

**Biographical Notes to  
“A Discourse on the Nature of  
Causality, with Air-planes”  
by Benjamin Rosenbaum**

by Benjamin Rosenbaum

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On my return from PlausFab-Wisconsin (a delightful festival of art and inquiry, which styles itself “the World’s Only Gynarchist Plausible-Fable Assembly”) aboard the *P.R.G.B. Sri George Bernard Shaw*, I happened to share a compartment with Prem Ramasson, Raja of Outermost Thule, and his consort, a dour but beautiful woman whose name I did not know.

Two great blond barbarians bearing the livery of Outermost Thule (an elephant astride an iceberg and a volcano) stood in the hallway outside, armed with sabres and needletrowers. Politely they asked if they might frisk me, then allowed me in. They ignored the short dagger at my belt — presumably accounting their liege’s skill at arms more than sufficient to equal mine.

I took my place on the embroidered divan. “Good evening,” I said.

The Raja flashed me a white-toothed smile and inclined his head. His consort pulled a wisp of blue veil across her lips, and looked out the porthole.

I took my notebook, pen, and inkwell from my valise, set the inkwell into the port provided in the white pine table set in the wall, and slid aside the strings that bound the notebook. The inkwell lit with a faint blue glow.

The Raja was shuffling through a Wisdom Deck, pausing to look at the incandescent faces of the cards, then up at me. "You are the plausible-fabulist, Benjamin Rosenbaum," he said at length.

I bowed stiffly. "A pen name, of course," I said.

"Taken from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*?" he asked, cocking one eyebrow curiously.

"My lord is very quick," I said mildly.

The Raja laughed, indicating the Wisdom Deck with a wave. "He isn't the most heroic or sympathetic character in that book, however."

"Indeed not, my lord," I said with polite restraint. "The name is chosen ironically. As a sort of challenge to myself, if you will. Bearing the name of a notorious anti-Hebraic caricature, I must needs be all the prouder and more subtle in my own literary endeavors."

"You are a Karaite, then?" he asked.

"I am an Israelite, at any rate," I said. "If not an orthodox follower of my people's traditional religion of despair."

The prince's eyes glittered with interest, so — despite my reservations — I explained my researches into the Rabbinical Heresy which had briefly flourished in Palestine and Babylon at the time of Ashoka, and its lost Talmud.

"Fascinating," said the Raja. "Do you return now to your family?"

"I am altogether without attachments, my liege," I said, my face darkening with shame.

Excusing myself, I delved once again into my writing, pausing now and then to let my Wisdom Ants scurry from the inkwell to taste the ink with their antennae, committing it to memory for later editing. At PlausFab-Wisconsin, I had received an assignment — to construct a plausible-fable of a world without zeppelins — and I was trying to imagine some alternative air conveyance for my characters when the Prince spoke again.

“I am an enthusiast for plausible-fables myself,” he said. “I enjoyed your ‘Droplet’ greatly.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

“Are you writing such a grand extrapolation now?”

“I am trying my hand at a shadow history,” I said.

The prince laughed gleefully. His consort had nestled herself against the bulkhead and fallen asleep, the blue gauze of her veil obscuring her features. “I adore shadow history,” he said.

“Most shadow history proceeds with the logic of dream, full of odd echoes and distorted resonances of our world,” I said. “I am experimenting with a new form, in which a single point of divergence in history leads to a new causal chain of events, and thus a different present.”

“But the world is a dream,” he said excitedly. “Your idea smacks of Democritan materialism — as if the events of the world were produced purely by linear cause and effect, the simplest of the Five Forms of causality.”

“Indeed,” I said.

“How fanciful!” he cried.

I was about to turn again to my work, but the prince clapped his hands thrice. From his baggage, a birdlike Wisdom Servant unfolded itself and stepped agilely onto the floor. Fully unfolded, it was three cubits tall, with a trapezoidal head and incandescent blue eyes. It took a silver tea service from an alcove in the wall, set the tray on the table between us, and began to pour.

“Wake up, Sarasvati Sitasdottir,” the prince said to his consort, stroking her shoulder. “We are celebrating.”

The servitor placed a steaming teacup before me. I capped my pen and shooed my Ants back into their inkwell, though one crawled stubbornly towards the tea. “What are we celebrating?” I asked.

“You shall come with me to Outermost Thule,” he said. “It is a magical place — all fire and ice, except where it is greensward and sheep. Home once of epic heroes, Rama’s cousins.” His consort took a sleepy sip of her tea. “I have need of a plausible-fabulist. You can write the history of the Thule that might have been, to inspire and quell my restive subjects.”

“Why me, Your Highness? I am hardly a fabulist of great renown. Perhaps I could help you contact someone more suitable — Karen Despair Robinson, say, or Howi Qomr Faukota.”

“Nonsense,” laughed the Raja, “for I have met none of them by chance in an airship compartment.”

“But yet . . .,” I said, discomfited.

“You speak again like a materialist! This is why the East, once it was awakened, was able to conquer the West — we understand how to read the dream that the world is. Come, no more fuss.”

I lifted my teacup. The stray Wisdom Ant was crawling along its rim; I positioned my forefinger before her, that she might climb onto it.

Just then there was a scuffle at the door, and Prem Ramasson set his teacup down and rose. He said something admonitory in the harsh Nordic tongue of his adopted country, something I imagined to mean “come now, boys, let the conductor through.” The scuffle ceased, and the Raja slid the door of the compartment open, one hand on the hilt of his sword. There was the sharp hiss of a needlethrower, and he staggered backward, collapsing into the arms of his consort, who cried out.

The thin and angular Wisdom Servant plucked the dart from its master’s neck. “Poison,” it said, its voice a tangle of flutelike harmonics. “The assassin will possess its antidote.”

Sarasvati Sitasdottir began to scream.

It is true that I had not accepted Prem Ramasson’s offer of employment — indeed, that he had not seemed to find it necessary to actually ask. It is true also that I am a man of letters, neither spy nor bodyguard. It is furthermore true that I was unarmed, save for the ceremonial dagger at my belt, which had thus far seen employment only in the slicing of bread, cheese, and tomatoes.

Thus, the fact that I leapt through the doorway, over the fallen bodies of the prince’s bodyguard, and pursued the fleeting form of the assassin down the long and curving corridor, cannot be reckoned as a habitual or forthright action. Nor, in truth, was it a considered one. In Śrī Grigory Guptanovich Karthaganov’s typology of action and motive, it must be accounted an impulsive-transformative action: the unreflective moment which changes forever the path of events.

Causes buzz around any such moment like bees around a hive, returning with pollen and information, exiting with hunger and ambition. The assassin's strike was the proximate cause. The prince's kind manner, his enthusiasm for plausible-fables (and my work in particular), his apparent sympathy for my people, the dark eyes of his consort — all these were inciting causes.

The psychological cause, surely, can be found in this name that I have chosen — “Benjamin Rosenbaum” — the fat and cowardly merchant of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* who is beaten and raises no hand to defend himself; just as we, deprived of our Temple, found refuge in endless, beautiful elegies of despair, turning our backs on the Rabbis and their dreams of a new beginning. I have always seethed against this passivity. Perhaps, then, I was waiting — my whole life — for such a chance at rash and violent action.

The figure — clothed head to toe in a dull gray that matched the airship's hull — raced ahead of me down the deserted corridor, and descended through a maintenance hatch set in the floor. I reached it, and paused for breath, thankful my enthusiasm for the favorite sport of my continent — the exalted Lacrosse — had prepared me somewhat for the chase. I did not imagine, though, that I could overpower an armed and trained assassin. Yet, the weave of the world had brought me here — surely to some purpose. How could I do aught but follow?

Beyond the proximate, inciting, and psychological causes, there are the more fundamental causes of an action. These address how the action embeds itself into the weave of the world, like a nettle in cloth. They rely on cosmology and epistemology. If the world is a dream, what caused the dreamer to dream that I chased the assassin? If the world is a lesson, what should this action teach? If the world is a gift, a wild and mindless rush of beauty, riven of logic or purpose — as it sometimes seems — still, seen from above, it must possess its own aesthetic harmony. The spectacle, then, of a ludicrously named practitioner of a half-despised art (bastard child of literature and philosophy), clumsily attempting the role of hero on the middledeck of the *P.R.G.B. Śri George Bernard Shaw*, must surely have some part in the pattern — chord or discord, tragic or comic.

Hesitantly, I poked my head down through the hatch. Beneath, a spiral staircase descended through a workroom cluttered with tools. I could hear the faint hum of engines nearby. There, in the canvas of the outer hull, between the *Shaw*'s great aluminum ribs, a door to the sky was open.

From a workbench, I took and donned an airman's vest, supple leather gloves, and a visored mask, to shield me somewhat from the assassin's needle. I leaned my head out the door.

A brisk wind whipped across the skin of the ship. I took a tether from a nearby anchor and hooked it to my vest. The assassin was untethered. He crawled along a line of handholds and footholds set in the airship's gently curving surface. Many cubits beyond him, a small and brightly colored glider clung to the *Shaw* — like a dragonfly splayed upon a watermelon.

It was the first time I had seen a glider put to any utilitarian purpose — espionage rather than sport — and immediately I was seized by the longing to return to my notebook. Gliders! In a world without dirigibles, my heroes could travel in some kind of immense, powered gliders! Of course, they would be forced to land whenever winds were unfavorable.

Or would they? I recalled that my purpose was not to repaint our world anew, but to speculate rigorously according to Democritan logic. Each new cause could lead to some wholly new effect, causing in turn some unimagined consequence. Given different economic incentives, then, and with no overriding, higher pattern to dictate the results, who knew what advances a glider-based science of aeronautics might achieve? Exhilarating speculation!

I glanced down, and the sight below wrenched me from my reverie:

The immense panoply of the Great Lakes —  
— their dark green wave-wrinkled water —  
— the paler green and tawny yellow fingers of land reaching in among them —  
— puffs of cloud gamboling in the bulk of air between

— and beyond, the vault of sky presiding over the Frankish and Athapascan Moeity.

It was a long way down.

“*Malkat Ha-Shamayim*,” I murmured aloud. “What am I doing?”

“I was wondering that myself,” said a high and glittering timbrel of chords and discords by my ear. It was the recalcitrant, tea-seeking Wisdom Ant, now perched on my shoulder.

“Well,” I said crossly, “do you have any suggestions?”

“My sisters have tasted the neurotoxin coursing the through the prince’s blood,” the Ant said. “We do not recognize it. His servant has kept him alive so far, but an antidote is beyond us.” She gestured towards the fleeing villain with one delicate antenna. “The assassin will likely carry an antidote to his venom. If you can place me on his body, I can find it. I will then transmit the recipe to my sisters through the Brahmanic field. Perhaps they can formulate a close analogue in our inkwell.”

“It is a chance,” I agreed. “But the assassin is half-way to his craft.”

“True,” said the Ant pensively.

“I have an idea for getting there,” I said. “But you will have to do the math.”

The tether which bound me to the *Shaw* was fastened high above us. I crawled upwards and away from the glider, to a point the Ant calculated. The handholds ceased, but I improvised with the letters of the airship’s name, raised in decoration from its side.

From the top of an *R*, I leapt into the air — struck with my heels against the resilient canvas — and rebounded, sailing outwards, snapping the tether taut.

The Ant took shelter in my collar as the air roared around us. We described a long arc, swinging past the surprised assassin to the brightly colored glider; I was able to seize its aluminum frame.

I hooked my feet onto its seat, and hung there, my heart racing. The glider creaked, but held.

“Disembark,” I panted to the Ant. “When the assassin gains the craft, you can search him.”

“Her,” said the Ant, crawling down my shoulder. “She has removed her mask, and in our passing I was able to observe her striking resemblance to Sarasvati Sitasdottir, the prince’s consort. She is clearly her sister.”

I glanced at the assassin. Her long black hair now whipped in the wind. She was braced against the airship's hull with one hand and one foot; with the other hand she had drawn her needlethrower.

"That is interesting information," I said as the Ant crawled off my hand and onto the glider. "Good luck."

"Good-bye," said the Ant.

A needle whizzed by my cheek. I released the glider and swung once more into the cerulean sphere.

Once again I passed the killer, covering my face with my leather gloves — a dart glanced off my visor. Once again I swung beyond the door to the maintenance room and towards the hull.

Predictably, however, my momentum was insufficient to attain it. I described a few more dizzying swings of decreasing arc-length until I hung, nauseous, terrified, and gently swaying, at the end of the tether, amidst the sky.

To discourage further needles, I protected the back of my head with my arms, and faced downwards. That is when I noticed the pirate ship.

It was sleek and narrow and black, designed for maneuverability. Like the *Shaw*, it had a battery of sails for fair winds, and propellers in an aft assemblage. But the *Shaw* traveled in a predictable course and carried a fixed set of coiled tensors, whose millions of microsprings gradually relaxed to produce its motive force. The new craft spouted clouds of white steam; carrying its own generatory, it could rewind its tensor batteries while underway. And, unlike the *Shaw*, it was armed — a cruel array of arbalest-harpoons was mounted at either side. It carried its sails below, sporting at its top two razor-sharp saw-ridges with which it could gut recalcitrant prey.

All this would have been enough to recognize the craft as a pirate — but it displayed the universal device of pirates as well, that parody of the Yin-Yang: all Yang, declaring allegiance to imbalance. In a yellow circle, two round black dots stared like unblinking demonic eyes; beneath, a black semi-circle leered with empty, ravenous bonhomie.

I dared a glance upward in time to see the glider launch from the *Shaw's* side. Whoever the mysterious assassin-sister was, whatever her purpose (political symbolism? personal revenge? dynastic ambition? anarchic mania?), she was a fantastic glider pilot. She gained the air with a single, supple back-flip, twirled the glider once, then hung deftly in the sky, considering.

Most people, surely, would have wondered at the *meaning* of a pirate and an assassin showing up together — what resonance, what symbolism, what hortatory or aesthetic purpose did the world intend thereby? But my mind was still with my thought-experiment.

Imagine there are no causes but mechanical ones — that the world is nothing but a chain of dominoes! Every plausible-fabulist spends long hours teasing apart fictional plots, imagining consequences, conjuring and discarding the antecedents of desired events. We dirty our hands daily with the simplest and grubbiest of the Five Forms. Now I tried to reason thus about life.

Were the pirate and the assassin in league? It seemed unlikely. If the assassin intended to trigger political upheaval and turmoil, pirates surely spoiled the attempt. A death at the hands of pirates while traveling in a foreign land is not the stuff of which revolutions are made. If the intent was merely to kill Ramasson, surely one or the other would suffice.

Yet was I to credit chance, then, with the intrusion of two violent enemies, in the same hour, into my hitherto tranquil existence?

Absurd! Yet the idea had an odd attractiveness. If the world was a blind machine, surely such clumsy coincidences would be common!

The assassin saw the pirate ship; yet, with an admirable consistency, she seemed resolved to finish what she had started. She came for me.

I drew my dagger from its sheath. Perhaps, at first, I had some wild idea of throwing it, or parrying her needles, though I had the skill for neither.

She advanced to a point some fifteen cubits away; from there, her spring-fired darts had more than enough power to pierce my clothing. I could see her face now, a choleric, wild-eyed homunculus of her phlegmatic sister's.

The smooth black canvas of the pirate ship was now thirty cubits below me.

The assassin banked her glider's wings against the wind, hanging like a kite. She let go its aluminum frame with her right hand, and drew her needlethrower.

Summoning all my strength, I struck the tether that held me with my dagger's blade.

My strength, as it happened, was extremely insufficient. The tether twanged like a harp-string, but was otherwise unharmed, and the dagger was knocked from my grasp by the recoil.

The assassin burst out laughing, and covered her eyes. Feeling foolish, I seized the tether in one hand and unhooked it from my vest with the other.

Then I let go.

Since that time, I have on various occasions enumerated to myself, with a mixture of wonder and chagrin, the various ways I might have died. I might have snapped my neck, or, landing on my stomach, folded in a V and broken my spine like a twig. If I had struck one of the craft's aluminum ribs, I should certainly have shattered bones.

What is chance? Is it best to liken it to the whim of some being of another scale or scope, the dreamer of our dream? Or to regard the world as having an inherent pattern, mirroring itself at every stage and scale?

Or *could* our world arise, as Democritus held, willy-nilly, of the couplings and patternings of endless dumb particulates?

While hanging from the *Shaw*, I had decided that the protagonist of my Democritan shadow-history (should I live to write it) would be a man of letters, a dabbler in philosophy like myself, who lived in an advanced society committed to philosophical materialism. I relished the apparent paradox — an intelligent man, in a sophisticated nation, forced to account for all events purely within the rubric of overt mechanical causation!

Yet those who today, complacently, regard the materialist hypothesis as dead — pointing to the Brahmanic field and its Wisdom Creatures, to the predictive successes, from weather to history, of the Theory of Five Causal Forms — forget that the question is, at bottom, axiomatic. The materialist hypothesis — the primacy of Matter over Mind — is undisprovable. What successes might some other science, in another history, have built, upon its bulwark?

So I cannot say — I cannot say! — if it is meaningful or meaningless, the fact that I struck the pirate vessel's resilient canvas with my legs and buttocks, was flung upwards again, to bounce and roll until I fetched up against the wall of the airship's dorsal razor-weapon. I cannot say if some Preserver spared my life through will, if some Pattern needed me for the skein it wove — or if a patternless and unforetellable Chance spared me all unknowing.

There was a small closed hatchway in the razor-spine nearby, whose overhanging ridge provided some protection against my adversary. Bruised and weary, groping inchoately among theories of chance and purpose, I scrambled for it as the boarding gongs and klaxons began.

The *Shaw* knew it could neither outrun nor outfight the swift and dangerous corsair — it idled above me, awaiting rapine. The brigand's longboats launched — lean and maneuverable black dirigibles the size of killer whales, with parties of armed sky-bandits clinging to their sides.

The glider turned and dove, a blur of gold and crimson and verdant blue disappearing over the pirate zeppelin's side — abandoning our duel, I imagined, for some redoubt many leagues below us.

Oddly, I was sad to see her go. True, I had known from her only wanton violence; she had almost killed me; I crouched battered, terrified, and nauseous on the summit of a pirate corsair on her account; and the kind Raja, my almost-employer, might be dead. Yet I felt our relations had reached as yet no satisfactory conclusion.

It is said that we fabulists live two lives at once. First we live as others do: seeking to feed and clothe ourselves, earn the respect and affection of our fellows, fly from danger, entertain and satiate ourselves on the things of this world. But then, too, we live a second life, pawing through the moments of the first, even as they happen, like a market-woman of the bazaar sifting trash for treasures. Every agony we endure, we also hold up to the light with great excitement, expecting it will be of use; every simple joy, we regard with a critical eye, wondering how it could be changed, honed, tightened, to fit inside a fable's walls.

The hatch was locked. I removed my mask and visor and lay on the canvas, basking in the afternoon sun, hoping my Ants had met success in their apothecary and saved the Prince; watching the pirate longboats sack the unresisting *P.R.G.B. Sri George Bernard Shaw* and return laden with valuables and — perhaps — hostages.

I was beginning to wonder if they would ever notice me — if, perhaps, I should signal them — when the cacophony of gongs and klaxons resumed — louder, insistent, angry — and the longboats raced back down to anchor beneath the pirate ship.

Curious, I found a ladder set in the razor-ridge's metal wall that led to a lookout platform.

A war-city was emerging from a cloudbank some leagues away.

I had never seen any work of man so vast. Fully twelve great dirigible hulls, each dwarfing the *Shaw*, were bound together in a constellation of outbuildings and propeller assemblies. Near the center, a great plume of white steam rose from a pillar; a Heart-of-the-Sun reactor, where the dull yellow ore called Yama's-flesh is driven to realize enlightenment through the ministrations of Wisdom-Sadhus.

There was a spyglass set in the railing by my side; I peered through, scanning the features of this new apparition.

None of the squabbling statelets of my continent could muster such a vessel, certainly; and only the Powers — Cathay, Gabon, the Aryan Raj — could afford to fly one so far afield, though the Khmer and Malay might have the capacity to build them.

There is little enough to choose between the meddling Powers, though Gabon makes the most pretense of investing in its colonies and believing in its supposed civilizing mission. This craft, though, was clearly Hindu. Every cubit of its surface was bedecked with a façade of cytoceramic statuary — couples coupling in five thousand erotic poses; theromorphic gods gesturing to soothe or menace; Rama in his chariot; heroes riddled with arrows and fighting on; saints undergoing martyrdom. In one corner, I spotted the Israelite avatar of Vishnu, hanging on his cross between Shiva and Ganesh.

Then I felt rough hands on my shoulders.

Five pirates had emerged from the hatch, cutlasses drawn. Their dress was motley and ragged, their features varied — Sikh, Xhosan, Baltic, Frankish, and Aztec, I surmised. None of us spoke as they led me through the rat's maze of catwalks and ladders set between the ship's inner and outer hulls.

I was queasy and light-headed with bruises, hunger, and the aftermath of rash and strenuous action; it seemed odd indeed that the day before, I had been celebrating and debating with the plausible-fabulists gathered at Wisconsin. I recalled that there had been a fancy-dress ball there, with a pirate theme; and the images of yesterday's festive, well-groomed pirates of fancy interleaved with those of today's grim and unwashed captors on the long climb down to the bridge.

The bridge was in the gondola that hung beneath the pirate airship's bulk, forwards of the rigging. It was crowded with lean and dangerous men in pantaloons, sarongs and leather trousers. They consulted paper charts and the liquid, glowing forms swimming in Wisdom Tanks, spoke through bronze tubes set in the walls, barked orders to cabin boys who raced away across the airship's webwork of spars.

At the great window that occupied the whole of the forward wall, watching the clouds part as we plunged into them, stood the captain.

I had suspected whose ship this might be upon seeing it; now I was sure. A giant of a man, dressed in buckskin and adorned with feathers, his braided red hair and bristling beard proclaimed him the scion of those who had fled the destruction of Viking Eire to settle on the banks of the Father-of-Waters.

This ship, then, was the *Hiawatha MacCool*, and this the man who terrorized commerce from the shores of Lake Erie to the border of Texas.

"Chippewa Melko," I said.

He turned, raising an eyebrow.

"Found him sightseeing on the starboard spine," one of my captors said.

"Indeed?" said Melko. "Did you fall off the *Shaw*?"

"I jumped, after a fashion," I said. "The reason thereof is a tale that strains my own credibility, although I lived it."

Sadly, this quip was lost on Melko, as he was distracted by some pressing bit of martial business.

We were descending at a precipitous rate; the water of Lake Erie loomed before us, filling the window. Individual whitecaps were discernable upon its surface.

When I glanced away from the window, the bridge had darkened — every Wisdom Tank was gray and lifeless.

“You there! Spy!” Melko barked. I noted with discomfiture that he addressed me. “Why would they disrupt our communications?”

“What?” I said.

The pirate captain gestured at the muddy tanks. “The Aryan war-city — they’ve disrupted the Brahmanic field with some damned device. They mean to cripple us, I suppose — ships like theirs are dependent on it. Won’t work. But how do they expect to get their hostages back alive if they refuse to parley?”

“Perhaps they mean to board and take them,” I offered.

“We’ll see about that,” he said grimly. “Listen up, boys — we hauled ass to avoid a trap, but the trap found us anyway. But we can outrun this bastard in the high air-streams if we lose all extra weight. Dinky — run and tell Max to drop the steamer. Red, Ali — mark the aft, fore, and starboard harpoons with buoys and let ’em go. Grig, Ngube — same with the spent tensors. Fast!”

He turned to me as his minions scurried to their tasks. “We’re throwing all dead weight over the side. That includes you, unless I’m swiftly convinced otherwise. Who are you?”

“Gabriel Goodman,” I said truthfully, “but better known by my quill-name — ‘Benjamin Rosenbaum’.”

“Benjamin Rosenbaum?” the pirate cried. “The great Iowa poet, author of ‘Green Nakedness’ and ‘Broken Lines’? You are a hero of our land, sir! Fear not, I shall —”

“No,” I interrupted crossly. “Not that Benjamin Rosenbaum.”

The pirate reddened, and tapped his teeth, frowning. “Aha, hold then, I have heard of you — the children’s tale-scribe, I take it? ‘Legs the Caterpillar’? I’ll spare you, then, for the sake of my son Timmy, who —”

“No,” I said again, through gritted teeth. “I am an author of plausible-fables, sir, not picture-books.”

“Never read the stuff,” said Melko. There was a great shudder, and the steel bulk of the steam generatory, billowing white clouds, fell past us. It struck the lake, raising a plume of spray that spotted the window with droplets. The forward harpoon assembly followed, trailing a red buoy on a line.

“Right then,” said Melko. “Over you go.”

“You spoke of Aryan hostages,” I said hastily, thinking it wise now to mention the position I seemed to have accepted *de facto*, if not yet *de jure*. “Do you by any chance refer to my employer, Prem Ramasson, and his consort?”

Melko spat on the floor, causing a cabin boy to rush forward with a mop. “So you’re one of those quislings who serves Hindoo royalty even as they divide up the land of your fathers, are you?” He advanced towards me menacingly.

“Outer Thule is a minor province of the Raj, sir,” I said. “It is absurd to blame Ramasson for the war in Texas.”

“Ready to rise, sir,” came the cry.

“Rise then!” Melko ordered. “And throw this dog in the brig with its master. If we can’t ransom them, we’ll throw them off at the top.” He glowered at me. “That will give you a nice long while to salve your conscience with making fine distinctions among Hindoos. What do you think he’s doing here in our lands, if not plotting with his brothers to steal more of our gold and helium?”

I was unable to further pursue my political debate with Chippewa Melko, as his henchmen dragged me at once to cramped quarters between the inner and outer hulls. The prince lay on the single bunk, ashen and unmoving. His consort knelt at his side, weeping silently. The Wisdom Servant, deprived of its animating field, had collapsed into a tangle of reedlike protuberances.

My valise was there; I opened it and took out my inkwell. The Wisdom Ants lay within, tiny crumpled blobs of brassy metal. I put the inkwell in my pocket.

“Thank you for trying,” Sarasvati Sitasdottir said hoarsely. “Alas, luck has turned against us.”

“All may not be lost,” I said. “An Aryan war-city pursues the pirates, and may yet buy our ransom; although, strangely, they have damped the Brahmanic field and so cannot hear the pirates’ offer of parley.”

“If they were going to parley, they would have done so by now,” she said dully. “They will burn the pirate from the sky. They do not know we are aboard.”

“Then our bad luck comes in threes.” It is an old rule of thumb, derided as superstition by professional causalists. But they, like all professionals, like to obfuscate their science, rendering it inaccessible to the layman; in truth, the old rule holds a glimmer of the workings of the third form of causality.

“A swift death is no bad luck for me,” Sarasvati Sitasdottir said. “Not when he is gone.” She choked a sob, and turned away.

I felt for the Raja’s pulse; his blood was still beneath his amber skin. His face was turned towards the metal bulkhead; droplets of moisture there told of his last breath, not long ago. I wiped them away, and closed his eyes.

We waited, for one doom or another. I could feel the zeppelin rising swiftly; the *Hiawatha* was unheated, and the air turned cold. The princess did not speak.

My mind turned again to the fable I had been commissioned to write, the materialist shadow-history of a world without zeppelins. If by some unlikely chance I should live to finish it, I resolved to make do without the extravagant perils, ironic coincidences, sudden bursts of insight, death-defying escapades and beautiful villainesses that litter our genre and cheapen its high philosophical concerns. Why must every protagonist be doomed, daring, lonely, and overly proud? No, my philosopher-hero would enjoy precisely those goods of which I was deprived — a happy family, a secure situation, a prosperous and powerful nation, a conciliatory nature; above all, an absence of immediate physical peril. Of course, there must be conflict, worry, sorrow — but, I vowed, of a rich and subtle kind!

I wondered how my hero would view the chain of events in which I was embroiled. With derision? With compassion? I loved him, after a fashion, for he was my creation. How would he regard me?

If only the first and simplest form of causality had earned his allegiance, he would not be placated by such easy saws as “bad things come in threes.” An assassin, *and* a pirate, *and* an uncommunicative war-city, he would ask? All within the space of an hour?

Would he simply accept the absurd and improbable results of living within a blind and random machine? Yet his society could not have advanced far, mired in such fatalism!

Would he not doggedly seek meaning, despite the limitations of his framework?

What if our bad luck were no coincidence at all, he would ask. What if all three misfortunes had a single, linear, proximate cause, intelligible to reason?

“My lady,” I said, “I do not wish to cause you further pain. Yet I find I must speak. I saw the face of the prince’s killer — it was a young woman’s face, in lineament much like your own.”

“Shakuntala!” the princess cried. “My sister! No! It cannot be! She would never do this —” she curled her hands into fists. “No!”

“And yet,” I said gently, “it seems you regard the assertion as not utterly implausible.”

“She is banished,” Sarasvati Sitasdottir said. “She has gone over to the Thanés — the Nordic Liberation Army — the anarcho-gynarchist insurgents in our land. It is like her to seek danger and glory. But she would not kill Prem! She loved him before I!”

To that, I could find no response. The *Hiawatha* shuddered around us — some battle had been joined. We heard shouts and running footsteps.

Sarasvati, the prince, the pirates — any of them would have had a thousand gods to pray to, convenient gods for any occasion. Such solace I could sorely have used. But I was raised a Karaite. We acknowledge only one God, austere and magnificent; the One God of All Things, attended by His angels and His consort, the Queen of Heaven. The only way to speak to Him, we are taught, is in His Holy Temple; and it lies in ruins these two thousand years. In times like these, we are told to meditate on the contrast between His imperturbable magnificence and our own abandoned and abject vulnerability, and to be certain that He watches us with immeasurable compassion, though He will not act. I have never found this much comfort.

Instead, I turned to the prince, curious what in his visage might have inspired the passions of the two sisters.

On the bulkhead just before his lips — where, before, I had wiped away the sign of his last breath — a tracery of condensation stood.

Was this some effluvium issued by the organs of a decaying corpse? I bent, and delicately sniffed — detecting no corruption.

“My lady,” I said, indicating the droplets on the cool metal, “he lives.”

“What?” the princess cried. “But how?”

“A diguanidinium compound produced by certain marine dinoflagellates,” I said, “can induce a deathlike coma, in which the subject breathes but thrice an hour; the heartbeat is similarly undetectable.”

Delicately, she felt his face. “Can he hear us?”

“Perhaps.”

“Why would she do this?”

“The body would be rushed back to Thule, would it not? Perhaps the revolutionaries meant to steal it and revive him as a hostage?”

A tremendous thunderclap shook the *Hiawatha MacCool*, and I noticed we were listing to one side. There was a commotion in the gangway; then Chippewa Melko entered. Several guards stood behind him.

“Damned tenacious,” he spat. “If they want you so badly, why won’t they parley? We’re still out of range of the war-city itself and its big guns, thank Buddha, Thor, and Darwin. We burned one of their launches, at the cost of many of my men. But the other launch is gaining.”

“Perhaps they don’t know the hostages are aboard?” I asked.

“Then why pursue me this distance? I’m no fool — I know what it costs them to detour that monster. They don’t do it for sport, and I don’t flatter myself I’m worth that much to them. No, it’s you they want. So they can have you — I’ve no more stomach for this chase.” He gestured at the prince with his chin. “Is he dead?”

“No,” I said.

“Doesn’t look well. No matter — come along. I’m putting you all in a launch with a flag of parley on it. Their war-boat will have to stop for you, and that will give us the time we need.”

So it was that we found ourselves in the freezing, cramped bay of a pirate longboat. Three of Melko’s crewmen accompanied us — one at the controls, the other two clinging to the longboat’s sides. Sarasvati and I huddled on the aluminum deck beside the pilot, the prince’s body held between us. All three of Melko’s men had parachutes — they planned to escape as soon as we docked. Our longboat flew the white flag of parley, and — taken from the prince’s luggage — the royal standard of Outermost Thule.

All the others were gazing tensely at our target — the war-city’s fighter launch, which climbed toward us from below. It was almost as big as Melko’s flagship. I, alone, glanced back out the open doorway as we swung away from the *Hiawatha*.

So only I saw a brightly colored glider detach itself from the *Hiawatha*’s side and swoop to follow us.

Why would Shakuntala have lingered with the pirates thus far? Once the rebels’ plan to abduct the prince was foiled by Melko’s arrival, why not simply abandon it and await a fairer chance?

Unless the intent was not to abduct — but to protect.

“My lady,” I said in my halting middle-school Sanskrit, “your sister is here.”

Sarasvati gasped, following my gaze.

“Madam — your husband was aiding the rebels.”

“How dare you?” she hissed in the same tongue, much more fluently.

“It is the only —” I struggled for the Sanskrit word for ‘hypothesis’, then abandoned the attempt, leaning over to whisper in English. “Why else did the pirates and the war-city arrive together? Consider: the prince’s collusion with the Thanes was discovered by the Aryan Raj. But to try him for treason would provoke great scandal and stir sympathy for the insurgents. Instead, they made sure rumor of a valuable hostage reached Melko. With the prince in the hands of the pirates, his death would simply be a regrettable calamity.”

Her eyes widened. “Those monsters!” she hissed.

“Your sister aimed to save him, but Melko arrived too soon — before news of the prince’s death could discourage his brigandy. My lady, I fear that if we reach that launch, they will discover that the Prince lives. Then some accident will befall us all.”

There were shouts from outside. Melko’s crewmen drew their needlethrowers and fired at the advancing glider.

With a shriek, Sarasvati flung herself upon the pilot, knocking the controls from his hands.

The longboat lurched sickeningly.

I gained my feet, then fell against the prince. I saw a flash of orange and gold — the glider, swooping by us.

I struggled to stand. The pilot drew his cutlass. He seized Sarasvati by the hair and spun her away from the controls.

Just then, one of the men clinging to the outside, pricked by Shakuntala’s needle, fell. His tether caught him, and the floor jerked beneath us.

The pilot staggered back. Sarasvati Sitasdottir punched him in the throat. They stumbled towards the door.

I started forward. The other pirate on the outside fell, untethered, and the longboat lurched again. Unbalanced, our craft drove in a tight circle, listing dangerously.

Sarasvati fought with uncommon ferocity, forcing the pirate towards the open hatch. Fearing they would both tumble through, I seized the controls.

Regrettably, I knew nothing of flying airship-longboats, whose controls, it happens, are of a remarkably poor design.

One would imagine that the principal steering element could be moved in the direction that one wishes the craft to go; instead, just the opposite is the case. Then, too, one would expect these brawny and unrefined air-men to use controls lending themselves to rough usage; instead, it seems an exceedingly fine hand is required.

Thus, rather than steadying the craft, I achieved the opposite.

Not only were Sarasvati and the pilot flung out the cabin door, but I myself was thrown through it, just managing to catch with both hands a metal protuberance in the hatchway's base. My feet swung freely over the void.

I looked up in time to see the Raja's limp body come sliding towards me like a missile.

I fear that I hesitated too long in deciding whether to dodge or catch my almost-employer. At the last minute courage won out, and I flung one arm around his chest as he struck me.

This dislodged my grip, and the two of us fell from the airship.

In an extremity of terror, I let go the prince, and clawed wildly at nothing.

I slammed into the body of the pirate who hung, poisoned by Shakuntala's needle, from the airship's tether. I slid along him, and finally caught myself at his feet.

As I clung there, shaking miserably, I watched Prem Ramasson tumble through the air, and I cursed myself for having caused the very tragedies I had endeavored to avoid, like a figure in an Athenian tragedy. But such tragedies proceed from some essential flaw in their heroes — some illustrative hubris, some damning vice. Searching my own character and actions, I could find only that I had endeavored to make do, as well as I could, in situations for which I was ill-prepared. Is that not the fate of any of us, confronting life and its vagaries?

Was my tale, then, an absurd and tragic farce? Was its lesson one merely of ignominy and despair?

Or perhaps — as my shadow-protagonist might imagine — there was no tale, no teller — perhaps the dramatic and sensational events I had endured were part of no story at all, but brute and silent facts of Matter.

From above, Shakuntala Sitasdottir dove in her glider. It was folded like a spear, and she swept past the prince in seconds. Nimbly, she flung open the glider's wings, sweeping up to the falling Raja, and rolling the glider, took him into her embrace.

Thus encumbered — she must have secured him somehow — she dove again (chasing her sister, I imagine) and disappeared in a bank of cloud.

A flock of brass-colored Wisdom Gulls, arriving from the Aryan war-city, flew around the pirates' launch. They entered its empty cabin, glanced at me and the poisoned pirate to whom I clung, and departed.

I climbed up the body to sit upon its shoulders, a much more comfortable position. There, clinging to the tether and shivering, I rested.

The *Hiawatha MacCool*, black smoke guttering from one side of her, climbed higher and higher into the sky, pursued by the Aryan war-boat. The sun was setting, limning the clouds with gold and pink and violet. The war-city, terrible and glorious, sailed slowly by, under my feet, its shadow an island of darkness in the sunset's gold-glitter, on the waters of the lake beneath.

Some distance to the east, where the sky was already darkening to a rich cobalt, the Aryan war-boat which Melko had successfully struck was bathed in white fire. After a while, the inner hull must have been breached, for the fire went out, extinguished by escaping helium, and the zeppelin plummeted.

Above me, the propeller hummed, driving my launch in the same small circle again and again.

I hoped that I had saved the prince after all. I hoped Shakuntala had saved her sister, and that the three of them would find refuge with the Thanés.

My shadow-protagonist had given me a gift; it was the logic of his world that had led me to discover the war-city's threat. Did this mean his philosophy was the correct one?

Yet the events that followed were so dramatic and contrived — precisely as if I inhabited a pulp romance. Perhaps he was writing my story, as I wrote his; perhaps, with the comfortable life I had given him, he longed to lose himself in uncomfortable escapades of this sort. In that case, we both of us lived in a world designed, a world of story, full of meaning.

But perhaps I had framed the question wrong. Perhaps the division between Mind and Matter is itself illusory; perhaps Randomness, Pattern, and Plan are all but stories we tell about the inchoate and unknowable world which fills the darkness beyond the thin circle illumed by reason's light. Perhaps it is foolish to ask if I or the protagonist of my world-without-zeppelins story is the more real. Each of us is flesh, a buzzing swarm of atoms; yet each of us also a tale contained in the pages of the other's notebook. We are bodies. But we are also the stories we tell about each other. Perhaps not knowing is enough.

Maybe it is not a matter of discovering the correct philosophy. Maybe the desire that burns behind this question is the desire to be real. And which is more real — a clod of dirt unnoticed at your feet, or a hero in a legend?

And maybe behind the desire to be real is simply wanting to be known.

To be held.

The first stars glittered against the fading blue. I was in the bosom of the Queen of Heaven. My fingers and toes were getting numb — soon frostbite would set in. I recited the prayer the ancient heretical Rabbis would say before death, which begins, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One."

Then I began to climb the tether.

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