

# Psychopomp

By Steven Hendricks

## 1. AGNI

*...The subject is quieted when the object ceases.*

At first, Mr Fin will be dressed in faded gardening clothes, a scarf around his neck. He will be a comfortable and lively man. He will give a modest tour of his rooms, his art, relating graceful anecdotes along the way. He will give you a seat by the window and a nice cup of tea. Together, you'll look out on the garden and even see, in the distance, the empty air over the water.

Once all was on the shelf, he read diligently and was moved, he is moved, and this shapes him; but when he looks up to gather his strength and then again nods toward the book, the book is still, remote. He stares, emptied; he remembers, but does not know.

Poetry, he concludes, if we can call it that, is for summoning gods and entertaining children. He understands prose, long unending lines of formless forms, stories now crammed against the walls by the dozens, thousands even, lines woven tightly together to form substantial apparitions among the pages, even between books: these stories leap and hold to one another like lovers and like enemies and unearth a new desire, a desire that takes its own form, a form in the grid and in the mass of Mr Fin like a haunting, a lonely downlooking form, waiting and all the same engrossed in the gruesome possession that lets us read and write as if with liveliness: Mr Fin could then speak, could then move and orient himself as a character, beneath the necessary clouds one day as a character, and what's called a speaker, with verbs and objects and articles arrayed as torches, and by his own rhetoric become a place where voices can intersect, where lurks an eye that translates between the dead subject and the living object, not the precious intricacies of feeling and image, but the very pattern that warms blood in the reader's cheek: in the intimacy of marginal writing, that margin where readings intersect, there, he would become the

moment of reading with no recourse to memory.

Mr Fin sees his body as a librarian might, as a librarian might regard an estate, penetrated by divergent patterns each claiming a new hold on his nature; and this particular librarian daydreams that, when the sun is finally insufficient and the lamps must be lit, then the wild penumbra of other orders will present themselves, and so, burned orange in the lamp light, the world is available for reinvention on the same tired shelves.

There. His finger touches the story. And in that instant, Mr Fin, somewhat dizzily, but not at all blurred, perceives a galaxy of forms, lines intersecting, paths between objects, a grammar of space and time, as if from far far above, he sees the city, its water, rectangular roofs, rows of trees, the long twist of cliffs around the water, the water running off the rooftops, the rows of trees inhaling water, breathing out, footsteps on the gravel track, reflections in the window of ghosts walking by as he sits letting steam fill his nostrils and his tea consume the swell of honey from his spoon. He sees the form in the window, young and alive, breathing smoke, pinching its nose, a book before it—an extension of, the words crisp lines on a map, exhaling tendrils of nervous poison.

*..it explains why I have had unmitigated failure in that one area in which my whole existence might find rest...*

And then, he'll find himself alone again in the empty house. Loneliness is insufferable to him, though he tries his best to disavow this feeling. He would like to believe in the sufficiency of—that he can always, that he must always be vigorous within. But he needs people. They distract him from that darker business. And so he would think of you, wonder if you were out walking where he might encounter you, imagine the pleasant coincidence of new friendship. And still be sitting there, and reach for his notebook to surround this new, more complicated grief.

**Let that meek darkness be thy mirror, and thy whole remembrance**

He barely needs a body at all. He had knees and an elbow right away, and presumably the limbs and articulations necessary to work a hat, an umbrella. But as often as not, he doesn't need them: take his eyes, take his benches, take random moves through the landscape and between the phrases and fictional objects that sustain the act of narrating, take them and set them out back, pretend to understand. *Each written page is like a heartbeat, a folded rhythm between covers. Beginnings and endings are the dying of a story*, he writes, as if the revelation has dawned on him, but intuitively he also knows that the force of his proclamations is meant as a goad to memory, or, at worst, an attempt to manufacture a false index of spark-like emotions and insights so as to experience the sort of depth of consciousness associated with a good life. Or his focus here is two-fold, and is also leading him toward that point of oblivion at which he might speak in communion with the dead body in the room, hear its name and its excuses. In the absence of asking it to live, the most he can hope to gain is some sympathetic moment at the end of, or perhaps even in the midst of, his own story, *that death is only one instant in the infinite*

The sequence was always wrong; the texts perpetually collaborated to create shapes, landscapes, illusions of order, so that the quiet disorder introduced yet another and another chatter, a new voice, a new body desiring a name, and therefore morning, and waking, and pain rolicked in his eye as he searched the new confusion of pages.

*..He knows the three poisons are like foams appearing as it so happens to them...*

After all, his books are his shadow and his only memory of the mind of the body. One night, in a rage, he took them all down, notebooks, magazines, directories, old list pads bundles of documents and scraps, novels, books of art and of poems, mathematics, zen, jesus, the Buddha, the science of mind, biographies and polemics and monographs, journals, fairy tales, and all the others. A small fire in the stove only claimed three or four works when, two more thrown in, he started with fright, with both arms swept the fire across the room. In the tangle of paper and ash and coal he finally found a moment to weep, the same moment when his dreams and

remembrances began to pour from his eyes, from his ears, from his convulsing chin, the moment when all that was unknown became known, all that was mind became body, all that was unnamed suddenly sprang to his lips.

## 2. BUDHA

Mr Fin began as a corner of the basement, though his pale shelves soon held centuries of pulp and prose and poetry, Greeks and Babylonians, the mystics and existentialists—bookended by crimes and the distant future—a seemingly vast accumulation, a nest of this with that, the above beside the below. He wandered aimless and invisible between Lear and Gilgamesh: a bard turned to clay, exiled to these bookshelf cliffs, a mortal lunatic adventuring to this dark pool. By this wandering, he became synonymous with the page and transparent within it, so while one strains to hear in the words the etch or scratch or clack of the author, he alone inhabited that trail of words—as a latent formula that, by some calculation or in the midst of perfect dread, would produce the sudden solid phrase. One might imagine the lines could crack open, expose their working parts, fragile viscera, and he might gather a presence commensurate with that unhidden being.

*the tug of its precious blood when you were lost in speech—it won't suffer you to wander in form and degree of knowing. And therefore it kindled your desire full graciously, and fashioned by it a leash of longing, and led you by that thread to another state of knowing, to a horizon without form, where you might learn to live more ghostly beside your wits and curiosities...*

Of course he never said that; he would never say such things. He wrote it down. And no one writes of such a quiet with such calm who also possesses it. I see him differently: his manner was the same mask that his writing had become, the mask of seeking. His writing conveyed only what he wasn't, expunged it perhaps, or attempted to will it into Being.

I believe he would desire purgation, the eventual denial of denial. But no, he couldn't go that far, at least not before his mind and his disease did it for him. These

convictions, these instructions that he didn't speak but that he wrote and that I now take as scenes between us, speaking—these were not his words, instead, a long list of citations. Is this a riddle? A maze of words that lead to or away from him? Is this the absence of mind or its illimitable presence?

And his speech breaks off and continues, breaking whole passages from other speeches, *he spoke with pain, and he looked that nothing lived in his grinding mind but a naked intent stretched into the void, not clothed in any special thought of what the void shall be or be named. . . This naked intent freely fastened and grounded in every belief would be none else to his thought and to his feeling but a naked thought and a blind feeling of his own being: as if he said unto the void, from within, and in all moments of the nonthought of his meaning in the world...as if he said his name to it, and the name called forth nothing*

*...remembering as so often since first insight, the feeling that every instant is a new integration of the volume of the universe under the growing edge and that even each step of my feet at which I was looking was an integral inevitable part of the sublime. Today falling again as I left the house, both "me" and "this place" seemed to have no meaning whatever! With the path rocks plants ocean sky seals when it left, when it rained, when it spoke... vibrations: human speech is a very primitive form of communication at best, a primitive form compared to what, or at worst, an image came to mind....Just then, as I left the house, the young man came calling, suggested we sit at a bench, gave me a book, and asked me to read it aloud. (Coming to bring light to the lonely old man who trudged the path everyday—put me in the role of humble ignorant recipient,) He had me press my hands on the book, ask a question, let the question go out of the book into the air over the empty water, stick my thumb into the book to pick a page then read there on the book as answer to my question... The page I opened started with "wings." "See there!" he exclaimed pointing to a seagull in flight ... perhaps I am myself that place, that suggestion, that image ... a new ending a new beginning ... moment by moment...with very slight vibrations to hold them together*

*it knows!*

*it refuses!*

*it reveals!*

### 3. PUSHAN

*Long ago I had read or dreamed up a symbol of a bird in flight – the head to tail line and the wing spread, but have been unable to recall the specific symbolism.*

*Even the 20 hours of aloneness every day, the empty house, the silence in the neighborhood, the service places, the marketplace, the gathering place, in the place of walking, the place of resting, I am at the very center, the hub, at ease, free from all the circles spinning swiftly around me in all directions at all speeds.*

A short stirring to meekness, and to the work of this book.

*When you are by yourself he says,*

*think not before what you'll do after, but forsake as well good thoughts as evil thoughts, and speak not with your mouth but list right well all sense that remains. And then if you will speak, look not how much nor how little that it be, weigh not what it is nor what it means.*

and he has said already, as if rewriting what I have yet to write, he has said,

*I am restricted to my books, he would write, and begin, in the imagined city of tiles, the patterns that overrule all others, to become the necessary ghost, by first artfully denying his body, and then his mind, and then hovering between them, deny them again, and deny them so forcefully, saying, melt all to water, and surely he would think this device to be truly conceived, and gain a feeling of mind as art, and body as wretched and as filthy, far worse than nothing: where knowing and feeling is meekness, and he would shudder there on his bench, gazing down at the tiles, weeping through his teeth, knowing that the story is lost in the grid, that it shall be cast down and covered with a cloud of forgetting, though the city still stretches where he walked, and though the streets still produce a map of his*

years, and though his ambitions are as clear to Mr Fin as the moment he saw him there, he didn't see him there, he wasn't there, there was no there ever, as *by the failure of our bodily wits we begin more readily to come to knowing of ghostly things, so by the failure of our ghostly wits we begin most readily to come to the knowledge of words, such as is possible by chance to be had here, though the story be withdrawn, withdrawn for his carelessness; and if it is thus, he would feel soon after a full bitter pain that beat him full sore, the story will delay by an artful device, for it will by such a delaying make itself grow, and be had more in care when it is new found and felt again what long had been lost, so tumbling he stood full square in the grid of his imaginings, with only the syllables left to his lips, for days there in the first quake of delirium, there, his finger touched the story.*

FIN,

*Yes?*

NEAR A VILLAGE; GATHERED AT THE EDGE OF WHAT CAN BE SEEN (THIS EDGE OR THE OTHER); A STORY IMPLIED BY ADJECTIVES GATHERED FROM THE DIRT AND THE GRASS, ARRAYED ALONG THE STRICT LINES OF GROUT BETWEEN THIS FIELD AND THAT. THERE MY EYES HOVERED, MY MOUTH PARTICIPATED ACTIVELY IN BREATHING, THE STOMACH LURCHED WITH FEELING, AND THE MIND THAT ONCE FELL EVENLY ACROSS ALL SILENT MATTER HELD ITSELF LIKE A FIST UNDER THE SKULL, BEHIND THE JAW.

*There I would find your last moment, within which, without despair, was kept the beadwork of all possible pasts; I searched not by familiarity, and not by measuring my steps toward that moment frozen, hung, stitched in space across the pages, but by dragging my finger in the dust and ashes, following the trails of the others who have been dragged around the book, each marking out, blurring and disrupting, their names and the names they are given and the names they give. Where two woven lines cross, or three, or seven, everything else becomes possible: the addition of the combined parts which expand to form a lattice of sudden, sure, multiplicity, upon which you, too, converge.*

*As for what is mine, I can follow a path, building its intersections, learning its multitudes, and then, switching by way of a crossroads, can add new dimensions, change all objects, all verbs, all purpose, create an entirely new grammar, a new reason for the story to live and die, a new language for the moment, one that silence cannot staunch.*

There were thousands of intricately woven stories in the village, and only space, no time, no then, no soon, only road, only water, no if, only corner, turn, nothing else to see or hear or feel or smell, but the infinite tessellation of roof lines and walkways.

*I arrived and knocked quietly on the door. tok tok tok*

THE DOOR OPENED, AND, TAKING ME BY THE ELBOW, THE STORY LED ME TO A ROOM FULL OF TREES. THE STINK OF CLIFFS, DEEP BRUISE-COLORED WATER AND IN THE WATER, PERFECTLY DIGESTED REFLECTIONS; THESE HAVE THE FLAVOR OF WINDOWS AT NIGHT, AND ALL SWIMS ITSELF INTO STEAM, SETTLES ON THE SILL. AS I SAT, THE CHAIR CONFORMED TO ME WITH ITS OWN ARMS AND THIGHS.

THE SWELLING AIR SOAKS IN A WARM PINK SPOON, SMEARED BEHIND MY EARS, FILLED MY HEARING. THIS WAS THE BOOK THAT REARRANGED MY WORDS, TURNED OUT CERTAIN LINES, LIKE JOINTS, EXPANDED MAPS WITH SCISSORS AND PASTE, LET ME FALL INTO A DREAM OF

## 4. YAMA

Dimly aware of the bench beneath him, Mr Fin could not be certain that he wasn't about to fall over, or fall back, or, once he started falling, if he would ever stop. *first I must imagine myself well enough to be here*; soon that more frail form, more frail even than characters, who announce themselves with a mere pronoun and gather all the steam of humanity, that inhuman, tethered to the world by stupid faith, that story will appear, though also slip short, sit just out of reach. *first I slept, first I sat, first I walked, first I denied, first I held,*

He imagined that his own being, to the extent that he is merely a character—that composite, easy self—might now crack open, expose his viscera, another brutal list, a chronology, dreck. But perhaps there in the objective fragments of his body and his past would be the form of the story illuminated in miniature, pulsing in an oddly figurative tangle of veins and tissue, something for the Book of Oddities. In these moments requiring solace, Mr Fin, who carried a lunch sack on Tuesday, believed this lunch sack to be a portal to another universe, one in symbiotic combination with our own, at least with his. There was nothing of the miraculous or cosmic about Mr Fin's affection for the paper bag universe, he had no taste for science fiction or fantasy. Universes, he surmised, were extremely plentiful and entirely false—not space and dust and stars, but flickers of consciousness. This one he could keep balled up in his large coat pocket; his fingers would reach into that pocket, crush the universe from the outside, fiddle about its myriad exterior folds, worry its edges until some were thinned and a bit oily. But at that moment, a moment for solace, Mr Fin removed the sack from his pocket and flattened it on his knee, smoothed it. Time moved differently in the sack, perhaps dependent on the crinkling of the paper. Half-eaten bananas could last up to a week in there. Mr Fin enjoyed these simply travesties against time. Some days, he turned the bag inside out, whereupon something he hadn't put into the bag spilled from it and broke on the ground—once clear glass tubes, once small tin arms with gears on either end, once bright blue coins—but they were of little concern to him, he barely noticed them; instead, his attention was on the city around him: the passage of time was indeed slowed, but only in the manner that a river slows where you've pressed your hand into it, bubbling and pulling, it is both slowed and aggravated. What fell from the sack was the suggestion of a machine, all tubes and arms and blue coins, tumbling through from the other universe, in which Mr Fin failed to see his past, though, without the voice of the corpse, without its unwavering ability to brighten all corners with nuance and reason, such a machine would click or whirl or flicker or bubble but produce nothing, fail to act, fail to transform energy.

In the emptiness offered by the broken universe and the empty sack, Mr Fin thought that if he could find a story, that external, pulsing form, or if one could find its way to him, then everything would instead work out, he would see with new clarity; perhaps a magical whispering in the ear would guide him. His pitiful notes, the dying pieces of his memory flickering as they fall away, *all of the words that fail me, useless—nothing to do with it, nothing to do with it, nothing to do, nothing to contain what he contained: this single thread of a memory*

*persists: 'once upon a time, there was a boy whose pain was so unlovely,' but all I can attach to it are deceptions*

Mr Fin wanted *the story* there, not just some *it* to look at, not something to draw from, but *the thing itself*, the *gift*, the *bond* of story that would form a bridge between himself and the body. Would it not hum between them like a wire—could not a story change all things without ruining all things in its wake? Would it not provide the language that can't be spoken or destroyed? Notes and imaginings were mere *evasions*, evasions that assimilate him to the corpse, the death mask.

Mr Fin is a rearrangement of books on the shelf, a reordering that seeks not the identity of the organizer but the magic ordering latent in the texts themselves. He sees the shelves before him that are his very form—what he becomes by projecting a living being to explore his shelves, a being, however, that can only be aware of the movement and to which the static shelves are only dead, or death. Mr Fin imagines himself sitting there, a new, finely lined book, starting and finishing in one blank breath. He watches the stairs, listens for the creaking of fictional feet. Its feet like rotted fruit with bones. He nods to himself slightly, he remembers: hovering here with the old, vacuum-like books, *its body unwinding like wicker as I reached for it*.

The shelves regained their silence each evening.

Mr Fin exercised his theory of oneness and absence.

The mouth of the dead said to him: WE WERE THINKING OF LIGHT AND WAVES AND SENSATIONS, AND THE UNITY OF THE SENSES IN THE INTELLECT, THAT IS, THE COMPLETE INTEGRATION OF ALL SENSES INTO ELECTRICITY, THE SINGULAR SUBSTANCE OF ALL EXISTENCE, THE CONSISTENCY OF WHICH IS ALL THAT DISTINGUISHES CRASHING TO THE GROUND FROM FORGETTING A NAME; BY WHAT MECHANISM DO WE DISTINGUISH THE DANGERS OF LIFE AND AVERT DISASTERS? BY WHAT MAGIC IS THE SINGULARITY DIVISIBLE AND THEN AGAIN SOMEHOW CONCEIVABLE? IN ALL MOMENTS THERE IS BOTH THE PUSH AND THE PULL IN RELATION TO DISASTER, WHEN ONE IS, FOR INSTANCE, IF YOU CAN IMAGINE, PERCHED AT THE TOP OF SOMETHING, SOMETHING TALL, SHARP,

HARD, WAY UP, HIGH IN THE, LIKE A TOWER OR OVER A LARGE CRATER OR HELD UP IN THE AIR, SOMETHING HIGH IF YOU'RE UP THERE, ON THE TOP FLOOR, THE ROOF, THE HIGHEST BRANCH OF A TREE, WHICH WAVERS, ALL THE WAY UP THERE, THE TERROR, CAN YOU THINK OF IT, THE TERROR, AND ALL AT ONCE, THE TREMENDOUS CURIOSITY, THE ATTRACTION, THE DESIRE TO JUMP, AND THE QUIVERING MOMENT WHEN BOTH DRIVES, THE RECOIL FROM AND THE THRUST INTO, BOTH ARE SUDDENLY EQUAL, PRECISELY, YOU MIGHT SAY 50-50, THE ONLY WAY REALLY, THAT PREFERENCES CAN BE AVOIDED—BUT NO, IT'S NOT SO, NOT SO SIMPLE, THERE'S NO DUALITY HERE, THERE MUSTN'T BE, IN THIS MOMENT, DUALITY DISAPPEARS, THE TWO DESIRES, THE FEAR, ON THE WIRES OF THE BRIDGE, ON THE WINDOWSILL, FOR A MOMENT, THERE'S NO DUALITY, NO MORE TENSION, THE DISASTER IS NEITHER IMMINENT NOR AVERTED, THE DISASTER IS FULLY THERE AND COMPLETELY ABSENT, AND THEN, WHAT HAPPENS THEN?

Mr Fin remembers: *We were thinking of magic and waves and senses, and the understanding of the senses in the instincts, that is, the complete ascendancy of all senses into envy, and the singular subjects of all eyes, the copies of which are all that disembodies crossing to the green from finding a name; by what mercy do we differentiate the darkness of margins and arrive at dissolve? by what magic is the something dissolved and then again somehow composed? in all months there is both the pretend and the pressure in relation to dissolve, when one is, for instance, if you can imagine, piano at the top of something, something text, shelves, harp, way up the hill in the, like a touching or over a large cricket or held up in the art, something high if you're up there, on the top flowers, the room, the highest buddha of a text, which waves, all the way up there, the task, can you think of it, the task, and all at once, the tremendous cursive, the arrival, the despair to just, and the rearranged moment when both dramas, the relics from and the thick into, both are suddenly enough, precisely, you might say 50-50, the only way really, that pressure can be ascended—but no, it's not so, not so simple, there's no down here, there mustn't be, in this month, down dissolves, the two despairs, the feet, on the wood of the bridge, on the worry, for a month, there's no down, no more text, the dissolve is neither imminent nor averted, the dissolve is fully there and completely absent, and then, what happens then?*

With minor grace, the dead (*again*) slid (*absent*) off the bed, turned (*against it*) heavily between (*entranced*) the arms, then pulled jangling (in *arcs*) onto the chair. It let out a subdued (*unbroken*) exclamation of pain, which Mr Fin politely ignored.

Somewhat grave (*cursive*) behind the chair, Mr Fin pushed their way out (*patient*) into the hall. “Quite an interesting looking volume indeed...Quite interesting...” he said, searching his memory (*without objects*) for the relevant bit, “I...” (*planted, strung, drowned, voided, ended, burnt, sudden, nameless, noted, erased*)

The shelves and volumes absorb the mind, reproduce its cities and its limbs, a few expressions, its brightness and its silence. In one book, it leans against the margin, in another it notes, in Mr Fin’s own hand, *all is electricity and space*. In another it is a mere trace, my own desire, really, for it to coincide with my tracing, where I read, nonetheless, its tangled secrets, in order to become its creator, his, his parts arrive in the grid, the trace and the gesture and the lean and the cursive on the pages, wherein hide the architectural body of the text, its house, diamond, or eye, its bones etched by force of possession, gripped and released. The more I see it, him, the more monstrous, and at once the more his whole life is reversed: a long, long death, a leap from the water, the bridge, the agony of interrupted death, his face in his hands after such a leap, a miscalculation, to be sure, but the fingers at his shoulder, that sudden touch that receives him, yanks him as if it had reached all the way into the dark waters in search of him, and weaves his mind toward the image of his own eventual birth, from the tear in the pages to the hush of the opening, and he lives this book through its torment and disaster—attentive only to the pleasure of disappearance, of proceeding closer and closer to untellable, unknowable faces, a rustling world of noise and skin.