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St. John's Monkey Hour

An excerpt from *Art and Technology*
By Michael Aro

You start by waking up. It is hard. It is always hard at first. It is the middle of the night. Perhaps it is afternoon. It is difficult to tell. You tell me. There are no windows where we are. Maybe there are, although I am sure there are not. It is hard to remember. The place where you would go to remember is already occupied by another thing. The thing you always do to make things less hard, so you can go back to sleep, at least for a little while. It only works once. Sometimes twice. If you do it too often, you will hurt yourself. Where is my gift basket with the apples, bread and olives in it? I ask myself in my dream. It was right at my fingertips the last time I looked. I like that basket. It is made of plastic and is smooth on the inside as only a plastic basket can be. It is someone's old Easter basket. It has been recycled as a gift to me or someone like me. I am sure of it. It is a form of penance not to be able to find it. I am not blind. It is less that I am blind than that I cannot see to do anything in this strange darkness, a darkness arrived at, not through an absence of light, but through the addition of something new, mixed together with light and with itself, the two things making it more and more difficult to see anything at all as the galaxies grow dimmer and farther apart. Maybe there never was a basket. Did I eat bad bread instead? Something moldy perhaps, leftovers from an earlier gift? It would not be the first time it happened. It would not be the first time it happened and I or someone else wrote about it. A religious and totally unexpected turn of events has occurred. There is a religious event here somewhere. It is hiding. The fact that I cannot see it does not mean that it is not hiding. There is no other explanation. I say, Come here, but it will not come. It needs time. But there is no time. At least, not yet. Not for an event such as this. It does not even know what it is waiting for. Without time, it has no way of knowing anything. I am the only one willing to tell it what it is and it will not listen to me. It has never even heard of me. Me or anyone else I know or have heard of. From a certain point it all makes sense as long as you remember not to move too far away from said point. The further you move, the more the sense fades into non-sense along with everything else. That is always a good time to move to the next point. Begin again. Over and over. An infinity of random points, each of them surrounded on all sides by friends and relatives. They tell each other, This will all make sense soon. On and off. Above and below ground. Soon, very soon, it will become holy. You will see. We will all see.

There are three things to pay attention to in this new century. One is the market. The free market for attractors. Between, above and below atoms and molecules with their four forces, everything else is wanting, children and their toys, men and women, men and men, women and women, women and men, all the tragicomic faces of the five elements. The fire is in the mind and the loins are in the fire. The big brain and the little brain wrestle and sweat together in the game room in front of the TV. It is hard to pay attention to everything at once.

After so many years the solitude wears thin. It desires to be as specific as possible. Standing side by side, or perhaps facing each other, are two men. One of them has a long robe and sandals, something on his head. The other has something expensive on his wrist, or is it around his neck? They belong together, that one thing is certain. One is the father of the other. They walk alongside each other down one hill and up another. There is a woman with her face covered. The smell of cinnamon surrounds her. She is waiting for them in the turn of the road. She offers herself to them. She takes money and a keepsake from one of them for her favors. A promise is a promise after all. She intends to make him keep his promise, a promise he has already broken. Something for nothing. Where is the profit in this? What does that even mean? Everyone does this. Everyone says this. How different from a dream this is, this walking along the road with my father, or is it my son, discussing the many ways in which societies differ? How some of them have one man, almost never a woman, at the top, giving directions, making history and if not history at least books, newspapers, magazines, television, movies and money in their own image, the image of the great man with a name that someone is bound to remember sooner or later. How he dressed in such and such a way. How he carried himself. What he said. Perhaps he had a pet of some sort that he was fond of and he took with him everywhere, knowing that the right animal is the perfect image of compassion and that people will forgive almost anything for the sake of one's pet. Not an elephant or an alligator or a hamster, but a dog of some sort, a Scottish Terrier perhaps, or a German Sheppard. Given this, what other societies are even possible? Whatever they may be, whatever their intentions, they always come to this, a man and his dog, loyal, steadfast, even after death refusing to leave his master's side. That is the world of men, says my father to me as we walk up one hill and down another, alongside the rocky beach where you can see the white crests of waves lapping the shore, phosphorescent in the gloaming. Identity management is critical at times like this. There are so many to choose from, there is no other remedy than to keep a list in your pocket, and if not your pocket, at least in your sock, under your heel inside your shoe, where no one will think to look if they frisk you, searching for valuables. So many images come to mind it is impossible to list them all. Intent is everything. Do you try to make yourself as unpalatable as possible in an effort to eat or not be eaten, to present yourself in the form of leaves, twigs, tree bark, stones and dirt, or do you mimic something utterly desirable, the most valuable thing in the world, a diamond, a koan on the head of a dead cat, or even an angel, in order to attract your prey? I picture in my mind an insect of the order Neuroptera, eating aphids at a languorous pace, covered with detritus of every sort, a house in a good neighborhood, a car, two cars, one of them an SUV, good credit, a club membership, investments, a genealogy reaching as far back as church and

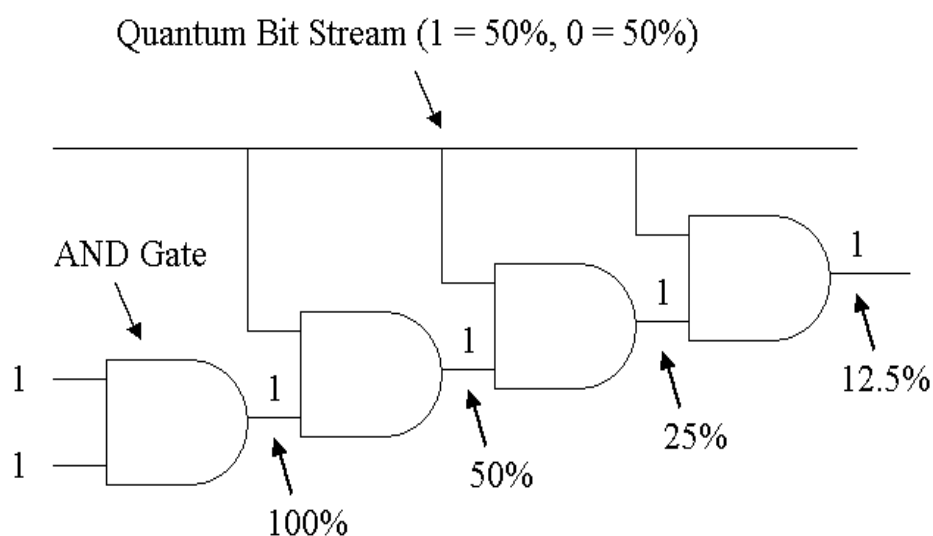
government records will allow, the right DNA, an education, a profession or occupation with notable prefix or suffix, a six-figure income, a stable marriage, the right friends, good looks and a sunny disposition. I am not bitter, although I have even been told on several occasions I taste of almonds. I look in the mirror. There is no mirror, so I look in the water, not the froth at the edge of the sand, but the calm of a nearby tide pool. In the shallow darkness I imagine my reflection. In my mind an image stares back at me, filled with curiosity, one eye open, one eye squinting, its mouth gaping a little. The obvious keen intelligence in its face could easily be confused with that type of idiocy whose chief symptom is the tendency to focus with such harmonic intensity on a single thing that it often forgets to close its mouth in time to stop the drool from escaping down its chin. There is a mole on its face, with several long hairs growing out in an arc like the long leaves of certain desert grasses, or the multi-colored filigrees that emanate from fireworks displays. Although I am not Mandarin, I must admit they are magnificent. They are not to be trimmed, or plucked away, but admired, in a quite, studious way by some, erotically by others. The mole is a planet with its own orbit, with a landscape not unlike that of the dark side of the moon. Gravity can be trusted to keep it well within the larger sphere of one eye and a nose that is, to say the least, august, pedimental, fit to crown the temple of a Roman emperor, a nose through which only the elect might enter the inner chambers. I will stop there. I am not proud. I am, in fact, humble, although I try to be objective both in my observations and in my sympathy for those who, like myself, choose to see their own true nature, not in a mirror, but in mind. I myself have no mind. I am nobody, no one, for I have heard God's voice and know my fate, to struggle constantly with myself, my pride, because of it. It is because I am humble, especially for the sake of others, and proud for the sake of stupidity, that I do what I can to put the best possible face on things. Where is the Other, the one who was standing near to me only a moment before? I say this in the full knowledge that I am being hierarchical in my pursuit of the facts. The Other is sitting on a rock nearby, smoking a cigarette. The Other is picking its nose and checking the tip of its finger intermittently. I love the Other and the Other loves me. At the very least, we are friends. I would like to think I would gladly sacrifice myself for its well being, but I know from experience that I am not capable of stepping between it and a stranger, especially when it has thrown a drink, still inside the glass, at the stranger's lap in a strange bar in a strange city. I am, however, capable of accompanying it headfirst into the street afterwards. That has some virtue, surely. I attribute the behavior on both our parts to dehydration. We never talk about it. We do not talk much about anything. We confine ourselves to gestures, sensations and intimations on the two. Intimations on the cigarette, or the tip of the Other's finger or the finger's potentially exotic cargo, for example. The real distinction between myself and the Other is that I

can never tell when I am boring, yet I can always tell when the Other is boring. The moment it is boring, it disappears from view. Like a stone passing through the surface of a pool, I have either to content myself with the ripples that remain or turn my attention away entirely, towards some other fascination. Right now I am looking at the night sky, or is it the ceiling, and thinking about the long panorama of human history that has preceded me, the high thoughts, the dreams and ambitions of those many people who with their last breath exclaimed, What time is it?, or, It hurts, or, I'm scared, or Don't forget to . . ., and so forth and so on. That is the real source of history, the simple, daily journey into whatever long night we all come to share, not as an Other but as ourselves. That is the true measure of my empathy. I want to walk in my friend's shoes, for I have none. That is something we could share. We could take turns wearing them. We could wear one shoe each. We could alternate. I could wear the left shoe for awhile and then the right. I would rather have them both, but that is unlikely. Our feet are not even within two sizes of each other. That is no matter. I want them. I could try to take them by force. I must be careful even thinking such thoughts, for if my friend suspects this, my friend, my beloved Other, may peremptorily strike me down, unconscious even, while I am at my most vulnerable, sleeping, or worse, squatting behind some reeds, concentrating on my bowels. Maybe that is what my friend is seeing on the tip of its finger. My selfishness, my greed and who knows how many other failings, both in character and logic. Get on with it, I tell myself. With what? a voice answers into my other ear. You know what, the purpose of our disputation, for it has some purpose, and if it does not, then that will be its purpose. We will take a vote once we are done. To begin with, I do not hate the French. It is not entirely accidental that they placed the Little Prince on their money. I adore them for that. They have taken relational attribution to its logical and terminal conclusion. Everything is random in its relation to everything else. Every statement, declarative or not, can be deconstructed, not only into a genealogy of language, which is boring, but also of politics, which is also boring. If it were not for this simple fact, I do not think I would have anything left to say. I would be entirely without philosophy, certain of nothing. How do I know these things? I have seen them in my dreams. I have seen, for example, a bicycle. In one country I know of there are almost as many bicycles as people, since the majority of people do not have cars and would rather roll than walk their way to wherever it is they are going. In another, imaginary country, a lost continent actually, bicycles are very rare, since the people in that country live both on and under the water. In my country there are fewer bicycles than in the first country and more than in the second, one of them the lost bicycle of my lost childhood, blue, to which I attached a parachute, rolled up tightly and held by a string as I peddled hard as I could, hoping to simulate a dragster. Instead, I simulated a bicycle wreck as the parachute opened and the bicycle

stopped and I did not, and the bicycle and I flipped end over end together in a spectacle of hubris, physics and humility. I say humility, for it was there I learned the physical limitations of my testicle. I would like to say that it still serves a masculine purpose, that I have seen it, well preserved and on display in a museum, or that it has found its way to a sacred reliquary somewhere, or that it was dried out, ground to powder and put into an amulet or charm to sooth a grieving heart. I will say none of these things, for to be true to my beliefs and my rectum, both packed tight with irony, I must confine myself to this one simple statement -- I love language. It is language that has given me the chapter titles for my Book of Man, an exegetic monograph subtitled, I Am Not Feeling Myself, Lately: 1) Identity's Self-Identity, 2) Body, Mind and Soul, 3) Physical Identity, 4) Virtual Identity, 5) Analytic Identity, 6) Transactional Identity, 7) Artificial Persons (Profiles and Proxies), 8) Schizophrenia, 9) Love and Death. I find it much easier to list the chapter titles than to write the book.

The night sky is hieratic. In it I can see letters and symbols of every color, written with a hand well-practiced in calligraphy. They surround a red moon, a harvest moon, in ever larger concentric circles, overlapping each other, filling all of space with their text. I cannot understand any of it, so I will have to make something up. I kneel down for no other purpose than to feel the sand beneath my hands. I pick up some of it, pinched like salt between my fingers and distribute it evenly over the palm of my other hand. I try to count each grain by wetting a fingertip and touching it first to the sand in my palm and then to my tongue where I count the grains before I spit them out, repeat the process. At some point, I get a single grain caught in my teeth and lose count. It is a stupid, futile plan and not the first time I have failed in it. I had hoped to count the number of grains of sand in a pinch, use that number to calculate the number of grains of sand on the beach and use that number as a way of remembering my having been here at all, beneath this night sky or ceiling, filled with its beautiful, textual light. There must be a better way. I reach into my pocket for something to pick the sand out of my teeth with and find a folded up piece of paper. I do not remember this piece of paper. Where did it come from? Did I steal it from the pocket of a drunken sailor in an alleyway? Did I rip it from a library book? Perhaps I just invented it. Yes, it is an invention and since I cannot read it in the dark I will have to invent it all over again. I will call it, A System and Method for the Creation of Quantum Digital Logic. It will have purely random events as one form of input and traditional, fully deterministic binary signals as the other. The logic gates themselves, AND, OR and NOT, will be arranged in various combinations until they are able to provide true random probability with any degree of precision. The result will be a hybrid quantum/digital logic. My invention has a single picture on it that looks very much like a picture I have seen in another dream, a dream in which a man showed me this picture and when

I asked what it meant in practical terms said, What does this mean in practical terms? It means it is possible to include a fundamental principle of quantum physics, random probability, in the construction of well-formed statements in any and all languages, both human and computer. It means that quantum events exist at all levels of reality. It means that language becomes the virtual image of the world, a universal poetry for the never ending creation of metaphor. It means that hierarchy and equality are the two poles or dominant countervailing forces within the social order and will always and forever seek equilibrium or else be in conflict, whichever way you want to look at it. Having said that, he bought me a cup of coffee and as we sat outside the bookstore where I had just made his acquaintance finally admitted, I am not sure what it means. The picture on the paper looks like this:



This is the means, the machine, by which I will recover my lost childhood. It is a better thing than memory. For my part, memory is no more than a history of what is best or bothering me at the moment, in turn a concatenation of mostly pleasant thoughts. Please do not ask me to remember them for you, even as an example, or to prove that I ever had them in the first place. Remember them for yourself. Remember that such distinctions are raised

from the dead in order to be dismembered. Remember also that the ability to do such a thing is no great privilege. A postmodern poet said something similar, I think, or would have, if there were such a thing as postmodernism. Modernism, with or without a post, is just another word for the act of trying to do something that captures the act of moving, not from the past into the present, but from the present into the present. It is not as if the past never happened or the future never will. It is that the present is that point at which all things converge. The question of time is finished. Time, the most relative of all things, permits us nothing. We permit time. No longer the end of History, the present is the beginning of memory, of recognition and of choice. It is not possible to observe any new thing without an act of memory. It is also not possible to act on our observations without making up, out of thin air, the next moment, and the one after that, and the one after that, as all possibilities collapse again and again into the certainty of knowing one thing and not another, seeing one thing and not another, choosing one thing and not another. It is this combination of memory and desire, of pulling the next moment out of nothing and nowhere that we call free will, aka modernism. And if modernism is free will, what is postmodernism? More free will.

Who is responsible for all this free will? I blame the patriarchy. No. Wait. I blame the matriarchy. . . . Now that I think about it, I blame them both.

I need a fresh start, but how? I began with a room, as does everyone else. A room, a knock at the door, and the next thing you know, there you are. But things have changed since then. These days I desire something with a sweet savor, not for myself of course. For a friend, always for a friend. My friend is languorous, lying on a divan, clothed in robes and bare feet, reaching over to dip fingers into honey and leave them there as if confusing the honey bowl for the water bowl, in which float rose petals for the girls and mint leaves for the boys. I feel obliged to drink my water bowl, filled as it is with rose petals, if only to save my friend the embarrassment of having to admit a serious mistake in table manners, the mistake of not knowing the left hand from the right. Not stopping there, I reach to drink the water bowls of those to either side of me, even though the one to my left has already dipped its fingers and the one to my right appears to be dipping its napkin in and using it to clean out its ears. I have so many associations of so many people with so many smells, tastes, sounds and textures that even this adds nothing to my repertoire. I have gone so far as to compile a book of people, a Chinese menu, expressing in finite terms the variety of human possibilities. I would like to think that more than this is possible, but people seem to prefer it, to insist on it. Excuse me, what time is it? one will say. Another, What do you think about last weekend's game? Still another, You need to diversify if you expect to see any reasonable rate of return in this market. I do not fault them for it. In fact, it makes me love them more. What else is there to

do in this life, and how am I any different from the rest? That is what I think as I gulp down the nearest bowl of water, laced with the smell of mint leaves and bitter almonds. Do not pity me. I am the better for it. Like Mithridates, such lifelong habits as these protect me from poisons and keep me safe from the culinary designs of my enemies, even those who do not think themselves my enemies, my friends. It is not their fault I feel this way. It is no one's fault I find myself imprisoned on this island, this rocky hill with its little house, its beaches of pebbles and sand, bound on the one side by water and on the other by grasses and reeds. Worse things than this have happened. I hear about them all the time. I am blessed and know it and, except in times of depression, anxiety, histrionics and fear, grateful for my home, my surroundings and my lot in life. A fly is buzzing in my ear. I take it as an omen. A fly means worms are nearby. Worms are always nearby, waiting patiently. They are little bodhisattvas, giving themselves again and again, unconsciously and selflessly, to the greater good. Guileless, filled with irony, their machinations crank the wheel of life endlessly in a single forward direction, like a clock or corkscrew. As comfortable on a pile of shit or inside a dead animal as underneath emerald leaves, bright, blossoming flowers and pastel butterflies, they clock in and clock out, dutifully observing the company rules, never complaining. They are functionalists, through and through. They have no interest in structural economics, conflict theory or religious studies. There is something in my hand. Perhaps I have caught a fly. It is a piece of paper. Not the same piece of paper as before. It has something written on it that I cannot quite make out, since I cannot see in the dark. I ask the person next to me to read it for me. They whisper in my ear, I love you. What was that? Could you repeat that? I said, I love you. I am speechless. Someone loves me. I need time to think. For one, I am alone. Perhaps not. For another, whose hand is that in my lap? Is it mine? I cannot tell. Is it the hand of the one who loves me, or someone else? Is there a third party involved already? Am I engaged in a ménage à trois, or is a jealous outsider trying to come between me and my new love? Shouldn't there be some lips around here somewhere? I have nothing but questions. Smells of frankincense and sandalwood fill the room. Pheromones no doubt. I hear poets chanting in a dozen languages. I cannot concentrate. I can barely concatenate. You would think I had learned my lesson, that I would know better than to try and write it down. Like a person with a severe memory or monetary disorder, I repeatedly scribble down all the things I think I know, hoping to use the words at some later time as currency, to exchange them for the memory of other things, things that I have seen and done for instance, or think I have, or wish I had, hoping not to have left anything out.

You always leave something out.