

HENRY AND THE MOON BABY



by

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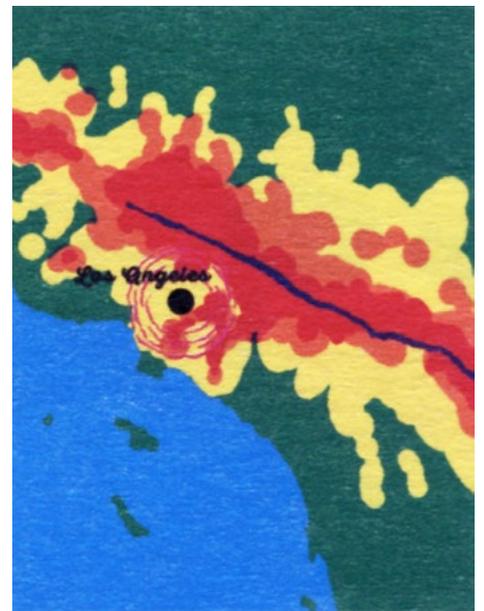
In the early morning hours of 2 August 1906, the fully-rigged French steel ship *Socoa* tore into a large underwater rock the locals called Craggon. Water swirled into the hull and rose up onto the decks. The captain ordered his crew to gather.

The *Socoa* had left her port in Stettin, France bound for San Francisco. In her hold lay 50,000 barrels of cement. The city had sustained a massive earthquake, and this cement had been ordered for the rebuild. Throughout the journey the weather had been mostly fine, with clear visibility—until that morning, when dense fog rolling in from the Lizard Peninsula enveloped the ship. Near Cadgwith, she hit rocks. As the crew assembled for guidance, a sailor pointed to a parrot perched high up on the middle mast. This bird was the captain's—a scarlet macaw he had been given from another ship captain just returned from Peru, where the bird had apparently originated. Normally the parrot was padlocked inside its cage. As the *Socoa* foundered on the rocks, and the captain ordered his entire cargo thrown overboard, the parrot flew for land.

Many astronomers, botanists and mathematically-inclined musicians point to patterns in nature—scattered matter symmetrically aligned as if by an invisible hand, harmonies in cloud formations matching the law of thirds in a Bach composition, fractals in supernovae bearing the identical configuration of oak leaves, Fibonacci sequences in human bones which mimic those of flowering pineapple. But what of those elements of reality which do not, by any conceivable interpretation, cohere? Are so-called accidental events only meant to frustrate those who observe them, like red herrings in a wider mystery? Are even the detours devised by a mischievous god?

Take the French ship parrot later to be known as Henry. Why an earthquake brought a Peruvian scarlet macaw to inspire the residents of a Cornish sheep farm may never be known. What is known is that the 50,000 barrels of cement destined for San Francisco never arrived. On that summer morning, while the captain jettisoned his cargo to save his vessel, the bird flew over the waves and two miles along the Lizard-Helston road to the home of Mr and Mrs Francias Bosustow, where he stayed for his remaining years. Henry soon became famed throughout the region for his phoenix-like escape from certain doom. At his death he was stuffed and encased, passed down to the Bosustow grandchildren, and eventually immortalised in the shadowy back room of the Helston Folk Museum. There Henry can be seen today, perched inside his glass box, surrounded by farming implements and First World War medals, his beak fixed in a grin.

Perhaps we only exist because of alternate narratives. Life shouldn't be here, and yet it is. The parrot is dead, yet it lives on. The bird should be mute, but now he speaks.



The earthquake

Just after five o'clock on the morning of the 18 April 1906, the seams of Earth tore apart. Along the San Andreas fault forming the tectonic boundary between the Pacific and North American plates, the Pacific plate shifted violently to the north, and kept shifting, for nearly three hundred miles. This earthquake was later judged to be a 7.8 on the Richter scale. Aftershocks were felt as far north as Oregon, as far south as Los Angeles, and as far east as Nevada.

In San Francisco, entire buildings collapsed. Roads opened and became graves. Hundreds of shop windows smashed like tiny bells. Burst gas lines, together with the ensuing panic, created a series of conflagrations which engulfed the city and raged on, and on, and on, for three dreadful days.

When the fires were finally extinguished, over 3,000 people had died and 80% of the city had been destroyed. San Francisco had grown quickly during the Gold Rush, and its flimsily built structures burned like paper. The majority of the city's population were left homeless and fled the region, some of them never to return.



'Every case of clinically recognised bacterial disease...is an instance of imperfect parasitism because the host is suffering at the expense of the parasite.'

Dr John Drew (Man, Microbe and Malady)

The writer

Writers are drawn to shadows of museums. We stare into forgotten glass boxes until their contents break our fault lines. Some writers create narratives in order to enshrine themselves. Pathologically originalist, we navel-gaze the conditions under which we are conceived as if our environments and our ancestry carry explanatory truths. In this way writers are, in fact, no different than everyone else.

My mother contends I was conceived on the night of the first moon landing. I cannot contradict her—and anyway, it is indisputable that 20 July, 1969 precedes my birth by roughly nine months. Baby-boomers didn't need any excuses to lose their sexual inhibitions, but that night the televised wonder of space travel, coupled with the inseminating image of the sperm-like rocket landing on the egg-like moon, gave them additional inspiration. I am, most probably, a moon baby.

My own history is not all that anomalous. It is Henry's story as well. It is Henry's, and it is yours. For centuries the moon and the stars have inspired us to write ourselves beyond the visible. And now, perhaps more poignantly than ever, we have discovered the extent of our insignificance. We know our planet is not capacious but small and tenuous, more fragile than we cared to imagine. It is birds like Henry, who appear seemingly out of nowhere, who show us what we are capable of.

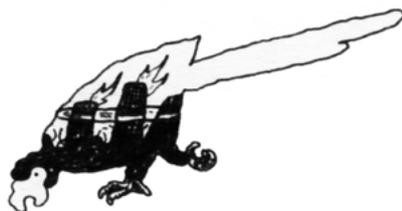
The Socoa

The captain sailed a modern ship. He had a professional crew and used the most up-to-date maps. The most dangerous rocks were known and clearly marked. How could it be, given the enormous cost of the cargo and the number of lives at stake, that he went so badly wrong? Does Henry's fixed smile contain a secret—could it have been, that August morning, that the bird caused the Socoa to run aground?

The day before the accident, according to the captain's diary, he let his parrot out of the cage to show his first mate. Could it be that he failed to return the bird to captivity? If so, did Henry choose the enveloping fog as the moment to flaunt his plumage—a demonstration so magnificent that the captain lost his bearings, divided his attention, and drifted closer to shore than he realised?

Perhaps Henry smelled something. Perhaps he carried a seed in his stomach or a hitchhiker on his feathers—such as the stately echium, which would go on to establish itself as the flowering plant apiculturists most cherish for attracting bees. Because how else do we account for the mysterious appearance, just months after the Socoa's loss, of the first recorded tasting notes for Cornish honey? Of course, Henry could also have been carrying the seed of what would become the soft, creamy, and impossibly delicious Plympton Pippin, an apple variety from the orchards of Brittany now used for West Country cider. Or perhaps this monogamous macaw, hoping to find his mate, had been lured by a sound he'd heard the night before—the chatter of drinkers in pubs along the peninsula—a chatter which reminded him of his social environs

in the Amazon, where the sound of parrots can be heard for miles. After the Socoa ran aground and her voyage ended, Henry's had only begun. His wasn't the only life to be changed. The cement barrels destined for San Francisco sunk to the sea, forever changing the thousands of creatures passing beneath her hull. The ocean floor would have shaken under the impact. Without a whisper of delay, new aquatic cities were created—labyrinths of cement tunnels and byways, monumental plinths, high-rises and multi-occupancy flats for octopi, molluscs, and crabs. To this day, divers investigating the area encounter the solidified remains of this cement, scattered on the seabed.



Panspermia

Each one of these events—from the design and construction of the Socoa in its steel shipyard at Chantiers de St. Nazaire, followed by the earthquake five years later in San Francisco and its ensuing three days of fires, and the frantic telegram to France where the Socoa promptly loaded its cargo, and the intervening days between its departure and voyage and calamity on the Cornish coast—all of this, every last second, was predestined. The events weren't only predestined by Henry, or by his captain's easily distracted personality, or by the dubious gift of this particular Peruvian parrot from one captain to the other, or even the fateful weather conditions contributing to the fog of that August morning. No, it was predestined long before that, long before such things as mornings were invented. The Socoa's accident was predestined over 14 billion years ago, at that moment we fictionally call The Big Bang—a moment which becomes more relevant 6 billion years ago when the stardust burst out of its primordial soup, and 2 billion years later when this dust mysteriously coalesced into spirals of spinning methane gas, creating the infinitesimal molecules in which Henry's ancestors were conceived.

It seems miraculous, but it had to be the case. It could never be different. Life is bacteria, until it isn't.

The idea that the building blocks of life arrived on Earth through pollination was first called panspermia by the Greek philosopher Anaxagoras. Our planet, we still believe, wasn't capable of hosting life on its own. So the bacteria forming the basis of life had to come from somewhere else—a meteor, perhaps a comet, sneezed onto us by Mars or some other planet, even outside our solar system. This seed transfer could have occurred by purposeful design or accidental contamination, but whichever the case, it contained messages inside its genetic code. When the vehicle landed, it carried the genesis of Earth. Henry's ancestors arrived that day. And so did ours.

Since then, there have been five mass extinctions in the history of the Earth—six, if you count the first great oxygenation event over 3.5

billion years ago. Core studies of trees tell us that plant life used to be comparatively enormous, even obscene. Some flies were bigger than humans. This fact may be hard to countenance until we remember that we are distant hybrids of distant hybrids, sheltered inside our little manmade museums. Ninety-five percent of life that ever existed is now extinct.



Clay

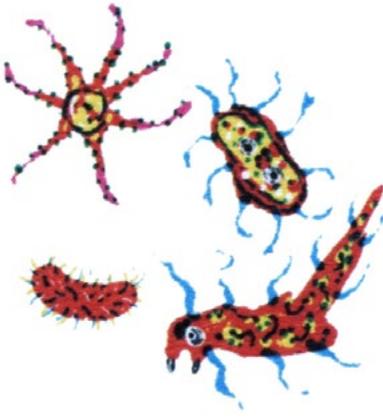
Maybe Henry didn't carry a seed in his feathers after all. Maybe he just wanted to eat some clay.

By 1906, Cornwall was producing fifty percent of the world's china clay—the crucial ingredient in fine white porcelain valued around the world. China clay was used for rubber and paint. Newspapers used china clay for texture and glossy design, such as the Financial Times' signature pink. The same day the Socoa approached the Craggon rocks, thousands of workers would have been aiming their high-pressure hoses on open pits. Above them would have towered the white conical clay tips known as the Cornish Alps. Out on the water, hundreds of ships would have been waiting to dock at tiny ports such as Charlestown, like so many airplanes circling the runways of Heathrow.

Henry would have smelled this activity. The thick clouds of moisture rising from this great mass of workers, swarming the clay pits with their massive water harpoon guns, had to have permeated the fog. Just as the ship neared Cadgwith, and it drew ever closer to its terrifying coastal rock formations, Henry must have decided to act. He was obliged to. He smelled something deep within him, a scent that reminded him of home.

Deep within the Amazon River Basin, in the Tambopata cliffs of Peru, the light brown exposed rock face has come to be known as a giant clay lick. It is because of the macaws. For years the birds have been arriving by the hundreds, flying from their nests in the forest. There they cling, in neat bright rows of red and blue, like so many garlands on a grave. After stuffing their beaks, they fly back to their trees and eat.

This behaviour has confused ornithologists. Some think the birds need clay to bind to the toxins of plants before being passed through their gastrointestinal tracts. Others believe the clay adds a necessary amount of salt to their diets. Either way, Henry would have taken part in this feeding ritual. The evidence might even be found today, in bacteria preserved in his stomach, written in a language simple enough for humans to understand.



Microbes

We search the stars for gods. We ask our leaders for codes of proper conduct and study Einstein's brain for patterns of intelligence. If only we can understand the historical processes giving rise to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, we are told the ineffable power of their work disappears and their literary greatness deconstructed. Are stories reducible to their authors' biographies? How many wars have been waged over such useless and sweeping claims?

Perhaps the underlying patterns of our universe are not complex but microscopic.

Botanists tell us that all plant life involves two main activities: a fight for light and an avoidance of drought. A single blade of grass contains both instincts. Every day it alters its trajectory and digs deeper for moisture. Some orchids take more radical steps for survival, transforming their appearance into the very bees they need to attract for pollination.

On any given day, we have twenty-seven different kinds of worms in our eyes. We rub them in an attempt to clear our sight—but what if these worms, all along, have been guiding our seeing? Bacteria have no inhibitions. They are ideally suited for one thing, and one thing only—reproduction. They are asexual and quite possibly immortal. Given food and an ideal environment, they are quite capable of multiplying to infinity. It is, in fact, their only mission.

The unseen worlds inside our bodies are both mundane and sublime, normal and pathological. They are settings for a realism routinely described as science fiction. Tiny tunnels spread inside each human eye, corridors for the blood snaking into our chambers and vaults. Each of us possesses our own hidden worlds with uncannily familiar dead ends. How is it possible that vision be uncanny? What is the connection between sight and strangeness? When did we lose our ability to understand our own environment, and how can it be that only the most oblique art reminds us of home?

Every day, the mouth swallows 100 billion microorganisms, more than the number of stars in the sky. Human life begins in a sterile womb—and at birth, the invasion of microbes begins, colonising us ever more steadily until we are completely consumed at death. If we ever discover life in outer space, it will most likely be microbial.

The questions persist and multiply, despite our supposed understanding of history. What is our planet's current stage of death? Microbial hosts are only disease-free until the parasites which colonise them start to take over. Only at the last minute does any host act up. It acts both logically and abnormally in an effort to right the ship. Perhaps the bacteria in Henry's stomach will tell us what its host needed to survive. Perhaps microorganisms, not people, caused the Socca to run aground.

It is as if a single plant were behind it all, forming the common ancestor to the echium, the Plympton Pippin, the clay, the macaw, the writer and the story. Should we look away from each dramatic display of plumage in order to avoid an accident, or is the accident the point? Have birds been created to guide or antagonise us? Has every plant and animal been designed to design, or designed to disabuse us of design? We are urged to choose our own futures, but as we write we find ourselves side-tracked and subject to the whims of our more colourful protagonists. The historian and the author can be colleagues, even friends—or in Tolstoy's case, one and the same person. The rat that carried the plague came from the same space matter as its eventual inoculation.

Perhaps Henry simply wanted to come home. But there is another possibility—that Henry has always been here. His journey is complete because it was prefigured in his molecules and guided by the bacteria controlling his brain.

We do not know if we are moon babies or Mars infants or distant intergalactic ancients. We may be at the beginning or the end of our journeys, or erroneously applying time to track our progress. We only know something of our own past, a little of our present, and even less of our future. But perhaps there are lessons Henry taught us—that life is about competing for light, surviving the drought, and flying to our next best home. Around the sheep farm, Henry proved a popular attraction. How could it be, the children asked, that this strange and beautiful bird, once free of its cage, chose to come here?

We could ask similar questions of the creatures inside the man-made biomes not far from Henry's eventual destination—sphered globes under the sky, absurd constructions within an arid, hollowed-out former clay pit. There, the world's largest enclosed rain forest grows. What if we could ask the plants and insects how they worked their way into our future? Did they lure their hosts inside? May we imagine ourselves, one day, in a similar condition, traveling beyond the globe and heavens, not as passive passengers but authors of our fates?

Maybe out of every disused clay pit a rain forest could grow. Henry knows the truth of it. Pay him a visit, and you'll see him grinning behind the glass.

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