

# All the Realms

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## ❧ *The Gods*

I was fortunate to be present for the reunion. Or reconciliation, as it was intended. While a recent arrival in Toronto – and only twenty-three years old – I’d ingratiated myself in its society of book-sellers, writers, and scholars; although the events I experienced, or persons I met, often found me out of my depth. Not unlike my first exposure to Buddy Ebsen, as Jed Clampett in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I was only twelve years old then and didn’t know he’d been a song-and-dance man in the movies and vaudeville. (He was going to be Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* no less, but he couldn’t tolerate the makeup.) Barker Fairley, one of the two desired to be reconciled, was himself less famous than his depth might recommend. A poet and painter, he’d written a landmark study of Goethe, and was friends with members of the Group of Seven and other distinguished persons in the Arts and Letters Club circle. He’d painted A.Y. Jackson in 1939, and Fred Varley had painted him in 1922, when he was thirty-five. By the time the launch for his book of poems was being refashioned for rectification in 1977 he was ninety. Everyone thought the two had better patch things up, because they weren’t going to live forever and people ought not go to the grave with things unresolved. In fact, he didn’t die until 1986, at the advanced age of ninety-nine. Thoreau MacDonald, the one from whom Barker was estranged, also had many years still to live, passing away in 1989 at the age of eighty-eight. He was and is among Canada’s most distinguished artists. His preferred medium was woodcut illustration, and he’d decorated and lettered poems of Barker Fairley’s in the 1920s. But they’d had a falling out and hadn’t spoken for forty years. It was Thoreau who got up from his chair that evening at the party. He walked over to where Barker was sitting and leaned forward slightly on his walking stick. “Hello, Barker,” he said. “Hello, Thoreau,” Barker replied. Then Thoreau turned and walked back to his seat.



## Demigods

You could spot the men and women who travelled with the company, as opposed to the local hires. They were deeply tanned. Seasoned. Vaguely dangerous. They had their own train! Which you could see parked on a railway siding beside the fairground while the show was on. At its peak Royal American Shows was the largest carnival company in North America, which after the War included a number of city fairs in western Canada where I lived. You'd often read in the newspaper back then how people wanted the midway cleaned up, or modernized. Little was changed or updated over the years, and by the late 60s the Royal American train was a rolling anachronism, loaded with the artefacts of an already-bygone era. Today, exhibition midways are mostly amusement rides and games of chance offering plush toys for their hapless winners. In that earlier era, carnival operators had those things, but they also had *sideshow*s, announced by hand-painted banners, hung in rows like huge lettered sails. There was Leon Miller's *Club Lido*, a burlesque tent that travelled with Royal American. *Blaze Fury! The Human Heat Wave* the banner announced, famous for twirling flaming tassels. The company was also renown for its girl-to-gorilla illusion, a must-see, portrayed on one of these colourful flags. Next to that, a banner for *Serpentina, the Reptile Queen!* in the Museum of Mystery. At bottom, it was this everyone wanted "cleaned up." The freak show. The circus tradition of parading shocking medical anomalies and persons of peculiar talents (such as contortionists and sword swallowers) in a sideshow tent came to trouble public conscience. Not so for the Wall of Death, though, where daring motorcyclists rode stunts on the inside wall of a carnival motordrome, like a giant wooden barrel 16 feet high and 30 feet across. We watched from the spectator platform around the top edge above as they entered the arena floor below, waving up at us as they started their stripped-down Indians and Harley-Davidsons, the roar of the engines engulfing our applause.

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# ¶ Humankind

1930 was not a good year to be born in Tibet. In your late twenties, as you reached your prime, your home and culture and country would be smashed by foreign military forces. You would likely be imprisoned and tortured, and your mother and father would be brutally murdered in front of your eyes. On the other hand, 1930 was the best year ever to be born in the west, especially in Canada or the United States. Too young to serve in World War II, you enjoyed the buoyancy of its patriotic mood in safety as a child; then had many veterans' benefits available to you when it was over. A time of terrific waste and excess, you suddenly and relentlessly mowed down vast forests, raped the great oceans, and burned huge quantities of petroleum. With these assets, you enjoyed stunning economic and technological prosperity, never before imaginable. And jazz. You had jazz music. Especially swing. Swing was a big band sound for dancing, full of primal rhythms. The best of swing were the bands of Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. For me, their finest moment was *Sing Sing Sing*, written by Louis Prima and made famous by Benny Goodman. Born in 1954, I was too late for the original passage of all this, although enjoyed the tide water of its prosperity later. But as a teenager I scorned the jazz singers, like Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, and Ella. And scorned my dad for loving them. Which, when I got to my forties, suddenly flipped to a powerful lesson of just how wrong you can be. My dad was gone so I couldn't tell him I'd come to this realization. Although opera was my first love then, not jazz, and I woke up to CJRT radio at 6 am for the classical program. One day in a mood of mischief, the announcer played *Sing Sing Sing* at 6 am for his still-sleepy classical listeners. While I lay there in bed listening to the huge chorus of brass, and Gene Krupa pounding his drums, this seemed to me the very essence of the entire possibility of living.

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## 5 *Animal Kingdom*

My supervisor explained that people noticed I was always staring at the shapely young women who came in the shop. I replied I wasn't looking at all of them; and besides, I wasn't staring, I was just trying to comprehend them. Besides that, he wasn't really my supervisor. I was supposed to be working in the back, doing cutting and collating and other bindery jobs for the document printing and copying the others did out front. But I always seemed to drift out to the retail counter, where the supervisor was, where the men and women were, and where I thought I could be more useful. Although, there was the guy who came in one day and grabbed my shirt, saying he'd have killed me if I'd been there in the meeting when he handed out the misfed photocopies I'd done for him the day before. I explained it was really up to him to inspect the work, that the machines weren't completely reliable. What machine could be! The accounting girl wasn't my supervisor either, but she caused some trouble when she shoed me out to breakfast one day. There was a restaurant next door where I often had an omelette in the morning, but I was kinda late that day and my boss said "no," that working hours had started; but a little later the accounting girl said "go ahead," and I did. But my boss came into the restaurant for his coffee and saw me there and took me back to the shop by the throat, which I thought was excessive. When the new shop expansion opened there was no counter to stand behind, but my boss was still never happy with me, although I was there working even when he wasn't. It was not unlike how one day a customer came in with a short story to copy. Behind the counter we stood about nine inches higher than the customers down in front, which gave me a sense of superiority to them, but not to this man. I was reading his story and it was moving to me. Like my boss, the character in the story was not happy. He'd become traumatized after he'd seen a bumper sticker that said JESUS LOVES YOU, *but everyone else thinks you're an asshole.*



## ḡ Hungry Ghosts

The soles of my shoes were squeaky on the mat my office chair rode over at work, which kept its wheels from grinding the carpet. She said they must be sticky with muck from the raisins I'd mashed. Well, I ate lots of raisins, but I hadn't mashed any on the plastic mat. But then, only about ten minutes later, what do you think? I mashed a raisin on the mat! Under my shoe. I hadn't said anything, but I think she knew I couldn't imagine myself mashing a raisin under my shoe, but then I'd just gone and done it! As though some part of my subconscious brain just had to go and prove I might indeed do the raisin squashing. I remembered how once when I was working at University of Toronto Library I noticed I'd never goofed up my lunch break, going at 12.00 instead of 1.00, say, if I'd been scheduled at 1.00 that day. (When later I first started at the record company my boss said he wanted me to start at 1.30, but he meant \$130 dollars a week, not 1.30 in the afternoon, which confusion was awkwardly resolved.) Anyway, the very next day I went for the wrong lunch! Nobody was mad at me because I was usually so reliable and they knew it was just a mistake. But it was as though my mind sought the experience I believed I'd never have, even though when I missed the lunch I'd already forgotten the thought I had the day before. But when I realized my mind would do this, I started thinking, *Oh, I'd never see that girl naked!* when I went by a beautiful woman on the street, or *Wow! An Austin Healey 3000! I could never, ever own a car like that!* Everywhere I went I was thinking about the things I'd be so unlikely to have happen. There was no lottery then, or I'd surely have considered that the most unlikely thing of all. But, hey, if I rescued the son of an oil sheik in front of the Ritz Hotel in London, he'd certainly reward me, although it was so improbable I'd be on the spot right at the crucial moment, and would be modest even though I'd have been injured.

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## 5 *The Hells*

The air changes when it falls below -40 degrees. Too cold to hold moisture, it becomes dry and still. The air was cold and dry and still every winter in Alberta before the 1970s, when the warming began. A young child then, I didn't realize there were places elsewhere in the world where winters were mild. I'd seen photographs of tropical islands in *Life* magazine, abundant with hibiscus flowers and pretty young girls, but I didn't know they had mild winters, or no winters at all. That they'd never seen sun dogs, or knew the air could be as cold as that. That they didn't know the sun only shone six or seven hours in a midwinter day, and had never once seen the northern lights. I took our winters in graceful stride, knowing no other life. I knew how to protect myself outside, and how to warm up coming in. How to avoid swollen hands and ears and cracked lips. I don't know how we could possibly have had jackets and gloves and hats and boots warm enough, but I do remember being upset with my dad for bringing home a new jacket for me, a faux-furry jacket, which I thought was effeminate and I was embarrassed to wear. My friend Grant Hagen didn't have to wear a girls' jacket. Grant and I were school patrols on December 15 1964, in Grade 6 at Crestwood Elementary School, the day it was colder than it'd ever been before. The radio announcer didn't say 'Crestwood' reading his list of school closures, so we went on our way, fulfilling our charge at the 96th Avenue crosswalk along the way, unaware that thousands of beef cattle were that moment freezing solid in their shelters. The blizzard raged with heavy snow, high winds, and bitter cold. I saw on the front page of the *Edmonton Journal* that evening, delivered by another boy indifferent to the crisis, a chart showing the windchill temperature of -90°F. Back then the transit bench by the crosswalk on 96th Avenue was painted with the slogan *Rest and Read the Journal*, but there was no one relaxing there with the newspaper that day.

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# བར་དོ *The Bardo*

I've only had one lover in this lifetime. Whom I loved and enjoyed, and who loved and enjoyed me. This only arrived for me quite late in life. I'd begun to think I might die before having that experience, which always filled me with regret. I said that to her once, to Amy. She was quite a bit younger than me, and didn't really understand me about this, although she'd never had that experience either. Amy was highly intelligent, at the time in grad school in medicine. Also, on the autistic spectrum, pathologically secretive, and often suspicious. If the latter were a thing to earn trust against, then eventually I did. She would sometimes rail at me if, say, I expressed regret that she couldn't make a date. This one time she said, "You are behaving like a controlling person." I answered, "No, I'm behaving like someone who loves you." She was thunderstruck. You could see the light come on, see it in her eyes. Things were different between us after that. Mind you, all along Amy had accepted and valued me as I was. Tolerated our difference in ages, although I remained a secret from her father. Still, this tolerance was unusual. The first thing you learn when you get older is that relationships, even friendships, with young people are not allowed. There is a stigma attached, about which I do not even disagree. (Oh, lately an older man can be in an 'arrangement' with a younger woman, a kind of mutual benefits relationship, but which lacks warmth.) I first met Amy in a bookstore – she sat down in the reading chair beside me, asked me what book I had. After talking for a while, she asked me if I would be her friend. Full of warmth. We were good friends to each other for four years, until she became ill suddenly. Then passed away, just like that. I was overwhelmed with grief. I remain sorrowful, every day. Every day. Although, indeed, I am deeply grateful we had that time to enjoy. But, I'll tell you what: the *memory* of our time together gives little to my quality of life. Eternity is now. I just don't know what to fill it with. Still, I hold with Miguel de Unamuno: *Let us perish resisting, and if it is nothingness that awaits us, do not let us so act that it shall be justice.*