Looks up and smiles. "Why don't we just say . . . let's just say that maybe I want to hear what you think is going on with all those crazy visions we've been having."

Her apartment is a small walkup at the top of a rickety set of outside wooden stairs. It is the converted top floor of an ancient, dilapidated Victorian a few blocks from the main drag. She leaves her shoes by the front door, and I do the same. The inside is clean and neat and exudes the

musty odor of old books and spice tea. The small front room is carpeted and furnished with a worn sofa, a chair, and a floor lamp. No television. An old Navajo blanket is draped over the sofa. Suzanne doesn't own much stuff. She shows me through the kitchen to a tiny back bedroom, not much bigger than a closet. An open futon covers most of a worn beige carpet. There is just enough room for a table lamp, an orange crate, and a couple of cardboard boxes stacked in a corner. A small, high window opens toward the west. There is no view of the mountain. It suits me fine. I set down my duffle bag and center my zafu on the futon.

In the hall she clicks a thermostat, and a gas heater whooshes to life and begins to crackle and creak. She pokes her head in and asks, "Will this do?"

"Perfectly." I bow in gratitude.

"Listen, I have to get to work," she tells me. "I'm a little late already."

"What do you do?" I follow her into the hall.

"Oh, I'm a phlebotomist. On-call part time at the hospital. The regular tech is out on family leave today ." She turns to see whether further explanation is needed.

"You draw blood from people," I say.

She smiles. "I do. For lab work, mostly. I have to change now." She ducks into her bedroom and shuts the door. When she emerges, she is wearing green scrubs with a name tag and photo ID clipped above her breast.

"When will you be back?" I ask.

"Not until after six." She pulls on a navy windbreaker and drags open the front door.

"I can make soup for dinner," I offer. "If you trust me in your kitchen."

"That would be nice," she smiles. "And I do." The door closes behind her.

I stare at the closed door for a long time. Little squares of glass behind the sheer mesh curtain let in a diffuse, dreamy light. I draw a deep breath. Let it out. Drawn another. Let it out. Now what?

I decide to try meditating. In my room I settle myself on the zafu. I stay in my civies. No sense changing if I have to go out to the market later. I sit. I breathe. I try to count my breaths, but they are slippery this morning. They wriggle away and I lose count, again and again. This is not the abbey. Not a proper zendo. It shouldn't make any difference, but it does. No bells. No incense. No chanting. No sangha. No fellow monks sweating white beads beside me. My thoughts wander over my new surroundings. I am not used to this strange bright room. My situation. I try again. I breathe

A loop of dark hair curls forward under Suzanne's ear. The twin pricks of the serpent's fangs mark her cheek. The curve of her neck. I want to touch the curve—

I draw myself back into the present. Shift my posture. Bear down harder. Begin again. Breathe. Breathe again. Begin to count my breaths

Say the wrong thing, and a gap opens up between heaven and earth. Do the wrong thing and a gap opens. A gap of years. Thirty years old. Forty-one. A gap of eleven years opens. A gap opens up between—

I try to bring myself back into the present. Again and again. It is no use. I give up and wander about the apartment, looking over Suzanne's possessions to see who she might be. In the kitchen I think about dinner and pull a large pot out of a lower cupboard. As I look through the drawers for cooking implements, I practice breathing. Practice bringing myself back to the

present.

I step into her bedroom. Her fresh scent lingers on top of the dry, spicy ambiance of the old Victorian. A poster of a mandala is mounted on the wall above her low bed. The bed is neatly made and covered with a striped wool blanket. A quilt is folded over the foot. A big double-hung window faces east. A faded paisley curtain is drawn aside. From her pillow she can see Mt. Shasta through the wavy Victorian glass. The mountain looms white over the roof of an outbuilding and the bare branches of an ancient apple tree. Against the wall stands a chest of drawers. Beside it is a coffee table with a small wooden Buddha and her incense burner, a rice bowl half-filled with sand and bristling with spent sticks. In one corner a straight-back chair holds her folded clothes. Beneath it is her zafu. Clothes hang in an open closet. A short bookshelf is half-filled with books. I do not read the titles. That would feel like intruding. On a little round nightstand is a short lamp, a digital clock, and a small volume she is reading. There is no computer. No television. No knickknacks. No photos. Her private life appears to be as transient as my own.

I pick up the book beside her bed. It is thin and narrow. Entitled “Wild Ways,” it is a book of Zen verses by Ikkyū translated by John Stevens. I think I might have heard the name Ikkyū, but I am not sure. Not at the abbey. I read the translator’s introduction. Ikkyū was a Rinzai Zen monk, an iconoclast, and a reluctant abbot. Sometimes a wastrel. Sometimes a saint. He would cast off his robes and leave the monastery for long periods to practice his Zen in the taverns and brothels of the wide world, drinking, whoring, eating animal flesh, and breaking every precept. In a straw hat, raincoat, and sandals he would live among the fish mongers and farmers, sometimes under a bridge, and sometimes as a hermit in the deep forest. He called himself “Crazy Cloud” and scribed his beautiful poems as he wandered his own Zen path. Many verses described his joyous lovemaking with the blind courtesan, Lady Mori, who came to him when he was already an old man. Yet he had followers who recognized him as a great Zen master. When he was eighty years old, they called him back to become the abbot at Diatoku-ji Monastery. Of that he wrote, “I hate the smell of incense.”

I sit down on the carpet and lean my back against the doorway. I begin to read the poems. They speak to me. I read them all, from start to finish, then move onto the sofa in the front room and read them all again. Only then can I return the slim volume to Suzanne’s bedside table.

7

I stroll down to the business district. It is only a few blocks from the apartment. The warm sun feels good on my face. Mt. Shasta Boulevard is busy with traffic. Everyone seems to be in a hurry. Waves of roaring vehicles wash past ceaselessly from either direction. The air is hazy with fumes. Only a few people move along the sidewalk. Out of their vehicles, walking, they look soft and vulnerable, like grubs. We nod to each other as we pass. I suppress an urge to bow.

I find the bank. I have been here before, but it seems like such a long time ago. In another life. It is an attractive structure. A monument with tall, exposed-aggregate walls topped with narrow strips of glass that leaves the impression the roof is floating. It is a temple of its own kind. No one else seems to notice. I go inside to the marble counter and write a check for

cash. I breathe deeply as I wait in line for the window. The teller is too cheerful. Too friendly. She needs to see my ID and seems to recognize me in the photo. I do not. I ask to check my account balance and am comfortable with it. Money flowed in. Now it flows out. Like the air we breathe. It will flow in again. I cash the check, the teller counts out twenties, and I fold them into my wallet without counting again.

After the bank I stop at the library and look something up about dinosaurs in the reference encyclopedia. When I finally arrive at the market, it becomes almost too much for me. The bright yellow and red boxes crowding the shelves. The harsh fluorescent lighting. The gleaming floors and chrome-edge cold cases. The mindless chattering and bustle of shoppers. A sea of samsara. I shop as efficiently as I can, letting my breathing buoy me like a life vest, then flee with paper bags clutched in both arms.

When I get back to the apartment, I sit and breathe at the kitchen table before eating a chunk of tofu and a slice of bread. I boil some water for tea as I set out the groceries, trying to remain in the present. Aware. My fingers trace the grain of the oiled wood as I place the cutting board carefully on the counter. I breathe. I feel the knife handle. There is nowhere else I would rather be. One by one I wash the carrots in cool water. Breathe as I cut each one. Wash the celery. Slice each stalk. Dice each slice. Breathe. Chop up a slice of onion. Cut some broccoli and cauliflower. Toss it all into the pot and add vegetable broth and water. Pause. Breathe. I open a can of white beans, dump it into the pot, put it on low to simmer, and stir in barley and lentils. I turn down the heat.

While the soup cooks, I strip off my clothing in the bathroom. In the mirror I do not recognize my face. I dig my shaving kit out of my duffle bag and find a towel neatly folded in the hall cupboard. Mindfully I shower and shave. When I gaze again into the fog-streaked mirror, I appear both younger and older than I remember. I blot my hair with the towel and pull on my drawstring meditation pants and the purloined black robe.

I stir the soup, taste it, and add seasoning. I try meditating again, but it is no good. I need to sort things out. I need to figure out what I am going to tell Suzanne when the time comes, as it surely will. About the visions. My crazy notion. I stir the soup again and turn the heat up a bit. Find a yellow pad and a pen. Wait for inspiration. Stir the soup. *Lenticular clouds. The red tower. A cover crop. Cleansing the path.* Those are all a part of it, but I try to remember what I saw *behind* those images. What I saw in the mind of . . . of whoever was doing the dreaming. *A longing for home. A purpose for being here.* It seems crazier than ever when I try to write it down.

Suzanne is weary when she gets home. She washes up and changes into her own meditation robe. Her white skin is lovely against the black cloth. I serve the soup in shallow bowls at the kitchen table. Through the window the sun sinks behind the Klamath Mountains. The room darkens, but we do not turn on the light. Like at the abbey, we eat in silence.

8

“Tell me about the visions,” she says after the dishes are done. She settles onto the sofa and drapes her meditation robe over her curled legs. “You called them ‘Farmers’.”

I pace back and forth uncomfortably. This is all speculation, what I have to say. A

fantasy. Madness. But in the end I sigh and face her squarely. “Sixty-three million years ago,” I begin, “these . . . Farmers . . . or whatever you want to call them . . . chanced upon the earth. It was just one planet among billions . . . circling one star among trillions. But it had potential. It was located precisely in the right place. Except the atmosphere was poisonous. At least for them it was poisonous. But that was something that could be adjusted. They were resourceful. They were armed with unimaginable technology and almost infinite time. They could fix it.” I pause. “Is this crazy enough yet?”

“Pretty crazy. Why sixty-three million years?”

“I’ll get to that. But first . . . what does a homesteader do with new land? The very first thing?”

She shrugs. “Plant it?”

“No, before that he clears it. He removes the rocks and cuts the trees. He plows it. Then, if he can, he plants a cover crop to improve the soil. To make it more productive. Okay?”

She nods.

“So, first off, these . . . Farmers . . . they crash a massive asteroid into the planet. That kills off all the dinosaurs and opens up the land for a new species. For a new crop, if you will.”

“And that was what happened sixty-three million years ago?”

“Yes. If what I’m suggesting is true. Should I go on? This gets even weirder.”

“Please,” she says, settling back into the cushions.

“Well, the asteroid creates volcanos and clouds of ash that block out the sunlight, but it doesn’t really fix the atmosphere problem. They needed more carbon. More heat. So they planted a cover crop. Not plants, but animals. Animals genetically engineered to increase in number and evolve and cover the earth. To do the work for them. To eventually extract all the oil and the coal and the natural gas and all of the other fossil fuels buried in the planet’s crust and burn them in the atmosphere to increase the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses. The temperature would rise to suit the Farmers. Carbon dioxide would become adequately abundant. I don’t know, maybe they photosynthesize. I have no idea what the Farmers are.”

“And in the process,” Suzanne speculates, “the cover crop would self-destruct. Would annihilate itself. By changing the climate and poisoning the atmosphere.”

“Exactly. Like clearing a field with Roundup. Cleansing the path. So when the Farmers come back, the planet would be unoccupied. The climate would be adjusted to suit them. The ground would be ready for the cash crop. Those lovers of dry dunes and blowing sand and carbon-rich air would move in.”

“Millions of years later,” she muses. “The time scale is . . . is impossible to imagine.”

“Yes,” I say. “Living eternally must offer a different perspective of time.”

“But what if the species . . . the cover crop . . . what if someone in the cover crop figures it all out? What if they decide to stop generating the lethal greenhouse gasses?”

“They can’t,” I respond.

“Why not?”

“Remember, they are genetically engineered for a single purpose. They are programmed to indulge only their own short term gain. They are programmed so they *cannot* do a single thing about it. That would go against their nature.”

“That’s crazy,” she says.

“Yes.”

“And the visions? What about them? The tower?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Maybe messages home. I don’t know.”

“And the clouds?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Communication structures? Monitoring stations maybe?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the clouds are the Farmers themselves. I just don’t know. Or maybe they have nothing at all to do with it.”

She sits quietly. Silently I watch her, waiting for a verdict.

“What if this is all true?” she asks at last, her dark eyes troubled. “Now that you’ve figured it out, what do you plan to do?”

I shrug. “Nothing, I guess.”

“But . . . but that would be horrible, wouldn’t it? The whole idea kind of shoots the hell out of trying to plan your life.”

Slowly I shake my head. “Not really. Not so horrible. Nothing has changed. It’s not so different from what they teach at the abbey. The Zen universe is a cold place. In our short lives, it won’t make much difference. After we are dead, it will matter even less. Besides, there *is* nothing we can do about it. Don’t you see, it doesn’t make one scintilla of difference whether we were designed by an alien race of Farmers or by a blind process of natural selection. They produce the same result: a species incapable of giving up short-term gain for long term sanity. Think about it.”

“But”

“Let me read you something from that little book of yours,” I say. “The one beside your bed—”

“Ikkyū?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I hope you don’t mind that I was reading it”

“Not at all,” she says. “I love Ikkyū.”

I pad into her room to fetch the book. “Things are no different now than when Ikkyū wrote these verses,” I say as I return. Thumbing through the passages, I settle onto the sofa beside her. “I never read him before. These verses seem so . . . for me anyway . . . they seem so . . . so poignant. One passage in particular struck me.” I find my place. “Let me read it to you.”

She nods.

I read, “*Delusion makes it appear that though the body dies, the soul endures—this is a grave error. The enlightened declare that both body and soul perish together. ‘Buddha’ is emptiness, and heaven and earth return to the original ground of being.*”

“I know those lines,” she says. “From ‘Skeletons.’ I’ve read them a hundred times.”

I glance up, then continue, “*I’ve set aside the eighty thousand books of scripture and given you the essence in this slim volume.*” I close the book and set it beside me. “In the end,” I say, “after we are gone, what does it matter *why* we have poisoned the planet?”

A shiver passes through her. “I’m cold,” she says. “Will you hold me?”

I slide over to her. Circle my arm gently around her slender shoulders. Cradle her. Suzanne is trembling. I draw her closer. Rub her neck. Stroke her hair. I comfort her. Both of us are wearing our priestly robes. This irony would have pleased Ikkyū beyond measure.

She snuggles her head against my chest. It feels wonderful.

“You are ten years younger than I am,” I whisper with a last vestige of propriety. “I’m too old for you.”

She lifts her face. Her dark eyes are soft and moist. “Ikkyū had his Lady Mori,” she whispers. “He was in his seventies while she was still a young woman.”

“She was blind,” I remind her.

“We are all blind,” she replies. “They loved each other.”

“Yes,” I say. “They loved each other.”

“And he wrote such beautiful verses about their lovemaking.”

“That’s what we remember, isn’t it?” I whisper. “That’s what lasts.” I am still for a long time, holding her, rocking her. “Ikkyū and Lady Mori. We remember them even though they have been dead for a long, long time.”

“Ah,” Suzanne smiles, snuggling closer and slipping her small hand onto my chest beneath my robe, “but while they were alive”