

# Stories and Rituals in the Interstices between Utopias and Apocalypses

by *Adrian Ivakhiv*

1

We walked along the beach, shrouded in fog, with only the sound of the waves lapping gently against the shore giving us a sense of direction. We walked slowly: I, unable to see any shapes or forms in the dense mist, held your hand tightly; you sensed the way forward, each step a mystery into an abyss, each step an eternity, where all things swirled half-remembered and all memories shimmered with the safety of their concealment.

You spoke of the world whence you came. You spoke in a language I hardly remembered. Your world had been lit from within, it had burned with an inner awareness, so all-cognizant, so complete in its exposure of itself to itself that it longed for something beyond its own embrace. There, where omniscient memory mirrored itself from millions of space and light and time illumined galaxies, there perfection sought to disturb its own fullness. That world began to hunger for dynamism, it began to rage and to quake for an other to embrace and to strive for; choked by its enclosedness, it sent you here.

You described that world to me, that world which you said I'd already forgotten. (You said we'd arrived from it together.)

You told me of the blueprints and plans we'd been shown at the time of our arrival here: the divisions into political units, the borders patrolled by armed men, the blocs and junctures, the military testing zones and fences, the trade routes and airports and superhighways, the cities with inhabitants grouped atop each other in concrete encasings that block sun and sky, the subdivision of cities into residential, industrial, administrative, recreational zones, and beneath it all the hidden intestinal passages, the secret mechanics of civilization.

You recalled what we had learned about the inhabitants here, their beliefs and convictions, and about the other creatures with whom they shared their world's surface, about the increasing loss of habitable spaces, and about the physical conditions, the lengths of days and nights, the cycles of seasons and climatic change. We were warned to expect some surprises, changes and disruptions as their social orders adapted erratically and unwillingly to pressures they themselves had created. You recalled my reactions, my concern that the divided nature of this world might reflect a psychic division within its inhabitants. But we were assured that they had all come from the same place as we had, and had (like you said of me) forgotten this, only rarely, fragmentarily, seeing the shadowy angels of remembrance pass through their dimly-lit, fog-misted alley worlds.

Of all of this, I remembered little. (You explained that this was the usual course of events, this forgetting, this hollowing out of one's soul, consumed by the physical and emotional adhesion, the viscosity of this world onto its new arrivals.)

Walking further, I felt the light embraces of wavelets slipping between my toes and the sand on the shore.

2

Quick: descending  
falling forward:

oxygen surges through lungs  
so swiftly--chase breaths descending  
fall over atmospheric orbits, through grids and currents  
encircling great coloured globe below--dizzy whiteness  
rushing past  
colours flaring outwards--shoot across suns  
fall between solar winds: body pulsating dizzily  
being born

Quick: impressions rush through consciousness  
blurring burning speed--

what is this who is this twisting and twirling  
through space through clouds  
spiralling downwards through  
torrents, discharges--through currents  
absorbing emissions immersed in  
sheaths pattered woven around globe:

Now--bathed in light--heaviness breathing--convulsing  
breathlessly in heavy air--  
beating out--  
breathing out--



3

We breathe. Together.

Rhythmically, heaving. We expand and contract.

We breathe as one body. Each breath as one body.

We are stone, whose molecules have begun now to shimmer and vibrate. We are wood, so contained in our movement.

Expand and contract.

Whose molecules have begun now to move, and we know that we move, nothing more. We move as only we can, a solid geometry of mass set in motion.

We begin to feel in our motion. Our members push outwards and slowly become arms and legs. We are breathing in unison. We are beginning to rock. We sway, leaning forward then back. To one side then another. Expanding contracting. We sway, breath together.

We move as we know; we know what we must; we feel what we are with one body, exhaling.

We take air, it fills us: release all in unison, one slow total motion.



4

*Human history is the history of domestication, the history of the gradual replacement of the world with its simulation.*

*In our relationship with the world, its primary elements--earth, air, and water--did not need to be domesticated; their domestication to the biosphere took place well before our arrival. It was fire that we needed to domesticate, to steal from the gods and to swallow into our own domain, so that its transformative power would become ours, our technical genius, harnessed for the transmutation of minerals, their purification, the creation of alloys: ultimately for the creation of our new world.*

*Fire is the element of transformation. Unlike water, which dissolves all into the semen of living potency, fire melts bodies and delivers up the soulless ash of their substance, liberating their essence to roam ghostlike across the plains of charred landscapes. Fire's potency is contained by the very walls of civilized life, and it is from our very first moment that we begin to consolidate our control over its demons, gently at first, but knowing in our depths that the project is temporary and doomed to fail . . .*

5

Still walking, you recalled those first days, days full of patient anticipation. I, as always, didn't remember them. I only remembered the first glance I had of you: I was sure I had seen you somewhere, perhaps in a crowd, and you had illumined a memory of long ago, of someone (I thought).

Days passed, and the uncertainty left me. It did not seem to matter. We passed the time together: days and nights. We walked, I remembered, through a park, the oasis of a city, and noticed squirrels holding their breaths, probing our eyes, as if to measure our intentions... One day, in a planetarium, we surveyed the skies like exiles seeking their distant homeland. Though you said nothing, the expression on your face filled me with an indefinable longing, and with a happiness that we were together then... We sat in the cafes of a large city and observed the ceaseless tides of life spiralling around us... I remember a museum in New York City, the one where the great carcass of a whale floats in the air shrouded in the comforting blue light amidst the curved walls of the hall... Or the ethereal mountains of Vermont on an early spring morning, dew moistening our lips and eyes as we stepped out into the morning newborn...

You reminded me of these times and places we had met, photographs of some past that may have been mine, though I could not know for sure. Your words wove themselves into the crystal swirls of the fog, harmonized with the wash of the waves caressing the shore.

For as long as any of us could remember, this branch had always been our home. Everything here had its order: from the morning sun (obscured, sometimes, by clouds or rain) to the voices below, telling us how to do this or that, and alerting us of dangers or of the arrival of gods and kin. Sometimes we would give chase to the little creatures (in earnest), or to each other playfully; and then we would move into our dance, our song. We lived our song, and sang as we knew, according to our sense of what was right at any time. But always we returned to our nests. Our tree was the center of all, and everything here had its place: the earth and grass below, the sun and sky above. The tree surrounded by space, and between the branches, sometimes, us.

It was at first not easy for us to understand, but the elders revealed one day that our tree was changing, it was growing into something different, they said, and there were appearing unexpected new twists and turns in its branches, labyrinths of them, and new insects and tiny animals. Our elders weren't sure how to interpret these changes, but they felt it was of greater importance than we could know.

We weren't aware that one day our tree would meet and intertwine with others. We did not know that to the north there were large mountains, and behind them, expansive, treeless deserts. We knew nothing of the endless oceans, on which sailed ships from distant lands, where civilizations appeared and disappeared. We knew nothing of what the ships would bring, and of what they would take from us. And yet we felt a sense of preparation, and we accepted the changes as they came.

*Utopia = u-topos: no-place. A place imagined, not existing. Our minds are forever imagining utopian fictions, sputtering out endless reams of daydream fantasies, artificial communities of contentment. Our daily forgetfulness generates utopias that are self-centered, superficial, trivial. When these, disturbed by groundswells of threatened emotion, break from their accustomed paths, they mutate, becoming fuel for revolutionary movements, fanaticisms. Pursued by the shadows disturbing our utopian fictions, we resort to great cleansings, purifications, smearing our responsibility out into the cosmos.*

*The first of these impulses compels us to pursue those glimpses of allowable utopia; the second coerces us into its karmic cycles of bloodletting. Both arise out of a partial recognition of beauty. We, creatures unnaturally sensitive to beauty, find it unbearable to live with the tension of a universe so rich with magnificence, which we, finite creatures, cannot contain within ourselves, cannot consume into the costumes of identity we construct as shields against the ceaseless pressure of life's ambiguity.*

*Between the polarized pulse of utopia and apocalypse, this current that presses forward history's march, there are eddies of light, little pockets of air, tiny yet immeasurable rises that momentarily illuminate all, then slip out of the embraces of explanations.*



You stand, surrounded on all sides by sand. Before you stands a circle of mirrors. As you observe, their metal glows as if lit by flame, and each becomes for you a window.

In the first you see a fool. A marionette. The wheels of fortune spin by, and the fool lifts his first foot forward in blessed unawareness of the currents that carry him and the winds that blow him in all directions.

In the second - the moon. Reflecting the sun, he sends light into the darkness below. Beneath it, two lovers dissolve into each other.

In the third - apocalypse. A world existing side by side with ours, always on the threshold of chaos. The tower in the moment of its falling. Thunders of confusion echo through eternity.

In the fourth - a temple. Here you find a place to rest. Here the waves of chance harmonize. Here you look back onto the open wounds of the road behind you. But before you can sink into the numbness of shelter, something compels you forward, and you move on.

In the fifth - the devil. Appearing in many guises. Idols from the past, mirrors of your own inflated selves, the riches you could have had and the empires yours to build. Here you battle with your slavery. Losing, in the end, you see his face - it is you. And all fear vanishes.

In the sixth - a saint. An elderly traveller who for many years traversed his lonely and dangerous path and now gives freely of his grace to all who ask of it. (He reminds you of yourself in your youth.)

In the seventh - wisdom. An old woman sits weaving at a loom. Her loom is the heavens, with their net of constellations and eternal correspondences, dynamic interrelationships, forever twisting and turning like the waves of the sea, ever changing, ever transforming.

You pass through from one station to the next, or maybe through several at once. Each burns at its own rate, each subsumes you within its alchemical fire. They burn through days and nights. They burn through ages.

We walked on. The swollen waves now thundered against the shore and washed away all traces of our footsteps and of our thoughts and words and feelings, crashed around us swooshing and sliding from left to right and right to left, this ceaseless immensity, and we listened, and we spoke to each other, wordlessly. I felt the beat of your heart, irregular, and the rhythm of your breath, shorter now, as you panted, and coughed, as had become your custom these past days, though the lightness of your soul and your calm quietude exuded a warmth that told me that it did not matter, that everything was as it must and as it should be, and that it was good. And yet, I wondered, and yet, what if you left me, far away to some vast unknown, or to this land you spoke of, and I listened to you not knowing if these were just stories you told me to calm my agony. Your coughing stuck in my throat and choked me with a helplessness, like a dreamer pursued by assailants, who cannot run, whose body will not obey him.

And I knew that this would pass, as everything passes, as everything has always, somehow, continued. And there was a bittersweet glow extending from our bodies, as if we stood at the end of something and looked back onto its beginning, when we had entered into this world, this newly-chosen home of ours.

The roots of our trees have intertwined, they have stumbled into each other's heaviness and woven thick collisions under the ground: like the buildings of a city fused thickly by their networks of electrical cable and sewer and traffic pipeline and alleys reserved for ghosts and refuse. (And beasts.) The city has its web of constructions and technical labyrinths that pound out its lifeblood through criss-crossed corridors. It is a great living body: a devouring Machine into whose embrace we have thrown ourselves by our birth or by some other accident. (Our existence is woven collectively into a karmic cloth made heavy by the debts of countless forebears, and all of us and our bodies and worlds co-responsible, parasitically-dependent corporate mediators of the Great Machine's will: miraculously, we feed on others, as others feed on us.)

There are those who have left the Machine: in another time and place, they await the return of the icebergs. They set aside ample reserves of life's gifts into deep chambers. They encode their wisdom into stories and rituals and teach them to their children. They wait patiently, hoping that the destruction is limited...

Life thrusts its slithering body ever forward around itself, coils like the serpent devouring his own tail. At one end birth, at the other - death, the eternal uroboros twists and winds its flesh and blood, redigesting matter and mind and planet surface and civilizations, extinguishing the old, and making room for its successor.

The great man lies, snake-bitten, dying.

In other times and places - it is a wise matriarch; or a girl with the devil in her eyes, burning at the stake. Or maybe it is a king, rattling the golden chains of his fading power. In another instance it is a person unnoticed, or one whose day has long passed, now forgotten by all.

Civilization lies, burning.

The great man has been left alone, adrift on a floe of ice, surrounded by sea. And silence.

(In the same moment, a tiny island emerges out of the water's surface into its first gleaming ray of sunlight; a volcano erupts swallowing the population of an isle; a hundred are born, and wars toll their thousands.)

I can see, far off in the sky, the reflection of a great sea. From its surface rise yellow and scarlet vapours. Above it great sails hang from threads in the clouds; they rotate slowly from the wind. I see ships of many colours sailing there, and between them doves circle excitedly. In the middle of it all, like a tornado, a great wooden axis is turning, and the world revolves slowly around it: the farther away from the center, the slower it turns. From a distance I hear the wailing of sirens, from a distance I hear the cackle and moaning of lepers, stationed on some island to watch and keep count of the rotations of the world.

The waves have enveloped us, they surge onto us from all sides...

This is not the place where all memory resides, but rather it is the place where memory forgets itself and is swallowed up into eternity. Outside, memory had been a distinct possibility to which we had struggled. Here, the conscious individuality disappears into the endlessness of all memory...

Subsumed and overtaken now by water, immersed in the eternal ocean, which is at once the repository of all knowledge and the murky stream of all forgetting: knowledge, because it existed before the awakening of individuality; forgetting, because each temporarily illuminated silhouette of Being returns always here and loses itself...

This has always been our home. Here, all identity and solidity, all feeling and desire, passion and will, knowledge and understanding, flow into each other and dissolve into their source...

And emerge again... And disappear again...

Expanding and contracting...

Through days and through nights... Through ages...

And the rhythmic sea sways in its eternal immensity... The slow breath of aeons... Awakening and returning to its dream... The rising and the falling... The surging forth and the releasing... The swaying of trees in the wind... The burning desire and the eternal return... The crystal explosions and the long, warm silences...




---

*Adrian Ivakhiv plays and composes music, writes, travels, and periodically interrupts these activities to "do" degrees in Environmental Studies at York University (previously, a Master's; presently, a Ph.D.).*

---