

The Monkey Block

I. Where East Meets West

At a San Francisco poetry workshop in the early '90s, Carlo shared three simple steps for writing a poem: 1) Look up, write what you see; 2) look around, write what you see; 3) and look down, write what you see.

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Leaving the cellphone zombies in the deep steel and glass canyons behind, I gumshoe upslope on California Street on paths once trod by the Continental Op and Sam Spade. After thirty years, is there any Friday night electricity to be found in this a rapidly mutating city? Anticipating the rare Merry Prankster reunion at the Bop Museum in North Beach, I turn into an isolated city park bathed in inviting twilight. There, I sit on a bench to collect my thoughts and meditate in the comfort zone of a green urban sanctuary: spine straight, shoulders back, tip of the tongue touching the palate...lightly.

Unable to still my mind, I look up to observe the aged wooden sign on the red brick steeple of Old St. Mary's Cathedral, emblazoned with a dire warning to Whoremongers in the rough-and-tumble Barbary Coast, circa 1853:

*Son, observe the time and
fly from evil!*

On another bench near to me, a staid nuclear family huddles in a theatrical diorama, frozen in a Trinity. Their overly modest, show-no-ankles Sunday attire seems straight out of a flickering black and white teleplay of another day – *Donna Reed, Route 66*, or maybe even *The Twilight Zone*. Like

displaced Evangelicals wandering out of the desert into the Babylonian city, they bear witness to their muted passion, reading aloud timeless tales of dying and resurrecting sun gods from cuneiform tablets of red clay.

Then, a film montage of historic trivia unreels in the hungry recording eye in my mind: in the early 1800s, just down the continental slope from here, once flourished abundant bird life in reedy marshes of Yerba Buena cove – the bounty of the Yelamu tribe. In those days, the sea goddess Oeesha still waded in ocean tide pools with starfish and anemones. Low on the horizon, vast Condor wings eclipsed the rising sun.

The largest building of the Yelamu, the subterranean roundhouse, stood at the center of the village. Inside, in the middle of that house, stood a stout oak trunk shaped like a “Y” with two branches piercing the smoke hole in the roof. Inside the Siberian sweat lodge nearby, pungent sage smoke and steam rolls like clouds inside the dome woven from the abundant marsh reeds. In those hot clouds, a medicine man raises the *mana* or *ka* – a man’s invisible spiritual energy – by waving the mottled feathers of an Eagle-wing.

Having discovered this present-day Eden, self-flagellating monks burned it to the ground. For their own salvation, the Yelamu were spirited away to the picturesque mud brick pueblo of Mission Dolores, with its sacred *grotta* and blue rose garden of winged skulls-and-crossbones.

Within two generations, no Yelamu remained to pass on their ancient rites, Coyote trickster tales, and astral mysteries. So what became of the Yelamu? A good friar recorded a few fragments of lore from the last Mission Indians. Perhaps their spirits crossed the narrow bridge of obsidian knives to reach the land of the dead on the Farallon Islands. Perhaps they climbed up the ribbon of the dancing hunter *Kuksu*: up through the roundhouse smoke hole to the Sky World. From there, they took a turn onto the over-arching Spirit Road, like numberless light-filled seeds cast into the stone vault of a cobalt night sky.

. . By 1853, business bustled in the expanding village of Yerba Buena Cove, now called San Francisco. The hardy exotic Anglo-Saxon stock that invaded from the east took root and thrived – displacing the former Spanish overlords and whatever Mission Indians still survived. Clapboard buildings and boardwalks lined the Barbary Coast district along Montgomery Street, which still bordered that crescent-shaped cove. And in that cove, General Henry Halleck constructed a giant raft built from felled Santa Cruz redwood giants and the hulls of abandoned ships. This raft became the foundation for a grand Greek-revival edifice, like an ancient ship temple of the healing god Aesculapius, at the birthplace of Rome on the *Isola Tibera*.

Enter the stage of the Barbary Coast: Lt. George Derby, Gen. Halleck's aide de camp, a topographer and the first California humorist. To boot, he was a dashing local Apollo of sorts, well worth a cameo appearance in this tale. He used Squibob and John Phoenix as his pen names and influenced the writing style of Samuel Clemens – and even Mark Twain. Up until this very day, Lt. Derby is the patron saint of the Squibob Chapter of *E Clampus Vitus*, a fraternity of pranksters from California's Wild West days.

. . Tonight, by some unknown anomaly of space and geometry of time, I felt the presence of Squibob and Carlo Marx by my side – like conflicting messengers of Apollo and Dionysus – from time to time, and place to place...

. . Now buried under the pyramid at the corner of Montgomery and Washington Streets, for decades the Montgomery Block was the toniest address in the city. But, after a long heyday, it devolved into a sanctuary for a long list of names from art history and other obscure Argonauts of the post-Gold Rush demography. Even the odd expatriate like Oscar Wilde and Robert Louis Stevenson made cameos in this long-running play. It is

alleged that San Francisco Renaissance poet and reluctant “father of the Beats” Kenneth Rexroth memorialized the pet name for the old “Monkey Block.”

In the 1860s, Samuel Clemens met the real-life Tom Sawyer in the expansive sanctuary of the Turkish baths. In the 1940s, nearby in Jackson Square, Frida Kahlo, the “Queen of Montgomery Street,” reigned with Diego Rivera from their art studio love nest. In their backyard, Ralph Stackpole’s “bone yard” of unfinished sculptures thrust up from crescent-shaped remnants of primordial sand dunes.

Windblown into the shape of lunettes, these dunes once stretched across the peninsula from the ocean to the bay, deep into the coastal floodplains beneath the surrounding cluster of hills of the San Miguel mountain range. To the Ohlone tribes in the east bay, those twin peaks, that fog-shrouded spit of land where the sun sets was a wild place haunted by ghosts.

. . . During construction, the floating edifice was ridiculed as “Halleck’s Folly.” The calloused hands of Irish and Chinese immigrants built the Monkey Block in the marshy graveyard of ‘49er schooners scuttled after sailors deserted the harsh life of the sea to pursue easy gold glinting in cold Sierra foothill streams. With walls filled with red bricks and three-feet thick, the Monkey Block raft rode out the big quake of ‘06 and stood as a firebreak that saved the “bone yard” and all of Jackson Square from one more infernal apocalypse. But the sturdy fortress couldn’t save some of its own: one poor soul lost his studio of 2,000 paintings in one day – or so the urban legend goes.

“Bagdad-by-the-Bay” sometimes can be a trickster even to its own immigrant song residents.

. . For a century, this grand edifice breathed like a living thing in the imagination of a city slowly awakening to the pulse of its own cosmopolitan heartbeat. But the fat lady sang the Swan song for the Monkey Block in 1959, when it stubbornly yielded to a brutal mania for urban renewal, and the erasure of urban history. Now, most of its colorful Dionysian residents are forgotten except by obscure academic archives – like Tonalist painter and dandy ringleader of the Coppa round table, Xavier Martinez; fiery French landscape artist Jules Tavernier; the devil’s own wordsmith Ambrose Bierce; Apollonian radical Jack London – and many others who sailed a different tack in life, often out of a dire necessity.

Around the turn of the century, these local luminaries held subterranean court in the Coppa trattoria surrounded by fantastic murals name-checking kindred spirits with similar internal upheavals of a restless philosophical animal nature – Nietzsche, Shakespeare, Dante, Plotinus – and other early disrupters of cultural DNA. And, above these Forefathers, walking on the top border of the mural, a long march of black cats circumnavigated the room like the ritual procession of an Egyptian Goddess.

The giant pet lobster in one panel of the mural most likely convened these meetings of the local avant-garde. Or maybe it was Emerson’s Platonic Idea of an Over-Soul who had some hidden hand in the proceedings. In any event, some guiding spirits inspired a fire in their acolytes’ souls to know the truth of things and to *know thyself*, like ancestral Roman household deities of the hearth like tribal Penates and ancient Lares watching over Xavier’s round table of initiates, a local oracular navel, a modern outpost of a dismantled Delphi – an odd place in the world even for these misfits.

. . Now, all of those strange imaginings recede to whence they came, and I am back on the bench in St. Mary’s square. There, I summon Carlo and Squibob to help triangulate tonight’s geo-mythic Barbary Coast survey.

As above, so below (as hermetic mystics say) and there, high in the darkening eastern sky, the Summer Triangle rides on the timeless tide of the Milky

Way. Feeling warmer against the fog now, I debark on Grant Street through an egg-shaped 5th dimensional portal opening to reveal an isolated fragment of grand imperial China. Though postcard-perfect now, it began as a fetid ghetto built on top of those desolate windblown sand dunes shaped like silvery lunettes.

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 . Buzzing electric neon gas of the art deco Bodhi Bar sign: a joint where Dashiell Hammett must have taken a dive or two, at least in the *film noir* montage in my mind. The large cinnabar arch looms like the engulfing mouth of a Stone Age cave temple, pulling me inside with a strange magnetism – but no lifelike charcoal figures of Aurochs stampede the walls.

Now, sitting down at the horseshoe bar, and a bit out of place, an auburn man with a manicured goatee and enigmatic, noble face. A rust-hued suit readymade, like the splendid shoes and bowler hat. Dark eyes turned my way, and widened with an instant of recognition. A transference of something subtle, even molecular, had taken place – like a mundane strong force interaction of mesons and baryons. Like the dance of quarks and particles that make up all existing matter as well as the negative spaces. Suddenly, the room began to spin and accelerate with the power of a cyclotron, with the pace of an infinitely expanding cosmos wishing to know its own outer limits. Then all faded to black...

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 . Beneath the Barbary Coast boardwalks, beneath the threshold of waking dreams, I awoke, groggy, to a subterranean city tunneled into caves where ephemeral floating clouds of mountainous islands filled with grand towering palaces and colorful stepped pyramids flickered with heat lightning in dark skies of expatriate opium dens.

And, from an underworld of even deeper caves, the muted screams of withdrawal.

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. . Back in the mundane world of reality again, I shook off the inter-dimensional space dust, and recalculated my GPS bearings. On the Chinatown curbside nearby, several troupes of sweet weathered faces of Chinese lyre players vibrating the air with rich alien beauty sounds of atonal contrapuntal antiquity. Up a side street climbing the Nob Hill slope, a narrow *chiaroscuro* canyon deep in light and shadow. There, a miniature Imperial palace stood sharply etched against the penumbra of the setting sun, three flags snapping in the westerly gusts above a roofline of bright nested gondolas of cinnabar and gold.

. . The next starry node on the Navigator's Triangle was this timeless sanctuary, *la grotta del Vesuvio*. Tonight, it's unspoiled by conspicuous signs of high-tech upward mobility. In the place of Aurochs, framed Beat memorabilia stampedes across the cave walls as I slouch towards the climax of this mystery play. I hoist a "Sal Paradise" or three, in anticipation of some much-needed bliss: renditions of Sal's early Bird-inspired bop prosody recited by remnants of Dean Moriarty's electrified prankster tribe as a nervous city makes merry staring deep into the new paradigm of a televised everyday abyss...

The Sal Paradise

Tequila

Rum

Orange juice

Cranberry

Squeeze of lime

So *Sub Limine!*

O *sublime!*

. . . Here's to Halleck's Folly. Here's to reforestation. Here's a 50th anniversary Summer of Love kiss for ye Pranksters, Merry or Otherwise:

Old St. Mary's Park is

a bright star on the Navigator's Triangle
a philosopher's flying island of
arcane knowledge surrounded by
a sea of mystery swirling
around an axis

bold as love

to kiss

shrouded in fog blind
to the forest of steely monoliths
where many jacks search
for gold but

little

gold

exists.

II: The Dead Trees Still Speak

The blue chip bankers, top-drawer lawyers, silver kings, and goldsmiths gradually vacated to the steel-framed skyscrapers of Hearst and other blue rosebud cases sprouting up like new spring growth near Market Street: another iteration of the new immigrant city searching for its multicultural identity. The grand floating temple of the Monkey Block was abandoned to artists, writers, sculptors, dancers, singers, orientalists, average Joes, neorophics, assorted eccentrics (you get the picture), and other social misfits.

There, in those deep alcoves of the Inferno-proof walls, up to 75 budding artists could nest like *Homo erectus* in their sheltering African savannah tree sculpting torsos of Adamic red clay, writing rule-breaking poetry, sketching fleeting visions, or escaping entirely from the material world into another heightened world of colorful abstractions and strange biomorphic surrealisms. Some images were captured in one medium or another, but many other fevered daydreams were lost to the Akashic records for unknown future brothers under the night vault of sacred constellations created around campfires projecting simulacra of the mythmaking human mind.

Sometimes the spiraling cosmos can play tricks even on its own primal residents.

“Go west young man and grow up with the country,” Horace Greeley once said. But take care, young Jacky, not to get cribbed by the painted ladies on Maiden Lane or have your heart shanghaied by a dandy in a scuttled schooner converted into some weird Oriental saloon. But when grappa, Pismo Punch, and wormwood absinthe starts to flow in your veins,

play tricks on your mind, and tarnish your Hummingbird soul, you can sweat it out in the purifying Turkish baths where gold-hearted firemen mingle with wild-hearted misfits, spinning tall tales of the fall of Adam in the rolling, consoling mists.

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. III. A Sworn Affidavit

Carlo Marx and Squibob hereby witness, and certify *in absentia* and *ex officio*: I, your unreliable narrator, swear on a stack of Akkadian tablets of red clay, on the tall tales of Wild Man Enkidu and Good King Gilgamesh: that's how that evening really went, more or less (except for some *lacunae* regarding the offstage main Prankster beatitude event) – at least that's how I fragmented it back together under a *lapislazzuli* sky adorned with small crystals and three silver lunettes. And if any of this is even remotely true, may a floating island of ancient Argonaut lore spirit me away to the mountain wise men from the East of an earlier day once called Sumeru.

Ron "Dante" Myers

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