

KEYS I DON'T REMEMBER

FORREST AGUIRRE

The Last Key in Sodom

Lot detested the thing, but it was, after all, a domestic necessity. Heaven forbid that a man of God use a stylized phallus for his incomings and outgoing, but it was so. He felt guilty, one step away from damnation, whenever he inserted the thing into the labial lock that adorned his front door. But once inside he could feel the holiness of his dwelling—a home is a man's temple, no less—and delighted in being enveloped in the warmth of hearthside security. He was a devout man, though, and counted his blessings. At least the keyhole was gender-specific.

The key passed through many hands the day after Abraham's pleading. Lot's absent-minded daughter met a pair of angels on the street that day and brought them home. Unfortunately, in letting them in, she completely forgot the key in the lock.

By this time, as the story goes, the townsfolk took an interest in Lot's visitors and came knocking. As soon as their hairy knuckles hit wood, though, they were struck blind. Someone on the outside, though, remembered seeing the key in the door and started to feel up the door to find the means to get in. One of the angels—more erudite than Lot's daughter, obviously—went to the window, gave a reach-around, and grabbed the key, pulling out just as a mass of hands grabbed at the spot below the brass handle. A collective "Awww!" rose from the crowd. Soon the Sodomites were on their hands and knees grubbing about for the key. "Bugger it all!" someone called out. The angel turned and closed the window forthwith, not wanting to witness what followed. He handed the

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key to Lot's wife who, he hoped, had more sense than her daughter.

After a quick debriefing, the family exited the back door and headed out of the city. As they walked out onto the plain, the angels explained that they must not turn back to the city, not even for a peek. The Lord was going to destroy the city, and they expected Lot and his family to leave it all behind them.

About halfway across the plain, as the ravens, sensing something spectacular about to happen, headed towards the city, Lot's wife decided to backtrack. Thankfully, in her sudden circling swoosh of skirts, the key flew out of her pocket and landed near her husband, who dutifully picked it up as a token in remembrance of her—she had turned to salt, he somehow sensed, before the key even hit the ground. So it was.

The group retired to a cave in the amber glow of the burning plain. Once inside, Lot, in his sorrow, drank himself into a stupor and slept on the floor. He awoke the next morning to find his girls moping guiltily in the corner. When asked what the problem was, both ran off into the cinder fields that once surrounded his fair city.

Lot sighed—it had been a hard day and night. The magnitude of the things he had seen weighed on him, and he questioned his grip on reality. Then he remembered the key, his only anchor to sanity, given all he had been through. He reached into the folds of his garments. Gone. The girls had taken the key from him, right out of his pocket. His grip on reality slipped ever so slightly. He didn't know where the key had been, nor where it was, nor whether it was ever really there at all.

It is now stuck in Palestine.

The Schloss Key

We very much want you to have it, but it is clearly not yours to have. It is beautiful to behold. You must behold it. You will behold it, hold it. Soon. Soon.

Perhaps.

If you stay within procedure.

The handle is black and green apple, a representation of a beetle with the same fruit embedded in its putrescent broken back. The tongue of the beetle—and of the key—is in the form of an etiolated Hungerkünstler, though few people care, past a certain point. It is beautiful, indeed. But they

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simply do not care.

You have submitted the requisite paperwork. You are to be commended, K. No, you are to be rewarded. Behold the key. Is it not as beautiful as we had given you cause to imagine it to be? You will find we know much. We share what we know. Of you it is only required to submit to our good judgment.

Place the key near a lock—any lock will do—and you will notice the tongue of the key changing shape, metamorphosing into the proper zigzag combination, dimension, and thickness needed to open the lock. This key will open anything. Anything.

You thrust toward a lock, watching the Hungerkünstler contort in a writhing dance of obedience to the approaching lock's tumbler. You guess—for you must, it is not given to you to know—that the bone-breaking spins and arches of the key's tongue must match the lock. Somehow, you just know, though you do not really know.

The key slides in, a perfect match.

Then flies out, as if from a gun, and tocks you in the forehead, leaving a raspberry smudge that will become, before the night is through, a small black bruise atop a knot.

You push the key in again.

And you find yourself with a sister bruise-to-be. You are a holy, horned Moses-in-waiting.

You look around for the key, the beautiful key, but it is not beholden to you. It is simply gone.

As we said, it is clearly not yours to have.

You will ask "where has it gone"?

We will answer: "This key was last seen on the streets of Prague, beneath a headless statue, where it was picked up by a man. Man? How does one know? Perhaps it was several men, a mob, who can tell? —wearing a black suit, polished shoes, and a bowler hat."

This is so far as you know. Please apply to section K for more information.

Penderekey

One feels the Penderekey, one does not see it, though it has been seen. It is an elusive thing—the object—but its presence is clearly felt. Thankfully,

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this key travels well, far, and often. The elusiveness of the thing itself it inversely proportional to the ubiquity of the thing's effect.

The effect is here described by Monterro Tulumé, a Spanish music critic who has followed the faint scent of the Penderekey from Northern Germany to Puerto Rico, San Francisco to Tokyo, Israel to Poland:

The audience is discomfited. Those who do not sense the real change in atmosphere—the spiritual atmosphere of the hall—might attribute their unease to stiff tuxedos and tight black dresses, to a heating system malfunction, or to the rising warmth of dinner's Haut-Medoc, Bordeaux. For some, it is the discordant screech, as they think of it, of out of tune violins. But this is all calculated, not accidental. Perhaps it is subject matter—our own mortality, the mortality of others, our own responsibility for the mortality of others. For yet others, it must be the controlled repetitive chaos that reflects these events, the brain-scratching staccato followed by endless minor notes and flatness drawn out into a thin wire of frisson that threads its way up and through the listener's spine to settle in the base of her skull. In that place, dark thought foment. Assumptions are challenged, comfort is stripped away, nothing is taken for granted. She sees herself as herself, and the thought is terrifying.

She does not, however, even know that the key is there. She feels it, but she does not see it jangling in the conductor's pocket, a jagged quarter note, all strange angles and spiny protuberances, surrounded by a tiny cloud of key signatures, ledger lines, semi-breves, and treble clefs. Only the conductor knows of the key and its purpose, which is to open a basement vault in the Sparda Bank, Hamburg. It is rumored that the "hidden" works reside there—Gomulka Emigrates his Jewish Wife and ZOMO et KOR—which are, it is said, written in the un-utterable keys of Ž and ę. It is good that the key remains hidden. Who knows what might happen to the woman, should she access those hidden works? The possibilities are horrific.

Key to the Labyrinths

The key is crafted of iron, shaped in the form of the Arabic letter meem, signifying mortal existence and its end, according to Abd' al Ansab. I remember it well, and if I had to tell a story about the key, it would be told in this manner:

On the 13th of August, 1944, I visited a noted journalist in Buenos Aires. As most people do, I browsed his bookshelf while he retrieved rum from his cellar. I was struck by the utter ordinariness of his collection—style manuals, classic works of Roman and Greek origin (many in their original language), Kierkegaard and his commentators, several thesauri, a Portuguese translation of Kafka's complete works.

I turned from the bookshelf of the low coffee table that hunched before his sofa. Atop the table rested a bulbous tome, thick as five fingers, seething to be read, though I did not, at the time, know the language. The front cover was rounded from bulk, looking like a leather-backed turtle replete with knobs—thick leather embossments—into which were engraved short sayings in Arabic. Only many years later did I realize that I was seeing a very rare, possibly unique copy of Ibn Arabi's al-Futahat al-Maghrib.

I picked up the tome and held it above the table. With my free hand I opened the pages, noting immediately the horror vacui evinced by the many hand-written illustrations, side-notes, and charts that filled every margin of the book. I stopped on a page that had been book-marked by a small, thin iron key that mimicked the shape of one of the repeating characters in the text-body and notes. For a time I admired the key as it rested on the page, but had to rub my eyes to rid them of the weariness-induced illusion that the key grew thinner with time. I would surely have to take a taxi home.

I was startled, once the phosphora faded from my sight, to see that the key had, in fact, sunk into the book. Not merely into the crook of the binding, but through the pages and words, though the parchment and ink remained unchanged by its progress. Again, I rubbed my eyes.

I looked for the key, but it had seemingly disappeared. I

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checked behind me on the sofa — perhaps I had just laid it to the side and forgotten about it. I looked at the floor, but it was not to be found. I was most embarrassed and was thinking up an apology for the lost key when my host walked through the doorway, a tumbler of rum in each hand.

The key slipped through the binding of the book — through, not around — and fell to the table, clattering loudly. I looked up at my host, jaw gaping, and slammed the book's cover shut far more loudly than I had intended. I set the book down clumsily, sandwiching the key between the tome and the table.

The reporter walked over to me and smiled, handing me one of the tumblers. I was glad for the rum's sharpness, each sip bringing reality burning back into my throat.

He smiled at me. Then, picking up the book, he turned to the exact page I had been admiring earlier. I looked down at the table where the key should have been, but it was not there. Instead it was, as before, wedged between the book's pages.

The reporter read, translating from the Arabic: "The key is crafted of iron, shaped in the form of the Arabic letter meem, signifying mortal existence and its end, according to Abd' al Ansab." I quaffed my drink, thanked my host, then left in utter astonishment. He smiled, as if pleased with the oddity of the situation.

It was only a short time ago that I learned that Ibn Arabi's al-Futahat al-Maghrib is still unfound, having been lost to Berber raiders over 900 years ago, though its existence is irrefutably confirmed in several catalogs of Ibn Arabi's personal libraries.

Bentham's Eye

Since its inception in the mind's eye of Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon has been the focal center of a contentious philosophical debate on the nature of power and control in the modern state. Despite the varied, sometimes chaotic reactions to the proposed structure, the building itself has never been built. It is, in its very essence, the greatest prison/laboratory/asylum/quarantine that never was.

The key to the Panopticon, however, is a very real object, now in the

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possession of Professor Emeritus Hans Vansanno, resident of Bern, Switzerland. It is carved from a single piece of crystal, a smooth, rounded key of elliptical shape, unlike the jagged-edged keys to which most of us are accustomed.

The central motif of the key is, as one would expect, an eye. Not just any eye, though. Bentham's key is modeled after the reformer's own eye—his left, to be exact; the droopy one that caused him such grief and made him the subject of much mockery as a young student. The very eye that taught him about the emotionally painful relationship between being seen and powerlessness, and the converse relationship between authority and oversight.

All biographical inferences aside, the object itself is an opus of inventiveness, surpassing the clever design even of the building that it has never unlocked. Its curvatures were cut and ground in such a way that the holder of the key sees on its surface only his reflection, no matter at what angle or distance it is held. He who holds the key to the Panopticon has the image of himself always before him.

But Bentham's audacity, craftsmanship, and genius is most powerfully made manifest when one catches the reflection of his own pupil within the key's crystalline lens. If you are so fortunate, or unfortunate, to see into Bentham's eye seeing your eye seeing Bentham's eye seeing your eye . . . If you are caught in that visual gravity well, you will understand that the entire world and all its inhabitants can be, and indeed is a Panopticon, with all its inhabitants completely visible at all angles, at all times, simultaneously.

And you will hold that curiosity in your hand, though your sense has left you, and be left, forever, with the question: "Am I a warden, or a prisoner?"

Tshibumba's Skeleton

Tshibumba Kanda Matulu painted what he dare not speak. His depictions of Belgian colonial brutality gave voice to the un-utter-able. The brilliance of his palette cut through and broke the jungle-shrouded silence of tortured screams and the thick layer of background weeping that pervaded central Africa for a lifetime or more.

The hierarchy of power was clear. European officers in starched white

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uniform held the kiboko, or rhinoceros-hide whip. Below them, dark-skinned askari in dark-green uniforms shouldered rifles and clubs. The askari were truly the fist of colonial law. Beneath the fist were the citizens, if that term may be used for those who lived under such forms of oppression.

Tshibumba's Skeleton shone like an African kaleidoscope. It was a mélange of cast off paint chips and unused canvas drippings in the form of a three-dimensional skull and spine. The bones were not cleanly separated by color. You would not, for instance, have found paint-by-number lumbar bones neatly stacked in barbershop stripes. Rather, each bone was mottled in a sort of candy-store camouflage, a hypnotic, if macabre, osteological tie-dye. That is, if you ever saw it.

Most who saw it claimed not to. Those who wished to see it dare not let their desires be known. The authorities hated the thing because, for all its concreteness, the ideas that it gave voice to—freedom, equanimity, hope, and possibly even joy—these ideas were anathema to the authorities. When the key was seen, by those who admitted it or not, it was inevitably in a position that strengthened its iconographic standing as a representation of those ideas: in the lock of a recently-opened stockade, protruding from a freely swinging prison cell door, stuck in the barrel of a gun that had been leveled at fleeing prisoners. For all the denial, Tshibumba's Skeleton seemed to be everywhere.

These repeated appearances of the key gave rise to several possibly unanswerable questions. What is the magic of art that leads man out of captivity? Is this escape literal or merely metaphysical? Exactly who was being freed, and to what end?

One final question must be asked: Why must we speak here of Tshibumba and his key in the past tense, as if he were already dead? Perhaps it is because the past has not yet given way to the present. The uniforms are different; the key remains unchanged.

Chung Ho-hsiang's Visitor

No one can accuse the Chia-yu empire of ingratitude towards its subjects. In 1054, one Chung Ho-hsiang discovered the famous "Guest Star" (a massive supernova explosion that has since expanded into what we now know as the crab nebula) in the constellation Taurus. A scant two years later, the star faded from naked-eye visibility. Chung Ho-hsiang, who had

since been promoted to the office of Director of the Astronomical Bureau of the Chia-yu empire, was rewarded with a token of remembrance by the emperor himself: a glass-blown key infused with a gold replica of the supernova as it appeared on the first night of its discovery. The locks on the royal observatory were switched out for new ones that matched the key. And there was only one key.

Astronomers and empires come and go, and China, despite its storied history and ancient heritage, holds no exemption to these changes. The key passed from director to director through a series of mentoring, regime changes, and public beheadings until 1449. Not long before that time, during the Qing dynasty, a bronze telescope had been built and mounted at the ancient Beijing Observatory. In that year, Emperor Zhengtong, known for his collection of one-thousand peacocks and his penchant for fried goat fat, died in his sleep—a rare royal victim of death by natural causes.

One must assume that security in the astronomy bureau had grown lax in the few centuries between Chung Ho-hsiang's discovery and the death of Emperor Zhengtong. For an unknown assistant at the observatory was so moved, upon hearing of the emperor's death, that he saw fit to adhere the key—colloquially known by that time as “Chung Ho-hsian's Visitor” —to the object mirror of the recently-forged telescope, thus reminding all who looked through the lens that Zhengtong had ascended, like a bright star, into the heavens. Of course, this rendered the telescope useless, but this was soon rectified when a second, more powerful telescope was built alongside the first.

For over 500 years—a span of time almost incomprehensible to the western mind, let's be honest—the Visitor loomed before the eyes of astronomers, curiosity-seekers, and historians. Then, in 1967, cultural revolutionaries dismantled the telescope, painted the bust of Chairman Mao over the top of the key, then re-assembled the scope.

Given the state of Chinese art in that decade, one who has not seen the portrait can only imagine the comical affectations given to the ruler's visage. Chairman Mao can now be seen gracing the heavens at any point in the sky, day or night, a 24/7 twinkle in his left eye. Even the introduction of Capitalism has not sullied his starry gaze. He just keeps on smiling. If you're lucky, you might catch him winking, a sparkle of acknowledgement just for you.

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FORREST AGUIRRE is a recent recipient of the World Fantasy Award for his editing of *Leviathan 3*. His fiction has appeared in *Flesh & Blood*, *Indigenous Fiction*, *The Earwig Flesh Factory*, *Redsine*, *3rd Bed*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Journal of Experimental Fiction* and *Polyphony 4*.

Locus Magazine calls Forrest, "...an interesting writer, worth watching, whom I think could benefit from disciplining the wilder flights of his imagination a bit." Forrest spurns such disciplinary measures.

A collection of his short fiction titled *Fugue XXIX* will be published by Raw Dog Screaming Press in 2005.

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