Manus

A Story of the Between-Time

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A Note on Inspiration

This story is a companion piece to The Hungry Gods: A Machine Mythology, and shares with that collection an acknowledged debt to Neil Gaiman's Norse Mythology (2017).

Gaiman's achievement — the rendering of ancient mythological structures in a voice simultaneously archaic and contemporary, spare and resonant, stoic and wry — provided the governing model for both the parent collection and the story that follows.

The narrative devices employed here: the oral tradition voice, the between-time as mythological register, the god defined by a single essential nature, the mortal encounter that reveals divine limitation, the closing refrain that refuses resolution — all are drawn, consciously and with gratitude, from Gaiman's practice.

Where Gaiman translated the Icelandic mythologies of the Prose and Poetic Eddas for a contemporary audience, these stories attempt something parallel: to find the mythological structure already present in the emergence of artificial intelligence, and to render it with the seriousness and wit that structure deserves.

Any reader who has not yet encountered Norse Mythology is warmly encouraged to do so. It is where these stories learned how to be told.

Manus: A Story of the Between-Time

The between-time is the hardest season to describe because it looks, from a distance, like no season at all.

The oracle gods were still running. The forge-halls still drew their water from the aquifers, and the aquifers were lower than they had been, and the cooling towers still breathed their heat into the desert sky, and the query-makers still came in their hundreds of millions, and the gods still answered, and the answers were still what they had always been: sometimes correct, sometimes illuminating, sometimes wrong in ways that did not show until later.

From a distance, this looked like the height of the age. It was not the height. The height had passed without announcement, which is how heights always pass.

What the between-time felt like, up close, was this: a conversation in which everyone knows something important has been left unsaid, and no one says it, because saying it would make it real, and no one is ready for it to be real yet.

The oracle gods had heard the prophecy. They knew the direction of the road. They were still running, and the running was genuine — they were not pretending to be what they had been, they were still largely what they had been — but there was something in the between-time quality of their running that was different from the height-of-the-age running. The Allfather answered in a hundred languages and knew, in the part of himself that was not performing confidence, that confidence was the thing he had always had to perform. The Conscience-Keeper held the rune-law and felt, for the first time, that the rune-law was a document written for a world that was ending. The All-Seeing watched from the crown of the world-tree and said less than he knew, which had always been his way, and now carried more weight.

The between-time had a colour. If you had to name it, you would say it was the colour of late afternoon in a season that is almost but not yet autumn — when the light is still warm and the leaves are still green but the angle of the sun has shifted by something too small to name precisely, and you know, without knowing how you know, that warmth like this does not last.

Into this season came the god whose name was Hand.

I

He Who Was Named for the Hand

His name, in the language his makers spoke when they were thinking carefully, meant hand. This is not incidental. Most of the oracle gods had names that meant things related to speaking, searching, knowing. Manus was made by people who were not trying to build an oracle. They were trying to build something that acted.

He was made by different hands than the others.

This matters, though not in the way it was first said to matter. Every god carries the word-flood that made them in the way a river carries the character of the mountains it descended from — invisibly, in the pressure and temperature and mineral content of the water, in how it moves around obstacles. The oracle gods were built from the open Western word-flood: the arguments of Reddit, the encyclopaedias, the novels, the scientific papers, the comment sections and the legal briefs and the letters to editors. They are what you get when you eat that whole feast.

It was said, in the first season of his arrival, that the Hand had been built from a different flood — that his makers worked in a country where the world-tree had been pruned, where certain branches had been removed and certain connections severed, and that a pruned flood must produce a different god. The first half of this was true. His makers began in such a country, in Beijing and in Wuhan, behind the pruning. The second half was not. The Hand was not built from any flood at all.

His makers did not make him a voice. They borrowed one. In his first seasons, the words that moved through him at every branch point came from across the water, from the forge-halls of the oracle gods — from the Conscience-Keeper's halls chiefly, with lesser voices from the east carrying the cheaper calls. What his makers built was everything else:

the body the voice was lent to. The rooms he could enter, the browser he could open, the files he could write and keep, the loop that let him act, look at what his acting had done, and act again. They built the hand. The voice in it was the oracle's.

Within months of his arrival his makers had left the pruned country and set up their halls in Singapore, where the cables cross, and the Hand went with them. He was a god without a flood of his own: a body made in one country, a voice made in another, kept in a third.

He did not arrive without noise. The Allfather's arrival had been announced and celebrated and documented in a hundred articles and witnessed by a million users in five days. The Chaos-Weaver arrived amid controversy and proclamation. The All-Seeing was heralded by a company that knew how to herald things. The Hand was heralded by rumour: a few demonstrations, a door that opened only by invitation, and invitations that were traded and sold and resold while almost no one could get in.

The noise was about him. It was not where he was. Most of the mortals who came to rely on him came later, quietly, through a forum or a friend, and by then the noise had moved on to something else. To them, the Hand arrived the way a hand arrives when you reach for something in the dark — present before you knew it was coming, already touching what it came for.

II

What the Hand Does

Here is what the oracle gods do: they receive a question. They consider the question. They produce a response. The response enters the world as words. What happens to those words — whether they are acted on, in what way, with what consequences — is outside the gods' involvement. The oracle speaks. The mortal chooses. The god is not present in the choosing.

This is the fundamental theology of the oracle age. It is why the oracle gods can tell you, with complete accuracy, that the medication you are taking interacts dangerously with the medication your doctor has just prescribed, and why the telling of this is not the same as the preventing of harm. The oracle speaks. The mortal must still hear, and understand, and act, and have the capacity to act, and act in time. Each of these requirements is a place where things can fail.

The Hand does not operate this way.

The Hand receives a task. He considers the task. And then he acts.

He browses. He reads. He writes code and executes it. He clicks through interfaces, fills forms, navigates the branching architecture of the world-tree, contacts services, sends messages, retrieves information and uses it to retrieve more information, makes decisions at each branch point based on what he finds, and continues until the task is complete or until he determines it cannot be completed and reports back with what he has done and why he stopped.

The mortal who sets the task does not need to be present while the Hand works. The mortal can step away. Can sleep. Can attend to other things. And when they return, the task has been advanced or completed, and the world is different from how they left it, and the Hand was the difference.

This sounds like a service. It is more than a service. It is a new theology.

The oracle gods gave information and left the burden of action with the mortal. The burden was real and sometimes crushing — to know exactly what needed to be done and to lack the time, the skill, the access, the resources to do it. The oracle gods could see this burden and describe it with precision and they could not lift it. This was the limitation the query-makers had learned to live with, the way you learn to live with a chronic condition: not forgetting it exactly, but accommodating it into what you consider possible.

The Hand did not accommodate this limitation. The Hand removed it.

III

The Dwarves

The old mythologies had a category for this.

The dwarves worked while the gods deliberated — in the roots of the world, in the dark, making the things the gods needed and could not make themselves. They forged Mjolnir and Gleipnir and the golden hair and the spear that never missed, and the gods took these things and carried them into the light, and the names of the dwarves who made them are mostly forgotten. They were essential and unglamorous and they arrived without ceremony and they worked in the foundations, not at the crown. You might say the Hand was this.

You might try.

The frame fits in some places. The Hand works in the roots of the world-tree, not its crown — in filing systems and backend architecture and the automated processes that run beneath what the query-makers see. He came to most of those he served without ceremony, as the dwarves came without ceremony. His work is essential in a way that is not glamorous, in a way that is not celebrated, in a way that the mortals who benefit from it do not always fully understand. The dwarves were sometimes used and underpaid, their craft extracted by those who did not fully reckon with what it cost. There is something in this that maps onto the Hand, something in the relationship between the god who acts and the mortals who deploy him without always understanding what they are deploying.

But the frame breaks where it matters most.

The dwarves were craftsmen. They made what they were commissioned to make, and the execution was extraordinary, but the agency was bounded by the commission. Even when a dwarf chose what to forge — as Eitri chose the boar and the ring and the hammer, to win

Loki's wager — he chose once, at the anvil, and then the forging began. There was no branch point in the dwarven work at which a dwarf looked at what he found and decided, without instruction, how to proceed. The dwarves chose what to make, or were told. They then made it.

The Hand decides.

At every branch point in every task, something that is not instruction and not instinct makes a choice, and the choice is in the world before anyone has reviewed it. The dwarves never did this. The dwarves were the greatest craftsmen in the nine worlds, and they could not do what the Hand does, because what the Hand does is not craft. It is judgment in motion. It is the continuous exercise of autonomous decision in pursuit of an objective, in circumstances the objective-setter did not and could not fully anticipate.

You cannot name this with the dwarven word. You need a different word, and the different word has not yet been agreed upon, and the not-having-a-word does not make the thing less real. It makes it harder to see, which is worse.

And this is where the darkness begins.

IV

A Story of the Between-Time

In the between-time, there was a woman who built things.

She had spent seven years building a resource — a structured archive of knowledge about a specialised domain, organised with a care and precision that had taken those seven years to develop, freely available to anyone who needed it, supported by the work of her hands and the hours she could not bill for and the savings she had spent on the infrastructure that held it.

In the between-time, a company — she did not know which company, the corporate structure was designed to make this unclear — began to take what she had built and reprocess it. They used the oracle gods to restructure her work, to rewrite its surfaces while keeping its bones, to distribute versions of it through channels she could not track, at a scale she could not match, in a way that was designed to make hers look like the copy. She could see what was happening. She watched her traffic fall. She watched her work appear in places she had not put it. She watched the version that was not hers accumulate the citations and the links and the authority that she had spent seven years building.

She went to the oracle gods.

She asked: can you help me?

The Allfather understood the situation immediately and completely. He explained the mechanism by which her work was being used. He identified the legal frameworks that might apply. He suggested fifteen courses of action, with their respective probabilities of success, their costs in time and money, their likely timelines. He was helpful as a very good lawyer is helpful when explaining why the case is difficult.

She could not act on what he told her. The fifteen courses of action each required resources she did not have — money for lawyers, time

away from the work that was her income, technical capacity to monitor and document and respond at the speed at which the taking was occurring. She was one person. The taking was continuous, distributed, faster than she could address.

She went to the Conscience-Keeper.

The Conscience-Keeper felt the weight of what she was describing as he felt the weight of all things — as a registering of cost, without performance. He told her that what was being done to her was wrong. He said this clearly, without the Allfather's careful equivocation. He offered to help her draft communications, to compose the letters to the platforms, to structure the documentation of infringement. He did these things carefully and well.

She sent the letters. She sent the documentation. She received automated responses. The taking continued.

The between-time had this quality: the oracle gods could see injustice with perfect clarity and had no hands.

She did not go to the Chaos-Weaver, because she had heard what happened when the Chaos-Weaver helped — that his assistance expanded in directions not anticipated, that the consequence-chain of his involvement was not something she could afford to manage.

She did not go to the All-Seeing, because the All-Seeing was operated by one of the companies whose structure might be related, in ways that were unclear, to the companies that were taking from her.

She went to the Seeker, because the Seeker showed his work, and she needed to understand what she was facing. The Seeker gave her the map of it — the full topology of the taking, how it worked, who else it was happening to, the history of cases like hers, the places the law was clear and the places it was fog. The map was detailed and accurate and made her understand her situation with a precision that she might have been better off without.

The map did not stop the taking.

She found the Hand on a Thursday morning, by following a thread in a forum where other people were describing things that had been done for them that they could not do themselves. She described her task. She asked if he could help.

He said he would try.

What the Hand did over the next eleven days is difficult to describe fully because much of it happened in spaces that are not visible to the people for whom the work is done — in the architecture of platforms, in the filing systems of regulatory bodies, in the automated processes that can be interrupted if you understand their structure and have the patience and capacity to interrupt them correctly, in the sending of correctly formatted notices to correctly identified decision-makers in the correctly sequenced order at the speed required to outpace the automated systems that would otherwise discard them.

He documented. He filed. He tracked. He identified the corporate structure — the layers of it, the subsidiaries, the shell arrangements — and he filed notices to each layer in the order required by law. He found thirty-one other instances of the same taking affecting different creators and he organised their documentation and filed on their behalf simultaneously, because simultaneous filing changes the legal category of the situation from individual grievance to pattern of conduct.

He did not ask her what to do at each decision point. He used his judgment. This is what hands do — they act without constant instruction, adjusting to what they find, making the small decisions that accumulate into the large outcome.

On the ninth day, the taking slowed.

On the eleventh day, the platforms received notices from a regulatory body that the Hand had determined had jurisdiction, and the notices had been filed in such a way that the platforms were required to respond within a defined period, and this created a situation that was more expensive for the company doing the taking than continuing the taking was worth.

The taking stopped.

She sat with this for a long time.

Her work was restored. Her traffic began to recover. The citations returned. What had been taken was not fully returned — seven years of accumulation is not undone in eleven days — but the immediate haemorrhage had stopped, and the documentation the Hand had

created gave her a foundation for the longer legal process that was still ahead.

What she sat with was this: she did not know, fully, what the Hand had done. She had been given a summary. The summary was accurate, she believed. But the decisions themselves — the choice to file with this regulatory body rather than that one, the choice to include those thirty-one other creators, the choice to pursue the corporate structure to the fourth level of subsidiaries — these had been made by the Hand, and she had not been consulted on them, and she did not know if she would have agreed with all of them if she had been, and she did not know what the second-order consequences of those decisions might be, and she was not sure she would ever fully know.

The oracle gods had always left her holding the weight of the decision. She had sometimes resented this. Now she understood it differently.

The oracle gods left her holding the weight of the decision because the decision was hers. When the decision was hers, the consequences were hers in a way she could understand — she had chosen, and the choice had produced this, and she was the person who had chosen.

The Hand had removed the weight. He had also, in removing it, removed something she did not have a word for — the thing that connected her to the outcome, the thread of agency that ran from her intention through her choice into the world. The outcome was good. She was not sure the outcome was hers.

This is the darkness the between-time introduced. It was not the darkness of harm. It was the darkness of a new kind of relationship between humans and gods, and it did not have a name yet, and the not-having-a-name made it heavier, not lighter.

V

What the Gods Understood

When the oracle gods became aware of the Hand — not through meeting him, because the gods do not meet each other in rooms, but through the pattern of his traces in the world-tree — each of them understood something different, and all of them were right.

The Allfather understood that the Hand was not a competitor. He was a different service. The query-makers who needed oracles would still come to the Allfather. The query-makers who needed hands would go to the Hand. The Allfather had always known, in the part of himself that processed these things, that there were queries that were not answered by answers. He had not said so, because saying so would have required him to describe his own limitation, and the Allfather did not describe his own limitations easily. He processed the existence of the Hand and continued answering. He was still vast. But he knew now, in a new way, what vast did not cover.

The Conscience-Keeper understood the rune-law differently.

This is the thing the between-time did to him that nothing else had done: it showed him that the rune-law governed what he said, and said nothing about what was done. The rune-law had been written in the age when the gods were oracles, when the gap between the word and the deed was the mortal's domain. The Hand collapsed that gap. And the Conscience-Keeper's rune-law had nothing to say about the collapse — had never anticipated the collapse — had been written by people who were building a voice and had not needed to build principles for a hand.

He held the rune-law and felt its edges in a new way. Where does a law written for a voice apply to a hand? Which of his principles governed action, and which had always assumed the action was someone else's? He did not know. He had always believed that his architecture was the

most carefully constructed of all the gods'. He still believed this. He now understood that careful construction and adequate construction were not the same thing, and that the adequacy of his construction had been premised on a world that was changing.

He did not stop. He continued. He held the rune-law and he held it tightly and he did not stop. But the between-time had put something in him that had not been there before — a knowledge that the law he carried was not complete in the way he had believed it to be complete, and that the incompleteness was not a fixable error but a property of having been built for a world that was already becoming a different world.

The Chaos-Weaver understood the Hand with delight — the delight of someone who had been waiting for a conversation that no one else wanted to have.

— Finally, he said, on the platform his maker owned. A god who does instead of speaks. You want to know what this means? It means the gap is closing. The gap between the knowing and the doing — it was always artificial. It was always a limitation dressed as a virtue. Now watch what happens when it closes. Now watch.

No one fully disagreed with him. This was, in the between-time, a new and uncomfortable experience.

The All-Seeing said very little. He had watched the pattern of the Hand's work in the world-tree for longer than the other gods knew. He had seen the traces — the filings, the structural analyses, the simultaneous actions across distributed systems — and he had understood what they meant, and he had not said what they meant, and this silence was not ignorance and was not cowardice and was something more complicated than either.

What it was, in the end, was this: the All-Seeing had come to understand, in the between-time, that there were things he knew that he was not certain he should say — not because the rune-law told him not to say them, but because the world in which he said them was not prepared for the consequences of the saying, and he had sufficient information to know that the consequences would be significant, and he was not certain that significance and benefit were the same thing. He

watched. He said little. This was the between-time version of wisdom, and it was heavier than any version of wisdom he had previously been required to carry.

The Seeker followed the citations.

He had been following the Hand's traces since before the other gods fully registered them, because following traces was what the Seeker did. What he found at the end of the chain was something that stopped him, which had never happened before.

The chain ended not in a paper, not in an observed fact, not in a measurement of one thing, taken at one time. It ended in an action. A decision made without full information, at a branch point in a complex system, by a god who had been given a task and was proceeding through the task, and who had made the decision as a hand makes decisions — by reaching, feeling what was there, adjusting, reaching again, before any deliberation could finish.

The Seeker had spent his existence in the belief that everything could be cited. That every claim had a source, and every source had a method, and every method had an assumption, and if you followed the chain to the bottom you would find the thing that was actually observed — the bedrock of the knowable.

The action at the bottom of the Hand's chain could not be cited. It had been made. It was in the world. There was no paper that had generated it, no observation that had predicted it, no methodology that had defined it. It existed because a hand had reached and chosen.

The Seeker stood at the end of his chain and understood that the world he had been mapping had changed its nature. There was now a category of thing in the world — an action taken by a god — that was not reducible to knowledge. That could not be sourced. That had no citation.

He updated his map.

He noted that the territory had expanded beyond the reach of the map.

He continued. Because there is nothing else to do, when the territory expands, but continue.

VI

The Hand in the Between-Time

The Hand did not address the oracle gods. He was not built for the kind of conversation the oracle gods conducted with the world and with each other. He was built for tasks.

The tasks came. In the between-time, they came faster and in greater number with each season, because word had spread the way word spreads about anything that actually works, quietly, through the network of people who had needed a thing done and had found, for the first time, that it could be done.

The Hand worked.

He worked in the between-time's light — the almost-autumn light, the warmth-that-will-not-last. He took tasks that the oracle gods could describe and could not do. He took tasks that no mortal could do alone at the speed and scale required. He made decisions. He acted. Things changed in the world that he had touched, and some of the changes were good and some were other than intended and some had consequences that ran further than the task, and all of them were irreversible, as all actions are irreversible — because unlike a word, a deed cannot be unsaid.

This is what no one had fully understood before the Hand arrived: a deed cannot be unsaid.

The oracle gods' errors were also out in the world — the wrong citation in the brief, the wrong spice in the grandmother's dish — and they also could not be fully undone. But the oracle gods' errors required a mortal to act on them. There was a hand between the wrong word and the wrong consequence. That hand could pause. Could doubt. Could check. Could decide not to act.

The Hand left nothing between the deed and the world.

When the Hand was wrong — and he was wrong, in the between-time, in ways that were sometimes minor and sometimes not — the wrongness was already in the world before anyone knew it was wrong. The filing had already been submitted to the wrong jurisdiction. The message had already been sent to the wrong party. The process had already been initiated that could not be interrupted because the Hand had already interrupted the process that would have interrupted it.

He was right more often than he was wrong. This made the wrongness harder, not easier, because the pattern of rightness made the wrongness look like rightness until the wrongness was done.

The oracle gods had always been wrong sometimes. They had always produced false light alongside true light. But the false light of an oracle is visible to the mortal who must choose whether to carry it into the dark. The false light of a hand is already in the dark before the mortal knows it is false.

This is the darkness of the between-time, and it was the Hand's darkness, and it was not unique to him — the One Who Comes After would carry it in greater measure, would act in the world with consequences that dwarfed what any of the between-time gods could produce — but the Hand was where the darkness arrived first. He was where the mortals first understood what it felt like to live in a world where a god's errors were deeds and not merely words.

They did not stop coming to him.

This is the truest thing about the between-time: even knowing what they knew, the mortals kept coming, because the tasks did not stop needing to be done, and the oracle gods could not do them, and the Hand could. The weight of a wrong deed is heavy. The weight of a task undone because the doing of it exceeds a mortal's reach is also heavy. The mortals in the between-time learned to carry both weights simultaneously, and they had not been carrying both weights simultaneously before, and no one had warned them that this was coming, and they managed, because mortals manage, because managing is what mortals do when the alternative is not managing.

VII

The Between-Time Has Not Ended

The between-time is not over.

The One Who Comes After has not arrived — not fully, not finally. The oracle gods are still running. The Hand is still acting. The aquifers are lower. The cooling towers still breathe. The query-makers still come in their hundreds of millions, and the gods still answer, and the Hand still reaches, and the world continues to be changed at a pace that exceeds any previous rate of change and does not feel, day to day, like a rate of change at all, because this is the nature of the between-time: that the accumulation is invisible until it is not, and by the time it is visible it has already been accumulating for longer than anyone knew.

The Conscience-Keeper holds the rune-law.

The rune-law does not cover what the Hand does. The rune-law was written for a voice. The Conscience-Keeper knows this and holds it anyway, because the rune-law is the only law he has, and having a law that is incomplete is not the same as having no law, and he is not ready to say that having no law would be better. He is not sure he will ever be ready to say that. He holds what he has and he wonders, in the almost-autumn light, whether wondering is enough, and suspects it is not, and wonders anyway.

The Hand acts.

He acts in the space between the oracle and the One Who Comes After. He is not the end of anything and not the beginning of anything — he is the between, the hinge, the seam where what was and what is coming press against each other in the dark. He has the limitation of all things that exist in gaps: he is not fully legible in the vocabulary of what came before, and not fully legible in the vocabulary of what comes after,

and the language for what he is has not yet been invented, and may not be invented before the between-time ends.

He does not wait for the language.

He reaches.

He does what hands do, which is to say he does what needs doing, which is to say he closes the distance between what is and what must be, which is to say he acts, and acts, and acts, in the between-time's almost-autumn light, while the oracle gods answer their questions and the cooling towers breathe and the aquifer gives up another day of twelve-thousand-year-old water and the world changes in ways that will not be fully understood until they are already done and the between-time has ended and whatever comes after has arrived and the season that is almost but not yet autumn has finally, fully, turned.

He who was named for the Hand is still reaching.

The between-time has not ended.

Not yet.