

‘O Mother, I have no one else to blame:

Alas! I sink in the well these very hands have dug.

With the six passions for my spade,

I dug a pit in the sacred land of earth;

And now the dark waters of death gush forth!

How can I save myself, O my Redeemer?

‘Surely I have been my own enemy;

How can I now ward off this dark water of death?

Behold, the waters rise to my chest!

How can I save myself? O Mother, save me!

Thou art my only Refuge; with Thy protecting glance

Take me across to the other shore of the world.’

-- The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna

*Cover illustration: Portion of 'Mother Goddess Kali'
by Jennifer Jacklin, acrylic on canvas, 1999.*

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‘The soul that picks and pries at itself in the isolation of its own dull self analysis arrives at a self consciousness that is a torment and a disfigurement of our whole personality.

‘When we look inward and examine our psychological conscience, our vision ends in ourselves. We become aware of our feelings, our inward activity, our thoughts, our judgments and our desires. It is not healthy to be too constantly aware of all these things. Perpetual self examination gives an overanxious attention to movements that should remain instinctive and unobserved. When we attend too much to ourselves, our activity becomes cramped and stumbling. We get so much in our own way that we soon paralyze ourselves completely and become unable to act as normal human beings.’

--- Thomas Merton

‘Above the pitch, out of tune, and off the hinges.’

--- Francois Rabelais, the son of a hemp farmer, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book IV, Chap. XIX.

‘Nothing angered and mortified me so much as the Queen’s dwarf.’

--- *tales from the tattva tower*

prologue
Prenatal ladle

I am. This much is ascertained. And I, obviously, am conscious that I am. I have, in fact, always been. This, too, is obvious. There is nothing in me or about me which is incomplete; there is nothing to be desired. This is what it is like, simply, *to be*. There is no knowledge, wisdom, or understanding I am without. There is nothing I need, nothing I want, for I have everything, *I am* everything. There is tremendous strength in my very being, tremendous peace and contentment and fulfillment. I am wise. I know I have traveled far to exist as I am; yet, I know, somehow, that I have not had to go anywhere at all to become fully conscious. I am without fear, without apprehension, and whole.

Words are not a part of my realm. The experience of my being is direct. It is pure consciousness, a consciousness that knows only itself.

The arrival at *I am* was like awakening from a deep, peaceful sleep, but without any remnant of a transition, without a moment during which a residue of the previous state was perceived to remain, like stiffness in the joints, a funny taste in the mouth or fuzziness in the mind. All these current suppositions about the nature of myself and my existence are taking place in some future time, of course, a time outside, a later time when I am free to ponder these first direct experiences. Here is the Mobius strip of my life-space-time continuum, conceived in love, yet beginning and ending in chaos. I don't see anything, nor do I feel anything. I have no awareness of a body. This is pure awareness, and this is pure, unadulterated bliss. It is not dark, although, as I have said, I do not see anything. Perhaps my eyes do not function; what makes me think I even *have* eyes? Perhaps it is just too dark. It is not hot, nor cold, neither wet nor dry. It is not night nor day, nor do I really know anything about the difference between night and day. Time, as such, is a foreign concept to me, ridiculous really. For I have always been.

I feel extremely safe, extremely comfortable. I could go on like this forever. In fact, as things progress, I definitely feel something like a desire. I desire...to remain just as I am. I would like it if conditions could remain static. Ironically, just then, I faintly become aware of a certain periodicity, I begin to fathom the necessity of linear movement of some sort. In this way, I begin to posit, intuit and ultimately

perceive the existence of...*time*. Now things seem to be moving along minutely, not in space, but in time. I sleep endlessly, during which time I know nothing of the state of consciousness I took for granted previously. But it can hardly be called sleep. It seems more like a long forgetting of my essential nature.

What seems like substantial gaps now begin to emerge in my life span. There, you can see it dawning upon me just by my choice of words. *My life span*. Finite. And the personal possessive pronouns have started to slip in...*MY*. It is a subtle distinction, to be sure. At the beginning, it was simply I. I am. Now I seem to have the notion of possession, of having something. A life. I am alive. This is *my* life. What does this portend?

A body. Yes. Yes. I definitely must have a body. I have a body, but I am not my body. What a strange metamorphosis! How shall I ascertain the validity of this theory? I will try to move an appendage. I will attempt to move this body of mine about. There. I seem to have accomplished some movement. It seems futile, though, rather odd and meaningless.

There is a taste of something. I sense it. Bitter, sweet, pungent. I hear something, too. Now it is quite clear to me, this sound; it is a consistent beating, a low, comforting swelling up of sound and a similar subsiding, somewhere near me. And I sense a like sound within my own self. Yet, I see nothing.

From whence, then, does this slight feeling of apprehension dawn? I seem to feel some willfulness developing within me, a mind and a will with a definite purpose and an agenda. Only a short time ago, I was pure awareness, absolute consciousness, existence and bliss. Now I am a will and a mind, with sense impressions and feelings and thoughts. Have I actually heard words spoken? It seems so, now. It seems as though I can hear voices, voices somewhere in the dark. They speak and I hear the words. Perhaps I understand enough to use words in forming my first articulated thoughts, if only in my own mind.

This is beginning to get on my nerves.

This is the genesis of ego.

The ladle never knowing the taste of the soup.

I sense an end to all things. There is some inexplicable tension. There is something impermanent about all this. I feel eminent transition being forced upon me, against my will. Some miscalculation on my part, no doubt. Some hastiness, perhaps. Perhaps, coming here was not such a good idea. I am beginning to feel very apprehensive about my future. In fact, the walls seem to be closing in upon me.

I can feel this body of mine more and more. From time to time, I thrash around in a vain attempt to execute real forward motion. This cannot go on forever. I realize this now. I no longer bask in the light of my pure, superior, all knowing consciousness. I am now assailed on all sides by sense impressions, desires, fears,

thoughts, my will, my ego, there is no room left in this place. I feel extremely claustrophobic now. I can hardly breath. My body is all scrunched up.

I WANT OUTTA HERE!!!

P art 1

Birthday, February 28
Uno Compleanno Lucido?

Down the chute. Pop goes my head out of the box like a balloon. Slurp, gush, plasma, phlegm, bile, water, salt. Sinew, hair, bones and skin and flesh. Push! Pull! Slap! Breathe, I better breath. A scream of recognition? Of the light? The slap. Again! Hanging upside down by my ankles as Dr. Gillette does me the ignominy of forcing me to take air into my lungs. The removal of the placenta. A belly button baby. A little pee pee. Give out the bubble gum cigars, the blue ones with *It's a Boy* on them. The poignant reunion with mom is not remembered. First hard fact. A long, narrow tiny bedroom in an old two story house. Two short blocks away from the iron and steel foundry. Born into bathtub gin and coal dust. Moonshine, it was during the Prohibition days in America, near Chicago, circa 1920, when my dad, born in the previous century in Italy, first constructed his facade. I'm born mid twentieth century but I live the legacy of the Mafia anyhow. *Mio padre fu molto paisano Siciliano et Cosa Nostra.* Si? Born across the railroad tracks, born into the boxcars and the Cadillac cars. I found a mother body that was twenty eight at the time of my birth, a Scorpio child of the '20. Semen donor dad, five foot two, accent, flat feet, pencil thin black mustache, diabetic, lived to be ninety two years old. Mark his soul, *spiritus sancti*, Amen. How can an embodied *anima* know for sure? Clinical setting. Crinkled blue green gowns and plastic aprons. Stainless steel fixtures and marble floors. Curtains surrounding an

electric bed. Bright lights. White, starched, soft cotton cloth, sheets and pillow cases. People come and go. No idea of mother or father. No remembrance of suckling at my mother's breasts. Food means nothing to me. Warmth, the warmth of another's body, their presence, is absent. Bland pabulum and chalky formula. Shock. The shock of it all. Complete helplessness. Assailed on all sides by sense impressions. The feel of a wet blanket. The smell of warm, soft shit. Alcohol. Antiseptic. The sound of clanking bedpans, gurneys rolled to and fro. Human beings so big and ugly. Looking down with their big ugly heads and mouths and wide hairy nostrils. The steam blowing off the radiators, the rattling of the steam in the radiators. No consciousness even when awake. No memory, no memory at all. Shot out into all this. Who asked to be categorized and labeled, named and numbered? Foot prints in ink for the birth certificate. Mom and dad so happy, presumably. This little bundle of joy entered the world kicking and screaming --- I don't want to be here! Waaaaaaaa! What has happened to me? And what do these strangers mean to me? A drop of sperm and an egg. *Voila!* What am I to them? They are responsible for this more than I -- they owe me. But I owe them too. The fortunate human birth! A rare occurrence. *BHOGA*. The game's begun now, again, the long climb back up the Tree of Life, back to Kether, back to The Castle. Would that I could return to the sea. In the early years, a flood in basement, walking around in tall rubber waders, Monsieur Peek-a-boo. Silly word games with mom leading to a life of writing. Visual art, of paramount importance. And the ever present music of the juke box, downstairs, playing the tunes the customers bought for a quarter. She's a painter. Dad knows American English and an remote Sicilian dialect. I'm really pretty much alone from the start, with no brothers or sisters. Dad and mom go down three small steps to the bar they own in a small Midwestern town where there's a bar on *every* corner; at least that's the way it was in the fifties and sixties. TURN ON THE WAYBACK MACHINE, Sherman! HERE THEY COME, Mr. Peabody -- bunk beds, writing on the walls with magic markers, smashing my elbow through the plaster and writing on the wooden slats behind it, climbing to the upper bunk from the lower while scaling Mount Everest in my mind, sore throats, fever, measles, broken bones, wounded pride, nullification, shame, innocence and bliss and instant realization. The early jokes: *Want to buy a deck of cards? It's a good deal.* The only way imaginable was creative expression -- solvable, salable, sealable, sizable, selectable, salvageable, seizable, smashable, sightable, potable, laughable, on down the alphabet of symbols from Alpha to Omega. Where are the songs of my youth? All gone down now. I can't plumb their rhythm nor fathom their rhyme, drumming with my fingers on the school desk from a very early age, look at me, look at me, a lot of energy here, eclectic here, an interesting kid here. Different means individual expression. The age of individualism, again. Just like before the French Revolution. *Me no really play the fife.* Making cheese in the kitchen, getting a huge metal container

as big as me full of unpasteurized milk from the farm, bringing it home and plopping it on top of the stove, then standing on the stove itself and churning the milk with a large wooden broomstick. A buckwheat buttermilk vegetable pepperoni and banana slice pancake omelet. A cowboy outfit. My first black eye. A little gray fuzzy kitten. Santa Claus storing his Christmas gifts for me in the recesses of my closet. The end of a mythology. Curiouser and curiouser. A million pictures of myself as a kid. Bottle rockets on the Fourth of July get caught in the tree branches and leaves, causing a fire. Tony, the tamed flying squirrel from next door, used to leap through the air and land on my shoulder. The big oak tree and the cement driveway with the cracks and splits in it. Huge, fragrant and serene benevolent lilac bushes. The ants, and down the alley, the sorrowing of houses, the houses of the poor black people and the poor brown people in the ghetto where I live. I'm white, ostensibly. My name, Tono, like the similar Longhouse Indian-Native American appellation, means *a good singer and man, can he cook*. Olive skin, ham and provolone sandwiches on Italian bread, with a side of pickle and a pepper. Greaseball. Wop. Son of an innkeeper and an outplacer. My friends, Moat and Aude and Anderson and D'acquisto. Hung and drown a cat. Us bad bad boys. Jumped fences and rolled on the ground and played cops and robbers and beat off together. Us bad bad boys. *I'm getting a head of yourself*. When I came into the world, laying on my back as a month old infant, I would scrunch down my eyelids and make the explosions of the million suns happen between my eyebrows. Reveling in the absolute wonder of the miracle of a human birth. And life eternal. Again. I am reborn from the seed of a yogi. The *chakra ajna*. The seat of the soul. Digging it at such an early age. Fifteen men on a dad man's chest. The tinkling of the ice cubes in the drink glasses downstairs. The sound of all the riot, rack and ruin of the bar, every night as I lay in bed, trying to get to sleep amid streams of beer barrel polkas and bottle playing by my dad. Bravo, Antonio, bravo! Encore, encore! He would bring down the houses of sorrow some nights. *Got soul, got soul. Reggae got soul*. A humiliating magic show. The brunt of the jokes. The horrifying first day of kindergarten. Who were all those kids? They stunk. They pushed a lot and were of all colors. I was the class artist, along with Gregory Harris. Ever since then, ever since, ever since. My desire is to be an *artiste*. Go to the head of the class. Bad at spelling bees. Beat up by a kid who jumped me and pinned my arms down on the ground with his knees. The first shock of violent behavior on the part of my fellows. Tortilla Tommy and me, we burned down a warehouse playing campfire. About this time Dawn showed me hers, except I couldn't see anything at all. Alan got mad at me for stealing his tin soldiers, which me don't do. JUDE: *'Let's go on a holidead. To the crematorium, the mausoleum, the septic tank. Afterbirth on toast.'* A thousand million suns in my head. Exploding in my little tiny brain. The result of past action. From the other side of the meat puppet. Meat puppet within meat puppet. A hideous and probably dangerous plastic space

station that breaks in a week. The cardboard box that used to have automobile windshields in it made the best submarine a kid could have ever wanted. And it cost nothing. Best toy of my childhood. Cap pistol. This was my soapbox derby race car and it didn't even have wheels. The cutouts in the cardboard for hands were my periscopes. A childhood illness; sleeping sickness. My eyes go. I am in and out of the hospital, I can't study, sleep all the time. Convinced by a mentor of nullification. Does not work well with others, they labeled me in school. Girls don't like me, the weak dorky bespectacled nerdy bookworm artistic sensitive young boy. Science project. The photoelectric effect. Tubes of watercolor paints. Sable brushes. An art book with a nude woman posing for a life study. A swordfish made out of brazen coat hanger wire and painted white, then hung on the wall. Red and black paneled bookshelves. An art deco chair. Ornate, thick patterned curtains with rich, deep textures. My mother's lipstick and stovepipe tight capri pants. Dad's shaving brush, his pale yellow thick tweed herringbone jacket, and his black satin faux bow tie. The first time my father beat me with a stropping strap. American cheese sandwiches on white bread with the crusts trimmed off. Coca Cola and Geysers' potato chips. Hersey's chocolate bars. Planter's peanuts. Pissing in the gas tank of an old Harley Hog parked in the back yard. The white trash hillybillies that lived in the apartment upstairs. My dad a property owner. I did not inherit a modicum of money. Dr. Seuss. The Three Stooges. Rocky and Bulwinkle. Bugs Bunny. Crusader Rabbit. Popeye. The Pennsylvania Polka. Bowling shoes. Brass plated tin figures bowling on the top of atrocious trophies. Cub scouts. A wolf pack. A den. What is the law of the pack? Balsa wood two part hand sized airplanes, weighted down in the front with a clip of lead. You've got to keep the nose down and the airspeed up. Lick on tattoos. Candy dots on a strip of paper. Matches. I had a little white and black plastic lunch bucket with a small plastic thermos bottle. I stood on my tip toes and reached the beer spigot on the bar tap, filling the thermos to the brim; then I went in the backyard and pretended I was on lunch break from the factory. I downed the brew. Pabst Blue Ribbon. The old Blatz neon beer sign hung from the ivy covered red brick wall on Albert Street. The bar address numbers were 1330. The phone number was Melrose 4-9570. The huge antiquated mechanical bowling machine with noisy relays, plastic bowling pins and a chrome puck to slide down the sawdusted lane and hit switches in the wood below the pins that would trigger the pins to raise. Running along the top of stationary boxcars aside the railroad tracks next to the warehouse. The huge black and white electric clock that hung in the bar. At night, an equally huge blue neon sign would light the bar with an eerie empty pallor. Our first B/W TV. Civil Defense drills. Duck and cover. A new red and white nineteen fifty four Oldsmobile Rocket 88. Balls made out of spinach and toilet paper, thrown at nurses. A blood test. Needles mean blood test after blood test, pain and fear and crying. The common cold. The flu. A scorched forearm on the

oven door. Danny died of diabetes. Hamburgers with onions and ketchup. *Volare*. We ice skated on Root River and played hockey. I could not fish. Pain pills. Mother threw me in the deep water at Washington Park Pool and I had to sink or swim. Down the water slide. A cannon ball off the quarry wall. Bubbling saltpeter, set on fire with a wooden matchstick. Clumps of coal being shoveled into the furnace. Clinkers. Spent coal. A witch walled up in the dungeon. Take a drink of Tang orange drink. The Lone Ranger on TV to the tune of the William Tell Overture. My name is like Tonto. Rondabaloney. Toto. The scourge of appellation. We were going to see Disney's Sleeping Beauty, that time in Miami, when I put my shoed foot into the night lighted swimming pool by accident. Squish, squish, squish. The water so transparent in the dark I couldn't see it at all. The all alone games. Magic tricks. Card tricks. My dad is old and short. My mom is much younger than he and taller, too. He is like a little baby, even at seventy. *Illiterati*. Steak sandwiches at 3 am in Kenosha with mom and dad, with me sleeping in the back seat of our new big white Cadillac El Dorado as we drive home. Carry me up to the house, mommy. *Don't wake him, Tony*. A gold painted kazoo. A huge hollow rubber ear you put on as a gag. Cracker Jack prizes. A match gun made with an old style three piece clothes pin, the ones with the metal springs. Somehow, we turned the wooden halves around in the clothes pin and put wooden stick matches in it, the ones with the self igniting tip. When you squeezed the clothes pin with the wooden match in it, it would shoot the stick out and ignite it. Incendiary at an early age. Bubble gum cards. Archie comics. A beagle hound named Candy. She could be scared pissless merely by pointing of a stern finger at her. The effect of animal abuse. A brindle boxer named Satan who drooled too much. I loved him so. Truly, a boy's best friend. Mom took him out to the country to die, but he hightailed it all the way back into town and right into our backyard again. Sadness of sadnesses. The nullification of a hound from heaven. Will the hounds of hell haunt the perpetrator of this travesty? What's the sense of blame? Will it bring my dog back, my youth back? A deadening formality while fetuses are being aborted. The sorrowing of the uterus. Go out and play, Tono. I come back in two hours and the place smells like Lysol antiseptic. A strange woman comes over to my mother's house and I'm ushered out. Come back in two hours. That'll be \$500 dollars please for a bubble of air in your uterus, please. Years worth of aborted fetuses buried in my backyard in a mulch pit. Going down to Illinois for yellow margarine. Oleo. Homemade warm Sicilian provolone, fresh and aromatic when sliced. Stored in a wicker basket after the loaf of cheese had been coated with salt. Salt rind. Dago red wine. My first pizza downstairs at the bar in the middle of the night. Customers smiling at the little boy who came down to eat a slice of something awful. Throwing up *canard de l'orange* in Fort Lauderdale. Holding on for dear life as a horse decides to gallop to the barn. Burma Shave. The headless rooster that ran after me in the barnyard. Old

Spice shaving soap in a mug and a horsehair shaving brush. EDIT. A glass eye which my dad wore, in a ring case. Hair dye. An enema bag. A .38 caliber revolver broke into two and thrown into the bushes in the backyard, so my mom wouldn't off herself. Being tied to the bedposts of a crib by the wrists late at night so that I couldn't get out while mom and dad were downstairs running the bar. I shit in my pants and screamed and screamed and screamed at being held captive. Sorrow on Albert Street. The first time my dad called my mother a whore. Alcoholics. Dexedrine spats. Disarming a potential suicide victim. The crying, the shouts, the violence. She threw him down the stairs. Lucky for him there were only three short ones from the house to the bar. He said that she was having sex with me. Oedipus, I did not have a kite. No one took me out to play soccer. Mad Magazine. A literary life in America begun by reading comic books and Cracked Magazine. My hometown is nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Microcosm and macrocosm. I run up and down a mountain of coal, at Pugh's coal yard down by the river, and come home as black as a chimney sweep. Watching the man who ran the juke box and the electric bowling game concession come to the bar and change records. I'd get to see inside the machines and watch him count the quarters, dimes and nickels on the bar and shove them into sleeves, then into bags. He hauled electric pinball game machines in the back of his *El Camino*. I think he was a Jew. HO railroad trains, with an engine that had a little light on it and smoked real smoke. Dad would sit down at the kitchen table, cut up a bunch of vegetable and eat them raw, without a plate or a napkin. When he ate meat, his hands would get thoroughly greasy and he would hold them out in a crude manner. Mother criticized him. He was uneducated and illiterate. She was self educated, artistic and literate. The age difference. My dad thirty five years older than my mom. My grandfather younger than my dad. My half sister's my mother's age. On dad's side, I have a cousin who owns a Sicilian liquor store in the deep black ghetto. Dad's brother started it with a grocery store. Sam. Sam the Sicilian grocer was a cool dude who had the right idea. He was a real sweet guy. He reminded me of my dad but older. I never knew my grandparents on my father's side. Psychotherapy as art. Analysis or anal retentive? Going to see Santa Claus at Zahn's department store downtown on Main Street. Getting dressed in so many layers of clothing in the middle of winter that I couldn't bring my arms down to my side and if I fell over I had trouble getting up again. Falling on the ice while learning how to skate. School a big blur. Grades one, two, three, four, five, they all blend together into a big nothing memory. An indication of trauma. How important could it have been if it was so unmemorable? How much fun? Or how cathartic? A socialization process which I resisted, because I didn't want to be so damn social. Yet I was and still am. I am a victim of an educational system that socialized me, that prepared me to take a useful place in the city state and I resisted with all my might. We used to burn the trash, the used paper and cardboard in the backyard in a heavy

cylindrical wirechain receptacle. A ball and jacks. I couldn't fathom how to play. Poker cards. Two dice and a shaker, slammed on the bar. Pass the cup from patron to patron. Win a free drink at Tony's! Roll one ace and you name the drink. Roll the second ace and you pay for the drink. The third ace and you drink the drink. An American Flyer seems like pie in the sky. Red Ball Jet tennis shoes. It was an European ghetto that my dad moved into in the thirties. German, Irish, Italian, Polish, Scandinavians. Later, the European immigrants moved out of the neighborhood and the blacks moved in, followed by the Mexicans. Except for dad -- he stayed. His bar had an all white clientele and there was never a hassle even though there were black bars on either corner of my street, and my dad's bar was in the middle of the block. He knew the right people. Shotgun blasts going off in the night. I would lay there in the dark alone in my room in bed and count the gunshots blasts. My Siamese cat named Buddha. He liked long Johns, an indigenous Danish pastry. Racine is famous for kringle. I could drive him into a frenzy with a poised, menacing, grasping clawhand above his head that mimicked a snake. I loved Buddha. Where did that cat go?

This is the childhood I can remember and want to remember.

Perhaps that childhood ended with the severing of the relationship between my mother and my father. It was the thirteenth year of my life, and by that time, I was well on my way to becoming totally confused about what human sexual relations and love were all about. It was an ugly, violent and profane breakup, and it startled me in a way few other things have. It doesn't take too long to get clued into the impermanence of all physical things. Two bodies attract one another and then veer off on tangents and depart. Things are new and things are old. I remember thinking that I was living in an old dirty building and that I longed for a clean, new environment. How seriously I would play submarine out in the backyard.

The days I spent in that small ghetto neighbor in middle America, with my original family, before my mom divorced my dad and moved in with my second father, were the only real childhood days of my life, the most blissfully memorable, warm and filled with love; that period as well was filled with fear and filled with woe. My dad coming home dwarfed behind the wheel of a new, white, 1960 Cadillac, in all its immensity and pomposity. His outrageous jealousy. Jim and my mom used to pass correspondence even while mom was still married to my dad. I found this out from going through my second dad's affects after he died. She met him in the bar, as she had met Tony, my father, in his bar, on her way back from tracking a couple of embezzlers down for Pinkerton in Rockford. Her buddy detective wanted to stop in Racine and nibble a couple at Tony Rondone's, and introduced the two of them. The following week she quit Pinkerton's and began living with Tony. Erv wondered why she never showed up for work again, so he

took a ride down to Racine and found Val behind the bar working with Tony. That told Ery what he had wanted to know.