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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 44-46: The Ballad of Time Travel

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



April-June 2022

A rug seller in Istanbul convinced me I could fly home on the carpet I bought from him last month. I didn't believe in time travel until that moment, when the persuasive salesman spun the woven masterpiece in the air like uncooked pizza dough. Yet, it wasn't because I really thought I'd be able to take flight over the resplendent and grand city and glide magically through a half dozen time zones back to Dallas. Instead, I realized I'd just been transported once more into an enchanted passage of time and space, my mind reoriented to the particularities of our global geographies in this late pandemic reality.

You see, in that instant, surrounded by the voluminous antiquity, just yards from the famed imperial Blue Mosque (right) and no more than a thousand feet from the mouth of the Bosphorus, seagulls swarmed above in cascading plumes while the latter day *ezan* (call to prayer) enveloped the city in its haunting embrace. The late afternoon rug purchase somehow coincided with the Turkish *ikindi*—the time of day when objects and their shadows have equal height, indicating the schedule of the particular prayer call. It was as if the shop owner who enticed me into his boutique had timed the whole thing to heighten the experience of his pitch and sale.



And it worked. Not only was I distracted, but I was transported through time and space with

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a distinct power and magic; it was peculiarly mystical. Of course, I really *did* want a rug! But all of these moments fell into place and made for a particularly meaningful experience. I also realized upon my return home that I believed in both time *travel* and time *warping*. When we travel by airplane we experience time rather differently. We are forced to confront the realities of unplanned sunrises, expedited nightfall, and lost time. And once we arrive in a new place, the circumstances of geography condition us to distinct new rhythms of space and topography. Many of us also succumb to the perils of jetlag.

Over the course of this last year, including my most recent trip to Central Asia, I stepped foot on four different continents — North America, Europe, Asia, and if you count Hawai'i as part of the Pacific's tectonic landmass, Oceania. In each of these spheres, I experienced spatial and temporal modulations—and some form of time travel. This was not simply because of how far I had gone, but because of the nature of the tempo and cadence of life in each of these places.

Out in the middle of the Pacific on the island of Oahu, the air is thick with a salty humidity and the thriving foliage is dense and verdant. Flowers the size of melons cloy the air with pungent delight, as they wilt and fall upon volcanic soils and rot. The human populations in the city of Honolulu are crammed into

tightly packed high-rises and squat cement homes, which have spread up the watersheds of Liliha-Kapalama, Manoa, and Palolo like fast growing *Ipomoea* vines. Set against the deep sapphire ocean (below), the riotous greens of boscaje and jungle scream against the sky's divinely created blue. And the general pulse of social activity is noticeably laid back, without worry, and independent in its identity of place and custom. Once its own country, it preserves to this day a resilient power of belonging and distinction that makes it part of the greater oceanic culture from whence it came.

In Central Asia, the stretch of land that constitutes Uzbekistan is a diverse landmass of desert, mountains, and fertile valleys. It is a country richly overlaid with ancient historical sites, deep traditional connections to various ethnic groups, and modern states with contemporary economies, commerce, and politics. The landscape is variegated and evocative, illuminated by an imperious sun and shaded by few trees, but alive with a bustling populous. Every town wakes to the call of the *fajr* (sunrise prayer), followed by the cackles of agile roosters, and then the golden glimmer of dawn. Many men still sport the traditional embroidered square hats called *doppa*, and women wear exquisitely detailed full-length dresses, even while you'll find an occasional person wearing shorts or flashing a tattoo.

And on the Bosphorus, the great bridge of continents, the city once called Constantinople draws millions to its shores in a confluent and complex space of Europe and Asia. Istanbul is an ancient city of contradiction, but a modern one of adaptability. Its buildings are a vibrant mix of nineteenth century European and



Ottoman Turkish, echoing the dynastic beauties of handmade textiles, gold adornments, and finely hewn rock embellishments. It is more crowded than Tashkent or Honolulu and boasts an undulating skyline of crowded hilltops and valleys, for as far as the eye can see.

These are the things that time travel is made of. And curiously, having experienced these locales, one thing became very clear: the idea of distraction has a very different meaning depending on where you travel and how much technology you use. When visiting these places, I purposely limited my use of media,

and specifically shifted my distractions from technological gadgetry to the real world around me. I rarely used my phone, watched television, or checked social media or email. I freed myself temporarily from this invasive techno-conditioning. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and search results

couldn't target me with ads about pineapples, Silk Road tours, or Turkish coffee, because I turned off my location and ignored anything technologically social.

I wanted to be distracted by real life, not technological life. And it worked. The few times I watched TV in Tashkent or Samarkand (next page photo), there was little in the way of anything English. TV shows come from all over Central Asia—a talk show from Azerbaijan; a sitcom from Iran; a soap opera from Turkey; and headline newscasts from Uzbekistan. Save for a short BBC transmission, the news conveys little information that we might likely be exposed to in the US. Even in Istanbul and Honolulu, the pulse of news and entertainment were distinctly different and made me feel like I was

in another time. I was distracted by real people, real places, real weather, not some mediated information about those things. I no longer felt an impending sense of media-driven anxiety, because I'd left the inflection of technology behind and focused on the present.

We live in a time and place that battles mercilessly for truth and accuracy, while we are buoyed in a sea of purposeful information deceit, manipulation, and control. It's not uncommon for the contemporary American to feel like some great unknown is macro-gas-lighting us into questioning our sanity, when nothing seems true any longer. A momentary retreat from our phones and screens and media may give us a glimpse into the worlds we are really missing. And it may be just what saves us from our own devolution.



Back in March, during our *Festival of Form*, we had an unexpected peek into this same world of time travel, a *coup d'ail* that stopped the motions of our busy workplace and frantic schedules of meetings for just a day and made us experience a world twisted by the continuity of sound. The centerpiece of the festival was a 16-hour performance of John Cage's *Organ²/ASLSP (As Slow as Possible)*, which was performed by Christopher Anderson from 6am to 10pm on a Tuesday. I marked off about eight hours during the day to partake in the performance, between requisite meetings and work functions. The morning hours from just before dawn till about 9am were the most transformative and beautiful. Light, sound, silence, and the motions of a day just beginning, offered an imaginative environment

nearly identical to those I had or would experience on these other continents.

Time slowed. The meditative habitat of a dark chapel illuminated by a single candle and the hollow sustainment of organ bellows focused the mind. Throughout the day, when I came

and went, I found myself annoyed by technology's infringement upon that space or interferences by outside sounds. Some colleagues apologized for packed schedules that didn't allow them to attend. The world would not stop outside or yield to our pause. We had to pause for ourselves alone. But that contrast too made me realize how

the world is noisy with distractions we often have little control over.

Sometimes it requires us to halt and find a place or moment that will allow us to time travel. Even if our sojourns are nearby or in the boxes of our minds, it is still worth something to find peace in the exploration or quest of going to another time or place. It may just bring you back to a position of presence and peace.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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