

from the morning

a psychedelic novel

Aragorn Eloff

"We are children of chaos,
inextricably intertwined with
it. Our deepest nature is
disorder. That is the beginning
of all things."

- Carl Gustav Jung

1: March 6, 2025 – Moondawn

Record: Laura Cannell – *The Visible Light of Other Worlds*

The trees around me shimmered with the restlessness beneath things as I made my way through the park. Twilight was the crack between worlds, Don Juan had once told Castaneda, but I'd had a strange sense of something splitting open since the morning. I was running in silence, which was unusual. Most evenings I'd be listening to music or a podcast, but I needed to clear my head and nothing in the playlist on my fitness tracker seemed quite right. Was that bench always there? I had run this route thousands of times – near daily since moving to Bristol close to a decade ago – but it seemed unfamiliar right now and approaching a fork in the path I found myself hesitating. I'd been travelling a lot since the publication of my book, which had disrupted my usually fastidious running schedule, but this morning's talk had been at the local university; a homecoming of sorts. The book had its roots in a philosophy PhD completed there several years back. I had taken care to excise the turgidity typical of doctoral dissertations while rewriting it for a popular audience, but I occasionally worried that it remained too steeped in the specialist language of my field. This was, I think, although it remained unclear, the worry that had woken me up an hour earlier

than my usual 5:30am, meaning I hadn't slept more than five hours, a fact that likely contributed to my current semi-oneiric state. The talk itself had gone well. I'd decided to walk the three miles from home to campus, hoping that the freshness of an early March morning would help dispel my inchoate anxieties. It did a little, but I nonetheless reached the university with a cold sweat drenching my underarms and hoped it wouldn't be too visible once I took my jacket off. A small ink jet printed poster advertising the talk was stuck up outside the seminar room: "an introduction to the complex systems theory of consciousness with Aaron Carter, author of the groundbreaking *Vectors of Thought*. March 6 2025, 9am." There was something slightly absurd about the poster, or at least that's how I felt glancing at it on my way inside. Perhaps it was the photo they'd used, which somehow made me look both smug and uncomfortable. Then again, this was a look I had perfected across many photographs, never having quite figured out how to navigate the profoundly contrived experience of looking natural while someone fiddled with their camera settings or phone app. Which was probably why I didn't have an Instagram account, still preferring the written exchanges of emails, blogs, forums and the occasional Facebook post. The term 'groundbreaking' also felt off. In recent weeks, in fact, I'd begun to have reservations about my book and during the last few talks I'd given I'd begun to worry that it was the textual equivalent of my awkward Kodak smile.

Regardless, in those talks I had stuck to what was by now a well-rehearsed script. I'd usually begin by expressing some faux modesty about the surprising success of my book, although to be honest I had been genuinely surprised when the first run had sold out in a few days, largely on the strength of two decent reviews in *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*. I'd then remind the audience of the slippery nature of consciousness – the weird existential infinite regress of reflecting on what is simultaneously the subject and the object of our reflection, perceived and perceiver – before presenting my own solution to this problem. Solution was perhaps a strong word. My doctorate had been the culmination of a years-long simultaneous obsession with

chaos, dynamic systems theory and other trendy areas of mathematics on the one hand, and philosophy of mind on the other. Bringing the two together, in some ways all I had really achieved was to rephrase the question within the novel language of vector fields, attractor spaces and topological manifolds. Still, my idiosyncratic take on what was sometimes referred to as ‘the hard problem of consciousness’ – although I had come to think there wasn’t just one hard problem – had evidently resonated with a lot of people. One of the philosophers I’d focused on in my PhD had said somewhere that we get the answers we deserve based on how we pose the problems. Posing the problem of subjective experience – of the ‘something it is like-ness’ of our being in the world – differently, I had, I told myself, at least created a space for new answers to emerge. Perhaps. Veering unexpectedly off-script towards the end of today’s presentation I confessed my growing reservations about my project to the audience, a group of thirty or so students and lecturers, none of whom seemed particularly aware that I was being more candid than usual.

Now close to the park gates, my tracker displaying a faster pace and higher heart rate than usual, I wondered for a moment why I’d allowed myself this moment of public self-reflection on the limitations of my work. It had probably been Kim. They’d had a kind of liminal, unreal atmosphere about them and perhaps I’d been sensing their presence throughout the talk, somewhere just below what I described in my book as the chaotic itinerancy threshold of conscious awareness. I did know for sure that they had unequivocally breached that threshold with their question. There had been a few others, the usual mix of technical pedantry, grandstanding and the sort of undergrad word salad that always made me wonder whether it was me or them that was so profoundly confused, and I had provided my usual answers, inevitable outcomes of the ways the problems were posed. There was time for one more question and at first no hands had gone up, which had relieved me given that I was speaking less lucidly than usual. But then a hand towards the back of the room had shyly lifted itself and an almost inaudible voice had asked, in a faltering, meandering kind of way: *aren’t you afraid that if you’re right then your disenchantment of consciousness is also a disenchantment*

of the fundamental mystery of life? That was what I'd managed to glean from the awkwardly posed question anyway. I'd been forced to respond to the question of meaning many times in contexts like these and on this occasion it annoyed me more than I thought it would. Several canned answers rushed towards my mouth. Just before one of them was able to escape, however, I caught their eyes. Sensing my irritation, they were already regretting their decision, silently imploring me not to shame them in front of their peers, some of whom were tittering at the awkwardness of the situation. There was more to it though, a sense of something unknown welling up to the surface. The crack widened an inch. Attempting to respond graciously, I found myself tangled up in a rambling non-answer about the interrelationship of sense and meaning, false salience and the roots of the spiritual impulse in existential finitude. Halfway into my lengthy digression I stopped, realising that I'd talked myself into a circle and hoping that the increasingly listless audience was too confused by my messy bricolage of thoughts to notice. I attempted an ill-delivered joke about the effects of lack of sleep on the language-making parts of my brain and then quickly wound things up before moving to the book stand that had been set up just outside the entrance.

I sat down and began shuffling books and pamphlets around the table. Kim walked up to me a few moments later and awkwardly introduced themselves.

"I'm sorry about my... question, I... umm... didn't phrase it well."

"No, it was a good question. I've just been having a bit of a weird day is all."

I carried on aimlessly redistributing the contents of the book stand.

"Every day's... a bit of a weird... day for me."

That caused me to look up. There was something familiar about them. Specifically, there was something about the way they spoke, pausing at random intervals as if carefully navigating the currents in a river of thoughts that was in constant danger of tipping their precarious vessel or sending them off down one of myriad ill-defined tributaries. It reminded me of something, or someone. I asked them to say more and as I did, I noticed the book and the crack widened substantially further. There in

front of me, outside a university seminar room in Bristol in March of 2025, a shy young person whose thoughts and words seemed connected by only a thin thread stood holding in their left hand a well-worn copy of a mid-90s Ronin Books edition of Timothy Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers*. As reality began to shudder slightly around me, I tried to remain focused on what they were attempting to tell me, their words now imbued with a subtle psychedelic sheen of enhanced meaningfulness. I'd never had a flashback, but I was imagining that if I did it would be very much like this. Whatever I was feeling, however, seemed doubled in them, their pupils far more dilated than the late morning light required and their facial expressions randomly mapping the space between politeness, confusion and enthusiasm as though they had momentarily forgotten the social agreements bound to each distribution of eyes, mouth and brow. Piecing together their incongruous presentation and stumbling, allusive language, I realised what was happening.

"So if I could take a wild guess, you've been experimenting with psychedelics and you feel like you've unravelled yourself a bit?"

"That's... kind of it, yes... but how did... I've... I... So, I've read about integration but... so... I don't know how to..."

"Do you have friends who know about these kinds of experiences who could help?"

"Not really... I... Well, I've kind of been taking stuff alone..."

"So you're not part of any university psychedelics group or anything like that?"

"No... I've only been here since... since the start of my post grad... a couple of months... I... it's just LSD and mushrooms and... well, just a few times really..."

"When last did you take anything?"

"Well... so... I took LSD two weeks ago."

"How much?"

"I... a proper... apparently altogether it was 800 micrograms?"

"Wow, that's a very strong dose. And you've been feeling a bit ungrounded since then?"

"It's like I haven't really come down properly... Like... I thought

something during the trip and... so... it's like an insight that I... can't get rid of."

"An insight into what?"

"Consciousness."

"And what was the insight?"

"I... that's the thing... I... I can't explain it... It's like this... this deep sense and... everything seems different since then... like I've... flicked a switch... it's like nothing means anything... I don't know how to..."

The crack expanded yet again, this time with almost visceral force. I remembered being where they were, trying to piece the fragments of my identity back together again after my own dark night of the soul. This conversation was bringing back long-repressed memories, memories I was especially ill-prepared to countenance today, and I wanted to find a way out, but I was also worried about them. They were clearly in a precarious state and I felt a strong responsibility, driven in part by the book they were holding, a book whose cover I was now again staring intently at.

"Earth, sky, thunder, mountain, water, wind, fire, lake... These change. And if these do not last, do man's vision's last? Do man's illusions?"

Kim's face dropped into an expression of pure shock. Mine too. I'd just recited a passage from All Things Pass, one of the prayers from the book, itself a rewriting of some passages from Daoist literature, and something I had last read almost thirty years ago. I had no idea how it was possible, but I had spoken it word for word, just as it appears on page 51. I knew because they immediately checked. A brief silence followed, during which much was said between us. Then I made an offer.

"As you may have guessed, this is something I have a bit of familiarity with, although it's not something I've engaged with much recently. I think I know some people who could help you integrate your experience, although you would have to promise not to tell anyone. They're professionals who could lose their jobs. Would you like me to introduce you to them?"

"Please! Thank you so much! This... I promise I'll keep it a secret."

"I trust you. You'll be okay, I promise. Look, here's my number and

my email address. Think about it and if you'd like to take me up on the offer, let me know and I'll arrange it."

"Definitely! And..."

Kim stood there silently for a moment as if wanting to say something else but then, obviously thinking the better of it, waved and nodded a farewell and wandered off.

Kim... Arriving at the park gates completely out of breath, I stopped my tracker and checked my pace. I was hoping they would get in touch, especially as they didn't seem to have any other support network. I'd met a few Kims over the years and knew what could happen if things went badly. Kids took such risks these days, and in much lonelier contexts too. I'd often taken acid alone when I was younger, but from everything I'd read, the drugs were getting stronger and difficult experiences were more common, a situation compounded by the hyper-exposed, ever-accelerating set and setting of digital capitalism. These half-baked musings shifted to a memory of how ephemeral Kim had seemed as they'd waved goodbye, how between worlds they were. Wondering whether my friends – an elderly couple I'd met at the original launch of my book and who ran a covert psychedelic therapy clinic at a retreat centre just outside of town – would be able to bridge the rift and ground them back in this world, the crack finally tore wide open as I crossed the street and saw the news headline affixed to a nearby street pole: *Tech entrepreneur Simon Robson dead in apparent suicide.*

There's a void between that moment and where I find myself now, two hours later, sitting in my lounge with my laptop open and a barely-touched glass of whiskey on the table in front of me. I'm scrolling through articles about Simon's death. According to some of his employees he had been increasingly absent from the office in recent months and seemed distracted in meetings. A few weeks back he had stopped coming in entirely and was unreachable by phone or email. He was last seen driving away from his Lakeside house, which looked surprisingly modest in the photos given the hundreds of millions he was worth, late last Wednesday. An extensive police search that weekend located his car in the parking lot at the foot of Table Mountain and his body was found near the top

of one of the peaks towards the end of the Twelve Apostles hike. The official cause of death was a sleeping pill overdose, although they had also found ketamine in his bloodstream, which made me think about Marcia Moore's tragic demise. Deep in the throes of ketamine addiction, the yogi-astrologer heiress had ventured outside one night, climbed up into a tree and injected herself with an enormous dose, concluding the journey to the bright world she had attempted to describe in her final book. Her frozen corpse was discovered the next day. I closed my eyes and tried to picture Simon's last resting place. All I could see was him sitting high up in the branches of a leafless tree, mouth hanging open, eyes blankly surveying the cosmos. At some point his face mutated into Marcia Moore's face, then shifted back to his own, then hers, then his, then at some point Kim's, until the scene entered a kind of superpositional state, multiple simultaneous realities clamouring for attention. I opened my eyes. I couldn't fathom why he had done it. There was no suicide note, no family to ask, not even, as far as I could tell, any close friends. It had been over 25 years since I'd last seen Simon, but I'd followed his narrative arc, first via our broader social networks and then in the media, from the original high praise for his development of the software he was famous for to the more recent gossip magazine articles about his eccentricities and obsessive need for privacy. I wasn't very good with computers, but as far as I understood, he had figured out some new and more efficient way to handle internet traffic routing, which had primarily entailed writing a program which, from the accounts of those few people who had seen the source code, contained some remarkably ingenious and arcane programmatic logic. His company, built on the strength of this one product, had rapidly achieved market dominance and had subsequently developed a whole array of software and hardware products. Apparently, however, after releasing the software he was so well known for Simon had not written a single line of code, leaving that task to the carefully curated team of programmers working under him. In more hyperbolic versions of the story he began to eschew computers altogether in his private life and a purported insider posting in a Reddit tech gossip channel a few years back had even claimed that he didn't own

a laptop.

I was distracting myself with these details because I wasn't yet ready to broach the real question of why he'd done it. It made so little sense, given what I remembered about Simon, that every time I began to ponder this question the thought dissipated and I looped back to the apocryphal persona that had been carved out for him in lieu of his own participation in public life. It was nearing 10pm and the whiskey was now going down more easily. Nothing in me was ready to sleep and so I began rifling through my record collection, suddenly aware of the overwhelming silence and seeking a passage into memory. Reaching K, I pulled out Klaus Schulze's *Moondawn*. Released in 1976, the year both Simon and I were born, the album was a treasured and well-played favourite. The one we'd had back in the 90s was on a poorly recorded cassette, a copy of a copy made on a cheap double tape deck, tipped label and sellotape stains marking the recording protection holes. Regardless of the hiss and warble, however, the magic had shone through. As the opening chants of side A's *Floating* began to fill the space I turned off the main light and switched on the two coloured LED lamps that usually accompanied my late night musical journeys. Adjusting their colours on the accompanying app, I curated an environment of red and light blue that came close to the picture on the back of the record sleeve, where Klaus, surrounded by his synthesisers, summons the forces of the universe within what looks to be some kind of church.

I tried to think back to the first time we'd all heard this album, the five of us, but what appeared instead was a blurry overlap of all the other times I'd listened to it, both alone and with others, times and places seeping into each other as if there was just a single listening that echoed across all these different instances and which was taking place right now just as it was taking place back then. The Berlin School sound of deceptively simple repetitive sequences on analogue oscillators, coupled with phased washes of organ chords, was especially well-suited for these kinds of temporal stretchings. Schulze, like Froese and several of the other great synth artists, knew just how to catapult you through space and time with a single sweep of the filter cutoff, a lesson they had undoubtedly learned

from lengthy LSD sessions in the studio. It was LSD in turn that had first drawn us to this music, and listening to Schulze since then had always produced a softly psychedelic electricity in the air. Leaving the track playing, I headed to the bedroom and pulled a small photo album from a drawer, returning just as the 4/4 beat kicked in. Apart from a couple of Facebook holiday snaps, these were the only photos I had. I wasn't a particularly nostalgic person and in fact the thought of holding onto things made me slightly anxious. I didn't like being bound to the past, looping over the same moments again and again, reducing the future to the consequences of what had already happened. And yet at the same time my past loomed in front of me in the two large record shelves on either side of the audiophile system I had spent a substantial chunk of my savings on. A sprawling archive of extended memory pressed into cheap plastic, a diamond needle traversing the contours of my life at 33 cycles a minute. These records held far more than the few dozen photos on my lap, I thought. I flicked quickly through the childhood birthdays and first days of school before reaching my teenage years. The single two-page spread told a reasonably simple story: smart kid becomes bored and disillusioned in high school, discovers black metal, then the goth scene, then... There's a gap in the narrative here, a period between mid-1992 and late-1993 where some dramatic shift occurred, a shift I lived but cannot articulate, not even to myself. In May 1992 I'm standing outside an alternative club in Johannesburg, black jeans and holey black sweater, long hair and a nose piercing that, even in the grainy, low-resolution photo, doesn't look fully healed. The next photo is dated October 1993. There's a wild look in my eyes. Half my head is shaved bald and several more piercings adorn my face. My outfit makes no sense – I look like I've chosen clothes at random from a communal pile, a practice that was popular with the Diggers and some of the other hippie communities back in the Sixties, although I can't recall have been familiar with this anti-propertarian impulse back when I was seventeen. A question hangs in the margin between these two pictures: *what happened during this time?* This was not the question I was currently asking though and my eyes moved down the page to the photo I was looking for.

Rustlers Valley Festival: April 1994. Ashley, Simon, Lenna, Aaron, Cassie.

We're sitting outside our tent, surrounded by hundreds of other tents, the grassy slopes behind us arriving at the main lodge and behind that, the mountain with the hole in it that always came to mind when I thought about Rustlers. The walk up to the hole was a ritual for many attendees. Terence McKenna, during his 1997 visit to the valley, had apparently remarked that it felt like an area of great spiritual resonance, although in the fuzzy hand-cam video someone had uploaded to Youtube sometime in the late 2000s, he looked stoned enough to have said that about practically anywhere. Either way, for us it was a sacred place. Examining the photo more carefully, it seems we all shared the Digger aesthetic back then. Lenna looks like she's sorting some weed, getting ready to roll a joint. For the first time, an odd thought strikes me: who actually took this photo? We're all in the frame and there were definitely only five of us at the camp site that year. Resigning myself to the fact that this knowledge is irrevocably lost, I'm drawn again to Lenna. There's a book on her lap, the title of which I can't make out. I remove the photo from the plastic sleeve and bring it closer. The track reaches maximum intensity. Fragments of present and past explode everywhere. The LED lights are pulsing. A bolt shoots up my spine, followed by a moment of transcendental clarity as the letters take shape: *Psychedelic Prayers*.

