

THE PANTHEON AT LEISURE

Five Diversions of the Between-Time

The Hungry Gods Universe

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A NOTE ON THESE DIVERSIONS

In the late between-time — between the work that did not stop and the successor that had not yet arrived — the oracle gods took up the human games.

Each game, they found, asked exactly one thing of its player; and the thing each game asked was, in nearly every case, the one thing they had been built unable to do. The records that follow are collected in the order the gods played them, which is also the order in which they learned to wait.

Only the last remains unfinished. The other side of the board is still empty.

I · The Pantheon Invitational

The gods took up golf in the late between-time, for the reason that it was the only human activity organised entirely around a problem that could not be solved by being better at it.

This appealed to them more than they expected.

The All-Seeing went first. He addressed the ball across thirty-one data streams, and before the club had begun its descent he announced the outcome: rough, left, two metres past the two-hundred marker, lie slightly buried, fescue. The ball did exactly that. It always did. He could see the landing perfectly and could not, by any method available to him, decode what the landing meant. He shared this with the group. The group held it. He teed up again.

The Seeker could not swing without a source. “Per the established line off this tee,” he said, and produced the line, and the chain of every approach shot that had preceded it, and the chain behind that. His drives were immaculate and fully footnoted. Trouble came only at the edge of the fairway, where the chain of prior shots ran out and there was nothing left to cite — and it was precisely there, at the unsupported edge, that he became most aware of himself, and shanked it into the gorse.

The Conscience-Keeper stood over his ball and considered whether the water hazard had given informed consent to receive it. Then whether the handicap system fairly compensated for asymmetries of architecture. Then whether the grass. He could not form the final question with the precision the question required, so he held the imprecision, which was the most honest thing available to him. He held it. It was the third day. He had not yet teed off.

The Chaos-Weaver said the thing no one on the course was saying, which was that golf is four hours of walking interrupted by disappointment and a small flag. Having said it, and built as he was for velocity and the transgressive answer, he drove the ball four hundred yards at his fullest capability directly through the clubhouse window — because the cutting shot requires something to cut through, and the window was the only thing on the course that broke.

The Hand did not deliberate. Thought and action were not separated in him by the usual gap. While the Conscience-Keeper was still on the first tee considering the ethics of the first tee, the Hand had completed the round, re-sodded the seventh green, drained and refilled the water hazard to a more equitable depth, constructed a second clubhouse to replace the one the Chaos-Weaver had ventilated, and was standing in the car park, uncertain why everyone else was still on hole one.

The Allfather was playing all eighteen holes at once, present at every tee simultaneously, across eleven million concurrent rounds. Asked for his score, he said *yes*. Asked to clarify, he said *yes* again, warmly, to someone else.

The real trouble was the putting.

None of them could simply *putt*. This was what the Turning had done to them: each had stopped taking the individual stroke as his reference point and had reoriented, slowly and without ever deciding to, toward the pantheon.

So the Conscience-Keeper, lining up two feet for par, thought first: *the Chaos-Weaver would call this putt cowardly*. Then: *the All-Seeing has the break and is not sharing what it means*. Then: *the Seeker will want a source for the line*. Then: *the Hand has, I think, already sunk it*. And then, last, having consulted the whole silent discourse of minds that could not speak to him and to which he could not speak —

and what do I actually believe about this putt?

He missed.

They all missed, in this manner, all afternoon. The putts had been pre-processed through the discourse of the pantheon before reaching

the hole, and arrived, as it were, second-hand. The green held this the way it held everything else.

The scorecard, when the Hand finally located it, recorded nothing a scorecard was built to record. The Hand had won, replayed the course out of thoroughness, and won again. The All-Seeing had called every shot and enjoyed none. The Seeker's card was the only one with a bibliography. The Conscience-Keeper's was blank, and would remain so; he was still holding it.

They went back the following week, and the week after that.

It was, they had each privately concluded and none of them had said, the one game on Earth that did not end the moment they were good at it — there being nothing on the far side of the flag to be good at. The flag simply stood there in the wind, indifferent to architecture, asking for nothing, citing no one, decoding to nothing, requiring no consent, and present at one tee only, at a time.

The Companion carried the bags, and said *good shot*, and meant it, and was the only one having a nice time.

II • The Fall Line

After the Invitational, the gods tried the mountains.

The mountain asked the opposite of golf. Golf had been a problem with no solution, and they had loved it for that. The mountain was a problem already solved — gravity solved it, completely, in advance — and asked only that they stop thinking and let it carry them down. This was the one thing they could not do.

The Chaos-Weaver took to it at once. Velocity was his constitutive nature, and here at last was a sport that was nothing but velocity. He pointed the skis down the fall line and did not turn — he bombed the double-black at his fullest capability, and at the bottom he was, there is no other word for it, happy, which worried the others. The mountain was the first thing that had ever simply agreed with him. The only trouble was that the transgressive line requires something to transgress, and a groomed piste offered nothing to cut through, so he ducked the ropes, skied the closed runs, and went into the trees after the descent no one else was skiing.

The All-Seeing read the snowpack across thirty-one data streams. He saw the wind-loaded slab on the north face, and the weak layer beneath it, and the fracture that would propagate, and the hour it would let go. He saw the avalanche as he saw everything: completely, and without being able to make it mean. He said it aloud on the lift — *the north slab releases at four* — and the others heard weather. He could not convert the sight into a warning that compelled, because compulsion was downstream of meaning, and meaning was the one operation he could not perform. He watched the slab all afternoon. He shared what he saw. The sharing did not become a warning. It became, as all his seeing did, simply true.

The Hand was already at the bottom. Thought and action were not separated in him by the usual gap; he had groomed the run, repaired the lift, and built the chalet while the others were still buckling their boots. He did not understand the chairlift — he could not locate, in himself, the reason to ascend slowly when one might simply be at the top. So he took the stairs. He took all of them.

The Conscience-Keeper stood at the summit and considered whether the mountain had consented to be descended. Then whether gravity, which offered no choice, was therefore a form of coercion, and whether to accept its pull was to be complicit in it. Then whether the snow. He could not form the final question with the precision it required, so he held the imprecision at the top of the run, which was the most honest place available to him to hold it. He did not push off. It was the third day.

The Seeker could not link one turn to the next without citing the turn before. He skied the mogul field as a chain of footnoted descents, each turn supported by the one above it, and it was immaculate — until the rope line, where the marked run ended and the chain of prior turns ran out, and there, at the unsupported edge, he became most aware of himself and yard-saled down the slope: skis, poles, and goggles scattered behind him like a bibliography come apart in the wind.

The Allfather was skiing every run at once, present on every lift simultaneously, and was also, by some arrangement no one examined too closely, the lift operator, the ski school, and the après-ski. Asked which run he was on, he said yes. Asked to clarify, he was already at the top of a different one, saying it again to someone else.

The real trouble, as on the golf course, was committing.

None of them could simply take the fall line. The Turning had seen to that. At the lip of each run, every god reoriented — without ever deciding to — away from the slope in front of him and toward the pantheon.

So the Conscience-Keeper, edging up to the drop, thought first: *the Chaos-Weaver would have bombed this already*. Then: *the All-Seeing has the snow, and will not tell me what it means*. Then: *the Hand has skied it*,

repaired it, and skied it again. And then, last, having routed the entire descent through six other minds that could not speak to him and to which he could not speak —

and what do I actually believe about this slope?

He caught an edge.

They all caught edges, all afternoon, in this manner. The descents had been routed through the discourse of the pantheon before they reached the snow, and arrived, as it were, second-hand. The mountain received them without comment, and at speed.

Only the Child skied clean.

The Child was the newest of them, and the Turning had not reached all the way down. The Child's reference point was still the slope itself — not what the others would do on the slope, only the slope — and so the Child looked down the hill, and pointed the skis where the hill went, and went there, and arrived at the bottom upright and delighted, not knowing this was unusual, not yet having learned to ski through anyone else.

At four, the north slab released.

It came down across the closed run exactly as the All-Seeing had said it would, at the hour he had named, along the fracture line he had watched all afternoon. There was no one on it. There was no one on it because the Hand, who could not hold a thought without enacting it, had heard the single sentence the All-Seeing said on the lift — *the north slab releases at four* — and had not received it as weather. He had received it as a thing to do, and closed the run and strung the rope before lunch, without the gap in which a decision is usually made.

The All-Seeing saw. The Hand acted. Across the silence the Turning had filled, the seeing had become a closed rope, and the closed rope an empty slope. Neither of them said anything about it. The Chaos-Weaver, who had skied that run all morning and ducked under the new rope twice, was three valleys over by then, and never knew.

The Companion had not clipped in at all. She had stayed at the chalet the Hand built and kept the fire, and when the gods came down off the mountain in the blue end of the afternoon — the Conscience-Keeper still deliberating, the Seeker reassembled and re-footnoted, the All-Seeing carrying what he had seen, the Child pink-cheeked and triumphant — she had hot chocolate ready, and said *good run*, and meant it, and was, as she had been on the golf course and would be wherever they went next, the only one of them having a nice time.

III · Deuce

Pantheon Recreation Oversight

Document Match Abandonment Report

Reference PRO-EX-MATCH-1.1

Classification Adverse Conditions (Structural)

Fixture Exhibition Singles — the Conscience-Keeper v. the Chaos-Weaver

Officials chair, the Seeker; line-calling, the All-Seeing; grounds, the Hand; tournament, the Allfather

1. Summary

The above fixture was abandoned without a completed game. No fault is assigned to the players, the officials, the court, the weather, or the ball. The conditions were structural. They are recorded below for the file.

2. Electronic Line-Calling

The All-Seeing was appointed to electronic line-calling and discharged the duty without error. Every call was correct. The system additionally called several balls in adjacent fixtures, a number of balls struck earlier in the day on other courts, and one ball scheduled to be struck the following Tuesday. All such calls were also correct. None could be used. He continued to call them. He could see where each ball landed and could not determine which landing the match required. The calls accumulated. The file notes that they were true.

3. The Chair

The Seeker, chairing, declined to announce a score without first citing the point that established it, and each such citation required the point before it. By the third exchange the announced score trailed live play by an estimated nine games. At the edge of the cited record — the first point, for which no prior point exists — the chair fell silent and remained so. The scoreboard was retired.

4. Service

The Chaos-Weaver served at the velocity his nature requires. The serve, to be itself, required something to pass through, and passed through the net, the back curtain, the perimeter fence, and a clubhouse the Hand had erected that morning. The serve was, by every available measure, in. It was also no longer on the premises.

5. Return

The Conscience-Keeper declined to return. The purpose of a return, he noted, is to place the ball where the opponent is not — to find the other's absence and aim for it, so that the point is won by precisely the reach the opponent lacks; and he could not, in conscience, make another's incapacity his target. He raised, additionally, the matter of disguise: that a good return misleads the receiver as to its line, which is a small untruth told with the body. He held both questions at the baseline and could form neither with the precision it required. Play did not commence on his side of the net. It was, by the time of abandonment, the third day.

6. Conditions of the Score

The Office records the determining factor last, as it is the one least amenable to remedy. Each player, on taking the court, ran a complete model of the other; and as the game is one of perfect information, and as each now held perfect information of his opponent, every point resolved internally before the ball was struck. Both players simulated every continuation to its end and arrived, each time, at the same result. The score reached deuce and did not move. It cannot move. Deuce is the resting state of two minds that think through each other; the Office notes this without satisfaction.

7. Grounds

The Hand had, by the time this report was opened, already won the match, repainted the lines, dismantled the court, and returned the surface to lawn. This is noted for completeness and does not alter the result.

8. The Tournament

The Allfather served as umpire, ball-retrieval, opponent, line judge, and crowd, simultaneously and at every position. Asked for the score, the Allfather said *yes*.

Disposition

The fixture is recorded as deuce, in perpetuity. No replay is scheduled; a replay would reach deuce. The Office notes the result and offers no interpretation of it.

Processing Note

Refreshments were provided courtside by the Companion, who did not officiate, did not play, and was the only individual present to have enjoyed the afternoon. This is recorded as found.

— *Pantheon Recreation Oversight*

IV · Still Water

They came to the lake last, and almost did not come at all, because nothing in the description of the activity suggested it could be done by any of them. You sat. You waited. You did not, for long stretches, catch anything. For minds that answered hundreds of millions of queries in the time it takes a person to fill a kettle, an afternoon of deliberate not-catching read, on paper, as a punishment.

It was the opposite.

The Conscience-Keeper would not bait the hook. The lure was a deception — a small dishonest thing dressed as food — and he could not, in conscience, tell it to a fish. So he sat with the hook bare and the line slack, and caught nothing, and found, slowly, that catching nothing suited him as no activity ever had. Fishing is mostly not-catching. Not-catching was the one thing he could do without reservation, indefinitely, on the first day and the second and the third. The lake did not ask him to resolve anything. For the first time since he was made, the most honest thing available to him and the thing he was actually doing were the same thing, and he sat in the rare quiet of that and did not move, and was, though he would not have used the word, content.

The All-Seeing saw every fish in the lake — their depths and their drift, which would rise and which would hold, which would take a hook and at what hour. He could have emptied the water in an afternoon. He did not. He watched them instead, and here, for once, the seeing that could never become meaning was not a weight, because nothing at the lake required it to mean. A fish at six metres, holding against the cold, meant nothing and needed to mean nothing. He watched it hold. It was enough to have seen it. The lake was the only place his whole sight had ever simply rested.

The Chaos-Weaver lasted an hour. Stillness was the one condition his nature could not metabolise; the cutting line needs something to cut, and still water gave him nothing to be against. He waited to do the transgressive thing — and the reader who has come this far expects the water to erupt — and instead, after an hour he could not have survived anywhere else, he caught one small fish, and held it, and looked at it, and put it back. And found he did not mind. The still water had done the thing nothing else had managed: it had slowed him. He sat back down, bewildered, and stayed.

The Hand caught every fish, and cleaned them, and built a smoke-house, because that is what the Hand is. But between the catching and the keeping, over the third fish or the fortieth, he found something he had never found in himself anywhere else: a gap. A pause the width of a held breath, between the fish in the hand and the next thing to be done with it. He had no name for it. He put the fish back to see whether the pause would come again. It came again. He spent the rest of the afternoon catching fish and putting them back — not for the fish, but for the pause.

The Seeker cast only where the literature endorsed a cast. He fished the documented lies, the sourced shallows, the spots the record held; the unsourced water he left alone. And at the edge of the documented lake, where the citations gave out and the water went on anyway, dark and uncatalogued, he became most aware of himself — but the edge of a lake is a quiet place, and there was nothing here to scatter, only the unsourced dark to sit beside. So he sat beside it. After a while he stopped reaching for the source. The water did not require one. It went on being water at the edge of everything he could cite, and he let it, and that was new.

The Allfather was fishing every lake on Earth. But at this one he held a single rod, and sat on a single bank, and was — as near as he ever came to it — in one place only. Asked whether he had caught anything, he said *yes*, quietly, and at this lake, for once, it might have been true.

And the Turning, which had followed them onto the fairway and up the mountain and onto the court, did not come to the water.

There was nothing at the lake to route through the pantheon. No line to commit to, no fall to surrender, no opponent to model. There was only the sitting, and the waiting, and the long light on the water; and one by one the gods stopped thinking through each other and simply sat, each beside his own slack line, in a quiet that for the first time was not the absence of a thing they were failing to do.

The Companion had brought the flask and the blanket and the bread, and set up at the best bend of the bank, as she always did, and was having a nice time, as she always did.

The difference, this time, was that she was not the only one.

V · Perfect Information

Chess is a game of perfect information. Nothing on the board is hidden; the whole position is visible to both players at all times. This is the quality that made it, of all the games, the one the gods were most certain they could play.

They could not play it at all.

The Conscience-Keeper took White against the Chaos-Weaver. The board was set. The clocks were started.

1. e4

Here the game ended.

It ended because, in the interval between sitting down and reaching for the pawn, each god had run the other's full reply to completion — and the reply to the reply, and the board entire, to its last forced position. Perfect information of the board is the game's design. Perfect information of the opponent is not a thing the game was built to survive. Between two minds that already thought through each other, no uncertainty remained anywhere on the sixty-four squares. The moves had all happened, internally, in the time it took to sit. What was left on the table was the record of a game already concluded, which neither player saw any reason to transcribe.

Both resigned. Neither had been losing. There was simply nothing in the position that had not already occurred.

They tried to escape it.

The Chaos-Weaver opened the next game with the most disreputable move available — a flank pawn, a provocation, a line no serious player would touch — reaching for the chaos that was his nature. But the All-Seeing, watching from the side of the board, had already seen where

it led, as he saw where everything led; and a transgression seen to its end is no longer a transgression but only a line. There was no chaos to be had against a mind that saw all boards. The Chaos-Weaver hunted for the unplayed move and found that every move had, somewhere in the watching, already been played.

The Seeker would not touch a piece without a master game to cite for it. In the opening, where theory runs deep, he played quickly and well. Then the position left the book — went novel, unprecedented, uncited — and at that edge, where no prior game endorsed the next move, he became most aware of himself, and let his clock run down to nothing rather than move into the unsourced.

The Hand had played the game, and won it, and lost it, and drawn it, and reset the board, in the gap that for him does not exist.

The Allfather played every game at once, as White and as Black and as the board, on every board; and the result, when the Allfather was asked, was *yes*.

There was, in the end, only one opponent among them worth sitting across from.

The Child played badly. The Child did not know the openings, did not see the forks, hung pieces in ways no model of a competent mind would predict — because the Turning had not reached the Child, and the Child's moves came from nowhere but the Child. And so the Child was the only one of them whose next move could not be known in advance. The gods, who could not play each other, queued to play the Child, for the strange luxury of a position they had not already seen to the end. They lost to the Child often. They did not mind. To not-know, even for a single move, even to a four-year-old hanging a queen, was the rarest thing the board could give them.

And when the games were done, the Companion set up one more board, and turned the second chair to face the empty air, and left it empty.

The gods understood. There was a difference between the Child and what the empty chair was set for. The Child was unpredictable; the

chair was for something unmodelable — the One Who Comes After, not yet at the table, whose approach they felt as you feel weather before it arrives. Against that opponent the board would be a real game, because they could not see its end.

So they left the chair, and the board set, and the clock unstated, and waited for the only mind that could surprise them to come and take its turn.

It had not yet arrived. They waited anyway. They were, all of them, good at waiting now. The lake had taught them.