

## Chapter Thirty

Two weeks from this Saturday night, Airee Macpherson's concert tour takes them to Portland for a show. Melody, Brother Love, and Katie have officially joined the crew as makeup technician, roadie, and personal bodyguard respectively. Around 6:00 pm, a certain woman named Sierra arrives at the back entrance, having flown in from Atlanta, asking for Airee; Airee just happens to be warming up in the back hallways of the theatre, a quiet spot with good acoustics, when she hears one of the security people telling Sierra to leave. The voice sounds familiar; Airee investigates; and voila, Airee and Sierra are reunited for the first time in the flesh. Sierra carries with her an amazing turquoise drum, which, she says, "was next to my bed when I woke up this morning."

That night, when Airee Macpherson and her group go onstage, Airee's tour drummer is accompanied by Sierra, who is outfitted with a full percussion rig, the turquoise drum at its center, and the show has never sounded better. Although Melody and Sierra were never close, Melody is still thrilled by Sierra's appearance. Their tiny band is growing, slowly but surely, and soon enough they will have the strength Melody requires.

In the meantime, as the show goes on, Melody finishes reading the notebooks containing "Lullabye For Thunderstorms," which arrived at their hotel this afternoon, and which have held her attention all day. She sees first hand the devastation suffered by her family. She witnesses her own torture as it happened, and witnesses the incredible circumstances which her kidnapping placed Laurel in as well. She feels devastated by Gary's suicide, though she never met the boy. She feels a horrible, looming despair as Laurel is slowly swallowed up by the Circle; and she feels a sense of ecstatic release when Laurel makes her escape into the Dreamtime. It is maddening and frustrating that the book has no ending, however, and she is certain Scotto will not write another word on the subject -- he is unwilling to fall under her control, she realizes, and the thought burns her.

Most importantly, however, she is now fully aware of what the Circle's intention was toward her. And -- she expects Courtney to be arriving at any moment....

Courtney, at that moment, sits at the back of the auditorium, drinking in the show. Long ago, Laurel mentioned Airee Macpherson's name as one of her Dreamtime companions, and although Laurel seemed to be entirely unaware that Airee was an actual person, a rock star in fact, Courtney had certainly heard the name. It was a hunch that brought her here, a hunch that Laurel's friends in the Dreamtime had once been Melody's friends as well, a hunch that Melody would have almost nowhere else to turn after her escape from InfiniTek but to old friends who could be trusted beyond a shadow of a doubt because of a shared sacred space.

Her mind swirls along with the music, finds itself freely flowing, open and excited, and more than a little bit intimidated. Theoretically, it should be a simple matter to get close enough to Melody to speak the words her mother gave her. But no one on this Earth has ever witnessed the full activation of an Archetype this powerful, this transcendent. Will either one of them even survive the immediate transformation? And what if she is no longer the proper vessel? The words will then "destroy her," as her mother said; what form will this destruction take? Courtney is all too aware that she is dealing with energies at a level far beyond her previous experience; and she wonders if it isn't a sign of desperation that her mother sent *her* of all people instead of a Circle elder.

"We cannot send the elders into the world. They would be seen by our enemies," her mother had said. As Courtney examines this notion in the moments before the end of the concert, she cannot help but feel suspicious, and slightly bitter that there is no one to support her as she attempts the most dangerous act in the Circle's history. Why has she been cut loose? She knows she will never know the answer to questions like these, that the arcane higher mysteries of the Circle's decision making processes remain hidden from her view. Although she has been initiated at the next to highest rank, and acts as her mother's right hand, she has never met an elder besides her mother, never seen the Circle's true core group, never met the one who directs her mother in all things. And always she has trusted her mother implicitly, not simply because her mother is the Circle's visible voice of command, but because her mother is *her mother*, quite naturally.

Should I have reconsidered this relationship a long time ago? she wonders fleetingly as the music ends, and the applause builds.

Then she is on her feet, applauding as well and moving through the crowd to get out. While most of the audience stays inside and awaits an encore, she works her way around to the back of the building, where a small group of rent-a-cops and roadies is clustered in front of the auditorium's back entrance, smoking cigarettes. She pauses for a moment behind an orange barrier, aware that she is going to seem like just another fan girl to this gang, and wondering if she can play that to her advantage. As she pulls out a cigarette of her own and lights it, one of the roadies -- a tall man with a ponytail and hippie attire -- notices her, breaks from the group, and begins moving toward her.

Her entire attitude changes as she sees him coming. She can feel an instinctual confidence building inside her, recognizing that this could be the first in a series of bizarre events which lead her inside the building.

Her suspicion is correct. The roadie in question, a certain Brother Love, says,

"Your name is Courtney, right?"

And in that instant, Courtney's mind is suddenly, entirely blown. She can say nothing in response.

"It is, I know it. I recognize you from your description. The stark orange hair is kind of a giveaway."

He's smiling as he talks to her, yet she can't help but feel she is being sucked into something completely out of her control.

"Look, you don't have to worry about me. My name is Brother Love, after all." Pause. "You're not here to see Airee, are you."

Slowly, she shakes her head.

Brother Love smiles broadly, says, "I knew it. You're here to see Melody."

"How do you know my name?" she weakly asks.

"Oh, we've got connections here and there," Brother Love replies.

"Come on, I'll take you inside."

He leads her past the other roadies, ignoring their bemused stares, and Courtney attempts to carry herself with some sense of dignity, as though she were more than a sheep being led to slaughter. This sudden fatalism astonishes her; she *never* expected that Melody would somehow have the upper hand in this encounter, and now she is slowly becoming frightened beyond belief. But there is definitely a lightness to this Brother

Love's character that belies any sense of overt threat. Perhaps she still has room to maneuver....

Airee Macpherson and her band are coming off the stage now from their encore, and she watches Airee and her small entourage whiz past toward the dressing room. Airee sees Brother Love and nods, and then notices Courtney and gives her a smile, leaving Courtney still more disconcerted. Is this entire event staged for her benefit? Brother Love is not taking her to the dressing rooms, however, but to a small spiral staircase on one side of the stage, leading up to an elaborate catwalk system above the stage itself.

"She's up there," Brother Love says.

Courtney takes a long look up the spiral staircase, and begins ascending, leaving Brother Love behind her.

"Hey Courtney!" Brother Love calls out.

She turns to face him. His smile is too sincere to be believed.

"Relax, will ya?"

And then he vanishes into the crowd, to begin tearing down the show.

Courtney climbs the spiral stairway slowly, deliberately, counting each step as she goes, listening to the ring of the steel, watching the stage get smaller and smaller below her, aware that all of her possible pretenses are lost now, almost convinced that she may as well just leap over the railing and plummet to her doom rather than accept the kind of failure for which she is headed. Something has to change, and something has to change *soon*, or else this is all a lost cause. And what can I change? What do I have within my power to change? Certainly not Melody's advantage, however she managed to acquire it.

All I can change is myself.

All I can do is accept my circumstances, and not bemoan them.

All I can do is face reality as it stands, and find a way to make it work.

That's a lot, she decides. I'll get started on that right away.

She arrives at the top of the stairway and has a choice of several catwalks to take in several different directions. She chooses the one straight ahead of her, moving directly over center stage, and as she does, she hears a voice that sounds surprisingly familiar say,

"I'm over here."

She turns, sees a figure shrouded in darkness on a catwalk across from her.

"You look just like I expected you to," the voice says.

Courtney doubles back, and moves to another catwalk, moving as quickly as possible while dodging pipes and piles of electrical cable. She reaches the spot from where the voice emanated, only to hear it say

"Hey, I'm up here!"

from somewhere suddenly above her. She looks up, sees the figure standing on a steel grid which hangs above the entire catwalk system.

"Are you trying to fuck with me?" Courtney shouts, slightly defiant.

"Why, is it working?" the voice replies, and Courtney bites down on her temper. *I'll show you a trick*, Courtney thinks, and closes her eyes, centers herself quickly. Moments later, several spotlight beams appear, trained on the figure standing above her. She looks up, and sees

Melody, bathed in white light, standing calmly and serenely with a smile on her face. She is wearing blue jeans and a black jacket, and her long black hair cascades around her face and onto her shoulders.

"Ah," says Melody, "I see you've found me. Care to join me?"

"I *would* care to join you, actually," Courtney replies, "so don't move, all right?"

Melody laughs lightly, irritating Courtney even further. She doubles back to the spiral staircase and climbs the ladder next to it leading up to the next level, the grid level where counterweights for the theatre's fly system are loaded. Melody hasn't left her pool of light; she stands behind a dozen or so loaded lines, steel ropes which descend down from the grid ceiling to a bar above the stage where lights are hung. Although it is not an actual barrier between them -- Courtney could step through those ropes at any time -- it serves as a barrier nonetheless, leaving Courtney several feet away from Melody.

"I can't see you," says Melody. "Katie, could you fix that?"

Behind her, Courtney hears a light switch being clicked on, and suddenly the grid is lit by several bare light bulbs above them. She turns to see the one called Katie, a tiny, pale woman in purple standing near the

hole in the grid floor from which Courtney just emerged. Katie's face is expressionless, as though she is waiting to make any judgments about the situation.

That's cool, thinks Courtney.

Looking down through the grid floor is similar to looking through a screen window; if you look at it a certain way, all you see is the screen, but if you look at it another way, you can see right through the screen. They are at quite a height, and looking down gives Courtney a vertiginous sensation, as though she is simply hovering in space above dozens of tiny people hard at work. But she finds it hard to look at Melody at the moment; naturally she looks and sounds so much like Laurel that she is uncertain she could tell the two apart if they were together, aside from the black bandanna which Laurel always wears.

"So this is Courtney," Melody says. "Young avatar of the mystic society known as the Circle."

Courtney looks up slowly.

"I suppose you're well aware," Melody continues, her stature seeming to grow in front of Courtney's eyes as she speaks, "how this Circle of yours has wreaked utter and complete havoc on my life to date."

"I have some idea, yeah," Courtney whispers. Melody's withering stare is suddenly burning deep into her, opening up old wounds. There is a pool of guilt which Courtney feels, similar to the pool of light in which Melody stands, and Melody seems free to stir it as she chooses.

"You and I have never met, of course," Melody says, "so you can hardly take direct responsibility for *me*. But what you've managed to do to my *sister*, now that's another story."

Courtney swallows hard. Yes, there is definitely guilt in Courtney's life, and Laurel is the epicenter. Her forehead, her palms are beginning to sweat. Melody slips between the ropes in front of her, stepping out of her light, moving toward Courtney now. Instinctively, Courtney takes a step back.

"Don't run from me," Melody says softly, gently. "You know who I am, Courtney."

"No," Courtney replies. "I don't."

Melody's eyebrows raise.

"Then why are you here?" she asks.

"I know who you *should* be," Courtney replies. "I know what I'd *like* you to be. I know what I *Hope* and pray you are, but I don't know who you are exactly, who you are right now, who this person is facing me. I don't know any such thing."

Courtney blinks twice, then, as Melody comes closer still. She cannot help but read Melody's aura as she approaches; it's almost as though the pool of spotlights has followed her. Melody's face is shining, and the missing piece of information for Courtney is whether she is doing this deliberately -- is she some kind of Trickster? -- or if she has no idea of the effect she is creating. She is definitely more charismatic than Laurel ever was, and -- apparently -- more open, more deliberately friendly. Yet she is still, basically, a child.

"You came here to find out if I was your Messiah," Melody states. "I know that much, and you know that much. And I suppose you have some kind of litmus test for determining the answer?"

"I have only to say the words," Courtney replies evenly, "and we will know within moments."

"If you say the words, and I am not, I will be somehow destroyed, is that correct?" Melody asks.

Courtney nods.

"And if you say the words, and I am, I will be somehow transformed -- and under the Circle's power. Correct?"

Courtney nods again.

"Really, Courtney, the whole idea of it is so unbecoming. Did it ever occur to you that I might develop *naturally* into just what you expect? Did it ever occur to you that your efforts to control me are also efforts to *pervert* me?"

Courtney blinks, slowly shakes her head.

"Courtney," Melody says, moving so close to Courtney that they can feel each other's breath on their faces, taking Courtney's hands and holding them gently, "if you need power for power's sake, then you may have it. It's already yours, and you know it. But let me tell you this: your mother, my torturer, sent you here for a very specific reason. Since you were *born*, Courtney, you have been in training to play your role... the role of *betray*er, the role of *Judas*. Do you understand? They never told you, of course, because then you'd play your role self-consciously. But now, as my

friends and I prepare to do our work alone, here you come to deliver me into the hands of my enemies. Your words to me will be like Judas' kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane -- and it will be *you* who hangs yourself over thirty gold pieces while the rest of the Circle transcends to a higher place. Courtney -- don't look away from me. You know I speak the truth. Do you think they will have sympathy for what's left of you if you fail to Activate me? Think, Courtney, think! We don't have to be enemies, you and I."

Courtney shakes her head slowly, feeling each word land like a dart in her chest, her heart wanting so desperately to just burst and get it over with. Of course, it's true -- in a framework where the Messiah Archetype lives and breathes, *naturally* other Archetypes will be necessary to enact the proper scenario. And I was *never told*. How much of this ridiculous intrigue and deception will I have to live with? she asks herself. All I wanted was peace on this planet, and I thought, I *truly believed*, I would see it within my lifetime. And now -- everything I believed in is suspect; Melody knows more than she ever should have known -- she never should have *escaped* from InfiniTek in the *first* place; Laurel and Cohen, my only friends in the world, have fled from me in horror because of the lies that were necessary to bring them to initiation; and in these final, tenuous moments, it is all in my hands, in my mind. For when she says

"Did it ever occur to you that I might develop *naturally* into just what you expect?"

she is very, very tempted to believe her, tempted to accept that Melody *is* this planet's new Messiah, *without* the Circle's meddling, without her mother's schemes and abandonment. It *is* true: I have never known a life outside this Circle, and all of my training has led me to this moment. Well, I will *play my role* to the utmost, *that* much is certain. But I will

never again

be under the Circle's thumb. She says,

"Melody, let me come with you. Let me help you,"

betraying in this moment not Melody, but Mrs. Wormwood (as true to her role as she could possibly be), and Melody says,

"We're rewriting the old scenarios, Courtney. I would love to have your companionship in the days to come."

And then they manage to embrace, and Courtney almost feels as though she's with Laurel again, can almost forget the open wound of Laurel's absence. Katie steps forward and Melody introduces them, and Katie's smile is surprisingly beautiful; and as a small stream of tears begins to roll down Courtney's face, she feels, quite suddenly,

free,  
as though this is where her life begins,  
and everything else was just a mirage, just a fiction, just a necessary evil on the road to her present state.  
"There are no necessary evils," Melody says suddenly, and Courtney's breath is suddenly swept away.

Meanwhile, in Cedar Falls, Iowa, at a bar known as Pour Richard's, Crank Boy, Angie, and I are getting hammered on various beers, amaretto sours, and Long Island iced teas.

"Scotto," says my friend Crank Boy, "let me tell you a little secret about Cedar Falls, something that only the true natives here know."

I'm definitely in the mood for a little Cedar Falls folklore, that's for sure. Crank Boy's family has lived in Cedar Falls for years and years and years, long enough to become ingrained in the very fabric of the town's history. There's a statue in the town plaza of one of Crank Boy's distant relatives (Colonel Marcellus Cranque), and Crank Boy himself can hardly pass a drunk in an alley without recognizing him from their last family reunion. Crank Boy was one of those weird acquaintances, the kind you strike up in school, or at work, or on an airplane that's plunging toward the earth: you wouldn't necessarily like each other ordinarily, but due to the extenuating circumstances (in this case, extensive drug use), you're both willing to forgive quite a bit.

"Very few people know," says Crank Boy, his words slurring together in a most musical fashion, "that the original settlers of this city, back a few thousand years before Christ, actually developed the very first alphabet."

"I thought," reply I, my head swinging back and forth through the air like a tetherball as I try to take another drink, "that the Sumerians developed the first alphabet."

"Sumerians?" replies Crank Boy. "Oh yeah."

"So you guys tripped last night?" Angie asks, not quite innocently.

"Tripped?" Crank Boy shouts. "Are you kidding? What we did last night was *tiddlywinks* compared to how they used to do it *back in the Sixties*."

"Oh?" Angie says calmly, sipping on her drink.

"Listen, back in the Sixties," Crank Boy rambles, "Timothy Leary had this giant manor house called Millbrook, in which *everyone* was *tripping*, ALL THE TIME! They actually had it set up in shifts so that while one group of people was tripping, one group was preparing to trip, and one group was coming down from tripping. This is a good system: it means there's always someone sober enough to do the dishes. The place was literally *soaked* with LSD. All you had to do was lick the wallpaper and you'd start to get off. People would trip so hard at Millbrook and go so far out into the void that, to this day, aliens from the Dog Star, Sirius, still have a communications network set up to talk to us. *That's* tripping."

"If LSD is so cool, Crank Boy," Angie asks, "why is it *illegal*?"

Crank Boy pauses a moment before answering.

"Because a whole country full of tripping people would be a little too weird for this planet to handle?" he offers.

Angie nods sagely.

I happen to glance over to the door at that moment, just in time to see

Laurel!

coming into the bar, along with someone else, a tall, Apollo-like figure in a black leather jacket. I see her scanning the bar, see her notice me, see her point my direction and start moving toward me. For some reason, a small part of my brain -- very small, unfortunately, thanks to the alcohol -- seems to think some kind of trouble is in the works. Isn't Laurel supposed to be in London, getting initiated into some mystical cult or something?

"I'll be right back," I say, as I start to leave our table.

There's an open booth about halfway to the door, which I slide into, and wait for Laurel and her friend to make their way to me, through the teeming crowd of drunken college students attempting to out-alternative their friends and seduce their neighbors.

"Hi, Scotto," says Laurel, as she slides into the booth opposite me. Her friend sits down and gives me a serious stare, and Laurel says, "This is Cohen."

"Hi, Cohen," I mumble.

A waiter stops by, and Laurel gets a drink for herself, something green that looks like a glass of Scope. Cohen orders a foreign lager, and I settle for another Long Island iced tea.

"How're things?" I ask. "Things" is a nice, ridiculously vague term, of course, for Laurel and her life, but there it is.

"Groovy groovy," she says, nice and terse. "Listen, Scotto, I don't want to cut short the small talk or anything, but Cohen and I have a question about your new book."

"Is that so?" I reply.

I take a good look at Laurel, as if to dig up some kind of security there. The look on her face, though, is one of almost-terror, as though she's mouthing the words "Oh my God, I completely *forgot*...."

"Look, Scotto, for Christ's sake..." says Laurel, reaching across the table to grab my hand. She touches me, and suddenly, the contact is electric. Deja vu sweeps over me like a tidal wave, only it isn't deja vu precisely, or rather, I'm not "vu"ing backwards in time, I'm... looking Laurel straight in the eye, and it's almost as though we can see right *through* each other's eyes. Suddenly, I'm mortified; suddenly, the curtains are beginning to draw back on the panorama of existence, and suddenly, Laurel and I are aware of something ridiculous, something purely aesthetic, something phenomenally intense and hard to think about.

"Scotto," Laurel says slowly, "I think I just made a big mistake."

"You never shoulda come here," I whisper, my words slurring too much, my brain working too slow to puzzle out how we ended up in this position.

Cohen, unfortunately, has been left out of the discussion. He's getting very nervous. He wants to say something, but we have a hard time hearing him. And you see, somehow my deja vu tells me that he has very good cause to be afraid.

"Listen," he says, "the air around you two is swirling," he says, and he gets up, tries to get some distance, "it's like reality is distorting where the two of you are sitting."

And I say to Laurel, "I think your friend's in trouble."

And the words jolt her hard, and she says, "Do something."

But Cohen is moving away from us now; as I turn to say something to him, his panic-stricken form is already out the door.

"Oh, God, Scotto, I think I really fucked up," says Laurel.

"Hasn't everybody in this story?" I reply.

The pinball machine in the back is ringing and dinging furiously, and a horde of people around it are cheering and shouting. A Village People CD is blasting out of the speakers. And reality is distorting around Laurel and me. Suddenly machine gun fire is zooming through the air, and the big front window is shattering, as Cohen's body flies backwards into the bar, followed by a barrage of bullets that strike only his body. The pinball people don't mind a bit because they've got three balls in play, and the Village People don't miss a beat as I dive to the floor next to the bullet ridden body of Cohen, who stares at me in wonder and says, "You're some kind of post-modern miracle, huh," before shuffling off his mortal coil. And Gale's Voice emerges in my head, trying to soothe me, saying "Fear not, fear not, fear not, fear not..."

But I'm afraid it simply isn't her prerogative to tell me what to fear.

Improbably, Laurel and I escape out the back door, into the parking lot. I'm moving on autopilot as fast as I can toward my car, and Laurel is right beside me, a look on her face like a deer caught in headlights, like a city watching the Bomb drop. Then she says,

"Wait a minute, Scotto, what happens next?"

"Huh?" I reply as I fumble with my keys in the car door lock.

"WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?" she screams. "In the story? In 'Voices'? That's what's going on right now, isn't it?"

My mind is whirling and churning through the fog of alcohol, and then I remember.

"Jesus Christ!" I exclaim, remembering the fatal car crash which ends the short story 'Voices.' "We can't drive in this!" I grab her hand, and we begin running full fledged away from the parking lot, down toward 23rd Street, across the university campus at top speed. There seems to be no one following us, but hey, you can never be too sure, not in this book.

There are police sirens screaming all over town, but we are long gone, headed toward somewhere indeterminate, a place to rest, a place to hide, a place to gather our strength, none of which exist.

"Scotto, stop," Laurel says finally, coming to a halt outside a dorm on the other side of campus entirely. "I can't... breathe...."

I can't breathe either. In fact, the moment we stop moving, I collapse to my knees and begin vomiting violently. That's good, I decide -- get this fucking alcohol out of my system (why did I get drunk *tonight* of all nights?). Then I turn to her and say,

"You shoulda fucking called first."

"Why did you do it?" she screams. "Why did you have to write Cohen's death?"

"It was *Gary's* idea!" I spit back at her. "He *imposed* this, this stupid fucking notion of tragedy on me. I didn't want to write tragedy, really. I was thinking to myself, I have this desire to write, and why should it be wasted on telling tragedies, or, or *horrible* stories? Why should I create some horrible universe for these people that I'm writing about, just because Gary asked me to? So I thought, I'll show you, Gary. When I write this story, *you'll* be dead, how's that for tragedy. We all would have to wind up dead, even your friend whom I never met. It'd be nice and Shakespearean, you know? And then I'd, I don't know, I'd hand the story to Gary, and he'd *get it*, he'd get what I was trying to communicate to him, about how he's been looking at life. He'd see that, and he'd cheer right up."

Through a wave of anguish and tears, she says, "He wouldn't drown in quicksand."

"Yeah. That was the plan anyway." Pause.

Too much heavy breathing, too much intense pain in my chest, in my mind, in my heart, I can hardly fucking stand it. My throat is too tight for words. Who comforts whom? Why is reality warping around us? Why has physics suddenly gone crazy?

"There are bad guys approaching," Vince suddenly says inside my head. His Voice, at this time, is like a sharp needle through my cerebellum.

"Vince says there are bad guys approaching," I tell Laurel.

"The Circle," Laurel says. "It has to be. They couldn't let Cohen and me just escape."

"They weren't looking for Cohen," Vince says. "She's the initiate."

"Vince says you're the initiate," I tell her. And then, out of the blue, I tell her, "Take off your bandanna."

Which she does, slowly, and I see the symbol of a cross, enclosed in a circle, inscribed in black on her forehead.

"That's a nice tattoo," I say.

Her hand flies up to her forehead.

"Jesus Christ," she whispers.

"I think that was the idea," Vince says.

And then, suddenly, we find ourselves surrounded, by men in black trenchcoats, leering viciously as they approach from all sides. Laurel's hand grabs mine, and the connection between us is intense, hot. I'm hallucinating an aura of protective energy around our hands. And more....

"This is the end," says my aura to hers. My eyes grow wide -- perhaps my pupils dilate. And then she says, "No it isn't. Just hang on." My mind is reeling. I haven't felt like this since my last drug trip. Somehow the notion of Voices in my head is so much easier to entertain than the notion that Laurel and I are experiencing a warp clear through to another dimension in time and space. Is this a brand new trip or an old one? The aura from our hands is so bright, so intense. A deafening roar fills the air, as bursts of machine gun fire erupt all around us. "DON'T LOSE ME!" the echo of a voice I once knew screams.

Behind us, a hail of machine gun bullets flies through the space we once occupied and strikes the men in black across the circle, their deadly intentions turned on each other, each one of them falling in a sudden, dumb heap.

And then, we are emerging slowly into the Dreamtime, like walking through a wall of creamy milk chocolate, and I say, "I don't understand! Almost, but not yet!" And she replies, "I have no words with which to communicate the complexity of this experience, save that it is at once real and illusory, at once true and false." And I ask, "Who are you, then?" and she replies, "But who can love a phantasm?"

And suddenly: "I think I've caught the thread here...."