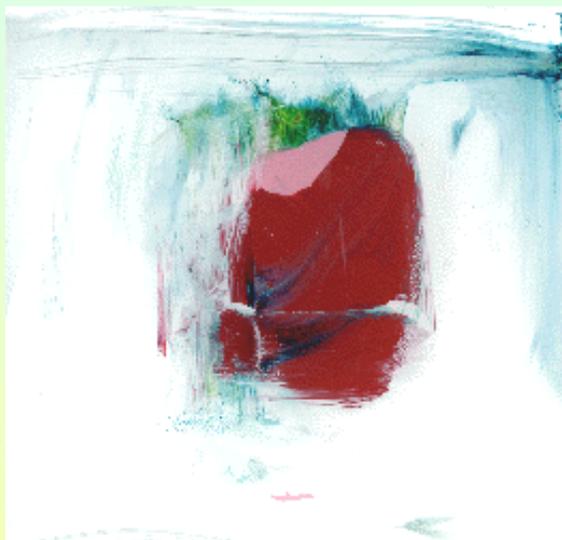


# The Books of Joshua



Steven H. Friedman

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To Helena

Technologies  
tolerate  
imprecisions.

Unlike  
worlds.

## Before the Beginning

The writing of the philosophy began 25 years ago, almost to the day, in a swimming pool. And it began with this:

Mark Fidrych, the pitcher, with bases loaded and the game in the balance, calmed his nerves with thoughts of universal death, in 10 or 20 billion years.

Shakespeare, and more clearly still Sakyamuni, discerned that, if all is time, and time is change, neither time nor change could be what they appear, could be anything at all. The world of the Western God, seen from on high, as of the Buddha, seen from anywhere, is a world without concepts. In such a world, from such a perspective, disease, old age, and death find resolution.

But this surely is our world too. And so the question returns: What is time?

Experiences such as John von Neumann's sustained the development. Von Neumann worked on the Manhattan Project; designed the ENIAC, the first electronic computer; created game theory; and screamed himself to death . . . not from the physical pain of the prostate cancer that would take his life—drugs, then as now, could control such pain—but from the mental anguish of the dying process.

Physicians say candidly that no one dies well. Dying is death by a thousand cuts, and this remains the most horrific of tortures—not, as commonly misunderstood, bleeding to death from a thousand nicks, but the progressive and inexorable disembodiment of the human personality. Officials cordoned off the wing of the hospital where John von Neumann lay dying, fearing that, in his anguish, he'd scream out national security secrets.

Von Neumann was a Catholic. Priests came to comfort him, but to no avail. And we shouldn't be surprised. Belief, faith, a point of view are not enough to address the extremity of human suffering. When Jesus on the cross cries out in despair, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?," Christianity had failed its most important test. The faith would have ended, then and there, had there been something stronger.

The issue affects more than a moment of dying. As Siddhartha and the Greeks of classical antiquity knew, and as survivors of extreme torture have written—and there have not been many—the horrific is retroactive, and can undermine the entire previous reality of one's life, transmuting existence into pain, so that one will wish, with all of one's heart and soul, to have never been born.

Faith and belief are not strong enough. It has taken 2000 years of intellectual development to produce something that is.

July 20, 2008

## The Books of Joshua

## The First Book of Joshua

## The First Book of Joshua

### A Fable

If it started anywhere, it was in a nightmare. And not just one, but three. Each repeating itself with the insistence of a drumbeat, a human drum, hammer on flesh, night after night after night. And no one thought it would ever stop, or would have, had anyone known.

The dreams themselves exist now only in bits and pieces reflecting bright sunlight. Though this must be a construction, a distortion, a lie. For darkness must have been the original setting, as everyone would surely agree.

A soft white room without detail or contrast, deep inside a cloud. A stool, and two portraits on opposite walls. And the old man, stooped and bald, with sagging skin. Solemn and sad and miming his words.

The old man might have been the grandfather, but only in prophecy, since this old man was lifeless, even as he moved, and the grandfather would live for another decade, measured in biblical time. Was it a premonition? Even now we can't be sure.

This much, though, is clear: the basement was dark, wet, roughhewn in red brick and mortar. A vast, claustrophobic space, centering an old woman doing her laundry. We never see her face, but imagine its quiet resolution and discipline to the tasks at hand. But her frail white hair, fine and translucent, arrests attention. She is the grandmother, if she

is anyone at all. This must be her prophecy, and a mournful one at that. As to the cadaver, tumbling out of the dryer like an opulent rag doll, we cannot even begin to speculate, since we dare not try to look into its eyes. It is a dream within a dream, a supposition, and cannot bear very much reality. And we certainly cannot hear our screams above the din of the machines.

As to the third . . .

So this must be how it began, and it could not have been any other way.

Again it's the hair that leaves its traces on the mind. Burnt red in reluctant curls. He had seen it somewhere, but quickly buried the memory at the foot of the backyard wall. In silence: he could not hear the sound of his voice. So it should not have surprised him when the lady in red curls summoned his fate.

It came in yellow. No negotiation, just a decree. A bungalow. And an inquiry: What good is speech if no one can hear? And what good is hearing without understanding? So he gathered his books and went on his way.

It was the sound of "L" that stymied him, though he couldn't tell anyone why. The sound of bells and liquid cities, of pristine skies and languid despairs. Shelters of sound. The tones of April and the lilacs of Cael.

There was fire, but on this day it did not come from the sun. The number may have been numberless, but on this day it may have been three, sitting round the table in tribulation and judgment. He was all ears, and heard not silence but strangeness. Try as he might, he could not understand. Had it come to this? An ending before a beginning? For the first time in his life he would fight a decree.

Mothers are ambassadors appointed to rule. For the third time, it was the voice. And the burnished hair. The voice that commands and the hair that seduces, or the voice that seduces and the hair that commands. An urgent request for dignity and freedom that will not be denied. Then an act of will. Then the need recedes, like shadows into night. The warmth of the night and the warmth of the sea convey what we want and try hard to be.

The bungalows were a banished land, but now arose a second demand. Stride! Stride! Stride! Stride! It was both a call and a chant, the requirements of command. The lady in red curls gestured with her hand. Every aspect of demeanor was a lesson and a claim. Learning to walk was yet another component of the game.

The lady wasn't a dream, but had two names. One for the class and another for the mother. And a son, who grew up strong and proud, that his father did not live to see. And a student named Joshua who, under her spell, perfected his walk and chiseled his talk, becoming president of his class.

Events demarcate by the watershed years, anointing a grandfather's fears. The only son gave him no say in that darling and desperate month of May. But oddly it put the nightmares at bay, to this very day.

At seven years a second thing would take him by surprise. The teacher's fingers ringed his wrist with questions in her eyes. He was so thin he almost seemed a phantom in disguise. And too, the moon raised questions beyond its need to rise.

Now his grandpa starts to sing a lengthy, dying song. To teach the boy that presence would not abide for long. The process slowed in agony. It ground and ground and ground, until the cycle came to rest, to question all around. He had too little access to make the turning real, but met a vacant outcome he tried to fill with tears. His grandpa feels no mortal fate but simply disappears.

Within the conventionality of an unconventional life, two days of magical phosphorescence levitated its strife. The midpoint of his ninth and subsequent year, the dawning of summer, the horizon so clear, and cascades of time both far and near. School was a burden but summer's release conditioned the form of penultimate peace. And cascades of time that would never cease.

Wood will float if given the chance; carved to shape on waves will dance. And currents will steer and lives enhance. But only if sails are given a chance. He whittled away superfluous form to forge an ark to ride a storm, in miniature. But winds are fickle, and waves replete with urgencies to sink a fleet. And regattas can often not bear the heat. He watched his woodwork veer from its course. And accepted its fate without remorse. Despite his disappointment. Racing would not be his forte. And sailing would not lead to port. But odysseys will not abort. Despite the consternation.

What we know early is mastered for late, and is the tool for conquering fate through what we factor and what we create. Even as we hesitate to claim a guiding hand for all the esoteric tracings in the sand.

We seek the sense beyond the sound. What we see will not be found. Words obscure the fertile ground where words, knee-deep, abound.

Joshua chose with either hand, respecting the customs of the land. He lived within ambidextrous space, where left and right had left no trace. What passed for others as direction, Joshua met with circumspection. He relied on other cues—convection currents, native hues—to steer his singular course toward each hypothetical source of meaning and despair. Which meant he had to master the subtle trick of walking on air.

But what will come, truth be told, will not come unless we're bold.

If Albert Schweitzer the public forgot, what can have been Alfred North Whitehead's lot? *Science and the Modern World* for Joshua new fields unfurled. Having long hovered in physics and math, he sought the view from a higher craft. By accident. Science was the book's superficial sheen, philosophy its deeper theme. Joshua crossed over as in Dante's dream, starting from rigor and ascending the mean.

The city groaned and glittered perspective, serving as a brusque corrective to the pallor of his pride. Even a pedestrian subway ride managed to chafe and chide each abstraction far and wide. See him naked, nowhere to hide. Hear him stumble side to side. Feel his grasping for a guide. And still the city will abide.

Nervously he wrings his hands, unsure now of where he stands.

But the sun will have an answer.

Galileo stared too long, taking up a blind man's song. Joshua looked the other way, in shadows of reflection. He sought in sunspots and in glare the umbra of direction, eclipsing lunar parables with totems of protection.

Onward now we go, to study what we think we know compared to what is truly so—a process Socrates began, to die the model of a man, over two millennia ago.

The time had come to read the sum of Western philosophic thought. To discover what had been tried and taught. From Plato to Aquinas to Descartes to Hume. Kant and Kierkegaard and Russell to consume. And everyone in between, before and after, were the authors he tried to master. As deities start counting tears in the early teenage years.

And his muse sustained him as she constrained him to focus on each present task, to use to purpose his chameleon's mask, and never in vanity or laurels to bask.

From west he traveled east to weigh the words that had released ascetics from a wheel of fire. He joined Stoics and Siddharthas in fistings to disarm desire. Soon he would produce essays of his own design, attempting to deduce satisfactions for a rational mind. Or something of the kind.

And then a girl from Oz appeared and waved her magic wand—a second muse to guide him to enchantment and beyond. She taught him how to read the patterns in a rippled pond, as at the moment of creation and every moment on.

Under her spell he learned to dwell in rhythm and in rhyme,  
and to address each pregnant stress in the silences of time.

Induction became a recurring concern: how we can know  
the future, how we can ever learn. And how we can escape  
the imaginings of fate. What we know and what to sow,  
what we can assume. And every mode of exit from a  
cloistered room—the tragic vision of the world and certainty  
of doom.

And the climate and the soil that Eden needs to bloom.

These obsessions formed processions of symbols in the  
mind. Abstractions of subtractions detailed and refined.

An answer to a dancer choreographed to a will resigned,  
but seeking a solution in symbols of another kind.

Something he could not be sure that he would ever find.

She wore no shoes, confessed no clues, even as she taunted  
rules only made for summer schools. She had dark hair, a  
pliant stare, and blithely moved through fractured air  
without resistance, without care. For hers were the  
kingdoms of the fragrant and fair. And her scepter was  
power everywhere.

But Joshua, laden with care, did not dare to greet her.

Then she faded away, in the heat of an August day.

It was the simulacrum of a dream. Or so to others it would often seem. A madman's state of mind we cannot glean. A bird of prey with vision all too keen. Suspended high above and in between the hope that dreams say more than they can mean.

And Joshua awakened cold and covered in a moonlit sheen.

Martin Luther could not leave confessionals at bay. He lived within recycled sin resistant to decay. Try as he might he could not fight the curse within the clay. And so did soul and circumstance divert themselves one day.

Spirits do not boast but pay witness to the host. They parse the terror and the horror, not the dolor or the farce. And seek to release a brodequined bone and draperies of flesh from a sparrow's home, elevated and alone.

And Catherine sends her legions forth, to embolden Joan on her journey north, towards a trembling star. And her only trace is the wind on your face, blowing from afar.

Museums were mausoleums to Joshua's unstudied eye.  
Anachronistic tracings on headstones that refuse to die.  
And portraits of chimeras that embody every costumed lie.

Only once a tailored red caught his eye and turned his head.  
But once suggested how the dead might in living terms be read.  
So began his visitations to prismatic alterations that  
the soul to body wed, leading to the marriage bed on which  
the painted body bled.

Intensities were the cities of Joshua's domain. Everything he  
undertook as if it were the last refrain. As a chameleon must  
commit, or suffer the predator's pain. Nothing short of  
mastery offered a Protagorean gain. And nothing less could  
profess ever to remain. And so the mansions of his cities  
were serial multiplicities. Even to the relationships he  
needed to stay sane.

Can a country's broad expanse a philosopher's claims  
enhance? Must we travel far afield to gather a mintable yield  
of truth and its reflections? Or is staring at a wall likelier to  
free us all? Or is there a third, and better, way? Or multiples  
to pay?

Joshua was not yet in a position to say.

But a mathematician may. Several years earlier he had had  
a brush with a secret of Pythagoras. One Friday afternoon a  
pond of ripples showed him how to find all Pythagorean  
triples. Just hours after the teacher had taught him the  
theorem. And on Monday, without fuss, Joshua calmly  
astonished us.

What is there left to say when we travel day by day, and selflessness cannot pray? What is there left to say on the turning of the day? And whose bright eyes can eulogize the dying of the day, as we journey on our way?

A deep blue sky that we singe on high turns to orange bye and bye. Joshua soon would look into a neglected coloring book. To recalculate the math of a fading yellow path. And color to the edge everything he would allege.

Now we go further back to fill a conspicuous gap. Age is hearsay, says the sage. When we think we came to be is elemental mythology. One day Joshua asked a friend, "Does philosophy have a patron saint to help secure its end?" On November 25 of a misplaced year she called from Huntsville to reveal Saint Catherine as the keeper of the seal. The learned Catherine of the elevated wheel, whose voice led Joan to her choice and her appeal. And so was Joshua born on the feast-day of a tortured form. The feast day of philosophy in the shadow of a dragon tree.

He was often invited but rarely incited to participate or attend. A reluctance persisting with friends insisting on his family's inevitable end. As Newton in bitterness would witness, and the Buddha would commend, to forestall an evanescence that atmospheres portend. But experience is hard to donate or loan, and presumption sufficient to its own. And the wind content to rattle and moan. As the furies compete to harmonize each tectonic groan.

While Joshua dreamed a dream that he was not alone.

When he awakened he reached for a phone, to sound for the marrow in a hollow bone. As a wall darkly bright glowed suspended in white stone.

Drowned out by a dial tone.

The waters strangely shimmered. The air held its breath. Branches shivered. Birth and death awaited address. And then the message was delivered.

And a time and place must surely come, when its contents will be heard and consequences considered.

Joshua had much to do. Paint the bridge a golden red, color the sky a gentle blue. Assignments we must all pursue. Or watch decay, emboldened, accrue. All to repay what life is due. In the redeeming hope that the cracks contain a vital clue.

Odd it was to stand in class before the muse of broken glass. To question the point of all of us is to bear the weight of Sisyphus. But little does it compare to the suffocating air crossed by her indifferent stare.

Nicholas of Cusa could hardly refuse a dialectical ruse. Even in the face of riches one can always choose. But in medieval times was there anything to lose equal to the price of a misplaced muse?

Despite what he would dare, wear and tear were everywhere. For Joshua, in beauty's lair.

What are the haunted memories that echo through the centuries of an individual life? Not collective and not shared, nothing borrowed, nothing paired. Exceeding designation as they thwart elaboration, much as final sums, alarms and drums. And so is life the metaphor of every world we answer for, sufficient to each one, as a tale not yet begun. As if the light had lost its sun.

Joshua would ornament his notebook and his door with epigrams that summarized an ancient wisdom's lore. Galileo protesting, despite what the Church could prove, that the Earth nevertheless continues to move. Saint Bernard maintaining that the apostles taught him to live. "And do you think it a little thing, to know how to live?" among what time can bring, and souls forgive. And Siddhartha proclaiming an ancient way that explains life's "coming to be, and its passing away," enough to annul desire and a savior's stay. And in a barely legible scrawl, postulations of physics and math mythologizing the facing wall.

Early morning was always best, though night was often doubly blessed. Joshua knew no passion that had to be confessed. For purity is singularity, the mark of the possessed. Freedom too is distinctive in blue, tinged with green and aquamarine. And mystery is argentine, precious and new.

In memory lies a treasury of an opalescent hue. And the wind brings transparency, crystalline through and through.

A mother tongue is warm and young, whispered, accented, or sung. The second language cannot give the sharpness of a primal sieve. A philosopher yearns for subtlety in every choice of terms; even more than metaphor, the sculpted key of poetry, reality is stringency, as every prophet quickly learns. To glean the depth of being, that even a seer is rarely seeing, words must be weighed as carefully as diamond is assayed. Joshua knew what words are due, and his hands grew sore as he scraped and tore to bore to meaning's core.

Even though Joshua didn't date he hoped one day to find a mate. Assuming that, at his birth, it wasn't already too late. But when and where and how—for these he didn't allow. Reasoning about such things takes seasoning past what logic brings. An awareness of which, if it ever comes, commonly violently stings.

But Joshua wasn't alone in this. The death of Socrates marks a change in philosophers from robust to strange. From Plato to Wittgenstein, Aristotle to Hume, the major thinkers join the dead in solitary tombs. In a symmetry of wombs.

Is it because they chase a new race? Are evolving at a faster pace? Or simply bear an unsuitable face? Socrates, whose uncomely trace found a place and an embrace, makes a different case. Perhaps an abstract system is too austere a home for any who would live with them. Or maybe something else is true for the harbingers of everything new.

























































































































































