

BETTERVUE HOSPITAL

a
lucid
story
about
being
out
there

*Of possible
use for HGI?*



JAMES HAMILTON

by
Richard
Kopperdahl

Between September 1973 and January 1976, I was locked in psychiatric wards six times: four times at Bellevue and twice on the seventh floor of the Bernstein Institute.

Almost every day in the summer of 1973 I walked past this black man, always in the same place. He sat on the sidewalk leaning against a building on Cooper Square just north of the Bowery. He wore an unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt and cut-off pants that had once been tan but were gradually assuming the color of the pavement on which he sat. All over his arms and legs and what I could see of his belly were these little round sores and scars about the size of shirt buttons.

One day he asked me for a light. He didn't say anything, simply held up this half-smoked cigarette. I leaned down and lit it for him. He

took a deep drag and held the smoke in for so long that not much was exhaled. Then he spread his legs a little and put the hot end of the cigarette against the inside of his left thigh. I stood there and watched. After a long minute the cigarette went out. Apparently the serum seeped through his charred flesh and put out the fire. I wondered just how much pain that was.

I had recently read about the way they measure pain. The units of pain are called "dols," and there's a scale of 1 to 10. One dol is like the pain we all walk around with—the pain of gravity we are not even aware of until it is relieved when we sit in a tub of warm water. Ten dols is

the extreme pain women sometimes experience during childbirth. I figured the black man with the cigarette end to his thigh probably peaked at about an eight.

I didn't feel that what the man was doing to himself was all that weird. It seemed to me, at that time, a reasonable way of dealing with all the other pain he lived with: the pain of being alone, of being hungry; the pain of having to sleep out of doors in all weathers—the complex pain of being a poor, crazy black man in an uncaring white world. The act of inflicting on oneself an intense, focused pain might have the effect of trivializing all the day-to-day pain one

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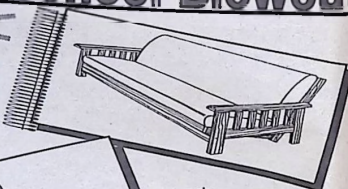
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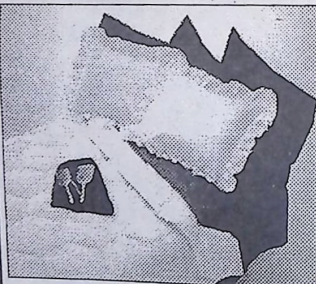
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could do little about. It was sort of like a backfire—the fire they build to halt the spread of a forest fire. Yeah, it made sense to me.

I went crazy that summer.

At the time, though, I thought I was just getting free. I had been a drunk for 20 years, ending up a stumbling wino on the Bowery. Now that seemed to be behind me. The stutter that had crippled my tongue all of my life was suddenly gone, and I could talk endlessly without any hesitation at all—and I did, to anyone who would listen. My world was full of miracles.

The biggest miracle of all happened at nine in the evening on September 21, when I thought I had changed the world, and shortly thereafter I was hauled off to Bellevue for the first time. Between that September and January of 1976, when I stopped being crazy, I was locked in psychiatric wards six times: four times at Bellevue and twice at the Bernstein Institute, which was associated with the alcoholism clinic I'd been visiting for the past year and was part of Beth Israel.

It was three or four days into my first visit to Bernstein that I recalled the black man on Cooper Square and his ingenious way of dealing with pain. I wasn't happy being locked up, but when I asked to leave they told me I would have to stay a few more days. So I decided to escape. I was not without resources—in fact, I had an edge.

It was one of my theories at the time: the magic of the edge, of the wedge, and the focused beam. What was important was the point—the point where something becomes nothing. The power was neither in the something nor the nothing, I was convinced, but in the becoming.

Next to the locked door of the ward was one of those trash cans that had a wedge-shaped top. I put the can on its side with the wedge end up against the door. I stood there, totally focused on the wedge, straining and groaning with mental exertion. It was like trying to force a bowel movement. With all my might I willed the wedge to do its stuff and spring open the door. I knew that anyone else would need to physically force the door, but all I had to do was the symbolic work—the Power that guided me would do the rest. And it might have if the aides had not come and dragged me away.

They put me in an isolation cell. There was nothing in the cell but a gray mat and a radiator. The radiator was covered with sheet metal so the crazies couldn't do themselves damage. I sat on the mat looking for something to do. After a while I noticed a hand-sized break near the bottom of the sheet metal cover. I put my right hand in the hole and found the pipe that fed the radiator—God, it was hot.

I took the pipe in thumb and forefinger, overriding the reflex to pull away.

Two dols, three dols, five dols, yes, seven dols—maybe even eight dols.

Eight dols and holding. Still eight. Wait. Seven and a half? Six and holding. Five dols, four dols. Four dols and steady.

Minutes later it was still a comfortable four dols—what did they do, shut off the steam? Finally I removed my hand and examined my fingers: great blisters on thumb and finger.

What had happened was, the heat destroyed the surface nerve receptors and cooked the cells, releasing their fluid. More fluid was pumped in by the lymphatic system, which caused two huge bubble blisters to swell and separate the hot pipe from the still living flesh

deep below. Then the pain began to recede. Truly marvelous, I remember thinking, the body really knows how to look after its own.

About half an hour later I held up my hand to the little chicken-wire window, and soon somebody came to let me out. I was taken to a treatment room where they dressed my wounds.

The reason I was in Bernstein this time instead of Bellevue was that Diane, my counselor at the alcoholism clinic on Cooper Square, had decided that I needed some psychiatric-style rest. I had been going to the clinic on a daily basis since it opened late in '72. The clinic served the population of the Bowery—winos and stumblebums among whose ranks I had spent four years.

Diane had known me since before I started going crazy the year before. We had had many talks together, but when I made the mistake of telling her that I no longer needed to eat conventional food, that I could live off sunlight, subway noise, and tobacco smoke, she became alarmed. I had been half in love with Diane from the start, so when she suggested I go with her to Bernstein, I agreed to do so.

The Bernstein Institute was Beth Israel's psychiatric unit. In addition to alcohol and drug detox wards, it had a psychiatric ward on the top floor. As we walked up to 17th

Street and Second Avenue, I tried to hold Diane's hand. She let me for a little while, but when I started calling her "honey" she disengaged. About a block from the hospital I noticed an empty pint wine bottle sticking out of a clump of dirty snow and I stopped to pick it up.

I held it up to show Diane.

"Real winos always put the cap back on an empty wine bottle before tossing it away," I told her as I unscrewed the cap.

"At the bottom of every 'empty' bottle is a little wedge of wine which winos call a 'corner.' If you collect enough 'corners,' you can get rid of the shakes." I proceeded to pour the corner into the cap, which I put to my lips. I stuck my tongue into the cap and said to Diane:

"I'm an alcoholic, that means I can lick alcohol."

Twenty minutes later I was behind locked doors on the seventh floor of Bernstein.

There was a lot I liked about Bernstein. Compared to Bellevue, Bernstein was a country club. Unlike Bellevue, which forced patients to scrounge for cigarette butts, Bernstein gave each patient who smoked a carton of their choice on admission and another every week thereafter. It was in every way a gentler place than Bellevue. There was a better class of crazies; many younger people, good-looking girls. My friend Don Wilsen—known to everyone as "Pillhead Don"—once told me that whenever he needed to get laid, he would act out and get himself admitted to Bernstein. And, indeed, while I was there I watched a long-haired girl, not more than 18, take one man after another into a dorm room and close the door: young men, old men, an Asian, an Indian—anyone who was willing or able. I'm sure the staff knew what was going on but elected to do nothing about it.

I remember one magical night at Bernstein, leaving my bed and walking down a softly lighted corridor to the nurse's station where I got my cigarette lit. (We got cigarettes, but weren't allowed matches.) I continued to the dayroom that was more like a large, pleasantly furnished living room, with subdued lights and tall windows overlooking Stuyvesant Park and the clocktowers of St. George's Church. It was

very quiet. I took a seat by the windows and looked out at the falling snow. As I sat there and smoked, lighting one cigarette off the end of the other, a woman in a long white nightdress appeared from the shadows and asked me for a light. We sat and smoked together. She was wonderfully easy to talk to—she seemed to know what was in my heart. I told her—the first person I had ever told—my vision of the past, the lost history of humankind; why we are what we are. Her eyes lit up when I told her how after a million years on the bottom of the sea we had emerged naked and nearly helpless with the weight of gravity into a cold and windswept world; how we had to learn, against our better nature, to kill animals—not for their meat, but for their fur, because the sea had stolen our coats.

We talked until nearly dawn. I never saw her again.

My medical regimen during my hospital stays usually didn't consist of much more than doses of drugs—usually Thorazine. When I took the prescribed amount, I was usually out of Bellevue in three or four days. But I hated the effect of the drug. It was like putting my head in a vise; it cut off the free flow of ideas; it stifled imagination; it literally killed inspiration.

So on my third visit to Bellevue I met this guy who loved Thorazine—he couldn't get enough of it. We made a deal: if I could find a way to give him my medication, he would give me three cigarettes for each dose.

Three times a day they rounded us up to give out the meds. The Thorazine was mixed with orange juice in little paper cups. The nurses or the aides watched us to be sure we took the medication. I picked up the cup, poured the liquid into my mouth, walked three paces to the water fountain, filled the cup with water, and used the water as a chaser. I walked away with the empty container in my hand, and when I was sure no one was watching, spat the Thorazine, which I had secreted under my tongue, back into the cup. It worked every time. I had my smokes and my head was clear. The downside was I was still acting as crazy as when I first arrived. After about five days, the doctor told me that I would need long-term care; on the following Monday she would sign the papers to have me transferred to Manhattan State. I knew that once they got me on Wards Island, I might never see the world again.

After a major effort I managed to get in touch with Diane, my counselor at Cooper Square. She arranged for my transfer to Bernstein—and in three days, Bernstein released me.

I was passionate about Bellevue: in the grandiosity of my beliefs, I felt that the entire complex had been designed back in the last century with my arrival in mind. Bellevue was a royal court whose prince had come. It was all such an obvious set—a grand stage on which I would perform the magic that would usher in a new world.

I knew—I was absolutely certain—that among the doctors, the nurses, the aides, and the patients there were key people planted to observe me. Their job was to watch everything I did, to listen to everything I said, to take notes, to test me—all to be sure I was not an impostor: that I was, indeed, who I was.

I thought that the mental health establishment—which I believed was predominantly Jewish—had a hidden agenda: to unmask the pretenders. That since the Jews were caught napping at the first coming, they were determined to be on top of things at the second. And I, of course, was the second.

I first became aware of my singular calling the summer of '73, not long before my first trip to Bellevue. I was smoking a joint in Washington Square Park when a man who identified himself as "Bambu, the Village poet" introduced himself. He sat down on the bench beside me

and asked if he could have a toke. I passed him the joint. Later he asked me if I wanted one of his poems. He rummaged in his bag and brought out a piece of stiff paper folded in half to make a booklet. On the outside were printed the words: "The Savior of the World." When I opened it up I found a little round mirror pasted on the right-hand page. In it I saw myself: full beard and long flowing hair, parted in the middle. I was He.

The wards at Bellevue were shaped like square *Us*. At each tip was a dayroom arrived at by a long corridor, off of which were the glassed-in dorms, the treatment rooms, toilets, and bathing rooms. At the bottom of each U was the dining area that doubled as the visitor's lounge. Across from the dining room was the door to a service corridor connecting to an identical but opposite U-shaped ward. On the fourth floor, one ward was called NO#4, the other was PQ#4; one faced the river, the other faced First Avenue. The door to the service corridor was locked at all times. Above the door was a clock, and the clock in one of the wards had no hands.

As crazy as I was, I loved the irony of a clock with no hands. It was far from the only touch at Bellevue that charmed me: there was the pool table without its cloth cover—there were only three balls, and the cue sticks had no tips. On the wall of one dining/visiting room was a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Cypresses*—one of those copies where the simulated brush strokes were done in relief. Adding to the effect was a glaze of old vomit. I thought it wonderful that someone had decided to hang such a picture in a nuthouse in the first place, then had allowed it to remain hanging after some long-forgotten critic had regurgitated his lunch all over it.

There were the two dayrooms at the tips of the U, each with a table or two and mismatched chairs. They were mirror images of each other; from one, you could see across the courtyard into its identical twin. It seemed so significant that the two rooms were the same, yet reversed. Many of the patients, myself included, spent the whole day walking the long corridors from one dayroom to the other.

The mirror image theme of the dayrooms, of the two U-shaped wards, extended into the toilets. Inside were the crappers, of course—in stalls without doors—and the urinals, all in a row. But the sinks were where the magic was. One wall held three sinks, above which were three stainless-steel mirrors. Directly opposite, and precisely in line, were three other sinks and three other stainless-steel mirrors. The first time I stood before the sinks and looked into the mirror and saw my face and the back of my head repeating and diminishing down an endless tunnel of mirrors, my heart quickened and I nearly swooned with the wonder of it all.

I spent a lot of time in the toilets. They were my workshops and laboratories. I brought to them such tools as I could find: styrofoam cups—important because they were cone shaped—bits of string, soda straws, and squares of paper I folded into triangles, the most powerful of all geometric shapes.

There were several projects I worked on in the toilets. One was to release myself from the rule of gravity. I just knew there was a technique that would suspend the law and allow me to float down the corridors to the amazement of all.

That the law of gravity might be negotiable had initially occurred to me not long after my first LSD trip, while I was working as a window washer in a downtown office building. Hanging by a canvas belt from a 30th-story window, I had a flash: that humans once lived in a weightless world and that, somehow, I could recreate that world.

I believed that the symbol for something was as good as the thing itself if the thing was unavailable. Therefore my cones and angles not only represented but became the objects and forces that I assigned them. It was like the Eu-

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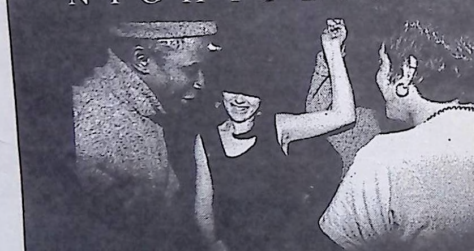
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charist: the bread and the wine became the flesh and the blood. I believed that even though you might be up shit creek without a paddle, you always had a symbol.

Now, in Bellevue, I tried to regain that weightless state in various ways: stacking the cups on the sink; sticking triangles onto the mirrors and dancing in front of them; chanting my favorite mantra, "The last shall become the first shall become the last shall . . ." over and over again. All to little effect—except, once or twice, to make me feel light-headed.

Another of my projects was banishing the color yellow from the world. This meant a personal sacrifice, because yellow was my favorite color. Yellow was the color of sunlight and daffodils, but it was also the color of cowardice and caution, of equivocation, and so I felt it had to go. My model was the traffic light: if green meant go and red meant stop, what the fuck did yellow mean?

My tools were the same: styrofoam cups and triangles pasted here and there, the infinity of mirrors. I squirted a little liquid soap in one of my cups, added water, and with the soda straw I blew a thousand bubbles, turning the cup into a nexus of lenses and mirrors. This optical stew, I felt, was the catalyst for removing yellow from the world. The experiment took place at night, so I had to keep running to a window to look out at the traffic signal on First Avenue to see if I had been successful or not.

This experiment was carried out on my first visit to Bellevue. A year later, my second time there, I was walking by the visiting room and saw my friend Randall. I walked over and asked him how he knew I was in Bellevue. He said he hadn't known, that he had come to visit Laura, the woman with him at the table. Later, after Randall left, Laura told me the reason she was in the hospital was that whenever she looked at someone their face appeared to turn yellow. I asked her if my face was yellow. She said that it was. Several years later Randall told me that not long after Laura left Bellevue, she took her own life.

I almost never had visitors myself. Most of the people I knew before I went crazy crossed the street if they saw me coming. Once, Pill-head Don, who hadn't seen me around for a few days and figured I was in Bellevue, brought me a pack of cigarettes.

The endless search for something to smoke was the driving force at Bellevue. During visiting hours I would hang around the visiting area and try to cadge smokes from other people's visitors. I would carefully note which patients got cigarettes and, later, hit on them. The rest of the time it was a constant search for smokable discards.

Once I teamed up with another searcher—a lanky guy who resembled the actor John Caradine. We divided the ward in half—he took one arm of the U and I took the other—and we met back at the dining area and pooled our finds. There wasn't much. After we smoked the few puffs we had, my partner held up a butt that was all filter—no tobacco at all.

"My friend," he said, "this is the best, the crème de la crème."

He lit the filter, took a puff, then passed it to me. It wasn't too bad—in fact, not bad at all. But it wasn't just cigarettes that I searched for in Bellevue: I also scrounged for signs and portents. Outside of Bellevue as well as inside I was led to my revelations by angles of any kind—they were markers, pointers that showed me the way. If I were walking down a street with no destination in mind, which way should I go when I got to the corner? When I looked down onto the sidewalk, there was always a sign: a piece of wire formed into a pointer >, a soda straw bent into an arrowhead <, a cigarette broken in half. Whichever way my found angle pointed, that's the way I would go. Sometimes, in the middle of a block, I would see a pointer indicating unmistakably that I should cross to the other side, so I would. Another angle might point at a store window, and I would stop to consider the display. On occasion the message was to reverse direction; I would turn around and go back the way I came. Going for a casual walk was always an adventure.

One time in Bellevue I followed an angle trail to a window overlooking the courtyard. Down below were four Corinthian columns stuck in the ground forming a square. (Whether they were left over from some old construction or demolition, I never knew, but in 1995, they were still there.) I was certain that the columns were a major sign. I knew that in the Bible there was I Corinthians and II Corinthians, but not III or IV. So the meaning had to be in either I Corinthians: IV or II Corinthians: IV. I needed to find a Bible.

My search for one took me to the nearest dayroom. I saw a young man lying on his side on a bench; under his head, like a pillow, was a Bible. At first I thought he was asleep; then I noticed that his eyes were open.

I approached him and asked: "Excuse me, could I see your Bible for a minute?"

"Not now," he said, "I'm reading it."

I found a chair and waited. Ten minutes later the guy sat up, looked in my direction, and nodded. Then he handed me the Bible.

To my great disappointment, in neither

Corinthians could I find anything that seemed particularly significant. The first contained a long passage about "the Apostles of Christ"; the other said something about "treasures in clay jars." A total dry hole as far as I was concerned, which, at that time, was surprising, because I could usually find great import in the most mundane of materials.

In my four trips to Bellevue, only once was I taken to the baths. After breakfast one morning an aide with a clipboard called out about a dozen names and led us to the bathroom. We were given a towel and a robe and instructed to wait in the corridor until our names were called.

Inside the bathroom steam was rising from six large porcelain tubs. Water continued to gush in from the taps even after the tubs were full to the overflow vents. I guessed this was how they kept the water "fresh" without draining it after each patient's bath. Only one of the baths had valves to control the mix of hot and cold, and an attendant sat next to it, adjusting the temperature for all the tubs.

Bellevue was a royal court whose prince had come.

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There were benches against one wall where we removed our clothes. I waited until the tub farthest from the attendant was available, then I plunged into the water backward like a skin diver into the sea. My plan was to look up through the water from the bottom and breathe the water into my lungs. Before I had a chance to take the first breath, though, the attendant was pulling me out of the tub.

"Hey, man," he said, "you don't drown yourself in my tubs."

I didn't bother telling him that drowning myself was the last thing I had in mind.

As far as I knew, no one in my family had ever gone insane. I had no history of adolescent schizophrenia. The first time I was labeled "schizophrenic" was the first time I hit Bellevue—at age 40. I knew I was having unusual ideas—that I performed what many would consider bizarre acts in public as well as in private. I didn't think I was crazy at the time. In fact, I thought that I might be the sanest person on earth, and I was aware that such a notion might be the craziest idea of all.

So why did I go crazy? The drugs had a lot to do with it. After 20 years of alcoholism, when I started getting "sober," I discovered psychedelics. Marijuana, LSD, mescaline, magic mushrooms—and what I thought was synthesized marijuana (THC), which turned out to be PCP, or angel dust.

Yet I knew many people who used a lot more of these same drugs than I did and did not go crazy. In the three years that I was crazy, except for the occasional joint, I would go months at a time without using any drugs at all. I was able to do this because I discovered a trick: to stop eating. Fasting was the greatest drug of all. I went for weeks at a time eating only symbolic meals: three raisins in the morning, for instance; maybe three raw cashews at night. I called these meals "minifasts."

My madness began with an idea I had late in the spring of '73, after I got hold of a half pound of the most powerful marijuana I had ever smoked. At the time I was spending most of my days at the alcoholism clinic in Cooper Square, shooting pool—or more accurately, waiting to shoot pool. There were always too many people signed up to play, so if you lost your game of eight ball, you had to sit and watch for an hour or so. I didn't mind; I was stoned most of the time.

It was during this period that I became obsessed with "English." The key to playing good pool is controlling the cue ball. And the way you do that is to put various kinds of English on it. There's reverse English, follow English, right- and left-hand English. You can also combine right-or left-hand English with follow or reverse English. English, the heart and soul of pool, gives the game a nearly magical quality.

But the most magical English of all is "body" English. A pool shooter makes his shot, and the target ball angles toward the intended pocket. But the shooter sees that the course the ball is taking is very slightly off—without a little help or luck, the ball may not go into the pocket. At nearly the very last moment, the shooter's body goes into a convulsive, twisting jerk—and the ball either goes into the pocket or it doesn't. Whether in pool, golf, roulette, or any other sport, body English has absolutely no effect.

I had practiced and watched body English all of my life, but now I was seeing it with fresh eyes. Why do we do it? Why is so much energy expended on a movement that can so clearly have no result? Was it a sort of prayer to the gods of moving objects, asking for their favor and assistance? Or was it just a convulsive act of desperation?

Body English is not a willful act. It is something done by the body, not the mind. It is more like a reflex than anything else. But it is not a re-

flex: put hand to stove, body jerks hand back before mind can send direct order. Body English, on the other hand, is a precise and controlled sequence of movements: there is a jerk and a twist. And the direction of the jerk and twist is predicated on the desired course of the moving object. If you want the object to alter its course to the right, you jerk and twist to the right; and you do the opposite if you want it to go to the left.

A precise and controlled movement, but one not controlled by the conscious mind. What's going on here?

Day after day I watched the other pool players. Some never used any body English at all. Others would use the barest trace of it: a slight movement of the head, a twist of the arm, a subtle turn of the torso. Still others gave it full rein: some of them moved so violently that people near them jumped back. The strangest thing was that nobody ever commented on even the most vigorous or comical manifestations of this peculiar action.

I could not believe there was no hidden purpose behind this phenomenon. My intuition told me that it was not for nothing: it was as if the physical self and some part of the mind knew that there were invisible threads connecting the body to the object in motion and that such a movement was a rational and practical response.

Sometime during that month of May in the year 1973, my imagination made a leap that was to lead me to revelation and to madness.

I asked myself, if body English were useless in this world, in what sort of world would it have a use? And the answer came to me: in a liquid world, body English could alter the course of objects that were moving just out of reach... if we lived under water, body English would be a natural mechanism to bring falling or floating objects within reach; a way of capturing food; a way of using the body's connection with its environment to help it do its work. Body English was remnant behavior. I knew then that, somehow, humankind had spent hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of years under the sea—the period of the biblical flood!

That pool table revelation was to lead directly to my first visit to Bellevue.

I lived, at the time, in a welfare hotel at the tip of a triangle formed by Christopher and Barrow streets in Greenwich Village. I had a corner room on the fifth floor—the only one with a private bathroom. I filled the tub with warm water, got into it, and practiced body English with bits of Ivory soap and other floating objects. I knew I was on to something.

I spent whole days and nights sitting in my swivel chair with my feet on the windowsill, looking out at the Hudson River and the lights of Hoboken. I slept no more than two or three hours at a time.

In my head I was rewriting the Book of Genesis.

I bought a cheap stereo and kept it tuned, day and night, to an all-music station. I loved Cat Stevens's "Morning Has Broken" and "Moonshadow." What really haunted me, though, was the saxophone solo in a song called "Stranger on the Shore." I thought that if I ever wrote my version of Genesis, I would title it "Stranger on the Shore."

I began to write things down. I wrote on scraps of paper, on napkins, on my hand; I filled several notebooks; I bought an old junk typewriter and tried to put some order to the flood of information that seemed to come out of nowhere. Was this what a vision was? My head was full of stuff that I didn't put in there! I bought Magic Markers and began scribbling on the walls. I wanted there to be a record if something happened to me. A couple of years later, during the last stage of my madness, when I was living in a storefront on Bleeker near the Bowery, I heard the wind rattling my plate glass window. I took all the written materials that I had

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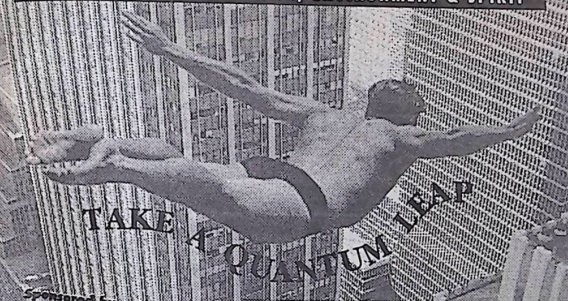
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saved—stacks of typescript, several boxes of papers, and notebooks—and dumped them outside my door and watched them fly away. I remember saying to myself: "Now, it's all 'Written on the Wind.'"

One scrap of paper survived. I have it tacked to a corkboard above my desk. It's a four-inch rectangle of yellowed paper on which I had typed in capitals:

KNOW THE IMPERATIVE THAT CAUSED LANGUAGE AND YOU'LL KNOW THE WHOLE HIDDEN HISTORY OF MANKIND!
DICK DAHL, 1973

I am sure there must be some significance to the shortening of my name, but at the time it just seemed less cumbersome.

As the summer of '73 was drawing to a close, my vision was pretty much complete. It may not have been quite the rewriting of the Book of Genesis that I had envisioned, but, all in all, I was certain it would shake up the world. The following is the short version:

STRANGER ON THE SHORE

I believe I can breathe water as if it air, into and out of my lungs; that everyone can; that in a past, past remembering, everyone did. At some point in prehistory, a tribe of protohumans developed the ability in their lungs to extract oxygen from water. They disappeared into the sea.

I believe we became human because of what went on out of sight of the world we know now. That we made a huge sea change. That we learned our upright carriage on the bottom of the sea; that we lost our fur coats as a result of total immersion, much

like whales and dolphins; that we developed a subcutaneous layer of fat to protect us from the cold (no other primate has one). Unlike the other mammals that returned to the sea, we did not need to rely on the surface air and therefore did not adapt for swimming and surfacing; instead we walked on the sea's bottom in negative buoyancy.

At first we lived on the shallow sea shelves where the sun's light dimly reached. Later we went into the abyss, into total darkness. And darkness was the imperative that gave birth to language.

We spent millions of years on the sea's bottom—a period remembered by all cultures only as the time of the Flood. Before the Flood we lived in innocence and harmony; after the Flood, in disharmony and struggle, with unsatisfied need and a yearning for a lost paradise.

The continents and islands of the earth were populated by peoples who emerged from the sea. Vast human migrations were made on the sea's floor, not on its surface. Why and when we emerged, I have no idea. But when we did reclaim the land, the protohumans who had not gone into the sea could not compete with those of us who had. It seems likely that they were killed and/or interbred out of existence. And perhaps not all humans emerged from the sea—some may be still be down there...

The central notion—that under certain circumstances humans might be able to breathe water—I might have dismissed out of hand, had it not been for something I had read a dozen years before.

It was in a newsmagazine, either Time or Newsweek. There was a photo of two small mammals—maybe a hamster and a guinea pig—on the bottom of a tank full of some liquid. The story said the animals were alive and well. They were somehow prepped, and the liquid was a

special concoction. A number of animals had been used. They ate; they slept; they frolicked in slo-mo. Some had survived several weeks in the tank and, after they were removed, had suffered no ill effects. Others had not survived entry.

What astonished me then, and stayed with me, was the fact that a mammal could breathe any kind of liquid—whether it was plain old water or some designer juice.

Years later, between episodes of madness, I searched New York Public Library microfilm files for the article without success.

III

It seemed evident that the only way to prove my vision was to demonstrate the act of breathing water. Standing out on the Morriston Street pier one day, I seriously considered taking the plunge there; just slipping into the green water and doing my stuff. I quickly decided, though, that what was needed was a more controlled test—with witnesses. Besides, in the '70s the Hudson was really a cesspool. Pillhead Don once said:

"There's so much shit in that river, even an atheist could walk on water."

For some reason I no longer remember, I felt I had to breathe water before the summer was over—in fact I felt a great pressure to do it on the last day of summer, September 21.

I spent most of that day at the clinic, shooting pool. At closing time I asked John C., a guy I had never seen before—or since—if he would come back to my hotel with me to witness a miracle. He said why not, he had nothing else to do.

In my room, John and I ate bread and grapes while the bathtub filled. At about eight

o'clock I gave John the addresses of some of my friends who lived in the Village. I had three \$10 bills in my wallet which I cut into thirds. I instructed John to give them to my friends so they would know I was serious; to ask them to come to my room within the hour.

After he left, I added salt to the tub—and a little sugar for good measure. I fiddled with the hot and cold, trying to get the water as close to body temperature as possible. The phrase "the shoes of the fisherman" suddenly occurred to me. I took off my sandals and threw them out the window. A fish-man needs no shoes, I decided.

When John returned, he told me my friends were not too friendly. Although several of them took the "tickets," one said I was "getting pretty weird"—that I should see a doctor.

It was just a few minutes before nine o'clock. I turned the volume of the radio to full blast—it was time for my baptism of fire and water, and I wanted maximum dramatic effect. I had decided that I had to breathe fire before breathing water—I needed to dry out the bronchi so that my lungs would be more welcoming of water. I unscrewed the bowl from a brass hash pipe, which left me with a three-inch tube. I put the tube to my lips, flicked on my lighter at the other end, and sucked in the flame.

When I began to submerge my head into the water, the lights and the radio went off and on three times. Three times I put my head down; three times I breathed in and filled my lungs with water. I believed I felt the earth shift. When I was done, I straightened up, looked at John, and realized that all he had seen was me dip my head in the water three times. As far as he could tell, I might have been doing nothing more than bobbing for make-believe apples.

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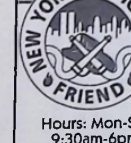


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Later, after John left, I went down to the bar on the ground floor of my hotel to shoot pool by myself. There was no doubt I had done an impossible thing: I had breathed water into and out of my lungs. I felt a great calm. I was certain that because of the rightness of my act, God would produce a wondrous sign. I knew that in the morning the sun would rise in the west to a world that was straightforward and honest. I believed that double-dealing and deviousness would be gone forever. I believed we would awake to a lowercase world where capital *Is* would disappear from typewriters and we would all love each other without ego.

I racked the balls and broke. I took joy in my skill in controlling and manipulating the cue ball: left-hand English, right-hand English, reverse English, follow English. The ball spun and danced and darted off in unlikely directions all over the table, and I suddenly realized that in my new straightforward world clever manipulation of the cue ball would not be either desirable or possible. I asked God for a dispensation: God, allow this pool table in this bar in this hotel on West Street, in Greenwich Village, New York, New York, on the morrow in our new honest and true world, to remain as it is, corrupt forever—a shrine to the old order. Amen.

I left the bar and returned to my room. There were a number of things I needed to do before I presented myself to the world. I would need some money, but all I had were a few dollars in change and the remnants of the \$10 bills. I didn't have any Scotch tape so I put the cut-up pieces in my wallet.

As I left my room that night, I left my door unlocked—in fact, I left the door ajar; I was to do this again on three different years in three dif-

ferent apartments. On each of these occasions, I ended up in Bellevue.

It was probably about midnight when I left the hotel. Earlier, when the power went off and on three times, I had decided that the nuclear plant at Indian Point had gone off-line and would never work again; that by morning all nuclear plants would cease reacting and would become monuments to an absurd age. I thought I'd better be prepared, so I stopped at the cigar store on Christopher and Seventh Avenue and bought a pack of Camels and a disposable flashlight. (Several weeks later I learned the real reason for the power interruptions: my next-door neighbor, disturbed by my radio blasting, went down the hall to the electrical box and flicked the switches to my room.)

I was on my way to the Bowery, but as I walked along Bleeker Street, east of Sixth Avenue, I decided to drop in at the Mills Tavern. It was a scuzzy bar, the kind I liked; you could get a small glass of sweet wine for 30 cents. There were only four customers at the bar.

I told the bartender that it was my birthday, to buy everyone a drink. After he set up the drinks, I paid for them with the three pieces of the \$10 bill. The bartender examined the pieces, then he looked at me—all six foot five, 150 pounds of me, bearded, hair flowing over my shoulders. I was wearing what I called my "blood of the lamb" shirt—red stripes on a white field—and my eyes, I'm sure, were totally mad. He took all this in and decided to say nothing. After he gave me my change, I watched him carefully Scotch-tape the bill together.

As I continued east on Bleeker, approaching Lafayette, I felt a surge of Power, of God's Power. Miracles were happening through me. On the corner was a pile of empty wine bottles.

I picked up a green glass pint bottle and pissed into it until it was nearly full. In the gutter I found a cap for it, screwed it tight, shook it up, and put it in my back pocket. I had full confidence that by the time I reached the Bowery, it would be turned into wine.

My plan was to collect as many drunks and derelicts as I could and lead them across town to the Hudson river at the Morton Street pier. There we would watch the sun coming up over New Jersey, the dawning of a new world.

As I walked up the Bowery to East 3rd Street, I recited my mantra, "The last shall become the first shall become the last shall . . ." I believed that the men of the Bowery belonged to a holy order; that the Bowery from 3rd Street to Canal was a hermitage and its inhabitants were seekers after Truth. Without knowing what they were doing, the men of the Bowery were mimicking the rites of ancient spiritual disciplines. Their poverty spoke for itself: on no skid row anywhere was denial of material values, effacement of the flesh, mutilation of the body so apparent as on the Bowery in New York City. On the Bowery, wine sores were stigmata; alms gathering was a Eucharist—"Gimme some bread, man, so I can get

me some wine." In no monastery were the monk's cells as cheerless and lacking in comfort as were the dormitories and cubicles of Bowery flophouses. This was my spiritual home; it was fitting that I come here first to spread the news.

At East 3rd Street I turned off the Bowery and walked by the men's shelter. Just beyond it was a vacant lot full of empty and broken wine bottles. I could see an old wino rummaging around looking for bottles that still had a little wine left in them.

I invited him to have a drink with me. As he made his way over, I took the wine bottle out of my back pocket and twisted off the cap. When I handed it to him, he took a swig—and then spat what had gone into his mouth out onto the street.

"That's piss," he said, giving the bottle back to me. I took a sip and had to agree with him; it was, without doubt, piss. I poured the rest out into the gutter, then I smashed the bottle. The wino went back to collecting corners and I walked back to the Bowery.

Seriously deflated that not all my miracles were working out as planned, I decided to abandon my notion of leading an army of winos to the Morton Street pier. It was getting late and there didn't seem to be many recruits about—at this hour, any Boweryman worth his salt would

Fasting was the greatest drug of all.

BlahBlah

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be safe in his flop, curled up with his jug.
I walked west on Great Jones Street across

Lafayette, still fuming that the piss had not become wine as it was supposed to. I crossed to the south side of the street, but my path was blocked by a new car. I was furious. What right did that car have, blocking a pedestrian crosswalk? I bounded up onto the hood and began jumping up and down. Then I tried—without success—to kick in the windshield. Finally, having taught the car a lesson, I got down onto the sidewalk, where my attention was caught by a dim light coming from behind the painted-over windows of a storefront. What were they ashamed of? What were they hiding behind that painted-over glass? I kicked in the glass door, then I kicked in one of the plate glass windows. I heard a scream, loud voices, a general commotion—thought I'd better get away from there pronto.

I continued west on Great Jones Street. Halfway down the next block, in the middle of the street, was an old black man in a wheelchair being pushed by a young white guy. The man in the chair, dressed in a jacket and a tie with a robe over his knecs,

hailed me to ask if I would have a drink with him. He produced a bottle of Johnnie Walker

My head was full of stuff that I didn't put in there!

and several plastic glasses and poured each of us a drink. While I was sipping my Scotch I became aware of something going on behind me. I turned to see a police car with flashing lights stopped where I had committed outrages against the new car and the storefront. Suddenly the cop car started moving in my direction. I went down to meet it and in no time at all I was sitting in the back seat on my way to the 9th precinct house.

On the way to the police station, I asked the cops if they had heard anything about the Indian Point reactor going offline. They didn't answer, but I noticed that they quickly looked at each other. I then asked if they didn't think that the crescent moon was in the wrong part of the sky. Again no answer, but did I detect a stiffening of their postures? I let it drop, but as they ushered me into the station house, I sensed from them a sort of awed respect.

While they were writing up their report on

me, another cop came over, glanced at me, and asked, "What's he being charged with?"

"Manslaughter," said the report-writing cop. After a long minute, he and his partner laughed. Later, they told me that a piece of glass from the window I had kicked in cut a little girl who was sleeping near by. They assured me it was a very minor cut and I probably would not be charged with anything. Shortly thereafter the van arrived and I was taken off to Bellevue.

There was a long wait in psychiatric emergency, where I amused the bored cops by standing on my head. I had been doing that a lot lately. It seemed to me that because we always looked at things the one accepted way, we were essentially blind two-thirds of the time. While I was viewing the emergency room from this fresh perspective, the intake psychiatrist came down the corridor to fetch me. He wore rimless glasses and a gray suit. I decided he was a jerk.

He asked if I knew why I was there. I told him of the events of the night. How I had become convinced that I could breathe water and, having done so, knew that the world would never again be as it was; how nuclear power and possibly all man-made electrical energy would vanish from the earth and—most wonderfully—the world would literally turn around and, in the morning, the sun would rise over the Hudson. He said that the earth "turning" is nothing new.

I said, "On its axis, no, but it is also turning on its antiaxis."

"What's an 'antiaxis'?"

"You know what I mean."

He told me that I was confused; that I had better stay here for a few days; that I was very agitated and he would give me something to relax me. Suddenly, I became very afraid. I had

given him this wonderful news and he was acting like I was crazy.

"You asshole," I screamed. "Why can't you believe in miracles, are you dead inside—have you no soul? What the fuck's wrong with you?"

I pulled the flashlight from my pocket and threw it at him; it missed his head by inches, hit the door, and clattered to the floor. He didn't even flinch. He opened the door and called the guards.

I awoke. I am lying on a gurney with the rails up. There is a sheet over me and under it I am naked and double crossed: my arms are crossed and tied to the rails; my legs, the same. An aide comes by and I ask her if I can be untied. She leaves and returns with a woman in a white jacket who says if I am good and promise to stay in bed I will be freed. The aide unties me and I find my Camels between my legs. I ask for a light and the aide produces a match. I take a deep drag and think it is the most wonderful cigarette I have ever had.

My bed is in a corridor with several others near a nurse's station. There are big windows on my right looking into wards flooded with sunlight from windows beyond. The sun has risen just past the horizon, and I can see, through the two sets of windows, the shining Hudson and the Jersey waterfront. . . . The miracle has happened! Yet, as I look around me, the patients in their beds, the aides in the corridor, the nurses in their station—none of them seem to have noticed that the sun has risen in the west. Then I remember, with a ghastly, sinking sensation, that I am in Bellevue, and Bellevue is on the East River with Long Island beyond. I feel an awful despair and turn my head away from the mocking sun. Then I see it—the miracle is intact.

good looks

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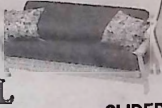
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Stenciled on the sheet that covers me is the name of the hospital: BETTERVUE HOSP. And I know that if Bellevue is on the East River, then Bettervue has to be on the Hudson.

I rise in my bed, I point out the window. I say, "Look everybody, it has happened—the sun is rising in the west! It's a whole new fucking world for everyone. . . . Oh God, it is so wonderful!"

No one seems to pay much attention to me. One patient looks at the sun, then looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. An aide lights a cigarette for a patient and they both look in my direction. It occurs to me that I am the only one who knows. The fact that the sun once rose in the east has been erased from every mind and document in the world.

After a while, a woman wearing a white coat and carrying a clipboard stops at my bed. "Are you Mr. Dahl?" she asks. I say I am.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Yes, I'm in Bettervue Hospital."

"Bettervue?" she asks. "Where do you get that?"

I show her the stencil on the top of the sheet. She looks at it, laughs, and folds the sheet over and the double Ts become double Ls and I'm back in Bellevue and nothing in the world has changed.

BETTERVUE HOSP.

The end, like the beginning, had a lot to do with chemistry.

On what turned out to be my last trip to Bellevue, in January of '76, I was given a new drug, Haldol (haloperidol).

Where with Thorazine I could either take it or pretend to, Haldol was a different matter altogether. Of its many possible side effects, I remember two in particular—constant drooling all over my shirt and severe tremors in my arms. In one way or another Haldol seemed to assault all of the body's functions. For me, its only saving grace was that I could doze off easily while the drug was working. But as it wore off, all of Haldol's evil side effects began to be felt. For the five days I was at Bellevue I was always first in line for the medication. The first thing I did after I was discharged was dump the pills they gave me and the prescription for more into the gutter on First Avenue.

Bellevue was no longer a safe haven, but a place to be feared.

At the urging of a friend I spent the next six months at a rehab in the Catskills. The place was run by a charismatic former prison guard and recovering alcoholic whose treatment program was a highly individualized version of Alcoholics Anonymous's 12-steps. I spent the rest of that winter with a crew of drunks, junkies, and loonies chipping ice off the road in front of the

establishment. When the snow was gone we cleared brush from around the buildings. Early weeks and then I took off, without permission, and came back to the city.

The first indication that I was no longer crazy was the return of my stutter. I can't honestly say that I welcomed it back.

In September I moved in to the apartment off Tompkins Square where, 19 years later, I still live.

For the next three years I continued to use marijuana. Every couple of months I would go on a four- or five-day drunk, but I stayed away from the heavier psychedelics that I knew would spin me off and away. I really hated not being crazy anymore, but I was too fearful to step off the edge again.

It was almost unbearable to

watch the vision that had sustained and energized me for three years begin to fall apart; to realize that I no longer had—indeed, had never had—a role in the shaping of history. I mourned the death of my madness like the loss of an irreplaceable loved one.

I mourned the death of my madness.

What saved me, I think, was the habit I had nurtured since leaving the Bowery in 1971 of going to daily AA meetings—even during those three crazy years, I went to meetings every day I wasn't locked up.

Early in August of 1979 I was finally able to stop using booze and marijuana. And with sobriety came the realization that I had better find some kind of work. Since 1973 I had been living on public assistance of one kind or another, and it seemed to me that as long as I was being paid for being sick, then being sick was my job, and I didn't want to work there anymore. Not long after that revelation I got a driver's license and by early 1980 I was driving a cab a couple of days a week on the streets of New York. Later that year I started a one-day-a-week job at *The Village Voice*. I have been here 15 years.

Bellevue Psychiatric has moved to a new building. The old building is still there and for several years was the home of an alcoholism rehabilitation unit. Two years ago, as a recovering alcoholic, I was asked to speak there.

Barnstein Psychiatric has been converted into an upscale apartment house with solar panels on the roof.

The alcoholism clinic in Cooper Square is now headquarters of The Village Voice. The area where the pool table was is now the Voice's finance department.

Donald Wilsen (Pillhead Don), who had stayed my friend through all of my craziness, was found dead in Abington Square one morning in the winter of '75-'76. Don took one pill too many.

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