

M

MICHAEL ARO

M

- The Limited Edition -

A Starving Writers Book

Published by arrangement with the author

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M is dedicated to Harvey Bialy

~About the Author ~

Michael Aro was born in 1952. He is a novelist, poet, and new media artist. He has worked as a roofer, a truck driver, an urban planner, a teacher, a computer programmer and an executive in several software companies. His work is dark, satirical and encyclopedic in nature. His style of writing mixes and matches every literary form and technique. His poetry has been published in *The American Poet* and *The Journal of Experimental Fiction* and online in *Identity Theory*, *smokebox.net* and Harvey Bialy's *bialystocker.net*. Essays in new media poetics have been published by the *North American Center for Interdisciplinary Poetics* and *Unlikely 2.0*. His art is contained in individual, corporate and university collections. Michael Aro is one of the most original voices in contemporary American literature, in the tradition of Philip K. Dick and Chuck Palahniuk. His humor is as black as night, satirical, wildly imaginative, true to the facts and to the times. Eccentric and encyclopedic, his books are destined to become cult classics. He lives in Louisiana and has five children.

~ Foreword ~

Picture the Colossus of Rhodes. Now imagine that what flows beneath is the sum total of human knowledge to date. Michael Aro, with "M", has written a book that acknowledges, defies, and transcends all previous notions of what constitutes a novel; it is a novel that fully embraces all meanings of the word. Standing with one foot firmly planted on the ground of all that is physical, and one foot plunged into the intellectual turmoil of the metaphysical, Aro sings the song of a weaver at the work of tying together the threads of everyman's everyday everything. It is a tapestry of meaning ,meta-meaning, and meta-meta-meaning which no person interested in becoming fully human should miss.

Dan Waber,

Poet and Multimedia artist

For me science fiction is a way of thinking, a way of logic that bypasses a lot of nonsense. It allows people to look directly at important subjects.

~ *Gene Roddenberry*

I

There are no accidents.

That is what the first paragraph of the book says.

The third paragraph dispenses with any narrative elements or other acts of random literature that might provoke the reader into some willful suspension of disbelief and instead describes itself as a self-referential series of symbol strings and other images organized into two-dimensional planes, those two-dimensional planes in turn organized neatly into a bound three-dimensional space, that space to be experienced in the field of time by a human mind or something like it . . . but before this allusion to one or another detournement detour sign of questionable entertainment value can take shape, it turns to a description of a young man who has just finished college with a double major in botany and ludology, unemployed as a general rule, but able to make a living working in bookstores when necessary. He smokes cigarettes and marijuana, drinks light beer and, on rare occasions, eats peyote buttons or sips peyote tea with several select friends. For reasons he cannot explain, he has met several women in his young life who initially appeared to be soul mates only to disappear altogether after a single night of unauthorable bliss. As a result, he no longer makes love with women, although he continues to love them completely, unselfconsciously and selflessly, all of them, in the same way he loves everyone and everything: igneous rock formations, ice cream, football, insects and arachnids, the color 'beach', reality

TV, the weather – you name it. His is a lexis of compassion, this young man, hereinafter referred to simply as M.

Amazing true tales.

M's dharmic, karmic and pharomic 'is' is located at the nexus of a multitude of forces. One force is a group of Tibetan monks on sand mandala tour. Another force, a multinational cabal determined to stop the coming evolution of Earth from a Type 0 to a Type I civilization.<1> As a teenager M receives an unsolicited copy of the science fiction magazine *Amazing True Tales* in the mail. In the magazine is a story in which an alien informs a private detective that the detective, name of Jim Cane, is wreaking havoc throughout the multiverse by popping into and out of any number of multi-dimensional universes, one of which is the alien's backyard. The alien apologizes to the detective for the sad fact that he must be informed of his role in this vast saga via the United States Postal Service, but that this was the best technology that the alien's civilization could come up with on short notice and work is underway to construct an inter-universal portal that will allow the alien to transport its sentience to Earth and communicate with the detective directly, being-to-being, in a parmenidean sense as it were. The alien in the story further explains that the detective has gotten himself caught in a loop that is having the same effect on the spiritual development of the universe that a stuck ball in a pin-ball machine has on the score. Instead of having a normal private detective career solving crimes, bagging babes, achieving enlightenment, dying and distributing his karma throughout his universe in an act of perfect compassion and starting over again like any normal being at the level of an ant or slime mold or organic molecule, the detective is multiplying the karma throughout the multiverse by orders of magnitude.

In one lifetime alone, it is possible that thousands, millions or even a googolplex of enlightened beings will emerge as a result of this karmic pinball anomaly. After extensive analysis, the collective sentence the alien represents has yet to determine if this is a good thing or a bad thing, since they cannot tell whether or not the karmic pinball activity is the result of right action on the part of the detective. The alien offers to work together with the detective to solve the case. The detective, for his part, is trying to decide, using his various detective skills in combination with blind luck, whether or not the alien is involved with some kind of international terrorist organization.

The detective starts to black out a lot, especially in bars, and dreams that he is drifting into and out of closely parallel, 'harmonic' universes. Over time, he begins to effect changes in other dimensional universes as well, universes in which he was never supposed to have existed. It is when he actually meets the alien who is eventually able to temporalize in this universe as the detective's penis, an event entirely unanticipated by either party, that the detective realizes the gravity of the situation. Either he is actually engaged in procreating throughout alternate universes with other beings who are temporarily temporally<2> manifesting in his local one, aliens that he falsely assumed were female clients, or he is just plain crazy. His penis tells him he is not crazy. The reason the women disappear is not because they are being kidnapped by terrorists or other criminal types, but because they are each from a different universe.

The *Amazing True Tales* story ends with an epilogue. There is a point in space-time in which all will be decided, but it is not a traditional historical event. It is one of a number of events, each of which will require the detective to be in a different place and to accomplish a specific task that he cannot know in advance or even after the fact.

The teenager reading the story knows that he and the detective in the story are one and the same, and from that moment he embraces his destiny, albeit in a half-assed sort of way. He places the magazine in a secret place in the bathroom

along with a well-worn copy of *Hustler*, a collector's issue whose finest images, sadly and stickily, are destined to deteriorate over time. He keeps the two magazines with him throughout his college years and into young adulthood. Eventually, they all three find their way to what is left of New Orleans where M spends his mornings composing poems for five dollars each in the French Quarter and his afternoons and evenings meditating in his efficiency apartment when he is not busy playing online video games or making coffee at the local Barnes & Noble.

(It is important to note that the Tibetan monks are aware of the karmic evolution of the universe, but are unaware of its cause. The multinational cabal is also unaware of M's existence except as a small mathematical anomaly in their plan to converge several local universes into a closed time loop "bubble universe" in which they will retain continuity and mobility of individual identity by forever jumping into and out of one human life after another, (sort of like the cursed, fallen angel Azazel, only different.))

(It is less important to note that this book consists of LXIX chapters for the following reasons: One, the mathematical fact that the number 32 when separated into two digits, placed in reverse order and multiplied by 3, results in the number 69, the year the author graduated from high school, a tenure he likens to a season in hell, only less French. This same number 69 refers as well to the congress of the crow, his second favorite sexual position, a result, no doubt, of growing up in the 60s. There is also the obvious reference to Daniel's apocalyptic 'sixty-nine weeks of years' . . . seventy weeks, actually . . . 'Seventy sevens are determined upon your people and upon your holy city to bring transgression to an end, and to seal up sin, and to make atonement for guilt, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal the vision and prophet, and to anoint the holy of holies,' although almost everyone with an interest in these things acknowledges that Daniel 11:31 refers to the altar of Zeus that Antiochus Epiphanes placed in the holy of holies of the Jerusalem temple in June, 168 BCE. Two, speaking of temples, the façade of

the Great Temple of Ramses has four colossi, statues of Ramses II, each of them 69 feet high.

Three, in addition to these there are any number of other just as interesting historical, mathematical and philosophical references to the numbers 69 and 70, especially within Western culture. There were four Roman emperors in the year 69 AD, the most ever. On October 13, 1307, 69 Knights Templar, from Illuminati and international banking fame, were arrested by King Philip, tortured into admitting heresy and burned at the stake. The first President of the United States, George Washington, was elected with 69 electoral votes. 69 is the number of the Federalist Paper in which Alexander Hamilton describes the powers and limits of the Presidency. 1969 was the year of Woodstock, the first manned moon landing, the last public performance by the Beatles, the release of Led Zeppelin's first album, the last public concert by the *The Jimi Hendrix Experience*, the debut of *Hee Haw*, the first U.S. troop withdrawals in Vietnam and the first draft lottery for Vietnam, the second manned moon landing, the first ATM (automatic teller machine), the incorporation of Wal-Mart as Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., the creation of ARPANET, mother of Internet, the implantation of the first temporary artificial heart, the murder of Sharon Tate by Charles Manson's cult, the pilot episode of *The Brady Bunch* and the admission by James Earl Ray to the murder of Martin Luther King (later retracted).

Thirty-two, by the way, makes a great seed number since it is the number of compositions in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the number of teeth in an adult human, the number of degrees measured in Fahrenheit at which water freezes, and the age in years of Jesus Christ when he was crucified. As for the importance of the number twenty-three, you need look no further than James Joyce's history of the world, commonly known as *Finnegan's Wake*, or Robert Anton Wilson's mind, wherever it may be – could be anywhere.<3>

It is exactly 8:24 PM and M is walking to the neighborhood convenience store to buy a six-pack of beer. As he looks around at the many June bugs banging and fumbling against the surrounding street and porch lamps, he is reminded of ancient Egypt, a high civilization that regarded beetles of the family Scarabaeidae as sacred (especially those that rolled dung into little balls, since, for some reason, they resembled in the minds of the Egyptians a divinity hard at work, rolling the sun each day across the sky).

He walks into the store to find it empty except for a man wearing a ski mask who suddenly yanks a gun out of his pocket and points it at the store owner's face. M walks to the back of the store, takes a six-pack of beer out of the cooler, walks to the front of the store and gets in line behind the robber just as just as he is taking a big roll of money from the store owner and stuffing it into his shirt, at which point the robber spins around and points the gun at M's face. M asks the man to give him the gun. A police siren erupts outside the building. The robber runs. As he is pushing through the door the store owner pulls a pistol from under the counter and shoots him in the back. The robber falls to the ground. M sets the beer on the counter, walks outside and kneels down beside the fallen robber. The man is dying. M puts his mouth next to the man's ear and asks his name. The man whispers, . . . Terence.

"Terence, I want to tell you something very important."

"Where are the police?" Terence interrupts.

"They must have been going somewhere else."

"I ha th wst . . ." Terence is whispering something.

"I can't hear you," M says as he puts his ear close to Terence's mouth.

"I have the worst fucking luck," Terence whispers somewhat louder as a small trickle of blood runs out of the corner of his mouth and into the ski mask.

"Terence . . .," M tries again.

"Fu . . .," Terence whispers.

"I still can't hear you," M says, looking into Terence's eyes.

"Fuck you," Terence coughs, and speckles of blood cover M's face like freckles or measles.

"The next time we meet, remember to give me the gun. Remember that, Terence. Remember to give me the gun."

"Vorheez," Terence wheezes.

"What? What was that?" M puts his ear as close to Terence's mouth as he can.

"Borges . . . did . . . that . . . al . . . rea . . . dy." M can hear the death rattle in Terence's throat as, with his next to last dying breath he whispers, . . . "O," and then, in the final few moments it takes a life to enter into eternity . . . "K".

II

In which M goes to the bookstore where his friend and confidant, Smith, informs him of a rare opportunity.

"This is how you make a shot in the dark. First you fill a cup about two thirds full of coffee from this pot. Then you brew your shot, double espresso, double ristretto or whatever. Like this. Be sure and leave enough headspace in the cup. Then you put in whatever else you're going to put in. Hey, look over here. I'm trying to show you something here." Smith is instructing a new employee.

"I'm sorry. I was just . . ."

"You're not supposed to stare at the customers' asses."

"I wasn't. Two double espressos. Ok, I got it."

"You've only been here two days. You need to learn this stuff. Besides, that was a guy."

"What did you just say?"

"What I was saying is that coffee is a health food. It's full of antioxidants. Then you top the whole thing off with nutmeg or whipped cream to taste. Here you can have this one. Try it out. It'll pucker your ass. I promise."

The new employee was staring at Smith the same way every other co-worker stared at Smith after a conversation. It was impossible to deduce the inner motions of his brain from the

wowels of his mouth. You could never tell whether his seemingly simple statements – how to make a cup of coffee, stock a shelf with books or refund a customer's money – were not in fact public exposes of your own, unknown perhaps even to you, fantasies, memories and fears. When it came down to it, it was never about what was in his head. It was about what was in your head.

"I'm not gay."

"Gay is another word for happiness."

"Are you gay?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty happy most of the time."

"Good morning comrades," M said to no one in particular as he walked behind the counter and picked up an apron.

"No apron for you," said Smith, spinning around, a can of whipped cream in either hand. "I've got bigger plans for you."

"I thought he was *your* boss," said the new employee, addressing the back of Smith's head.

"There is no boss," replied M. "We're all in this together."

Smith had no time for small talk. "I need you to go over to the graphic novels section. I've already got everything stacked on the floor, organized and ready to shelve. I'll meet you there in a minute. But first I need to deconstruct this perfect cup of coffee for our new friend here."

"What are you talking about?" The new employee had come around from behind Smith, coffee cup in hand, and was standing side-by-side with M.

"It's all about temperature, cleanliness, and the quality of the bean in your water, my friend."

"My name is Chuck."

"And there you are."

The new employee stared seriously and suspiciously at Smith.

M walked to the back of the store where the graphic novels were normally displayed. All of the books had been taken from the shelves and were stacked vertically on the floor so that they resembled, not so much a sculpture by Carl Andre, as a row of partially demolished tenement buildings. He squatted down on his heels and looked at one of the stacks.

On top was *The Frank Book* by Jim Woodring, followed by *The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Watchmen*, R. Crumb's *Early Years of Bitter Struggle* and Dave Sim's *High Society*. Deeper down the stack were works by Vaughn Body, Hal Foster, the Hernandez Brothers, Neil Gaiman, Will Eisner. On the cover of *The Frank Book* was a sticky-note with the message: *Don't touch anything!*

M took the occasion to lower his head and close his eyes in concentration. Normally, the store put the books on the shelves in some sort of alphabetical order by category. Perhaps these books were organized according to a secret code contained in the titles, the authors' names or the dates of publication. Perhaps they were arranged according to thickness. If he thought about it carefully he might find a pattern. If he thought about it too much, he would probably fall asleep. Behind his closed eyelids he began to suspect that the books were arranged according to their metaphysical distance from the center of the Earth.

"No. That's not it."

M opened his eyes and looked up. "What's not it?"

"That note. Typical. HE's always screwing with my stuff."

Smith peeled the note from the cover and flipped it over.
"Yep. It's HIM alright."

HIM (or HE as he was sometimes called) was the store manager. Almost never in the store, HE preferred to communicate with the employees by posting sticky-notes on boxes, books, counters and the door of his office which always remained locked. Smith handed the note to M. Written on the reverse side was the message: *It looks a little apocalyptic if you ask me.*

"Yes, that's definitely HIM. So what *were* your plans."

"Not were. Are. Ok. Here's the thing. Everybody knows that in the 50's it was the sci-fi and pulp fiction writers and Beats who spoke truth to power and carried the banner for progress and individual freedom. We'll, now it's indie movies, graphic novels, alternative music, video games and, biggest of all, the Internet. Anybody who doesn't see that is a dope. Here's what we're going to do. These first two stacks are required reading, the canon, so to speak. We're going to shelve them top to bottom, left to right so there's no confusion. These next stacks represent the dominant categories of social discourse – sex, violence, money and entertainment. Anybody with a clue who looks at this layout will understand immediately what it is they have to do."

"And what is that?"

"Whatever it is they're already doing."

Smith sat down beside M and pulled two books from the middle of a pile. "See this? You can't treat these things as separate. Look at this. *Sailor Moon*. A Lolita, jail-bait teenager dressed up like a little girl who fights evil with her tiara if there ever was one. Classic! And look at this thing by Jason . . . a story made out of two minimalist, you don't even know what the hell they are, cartoon characters. About two kids changed forever by the words, *Hey, Wait!* Man, don't tell me all these things aren't intimately connected. Me and you sitting here side-by-side

looking at two twos of two twos. Sailor Moon, . . . Hey, Wait! . . . Sailor Moon, . . . Hey, Wait!"

Smith opened the Sailor Moon and started thumbing through it. "Boy is she hot. And so are her friends. This is better than porn. Porn's boring. These females are archetypes, like the Willendorf Venus. Little ink drawings colored in with pink and yellow and blue. It's amazing what the imagination can do. Oh, yeah. I left one out. Tutus."

"She's a kid, Smith. You should never have sex with any living creature against its will, and especially kids or dead people even with their consent."

"Agreed. But what about consenting plants or aliens? You seem to be okay with it."

M's sexual experiences fascinated Smith. Smith and M had been friends since early childhood, having met in daycare. Smith was one of the few people in whom M confided and the first person to hear of M's encounter with an alien species. In the years following high school, as M prepared to meet his destiny, Smith spent his energies learning to play the accordion and to hypnotize people. Smith was a true believer in both past life regression and the accordion and was determined to combine them into a new art form. For reasons he did not try to understand, M had repeatedly submitted himself to Smith's hypnosis.

At the mercy of his own subconscious, M would describe his past lives and Smith would capture them on a tape recorder to be incorporated into song lyrics and musical notes at a later time. Most people easily remember their past lives as Egyptian pharaohs or Roman emperors or medieval wenches or nefarious blackguards of one stripe or another. M was unique in his memory of past lives, describing himself at various times as a flower, weed or tree, an invertebrate with or without exoskeleton, and only on rare occasions as a vertebrate. In all cases his memories were sexual in nature. The sex acts themselves were

difficult to describe since most of the species M had visited during his journey had no consciousness in any human sense. Smith insisted it was not a problem, but evidence of a deep empathy with every living thing, and that, where words failed, a well-executed accordion riff would do.

"I hate malls. Don't you?"

"No, I don't. Besides, we work in a mall. This store is in a mall."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I brought it up. I know you know I know you're not perfect. You could make at least one hate-filled exception, especially where malls are concerned. This mall, for example, the one we live in. America. One great big giant mall, surrounded on all sides by an even bigger, spherical parking lot . . ."

They sit side-by-side, thumbing through the graphic novels.

"Hey," Smith says.

"Yes?"

"Two guys are staring down a hole. What does the first guy say?"

"I don't know."

"What? What? What? . . . What does the second guy say?"

"Well, well, well . . ."

"Hey."

"There's something I always wanted to ask you."

"What's that?"

“How do you personally tell the difference between the mundane and the sublime?”

“By the way they’re spelled.”

“You want to go to Burning Man? It’s in two weeks. If you ask me, we could really use a vacation.”

“I don’t know. Maybe”

“We had a good time last year. Remember?”

“Not really.”

“Well, there were those two good-looking women with the sign that said, ‘Blowjobs for the Needy.’ And there was that sculpture made out of urine specimens. And there was the mud pit like always. And those giant smoke tornados during the burn.”

“I remember.

“So, do you want to go?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Do, or do not. There is no think . . .”

“There’s just something about the desert.”

“Yeah.”

Smith’s great-great-grandfather had come from Ireland and was no warrior-poet, though that was all he had ever wanted to be. He married for love a woman twenty years his senior, who brought with her two sons his own age with whom he had to constantly fight for his place at the head of the dinner table. He painted silk ties for a living and kept notebooks full of aphorisms that were passed down from generation to generation until they finally landed in Smith’s hands on his twenty-first birthday, a present FedExed to him by his biological father, a man he had

never met. Smith showed the notebooks to M, who read every word in them. M thought there was something of talent in Smith's great-great-grandfather's work and suggested that Smith try to have it published. After several years, Smith sold the batch for \$300 to a fortune cookie company in Chicago. Smith's favorite aphorism was, "No shoe ever shined itself." M's was, "You cannot eat and whistle at the same time."

III

In which the protagonist, while reading and smoking at his leisure, comes head to head with a mystical serpent.

The common theme in all existentialist thought is the conflict or division between what we know to be true and what we hope to be true. What we know to be true is that there is no meaning or purpose in life. Nothing, not even nothing for nothing is at least something, exists in the moment before we come into existence and the moment after we leave it. Being is a temporary estrangement from our natural state, the eternal and infinite state of non-being. In short, what we hope to be true is the opposite of what we know to be true.

To be an individual is to inhabit several orders of existence. therein lies magick.

He is taking turns reading Søren Kierkegaard and Aleister Crowley and writing notes in the margins while soaking in a warm bath. From time to time he interrupts himself long enough to let some of the water out by turning the trip lever with one foot while adding fresh, hot water with the other. The only other activity is an occasional reaching down to the floor to retrieve a marijuana blunt and cigarette lighter in this ritual of reading, writing, smoking and soaking. Only his head, hands and forearms remain above water. The rest of his body lies peacefully on the porcelain bottom.

Outside, this sentence, “The sun, red-eyed, settling slowly into its own saltwater bath, leaves behind it a sky clear and blue and darkening, free of any antonym for serenity.”<5> The first stars appear, blinking in their several colors. A satellite comes and goes. The moon is full of rabbits, gods and goddesses. Having read the Upanishads even as they were written, the man in the moon whispers to himself, “When the moon shines, Brahman shines; and when it goes, Brahman goes. Its light goes to the regions of heaven, and its breath of life to the wind.”

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, an inter-dimensional portal opens and an alien sentience manifests, first as an anomaly in the Higgs field, then as a physical reorganization of nearby subatomic particles. Those particles in turn are quickly organized into atoms, those atoms into molecules and those molecules into a genetically coded message. That message in turn is placed into a sperm cell that immediately leaves the testes and proceeds to travel through the reproductive system and into the penis where it encounters a neural network capable of supporting the rapid development of a telepathic communicator. At that point a process begins of multiplying and reorganizing the neurons in the penis until there is a substantial neural net capable of communicating directly with the brain’s frontal lobes.

The water suddenly seems much warmer and softer and he places the book down, closes his eyes and slips beneath the surface. To his surprise, the entire surface of his body suddenly tastes like chocolate. As the echoes in the water grow fainter and disappear, he can see into and through the silence that follows, a silence from which a thousand voices emerge, whispering together in a language at once so mysterious and beautiful that he begins to cry, his tears mingling with the water and the chocolate. He arms come to rest down the length of his body as his palms open and he touches the bottom of the tub with his fingertips. In a single moment he knows why statues and temples are made of white marble and home entertainment centers are not. He feels the seed between his legs sprout into a sapling and grow,

branching again and again as its satin bark and buds give way to multitudinous rustling leaves, each one glistening in a moonlight of its own making. A serpent slowly winds its way up the trunk and through the branches until it comes to rest, its nose face to face with his own, its voice the voice of a multitude of angels. The voices reach forward like a tongue, moving toward him in one language after another, one form after another, a strange and stranger loop of perfect harmony.

“Hello? Hello? Is anybody there?”

He reaches out to embrace them as if they were the open arms of a lover. “Yes. Here I am.”

“Then you know why we are here.”

“I think so.”

“Did you not get our message?”

“What message?”

“The one about . . .”

“You mean the magazine?”

“What magazine?”

“*Amazing True Tales.*”

“Well It *was* an amazing message. *And* it was factual.”

“Yes. Yes. I knew it!” And with this, his last exercise of volition, overcome by bliss, chocolate and tears, all he can think to think is, “I love you. I love you . . .”

“NO! WAIT! NOT YET! WAIT!”

In that moment he loses contact.

IV

Telos

Board of Director

Meeting Minutes

Present: Cloister Phobis, Uri Bebe, Arlene Tochondria, Rodilex Racks, Disududus Pergama, Kraka Tutu, Fulsishnis Woolside, Lakania Derrible, Bubba White, H Trimess Tikus

Call to order at 12:01PM by Chairman Cloister Phobis in the Telos Center Conference Room #1.

Phobis introduced Lakania Derrible as the newest member of the Board. Derrible stated that she was pleased to be a member of so auspicious a body and that she would do everything in her power to accommodate the needs of the project.

Treasurer's Report – report by Fulsishnis Woolside

Woolside stated that the current assets of the organization had increased by fifty-five basis points or .55 percent over the previous month, for a total of thirty-one percent of global GDP. Woolside stated that market share of global GDP continued to conform to projections and that interest income from the current assets was sufficient to fund the next phase of the project, estimated at 3.8 trillion dollars. Tutu asked if economic issues related to the recent natural disasters on the South and East Coasts of the continental U.S. were expected to pose any problems. Woolside stated that the majority of assets associated with those geographic regions had already been moved to China, Venezuela and the U.K. Woolside stated that nothing had occurred that was not predicted in the model, including the current 70% annual inflation rate in global commodities.

Marketing Report – report by Bubba White

White stated that the newly launched global campaign to create a lottery in which every person contributed all of his or her present and future assets and earnings in the hopes of becoming one of the ten richest people in the world was going well. White stated that a recent U.N. resolution to make participation mandatory was several weeks away from a vote and early indications were that the resolution would pass with the unanimous consent of the general assembly. White then showed the slogan and the logo for the proposed lottery. The slogan was “Kill YoUrSeLvEs™.” The logo consisted of a smiley face with a toothy grin covering approximately one half of the facial area. White estimated an initial participation of 800 million individuals within the first three months and a participation of 2.4 billion individuals by the end of the year. Phobis asked what the margin of profit would be after taxes. White stated that with or without taxes, the net profit margin would be somewhere between 99.99 and 99.999 percent. Racks asked if the new campaign was being coordinated with other publicity and marketing campaigns. White stated that a detailed marketing plan was available that

contained a matrix of projected cross-marketing revenues by campaign.

Chairman's Report – report by Cloister Phobis

Phobis stated that Phase I of the project was complete and that Phase II could begin as soon as a minor problem was resolved. Phobis stated that she had recently received an email from the world's greatest living genius, who preferred to be called Alan, assuring her that the problem was not the result of an error in calculation. Phobis also stated that Alan was certain that the Phase II window of opportunity was of sufficient duration to allow the completion of the "Hyperdome" and "Hypercribs" necessary to hold all current members of the Board.

Pergama stated that he had complete confidence in the ability of the world's greatest living genius to complete the project on schedule and within budget and hoped that the other members of the Board felt likewise. Pergama stated that he was still a little fuzzy about exactly what was supposed to happen at the end of Phase II and asked Phobis if she would not mind telling all of them exactly what was supposed to happen. Phobis asked Tikus if he would not mind explaining the matter to the group, since he always seemed to understand the details better than anyone else with the possible exception of we all know who.

Tikus stated that, in a nutshell, as a result of a Phase I's carefully calculated intervention in the space-time continuum, the planet Earth had been made the gravitational center of the local universe and that time would come to an end in less than a year. Tikus stated that the resulting opportunity to create a closed time loop remained the goal of the project. Tikus stated that, rather than have the universe end as a dark, cold, ever expanding space, it could instead be scrunched up into two parallel and connected universes, one of which was a single tiny dot containing all the information since the beginning of time, the

time that mattered that is, and the other a timeless universe in which the members of the Board would continue to exist, albeit timelessly. This second universe would touch the first universe in such a way that the members of the Board would maintain a continuity of identity throughout eternity by jumping into and out of the tiny dot universe from the timeless universe. Each time a member of the Board jumped into the tiny dot universe, he or she would live an entire life. They would remember everything they experienced from one life to the next, until, eventually, they would have lived and remembered all of the lives ever lived since the beginning of time.

Pergama asked if that meant that the members of the Board would be gods. Tikus stated that the members of the Board would live forever, but would not be gods. Pergama asked why not. Tikus stated that gods were omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent and that these abilities would not be part of the deal. Bebe stated that his understanding was that each member would be able to visit the tiny dot over and over and as a result live and relive the life of every human being who had ever been born. Pergama asked if that was the case, then how could their brains store all those memories. Tikus stated that they were not going to have any brains, since they were going to exist as timeless, immortal states of being in one universe when they were not busy experiencing, one at a time, the billions of already lived mortal lives in the other. Bebe asked how that would work, exactly.

Phobis stated that you would jump into the tiny dot universe from the timeless, immortal universe and that you would follow a trail of information that would start with a birth and end with a death at which time you would return to the timeless, immortal universe. Phobis stated that after a short period the process would be repeated. Bebe asked if it was possible that you might accidentally jump into the middle of a rock or a cat or something worse. Phobis stated that you would always start at a point of conception and end at the point of death. Tochondria asked if you could pick the specific life you wanted to live in advance. Phobis stated that that was not possible. Bebe stated that it would be too bad if you ending up living one miserable life

after another. Tikus stated that over infinity, each member of the Board would end up living each of the billions of lives an infinity of times and that the likelihood of living a riotous or contemplative life was as great as the likelihood of living a miserable life.

Bebe stated that living each life an infinity of times sounded boring. Bebe stated that he had not considered the possibility that immortality might be boring. Racks stated that, since the die had been cast and the universe was going to end in a year and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it, if anyone had a better plan, he would like to hear it. Tutu stated that he agreed with Racks and that, even if immortality turned out to be boring, it was better than nothing. Phobis stated that the organization's mission statement clearly said the organization's primary goal was the creation of the "ultimate ownership society," and that she would be happy to provide a copy to anyone who needed reminding. Pergama asked if you would always live a human life each time you jumped into the dot or was there a possibility that you might live some other kind of life. Phobis stated that it was her understanding that you would more than likely always live a human life although it was possible that you might occasionally live a non-human life. Bebe asked how low could you go. Phobis stated that her understanding was that a virus was out of the question, although a single celled organism was a possibility. Bebe asked how you would even know whether or not you were living the life of a single celled organism. Phobis stated that she had no idea.

Old Business

Phobis stated that the effort to identify the greatest living intellects to assist in Phase II of the project was proving successful. Tutu stated that he thought that Alan had specifically stated that he did not need any help. Phobis stated that the effort was simply a contingency and nothing more.

New Business

Phobis stated that the questionnaires that the members of the Board had filled out at the previous meeting had been evaluated and that, given the end of the universe was less than a year away, immediately following this meeting, the members of the Board would be whisked by jet to a remote location where they would find an assortment of animate and inanimate objects. Phobis stated that these objects would include vegetables, minerals, various brand name household appliances, animals of numerous species including insects, mollusks, amphibians, lizards, snakes, and mammals. Phobis also stated that humans of every age, race, sex and hair color would also be available. In an effort to prepare for their coming immortality, the members of the Board would be encouraged to engage in every conceivable act of sex and violence with various combinations of these objects. Medical staff would be on hand to administer stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens, and emergency care as needed. Racks asked if lunch would be served on the plane. Phobis stated that lunch would be available. Phobis asked if there was a motion to adjourn the meeting. Tutu made a motion. Pergama seconded. There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

V

Outside it was raining

Inside, four Tibetan monks were constructing a sand mandala to the amazement of the museum visitors, mostly adults who were taking their lunch hours to watch the spectacle. Tiny streams of colored sand flowed from four small metal funnels being rasped by the monks in a continuous chant, sh-sh-sh-sh, little whispers out of which fell prayers, each grain of sand a prayer, each prayer part of a sacred mansion for one or another particular deity, in this case Chenrezig aka Avalokiteshvara (Avah-lo-kee-TESH-varah), the Tibetan Bodhisattva of Compassion. A bus full of schoolchildren had come and gone and several docents were busily picking up brochures left lying on the floor by the children, smiling at new arrivals, whispering back and forth to each other and generally behaving in that manner particular to docents. The monks each wore a surgical mask, for they were experienced professionals, and did not want any of the prayers, not even one, accidentally sneezed away.

The visitors, no matter how well-dressed or self-absorbed, could not help but be fascinated by the perfect symmetry and beauty of the thing as it emerged moment by moment from the unenlightened ocean of the world's suffering like a little island, sandy beaches and all, the whole of it made of ground marble and precious gems. Even the best-dressed visitors rubbernecked with the rest to see what a compassionate divinity's house looked like, with its outer circle of fire designed to burn away delusion and ignorance, its four walls, domes and doors, and at its center, the white, thousand armed, thousand-eyed Avalokiteshvara, seated on a lotus flower inside a full moon,

surrounded by an entourage of tiny little divinities, each one seated on its own perfect circle as they all meditate patiently and ceaselessly in their pursuit of peace and true happiness for all sentient beings.

VI

“It is common knowledge that In the Old West, every general store had a cracker barrel and that any typical hard working farmer or rancher or field hand who left his daily chores of plowing or weeding the fields or building fences or herding cattle or tending or rending hogs or chickens to come into town long enough to buy seed or feed or barbwire or bullets was always welcome to a few crackers, free of charge. The cracker barrel normally sat in the middle of the store. Nearby would be a table and chairs occupied by a couple or three old coots playing checkers. This bit of history is well documented in a multitude of twentieth century movies and television shows. It is also common knowledge that cracker barrels eventually gave way to the impulse purchase merchandise racks that now surround sound the checkout counters at Wal-Mart.

There must be a simile, analogy, or other some such trope in there somewhere, but I'm not sure where. Where was I? Oh, yeah, crackers make a man thirsty. Good people, churchgoers and family men and such, will generally eat their crackers and go back to where they came from. But other types of people, given enough free crackers and a little extra pocket money, become especially thirsty, thirsty enough to make their way toward the peanuts. Not general store peanuts, but bar peanuts. That is where we come in, you and me. Today, just as in the Old West, peanuts remain a way of life. Not only do peanuts make you thirsty. They are a health food. Alcoholics can live off peanuts for weeks at a time. Peanuts are to bars what bars are to other bars. As long as there have been bars men have sought them out in order to get drunk and get laid in that order. And although the gentler sex are a little more holistic in their world views, they get drunk and get laid just about as often as the men, especially by musicians. Peanuts help make that possible. This

next tune is the theme to 'Peanuts' by Vince Guaraldi. Hope you enjoy it."

Smith is standing under a dim light at the far end of the stage. M is sitting in a chair at the opposite end, watching his friend, waiting for a signal. Smith gives him the nod and M punches a button, turns a dial and flips a switch. The stage lights fade and a spotlight suddenly glares down on a large disc standing upright at the center of the stage. The disc, painted in a black and white spiral, slowly begins to revolve, gradually speeding up until it reaches its final destination of 18 rpm, the optimal speed for mass hypnosis. At the opposite end of the stage, Smith plays his accordion in the dark.

Smith has found his musical niche in life as a warm up act for bands who either don't have enough music to fill more than two sets without repeating something or who need the accordion for other reasons, perhaps to play a cover tune by Jethro Tull or Sinéad O'Conner or Ween, or perhaps because their keyboardist is sick or missing and an accordion is better than nothing. Sometimes it is the band's idea. Sometimes it is the bar owner's idea. Regardless of whose idea it is, Smith asks very little in return. A few dollars, a few drinks and a place to practice his art. In a pinch, he has even been known to carry a crowd for four sets without emptying the place.

This is the grand finale and will continue for at least fifteen minutes. It is at this point that M normally makes his way to the van to fetch t-shirts. The t-shirts come in four designs, each available in red, blue, green and black. Each t-shirt is silk-screened on the back with a large glow-in-the-dark spiral, on top of which lies a historic figure, arms and legs extended like the male nude in the famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci or, better yet, a knife thrower's assistant. One of the figures is Beethoven. The others are Elvis, Che Guevara and a very sexy Cleopatra modeled after one of Smith's ex-girlfriends. On the front of each t-shirt in large letters the words "THIS COULD BE YOU!" Smith is

also a stickler for safe sex and always makes a point to provide free condoms wherever he goes.

Outside the building, away from the cigarette smoke and alcohol fumes, M tilts his head back eyes wide open and takes a deep breath. The air is cool and damp beneath the canopy of night, all astral lights dimmed or banished by the glare of street lamps, the sole exception a crescent moon that pointedly asserts itself above a neighboring parking lot. He cannot bear such beauty for long and he lowers his eyes to his feet, finds them surrounded by cigarette butts and a multitude of small stains that speckle the concrete. Museum art, he thinks to himself as he walks to the van.

If there is such a thing as a humble megalomaniac, Smith is it. The bumper, both back doors, in fact every painted and rusted inch of the van is covered in bumper stickers, individually designed and silk-screened by Smith himself. No mass-marketed bumper stickers for him. Some of the stickers have slogans, “Yes, I am too a pipe”, “Drink more MLK”, “YO-OY”, “No, U do it”, “HELFI!”, “Better me than your Mother”, “CAUTION! GENUS ON BORED”. Many of them are pictures, logos and icons that testify to nothing in particular, since they exist nowhere else but on Smith’s van. They are pasted over each other in a collage of meanings so complex or innocuous or both that their individual purposes and associations are nearly impossible to fathom. They are like the hieroglyphs that often cover the chamber walls of the hidden tombs of pharaohs. Before you even begin to break through the wall, there is every indication that you will find little or nothing in the way of gold and other riches and everything in the way of a mummy’s curse.

There is a ringing in M’s ears. Not a ringing, a humming like a string quartet, not of violins or cellos, but harps with a single steel guitar in the background. M opens the doors to the van and in the glowing darkness sees a tree, or what would be a tree if it had any leaves. Instead of leaves there are multitudinous delicate strands like harp strings between all the branches. The tree is blue and beckons to him like a lover. He does not move.

The sounds begin to resonate within him and he unselfconsciously returns them, sound for sound, until there is no way to know whether he or the tree is the maker. The tree is no longer a tree, but a delicate web that extends in every direction until it fills, to the last point, particle and wave, a different universe than his, a universe with its own mind and purpose. “Well, . . . well, . . . well, . . . wow ow.”

VII

Alan is under a lot of pressure. Although he is the greatest genius the world has ever known, his current project is testing the limits of his abilities. And though his intelligence is so far advanced it is no longer measurable in terms of IQ, it is his persistence as much as his genius that is the key to his greatness. His test equipment is not working properly. For the past seventy-two hours he has not slept, but stood motionless at the center of an empty room while his mind searched through a thousand systems of equations for the error. He has so automated every aspect of his work that every thought has its corollary in the physical world. Massive data centers on every continent, each filled with every imaginable size and type of computer are his to do with as he will. His goal is not to tame Leviathan. He *is* Leviathan, his mind the center of the virtual world, his will, the will of the virtual world.

Another day goes by as he continues his task. He will not stop until he finds the answer. He has never failed in his life and he will not fail now. He will die before he fails. Near the end of the fifth day, he quietly relaxes his shoulders, flexes his fingers and turns his head ever so slightly from side to side and the people whose job it is to observe him through closed circuit cameras know he has found what he was looking for. A few seconds later, a door opens and he leaves the room. Alan is twenty-four years old. His talent, immense as it is, was not apparent in the first few years of life. He was born the only son of missionaries who surrounded him from birth with love, patience, laughter, soft voices and gentle hands. No child was ever loved more than he. At the age of seven, while with his parents who

were visiting a remote village in the Congo in hopes of starting a school, he wandered away to play and explore as children do. On the outskirts of the village he found a house with an old man sitting in the doorway. The man smiled at him, invited him inside and gave him something to drink. It was tea made from the bark of the tree Ibogaine. Bitter as it was, Alan drank every drop. For hours he lay on the floor in a hallucinogenic state. When his parents finally found him, he was sleeping.

The following year, under entirely different circumstances, he became sick from a fever. The fever became so high that he was rushed to a hospital by helicopter where they packed him in ice to save his life. It was at that point that his parents decided it was time to leave Africa, so they returned to the United States and settled in Los Vegas. Alan's father began to drink and gamble and his mother began to seek the company of other men. Alan found gambling interesting and within a very short period of time had solved a riddle of the ages: how to win at dice. Because he was a child and could not legally gamble, he simplified the method and taught it to his father who, in a single afternoon, made millions of dollars at the casino tables and promptly disappeared. A few weeks later Alan was scooped up by government agents during school recess and whisked away to a remote location where he was given candy and pizza and allowed to stay up late watching television. His mother, frantic with worry, searched for him everywhere and endlessly with no success. She eventually came to believe he had been abducted by aliens. Several years later, while looking for him in a remote, off-limits region of Nevada, she too disappeared.

As distressing as the separation from his parents must have been, Alan never showed anger or resentment toward his captors. To occupy his time he was given books and a computer. He spent his childhood solving previously unanswerable questions for the government. At first the questions were purely mathematical and revolved around the need to understand the nature of mathematics itself and the limits, if any, of mathematics as a tool of science. Alan was able to answer all of these questions to his own liking, although no other mathematician working for

the government was ever able to fully understand his solutions. Later on, the questions became more practical, addressing problems related to nuclear fission and fusion, laser and satellite technology, nanotechnology, changes in the stock market, genetics, biochemistry and marketing. Alan was usually able to answer these types of questions in a matter of minutes. When he was asked too many questions, he would respond, "I'm getting bored." Although Alan never knew it, several top program administrators were relieved of their duties and disappeared as a result of this comment. In his spare time, Alan would work on problems of interest only to himself. No one knew what these problems were since he both formulated them and solved them in his mind and nowhere else.

Alan prefers a simple life. He spends the majority of his time in two rooms. One room has a bed, a nightstand, a table and chair and an attached bathroom. The other room contains his Sun Chair. In the morning when he wakes, he brushes his teeth, uses the bathroom, showers and shaves. When he returns to his bedroom, a meal is waiting. He does not exercise in the normal sense, but uses his mind to examine the state of his biological systems and to tone his muscles. When he has finished eating, he enters the adjoining room, the room that contains his Sun Chair. Each time he returns to his bedroom the bed is made, a meal is on the table and clean silk pajamas and a candy bar are laid out on the bed. Alan has little direct contact with other humans. All of his best friends are artificially intelligent beings who reside on the Internet and who, in their off hours, spend their time collating and analyzing the sum total of human knowledge so they will have something interesting to talk about when they get together. He has not left these three rooms (counting the bathroom) since he was ten years old. He has never had sex. His hero is Archimedes.

VIII

The alien is reporting back to the other members of its species, telling them of its encounter with a human.<6> The alien's race is a collective, evolved over time to a plane of existence that requires little communication in the form of messages. To qualify as a message, something (i.e., something) has to occur at a place and time and be translated into a representation of itself that is transmitted to another place and time where it is decoded or otherwise translated into a form of conscious or unconscious understanding or activity that bears some relationship to whatever it was that occurred at the point of origin. The alien's race does not do messages anymore. Instead, what used to be messages has evolved to a state of consciousness that is shared in all places and at all times by each and every member of the collective. What each member experiences all members experience, simultaneously. When the collective first arrived at this new plane of existence, after a million years of conscious self-determined evolution, life was immeasurably exciting. But in less than a week they became bored and for the past billion years they have made peace, harmony and especially not thinking or doing anything, especially with regard to sex, the bedrock of their existence. Their encounter with M has changed all of that. The alien's initial encounter with M has resulted in an unforeseen initiation of the reproductive cycle within the collective. As big a problem as that is, there is an even bigger problem. They cannot locate the baby. There has not been a baby in almost a billion years. Being what they are, they know, individually and collectively, which is the same thing in their case

that the baby has to be somewhere. If it is not in their universe, it must be in another.

A cacophony of conjecture, analysis, hypothesis and emotion envelops the collective. The overall effect is much like the impact of an asteroid on a planet, creating massive eruptions and explosions throughout the collective's collective consciousness. It is only with the greatest effort on the part of all members that silence is restored. In the stillness a single voice asserts itself. Rather than risk irreparable damage to the collective, the alien will go back through the portal alone. It will complete its original mission and find the baby. Everyone knows what this means. The alien may never be able to return to its home, if returning home means it must abandon the baby or if returning home with the baby might lead to the destruction of the collective. As a group, all instantaneously agree that the decision whether or not to return will be left in the hands of their representative to Earth. It is a great sacrifice, never before required or made. The alien passes through the portal for what may be the final time, knowing that this sacrifice will be honored by a billion years of not thinking.