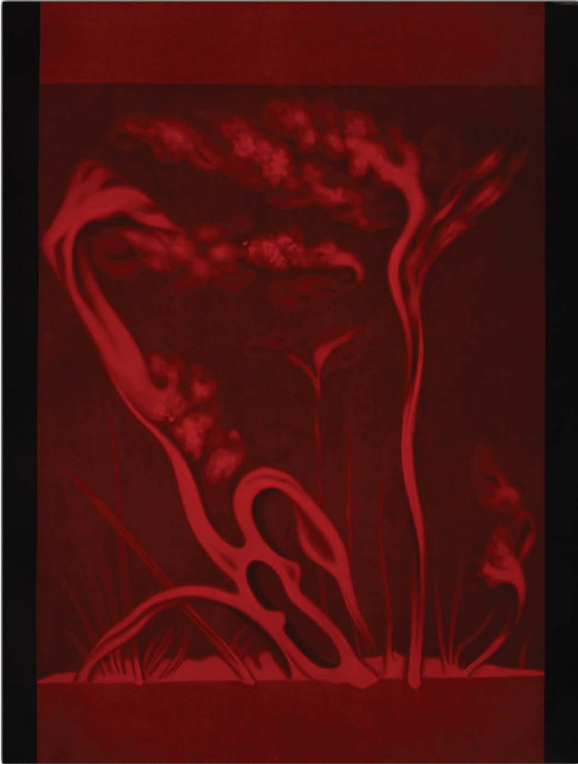


# *MAMURALIA*

*by Art Robin*



## *CHAPTER I*

## Mamuralia

The Mamuralia, Sacrum Mamurio, or “Rite for Mamurius,” was an ancient Roman festival held on March 15, named only in sources from late antiquity. The name is connected to Mamurius Veturius, who, according to tradition, was the craftsman who made the ritual shields (ancilia) that hung in the temple of Mars. Because the Roman calendar originally began in March, the Mamuralia is usually regarded as a ritual marking the transition from the old year to the new.

(From *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity*, by Michele Renee Salzman; and *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic*, by William Warde Fowler.)

Cover art: *Solar Protuberances*, by Étienne Léopold Trouvelot

# MAMURALIA

*a Western Kentucky Apocalypse*

*by Art Robin*



a blobfishtree story

## Preface

Many people know March 15th as The Ides of March, but the date also aligns with Mamuralia, a more obscure Roman holiday. In some ways, both holidays represent the same things—death. Transformation. Ritual. Rebirth. This book is based on a trip I took during the weekend of the 2020 Mamuralia, beginning on Friday, March 13th: the day that Covid-19 was declared a national emergency.

I set off on a solo writing retreat, ignoring the headlines, cutting a backroad path through rural Kentucky. Mentally, I was not in a good place. I needed rest. Rest was not what I found. Alone in unfamiliar surroundings, I was confused by the frantic and often conflicting news reports. As my trip progressed, I woke up every day expecting it all to be over only to find that it had actually gotten worse. All “nonessential” services throughout Kentucky ceased operation by Monday, March 16th. I found myself stranded in one of the strangest places I’d ever been during one of the strangest times in modern history—a once in a lifetime experience.

I quickly returned home to my fiancé and three-year-old son. There, learning the new, unsettling rhythm of quarantine, nervously wiping groceries down with sanitary wipes and teaching ourselves how to brew café-quality coffee, we noticed something different outside. I thought it was a neighbor’s dryer sheets, but the smell lasted all day. My fiancé corrected me: “That’s the smell of Spring flowers!” I couldn’t believe how desensitized I had become to our neighborhood’s air pollution. Now, the air was like that of an alpine village, yet we lived less than five miles from downtown Nashville, one of the dirtiest cities in the American South. This was just the beginning.

Something was happening I never thought possible: all around the world, all at the same time, human beings reduced pollution. It was a tragedy that this feat required the catalyst of widespread illness and death. Yet paradoxically, it was a miracle. We were experiencing the world the way humans had experienced it for tens of thousands of years, before industry. Watching Mother Nature awaken overnight, seeing our world instantaneously come alive around us, we knew we were living in a time of incredible transformation.

Residents of Kathmandu and Manila were astonished to be able to see Mt. Everest and the Sierra Madre for the first time in decades. CCTV in English villages showed herds of sheep emerging from the wilderness to fearlessly explore empty streets. Seismologists noted it as the quietest time in recorded history. I felt a powerful magic calling. If we were to reject this moment in time, seeing it as an anomaly, letting it pass, it would be buried. What could I do? What power did I have to change the world? Not much. But I knew I could capture it and immortalize it for future generations. I knew I could write a story.

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I began writing *Mamuralia* in March 2020 and finished it that same July, but I wasn't ready to publish yet. Not even close. A deep vein of mistrust and tribalism had been forming within our culture over the years leading up to the pandemic, bubbling beneath the lies we were telling ourselves, threatening to gum up the rat race. When we were all forced to shelter in place, destroying all face-to-face socialization, it was like throwing gasoline on a bed of simmering embers.

The establishment response immediately kicked the hornets' nest, spreading a swarm of rumors across the screens of millions of housebound Americans. Where did the virus come from? What weren't they telling us? How long would it last? How far would

they go in their attempt to reign it in? So much confusion clouded our sense of truth. Conspiracy culture—and the deep trenches dug in opposition to it—wrecked any potential for unanimity, creating chasms that still appear unbridgeable today.

There was understandable paranoia. Back then, we awoke every day to our own mortality staring us straight in the face, cold and pale. Would we make it through the year? Would we have to watch our family, friends and loved ones die, holding their hands in their final moments? Or, worse, will we not be allowed their company, forced to learn of others' deaths, or even die ourselves, alone and isolated?

A lot of us (including me) jumped to the worst-case scenario, abandoning civil discourse, coping with our fear in ways that are perhaps embarrassing to look back on today. These were not ideal conditions in which to release this book. I decided to wait until the dust cleared. I even took that opportunity to reexamine and rewrite parts of it, using the gift of hindsight as my compass, while waiting for the right moment to reveal itself. And here we are.

Mythological allegories. Ancient evil. Elemental gods summoned from beneath the crust of the planet to do battle. Who will win control over The New Aeon? Know that you don't have to believe in God or live a spiritual life to enjoy this book. I've simply taken natural cycles like death and rebirth and given them faces. Also know that I would never use a work of fantasy to trivialize the living nightmare that was America's domestic Cold War, days vividly marked by fear, by death and by sorrow. The soul of this story, I hope you'll find, is inspired by the same light we must shine on the path going forward.

I pray it doesn't reopen old wounds. These past years serve as a collective funeral set within our nation's history—and perhaps, as many say, a foreshadowing of darker things to come. I know that the next time I'm faced with existential fear, I want to act the

opposite of how I acted in response to the tumult of 2020.

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The pandemic's official status as a public health emergency terminated three months ago as of this writing. My family finds itself healthy and humbled. We were immensely privileged to come out unscathed while others lost everything. In many ways we have, in fact, gone back to the old normal. But no one can deny that Covid-19 changed us all forever.

I can feel it just as strongly today as I did back then: our existence has been turned inside out. We work almost entirely from home, which was once unthinkable. We're far more self-sufficient. And we're still too isolated—but now it feels weirdly normal. All is peaceful. Yet something strange lingers in the air.

Perhaps some people have gone back to their lives before 2020—not us. The pull of Mother Nature never fully retreated. We see magic where we once did not. We see, too, the brittleness of modern life, now knowing how quickly a seemingly predictable crisis can throw everything off the rails. Going forward we will greet every day with gratitude from the core of our being: alert, alive, and a little more prepared for whatever comes next—whether miracle, nightmare, or both.

*Art Robin - August 2023*

**“We are in the birth canal. If you came upon a birth in progress, you would never dream that this was the culmination of a natural process. It looks like a catastrophe of some sort. There is moaning and groaning and screaming and thrashing, and blood is being shed, and there is the feeling that the walls are closing in; and yet it is inscribed into each of us as a microcosmic reflection of the completion of human history.”**

**–Terence McKenna**



## Chapter 1

*Just got off the interstate. Might lose service. Love you much, I hope you're comfortable in the new house. See you in three days!*

The Southern Kentucky sunset spread flat like a saucer overhead, vivid orange against the charcoal purple sky sketching the horizon beyond the winding road. John Michael Jennings pulled back onto Route 185 North after sending the text message, dropping his cell phone in the middle console. A guitar, backpack, and a grocery bag full of snacks and bottled water sat in the back seat. *Love in the Time of Cholera* lay crosswise in the passenger seat to his right. Clothing hung down over the rear passenger window. It was Friday, March 13th, 2020. On the radio, two people were arguing about COVID-19, a nasty bug, statistically sparing, at least from what they could tell, but contagious enough that a national emergency had just been declared. His phone buzzed:

*Love you too! Lee says he "mihess" you. The house is...it'll be better when we're all unpacked. Enjoy your retreat :) :) )*

The sunset descended into soft whites summoning the onset of a deceptive and dusky haze. He turned off the radio to try and relax. "Pandemics never affect America," he said. "I almost fell for the Ebola scare, though," he chuckled. The remains of his fast food dinner wafted up from the brown paper bags littering the floorboards. He exhaled audibly and sat back in his seat as the outskirts of Bowling Green diminished behind him into the rear view mirrors. Oceanic contours of farmland dappled with horses, cattle and sheep flew through his peripheral vision, punctuated by thick patches of woodland occasionally obscuring the view. His pulse quickened and his stomach stirred as the solemnity of the land set in. Acclimating himself to the rental car, he stepped on the gas, anticipating every stray twig, leaf or pebble that lay on the road in

front of him, testing every curve with a merciless grip on the steering wheel.

The highway was wide open. The narrow road was a cottonmouth cutting through the woods and winding over every hill. An oversized pickup truck soon descended on John Michael's bumper though he was going well over the speed limit. He leaned hard into a blind curve surrounded by dense woods, surprising a deer and missing her by inches. Her hooves clattered as they failed to find traction on the asphalt. When they looked at each other in a single flash of time he saw no fear in her wide, chestnut brown eyes. He pictured the accident in his head repeatedly, heart pounding, imagining who would find him and how long it would take them to get in touch with his family in Nashville. The truck behind him backed off.

Miles fell away behind him. The streetlights started to thin and die out somewhere around the junction with Route 70. John Michael was alone in a sea of gray until a worn out minivan shrouded in a cloud of dust swung lethargically out from a driveway a few hundred feet ahead, forcing him to slam on the brakes. Its license plate had been obscured with spray paint. The driver waved an apologetic greeting out the window before rolling up the glass and maintaining a steady 30 mph to spite the open highway. Exhaust poured liberally out of the blackened tailpipe, the undercarriage sagging low over the road. The abbreviated reach of the headlamps glowed teal and white through the dense crops on both sides of the road, mirroring the monotonous crawl of the two vehicles.

Strangely, the driver accelerated as soon as John Michael attempted to pass on the left, black exhaust exploding from the rear of the van. The driver slowed to a near halt soon after and John Michael white-knuckled the steering wheel. His breathing grew rapid. He watched the doors and windows of the van for movement, involuntarily checking his phone—no signal. The van slowly returned to its easy

pace, a mad black beetle dumbly traversing the lawn of the gods, before finally turning off onto a gravel road. The journey grew uncomfortably still as John Michael accelerated anxiously up the highway without a soul in sight.

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Mother Earth's wrinkled skin passed under the last light of the day. John Michael scanned the black skies, trying to get in tune with this new country, seeing nothing. Route 185 ran out at Caneyville. He drove through town to catch Route 79 seeing hardly anyone. The town's seclusion lay naked in artificial light like an unguarded moment into which he was crudely trespassing. He saw signs towards the Parkway: the safest shot back home, back to the house. He feared an ugly fear around here. Maybe it would have been best to follow his gut. But he drove on, being so close to his destination and, he hoped, a refuge of long-needed peace. Solitude. Escape.

He arrived at the state park twenty minutes before their dining room closed. He went straight in with a smile and a wave. No response. "Where's the bar!" Disappointed to learn it was closed, he ordered a catfish platter to go and sat at a nearby table, absentmindedly drawing patterns in the pliant red carpet with his foot. "Bar closed on Friday night..." he muttered. A handful of restaurant staff were hurrying about, finishing their closing duties. News of the pandemic was bouncing loudly off of the wood-paneled walls from a radio near the cash register. John Michael went out of his way to appear friendly, but he was the last customer of the day and no one in the suffocating room felt like making eye contact.

The kitchen manager, an otter-like fellow dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt, announced John Michael's order, his beady eyes betraying his anxiety from under a mop of thick blonde hair. He dutifully approached and set the meal down, touching only the corners of the box, before taking an exaggerated step back away

from the table, asking if there was anything else, and retreating through the swinging aluminum doors. John Michael smiled, raised his eyebrows and glanced around the room, shaking his head with a laugh.

Checking in at the front desk, John Michael mentioned the drive up Route 185. “I got in a bad wreck on them curves,” the clerk responded, applying an alarming portion of hand sanitizer. “I don’t take that way no more.” Watching her fill out his paperwork with jilted movements and rushed handwriting, her darting eyes wide and awake, he grew uneasy and eventually headed back to unwind in his room with tired eyes and an upset stomach.

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*“Safe and sound at the lodge!”* he typed before pressing “send.” Rain moved in from the West and began to envelop the buildings in a shiny film, orange from the glow of the streetlamps. Room 259 was modest. It seemed somewhat neglected, but there was plenty of light. The carpet was crimson like that of the dining room. The stale air smelled of cleaning solution. “Thank God,” he said when he saw the back patio, thinking of a debate he had had with his wife Cass when they first started dating regarding whether or not it was necessary to lock the patio door of a hotel room when it wasn’t on ground level. While his wife had leaned on the side of security, John Michael had argued, “If anyone is ambitious enough to scale the exterior wall of a hotel just to test whether my door is locked or not, out of all the rooms to choose from, they’ve earned the right to come in.”

“PLEASE CHANGE THE BED LINENS!” said the card sitting on the bedside table by the phone. He picked it up and read the fine print, confirming it was not an instruction from the housekeeping staff but for them, should he wish to place the sign on the bedding.

He flipped the card over. On the backside of the sign he discovered a hand-drawn ballpoint pen sketch of a goblin: cat ears; humanoid face; blank, empty eyes; and a tiny mouth nestled between a sparse set of whiskers smiling suspiciously. The way the creature's mouth was drawn seemed distinctly human, oddly contrasting the whiskers and ears, bringing life to the rough sketch.

John Michael quickly put the card in the bedside table drawer and closed it. His mouth had grown dry. He turned on some music.

“They got a new freeway in my town...that just goes round and round and round...”

An unintelligible exclamation came immediately from somewhere through the walls. The cold, Spring rain was unyielding, draining loudly out of the gutter just overhead and splattering on the rocks below. Sitting outside on the upstairs porch, he saw how vastly empty the lodge was. Not a single interior light was on in any of the rooms in the adjacent buildings. He felt uncomfortably uprooted and alone. He tapped his foot restlessly, unable to relax. His nose grew numb from cold. Small animals rustled in the leaves in the woods down below. Even further past that, he thought he saw movement on the dock through the trees—but it was just the shadows from the pier lights bouncing through the windows of a vacant waterfront building.

Suddenly, he heard something moving through the trees towards the sidewalk. It was big. He stood up to look but saw nothing. He listened closely: steps, walking, growing louder, shuffling, one after another. “That is not a deer,” he said and hurried inside, locking the door to the porch, unable to laugh at himself for his impulsive panic.

John Michael turned in for the night, curtains closed and lights on in Room 259. He fell asleep instantly into a dream. He sits up in

bed and looks around the fully lit room, seeing a reflection of himself in the large mirror on the wall, wearing a facemask and a hospital gown. The warm tungsten light from his bedside lamp casts a sickly glow on the blood red walls. A dead hum pierces the air, permeating his skull and buzzing incessantly through the metal frame of the bed. He looks to his right. Three figures are standing with their backs to him along the wall; women, he sees, looking closer, wearing scrubs, hypnotized by their work preparing gloves, needles and pills. He smells a hint of strong soap and iodine before closing his eyes and falling into a black abyss.

Hours passed.

He is familiar with the recurring dream, just before dawn. The plane bucks violently in its descent. Bright morning light pours through the windows. Crew members and other passengers are standing up, walking around, talking calmly. There is no sound. But this dream is different. This time his doctor, a specialist in cardiology, sits next to him wearing his starched white jacket, eyes clear and blue. He looks to be a younger version of himself, marked by a long, blossoming beard which John Michael only faintly remembers from childhood.

“You need to take special precaution from this virus because of your preexisting condition,” says his doctor as the blue depths of the ocean grow closer out the window behind him. “Here is your escape pack.” He hands him two oxygen tanks with masks, connected to some kind of digital control panel. “The pressure of the gas can be utilized to create a jet propulsion of sorts. Make sure it’s strapped on tight. Oh, and here are your full medical records, of course.”

His doctor hands him a thick packet. John Michael begins to thumb through it: mostly standard medical histories and prescriptions, with detailed minutes from a surgical procedure here and there. Then, going deeper, he finds photocopies of an old book. Long, strange passages of unfamiliar recitations printed in faded Xeroxed

ink. Names of the ancients. *Pan, Set, Horus, Isis*. Pen and ink sketches of goblins with empty eyes and tiny mouths. Strings of numbers in handwritten columns categorized by different shapes, alien and unrecognizable.

“He’s trying to change me,” says John Michael, panicking. Looking up, he finds himself in the cockpit of the airplane standing behind the pilots. He can see only the tops of their hats and their hands gripping the control wheels, preparing for the crash landing. “My doctor...I’ve been seeing him my whole life, and he’s been trying this whole time. This is how the virus spreads!” The pilots are quiet.

The jetliner closes its steep descent. The ocean is entirely frozen over. They hit the ice hard and slide for three or four seconds before starting to sink through and slow down. Shattered shards of frozen crust pile up around the nose of the plane but the hull remains strong. They eventually reach a halt. John Michael and the two pilots exit out the nearest door into a silver, frozen world spanning in all directions, bright white under the azure sky. The last thing he remembers before the sun breaks through the curtains of Room 259 is a long walk alongside the two pilots towards the shore of a bright green jungle, yellow sand glowing vividly up through glassy sheets of ice at their feet. They are skating now, propelled by their makeshift jetpacks, up a frozen river at an otherworldly speed into the wild woods. He can’t keep up. He’s diverted off onto a creek to the South, the woods sinking into darkness on all sides as clouds blanket the sky, while muffled shouts of the pilots begin to ring terrified through the air.

## About Art Robin



Art Robin is a writer, songwriter and world traveler. By day, Art can be found somewhere near the border of Tennessee and Kentucky supporting conservation efforts, developing adult education programs, and conjuring the ideal pot of coffee. By night, he weaves webs of fiction and folk songs, ballads and travelogs, chipping away at an upcoming novel. Primarily, however, Mr. Robin serves as a husband, father and gardener.

Art Robin (a pen name) has always been drawn to the transformation that is creative writing, whether fiction, memoirs, or music. In 2006, Mr. Robin composed a series of short stories focused on personal awakening, including *Hindsight*, a dramatic coming-of-age tale about a boy who slowly overcame the lies he had been told to realize that he was much different from other people. *Lies Curated*, a fantasy novel steeped in synchromysticism and multiverse theory, was inspired by the unprecedented advent of online culture and the ensuing social cacophony. *In Like a Lion* is a short memoir about the curious nature of belief: a nonfiction account that attempts to document how our world is more than meets the eye.



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# Lies Curated Book I

## The Immortals

### Chapter 1

It was a night only Southern Oregon could conjure up. Undressing in my room, changing out of clothes soaked in sweat, eager to fill my empty stomach, I walked wearily over to the closet, stopping as I saw something out of the corner of my eye. The mountain sky was black and cold against the window. I turned to look at the mirror atop the dresser on the other side of the bed from where I was standing. My reflection was another person in the room with me, moving in my peripheral vision about fifteen feet away. I was looking back into my own wide, startled eyes, my mouth small and strange from far away. I slowly raised my hand to my chin in disbelief. My beard was gone. My face was as smooth as a child's.

I rushed across the room towards the mirror for a better look, tripping over the bed in my shock and nearly falling. I faced off with my reflection, millimeters away from the glass, grasping at my chin and stroking my cheeks in horror and awe. I had gone up the mountain with a beard and come down without one. I sat exhausted on the bed in shock, memories of earlier that day bouncing uselessly around in my mind, void of either clue or anchor. My thoughts eventually shut down. In less than a half-hour, I was asleep.

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Writing about the past is a world away from writing about the future. The past is an abandoned school of aged stone towering a mile high, hallways branching off forever in every direction. Each empty room, covered in dust, muck, often derelict and broken

down, offers its own distinct age up to its guest, drawn in by familiar murmurs bouncing off the walls, warmed by the smell of autumn or midnight. These chambers of days past will shift ever so slightly between each visit; they are only perhaps peculiar embodiments of their original form, only the bare foundations holding firm.

And under all of this, under the ground itself, there is a cold, uninhabited wing housing days one dare not visit, austere halls, dimly lit, all haunted by the black of the forgotten at the farthest edge of the final corner. A barren and chilling hiding place, it is this realm that inevitably offers the purest and most vulnerable source for transmitting the human experience via the written word.

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I ate an uneasy breakfast the next morning in a sparsely kept coffeeshop near town on the other side of the interstate from the ranch at which I was temporarily exchanging labor for residence. Southern Oregon is a vast, vivid world dappled in yellow gold and teal, stark against the deep perennial green of the mountain firs. In Spring the landscape will shine white and silver, crisp with the rain and snow of early March, until the sun inevitably breaks free to light the golden valley aglow, pitting the azure blue sky in a tense standoff against mountainous, colossal clouds, the biting wind from the Cascade and Klickitat ranges quickly rushing to shut out the sun again.

I had the morning off. There was a slight tinge of paint-thinner in the air. I involuntarily touched my face and suddenly saw myself in the bedroom mirror again, shocked and clean-shaven. My foot began to tap nervously under the table. After some mental prep and motivation, I had made myself look again this morning before leaving my room. Nothing had changed. The shave was so clean it left no evidence of a razor, either straight, electric or otherwise.

I quieted my mind but the silence grew uncomfortable. I stared out the window, coffee in hand. There were two real-world paths that could have led to my beard vanishing, I decided through a burst of caffeine. Either I had lost time via some type of psychological break wherein I or some form of myself had opted to shave off my two-year beard; or someone had shaved it in my sleep the night before my hike. Between the two I found the latter somewhat more absurd and opted to brave the days ahead through the paradigm of the former. Breaking out my trusty journal, I pledged to remain as vigilant and self-aware as possible—if I lost any more time (or physiological traits), I wrote, I would immediately seek professional help. Of course all of this did little to assuage my anxiety.

“Hey,” called a female voice. I glanced up at the barista, a college student at the university around the corner. I saw we were the only people in the café. “You shaved,” she said. I stared at her, unable to come up with a response. She grinned. “Nice to finally see what you look like under that bearskin rug.” I smiled uncomfortably and raised my hand in acknowledgment. She started looking for a counter to wipe, visibly annoyed by my silence. This was going to take some getting used to, I thought to myself.

Who am I, this baby-faced fellow staring at the morning rain out the window? Who was I yesterday, summiting the Cascade foothill peak behind the ranch carrying nothing but some water, my camera and my two-year beard? Did the answer change, and if so, how? I feel exactly the same. If I changed, how did I retain all my memories of the past? Of childhood? And what if I didn’t? I grew up in Tennessee. I am an only child. I almost died when I was a baby. I moved to Oregon to become a writer as soon as I graduated college. This is who I am: these are my truths. Unless I...what if they are artificial? How would I know that?

I involuntarily thought of my friends back home and my pulse quickened. I drew their faces in my mind. They were as clear as day and immediately became my anchor. “Of course I’m me,” I whispered. No doubt about it. I touched my face and scowled before completing my journal entry. Everyone has a weapon, a sigil or a prayer they turn to in times of trouble, and mine is my pen. I wrote a few words about not taking people for granted going forward and closed with a vision of waking up and living with my eyes fully open from now on. *All of this is somehow, I’m certain, connected to what I experienced yesterday on the mountain.* This seemed to provide the closure I was looking for. I closed my journal and headed home.

Lost in thought, I neglected to acknowledge the barista on my way out of the café. I considered how I had gotten here. After college, I moved to the West Coast. My plan had been to write full-time for a magazine in Portland or Seattle. I quickly found myself in Southern Oregon scribbling travel articles for twenty-five dollars per paragraph, an effective lesson in hubris. When I first arrived in Southern Oregon, I ended up at the pubs around town getting to know the locals. It’s easy for me to make friends quickly; I found a room almost immediately on a quiet, idyllic ranch in the foothills northeast of Ashland where I have been exchanging odd jobs in exchange for a spare room for the last two months.

I started my car and drove back across town, across the interstate and up the hill towards the ranch. The rest of the day was spent at work in silence. I wracked my brain, thinking back through every detail of yesterday’s hike, trying to find any clue that might shed light on the whereabouts of my facial hair.

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After breakfast I started walking up the hill behind my bedroom towards the edge of the property. Recently, having grown bored of

the pubs, I'd been exploring the open wilderness right outside my door: long, ambitious day hikes, discovering what was over every ridge. The wind was relentless and berated my ears. Idle thoughts clanged loudly in my mind as I climbed among the sagebrush and the ancient stone outcroppings. I thought I heard a voice speak a single melodic word. I stopped walking, took a deep breath and muted that omnipresent internal narration that echoes incessantly in our minds. Suddenly the day surrounding me, the relentless wind and the weak sun on my face, was all there was. Something was whispering behind me in the branches of a tree. It was an indistinguishable recitation and continued for a long period of time without pause. I breathed a deep, full breath, suddenly and acutely conscious of every part of my body from my feet to my cold, runny nose. The wind in my ears played a series of familiar tones I knew but had never quite been able to hear until now. Something gently pushed me from behind but when I turned around I saw no one. I looked back up at the crest of the hill in front of me, barren and rocky, and headed on.

The hike back down was spent taking photos. The sun set ominously between two distant rainstorms on the horizon. Finally there was the return, the exhaustion, the horror of my beardless face in the mirror. The shock and the descent into deep unsettled sleep. The dream of the cluttered room, the muted light and the covered windows. Cans and bottles strewn about out the table. The smell of paint thinner. Footsteps clopped behind me and I turned around to see a giant wearing blue overalls and a fiercely red baseball cap. At his feet sat an enormous black panther. The giant's eyes bore into mine angrily as he approached. The walls of the room had changed into that of a cave as darkness crept in. His mouth began to open when a curtain slipped swiftly over my vision and I was anchorless again in the black, ravenous folds of a desperate sleep.

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# **In Like a Lion: Maps, Myths, & Manifestations (a Memoir)**

## **Chapter 1: The Cabin at the End of the Road**

April 2019: Kentucky State Route 11 curved slow and long beneath the shadow of jagged hills upon my approach towards the cabins of Natural Bridge State Park. I had just departed the main lodge, where I had received my key, and was eager to drink beer, grill burgers and play guitar in solitude. I pushed the small Japanese rental car around the sharp turns, cutting ravenously into this ripe, new slice of Earth. Like a flash, a hawk suddenly appeared above me. I was happy.

I slowed down and advanced through the empty ranger checkpoint upon reaching the turn off, looking for signs of life. Miniature rivers, broken branches, rocks and other debris dotted the asphalt, remnants of the massive storm that had just rolled over. RV campers and tents lay splayed out along the banks of the Red River, backing awkwardly up the slope of the hill bordering the road to avoid the swollen water.

The way grew steep and narrow and offered impressive views. When I spotted the cabins, the cabin numbers made it obvious that mine, 208, wasn't anywhere close. Cell phone service was a ghost at best. The higher up the hill I drove, the stronger I felt the potent absence of other human life. Besides one empty pickup truck, I saw absolutely no signs of guests or rangers. Was I alone? A native southerner, I knew places like East Tennessee and north Georgia like the back of my hand; but I was fully uninitiated to this wild, ragged world between Lexington and the Virginias. This was uncharted land.

I lost all sense of direction as the hills began to dominate the sun. The road ran out at a large mossy bluff. I put the car in park, seeing my cabin number on a wooden sign painted in pale mustard yellow at the bottom of a long flight of wooden stairs. The cabin loomed above. I winced. I had already reinjured my bad knee on the first morning of my trip. Full time office work had not been kind to my body. Getting out of the car, I was greeted by the piercing sounds of the wilderness wafting eerily from all directions. I jumped as an owl hooted somewhere close by.

Groaning, I forced my way up the stairs with my belongings in tow. My clothes, guitar, laptop, backpack, and the groceries I'd brought for the grill required three or four trips. But despite the screaming pain coming from my MCL tendon, I liked this place. I had my own private refuge deep within a haven as strongly established as my childhood memories: the forest.

Once loaded in, I stood perfectly still inside the living room to get my bearings, glancing around the corner towards the bedroom. Something pushed back against me, heavy and laden with shadows. The air grew very still. I instinctually checked my phone—no service. Goosebumps tiptoed across my skin. I felt something similar to the anticipation of knowing someone else is about to speak despite deathly quiet and moved quickly to check every room, finding nothing.

“Get a grip,” I said out loud. “This place is a dream.” I had just stayed the night in another even more isolated cabin two nights earlier, down in Pine Mountain State Park, without incident; the fact that I was feeling unnerved here in broad daylight seemed nonsensical. But when I turned to sit down on the couch, I found myself physically unable to. Something about the light of the late afternoon gave the shadows shape, stretching sparsely in through the trees, spanning the corners of the room. I knew the dangers of the night were trespassing here in the sun.

“Come on, stop. I don’t believe in anything like that,” I said aloud, a go-to that had come to serve me well over the years. Besides, it was true. Mostly. While I was a seeker at heart—after all, here I was alone in the Appalachian wilderness simply to write stories and play music—in my mid-thirties, a father, fiancé, and full-time office worker, I was comfortable believing that I didn’t really believe. I had replaced creativity with a car note and was commuting to and from a full-time office job to support a family. Having so mastered the architecture of the material world, I had neither the time nor the headspace to deal with the idea of staying in a haunted cabin on the last night of a long overdue creative retreat. I was here simply in search of fresh air and screensaver sunsets.

But nonetheless, here I stood a statue. Something real—not my imagination—gripped me in its hand. My heart pounded and my throat constricted. The aura of the cabin’s interior; the empty space overhanging the chintzy, dated furniture; the heavy, magnetic buzz...I felt pushed and backed out towards the door. I left so quickly I forgot my cooler of groceries and had to come back later, shaking in fear, to retrieve it. I started the car and drove back towards the lodge, nausea taking over, repeating to myself, “But I don’t *believe* in any of this...”

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# THE OLD ONES HAVE RETURNED



John Michael Jennings just survived a tornado. He needs a vacation. But escaping into the heart of Western Kentucky, relaxation is the last thing he finds. Something in the woods is awake. Something is stalking him. Something's in his dreams.

March 15: the Ides of March. But it also marks the Mamuralia, a more obscure Roman ritual ushering in the new year. In the Mamuralia of 2020, the dawn of Covid-19, John Michael rides the line between panic and magic. The Old Ones have returned...



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