

February 25, 1975

The musical ideas were flinging themselves around my brain like a swarm of angry wasps. Tired eyes and sore hands, products of extended hours composing at the piano, urged me to take a break, if only for their sakes.

I traded the piano for my desk, the keyboard for a nice pipe, composing to reflecting on the morning's work. I had spent fruitless hours attempting the resolution of a modulation problem and was not even close to a satisfactory solution.

The sudden ringing of the phone jarred me out of my contemplation. I angrily dealt with the call, slammed down the receiver, and settled back down with my pipe. Although most men do not inhale pipe smoke, I did, and the deep inhalation of the fragrant tobacco smoke felt good. I finished it up by blowing a stately band of close marching smoke rings into the fan atop my desk.

I was feeling pressed to complete the piano prelude I had been struggling with, then proceed with my new string quartet. But my creativity was blocked and nothing I could do was able to make the psychic obstacle budge one inch. From the outset the juxtaposition of the harmonies and various points of the melody line had presented problems. More than once during the creation of the prelude I had written myself into an uncomfortable corner and I needed to find a way out.

The present focus was on trying to create a dissonant quality to the melody while simultaneously resolving the dissonance with a homophonic structure of the harmonies. If that sounds difficult just reading it, if you can imagine trying to do it I will be excused the break I felt I needed.

I was greeted by morning chill as I made my way to the park in El Segundo. I'd liked this place from the first moment I had seen it, love at first sight, and it seemed to have a special quality all its own. The surroundings were both dark and somber yet uplifting and comforting.

As I drew near the park, still fairly well socked in with morning mist, I could see looming up out of the fog the old Spanish-style fountain, surrounded by its stalwart guardians, pine, maple, and very old oak trees. The trees were silently speaking forth from their deep wells of wisdom, which wafted towards me on the wonderful waves of serenity generated by the sounds of the water cascading from the fountain artfully mixed with the faint light penetrating the clouds and fog. The scenario was one of great natural beauty presented to all the senses at once with equal grace and tender balance, the perfect mixture of profound peace and great inspiration.

The broken layers of fog meandering through the park gave the water a grayish hue, carrying the moisture up into the trees and from there to the boundaries of the imagination. It was a truly mystical atmosphere.

My metaphysical revelry was disturbed by the very physical coldness of my hands, not surprising on a morning whose temperature clearly revealed the small puffy clouds of warm breath I was exhaling. The entire scene reminded me of something that happened during my army days at Fort Ord.

It was 1964 and an epidemic of spinal meningitis had swept the base, inculcating fear in officer and enlisted man alike, as the disease seemed to be playing no favorites based upon rank and pay grade. The base was quarantined and the fear and uncertainty had everyone on the base on edge.

Military life is made up of a set of routines, making beds, going on patrols, drilling, KP, and a host of other incessantly trivial duties whose commonness and banality were both exceedingly boring and yet somehow reassuring, as there were very few surprises to catch one off balance.

It was Sunday and I was looking forward to my day of rest as I returned to the barracks from morning church services. Fort Ord is in Carmel, on the Monterey peninsula on California's central coast, a peaceful beachside community of artists and writers and other creative types who have the good fortune of residing along one of the world's most beautiful shorelines.

That morning a ghostlike fog had wrapped its arms around the stark manmade hills that had been formed by the Army Corps of Engineers, who had expertly turned part of a breathtakingly beautiful landscape of rolling hills into a rehearsal ground for death and destruction. The rigors of training for combat made it not unusual for a soldier to be accidentally killed here even in mock fighting. The vibration of violence permeates the place, it sticks to everything.

The morning service had concluded with my playing "Onward Christian Soldiers" while the chaplain made a closing benediction for all soldiers everywhere, and I must admit he had been effective. I still carried with me traces of the feeling of camaraderie with all my soldierly brethren who had served in all wars. But the brotherly glow that had arisen as I played the hymn began to fade quickly after I left.

The day room near the barracks was filled with soldiers playing pool and ping pong, watching television, reading, doing whatever they could to connect their minds with something other than their regular daily grind. My head was already painful, as usual, and the sudden increase in the noise level did nothing to assuage the discomfort. I decided to get off by myself and walk the open areas lying along the fence that winds over, down, and between the fort and the soft sands of the beach beneath it.

Years of shelling from artillery practice had rearranged a once pristine landscape into the dark side of the moon. The sounds of the 30 millimeter shells pounding craters in Mother Earth's gentle face seemed to linger in the air along with her pleading cries for relief. On the other side of the fence and down the rounded crest of a hill was the Pacific Ocean. Before I could see the endless tapestry of deep blue I could hear the waves crashing against the beach, water engendering water as my eyes filled with tears and my heart with longing for home.

Homesickness was not the only malady in evidence here, however. My head had been wracked with pain since the church service and the incessant throbbing in my brain was now invading the back of my neck and spreading out into the lower body.

I grabbed for the fence as a wave of dizziness washed over me, cutting my hand on the barbed wire that snaked along the fence top.

“Goddammit!” I screamed, insulting the quiet air with my harsh language.

Even with the hand wound and the other pain, there was deeper harm being done by the festering anger that seemed to have no specific target. The hills and beach began to rotate with ever increasing speed and I lost control of my consciousness, the cool morning air, sounds of the sea, smell of blood, sears of pain, all amalgamating into a bursting swirl of insanity.

For a moment my awareness seemed to steady itself, to bear down on a circle of clarity. I thought I could see soldiers filing towards me, their steel bayonets reflecting angles of light. Emblem-embroidered banners flapped in a wind artificially produced by the staccato concussions of warfare.

At first it seemed a company of men, then expanded in front of me into an entire division. Their marching was well-practiced and done with care and precision. They drew nearer, their features becoming discernible. There were no ruddy cheeked Irishmen, no olive complected, wavy haired Italian boys from the Bronx, no surf jockeys of mid-European descent sporting blonde locks and impressive physiques, no scholarly, bespectacled Jews, none of the ethnically colorful stock characters populating every good war story. These were the faces of the dead.

They were ghosts, phantasms, fighting their war in the realm of the deceased. Malevolent grins spread over their white skull faces as they continued their march to a destination I cared not to know. Smoke filled the air as artillery shells crashed down all around them.

A spectral officer shouted the command to charge and they quickened their pace to meet the as yet unseen foe. An explosion of apocalyptic proportions brought the scene to an end and me to my senses, my head still pounding as I lay on the ground flanking the fence. My head felt as though that eerie band of skeletons was marching through it.

Shaken by the recollection of that horrible scene from years gone by, I reached into the fountain and splashed the refreshing water on my face, trying to wash away the painful memory. The coolness of the water was delightfully bracing and I let it remain for a few moments before wiping my face dry with the handkerchief I carried in my old green khaki uniform. I was dressed in my old soldier's clothes. Had that somehow triggered my recall and was that old visionary episode somehow heralding events to unfold this morning?

Two rows of oak trees lined the pathway forming the middle of the park. The leaves played hide and seek with me through the lazily drifting patches of fog as I threaded my way between the trees. Suddenly, a flash of intuition sounded as an alarm bell in the back of my thoughts.

My arm jumped, my leg began to quake, my head was shaking uncontrollably. Reaching out blindly, I was able to grasp the limb of one of the trees and steady myself. I calmed down enough to notice the fog was doing its usual thing, beginning to thicken its consistency all around me. In seconds I was barely able to see the tree right next to me. Something moved in the fog, close to one of the trees, but I could not make out what it was. Then I saw a sliver of light reflected off what seemed to be the shiny button on a colorful jacket covering a red and white checkered shirt. The image was immediately hidden by fog.

Then I felt things, something, jumping all around me, hopping, flitting, as though I were in the midst of a cloud of locusts. All of these scenes appeared as random jump cuts in a movie concocted by a demented director. There was no time to get my bearings and put the fleeting pictures together into something I could recognize and mentally do something with.

Then, I swear in the Name of God, I saw emerge from the fog a white rabbit, dressed in a blue blazer and carrying a silver pocket watch and, to make matters worse, it was hopping towards me. Unlike DeForest Kelley in the "Shore Leave" episode of *Star Trek*, I didn't have the luxury of knowing that I was being approached by nothing more sinister than a nameless actor making a day's wages by wearing a bunny costume.

I blinked my eyes and the apparition vanished, only to be replaced by a small leprechaun, rigged out in green suit, white beard, long stemmed pipe, the whole nine yards of Emerald Isle blarney.

What I was seeing created out of the fog were, of course, images from my childhood; stories I had read or heard were literally being formed out of the mist. Someone or something was painting these things on the canvass of water vapor floating through the park and somehow condensing around me. Perhaps my own unconscious was generating the images and manipulating the foggy medium, or someone was reading my unconscious mind and fashioning what they saw there. Colors were being formed into images, images into scenes, seemingly at random although I knew at some deeper level that something more organized was transpiring.

My unconsciousness was breaking down old barriers, sending out certain ideas, thoughts, images into my conscious awareness. What the purpose behind this was I did not know. Still, if I was caught in a childlike frame of mind I would inject my body into it as well.

I started chasing these mischievous imps from my extreme youth through the park, slipping and sliding on the damp grass, chasing them through the fog, around tree trunks, over the fountain, around and around the park until stopped by exhaustion.

When I rested to catch my breath, the creations began to multiply. Leprechauns, elves, white unicorns, all of them classical symbols of the elusive Trickster figure of folklore. Their numbers began to overwhelm my eyesight; I feared sensory overload.

"Stop!" I heard myself shouting at them "In God's name, stop!"

I fell near the fountain, hitting the wet ground hard. Tears were tracing liquid paths down my cheeks. I raised my hands to my eyes, blocking out the images, holding them there till the palms were wet with tears. Then they disappeared, being withdrawn into the fog of my memories.

Utterly confused, I walked back to my studio. What sort of lunacy was this, this attack of the tricksters? What was I being told, and by whom?

What was most disturbing was not the event itself but the form it had taken, as it had been many years since I had had visions of these tricksters, these manipulators of thought and emotion, who forced their victims to dance to their pipes and play according to their rules, whether their human playmates understood them or not.

Why had they returned? Why had they chosen this particular moment to do so, and this particular setting?

Still dizzy, I sat down on a wall to regain composure and try to think things through. Tears again began to flow as the icy tongs of fear closed around my heart and thrust their sharp tongues deeply into my soul.

I wondered if I should relate this to Paula, or to anyone. Frankly, one of my most haunting fears was that I might be a little mad. Or more than a little. The morning's events didn't serve to diminish the guilt and shame of that dread.

My head still hurt and my thoughts were not yet fully back under my control. The fog was beginning to burn away under the rays of the sun as it rose higher towards mid-morning, its brilliant illumination doing nothing to chase away the shadows from the dark corners of my mind. Dark and forbidding had this golden day become for me.

I had a wife and small daughter to support, to care for, to protect. What would they do should I become physically or psychologically incapacitated? What would it augur for them if hubby and daddy were locked away in an asylum?

Correctly or incorrectly, I needed to rationalize what I had just lived through. My mind had played a horrendously funny trick, that was all. I was hardly a stranger to that sort of thing. I would keep this to myself. I had to. I would lock it up inside with all the other episodes and the chips would just have to fall wherever they fell.

As I neared home I felt some confidence begin to show up in my psyche. I pulled open the sliding glass door of my study and immersed myself in things familiar. I would put this incident behind me right away. I had work to do, music to compose, a prelude to complete, a quartet to finish. I had less than a month in which to do it and they would not write themselves.

My schedule was too busy for this sort of nonsense, I decided firmly, little suspecting that the events of the morning were the birth of a process that would wind up taking me into worlds whose existence I did not even suspect, to places beyond my wildest flights of imagination.

My fingers began to produce sweet music from the black and white keys of my beloved piano. Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast, as someone said, and its beauty and mathematical perfection have a sweet sanity all their own. Madmen may paint and sculpt and write novels and plays and poetry, but they rarely create music.

I fused the dark chords of the harmonies with the lighter textures of the melodies, the integration that I myself needed. Perhaps I had found what I had needed, what I had been looking for, knowingly or otherwise.

The fear of the park gave way to the confidence of the musician's workshop. It felt so good to be playing.