

Knowing in an Unknowing Kind of Way

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TASMANIA

After a long climb up to a waterfall surrounded by jagged cliffs of eroded dragon teeth, like the maw of a gigantic crater in this Tasmanian wilderness, I am walking down the rushing river, dazzled. Suddenly I hear sounds of voices while I know for a fact there is no one here. I look and see the transparent figure of an Aboriginal woman looking up at me with curiosity in her eyes, which I know not to be physically there either. She is washing clothes in the fast-moving river. Ahead of me I see a man with a rifle lying in wait on the escarpment above the stream. He shoots the woman. I know he is not there. I know there is no shot. I know that he is utterly callous. I remember the piety of the signs near the marvels of the landscape which must fill the most hardened soul with awe, about Aboriginal culture in these parts and how it should be respected. It provides the names the original inhabitants had given to things. I have been told that Aboriginal Tasmanians were massacred, and that in 1878 the last full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian, a woman named Truganini, died. My heart grows heavy. I know I should be careful; while thinking this I slip, lose my footing and fall. I am lucky. The ground is soft in between the sharp stones.

Two realities exist simultaneously: physicality and imagination. But not *my* imagination, as in “a figment of my imagination.” The image I see haunts the Tasmanian landscape. The killings are still present as a live memory attaching itself at will to a perceiver, especially one sensitive to genocide as is this particular European Jew. I firmly feel that the agency in my perception of the transparent Aboriginal woman comes from two sides, from myself and from the killing alive in the landscape.

Yet I know it firmly in an unknowing way: I know I have seen her but I don't know if she was there. Knowing and unknowing coexist in an instance.

Driving back to the farm where I'm staying, I get hopelessly lost. Not that I mind: the Great Western Tiers mountain range with its flat mesa-like tops awash in the restrained olive green of Australian gum trees stretching out along my left keep me fascinated. Then I see a farmer with his wife and dog. His sharp face is red from high blood pressure and the effects the punishing weather around here has on his Anglo-Celtic skin. He looks friendly, her face is inviting. I stop the car, and the following conversation ensues:

“I have to get to Mole Creek.”

“You are lucky. Mole Creek is a beautiful place.”

“I know, I've been there; but now I can't find it.”

“It does that. It disappears at times. Sometimes you just can't find it.”

“Like a fairy fort.”

“Exactly! Now go to the end of this road and take a left...”

Jokes are ways of acknowledging something without doing so, by wrapping it in the absurd. We both know that Mole Creek is always there and doesn't just disappear off the map. Yet places which appear for a while in apparent physicality and then are gone off the face of the earth are rampant in Celtic fairy lore and this farmer instantly understands my reference. In Ireland many can point you to known fairy forts, and fairy sightings were still rampant a century ago. The “gentle folk” as they were called, were a bit taller than are we and blue in hue. They

would ride, horse and all into the fairy fort and disappear from view. Meetings with them were frequently fatal, since they hated being disturbed in their revels or needed the life force of humans. Contemporary Irish, especially the younger ones, pointing to the fort today do so with a sheepish grin of one who feels the whole notion is a bit loony. But ask them on a moonless night, outside, near the fort, and their ancestral beliefs may return. Yet by day they know of the Gentle Folk in an unknowing kind of way, wrapped up in a joke. Their unknowing differs from the nineteenth-century sightings, which were told as a matter of course, in the single state of mind of one who knows they are true. In the twenty-first century, most Westerners are also in the single state of mind of one who knows these sightings are not true. One who knows that fairies are for the gullible and don't exist. And then there are the ones like me, who know in an unknowing kind of way that intelligences abound around us, sometimes on the map, sometimes off. This knowing is robust, yet I have no idea if it is true.

The mountain rises like a bald, wrinkled brick straight up from the bucolic green around a hamlet called Paradise. Everything is ancient here in Australia and its heart-rending beauty is carved by eons of erosion. As I enter the track I look up and am instantly aware of the grand groggy elephant emphatically present on a rock-face a thousand feet high. His gaze into nowhere includes me and my speck of existence, briefly part of a present that has been here forever. It is like looking up at clouds to see them configure into myriads of beings – now they stay carved in stone. The artist has carelessly left the debris around in landslides of rock avalanches. Any sculptor knows that the elephant had always existed in this rock, and eons of weather had just brought out this grey mineral pachyderm. I walk along the vertical rock-face after signing the trail book, so they know that I'm here, in case I get caught in thunder and lightning with a sprained ankle in some forsaken crevice. Around me the woods with their high eucalypts are scarred by recent bushfires. As I get higher to a place not reached by the fire, I notice how the ugly outer bark of the trees is peeled away in strips like a shedding snake, and the silk of their light olive skin is bared to my view all the way up to the sky. It almost feels as if I catch an unsuspecting woman naked, and it makes me shy. To my right I notice Star Wars' Yoda on a space-motorbike with wings, gnarled from the roots of a toppled giant. A story is beginning to unfold, yet I can't decipher the plot. Then mists set in. Behind a dance of hazes, lush ferns suck themselves into the brightest of green from the trickling streambed underneath. After three hours of climbing through the fog I reach the heath. The choreography of veils continues to dance undiminished. Now the landscape compares to the African Serengeti, with sparse trees and high grasses. Among all the green, lavender heather clusters in huddles. Each little flower consists of fibre-optic filaments culminating in a tiny ball of white. I need my reading glasses to marvel at these intricacies. Next to the heather are yellow sprays of micro-orchids with hearts of maroon. Conscious of the need for hardiness, Australian land creates its magic from myriads of miniature flowers. The only smell is of clouds. After passing random boulders who smile like lizards, a Guernica horse-head ten times my size, and dozens of Henry Moore's, suddenly *there* is the summit. More boulders with an actual communication dish on top. I take out a Gouda cheese sandwich, being tamely Dutch on top of wild Tasmania. Then three Canadian boys appear out of the fog, with loud music broadcasting the fact that they take their familiar environment wherever they go, as do I. "This is the fucking top of this mountain, man," I hear them yell, and they wave a tiny Canadian flag just for fun.

The wild is unpredictable and needs to be covered with cheese cloth. Virgin land elicits conquerors and its elevations are made useful for smoke signals, or satellite dishes. The

unfamiliar needs to be covered, conquered, made to serve, or it may unnerve our carefully constructed selves, disrupt our hulls. Pure unknowing overwhelms with unformed presence. Pure knowing covers the world with a reflecting film, making it invisible. Knowing in an unknowing kind of way allows a story to unfold from behind apparent reality, from a world that is not merely in my mind nor just out there and dumb, but talks to me.

It turns out I have a cabin on a hill. Reception on my mobile phone has been terrible all along, but miraculously this time there is an ample three bars of connection. The wireless icon on my computer tells me it is good, and so it is. After attending to twenty-one urgent emails, driving the bucolic outskirts of wilderness into hiding under a twenty-first-century cover, I have a psychotherapy video session with a woman in Colorado. Her face appears among the mountains and her two-dimensional, 15-inch presence overwhelms the spectacular environment as we get absorbed in our intimacy. I'm sitting outside and she comments on the big sandstone bricks behind me. I am staying in a cottage built in 1830 by convicts, converted into sheer loveliness by a bright cloak of professional hospitality spread over its painful memories.

Suddenly a thump.

I look up and see a beautiful green bird on the ground under the window, standing out against the sandstone. Its twisted neck makes me fear it is broken. I point the camera in his direction to show my video partner what has happened. She suggests I attend to the bird. So I take off my headset and go over. I don't know what to do. When a human being has a car accident, you are told not to move them until the paramedics arrive, since you might injure them further. No bird paramedics here: I'm it. First I gently cup the tiny bird in my hands. It is shaking. I feel its claws grab my finger. They don't seem to be broken. The bird is stunned. As I try to take it off my finger the claws grip tighter: "Not yet, give me time." So I take it to the computer, put my headset back on and show my video partner this gorgeous green presence. We are silent. I can feel that I am shaken, and so is she. The bird is still shivering, which translates into a tremulous sensation inside my chest. The woman in Colorado feels the same. "His heart is beating so fast," she comments. The three of us, two species, two locations, are enveloped by a single embodied state. Slowly we feel ourselves unbend. I stroke the bird along its throat while its claws keep on gripping "Not yet." Then a take-off, a flight to half the tree height, a drop – I feel my heart skip – and a pull-up like a stunt airplane to the large olive-green tree which envelopes our bird with its safety. A woman in Colorado, a man in Tasmania, and surely the bright green bird in its own way breathe a sigh of relief. We are left with the aftermath of shock. "You healed him," she asserts ... and we're back to therapy.

All snakes here in the Tasmanian wilderness are poisonous.

I'm climbing around a track which I later find out has officially been closed because of rock fall. On arrival at the first lookout point much before schedule with a whole day ahead of me, I had asked a young bright-eyed, bearded ranger who, by fortuitous coincidence, happened to be walking down as I stood pondering my desire to walk along the rock face of Cradle Mountain. He assured me the trail was safe enough. Some parts were steep, he said, but not unmanageable. Did I carry plenty of water? Then he asked me for my name and offered to enter my change of itinerary into the walkers' log at the entry. So I had set out infused with his youthful confidence. Some parts are indeed exhilaratingly steep and I praise providence for having given us four limbs. The volcanic face above me, a concave chorus of spires reaching up sharply, offsets its dark brown verticality against the spring-blue sky. I overlook the dark crater-

lake with blood red hues along the edges, and ponder the primeval waterfall formed by the torrential thunderstorms two days before. As I look down at my feet to resume my walk I see it. A spurt of panic shoots its adrenaline throughout my body in a rush of blood. Then I am corrected by the visual cortex: it is just a glistening tree root. I relax, laugh, and exclaim to myself: “An amygdala moment!” My body is in aftershock, the blood heavy. I had often read and re-read the teaching tale of coming upon a stick in the woods. The archaic amygdala picks up on it before the signal is processed by the cortical brain, the recent outer bark which makes us human, and puts the entire system on high alert: “A mortal enemy!” It is corrected several milliseconds later by the visual cortex: “This is not a snake.” Yet my direct experience is different from my mental understanding of these vital insights from neuroscience. I can *feel* the two moments distinctly: the amygdala rush and the cortical correction separated by an observable lapse of time. It is exhilarating. I have been changed from having heard about it into viscerally knowing.

Further down the track I rappel along a chain on a very steep section, going down backwards, holding on tight, awed by the fact that I have lost the fear of heights which had come upon me when my father died. He was terribly afraid of heights, which I had never been until he was gone, and as if the gene of vertigo had been turned on in me upon his death, it then became mine. I thoroughly enjoy its absence. After this new awareness has hit me, I walk carefree along an even trail. I see it to my right. It is thin like a dark rope. This is the real thing. The snake and I are fully aware of one another. We know that we don’t want to get hurt. We wait. Nothing happens. I make a slight move. The snake moves toward me. I stop. We are both calm, like pedestrians on a crossing without lights. Then he crosses in front of me in that slender meandering of his people and disappears into the bush to my left. I am not relieved, since I had not been afraid. The moment had been a pensive one. I think for the both of us. I feel the alertness which comes with essential encounters.

I learned the power of unknowing from dreams.

Wherever I go, the first thing people do to me as a dream professional is tell me their dreams and ask what they mean. In the same breath: this is my dream – what does it mean? There is urgency to the question as if the questioner wants to exterminate an encroaching pest. Often they follow up by saying “I know what it’s about,” which then they tell me to our mutual relief and I concur, leaving safely behind us the jungles of unknowing ready to pounce. Of course instinctively I do exactly the same when I wake from a dream, until I remember my decades of training in leaving dreams be. Then we momentarily co-exist, the living dream and I, knowing one another in an unknowing kind of way.

I am in a city on my way to a lecture I have to give, a frequent occurrence in my life. My hosts bring me to our destination about ten minutes late. We had been rushing. The lecture hall has descending brown pews like the church in which I had given a talk in Melbourne. As I enter, I notice that the room is full. I gulp. Our main host begins to speak from his seat in the audience. He tells us that under regular circumstances my lateness would have been almost OK, but this time, with the suicide rate being so high and all, the pertaining institute had done a quick research and found that the anxiety level in the room was up to 60. Then it is intermission. I can’t remember what I have talked about before the break but I know that the prepared papers for my lecture are back at my office. I want to give a prepared talk. Women are waiting in a long line for the toilet and I know that there are about ten minutes in which to get the papers. A colleague

offers to drive quickly with me back to my office and get my talk. We rush out and get into his rusty old black Citroen, which has been completely blocked in by other cars. He manages to get it out, as I realize that I have already given this particular lecture in this town, Sydney. We are driving through Cambridge and there is a lot of traffic on Massachusetts Avenue. I say we should turn around and my colleague is upset with my vacillations. I respond that it is important not to be late again. I will have to improvise, which is anyway what people want me to do, because it makes them understand how I work. As we drive on the Tobin Bridge I wake up.

I lie very still, going over the events of the last few minutes. Feeling the rushing about through Melbourne, which is Sydney, which is Cambridge, I connect my lecture right away to the writing of this riff about unknowing, realizing how I instantly regress to default by wanting to base myself on what I wrote before. The anxiety level is suicidal – *I don't know how to do this* and procrastinate while not understanding that this is just the point: to write while not knowing how. I remember that my sixtieth birthday is just around the corner and, feeling rushed, I'm aware that so much still needs to be done as time is pressing in. I conclude that writing about knowing by way of unknowing should be like improvisational jazz.

I'll write my words not knowing how.

Waking up to a bridge ...

The End

I fall back asleep.