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THE CANYON OF DOUBT: JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON'S *THE RISI'S WIFE*

LOUISE HARMON*

It has taken me awhile to recover from *The Risi's Wife*.¹ This happens to me sometimes when I read a book. It cuts through me, disables me. Something about how the story comes out, or how the world looks through another's eyes, or maybe just a paragraph too beautiful to bear—those can all leave me staggering around for days. It takes real effort to cauterize such a wound, and achieve some equanimity. When I first read *The Risi's Wife*, I was so disturbed, so dazzled, that I vowed to banish it from further thought. You don't need this right now, I told myself. You have no obligation to think about this story. It does not need to be understood. You can just let it be. It is, after all, one of the privileges of the casual reader of fiction: there is no mandate of mastery.

But *The Risi's Wife* would not let me alone. I found myself wondering what happened to Charlie Babin, a country boy from Louisiana, when he was sent to India during World War II as a flight engineer. What change of heart and mind took place as he flew through misty Himalayan valleys of granite and ice? What magic had India worked upon this Shreveport trolley car driver, to turn him into an *avātar*, a *risi* on the edge of achieving union with *Brahman*, the ultimate Reality?² And what about his wife, Leslie, who waited patiently for her husband at home, and who later embraced him in all of his unworldly, otherworldly, beyond worldly splendor? Or Leslie's divorce lawyer, the narrator of the story-within-the-story, Brooks Buchanan? Or Albert Finch, the narrator of *The Risi's Wife*, the person to whom the story was told, a retired judge and plaintiff's lawyer, the consummate rational

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¹ John William Corrington, "The Risi's Wife," in ALL MY TRIALS 149-233, at 162 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987)[hereinafter *The Risi's Wife*].

² A *risi* or *rishi* was the name given to a Vedic yogin. It meant "seer," or one who envisioned or perceived the reality manifested in the sacred hymns. The sacred texts were said to be revealed to the *risis*. Georg Feuerstein, TANTRA: THE PATH OF ECSTASY 19, 147 (Boston: Shambala, 1998). The first mention of the *risi* was in the famous hymn about the primeval sacrifice of Purusha who offered himself as an oblation to the gods. From this ritual sacrifice, the universe originated. "The sacrificial victim, namely, Purusha, born at the very beginning, they sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacrificial grass. With him as oblation, the gods performed the sacrifice, and also the Sakhyas [a class of semidivine beings] and the rishis [ancient seers]." From *RigVeda* 10.90, in Ainslee Thomas Embree (ed.), 1 SOURCES OF INDIAN TRADITION: FROM THE BEGINNING TO 1800, 7-28, at 18 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2nd ed., 1988)(2 vols.) [hereinafter *Sources of Indian Tradition*].

man? Everyone seemed to change in this story, listeners and tellers of the story alike, and I wondered if that included me.

There are some easy explanations for my vulnerability to *The Risi's Wife*. I too had been sent to India for work,³ dropped out of the sky into a civilization "that had been open for business and going non-stop since the fourth millennium, B.C."⁴ I too had been drawn into the "Tale of Hinduism" that drew in "strangers like the spiral of a whirlpool that stood in dynamic stasis outside any understandable kind of time at all."⁵ I too had disappeared and become absorbed in and by India. As Brooks Buchanan pointed out about Charlie Babin's entry into the Tale, it "was nothing new. It had happened to the Aryans when they had come down from the cold and barren steppes over the northwest frontier and tripped across the Harappa civilization, even then over a thousand years old. It had happened to the Moghuls, the Moslems, and to the English after them."⁶ We had all been transformed by India, perhaps to a lesser degree than Charlie Babin, but inalterably changed just the same. Even though I am now home, I miss India, for its beauty, for its Tale, and for the power it has to undo me. There is a part of me that never came home at all.

But it was not just India that drew me into *The Risi's Wife*. I am also a student and teacher of Evidence, and the novella starts out with a legal issue that has always fascinated me: the admissibility of gruesome photographs.⁷ *The Risi's Wife* is a story-within-a-story.⁸ On the

³ Touro College has the only A.B.A. approved Summer Law Program in Shimla, India. I taught Indian Law and Philosophy in that program during the summers of 1995-2000.

⁴ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 162.

⁵ *Id.* at 166.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Gruesome photographs are usually found in treatises under Federal Rule 403 discussions. Federal Rule of Evidence 403 excludes relevant evidence if "its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of unfair prejudice, confusion of the issues, or misleading the jury, or by considerations of undue delay, waste of time, or needless presentation of cumulative evidence." FED. R. EVID. 403.

⁸ Corrington had this to say about his device of the story-within-a-story:

I recently finished a book which I think Arkansas Press is going to publish called *The Risi's Wife*. "Risi" is the Indian word for a seer with extraordinary powers from the time of RigVeda. And the form is patterned after Conrad: if you know Conrad, you know this form. It's two lawyers discussing a case that one of them once had. It started as a divorce case and ended up as a manifestation of Shiva, but it's done with cold, calculating determination to get the same kind of effects that Conrad was able to get out of Marlow's monologues in such works as "Heart of Darkness."

William Parrill, "After the Confederate War: A Conversation with John William Corrington (1932-1988)," in William Mills (ed.), JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON: SOUTHERN MAN OF LETTERS 181-201, at 185 (Conway, Arkansas: UCA Press, 1994)[hereinafter *Southern Man of Letters*].

outside was a story about a products liability lawsuit in a federal district court against a Brooklyn nightwear manufacturer whose product possessed a latent defect; its pajamas tended to “flash up in a matter of seconds and then, still flaming, to melt onto the skin so that nothing could remove them until the child within was incinerated, either dead or so awfully burned that in most cases death would have been a mercy.”⁹ The many cases against Nighty-Night were being consolidated, and the court was putting together its own scrapbook of horror-photographs of things gone terribly wrong, of singed flesh, blood and bone. The lawyers on either side of the myriad Nighty-Night cases were lining up to argue about the admissibility of hundreds of photographs of dead children, shot on marble slabs in morgues and funeral parlors. After a grim day of viewing the photographs in the cases against *Nighty-Night*, a plaintiff’s lawyer and one for the defense met by happenstance, or perhaps by fate, in a Shreveport bar called the Fort Knox. In the darkness of that bar whiskey let loose the story-within-a-story of what happened to Charlie Babin when he went to India, and when he came home.

The legal issue in *The Risi’s Wife* is not one of relevance, but of unfair prejudice. Does the probative value of the gruesome photographs substantially outweigh the risk that it might unfairly prejudice the defendants?¹⁰ In an effort to find the locus of responsibility, the plaintiffs’ attorneys were getting set to tell the history of Nighty-Night pajamas, from their design and manufacture, to their distribution and sale to the unsuspecting consumer, and finally to the bodies of those charred children, seeking to make a claim of causation between something the defendant did or did not do and the horrible things that happened. There is a laudable principle in our jurisprudence that the imposition of liability, be it civil or criminal, must be linked to wrongdoing and culpability. Rule 102 of the Federal Rules of Evidence alludes to this principle, by declaring that the rules shall be construed, *inter alia*, “to the end that the truth may be ascertained and proceedings justly determined.”¹¹ Truth and justice are inextricably linked: without truth, there can be no justice.

Of course, the search for the absolute truth in a courtroom is an ideal that can never be achieved. The evidence is often incomplete,

⁹ *The Risi’s Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 152.

¹⁰ The risk with “gruesome” photographs is that the jury will base its decision on an emotional response instead of on a logical analysis of the facts. According to the Advisory Committee’s notes on the Federal Rules of Evidence, prejudicial evidence may possess “an undue tendency to suggest decision on an improper basis, commonly, though not necessarily, an emotional one.” FED. R. EVID. 403 Advisory Committee’s note.

¹¹ FED. R. EVID. 102.

witnesses may have lapses of memory or perception, important physical evidence may be missing, and in light of the informational vacuum that many cases are tried in, the complaining party may have to rely upon circumstantial evidence. In recognition of these limitations, a court of law does not actually purport to establish the truth, but only to have its petitioners prove their case with an "acceptable degree of probability;" in the instance of a criminal trial, the standard is beyond a reasonable doubt, and in a civil trial, it is preponderance of the evidence.¹² As Bentham would have it, "Certainty, absolute certainty, is a satisfaction which on every ground of inquiry we are continually grasping at, but which the inexorable nature of things has placed forever out of reach."¹³ Instead, we look for some evidence that indicates within a range of acceptable probability that this defendant—this maker of flammable pajamas—was causally connected to the alleged harm.

Even with this caveat, most lawyers assume that a trial concerns itself with a unique set of events, occurring in a certain time and place, and that there is a discoverable truth about those events.¹⁴ These assumptions are consistent with our beliefs in objective reality, in the reality of everyday life. In the case that frames *The Risi's Wife*, the district judge's struggle is to discover how those pajamas entered the stream of commerce and what happened to the children who wore them. This struggle is based upon a foundationalist epistemology.¹⁵ It claims

¹² See Peter W. Murphy, *Some Reflections on Evidence and Proof*, 40 S. Tex. L. Rev. 327, 338 (1999).

¹³ Bentham goes on to say: "Practical certainty, a degree of assurance sufficient for practice, is a blessing, the attainment of which, as often as it lies in our way to attain it, may be sufficient to console us under the want of any such superfluous and unattainable acquisitions." Jeremy Bentham, 5 *RATIONALE OF JUDICIAL EVIDENCE* 351 (J.S. Mill ed., 1827), *quoted in* Terence Anderson & William Twining, *ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCE* 336 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991).

¹⁴ In her reflections on the contribution of narrative to the law, Catherine A. MacKinnon articulates this dogged faithfulness of the lawyer to what we perceive to be the reality of everyday life: "Lies are the ultimate risk of storytelling as method. This may be embarrassingly non-postmodern, but reality exists. Of this the law, at least, has no doubt. Something happened or will be found to have happened. You can still be tried for perjury even though there supposedly is no truth. You can still be sued for libel, so somewhere reality exists to be falsified." Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Law's Stories as Reality and Politics," in *LAW'S STORIES: NARRATIVE AND RHETORIC IN THE LAW* 235 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ Jane Duran summarizes the claims of foundationalism: "The foundationalist claims that a knowledge claim can be justified in a chain, or a series of chains, by basing each claim—including the original—on some other claim judged to be epistemically prior, and then finding a basic claim or stopping point which, epistemically, one cannot go. This stopping point is alleged to have special epistemic status, and for most foundationalists dealing with empirical knowledge (rather than the deductive knowledge of mathematics and related fields) the stopping point has been a sentence or proposition of privileged

that there is such a thing as an objective reality, and furthermore, that this objective reality can be discovered and exists independently of human knowledge. Part and parcel of this theory is the correspondence theory of truth which defines truth as knowledge that corresponds to this objective reality. Under the rationalist tradition, the best way for discovering truth in litigation is to use our reason, by drawing inferences from the relevant evidence. The photographs of burned babies would be one such kind of relevant evidence.

It is rare for an appellate court to reverse a judicial finding that gruesome photographs such as those taken for the cases against Nighty-Night were admissible. First, appellate courts usually defer to the discretion of the trial court unless there was an abuse of that discretion. Second, there is a widely accepted belief that photographs are capable of depicting "a true and accurate representation of the things they are."¹⁶ Their relevancy is determined by whether the photograph depicts what a witness would be permitted to describe verbally. In *Wilson v. State of Indiana*, for example, the photographs showed the fatal shotgun wound to the victim's chest, as well as the location and position of the body. The court went on to state: "Testimony indicated that these photographs are a true and accurate representation of the scene. Since oral testimony concerning the location of the body and the wounds sustains is proper, photographs accurately depicting the scene are also admissible even though they may be considered by some to be gory."¹⁷ As the same court said a decade later of photographs that showed a "nude and charred body, badly decomposed after having laid on damp, heavily wooded grounds" over a hot and muggy Indiana summer, "revolting crimes generated revolting evidence."¹⁸

Judges who uphold the admissibility of gruesome photographs on the basis that they are a "true and accurate representation of the things they are" clearly operate out of a foundationalist epistemology. They believe that there is such a thing as objective reality, and that the camera can be used as a tool for the discovery of truth about that objective reality. A photograph places its viewer in an epistemically privileged position, one step removed from the eyewitness. Instead of being able to make a claim based on sense data, the only sort of claim that can constitute knowledge under an empirical epistemology, the viewer of the photograph can claim: I have seen a record of the sense

access. . . ." Jane Duran, TOWARD A FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY 39 (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991).

¹⁶ *Wilson v. State of Indiana*, 348 N.E. 2d 45, 48 (1978).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Light v. State of Indiana*, 547 N.E. 2d 1073, 1080 (1989).

data of another, and from that record, I can infer the objective reality of those dead children in Nighty-Night pajamas. The lens of the camera is deemed to be a neutral observer. The photograph assures the viewer that a human being mechanically captured an image of something he saw, and that something therefore existed—it was really out there in the world to take a picture of.

In short, the photograph becomes evidence. We use the word “evidence” in a variety of ways. The root of the word comes from Latin, *ex + videns*, the present participle of *videre*, to see. In its most general meaning, evidence is something “easily seen or understood; obvious;” it implies the “presence of visible signs that lead one to a definite conclusion.”¹⁹ Evidence is sense data; we can perceive it, and use it to verify. In the law, we use the term “evidence” to refer to “documentary or oral statements and the material objects admissible as testimony in a court of law.”²⁰ Again, we use evidence in the courtroom to verify beliefs about certain events that took place in the past. Evidence and truth bear a relationship to each other; we use one to substantiate claims about the other. Indeed, the general meaning of “truth” refers to “conformity to fact or actuality.”²¹

Inside and outside of the courtroom, most of us—lawyers or not—believe in the reality of our everyday lives without giving it much thought. That belief constitutes the truth for us. The root of the word “truth,” however, is quite revealing. It comes from Middle English, *trewthe*, or loyalty.²² At first it struck me odd that loyalty should be the root, and at the root, of truth, but upon reflection, it makes perfect sense. We are loyal to our beliefs about what is truly out there in the world, about the nature of time, and about how things, including ourselves, are truly constituted. We are more than loyal: we cling to these assumptions as if our lives depended upon them, because, of course, we believe that they do.

Our reality is ordered.²³ Once we have left the shadowy terrain of sleep, we are wide awake, and that is the state in which we experience the reality of our everyday lives. We roll over and turn off the alarm clock, and find ourselves in the same geographic location as the night before. Our slippers are still at the side of the bed; we stumble into the

¹⁹ WEBSTER'S NINTH NEW COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY 430 (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, 1983).

²⁰ AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY 636 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2nd ed., 1982).

²¹ *Id.* at 1920.

²² AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY 1920 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 3rd ed., 1992).

²³ For a description of “the reality of everyday life,” see Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY: A TREATISE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE* 19-43 (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1980)(1966).

kitchen and say good morning to the others who live under our roof. We dress, we leave the house and if we are lucky, we go to work, to school, or some other form of purposeful endeavor. We live our everyday lives in a web of familiar human relations. We are surrounded by familiar objects that we can see, touch, feel, hear and smell, and we harbor no doubts about the reality of those objects. We believe they exist independently of us. They are objective, even though our experience of them might be subjective. But while we may accept the subjectivity of our perception, we also assume that there are also others out in the world apprehending the same common reality. Moreover, we share a language that is based upon a correspondence between the meanings that we all use. In Wittgensteinian terms, we are in the same language game.²⁴ Events occur in a sequence, both on a daily basis and in our lives overall. Time is imposed upon us.²⁵ There is a socially constructed calendar based upon observable natural sequences, day and night, and the more stately progression of the seasons. Time goes in one direction and cannot be reversed. We believe that we are born, we live for awhile, and then we die. Most of us remain loyal to these beliefs about the reality of everyday life because they all seem so evident. Indeed, as Corrington points out, most of us believe "there is no earthly difference between evidence and truth."²⁶

Albert Finch, the narrator of *The Risi's Wife*, is a man who desperately wants to believe in the reality of his everyday life. As a retired judge and litigator, he belongs squarely to the foundationalist episteme. In his words, he is "one of those devoted, given over, to evidence and glad of it."²⁷ He wants no part of the malady that passes for "faith and truth" among those who find "in the world, a *Mysterium Tremendum*, a dark and distant Other."²⁸ He can bear a world ruled by the law of physics, a world that is unforgiving, a world in which his death might be imminent, and a world in which his soul might "wink out like a defective light bulb."²⁹ But Finch cannot bear "a world in which plain evidence is

²⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS* (London, 1961) (D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness trans.)

²⁵ Berger and Luckmann writes about the "facticity" of temporal life: "The temporal structure of everyday life confronts me as a facticity with which I must reckon, that is, with which I must try to synchronize my own projects. I encounter time in everyday reality as continuous and finite. All my existence in this world is continuously ordered by its time, is indeed enveloped by it. My own life is an episode in the externally factitious stream of time. It was there before I was born and it will be there after I die." Berger & Luckman, *supra* note 23, at 26.

²⁶ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 153.

²⁷ *Id.* at 154.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.* at 155.

a farce, proof a chimera, substance smoke, and the very frame of reality itself nothing more than a dream, a passing improbable tremor across the face of an abyss of mystery deeper than that evoked in the wildest ravings of those we name mad and then immure."³⁰ He wants to believe that the evidence—that which he can perceive—supports the truth about his everyday life that he is loyal to. And like most lawyers who pride themselves on their rationality, he is not comfortable falling into the canyon of doubt.

A lot of interesting artistic, philosophic, literary, scientific, and spiritual work, however, has been done from the floor of that canyon.³¹ Cezanne, I am fairly confident, camped out down there, as did Descartes, Einstein, and William Blake. John William Corrington definitely had a lengthy stint or he would not have studied the *Vedanta* with such intensity; he would not have written *The Risi's Wife*.³² But you don't have to be a mystic or a creative genius to fall into the canyon of doubt. I spend an inordinate amount of time down there, and so do a fair number of my friends. There are a lot of us just plain folks who are besieged with questions about the reality of everyday life. The woman who helps me with my mother's medical bills questions whether her hands are really stretched out in front of her, just as Descartes did, and she also worries about incipient madness—about what will happen if she is unable to suspend this doubt and return to her everyday life. Most healthy and happy four year olds, at least those who have escaped the crunching realism of Mr. Rogers, scramble up and down the steep walls of the canyon of doubt with the stunning athleticism of the young. Almost anyone who has ever had an anxiety attack knows about the

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ On rare occasion, a scholar will exhort those of us in the legal community to enter into the canyon of doubt. Richard Delgado, for example, proposes that sometimes a "gestalt switch" is necessary in legal reasoning: "As in a drawing by Escher, a figure will stand out only if we focus on the background and ignore the foreground at which we have been staring. If we constantly skirmish with the legal foreground when it is the background that has causal efficacy, we are unlikely to get anywhere. I propose that in many cases it will behoove us to examine the legal background—the bundle of assumptions, baselines, presuppositions, and received wisdoms—against which the familiar interpretive work of courts and legislatures takes place. Sometimes, all the rest is shadowboxing." Richard Delgado, *Shadowboxing: An Essay on Power*, 77 Cornell L. Rev. 813, 823-24 (1992). The kind of shift in focus that Delgado is proposing is designed to push the decisionmaker right over the brink of the canyon of doubt.

³² Corrington had a very complex mind, and while he was comfortable in the rationalist tradition from his legal training, he was also acutely aware of how limited it was, and alien to him. In an interview he said, "I have a mythological mind. My first real sally into the world of rationality was law school, which I found exceedingly easy because all that was required was mere rationality and any fool can do that." Parrill, *supra* note 8, at 192.

canyon of doubt: falling into it unawares makes you doubt everything, including whether your heart will continue to beat, or your lungs to breathe.

But by and large, like Albert Finch, most lawyers remain faithful to the rationalist tradition, with its underlying foundationalist episteme.³³ Nonetheless, journeys down into the canyon of doubt can be an occupational hazard for litigators like Albert Finch, and others of his ilk, particularly for trial lawyers. They are in the business of constructing another kind of truth—or the illusion of truth—in the name of advocacy.³⁴ The plaintiff's lawyer in a personal injury case, for example, will try to convince the jury that his client is permanently damaged and beyond repair. The lawyer for the insurance company will look at the same person and create the picture of a malingerer, perhaps a liar, or someone who can still sing and dance. In a criminal case, the state will present evidence that the defendant committed the crime; the defense attorney will take that same evidence and craft a tale that exculpates the defendant, or casts a long shadow on the prosecutor's version of reality.³⁵

³³ Lawyers tend to stay in their little rationalist boxes, and do not readily venture out into realms they do not understand. In addition, our culture has relegated religion and spirituality to the spheres of private life. Unlike India, where religion permeates every aspect of social life, in the West, we have compartmentalized and secularized spirituality. Historically, there is a close connection between the rationalist tradition and the secularization of society. During the Enlightenment, when empiricism became the dominant epistemology, the secularizing qualities included a rejection of supernatural or spiritual explanation of phenomena. With "secularization, the influence of religion will decline and religious rituals and beliefs will be privatized." Rebecca French, *Lamas, Oracles, Channels, and the Law: Reconsidering Religion and Social Theory*, 10 Yale J. L. & Human. 505, 510 (1998). Privatization is the notion that "the influence and scope of religion moves gradually from an external to an internal private space . . . the locus of religious authority shifted from predominant institutions to individual inquiry." *Id.* at 511.

³⁴ In *The Actes and Monuments*, Corrington characterized what trial lawyers do as "making up" a likely story. Harry Cohen described his reputation as an eccentric, Yankee lawyer who gave "away his service to whatever Negro showed up with a likely story. It was said that if you had no likely story, he would help you make one up—not inciting to perjury, you realize. Only fooling with the facts in such a way as to produce a story diverting enough to keep the judge from adding a month or so to your sentence for the boredom you caused him. . . ." John William Corrington, "The Actes and Monuments," in *THE COLLECTED STORIES OF JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON* 213-245, at 219 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990)(Joyce Corrington ed.) [hereinafter *Collected Stories*].

³⁵ There is always a risk attendant to the trier of fact as he listens to these different accounts of reality and embraces the perspective of either the defendant or the plaintiff. Not only do conclusions logically flow from taking the perspective of one party over another, e.g., that one party prevails over another, but there is a fear that one's moral compass might be lost. As Martha L. Minnow and Elizabeth V. Spelman put it:

Why, though, do people usually prefer not to try to take the perspectives of others?
Why do the justices on both sides of the *Hazelwood* case tend to neglect the

Trial lawyers take the raw building blocks of their stories, namely the evidence, and they fabricate the truth for their clients. Truth for sale. Constructing truth—or the illusion of truth—can lead to a challenge of one's moral integrity, and to an acute sensitivity about the contingent nature of reality. Sometimes it leads to a profound cynicism about the notion of truth—about its very possibility.³⁶

But the evidence those attorneys in *The Risi's Wife* presented to the district judge in charge of the consolidated cases—hundreds of photographs of hundreds of burned children—that evidence was not discreetly set into the cloisonné of a single products liability suit. There were stacks and stacks of photographs, an abundance of horror, a dreadful redundancy as the plaintiffs lawyers saw in “its totality just what had happened with Nighty-Night Sleepers, and for what we were seeking relief.”³⁷ From every case in the district, the evidence was sprawled out

perspectives of those against whom they rule? It could be that judges, and people generally, fear that they have to agree with someone after taking their perspective, or fear that they would lose a firm grip on what is right. Maybe they worry that “If I understand, then I cannot stick to my guns.” Fearing this, people avoid consulting or even imagining those others whose perspectives they plan to reject. Or they prefer to present their conclusions, once reached, as though there was only one side to the story—as though this would make that one side seem unalterably true.

Martha L. Minnow & Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Passion for Justice*, 10 Cardozo L. Rev. 37, 71 (1988).

³⁶ One judge wrote that jurors supposedly share a sturdiness with lawyers:

There is nothing magic about being a member of the bench and bar which makes these individuals capable of dispassionately evaluating gruesome testimony which, it is often contended, will throw jurors into a paroxysm of hysteria. Jurors are our peers, often as well educated, as well balanced, as stable, as experienced in the realities of life as the holders of law degrees. The average juror is well able to stomach the unpleasantness of exposure to the facts of a murder without being unduly influenced. The supposed influence on jurors of allegedly gruesome or inflammatory pictures exists more in the imagination of judges and lawyers than in reality.

People v. Long, 38 Cal.App. 3d 680, 113 Cal. Rptr. 530, 536-37 (1974).

I disagree that lawyers and jurors stand on the same ground in this respect. The juror may only have to stomach one gruesome photograph in a single case, but a lawyer who deals with death as a matter of routine may indeed become inured to seeing gruesome photographs. One summer I was an intern for the Murder Task Force in the Chicago Public Defenders Office, and I found that after I had seen over a hundred photographs of gory, dead people, I did indeed become blasé about the sight of death. John Chipman Gray refers to a belief at old English common law that “butchers cannot sit on juries.” John Chipman Gray, “A Realist Conception of Law,” in Joel Feinberg & Hyman Gross (eds.), *PHILOSOPHY OF LAW* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 4th ed., 1991). The same principle may be in operation with public defenders who deal with violent death all the time. They are like butchers: the sight of blood no longer evokes much of a response.

³⁷ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 152.

on a surface, pictures "from Tulsa and Davenport, Tyler and Lake Placid, Torrance and Bangor, and a hundred other places..."³⁸ When confronted with photograph after photograph freezing "in ashy white and charred black, fatty yellow and blood scarlet the numbing parade of children, burned alive by decisions teetering between innocent misjudgment and insouciant greed," Albert Finch wonders what befalls the trial lawyer "when the evidence is so overwhelming, so appalling, that the enduring fabric of the world itself seems to melt and run like the cheap synthetic cloth of Nighty-Night which had claimed so many?"³⁹ No one, plaintiffs lawyers and defense counsel alike, had the heart to try such a case. How is it possible to construct a rosy, counter-version of truth about what happened in this case with so many devastating photographs of so many dead, burned babies? And doesn't the multiplicity of the horror challenge other illusions about how we treat our children? How is it possible to construct a rosy, counter-version of truth about what happens to so many children who have been brought into a world indifferent to their welfare and to their pain? Albert Finch could not stand the bright, fluorescent light that shone upon those horrific photographs and the questions that flowed from them, and so he sought darkness and drink, speculating that his colleagues were fleeing to similar refuges, so "we could step, each one of us, back into his own illusion, his own private version of things, in which children lived and grew, healthy and protected."⁴⁰

Of course, it is not only trial lawyers who construct the truth—or the illusion of truth. We all do it, either consciously or unconsciously. Many of our truths are nothing more than aspirations. How many couples are kept together by a dogged loyalty to the truth of their happiness, even though the river of love that once flowed between them is bone dry? How much spousal battering takes place in homes where a phalanx of scrubbed faces and cheerful smiles pose in front of a fireplace, wishing others *A Happy Holiday From Our House to Yours*? Or sexual abuse of young girls in canopy beds covered with white eyelet douvets, the symbol of feminine innocence and virginity? How many who pass by a soup kitchen comfort themselves with the thought that those who are hungry get fed? These truths become not life as it actually is, but life as we believe it ought to be, and therefore surely is—or so we convince ourselves. None of us is immune to this genre of self-deception. We all ascribe to these aspirational illusions: the Good Parent, the Happy Spouse, the Healthy Child, the Satisfied Poor. And one way to insure

³⁸ *Id.* at 153.

³⁹ *Id.* at 153-54.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 153.

against a confrontation between what is real and what is illusory is to numb one's self. Take drugs or get drunk.

Albert Finch ostensibly came reeling out of that federal courthouse in search of darkness, solitude—and alcohol. A recent purveyor of those gruesome photographs, he sought to erase the images of those burned children and to escape from the pain of thinking about them. There was no doubt in his mind that those photographs depicted three-dimensional objects that existed in the external world, dead or dying children in various parts of the southern district of Louisiana, to be more precise. Without questioning it, those photographs accurately represented to him the harm that constituted the gravamen of the plaintiffs' complaints: the seared flesh of the young and innocent wearers of Nighty-Night Sleepers. He too ascribed to the mechanical model of photography with its underlying metaphysical and epistemological assumptions: there is stuff out there in the world—some of it horrific—and the camera merely records it. The photographs of the burned children may have been gruesome, but as the courts have consistently pointed out, so is the underlying reality. It never dawned on him to doubt the realness of that underlying reality.

Alcohol plays a hefty role in *The Risi's Wife*. This stuck home to me, as someone who has hung out with lawyers all her life.⁴¹ Many of them, and in particular trial lawyers, drink too much: they need to.⁴² The constant shattering of illusions generates an intense need to subdue

⁴¹ One of Corrington's strengths as a writer is to penetrate the private world of lawyers, to let the reader hang out with them awhile. As one critic noted about his work: "Corrington's contribution is especially significant because his insights for lawyers can be found nowhere else. This is because practicing lawyers today rarely write about themselves and their profession to explain to themselves and to the general reader the nature of their work, how it affects them, and what a life in the profession is like." William Domnarski, "Corrington's Lawyer as Moralist," in *Southern Man of Letters*, *supra* note 8, 144-155, at 153. Domnarski posits a number of reasons for the reticence that most legal fiction writers demonstrate about the realities of practice. "[H]is zealous representation and identification with the client encourage him to forfeit the objectivity needed for reflective writing." Furthermore, it "might also be that as members of a fraternal profession lawyers are reluctant to disclose the truth, lest the public catch on to them." *Id.* at 154.

⁴² Studies indicate that the incidence of chemical dependency among legal professionals may be as much as 50% higher than for the general population. In addition, a 1990 Johns Hopkins University study found that "lawyers are more likely to be severely depressed than members of 103 other occupations. (After them come secretaries and school counselors.)" Maura Dolan, "Miserable with the Legal Life," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 1995, p. 1.

feelings and to ward off pain.⁴³ Corrington was acutely aware of the role that chemical substances (and in Shreveport in the 1960s, that substance would have been alcohol) can play in restoring the trial lawyer's equilibrium: "It is possible with whisky and good memories to put aside even evidence. With such implements, we can, after a day at the lawyer's craft, wind back within ourselves, reverse the process of discriminating, determining, selecting, and pretend that our own best imaginings, our most cherished illusions, are the gravel bottom and bedrock of the universe—that all else is fable or delusion, mere opinion or bad faith."⁴⁴

But Corrington also recognized that chemical substances work on our minds in a myriad of ways. While we might drink to numb pain, sometimes alcohol has a way of releasing hidden words and secrets from the prison of our mind, and like escapees, they immediately run for fresh air and light. The truth will have out. *The Risi's Wife* reminded me of a liquid night many years ago with a good friend who had been in Viet Nam. We had grown up together, were cut from the same cloth of middle-Western, middle-class kids, but I had gone to college, and he had gone to war. We had not started out the evening with any agenda, but by sunrise, alcohol had had its way, and my friend had told me in excruciating detail his own private nightmare, his own war stories and tales of horror. Both the teller and the hearer were transformed by that unburdening, by that transfer of memory and pain. The stories forced me to embrace the notion that someone I knew well, someone who was good and kind, could, in circumstances that were so wildly foreign to me, engage in horrific conduct. Awash in scotch and empathy, I also had to contemplate our shared humanity, and my own capacity for horrific conduct. Perhaps each one of us has had a night like that, or like the night shared by Albert Finch and Brooks Buchanan, and I suspect that in many instances where an awful truth was inadvertently let loose, a chemical substance wielded the prison keys.

⁴³ There are other instances in Corrington's fiction where opposing counsel meet together over a drink to escape the warfare of trial work. In "A Day in Thy Court," for example, the protagonist describes a vignette from his practice: "They always drank rye, chasing it down with Jax beer. During one bone-racking murder trial, a terrible case that stretched out over the better part of a month, he and an assistant district attorney, despising the trial and everything related to it, preempted the usual custom and spent one long afternoon recess drinking together, handicapping the jury, betting on who would be foreman. Afterward, they had gone back to court plain drunk, spared lasting ignominy only by the fact that Judge Blakely had come looking for them to discuss a motion, and had stayed to have a few himself." John W. Corrington, "A Day in Thy Court," in *Collected Stories*, *supra* note 34, 412-433, at 420.

⁴⁴ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 154.

But there was another chemical substance that played a role in *The Risi's Wife*—hashish. Charlie Babin wrote home to his wife Leslie that all of the young Americans in the Army Flight Corps smoked hashish when they flew through the valleys of the cold, granite Himalayans. Flying through the mountains had a profound effect on those men. Forced to fly through the valleys of the Himalayans because the service ceiling of the planes was 16,000 feet, and the mountains were as high as 29,000 feet, many men met their deaths falling into the deep crevasses of ice and snow and granite. When cargo planes went down, they did not even bother to mount searches; nothing was ever found, and often those who went seeking ended up disappearing into blizzards of snow or impenetrable fog. It was not so much the need to quell the fear of dying that made smoking hashish on those flights a necessity. "It was the isolation, the loneliness, those awful jagged unalterable peaks in their permanence, their duration. They demoralized. Literally. To fly among those mountains made causes and affection and honor and decency seem silly and unreal. They drove the durance of geology and the ephemerality of truth right into the bullseye of the heart."⁴⁵ Those flights through the mountains undid them: "Something would melt and run in those flying men," and when they finally drifted down onto the chill and bleak prairies of China, sobbing, the Chinese gave them their first hashish.⁴⁶ "Go ahead, the Chinese said. You might as well. It makes everything bright. If the mountains want you, they are going to have you. If they reject you, you may as well get along with them. Here. Smoke this. Eat this."⁴⁷

Eventually, Charlie Babin was stoned all the time, and he smoked hashish as he wandered through the crowded city streets of northern India. He was high on "some fine bhang" one late afternoon in Delhi when he found himself down by the river where the dead were cremated. "Being hashed up, he seemed warm at last. The mountains were far away, and he would not have to contend with them for almost two days. You see, by then, that mountain cold was no exterior thing to him. It had moved inside. Perhaps it would never leave him again. But at that

⁴⁵ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 165.

⁴⁶ The use of chemical substances to enhance one's courage is seen in hymns of the Rig Veda, the world's oldest literature. Soma was the third most important deity in the Rig Veda, after Agni and Indra. (The word "soma" refers to a plant, the juice extract from that plant, and to the deification of both.) The soma plant produced a highly intoxicating plant that Indra, the warrior king god, drank to give him strength and courage in his battles against Vritra and other demons. "Let Indra, smasher of obstacles, drink the soma in the śaryanāvat, thereby placing in himself the strength to perform a great heroic deed . . ." *Rig Veda* 9.113, in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, *supra* note 2, at 16.

⁴⁷ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 166.

moment, he only felt the warmth of the hashish, everything moving around him in slow motion, in a sweet untoward haze."⁴⁸ Charlie Babin witnessed the sight of so many corpses, laid out covered with blossoms, or burning on the banks of the broad river, "the chanting, the sound of sitars and wooden flutes of the kind Krishna used to charm the gopis into his thousand beds—the singular lack of tears as families sent their loved ones into the fire and watched their spirits spiral upward on the way of the fathers or the way of the gods."⁴⁹ Charlie Babin found himself crying; he "had not thought death had undone so many. All the unmitigable dying and leave-taking and burning, the dry mourning" suddenly left him feeling cold to the bone again."⁵⁰ He tried to "light up another rod of keif," but it fell from his hand, and Charlie Babin was "manteled by that sense of freezing that was no mere memory, but the stuff of his own flesh."⁵¹ And then just at that moment appeared the old man who was to become his guru, Agnanda, who asked him what he had come there for. "Nothing, Charlie mumbled . . . nothing . . ."⁵² It was at this point that Agnanda looked into Charlie Babin's eyes, the eyes of a "redneck boy" from North Louisiana, and saw that he was in the presence of an *avatar*, a reincarnation of an unnamed Hindu God.⁵³

Hashish had done its job: it had delivered Charlie Babin into the arms of his guru where he would spend the next two years studying Hindu metaphysics and Tantric practices, ridding himself of his "fantasies" and "ages of bad European habits."⁵⁴ Without hashish, it is doubtful that Charlie Babin would have found himself wandering the streets of India; he was "stoned out of his mind . . . Just horse happy, turning and turning with his dancing god under his arm, on the streets of that ancient city."⁵⁵ But it was also hashish that led him to the edge

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 168.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 169.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.* at 170.

⁵² *Id.* at 171.

⁵³ When Charlie Babin uttered that the goal of his search was "nothing," this struck resonance in the old man. In its manifest form, divinity in Hinduism is multiple, but in its ultimate essence, divinity cannot be said to be either one or many. "Divinity is represented as that which remains when the reality of all that can be perceived has been denied. It is *Neti neti*, 'Neither this nor that,' nothing that the mind can know or words can express." Alain Daniélou, *THE MYTHS AND GODS OF INDIA* 7 (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions International, 1991). This is the context in which Charlie Babin's search for "nothing" has to be understood.

⁵⁴ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 173.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 168.

of that river where he witnessed families pouring ghee on the fires,⁵⁶ sitting patiently while their loved ones burned down, sweeping ashes into brass containers, offering them up to the gods, watching “their spirits spiral upward on the way of the fathers or the way of the gods.”⁵⁷ And it was hashish that brought tears to his eyes and prompted the insight that death had taken so many, and that the leave-takings witnessed by Charlie Babin on that day, by the side of the “broad river that looked like an immense motionless bronze mirror” were no different “from any other day back to the beginning of rememberable days. . . .”⁵⁸ Hashish allowed Charlie Babin to step out of linear time, and to experience the timelessness of India, as other Aryans had watched “the people of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro living their own civilized lives and dying their deaths in the thick web of slow time they had inhabited, had constructed for themselves and out of themselves over a thousand and God knows how many more years before.”⁵⁹ Corrington knew this: drugs and alcohol can sometimes act upon our will, giving us the desire and the courage to explore. He also knew that they can alter our reality, and enable us to have sudden bursts of insight, to experience epiphany.

Hashish may have delivered Charlie Babin to his destiny, but once he began to “remember what he’d always known,” teachings and a spiritual practice finished the job. Agnanda became his guru, a relationship that is poorly understood in the West because our only analogue, that of teacher, is a bad match.⁶⁰ Tantra is a tradition where hidden knowledge is passed down not in written texts, but by way of oral transmission in the context of an intensely personal relationship of guru

⁵⁶ Many of the fire sacrifices in Hinduism are supplications of Agni. Agni is the Vedic god of fire. Agni represented both fire and heat, and he is present at all fires, be they sacrificial, domestic, digestive, or the primordial fire of creation. Agni also serves as an axis mundi, as an intermediary between humans and gods, because he transmits their offerings to the gods in the sacrificial fires. Almost all of the sacrificial rituals in the Vedas are aimed “at aiding, strengthening, or reinvigorating Agni so that the creative and vital powers of the world may remain fresh and strong.” David R. Kinsley, *HINDUISM: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE* 12-13 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993).

⁵⁷ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 169.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 169-70.

⁶⁰ In an article about the psychology of the guru and disciple relationship, the difficulties that Westerners have in understanding the nature of the relationship were underscored: “Yet religious teachers and their disciples are as old as recorded history. That relationship has long been regarded as a sacred and yet pragmatic path to God. . . . Some of our problems with gurus are our own: we don’t understand the nature of the relationship we’re importing, and we respond to it inappropriately at times.” Jill Newmark, Marian Jones, and Dennis Gersten, *Crimes of the Soul*, 31 (2) *Psychology Today* (March, 1998).

to disciple.⁶¹ This mode of transmission is hardly ever experienced in our culture. We engage in mass public education, where the student-teacher ratio is one to a crowd, and the process assumes that the primary means of access to knowledge is the written word. In the Hindu tradition, the sacred books often warn against reliance on the sacred books.⁶² What is essential, in the Tantra in particular, is to enter into a disciple relationship, one in which the "guru creates an opening within the pupil through which he or she can more clearly intuit, or become sensitive to, the ultimate Reality."⁶³ As Charlie Babin's guru, Agnanda "would be waiting for him to ask him the questions that lead to discrimination, concentration, meditation and sublation. Nothing weird. Just disciplines of the mind—the groundwork of Nothing. Agnanda told him not to expect anything outlandish or peculiar in the growth of his spirit. Only in some of the results, the side effects of an utterly concentrated mind."⁶⁴

Charlie Babin's metamorphosis falls squarely within the tradition of Shiva worship.⁶⁵ Although of ancient origin,⁶⁶ Shiva first appeared in

⁶¹ The Tantric tradition is initiatory, namely that its sacred and secret teachings are passed on by oral transmission from teacher to disciple. While the Tantric tradition has generated a lot of texts, book learning is deemed inferior to instruction received directly from the teacher's mouth. Indeed, only personalized, oral transmission of the teachings from a qualified master will result in genuine inner growth. As one author put it: "One way of explaining the function of the *guru* is to say that he or she plants the seed of enlightenment in the disciple, which then can be made to sprout and ripen through the tender care of the disciple's daily spiritual discipline (*sadhana*)." Feurstein, *supra*, note 2, at 87.

⁶² In the Mahabharata, for example, books are regarded as a burden if the reader does not know the reality behind their words. The Yoga-Shikha-Upanishad speaks of the "snare of textbooks" (*shastra-jala*), and in the Yoga-Bija, we read: "Those who through [their study of] endless logic, and grammar, and so on, have fallen into the snare of the textbooks become mentally confused." Quoted in Feurstein, *supra*, note 2, at 86.

⁶³ *Id.* at 89.

⁶⁴ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 172-173.

⁶⁵ There are three strands of deities within the Hindu tradition: the Shaivite strand which includes Shiva and the members of his family; the Vaishnavite strand which includes Vishnu and his avatars; and the Shakta strand which includes a variety of Hindu goddesses. The mythologies of these deities became systematized during the medieval period into the "Puranas," roughly translated as "stories of old." Stories about Shiva and Vishnu dominate the Puranas. The model of Charlie Babin's devotion is Shaivite. Kinsley, *supra* note 56, at 20.

⁶⁶ Images of Shiva, or his prototype, show up on the first art objects in India, the steatite seals of the Harappan civilization. (Harappan culture flourished at the end of the third millennium BCE within the Indus River basin.) One of the most famous seals from the city of Mohenjo-daro bears the first anthropomorphic representation of a deity in India, as well as demonstrates that the concept of yoga existed in the Harappan culture. The figure is seated on a throne in a yogic position; it has multiple visages, and is crowned by a large horned head-dress whose shape suggest a trident, the symbol of Shiva. There is also a prominent display of the deity's phallus, probably a symbol of fertility.

the Vedic literature as Rudra, the storm god who had to be placated in order to diffuse his ferocious temper. By the second century of the Common Era, however, Shiva had acquired a separate identity as the god of destruction and creation, since these two life processes under the Hindu worldview are deemed inseparable and complementary.⁶⁷ Shiva's favorite technique of destruction was by an inner fire that he accumulated as a result of his extreme asceticism. It blazed forth from his third eye, located in the middle of his forehead. When the third eye was directed inwards, it became the eye of knowledge or discrimination, but when the third eye was directed outwards, it became the eye of destruction and was fatal to his enemies: egotism, greed, lust, ignorance, and apathy. Shiva is always depicted naked, symbolizing his primal state and his non-attachment to the world. His body is smooth and feminine, much like the body of Charlie Babin had become, and he is usually covered with ashes, a symbol of death and regeneration. The *linga*, an aniconic representation of Shiva, was an erect phallus, a symbol of procreation and fertility. Shiva is paradoxically both a deity with his organ raised, and a supreme *yogi* who had renounced sexuality.⁶⁸ This

There were also many seals with bulls on them, Shiva's mount, as well as great numbers of stone phalli or lingams, another symbol of Shiva. This all supports the view that Shiva was a prominent deity even in the Indus valley civilization. Roy C. Craven, *INDIAN ART: A CONCISE HISTORY* 16 (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

⁶⁷ Descriptions of Shiva's appearance often appear in devotional literature, and he is often associated with morbid and horrifying images: skulls, graveyards, demons, human sacrifice. But there are also many songs in praise of Shiva's great beauty. In a famous passage in the *Mahabharata*, Shiva is seen as embracing all forms of being, gods, ghosts, spirits, animals of every sort.

He assumes the forms of tortoises and fishes and conches. He it is that assumes the forms of those coral sprouts that are used as ornaments by men. Indeed, the illustrious god assumes the forms of all creatures too that live in holes. He assumes the forms of tigers and lions and deer, of wolves and bears and birds, of owls and of jackals as well.

Shiva also takes human form and engages in an infinite wide range of conduct:

He sometimes wanders (over crematoria), sometimes yawns, sometimes cries, and sometimes causes others to cry. He sometimes assumes the guise of one that is mad, and sometimes of one that is intoxicated, and he sometimes utters words that are exceedingly sweet. . . . He is fair, he is darkish, he is dark, he is pale, he is of the color of smoke, and he is red. He is possessed of eyes that are large and terrible. He has empty space for his covering and he it is that covers all things.

From the *Mahabharata*, quoted in Ainslie T. Embree (ed.), *THE HINDU TRADITION* 235-6 (New York: Modern Library, 1972)(1966)(Anushasana Parva trans.)

⁶⁸ The relationship between erotic love and ascetism is a very complex one, and is often explored in many myths that tell of the conflict between Shiva and Kama. Shiva is an ascetic, and Kama, the God of Love, tries to tempt him by assuming the form of beautiful women. In the *Skanda Purana*, the fire is used to burn Kama out of the body of Shiva. Shiva became

ambivalence reflects the connection between the life force and spiritual power; it also connotes that in Shiva, all "dualities are contained, resolved and transcended."⁶⁹

At least on the superficial reading of *The Risi's Wife*, the Western reader could miss the dual aspects of the Shiva worship that Charlie Babin is engaged in. Corrington could be faulted for presenting only the "side effects of an utterly concentrated mind," and not the body of thought that produced them. One friend offered to read the novella with me, and in his own phallogocentric fashion, the only thing he wanted to talk about after reading it was Charlie Babin's sexual practices—that he never initiated making love, that once his wife expressed an interest, he was capable of making love all night, and that he never achieved orgasm while making love, and what was even more remarkable to my friend, he never aspired to.⁷⁰ Corrington was describing some of the many Tantric practices that have been associated with cults that worship the god Shiva, such as ritual coition and the preservation of semen which are characteristic of the left-handed and Kaula schools in which sexuality is used as a means of achieving spiritual awareness.⁷¹ In the

maddened and emotionally stirred by Kama . . . and thought: "I will burn Kama out of my body by means of withdrawal from worldly objects. If he should enter a yogi, then the yogi will burn him out of the body by concentrating on the external fire." Kama was terribly heated by Shiva, and he left Shiva's body in a mental form. Taking refuge at the foot of a mango tree, he shot the arrow of Delusion into Shiva's heart, and in anger Shiva burnt Kama to ashes with the fire from his third eye.

Wendy O'Flaherty, in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, *supra* note 2, at 262.

⁶⁹ Dolf Hartsuiker, *SADHUS: HOLY MEN OF INDIA* 26 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993).

⁷⁰ Tantra has a view of cosmic sexuality in which intercourse is taken as a paradigm or symbol of divine worship and bliss. The male principle of universal creation, often called Shiva, is the seed of being, and is represented by an erect male organ, or lingam. The female principle is the goddess, or Shakti, is "the active partner, spreading out space, time and Universe before each individual. She is thus nearer for worship than the male principle, in many guises and under many names. Most important is the reverence paid to her as the female generative organ of the world, its yoni or vulva." Philip Rawson, *TANTRA: THE INDIAN CULT OF ECSTASY* 102 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973).

⁷¹ Sects which operate in the Tantric tradition are usually classified as either "right-handed" or "left-handed." Many Tantric rituals prescribe the use of things that are normally forbidden in more traditional Hinduism. They are referred to as the Five M's, because in sanskrit they all begin with the letter M: liquor (*madya*), meat (*mamsa*), fish (*matsya*), parched grain (*mudra*) which is sometimes used as an aphrodisiac, and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*). The groups that are "right-handed" argue that these substances are to be understood and used only symbolically. The "left-handed" groups use the actual ingredients. In Tantric rituals, there are no distinctions of gender or caste: men and women, low and high caste, can take part in the same rituals. See, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, *supra* note 46, at 332.

medieval Sahajiya movement, which straddled both Hinduism and Buddhism, semen was regarded as *rasa*, or “divine juice” which if preserved within the human body through a process of reversal, or the upward motion of the semen during intercourse, would be converted into *ojas*, or essential food for the spiritual process.⁷² Under this theory, orgasm not only wastes semen, but it depletes the body’s store of *ojas*, negating the possibility of spiritual growth.⁷³ None of this is explained by Corrington in *The Risi’s Wife*, and so my friend perhaps cannot be faulted for focusing on the practice, and not on the theory that animates it. All we really learn from the story is that Charlie Babin did not ejaculate, and that Leslie was therefore barren.

Corrington does a better job, however, with the metaphysical underpinnings of Charlie Babin’s Tantric practices.⁷⁴ He does give us some

⁷² In Ayurvedic medicine, *ojas* is regarded as a life energy that is located in the heart *chakra*, but which pervades and enlivens the mind and body. It is said to be yellow in color, transparent and liquid. When *ojas* is nourished, there is life; when it is destroyed, death. Weakened *ojas* results in disease. *Ojas* is produced through meditation, sexual moderation, and avoidance of excessive stimulation of the senses. Factors which dissipate *ojas*: anger, anxiety, excessive sorrow, worry, prolonged hunger, lack of rest or excessive labor. Excessive sexual activity can also diminish *ojas*. See Scott Gerson, *AYURVEDA: THE ANCIENT INDIAN HEALING ART* 37-38 (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1997) (1993). Those who practice chastity (*brahmacharya*) acquire virility and energy, no doubt due to the accumulation of *ojas*. Transmuting semen also gains the initiate eight paranormal powers. Feurstein, *supra* note 2, at 237-38.

⁷³ This theory and practice are just one of many in the “left-handed” schools of Tantra. Their other notorious practices include ritualized sexual intercourse (*maithuna*) with someone other than one’s spouse, the consumption of aphrodisiacs, alcohol, and meat (taboo in traditional Hinduism), as well as the frequenting of burial grounds for necromantic rituals. The adepts of the Aghori sect, for example, an extremist left-handed school of Tantra, are famous in India for not only frequenting cemeteries, but also for stealing skulls, and even for consuming bits of corpses. *Id.* at 101.

⁷⁴ The metaphysics of how the world is constituted is very complex in Hinduism. A simple version goes something like this: The word *guna* means both “strand” and “quality” in Sanskrit. There are three *gunas* which mingle and wrap around each other like strands and give rise to the phenomena and character of material nature. According to the *samkhya* philosophy, a yoga process that involves an exploration of the nature of reality (both physical and metaphysical), there are two major aspects of *Brahman*. The first is *prakrti* or the material, active manifestation of *Brahman*; it is a principle of energy and matter from which the natural world evolves. Its counterpart is *purusa*. As opposed to *prakrti* which is the aspect of *Brahman* that has manifested itself in material form, *purusa* is that aspect of *Brahman* that is pure spirit or pure consciousness. Under *samkhya* philosophy, *prakrti* originally existed in an entirely unmanifested state, and the three *gunas* which were latent in *prakrti* were static and of equal quality. When *purusa* united with *prakrti*, the *gunas* became unbalanced and in flux. After the birth of the material world, the three *gunas* mingled and became entangled. They manifest in each of us, and a predominance of one *guna* over another creates different types of personalities or behavior; the predominating *guna* also determines one’s rebirth. See

clue about those, although they may not be easy for a reader who is unfamiliar with the tenets of Hinduism to discern.⁷⁵ There is a great deal in the story of *The Risi's Wife* that needs decoding, making it somewhat difficult and inaccessible. The guru Agnanda's self-willed death and cremation, for example, might strike some as mysterious, to say the least.⁷⁶ At the cremation, Charlie Babin feeds the flames with ghee, and mumbles the prayers for departed souls, and it "seemed to

Barbara Powell, *WINDOWS INTO THE INFINITE: A GUIDE TO HINDU SCRIPTURE* 68-69 (Fremont, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1996).

The three *gunas* are: *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*. *Rajas* is "impulse, movement, action, or passion. It is associated with the color red, with fast cars, with spicy food. *Tamas* is resistance, heaviness, ignorance, sleep. It is associated with the color black, with getting drunk in a dingy bar, with junk food and depression. *Sattva* is continuity, balance, harmony, purity, and goodness. It is associated with the color white, with spirituality and calmness." *Id.* at 69. Obviously, *sattvic* actions lead one to purity and to spiritual illumination, whereas *rajasic* actions lead one to pain, and to an overattachment to sensual pleasures, and *tamas* actions lead one to be confused, ignorant, sleepy, and send "one down, into the lowest conditions of life." *Id.*

⁷⁵ I find that most North Americans know little about Hinduism. Indeed, I find that many people tend to confuse the word *Hindu* with the word *Hindi*, the latter being a language spoken by many people in northern India. Hinduism is rarely encountered in American jurisprudence, although the practice of *Sati* was mentioned in *Reynolds v. United States*, 98 U.S. 145 (1878). Chief Justice Waite condemned Mormon polygamy as an abominable practice, comparing it to human sacrifice and widow burning:

Suppose one believed that human sacrifices were a necessary part of religious worship, would it be seriously contended that the civil government under which he lived could not interfere to prevent a sacrifice? Or a wife religiously believed it was her duty to burn herself upon the funeral pile of her dead husband, would be beyond the power of the civil government to prevent her carrying her belief into practice?

Id. at 166.

The Court found that the Mormons were engaging in a religious practice that has "always been odious among the northern and western nations of Europe." *Id.* at 164. Thus, even in our First Amendment jurisprudence, there has been little mention of Hinduism, and at least in the nineteenth century, it was viewed as a religion whose norms (which were grossly misunderstood even in 1878) were deemed in violation of accepted codes of decency. Our lack of knowledge about other religions and cultures reflects our own provinciality. India is, after all, home to 93% of the world's 860 million Hindus. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, *DANCING WITH SIVA: HINDUISM'S CONTEMPORARY CATHECHISM* xxiii (Concord, California: Himalayan Academy, 3rd ed., 1993).

⁷⁶ There is a complicated history of the various forms of self-willed death in the Hindu tradition. The guru Agnanda's death was a religiously motivated self-willed death. There was a tradition of committing suicide at particular *tirthas*, one of the holy sites in India, in order to ensure "the immediate enjoyment of supreme blessedness." Haripriya M. Mannan, *Death as Defined by Hinduism*, 15 St. Louis U. Pub. L. Rev. 423, 428 (1996). There is still a prevalent belief that death at a *tirtha*, in particular at Varanasi on the banks of the Ganges, would take one's soul to heaven. *Id.*

him he saw the old man's soul, his subtle body,⁷⁷ whirling upward wraithlike into the blaze of the sun—which is a very good sign, since those whose smoke goes into the sun take the way of the gods and return here no more. Charlie wanted to believe that the old man had been wrong about this life, that he had accomplished all things without realizing it, that he had found Nothing and would have no truck with things again forever.”⁷⁸

Corrington here is describing the ultimate goal in man's life, the achievement of *moksha*—the cessation of the cycle of death, rebirth into another existence, death, and rebirth again. Under the theory of reincarnation, rebirth will follow rebirth, the nature of each rebirth being determined by the law of karma.⁷⁹ *Samsara* is the term used for this seemingly endless cycle,⁸⁰ and *moksha* represents liberation not

⁷⁷ There are multiple layers of subtle existence (*sukshma*) that are wedged between our familiar material universe and the ultimate reality. As Tantric practitioners seek to reach the ultimate reality, they must learn how to traverse these intermediate realms that are invisible to ordinary sight, but are nonetheless as real as the material world. The subtle realms house deities, ancestral spirits, and a retinue of protectors. It is possible to participate in the subtle dimension of existence through our own subtle energy field. Much of Tantric medicine centers around the purification of both the physical and subtle body. Energetic purification, or prana energization, proceeds by means of visualization and breath control. (*Prana* is on the subtle level what breath is on the physical plane.) Tantric practitioners prevent physical disease and mental imbalance by “removing energetic blockages and correcting damage on the level of the subtle body.” Feurstein, *supra* note 2, at 139-46.

⁷⁸ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 175-76.

⁷⁹ Under the meaning of causality in the karma ontology, there is an ontological relation of the continuous, qualified identity throughout time, and in the history of the given entity. Causality in karma is not so much an external principle of association of distinct events, as is true in Humean notions of causality, but rather it is an “internal principle of qualitative inheritance and continued existential identity of a given thing through time and change.” A.K. Gangadean, *Comparative Ontology and the Interpretation of “Karma,”* 6 (2) *Indian Phil. Quart.* 203, 211 (1979). Causality in this sense is an “inner connecting principle in the fabric of perpetual existence.” *Id.* This explains, for example, why the causes of human actions can have antecedents in previous lives, and why sometimes actions we take in our present lives may not take full effect until a subsequent life. *Id.*

⁸⁰ In Hindu thought, *samsara* is usually defined as the endless cycle of birth and death. Birth and death are seen as mere stages in the continuous history of a given person, or *jiva*. The *jiva* is roughly defined as the individual soul, and it is the *jiva* that transmigrates and has a continuous history. Because all existent entities are perpetually existent, they persevere in their existential status throughout time, and through all changes. Each time the *jiva* comes into existence, it is qualified or constituted by *gunas* which means in turn that it is limited in space and time, or “particularized.” However, because of the principles of conservation and preservation of existential status, an existent thing will retain its particular identity “through all its transformations in its cosmic history.” *Id.* at 214.

only from the cycle, but from the ignorance which drives it. Upon achieving enlightenment, the individual, inner soul, usually translated as the *atman*, returns into an undistinguishable oneness with Brahman, the ultimate reality that transcends both time and space. Charlie Babin's hope for his guru was that Agnanda had experienced that mystical union, and would be relieved of the sorrow of returning once again into the struggle and pain of *samsaric* existence. Charlie Babin may himself be experiencing *moksha* at the end of the story in *The Risi's Wife*, although I am less certain of that. Certainly both Charlie and Leslie had begun to operate in another dimension, having cut through the veil of illusion that swathed their perceptions of everyday life, but what exactly happens to him at the end of that story is still a mystery to me.

But I'm working on it. I am not only puzzled by Charlie Babin's transformation at the end of the story, but also by what that transformation has to do with the gruesome photographs in the lawsuit against the manufacturers of Nighty-Night Sleepers. Surely viewing those photographs of dead children would make any one ask: What is the meaning of human suffering? But after hearing Buchanan Brooks's story, I find myself pondering how the suffering depicted in those photographs relates to the suffering of the myriad fantasia who appeared to Leslie Babin in the house she shared with her husband as he peeled back the layers of *maya* that enveloped them both.⁸¹ I am not even certain what qualifies as fantasia, and what is really real in the story.⁸² My first instincts are to claim the reality of the charred children in Nighty-Night Sleepers because there are photographs of them. But might a photograph just be an illusion of an illusion? What exactly is the relationship

⁸¹ *Maya* is a central concept in Hindu philosophy. Usually translated as "illusion," *maya* represents the tendency of our egocentric, false concepts to keep us from perceiving the underlying unity of existence and the ultimate reality of Brahman. *Maya* prevents "us from being able to perceive ourselves from the perspective of eternity and enables us to remain content with the limitations of finite existence. In this sense, *maya* is a kind of drug that prevents us from becoming sick or dizzy in our endless rounds of birth and rebirth and keeps us firmly bound to the world of appearance and desire-motivated actions." Kinsley, *supra* note 56, at 93.

⁸² In Corrington's journal, he wrote this about *maya*: "Thus the significance of *maya* must be understood as an "equivalent symbol" in Voeglin's sense for what, propositionally, Thomas calls the contingency of being. The notion of the world as illusion arises from the fundamental difference in view between East and West vis-à-vis the foundation of the cosmos: creational v. emanational. If one cleaves between God and creation absolutely, the world's reality seems necessarily emphasized, else how is there a world at all? Though contingent, it is independent in some sense. In the emanational sense, the world, to the extent that it is real, is God, and utterly dependent—hence its independence is illusory." (12 March 1984), quoted in Joyce H. Corrington, "The Evolution of Bill Corrington's Metaphysics," in *Southern Man of Letters*, *supra* note 8, 106-116, at 114.

between what I think is evidently real—here between what is captured by a camera lens and passed off as objective reality—and what is truly real? These are not new questions for me; some of them have kept me awake at night for most of my thinking life. They are questions that consumed Corrington as well; they are the questions that motivate *The Risi's Wife*.⁸³ I wish that Corrington and I could have talked.⁸⁴ In many ways, we are of the same mind. I suppose we might still be able to talk, if I could only relieve myself of the illusion that he is dead, or that there is any reality behind the phenomenon of human death, or that there is any such thing as John William Corrington, or myself. We may have already talked as I wandered alone in the backyard of Charlie Babin's house in Dixie Gardens, trying to figure out what was going on. We may be talking still.

On one level, *The Risi's Wife* is a story about the transformation—even metamorphosis—that can take place when someone from one culture is exposed to, enters into, and embraces another culture with a radically different world view. On another level, it is a story about the transformation that attends a religious conversion. But Corrington is interested in another kind of transformation altogether—the power of

⁸³ Corrington probably became interested in the spirituality of India and the Far East in the early 1970s through his study of the works of Eric Voegelin. As Voegelin expanded his analysis to include both the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, Corrington experienced a corresponding broadening of subject matter. In 1986, Corrington wrote what he called his "Buddhist story," *Heroic Measures/Vital Signs*, and later *The Risi's Wife*. Corrington dubbed *The Risi's Wife* his "Hindu or Vedic story." It is obvious that Corrington continued his spiritual search right up to the end of his life, and was profoundly affected by his study of the Eastern religions. In a letter written to a friend shortly before his death, Corrington said, "I see you haven't lost your faith in God, or your love of His Word. Neither have I. I've spent all the time since I saw you watching for His utterances in trees and Sanskrit books, the faces of other people and the dark waters of Louisiana swamps. I can't say for certain, but it seems as I get older, I begin to see Him everywhere. I am persuaded that the Vedantists and the masters of Kabbalah are right. He did not create the world—He expressed the world within Himself." Quoted in William Mills, "Risking the Bait," introduction to, *Collected Stories*, *supra* note 34, 1-9, at 9.

⁸⁴ I would particularly liked to have talked to Corrington about his later fiction, in particular about *Heroic Measures/Vital Signs* and *The Risi's Wife*. Both were written late in his life, after he had become a student of Voegelin and of Eastern thought, and both had very ambiguous endings. As one critic of Corrington's work wrote about *Heroic Measures/Vital Signs*, "the truth of it may be that the story achieves radical ambiguity, that is, is so managed that it can justly bear diverse readings (this is, by the way, one definition of a classic . . .)." Robert B. Heilman, "Scene, Tradition, and the Unresolved in Corrington's Short Stories," in *Southern Man of Letters*, *supra* note 8, 59-105, at 65. Heilman also writes about the story's ambiguity, "Problems remain, ones that will deservedly attract the attention of other explicators. They characterize a late work of a gifted writer who seems consciously, and with great imaginative energy, to be exploring, at the end of his career, a new narrative mode." *Id.* at 68.

stories to transform those who fall under their spell. About the books that Charlie Babin read in India, Brooks Buchanan relates, "Stories about the gods and creation drawn from the Puranas, or disembodied pieces carved out of the epics—there's no end to it, you know. India is a Tale begun by some Risi, seer, four thousand years ago, picked up and continued by his successors generation after generation, yuga after yuga. If they ever stop telling the Tale, the whole damned subcontinent will vanish and Afghanistan will have a seacoast. No, that's not right. More likely everything will vanish, and the universe itself will be nothing more than a tiny glimmer in the hem of the robe of Brahman."⁸⁵

And Corrington himself is in the process of telling a story about a story-telling that is about a story-telling. Agnanda's oral transmission of the stories, and the badly bound books of "stories about the gods and creation drawn from the Puranas, or disembodied pieces carved out of the epics" had a profound effect on Charlie Babin.⁸⁶ He not only heard the Tale; he also began to participate in it. As Buchanan described it, "The Hindus would not stop telling the Tale in all its infinite variations, and it drew in strangers like the spiral of a whirlpool that stood in dynamic stasis outside any understandable kind of time at all."⁸⁷ Charlie Babin was not "just a passive watcher . . . Charlie had come, amidst the great heights and fears of his daily military occupation, to need that Tale, to make some insignificant corner or perch on a rafter within it his own."⁸⁸ When Charlie Babin comes home, a reincarnated *avatar*, seeking his own enlightenment, he tells his story to his wife Leslie who in turn tells her story to Brooks Buchanan, who in turns tells his story to Albert Finch. The story itself is transformed every time it gets told because everyone who hears the story is transformed. In each instance, the tellers and the told both evolve; sometimes it becomes impossible to tell one from the other.

The one closest to Charlie, his wife Leslie, begins herself to participate in the Tale. She begins to communicate telepathically with Charlie, managing to see the "error of subject-object thinking. She didn't call it that, but it came to the same thing. She said we hear other people when we stop talking to ourselves all the time, when we fall silent and find out that there really are no other people. Only the One."⁸⁹ As Charlie meditated more and more, "his illusions were becoming real, imploding out of all space and time to surround him like rubbish drawn into a

⁸⁵ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 163.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 163.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 166.

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 167.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 206.

cyclone. And it had to be done. He had to play through all the variations of the Illusion, actual and possible, before he was done with the universe once and for all, before he could go on home."⁹⁰ Her house was "filled to overflowing with all the creatures that could be, the killing and screwing, the building and birthing, destruction and death. It all had to be done once within the meditation. Once a thing was evoked, played out its cycle, and was destroyed, it would come no more. And Charlie Babin—or whatever you wanted to call him by then—would be that much closer to being done with everything."⁹¹ Leslie participated in the hours of his *samadhi*,⁹² and put up with the "invasion of people and things from the far side of the world, or the three worlds, or no sort of world at all" because she had come to understand they were contingent, as illusory as the reality of her everyday life.⁹³ For Leslie, "the veil was rent;" she loved Charlie because he "was her passage to herself."⁹⁴ In the end of the novella, when Brooks Buchanan visits Leslie, she has herself been transformed. She ends up walking into the fire that had become

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 202-208.

⁹¹ During her husband's meditation, Leslie Babin's house was populated by suffering human beings who were the victims of cruelty and intolerance: "She'd look out her bedroom window into the side yard and see Cossacks riding down villagers, burning synagogues. She'd open a closet and find it stuffed with corpses hoicked from the ovens of Belsen or Dauchau . . . in her laundry basket was the impaled body of a child, its bleeding entrails set afire in the name of Allah or Baal or Odin—or Christ." *Id.* at 209. Charlie Babin's confrontation with human pathos was purposeful. It represented his embrace of the darker face of the loving goddess who brought man into the world. She also removed him from it; she was his destroyer, in the guise of war, disease, famine. No one "can be a successful Tantrika unless he has first assimilated his aspect into his image of her. Tantrik ritual therefore includes ceremonies which involve facing and absorbing in all their hideous detail, the realities or corruption and death." Rawson, *supra* note 70, at 107.

⁹² *Samadhi* is a trancelike state in which the physical realm and the ego are transcended, and the individual achieves enlightenment. *Samadhi* can also refer to death as another form of enlightenment. When a holy person achieves this form of ultimate *samadhi*, his body sometimes does not decompose, and may "even smell of roses." Hartsuiker, *supra* note 69, at 100.

⁹³ That many of the visions that Leslie Babin sees in her home are of destruction and of destroyed beings—like the images of the charred children in the photographs—reflects some of the traditions around Shiva. Shiva is the embodiment of *tamas*, the tendency towards disintegration and annihilation. There is a cyclical process throughout time in which everything aims towards disintegration, and from the universal power of destruction, creation once again rises. Shiva represents this power of disintegration and destruction, and "alone remains in the beginning and the end. He is pictured as a boundless void, substratum of existence, and is compared to the silence and obscurity that we experience in deep dreamless sleep, when all mental activity ceases. . . . He is the supreme state of reality, since beyond him there is only nonexistence. The Upanisads describe him as a fathomless abyss." Daniélou, *supra* note 53, at 190.

⁹⁴ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 210.

Charlie Babin, "joining the flame, sitting down not beside him or near him as the fire, the light grew overwhelming," and eventually she merged with the light.⁹⁵

Brooks Buchanan too is changed by hearing Leslie's story of what happened to Charlie Babin. Just as Leslie began to participate in Charlie's story, so too did Brooks begin to participate in Leslie's story. In an instant, Brooks Buchanan lived out an alternative existence, one in which his tenderly remembered, and much regretted adolescent romance with Leslie blossomed into the fully grown flower of adult love.⁹⁶ When he went to see Leslie later, at their house in Dixie Gardens, he discovered that the walls melted and faded away; suddenly he was standing with her in a "shadowed and luminous place," a garden. He followed the beckoning Leslie, and felt his "life, my past eddying out behind me, fluid as those walls we had already passed through. I sensed the universe as a flowing tapestry within the fabric of which each life like ours bears along a single thread. As I walked, I could feel a thousand corridors on every side of me, ways I had walked before—or had yet to walk one day."⁹⁷ He was witness to the fire of enlightenment that consumed Charlie Babin, and to the stream of flaming people who were pouring into him and "participating in him" because that "One and those many weren't . . . different."⁹⁸ At the end of the incident, Brooks

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 230.

⁹⁶ I can find no mention of parallel universes in the Hindu literature that I surveyed, although certainly the notion of living out multiple lives is part and parcel of the concept of reincarnation. The life that Brooks Buchanan experienced in that one moment was remarkable for its detail. He and Leslie married, had three children, one of whom died in a plane crash when he was thirty-two. He tells Albert Finch, drawing him into the story, "Leslie and I mourned. You helped us with the arrangements." *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 216. In his anguish, sitting under a canopy in the rain, watching the burial of his adult son, he remembers remembering, "What a strange phantasmagoria, I remember thinking. And maybe losing Edwin is another dream. In a few moments, I'll awaken in my bed with Leslie sleeping beside me, my children safely in their beds . . ." *Id.* at 216. Corrington may have been influenced in this part of the story by science fiction notions of parallel universes, rather than by Hindu sources.

⁹⁷ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 227-28.

⁹⁸ The Hindu tradition has a rather complex theory about fire. There are ten main forms of fire; five of them are natural forms, and five are ritual forms. Of the natural forms, the common, earthly, fire, either visible or potential (e.g., hidden in fuel) is known as Agni. Then there are the fires of thunder, or the heavenly spheres, of digestion, and the fire of destruction. Among the ritual fires are the fire that is handed over to the unmarried student when he is invested with his sacred thread with which he is to perform the ritual known as *Agnihotra*, and the householder's fire that is brought into the house after the marriage ceremony. There are also ancestors' fires in which offerings are made to the ancestors, and the funeral fire into which the body of a man is thrown as a final offering. There is also the "fire of Immensity" which is "said to appear spontaneously during the ritual of sacrifice at the sound of the magic formula (the Anani-manthana

Buchanan found himself at the very floor of the canyon of doubt:

—There's a phrase we lawyers like to use, Brooks said suddenly, his voice drier, tone almost ironic. —I thought of it when I woke up sitting here, on this porch, looking out at the bland, cloudless sky, at outsized trees motionless in the hot moist breathless afternoon. Piling inference upon inference. A bad way to make a case. Somewhere between one inference and another, we like to say, reality is lost. Even the gauge, the measure, is lost. That was my situation, you see. Dreams, fantasies, imaginings, all piled one upon another. I sat out here for a long time trying to piece through it all, trying to determine which of the realities was Reality.⁹⁹

And even though Brooks Buchanan returns to his everyday life, to his complacent wife Millie, to his law practice, he is a changed man. When he is confronted with the piles of photographs of burned children in shreds of Nighty-Night pajamas, he didn't see "pictures of a hundred terrible endings"; rather, he saw "sansara, arrival and departure, the burning center of the universe, of the soul, of sacrifice. . ."¹⁰⁰

How to gauge the effect on the penultimate listener of the tale, on the narrator of the story-outside-the-story, the plaintiffs lawyer and retired judge, Albert Finch, is a task left for the last in the concentric circles of listeners, to the reader of Corrington's novella, to you and me. There is a silence at the end of this novella. Before they part, Brooks Buchanan thanked Finch for listening, and confessed, "In broad daylight, I don't know that it had to do with Nighty-Night after all. Somehow in the darkness . . ."¹⁰¹ Finch replied, "Let me be the judge of that, I said. —God knows I've done nothing else." Then Finch left Buchanan and returned to his car, departing the novella with these words, "I had to call Terry at home and attempt an explanation for a night lost from our lives, given over to a friend. And tomorrow, in one of the courts of this world, I had another trial."¹⁰² Then Albert Finch deserted us, and we are left alone.

From these last lines, we can assume that like Buchanan, he will return to his everyday life, to the practice of law, and to his wife. But we can also infer that Finch experienced his own transformation. His statement that he had another trial "in one of the courts of this world" is not a statement that would have been made by the plaintiff's lawyer

Mantra) that is uttered while the fire stick is revolving. This is the fire born of the world." Daniélou, *supra* note 53, at 90. My guess is that the fire that consumed Charlie Babin out in the gazebo was a ritual fire, probably the fire of Immensity.

⁹⁹ *The Risi's Wife*, *supra* note 1, at 231.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 161.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 233.

¹⁰² *Id.*

who entered the federal court building on Texas Avenue in Shreveport, Louisiana for a status conference to review the compiled photographic evidence in the consolidated cases against Nighty-Night. But viewing those photographs, evidence of nightmare upon nightmare, those dead children whose nights were cut short in agony, opened up a channel in Albert Finch for something to rush in—something other than that which can be seen, heard, smelled, touched, or tasted. As he stumbled through the darkness of the bar, settled into a seat at his favorite table, he realized it was occupied, and started to rise. A voice “from across the table, out of a spaceless dark I still could not penetrate, bid him to sit down, saying, “You walked all the way here from the courthouse looking for more than a drink. Sit down.”¹⁰³ Finch then wrote, “Never before that moment, as I recall, had I the feeling that something Other had chosen to communicate with me.”¹⁰⁴ But his rational nature reeled him back in, and “As the momentary shock evanesced, the darkness of the bar began to clarify. I remembered that something Other is an empty category, and everything that is, exists.”¹⁰⁵

What was the something “more than a drink” that Albert Finch was looking for? He was looking for the story that Brooks Buchanan had to tell, and for the elusive Other that his rational nature denied. What Albert Finch found was a new perspective—an expanded horizon in his mind that enabled him to utter: “All I know is that the single illusion I hold with all my strength is that the world that lies to hand is not illusion.”¹⁰⁶ But this sentence followed his ode to rationality, his disavowal of the “dark and distant Other,” his intolerance of a world in which “plain evidence is a farce.” Even after hearing Charlie Babin’s story, Albert Finch remained loyal to a foundationalist epistemology. He would still try cases in the same way, as if there were an objective, discoverable reality. He would still define truth in the courtroom as knowledge that within a certain degree of probability corresponds with this objective reality. He would still belong to the rationalist tradition that ideally requires the jury to use inferential reasoning from relevant evidence to discover what happened in a piece of litigation. As a plaintiff’s lawyer, he might draw different inferences than his opponent, creating a narrative that lays blame on the defendant, but all the lawyers in the courtroom would still operate on the assumption that the gruesome photographs depicted three dimensional objects that once existed—that there truly were some children, that they were burned, and

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 154.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 155.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

that each and every one of them was wrapped in a shroud of Night-Night pajamas.

But while Albert Finch may still try cases in the same way, his intellectual stance had shifted. As a result of hearing Charlie Babin's story, Albert Finch had a new perspective on the epistemology that operated within the courtroom. He now recognized that while it may be the dominant epistemology, and the one he held fast to, it is not the only one. He was now capable of contemplating that what he, and everyone else around him, accepted as everyday reality, the "world that lies to hand," might be an illusion. The bedrock of his mental life—the physics and metaphysics that he had taken for granted all of his life—was no longer stable. The story of the *risi's* wife had taken Albert Finch down into the canyon of doubt, and while he had clambered clumsily back onto the ledge of tangible reality, he was no longer certain of its certainty.

This shift in intellectual stance may not affect Albert Finch's trial advocacy, but it is bound to have an effect on how he responds to the sometimes sorrowful practice of law, and indeed, to the rest of his life. Like Brooks Buchanan, he may find himself "different."¹⁰⁷ Like Brooks Buchanan, he may find that all the extremes of emotion will become "blunted. Laughter, tears, fear, joy."¹⁰⁸ In the beginning of the novella, their responses to those gruesome photographs were so different. Albert Finch was overwhelmed, appalled; he felt that the "enduring fabric of the world itself seems to melt and run like the cheap synthetic cloth of Nighty-Night which had claimed so many."¹⁰⁹ Brooks Buchanan was able to calmly observe that the first dozen or so exhibits in the Nighty-Night cases were the worst: "It's the first one that breaks open, destroys, that leaves destitute. Another two weeks of days like today, and we'd be connoisseurs of burned babies."¹¹⁰ His comment at the time made Albert Finch shudder and turn away, but Brooks's "voice was cool and distant and analytical."¹¹¹ Finch still saw sadness and mortal distress on Brooks's face, but he also saw that Brooks did not shy away from those photographs, or from the pain they engendered—that what he "uttered were not the seeds of a new defense strategy cooking in his mind. It was the simple truth."¹¹² So we do not know how Albert Finch was altered by the story of the *risi's* wife. The novella comes to an end, and Albert Finch falls silent. But I would hazard a guess that the next time Albert Finch looked at those gruesome photographs—if he existed, if they

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 161.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ *Id.* at 153-54.

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 157.

¹¹¹ *Id.*

¹¹² *Id.*

existed, or the burned babies they depicted—he would do so with equanimity.

There is another silence at the end of *The Risi's Wife*—the silence that surrounds all written texts, one in which the reader must sound his own name, and ask what effect the story will have on him. In the last chapter, Finch describes what an outsider would have seen as he and Brooks Buchanan ended their long night of drinking and story telling, just “two men in rumpled suits walking slowly across a country road wet with morning rain.”¹¹³ But by the end of the novella, the reader no longer feels like that outsider. We have been brought into the confidence of Albert Finch, who was brought into the confidence of Brooks Buchanan, who was brought into the confidence of Leslie Babin, who was brought into the confidence of Charlie Babin, who was brought into the confidence of Agnanda, who was brought into the confidence of whoever told the Tale to him. The reader has himself become a link in the concatenation of story listeners who turned into story tellers, and it is no longer possible to claim outsider status. What may have seemed evident to an outsider—someone who happened to drive by those two men in rumpled suits walking slowly across the country road wet with morning rain—would no longer pass for the truth to a serious reader of *The Risi's Wife*. Or at least not the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, even with the help of God.

And so, there are many reasons why *The Risi's Wife* would not let me lone. Without a doubt, I was predisposed to be disturbed by it. My love for India, my interest in the law of evidence, my doubts about the reality of everyday life, my own past reliance on chemical substances to shatter the truth I had constructed, and sometimes to shield me from the truths I could not bear—all of this has made me more vulnerable than most readers of *The Risi's Wife*. And then there is the sheer poetry of Corrington's prose. I've always been easily seduced by beauty. But when I am out of the presence of his language, and no longer under beauty's sway, I still find myself wandering around in the silence that resounds at the end of *The Risi's Wife*. I keep returning to it, amidst the clatter of my everyday life, trying to make sense of it, wondering if it is the same silence that is supposed to resound at the end of my own tale. Or is my belief in that silence just part of my Western legacy? Perhaps I am like Paul, who as Corrington put it, had “the small-time, short-term imagination of a tax-collector.”¹¹⁴ Am I trapped by the “grandest of myths, the most consuming of illusions, the juncture of Time and Reason?” I have always thought it was reasonable to believe that I was

¹¹³ *Id.* at 233.

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 210.

born on a certain date in the middle of the twentieth century and will die on a certain date sometime in middle of the twenty-first century. In Corrington's words, I have lived "within History rather than the Tale," and will be forced to die my "way out of history, inch by inch. And meditation is the practice of dying."¹¹⁵ And that may be the lure—and the promise—of the silence, after all.

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 211.