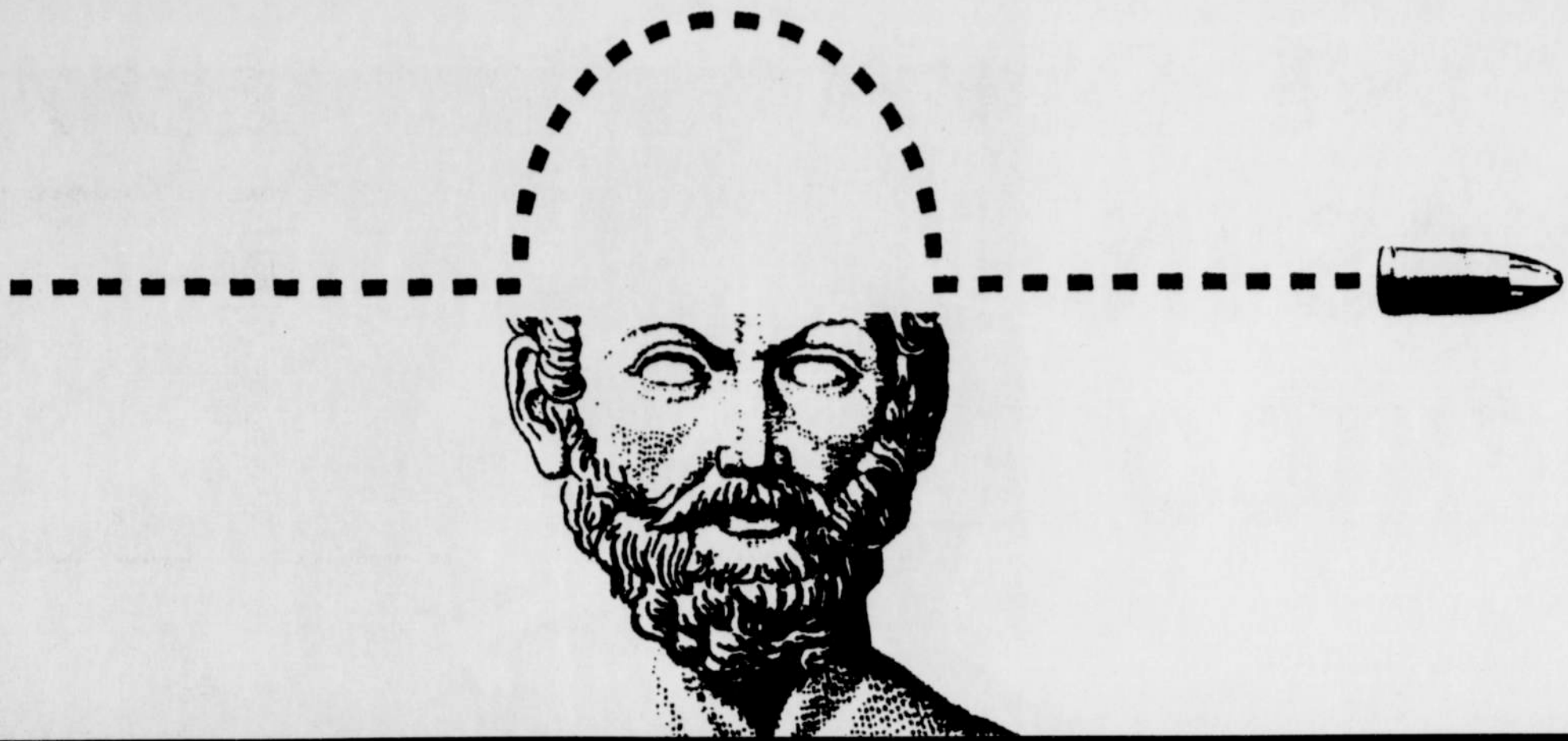




IGOR KOPELITSKY

THE OPEN SECRET

BY DAN ARMSTRONG

Hear it? That faint siren in the distance. They are coming for me. Yes, certain as dawn tomorrow, they are coming for me. A hot. Inescapable. Predestiny. I just know too much. That's it. The whole thing. I just know too much.

I know too much. Not much of a great quantity really, just a critical fact. And I can't let it go. I've been screaming it from my window all night. Surely they must think me drunk, shouting at passersby while others try to sleep. Someone must have called me in. Complaining of my vulgar reverence in the silence of the night.

You see, something else, some larger conceiving thing, is dwelling in my mind—most likely in all minds. I am not certain if those of the sirens are trying to hide this or deny it—or if they simply don't know. One way or another, they are after me for daring to announce it—daring to scream it!

Mostly I am afraid. And terribly confused. Because the idea is so unsettling. Even now reality shifts about me like headlights moving through the night. I try to assess this thing within me, but it does no good. It's too big. There is nowhere to start. And anyone to whom I might inquire merely gives me a blank stare or shakes his head. But I can't deny what I feel so strongly. So I will doubt everything else until I can reconcile with this thing this knowledge. Yes, even the starry sky seems a lie, all history but a cheap novel, geometry a slick magician's inverse compared to this surety in my soul.

But the sirens are growing louder now, and I can see the whirling blue lights though many blocks away. I'll have to take to my car and get away somehow. Just drive with no idea where I will go or what I will do—merely buying time. I'm confused and I'm scared. Scared of what I know and uncertain of what to do with it...

At a hundred miles an hour, an hour before dawn, on a trafficless highway, a silver ribbon into the desert night, I seek escape from something in my mind. Some psycho-scopic deformation, a conceptionary virus, that I don't expect to get away from. Still the sense of speeding and motion clears my brain, allaying my anxiety with a certain desperate suicidal crispness.

I've been subtly but severely mutated—and so, very probably, have you. It's taken my entire lifetime to come to that awareness. And at speed, my head conjoins with the night—or so it is my willing delusion. I squeeze more into the pedal. The wind whips at the gray threads of my hair. (Yes, it's a convertible. A big one. And what color? Why, bright vermilion.) I can almost stop my horrid thinking with this speed and exhilaration. Almost...

The damage has been done. Yes, the first serious poisoning took place half a century ago. The real regret is that it's taken us so long to understand its extent, its vast meaning. *Nagasaki. Hiroshima.* That was all it took genetically. Two severe burns and the global gene pool was irrevocably altered. Tack on another fifty years of experiment in the field—a scorch here, a sizzle there—and we have an inevitability born on the wind like radioactive confetti. Helical melt down! Musical proteins. Groping man fumbling with the dice of destiny. 7. 11. Snake eyes!

And far more striking than the physical deformities are these cerebral viruses. Oh, yes! The new age illnesses! The infected intellects. Ideas more subversive than 3-eyed infants. Non-rationalities that invade like radiation. Spreading like spilled black ink on a page of words. Minds blown like tattered sails in the sunset. Somber purple, veined with brilliant orange. Spectral ribbons of oil on pure waters of consciousness. Being unimagined. Disembodied psychic-being. Living cerebral bacteria threaded through the galaxies of light in breeding spirals of black web, hungry invisible beasts ravenous upon the void. A raging non-viscerality. An unstoppable prehistoric curse upon our Eden. And I dare embrace it! *Do I? Do I? Yes, I must.*

But it's nothing, really. I should never have brought this up at all. Just the frustrated cry of a man trapped in the container of his broken logic. Raving at the warped reflection. Thank God for this car, unfurling my consciousness with its gale. Blast this inking in my head! Rejoice in the survey of this soul. Blow logic out. Exponentiate reason. Know the unknowable! Forge into this infinite thing we share, mutable consciousness. Gracious, timeless, alien!...but there I go again. What is this within me?

Who stares out from those shifting pools in my face. No dog. No harmless spider resides in that furtless catacomb. It's something grand, something eternal. *That's only spent 10,000*

human lifetimes to unfold! This is the truth told as fiction. We are not alone...

Picture me. Driving as fast as my car will go. For the distraction of it. Some jittery-buggy octogenarian, frying on a heaping helping of something his old body just can't handle. But my bones shake out the last tangential steps of a deep astral boogie so strong they drag the rest of me along like a cheap suit on a hanger. You got it. Open, unspeakable, overwhelming *enthralment!* Just too much! What do I do with it? Crush it. Contain it. Package it. Put it on TV?

Here, one hand upon the wheel, one upon the keys of a laptop, I struggle with it. Filtering through are these words with some christ-forsaken vision beyond the pale. Either fryin' hot with grease. Insane. Or (*don't take my word for it, feel it yourself*) the plain and simple naked Truth.

Unfulfilled lifetimes rage in these re-coupled chromosomes, while the mere skeletal remains of a young boy persists behind a steering wheel and 450 diesel breathing horses. Years piled upon innocence. Pure light layered over and over again with ash. Only now, frayed, worn, fighting bitterness like age, pushing a single digit up through what I've been buried in, to probe out and poke indignantly at these plastic keys. Daring to illuminate something inside your head—like a cryptoglyph on an irradiated screen—S.O.S. To you there, inside, behind the fluid orbs—*HELP!* I scream to the passing landscape. *HELP YOURSELF!* I scream through my fingers. Take hold and fathom this thing. The opportunity awaits.

The darkness pales away. The blazing eye of God peeks its sultry radiance over the horizon. My friend the night dwindles in piercing beams. I, the culminating moment of one man's term on earth, offer this lone memory of hope. There isn't much else I can offer. But this one memory. This one deep and puzzling memory...

I am alone, stumbling downward into some dark cavern, my domed Golgotha with its two great windows to the stars overhead. But down I go, over charred books, tattered manuscripts, and bones, piles of bones, into some intruding passageway. The only dim light is from wicks sputtering in sockets carved in the chasm walls. My reason now is as unsure as the footing, but some dark secret lures me into smaller and smaller congress until at last I care no longer what I find, only that I proceed (*like this hurtling vehicle I drive—heedlessly*). Grisly death and age take my hand and lead the way for this cowardly swamp fellow, this moccasin of a man that I am, eeling down this dank rat hole for some unforgotten scribe's wisdom.

A bleak visage phantoms in the velvet darkness. Above me it hovers, this ancient alien face, looming and grim. I cry out in fear. I cower. I roll onto my back, a helpless mongrel dog given in to the pack. The face presses into mine. The light of 10,000

generations explodes within my head. The words *Criminally Insane* emblazon across my cerebral cortex. And still I squint up through the glare of all prevailing truth, and dare, and dare that deep clear-seeing eye, that solemn Adam, father of the 10,000 generations and all knowledge, to illuminate me further. And He says, with soft temporal cymballing, age upon age, the words I have waited all my life to hear. "Consciousness is eternal." So simple, so true. "Fear not thy death." (*Pedal to the metal now, baby!*) I scream to the viscous asphalt soul of man! Yes. Yes. YES!

I roll over to my knees and gather my feet beneath me, turning to reverse my dark descent. The passageway is blocked and narrow, choked with debris and ash. Burnt offerings of man. Lots of ash, ash on ash. I breathe it in as I fight my way up through the trash and rubble, choking, hacking, retracing the course of my life, grimly gripping this miraculous and all-sustaining piece of knowledge, The Great & Open Truth. I will bring it back for all men to finally know for certain. Nothing else in my life matters now, but this. It drives me upward, out of the darkness, through curtains and curtains of ash, until at long last I see the faint silhouette of two moons—No, twin halos of starry mist, my up-turned portals to Mammon's world. I have made it. I have made it back. And still, I entertain (*and this is a memory of hope?*) no hope of reaching those outside. No hope of anything that I can identify, and I pierce one finger up through the diaphanous shroud of mote and gently prod these keys, one by one, while driving at this insane terrestrial speed to slow my thoughts and type...yes, *there is mystic meaning to our new being, ah yes...*

The speedometer reads 130. The sky is burnt orange. Filaments of cloud trace deep purple above the plain. Dark telephone poles like puppeted crucifixes vanish into the black ribbon of distance ahead. In the rearview there are lights of another car. They have found my trail. I just know too much. A haunting siren wails upon the wind. Or is it in my mind? They are after me. I KNOW TOO MUCH. I nudge the needle up to 140. The tires now sizzle with the speed. The engine throbs with secondary resonances. Sweat beads along my brow. I can't outrun myself, but they will never catch me.

But they do.

My tank can only hold so much fuel. And they have legions of squad cars to untrack me from countyline to countyline, and I am at last theirs...or so it appears!

A sad sight though for ordinary eyes. An old man, bony legs swung to the street, barely creasing his trousers, confronted by these swaggering bulks in uniform.

"Going a little fast, old man?"

"Just trying to clear my head," I say, turning a single fallow eye to the man who spoke, as though the impinging viruses were nothing to me.

The officer finds no humor in my irony. "We clocked you at over 150. That's far in excess of reckless driving in this state. Got a license?"

I notice he's looking suspiciously at my laptop on the passenger seat. This makes me more uneasy than the question about the license which I quit renewing twenty years ago when I realized all they were trying to do is trace me from cradle to grave—that is, to make sure I completed my term. "No license, officer," I say.

Behind mirrored lenses he looks to his partner. The brute nods in agreement while admiring my flashy red rig. "How about a registration?"

"No registration either, officer," I say to my reflection on the toe of his gloss black boot.

"Guess we better take you in, old timer."

"Fine," I say, standing amid the horrid press of alien ideas. "Just drive fast, my ideas are beginning to race."

"What's that?" asks the one, disbelieving—this old man is offering a slack attitude to go with his total disregard for the speed. The other sensing a quickening in the air reaches instinctively behind his back to his handcuffs.

"Nothing," I mutter, presenting him my wrists. "Nothing at all."

Dan Armstrong is a frequent contributor to the NCTE. He lives in Astoria and subsidizes writing by painting houses. His most recent article in the NCTE was the 18th anniversary issue this past summer, *The Editor's Dream*.

