

Faces In A Cloud

by Chris Okum



The Nutmeg Of Consolation

Dr. Dickey asks me why I need bifocals and I tell him I need them to read. "Oh, you like to read, do you" says Dr. Dickey. "What do you like to read?" I tell him I like to read books. "Oh," says Dr. Dickey, who then asks if I like to read actual books, and I tell him I do, I like the real thing, real books, the kind you have to hold in your hand, the kind you can sit in bed and read, the kind I'm having trouble reading because all of a sudden I can't see up close. Dr. Dickey tells me he just got back from Nairobi, where he read three books; one on the future of artificial intelligence by one of the biggest investors in an artificial intelligence company; one of those seafaring novels by Patrick O'Brien; and a book about books about the Civil War. I ask him if the book about the books about the Civil War was any good and he says, "It was okay. Didn't learn anything new, except that what we're going through right now is nothing new." Dr. Dickey asks

me how I feel about the President Elect and I tell him I don't like the man, that I've never liked the man, that I've been aware of the man since I was a kid and I didn't like him then either, that the man has always struck me as being someone who's someone I wouldn't want to spend any amount of time around, nor would I want him running my business if I had one, which I don't, but then again, this last caveat wasn't for me, but for Dr. Dickey, who then proceeds to tell me to look at his ear while he sprays two puffs of air into my eyes. "See, that's the thing," says Dr. Dickey, "people like you have to get over your derangement." Dr. Dickey then spends the next fifteen minutes explaining in no uncertain terms why people like me suffer from derangement. During the fifteen minute rant Dr. Dickey barely stops to take a breath and his voice slowly but surely increases in volume as he comes to the conclusion of his rant, which is that people like me need to stop buying into the fear that the media tries to instill in people like me, and when he says "buying into the fear" his eyes open as wide as possible, making him look as if he's scared shitless that people like me are being tricked into being scared shitless. All the while he's still holding onto the device that puffs air into your eyes. I notice his hands are shaking, and he notices me noticing his hands shaking, and then, all of sudden, his hands stop shaking, as if the act of him noticing me noticing his hands shaking is the trigger he needs to make his hands stop shaking. I don't argue with Dr. Dickey because he's the man who is taking care of my eyes. I feel, in a way, that he has me over a barrel. Who wants to argue with their doctor while their doctor is in the middle of diagnosing them? Or maybe it's not that he has me over the barrel, maybe it's more like he's playing dirty pool. I don't know. I'm not sure about either of these idioms. I don't like idioms. I don't like saying things that make me sound old, and that's what idioms do. But I am old. My eyes are old. That's why I'm here, at Dr. Dickey's office, listening to him explain to me that when Reagan was elected everyone thought it was the end of the world, too, but, hey, look it wasn't, a point he seems to enjoy making, and I point I would normally quibble with if I wasn't sitting in a chair in a doctor's office while the doctor holds

various tools that have the ability to cause great discomfort to my body should he so choose to use them for that purpose. "This isn't the end of the world," says Dr. Dickey. "We're gonna try some multi-focal contact lenses on you and see how you feel about them." Dr. Dickey tells me multi-focal contact lenses will help me see far and near at the same time. When I ask him how that works, how can you see far and near at the same time, he says, "I could explain it to you, but I don't think you'd understand."

Grizzly Bear

From *Compact Trauma: How The Revolt Of Nature Mirrors The Revolt Of The Human Spirit*, by Dr. Robert D. Atwood, Routledge, 2022: "If movies had no effect on reality, on how we dream reality into existence, then human beings wouldn't have spent the entirety of the 20th century flocking into the darkened space of the theater in order to receive directions of which way they should point their subconscious. By the end of the 1960s it was becoming fairly obvious to the ruling class of America that the promise of a pluralistic democracy was coming true, and mostly because the federal government was forcing it into some kind of structural form. How do you stem the tide of history, though? This is but one of the questions the ruling class contemplates, ruminating on how they can turn popular opinion away from the notion that everyone deserves a fair shake, that the playing field must be levelled and that the rules should be uniform and apply to all, even to those who have been raised with the idea that the rules don't apply to them. Culture is, of course, upstream from politics (a necessary inversion of the only halfway intelligent thing that Andrew Breitbart ever said), and so culture is where you begin. You begin by telling stories. You craft a narrative that holds the attention of the masses. And then you let the narrative do its work, slowly, year by year, movie by movie, person by person. And one of the stories that worked best to slowly but surely pull people away from the idea that it's the government's function to take care of its citizens (and to implant the idea that for

our economic system to work optimally [for those at the top, anyway] everyone should be a free agent, on their own, or, at best, beholden only to those closest to them, like their wives, and their girlfriends, and the children they have with their wives and with their girlfriends) is the Revenge of Nature story, where some aspect of the natural world (usually an apex predator like a shark or a bear or an orca, or something sinister on a lower level, like piranhas or a gaggle of giant bunny rabbits or snakes or ants or rats or insects) goes haywire and attacks human beings for either a) reasons having to do with Big Government malfeasance, or, b) because that's what animals and wildlife and bugs do, they just attack us for no reason, maybe because we're humans and we're not very nice to them (therefore justifying our domination of nature (which is evil, right?) through the exploitation of resources via proprietary corporate technics, and what's worse, it's Big Government, at all levels, that is unable to protect us, because a) Big Government is comprised of nothing but incompetent bureaucracies unable to handle any sort of disaster, or, b) Big Government simply don't like us regular tax paying citizens and could give a damn what happens to us, especially if what happens to us doesn't affect the bottom line of whatever corporation is in cahoots with the federal bean counters and D.C. lackeys controlling any given region of the United States. This story was told over and over and over during the 1970s and the 1980s, and while some aspects of this story might be true, the effect this story has had on our collective consciousness is pernicious at best and apocalyptic at worst, because here's the deal folks, you either have a government run by the people for the people (with all its vagaries and inconsistencies and legislative bottlenecks), or you get a society run by the few for the few, i.e., a system whereby another kind of apex predator, the human kind, decides that the only thing standing between it and Utopia (which in this case, as in all cases, is nothing more than a land where the people at the top have everything and they don't have to worry about anyone else having anything because there is no one else, at least no one else who already isn't a member of the group of people who believe in the

Utopia beneficial to the group in question) is you, and by "you," I mean you, yes you. So, now that we're as close as we've ever been to finally getting rid of Big Government, of shrinking it down so small that it can be drowned in a bath tub, how do we protect ourselves from the types of people who claimed that there was no one who would save you? Because the story worked. Because it was a story we liked telling ourselves because it made us feel better about ourselves, made us feel as if our destiny was in our hands, that we didn't need anyone to help us, that it's preferable to be on your own. Which we are. We are on our own, finally. It's all against all. Law of the jungle. Human civilization as a cruel, indifferent machine, not unlike nature itself. And now there really is no one to protect us from what's coming. And what's coming? The usual: death, suffering, chaos, misery. And it was created by the very people who said we didn't need structures of protection from all of this. See, that's a neat trick. That's how you trap your prey. That's a story conceived, written, and told by the predator. But the predator isn't a shark or a grizzly bear or an orca. The predator is you.

The Aesthetics of Rock

Richard Meltzer couldn't sleep. It didn't matter that he had taken five Sominex and washed them down with half a bottle of Four Roses (which was a lot smoother than some would have you believe). He had dreamed the dream again, the dream where his mother is driving him to school and then she goes into a trance and starts to speed down residential streets and hits 100 miles per hour and crashes through a fence and into someone's yard and runs over a little kid and the parents start chasing the car with the father waving a gun and Richard's mother remaining calm as she reverses out of the yard and back onto the road and continues driving like white lightning until she arrives at Richard's school and tells him she'll pick him up later and he gets out of the car and the father of the dead kid is standing right there and he points the gun at Richard and pulls the trigger, bang, bang, bang. Instead of taking more

Sominex with another Four Roses chaser he decided the best way to get back to sleep, to really dive down deep into some hardcore R.E.M. action, he would have to listen to something that bored the shit out of him, and so he put on the debut album from Boston, which was, of course, eponymous, and which he knew, of course, would bore the shit out of him. The album was moving units like no one's business, and Richard had refused to listen to it for that very reason, not wanting to participate in the anonymous enrichment of some anodyne pituitary cases who had swallowed their raging libidos long enough to become barely proficient at the very instruments whose ability to master in the simplest way possible could lead to untold riches. Richard was about a minute in to 'More than a Feeling' when he realized that he had been wrong, profoundly wrong, and that the reason why everyone was rushing to slap this petrified turd onto their turntable was because the music (no, not music, that's not what it is), no, the tunes, yes, the tunes, they were machine-tooled within an inch of their lives, the perfect combination of the meatloaf and mash potato strut of Grand Funk Railroad, the white wine harmonizing of America, and the Merlin-Does-Six-Flags keyboard parts of Yes. Richard could not believe someone hadn't thought of this before. It felt like a terminus in the history of rock, a point from which there was no point in going any further, a signal that maybe it was time to go back to the beginning and start all over again. The rumor was that the fountainhead of Boston was some gangly engineering wonk with a degree from M.I.T. and that he had played almost every single instrument on the album. It made sense. The songs sounded engineered, like someone who didn't really care for the aesthetics of rock studied what made every Top 40 song of the last ten years work and then ran the numbers until 'Long Time' popped out the other end of the machine in the form of an Ezee Aktion suppository. These were the kind of tunes you shoved up your ass and waited as they absorbed into the walls of your rectum. It was horrible, and it was beautiful, and it was kind of invigorating, because it felt as if the field had finally been cleared and was now ready for a new crop. It calmed Richard down, this peaceful easy

feeling that rock and roll still maybe had one more life to live, and so Richard finally fell asleep during the middle of 'Let Me Take You Home Tonight,' which sounded to him like Crosby, Stills and Nash had Crosby never touched a drink or a drug in his life and Stills had actually served a tour in 'Nam and then re-upped for another because he liked it so much the first time around (and what about Nash? Yeah, and what about him?). He dreamed the dream again, except this time his mother didn't drive through the fence and kill the kid. Instead, the car magically took flight and rocketed high into the sky, where it slowly made its way towards the guitar-shaped spaceship on the cover of Boston's album. Richard woke up before the docking could be consummated. He unwrapped two sticks of Juicy Fruit. He turned on the television to the Faith Broadcasting Network and watched as the Reverend Dr. Gene Scott harangued his audience for not sending him enough money. "You people don't really love me," said Scott, who was wearing a beige three-piece suit and a bright red sombrero. "You want me to die. If you loved me you would send money. But you're selfish. You only love yourselves." It wasn't true, though. Richard didn't love himself. He didn't even love his own mother. The only thing he loved was sleep, but of a certain kind, the kind where dreams don't exist, where all is starless and bible black.

