

The Study of Professor Herbert Hand

by Marc Lowe

They say he started the study on February 26, 20—. Ever since that day, no one has seen or heard from him. E-mails have gone unanswered, his Facebook account has not shown any activity whatsoever, and his “wall” remains as it was prior to undertaking the study: blank. His subject, they say, is archaic, arcane, esoteric. It is not something that we would have the capacity to understand, they say. Whatever it is, it's apparently become an all-consuming obsession for Professor Herbert Hand. Something to do, they say, with quantum physics, with universal energy, with authors who killed themselves, with electronic musics composed by dead musicians, with ancient philosophies and spurious texts. Something about schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, depression, various obsessions and compulsions, sex. Something so complex, so overwhelmingly broad, that a single mind could not possibly contain all of it at one time without imploding. And yet, Professor Hand has taken it on. That is, indeed, what they say.

Professor Hand was what one might call an eccentric. Though he did not smell, he rarely changed his clothes, or perhaps he had multiple suits of the same exact color and style. (This is in the past tense because, for all we know, he may already be dead.) He smoked unfiltered cigarettes, drank whiskey (straight, never on the rocks), and was known to be a lover of films from the 1950s, especially noir. He played chess, practiced Tai'chi Chuan and Yoga, and ate canned salmon straight from the can. He was rumored to be homosexual, though no one ever saw him with either a woman or a man (though he did seem to own, or at least to regularly feed, an orange cat, probably a stray he picked up off the streets, for it had a large nick in one of its ears and a scraggly half-tail). He was left-handed, left-leaning in terms of his political views, but decidedly

right-brained. He alternately painted pictures of rotten fruit and/or women with large, pendulous breasts and crooked smiles. He was a chronic insomniac and slept for less than three hours a night. Or, well, at least, so they say.

As it has been related to me: He began his study on February 26, his birthday. In fact, he had thought about the topic for a good year prior to beginning the heavy research and writing, but it wasn't until that day that his work became his obsession. He decided from that moment on not to leave his apartment for any reason. (The door is still locked, the windows boarded up, though his rent was prepaid on February 25 for the duration of the contract—one year—on the condition that he not be disturbed, even if the apartment were burning down to the ground.) He had borrowed from the library, bought at used bookstores, or otherwise ordered from online vendors, all of the books he would need for at least a year (possibly longer), and hunkered down to complete his project, which he claimed (this on good authority) would be the largest study of its kind, one to “rival Robert Burton's encyclopedic *The Anatomy of Melancholy*” (in the words of my source, who claims they were spoken directly by Hand himself).

Some say his studies have driven him mad, and that he is determined never to leave his apartment again, even if he runs out of money to pay the rent (they say he'll put up a fight, to the death, if necessary). Others say that he hasn't completed anything, that the entire thing is a scheme, a farce, a stupid prank he has played on the public and which it has fallen for hook, line, and sinker. Yet others believe that he is a genius, and that he will one day emerge with a finished work that will blow both the laymen and the scholars away.

Yet others claim that Professor Herbert Hand maybe never really existed, that maybe he was just a figment of our collective imagination(s). For no one can remember ever having interacted with him, ever having had a conversation or even exchanging a few words. Our memories of him seem to come from some place located within, or if not within than beside, the subconscious mind; perhaps

we all just dreamed him up at the same time, and the apartment where some claim he lives (in fact, it's not the same apartment, depending on who you talk to and what they "know"), for some insist that it is in fact no more than an abandoned room with the doors and windows all locked up to keep out vagrants or would-be burglars; that is: decidedly *not* the residence of our legendary scholar.

My feeling, if you would like to know, is that Hand is simply beyond us. He has entered the realm from which some never return, the realm of bottomless wells, querulous conundrums, flawed logic and illogic and anti-logic. It matters to me not whether he ever turns up, or whether his study ever surfaces. It's really beside the point, in my book. For, when you think about it, nothing is ever really completed, and no one is ever really found.

And so, we end on an uncertain note. But let me glance at my calendar here, for as we've been passing the time, shooting the breeze, discussing what they say, February 26 has again crept up on us all.

I hear the sound of a distant ambulance as the wind rushes in through the crack in the window, blows thousands of my papers around the room, blinding me momentarily.

