

Excerpt 1 of 6- *The Official Report on Human Activity or Long for an Elephant, an Essay*

1. Ipsō in the Elephant

When Ipsō gave birth to what most agreed was an elephant, there were those who tried to act as though it was normal. Well, yes, he was a man, they said, and no one had known he was pregnant but, it was, after all, a small elephant.

Prior to the birth, he had been eating strangely and spending an inordinate amount of time alone. But no one had taken these things as signs that anything unusual was about to occur because he had said that he was a writer or that he wanted to be a writer. He had trouble deciding which of these things to tell people because writing happens so much in the mind that he thought it would be difficult to know when or if he had crossed the threshold. First, he would have to find something to write about.

He could write about the factory where he worked and things he and his coworkers made in the factory. He would have to start at the beginning and that would mean light in the morning. So he tried to begin with the light in his windows on the mornings he had to go to work versus the light in his windows on the mornings he did not have to go work. The difference between daylight and worklight was much like the difference between sleep on the nights that were not followed by workdays (Friday sleep and Saturday sleep) and regular sleep. The problem was, once he began writing about the light and how he slept, it felt like he was trying to walk on slippery rocks that sloped down toward quicksand or how he imagined a slope of slippery rocks would be, as he was not much for the outdoors and made sure to stay in when it rained. The fact that he could imagine these things made him lean toward saying that he was a writer as opposed to wanting to be a writer. But the fact that he had gotten his knowledge of quicksand from TV lessened his idea of himself as a writer.

2. Write What You Know

The factory where Ipsō worked was built early in the 20th Century. It was noisier and dirtier than more modern factories. It was much harder to find a place where you could be alone with whatever thoughts hadn't been purged by the noise and dirt. Perhaps, the lack of time alone with thoughts made the contemplation of light and

sleep seem like a grim, endlessly narrowing spiral. He didn't want to describe it as dark because he was dark and he associated the dark with warmth, standing by the oven when the sun went down in late winter with lights dimmed and bed waiting for him to deliver the heat his body had absorbed from the small kitchen.

He was torn between trying to describe the narrowing spiral and trying to find out where it led. He thought he should describe it because that is what writers do. He wanted to find out where it led because he was frightened and fear made him curious as though he were in a lucid, recurring nightmare. Where would a narrowing path draped in factory light lead, certainly not to a screened-in summer porch with cold beer on hand and Miles Davis playing.

He thought about Miles Davis a lot. Miles was dark like Ipso, but, having lived and died in the 20th Century was obviously older. Miles produced a tone on the trumpet of unerring beauty and played, in his second great band, with younger writers whose noise was as fitted and sculpted to jagged music as Miles' was to a clean Jean Toomer narrative. What held Miles and those wilder, younger players together was that Miles' melody led to the same inside dark with hidden sources of illumination. In short, they dreamt together awake, practiced hour after hour the climb on raggedy surfaces toward the edge of a cliff whose beauty would be a fantasy if not for the climb, whose beauty could only be grasped in the moments before the plunge into the white ocean of clouds rolling below the sun when the purity and cold of the air overcame thought and vision respectively, a fall as blind as the stasis of the womb.

Miles didn't give many interviews. Essentially, he thought it was all there in the music, no reason to talk about what everyone could hear. For Ipso, it was very strange for a writer to eschew words, even for an interview. But Ipso could still identify with Miles because he knew Miles had had difficulty getting along. He could hear it in the alone sound of Miles' trumpet and the heat beneath the loneliness, the Harmon mute at the bell of the horn honing every breath and note through a tunnel of black light to the inner ear, a path as lean and solitary as it was immutable and unforgiving and he feared that loneliness may be the only thing he had in common with another great writer.

Ipso couldn't find a comfortable place to sit with his birth family. They were, for the most part, good, normal people of African descent who spent Sundays in church and work days working. They reveled in purchasing things with the money they earned; he was trying to make his way on slopes of wet rocks. There was one brother of his with whom Ipso could discuss the work of Miles Davis. But as soon as the conversation strayed, even to something as mild as how his brother's daughter was doing in school, the exchange became contentious.

Ipso's regular days, to say nothing of his work days, were fraught. Words would rush to the front of his brain in the factory and the work seemed two or three times more difficult than it should have been or than it was or than it was for the other people he worked with or all three, which seemed a forth possibility.

There were, to his mind, very few people who could do factory work and something else and do either thing well. There had been a person back in the 20th Century who had made it to the Detroit City Council after attaining a law degree while working in the factory and, based on the interviews Ipso read, this person, Ken Cockrel Sr., had two brains. One brain coped with the factory while the other consumed law books. Ipso, on the other hand, was only able to string together a very few words and he left them in his mind as they seemed to need to germinate.

Monkeys with torches and hand grenades riding pigs into hell seeking the enemy among them

Monkeys with the reins between their teeth and the torches and grenades in either hand

Some with saddles some without

Some with letters from home attesting to bloodlines

Records that may be lost forever in the battle to come

And who will know who among them is the writer, the enemy or one in the same

Who will ever know their families again?

These words came to Ipso one Monday night and festered in him deep into Saturday sleep. He rolled and tumbled the whole night long wondering how to make things fit, how to get those pigs into the narrowing space. How

could the monkeys be the riders as pigs were probably smarter than monkeys? But the idea of pigs riding monkeys was laden with logistical challenges. Perhaps the riders could be chimpanzees or at least carnivorous humans. Ipso was a carnivore himself and admired vegetarians. There were a few vegetarians in the factory and they seemed calmer and listened to the news on stations where everyone seemed calm and smart. He thought vegetarians were smarter than he was and he so wanted to be smarter than he was.

All the great writers, from Harriet Tubman to Katherine Dunham, from Fannie Lou Hamer to Charles Burnett, all before since or in between, had been smarter than he was or seemed so at very least. Their work rose to the high stage, worked the brain stems, spinal cords, respiratory and nervous systems of large numbers of people, came down like invisible rain to be carried by media irrigation systems to the dry places until there were few towns where their work hadn't bloomed, fewer still where some derivation of their plants had not sprung up. People ate the plants without knowing where they came from and their bodies didn't care and the children they birthed with the nourishment that fused the egg and seed didn't care. Some reached back to find the source of what they had eaten and drew richness from the journey even if they had died before finding the root of the root. Others just grew.

3. Take Shape

One Tuesday (which seemed just as bad as any Monday, though Wednesdays were worse and Thursdays were sad until they became pay days and he walked out of the factory headed toward Saturday) he was wrestling with the monkey versus pig, round swine into narrowing orifice conundrums and noticed a stirring in him. He seemed slightly heavier than normal and a bowel movement was no relief on that score. Then a shape poked out of his abdomen. It didn't really hurt but he didn't like it. It was a dream injury. In the plain light of day, the thing stretched his skin so much it should have hurt and so he anticipated pain which was recorded somewhere but mostly in the places where he knew fear. The more he struggled with primates and swine, the more the pokes disturbed him and his sleep.

One afternoon in the plant, he was too sleepy to notice the Optical Touch Card Ancillary Firsthand (or OTCAF) Scrapper was in the descent mode pre-widgetization. His hand was still holding the Meid on lock. He would have lost that hand to the two ton scrapper except that a fellow worker (not surprisingly, a vegetarian) noticed the green and pink skull and cross bones warning signs flashing on the floor beneath the machinery and pulled Ipso's hand away just in time.

The incident shook him awake and, more than that, it shook him. After that, he did all he could to ignore the shape of the thing that he now somehow realized was going to emerge from him. He took time off from the job. He tried to screen in his back porch. He loaded his cooler with beer and tried to purchase more Miles Davis from the 1964 to 1968 period only to discover he already had every single recording from that era.

He tried to spend more time with his family and friends. But the shape(s) kept protruding from him. When asked about this by startled friends and family, Ipso would begin talking about the weather or ask about the other person's work or ask if the person had been out of town recently, if so, how had the weather been there, if the people in the visited city spoke of unusual cloud patterns or noticed any prints in mud. If the person who had noticed the protrusions had not been away, Ipso would ask about the color of the houses or buildings on the street the person had taken to get to where the two of them currently sat or stood. Occasionally, the person would actually answer the questions. Some ignored the questions and asked Ipso what the hell was going on. Others would simply walk away quickly, traumatized. A few actually tried to talk Ipso through understanding was going on inside of him. If these conversations didn't end with puzzled looks all around, they ended with Ipso frightened nearly to tears after probing the possibilities of what the thing might be. "Do you honestly expect me to figure this out while I'm on vacation?" he would scream, pound his fist on his knees and then apologize for his outburst.

4. Birthin' No Babies

The last Sunday night before he was to return to work, it dawned on him that the thing was about to emerge. Weeks ago, he had given up the idea of resisting figuring out who was riding whom and dealing with the size of the pigs versus the size of the hole. He slept and awoke with the questions' low grade fever. His pillow was wet and

his days were spent staring at the trees in his backyard and listening to Tony Williams, Miles Davis' drummer bang and fall silent on a recording called Circle in the Round. The drummer came and went; cymbals crashed like china to the rhythm then held a silence that was less than an echo but more than an absence.

Ipsو went to the Main Library on Woodward Avenue across from the Detroit Institute of Art. He was torn when he arrived as he learned the Detroit Film Theatre inside the museum across the street had a Charles Burnett retrospective that he desperately wanted to see. But the fear of the thing in him emerging in the dark on an unsuspecting filmgoer (perhaps even a Miles Davis fan) gripped him and he walked dutifully to the Library's main information desk.

"I am about to birth something," he announced to the woman behind the desk. This was not the standard response to her standard inquiry of "Can I help you?" especially from a male.

"The thing that is about to come out of me is somehow connected to words that have been in my head for a few days now. I am about to answer the question," Ipsо continued.

Urban librarians are generally used to homeless and or mentally ill people coming through the doors with inexhaustible queries. The woman behind the desk was somewhat new to her position, but assumed this was one such query, that is, until she noticed the shapes poking out of Ipsо. She insisted he needed medical help. Ipsо protested this vehemently. "It's the question coming to a head, can't you see," he said and pounded his knees with his fists. He was about to pound his head when a long cylindrical thing poked out of him, formed an "S," a backward "S," a question mark and fell back into him as quickly as it had emerged. He thought the woman's eye couldn't have gotten any wider and that's when she called the ambulance.

The Emergency Medical Service was on the way and Ipsо realized that he needed to talk his way into having this thing in the library. It had to be in the library or bringing it into the open would be even more difficult and dangerous. That was clear. He knew it as surely as he knew the question was nearly answered. He knew it the way Miles Davis and Miles' father (Miles Dewey Davis II) knew Miles had to be locked up on the family farm in East

St. Louis to kick the heroin habit he had attained in New York searching for Charlie Parker before he discovered he could not write in the gregarious, Neo African, Jackson Pollock baroque voice of Charlie Parker even as Miles realized that Parker's polyphony arose from a deep and harrowing silence that was Africans talking openly amongst themselves about all they had seen since the Middle Passage, a well Miles would have to tap alone in the dead starless night. It was then Miles realized he had to work with more sculpted silence, that he was working with a heat so intense it needed to be shielded from the outside and vice versa.

5. Language Body

Days after Ipso had come to her, the Librarian began to have second thoughts about having sent him to the hospital rather than allowing what was in him to emerge in the library. It all started when she was contacted by a reporter who just happened to have been in the Emergency Room of Receiving Hospital when they brought Ipso in strapped to the gurney flailing and straining against his restraints almost as much as the shape, now clearly an elephant, was flailing and straining to get out.

While medical personnel were scrambling, it occurred to Ipso that he had to make a decision about exactly how this thing was going to get out of his body. The options seemed as limited as they were unappealing. One option made him think that he would never again complain about digital rectal exams. The other was through the mouth. This was, in some ways, even less appealing than the option he had ruled out, though, practically speaking, it seemed the less dangerous of the two.

Even in the microseconds it took Ipso to choose an orifice, another deeper part of him had moved the elephant toward his throat and tried to calm whatever muscles needed preparation to get the thing out. His rib cage began to expand, painfully at first then relaxed to the point of unfeeling like a tooth disconnected from nerves in the flesh. The relaxation was in part a response to the awe he felt at seeing every story he'd ever read or heard pass before him like a bullet train. If Ipso had believed in ghosts, he would have seen one leaving. The train slowed and words came to him that seemed to have nothing to do with the answer to the primate, swine equations:

When the clouds fall to the ground

You will know where I can be found

Trackin crimes bigger than the sea

Can't see the forest strung up in a tree

Stalkin' the fog

I'm just a stalkin' the fog

Emmett said ain't nothing to it

He'll show you how to stalk the fog

Ipso saw Rufus Thomas with a James Brown cape open wide like wings. Did it matter that Rufus wasn't a vegetarian or that he had never so much as entertained the idea? Not now, because the trunk of the elephant was out, smaller than Ipso would have thought and so shiny black it seemed silver in certain turns of the light

The reporter told the librarian that when the elephant had fully emerged, Ipso's blood drained from its skin as if washed by invisible rain. Besides being smaller than any other elephant, its tail was curlier and the distance between its front and hind legs was greater. The elongation clearly facilitated what everyone assumed to be a message on its hide. If it was a message it was not delivered with words. The markings may have been hybrid hieroglyphs. Someone called the Egyptologist who'd helped to curate the Middle Eastern exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Art. The Egyptologist was, however, off on a trip and not immediately available. Just before the call to the Egyptologist was made, a security guard walked over to ask Ipso about the meaning of the markings on the elephant's hide. Of course, it was too late.