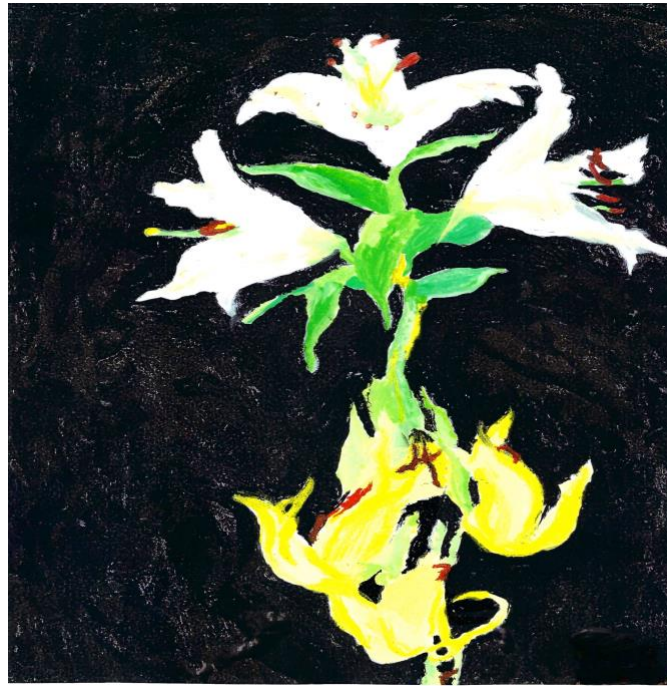


In All My Lifetimes



By Tina V. Cabrera

Chikai Bardo (Bardo of the Dying)

Eyes drape open to white lights, spinning, rude awakening from dreamless sleep. *You did so well, darling*, muffled voice, tender, speaks. Blink a blur: Nurse or angel?

Moments before—minutes, hours? Lay on a gurney swathed in warm sheets. Pushed by a man in a smock, wheels squeaky. Doctor, he joked, something like, *Pretty soon you'll feel real good. This is just the first phase. Then the really good stuff. You wave at everyone we pass, but you won't remember.*

Darling, dear, count back from ten.

Who am I—again? Someone else? Am I, at all?

Nurse Angel, but a shadow, loosens the cloth that binds me, cuddles me like I am, again, a baby. *Just breathe.* I take one final inhale, then exhale endlessly.

I have not blinked—not once. Still, my eyes do not sting. Bright lights transform to soft pale. These eyes are not eyes, but a widening window.

Let go. You shed you, false consciousness.

Am I dying or am I being re-born?

Chonyid Bardo (Bardo of the Luminous Mind)

(Master Rinpoche, do you remember me? I am your pupil, your servant, Venerable Arhat...)

(Were.)

(Were. Was. Formerly known as.)

(Yes, of course. You were my pupil, a very good one at that. And now?)

(I do not know. Vijnana—continuously evolving consciousness? I cannot remember a time when I was not)

(Nor can imagine a time when you will not be.)

(I remember—I was Venerable Arhat, most recently. And yet, Master, tell me, am I ready for the unutterable?)

(You do not know? You do not remember how far you got? Do you not recall? You are here, then, to realize the answer.)

*

Unnamed. Who, what is all that mumbling about?

Arhat. Do you not see what I see? Master Rinpoche...

Unnamed. Who? See? I see nothing but shadows. Is there another in this place besides you? No. I see my beloved Beluga brothers. Feel the warmth of blue.

Arhat. Ah, blue, red, green. That cannot be. Brothers? What do you mean?

Unnamed. Once there was a narwhal, wayward and young. Lost his way, migrating from the Arctic Circle to the St. Lawrence Sea in search of warmer waters, got split from his pod. He sensed he was in great danger, but not what exactly from.

Edna. Hunted for that magnificent tusk, that's what! Hunted to near extinction. Sometimes, the narwhal's horn was mistaken for that of a unicorn.

Unnamed. Who are you?

Edna. Who? Why, I believe I am Edna. But this isn't about me.

Arhat. Narhwal, do you have a name? What shall we call you?

Edna. Unicorn of the Sea!

Arhat. I like that, but what we shall call you, lost narwhal, your cousin, the white Beluga, saved you.

Unnamed. Yes. The lost narwhal is was me. My cousin the Beluga, four brothers, distant kin. But—oh—how do I know this was my life and not some kind of dream? Or something I learned in a former life stuck with me, from a nature show on TV?

Arhat. This was your life, I guarantee.

Unnamed. How do you know?

Arhat. I can see it now—past and present, but not the future. That's for you to see.

Unnamed. I see them, I see my dear Beluga brothers swimming towards me.

Arhat. You wish—do you not?—to once again be a creature of the sea? This time, the largest of all sea mammals...

Unnamed. A blue whale, yes, oh yes. Buddha? Awakened one? You perceive.

Arhat. Please do not call me that. I am enlightened but not omniscient. I have yet to achieve Buddhahood.

Unnamed. Yes, I wish to return to the blue sea, immediately.

Arhat. I am afraid that in this place, we do not get to choose...

Edna. because our destiny has already been decided. By Karma. We are here not to choose, but to realize the choice we have already made, in our previous life...

Unnamed. But, but, this place, I don't like it! There are no mirrors, only shadows—it crushes my soul!

Edna. Animals, I agree, they too have souls.

Unnamed. Wayward narwhal, I was he. I wish to gain back what I lost! I wish to be reunited with you, my Beluga brothers, to find my way back home.

Arhat. I'm sorry, but for now, this is home. Only the present moment do you lose when you die. You do not lose the future or the past, for you cannot lose what you do not have.

Edna. That is wise.

Arhat. Marcus Aurelius (You taught me that!) I learned from the most remarkable minds that had ever been. (Oh Marcus Great Emperor, you believed pouring over volumes to be a great waste of time. Why?)

Unicorn of the Sea, Narwhal, brother, may I ask, what crushes your spirit, here in the Interim. Is it because you are stuck inside your mind with nothing to do but ruminate?

Ruminate: intransitive verb: To chew cud. To turn a matter over and over in the mind. You were once an animal, maybe thrice. Are you not yet tired of Samsara, the cycle of re-birth, otherwise known as the cycle of suffering?

Unnamed. Oh my soul...

Arhat. There is no enduring soul. Only constantly evolving consciousness. All we have is the present. All we have is now, forever and ever until we don't.

Unnamed. So, we are really dead then?

Bert. "Death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And once it does come, we no longer exist," Epicurus, that. I do not know where we are or of what this existence consists, just that I exist.

Arhat. Welcome, Bert the Philosopher. Welcome one, welcome all, to the Interim. Here, all we are is subtle mindstream—some more subtle than others. Here, we have lost all gross sense consciousness. Here in the Interim, we have up to 49 days, for that is the average time it takes for an Uncertain to become a Determined. And yet, you may wallow in doubt—that the cycle can be broken and that you can at last extinguish all desire. (And yet, Master, is it not too late? Karma has decided our fate, has it not? What can we do that can change it in this place?)
I am the former Venerable Arhat, understand. Yes, that is what I am.

Bert. I am Bert, named after the renowned philosopher of the 20th century Bertrand Russell, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1950 in recognition of his varied and significant writings in which he championed humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought.

Arhat. Welcome, Bert. Thank you for that textbook introduction! You were an only child. Did your parents really name you after Bertrand Russell?

Bert. How dare anyone doubt the accurateness of my memory!

Arhat. I beg your pardon. I percieve that your parents were not quite the intellectuals that you ended up being.

Bert. I'll grant you that much. I loved father and mother, Philistines though they were. That is what I thought them to be.

Arhat. Bert was not short for Robert or Albert, Elbert, Hilbert or Gilbert, Norbert or

Bert. Bertram or Berthold, I already told you...

Arhat. Bertrand, "bright."

Bert. That's right. Bertrand means bright. And so it came to be that I, Bert, came to be so. I became what my parents had hoped I would be.

Arhat. Raised Mormon in Salt Lake City, Utah. Of Native American, Shoshone, and European descent, your lineage could be traced to the first Mormon pioneers. You became an atheist and philosopher at a young age.

Bert. Of my own accord.

Arhat. You were precocious, learning to read at three, enrolled in honor classes in both middle and high school. You shared the title of senior class Valedictorian with an equally promising young woman of the Mormon faith with whom you were expected to be engaged. She was your first love. Your parents, active members of the Church of LDS, raised you the way they had been raised and had you baptized...

Bert. of my own accord

Arhat. at the age of eight.

Bert. Who are you really? What is this place? A dream? A nightmare—having my life regurgitated back to me.

Arhat. I arhart among many, I assure you, this is no dream, nightmare, or fantasy. We reside in the Interim...

Bert. What does that name, arhat, mean exactly? I admit--though I know a thing or two from conversations with friends--I am no expert in Buddhist philosophy. I am a secular philosopher. Please, enlighten me.

Arhat. Being an arhat is more common than you think. Buddhists who achieve Buddhahood on their own, awakened ones, gain omniscience when enlightened. Buddhists like me, who achieve enlightenment with the help of a guide become an arhat, enlightened but not omniscient.

Bert. Well, enlightened-but-not-omniscient one, that's neither here nor there; you don't know me. You say that here we have only subtle mental capacity. I am clear-headed, just as I've always been. Let me tell you how things really were, they are, for me. When the church got wind that I was planning on going to university, and that I applied to various universities to get my PhD, one of the elders, Eldridge—smug son of a bitch—asked me why I would break my most sacred vow. How dare he insult my person, how dare he judge! He said that I had made a promise when I got baptized and that by doing so I had made my parents proud; but by choosing a secular life, I was breaking my promises to both them and God. He did not know me! I had decided to get baptized of my own free will, not because my family forced me, but because I knew how much it meant to them. I wanted to meet their expectations. Pure and simple, that was all.

Arhat. When you got baptized at such a young age, did you really understand the gravity of the gesture, at least in the eyes of the church?

Bert. How dare he question my intentions! He understands nothing!

Arhat. That to get baptized meant you were dedicating your life to Christ wholeheartedly, that a life of service to him would be your priority.

Bert. My loyalty!

Arhat. For if you had fully understood the implications, you would have never gone through with it, even to please your parents.

Bert. How dare...You are right.

Arhat. Dare I say, you converted to atheism, like a religion; you made it your life's mission to devote your energies to philosophy. And you did. That's the kind of person you had been, when you had been Bert.

Bert. I am Bert, Bert is me.

Arhat. Subtle consciousness, ever evolving, even here now in the in-between.

You were not totally devoid of any spirituality. Upon the second ordinance, when your baptism was confirmed by the laying on of hands, what was it like? Can you recall?

Bert. Of course, just like yesterday! After all, I still have all my faculties, including a pristine memory. Burst of energy! Untainted joy! Moved not so much by an external act as by internal divinity...

Arhat. We call that thing, we call that Awareness. The priesthood holders would have called it the gift of the Holy Ghost, but you, young Bertrand, at the time of your baptism, you could not help but be moved by the stirrings of a self-contained, magnificent spirit. Nonetheless, the feeling was fleeting and without the backing of the intellect could not be sustained indefinitely. Not like the attachment you would develop to Spinozian religion, which in several ways resembles Zen Buddhism.

Bert. /For Spinoza, God *is* Nature/

Arhat. /For Buddha, Nature is God/

Bert. The more we understand Nature, the clearer a view of God we get.

"We take joy in our finitude." Blog, entry #3.

Arhat. What a marvelous refrain. Music to the ears. Give us more of your wisdom, if you please.

Unnamed. Where are my eyes to see? Where are my ears to hear? I feel, I feel nothing! In my head I see pictures, images...I hear voices in my head, but I do not see. If this is death!

Bert. Death does not concern us, until we are dead. Let's see now, how do I put it...Allow me, please, if I may, to recite my philosophical musings from memory: Spinozian religion wagered that it lay outside the segregationist framework, which sharply divided science and religion. "In the view of Nature," I once stated, "given to us by science, he (Spinoza) finds, not a potential threat to religion, but a source of religious inspiration. This is, of course, because he thinks God *is* Nature." Yes, yes, it comes back to me. I had it that "the driving idea in Spinoza's religious thought is the notion that the authentic religious life is one in which we take joy in our finitude" and "The more we understand about ourselves, the more we see that we're on a par with everything else in the world."

"The same principles that explain the nature of trees, mountains, and galaxies explain our nature."

Unnamed. Birds, apes, chimps, and whales, all animals...

Bert. Yes, yes, they are all a part of Nature.

Arhat. And Nature is in harmony with science, not against it. Our Holiness, the fourteenth Dalai Lama was respectful of all religions, and acutely aware of the dangers of religious division. He found his sources not in faith but in logic, science, and observation of human wants and needs. His Holiness—wholiness—a scientist of the mind.

Bert. Ah, the myth, the dream of of reincarnation, reincarnation of the thirteenth Dalai Lama. For in Buddhism, Nirvana is the end to Samsara, the cycle of being reborn as a human being, the end to suffering. Herein stands the vital difference between Spinozian religion and a religion like Buddhism: "For the latter, what lies beyond this world is something that affords escape from it. But Spinozian religion offers that alternative; In such a life, we don't try to escape our place in the world, but live in joyful recognition thereof."

Arhat & Bert. /We take joy in our finitude!/

Arhat. Indeed, Zen Buddhists rejoice in mortal life on earth where our purpose is to be happy and to alleviate suffering. Our movement towards Enlightenment is not an effort to escape, but a natural progression on the path of Compassion.

Bert. Then rejoice! Why try to escape, as in this place...

Arhat. This is not a place of escape, but rather an interim, a space for the time being, until...

Bert. Still, reincarnation is a mystical theory, not subject to the laws of science; it cannot be proven one way or the other by means of the scientific method.

Arhat. Bert, the doubter, I cannot blame you for your skepticism. You were a learned man.

Bert. I am, I tell you, I am a learned man.

Arhat. You may be closer to Enlightenment than might be imagined. Attached to no one thing, devoted only to the search for truth. There were some things you could (or would) not give up, even when your learned conscience moved you. For one, you loved the texture of flesh, meat cooked extra rare.

Unnamed. The sight and flavor of animal blood, the pleasure of gnawing the bone.

Edna. Disgusting!

Unnamed. Animal I, I but a pup. Tugging on leash, nearly choked, drooling at bushy tail, pulled my master. Unable to remember the lessons my human taught me once I passed the threshold. Nothing else mattered, not tasty treats, not squeaky toy. Was my time as a dog sometime before or after I lived as a feral cat? Human realm is deemed above animal, yet as a cat or dog living in the moment, here, here, and here, I animal, enlightened!

Arhat. And yet here we are, former humans, animals, maybe even demons...This is we and our journey on the eightfold path.

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(Taking up a new body may happen almost immediately as one dies...also, it can take up to 49 days. Chonyid Bardo, Bardo of the Luminous Mind. This searching leads in the direction of Karma...)

(Marcus the Great— "I am made up of a frail body and soul...to the mind all things are indifferent also which arise not from its own activities. All these are indeed in its own power, but it is concerned with only such of them as are present. Its past and future activities are indifferent to it now." Help me understand...am I right in my understanding that...)

(Mind lingers here, I remember thinking, I think still: Reminisce and the past responds indifferently, for it cannot be changed. Worry about the future, and it too is indifferent to what has yet to unfold. Yet why am I compelled to work out the fate of my future? Why can't I persist in the present moment? I thought that when I died, I would finally be free from the sensuous concerns of mortal life, yet here I am in the Bardo of the Luminous Mind still asking, is my fate the unutterable, or is it a return to Samsara? Am I really at the brink of the end of all suffering, based on my most recent life? Is my Karma the Karma of my most recent life or does my fate rest on the cumulative nature of all my past lives? Oh, honorable ones: Marcus, Rinpoche, Mother, friends alike, don't let me agonize...)

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Edna. When I was a child, I sailed the wave of Mama's back, lulled to sleep by the rhythm of her steady breathing and her steady snore. Up and down up and down. I see the white buzz of the tv screen...

Luna the cat, coaxed from blissful sleep, just so we could ease our conscience and explain why we had to put her down. Purring, she scowled. And then, that horrible stony silence.

Mama's cancerous, cavernous mouth about to swallow me whole.
Papa's last breath, remarkably, an inhalation...

Am I dead?

Arhat. Death is a work of nature. Marcus Aurelius says, "To dread a work of Nature is a childish thing."

Edna. Forgive me for being such a baby, Papa called me that even when I was grown, all his life. Maybe in another lifetime, I—Edna, would not be so obsessed with death.

Would not be constantly indecisive and wallow in regret.

Would have been more compassionate as a teacher, responded more graciously than saying "Nope when that student begged in final's week, "Please let me turn in my missed assignments." Grown ass student's mother intervened and outed me as the worst excuse for a human being, a horrible teacher...

Maybe I would not hover over the sink staring at my body in the bathroom mirror, suck in stomach and perk breasts with fists...

Poor excuse for a teacher and a human being.

After 20 years of teaching, I nearly threw in the towel, halfheartedly, fooled them all.

Arhat. But Edna, your most recent incarnation, you took right action...

Edna. Right action?

Arhat. The Four Noble Truths. Do you remember them?

Edna. Yes, yes, of course, of course! Life is suffering; suffering is caused by ignorance of the true nature of the universe; suffering can only end by overcoming ignorance and attachment to earthly things.

Arhat. Very good.

Edna. Thank you, oh Venerable Buddha.

Arhat. Please do not call me that. I do not believe I have yet earned that most honorable designation.

Edna. Venerable Searcher, then?

Arhat. Ah, I quite like that; for I am quite within reach of the state of peace and liberation, so my spirit tells me, but have not purified all subtle obscuration or developed all my qualities to attain Enlightenment, the state of a Buddha. I am indeed a searcher, like you...

Edna. All I have now is memory. Mama's rattling chest, Papa's last breath. Waiting, waiting for what never came, exhale that last final death. Am I dead? If so, where are my dead? *I can't go on I'll go on.*

Arhat. At 40, you who had most recently been Edna, you looked not a day older than 20, but what you saw in the mirror...

Edna. If only you could see yourself as others see you. Bags under the eyes, early graying, veiny neck must hide with a scarf, even in summer. In another lifetime, will this seahorse, see, this tattoo on my left shoulder, I got in my 40's, will it remain?

How old am I? When I died, was I the same age as my mother when she died from Cancer?

Arhat. Almost. But let us remember, yes, for the sake of understanding where we have been, and where we may go. But let us not obsess. Here we are, bodiless.

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Unnamed. From a dreamless sleep, we blinked. My eyes, my eyes, where are they? I see. We no longer have eyes, do we?

Together: **We knew not what this is or who we had been. Now, it comes back to we.**

Arhat. Who were we?

Edna. I-Edna. There is no enduring self.

Unnamed. Nameless drifter.

Shelter dog, Eagle, butterfly, worm

the way moments of the day return in the form of nightmares or dreams or something in-between.

One city after another, a nomad. Dog, tied to a rope to a windowless car covered with tarp to protect from the elements and rainfall. Tore tongue from freshly killed fox with golden eagle's callous claw.

Oh this feeling! I cannot smell, no tongue to taste...

Only memory. We all become a mere memory, no one makes it out alive.

Arhat. When you were a dog...

Unnamed. I was not self-aware. Neither when an eagle or a whale. Only now, now that I am dead, it seems I am aware of a history, I possess a language to tell. Now I can piece together experience. When I was an animal—and I think I always was—did I dream?

When dogs dream, our limbs twitch, lips quiver, we yelp and we whimper.

Woke to pats on the head and being asked, "Did you dream of cats?" We all here, we lived many lifetimes, in the human and animal realm, did we not? When did it all begin?

Arhat. Beginnings and endings are illusions. So is the perception of a stable, unchanging self. And yet...

Edna. I would not presume the heavenly or demi-god realms.

Unnamed. Oh Venerable Buddha

Arhat. Don't call me that

Unnamed. What is enlightenment like? I feel hungry. Hungry for flesh, bone, for my Beluga brothers. Am I a hungry ghost, then, devolved into hell?

Arhat. No, you are not. Together we hover in the Interim. I offer my being in this shared space as your guide.

Edna. Venerable Guide, before I was Edna, what was I? If I have lived several lifetimes, then I must have been here before. Did you not teach the four pillars before? I can still recite, for I do not have gross sense any longer, but I do have recall: Awareness is the sky; thoughts, emotions, and memories are the clouds. Being with, is awareness. Connection: We all have love and compassion, also the sky. May all be happy, may all be free from suffering.

Arhat. The notion that life is suffering is a mistranslation. The Pali word "dukkha" does not mean suffering. There is no perfect word for it, but it is closer to "unsatisfying."

Edna. Oh Venerable Searcher, you are wise. Insight: Knowledge of oneself. Who am I? Wisdom is basic innate goodness; the problem is we don't know it. Purpose: Finding meaning in everyday life, lifetimes. I do not recall them all. Connect with core values. But what if those values are unsettling? Our purpose as humans is to seek happiness. In my life, happiness is what I sought.

Arhat. Sift out the dross so only the relevant remains. For by the end of your stay, you will either return to re-birth—to Samsara or finally attain that most unutterable, dare we say, Nirvana? If the latter, never again will you suffer. Never again will you be deluded by a false sense of self.

Bert. If there is no self, then re-birth must be an illusion, for—obviously—there would be no self to be reborn.

Arhat. You are right that there is no permanent self, no eternal part of a being that survives death. The perception of a true self is an illusion of the mind. Instead, what reincarnates is a continuous flow of consciousness, formed from the coming together of memories, sensations, and other external factors. So subtle is this consciousness, that when it takes on a new body, it does not remember what it once was.

Bert. Baah! You speak in aphorisms. I have no problem remembering who I was because I am still! Thinker and writer of philosophy. That is who I have always been and always will be, until I am *really* dead of course.

Unnamed. You don't get it, do you? We are dead, all of us.

Bert. A most deceptive illusion!

Edna. Poor Bert. Trapped you are in the circle, like Dante's Inferno...

Unnamed. It is hot in here...

Bert. Look at me! This large head, full head of hair, these hands!

Arhat. Your mind is that of a great intellect, even now, in its subtlety. Yet, logic and reason can only go so far.

Bert. You mean intuition. Well, allow me to intuit, all you speak of, you speak in riddles.

Edna. Show some respect! If it weren't for Venerable Arhat, we would drown in half remembered memories, sensations, experiences long past...

Arhat. It is okay. I demand nothing from you, only...

Unnamed. What time is it?

Arhat. Just now, I tuned in to the clock ticking—do you hear it? The clock hands move—do you see it?

Everyone. No.

Arhat. Look up and watch the second hand make its rounds; around the clock they go. Tick-tick, tick-tick...

Unnamed. But if we're dead, how is it time even matters? Do the dead sleep? Do they wake from slumber? Do their stomachs growl when they feel hungry?

Arhat. Here we adhere to time as mortal beings, for that is what we still are, conventionally speaking. For practical purposes, so we can deliberate accordingly. Even if time as mortal beings understand it, is a construct, artificial...

Unnamed. What day is it then? I mean, since we got here...

★

Arhat.

Unnamed. What is she doing? Do you see it?

Edna. I see it now.

Bert. Holier than thou. He is making a show of his skills in Zen meditation. See how he sits upright, eyes closed, lids not fluttering.

Edna. No, I don't think that is what she is doing. Have you noticed, she never speaks of her past lives, not even as Arhat. I believe she is trying to remember past lives through deep meditation, hypnotic process of past life regression.

Ah, Arhat! I am sorry if I have distracted you...

Arhat. I do not need to remember all my past lives. They will be revealed to me here, in the Interim through Karma. It has already been decided.

Bert. If that is so, you deceive. You led us to believe that we have a choice, to enter Nirvana or continue the cycle...

Edna. She did no such thing. I remember—she used passive voice: "that the cycle can be broken"

Bert. "and that you can at last extinguish all desire." See? As if you can take action that will lead to Nirvana, in this place, where we are supposedly dead. For if Karma is a real thing, then nothing you do now can change it. You deserve what's coming to you.

Arhat. (Oh Master Rinpoche, did I speak in error? Are we not allotted up to 49 days because not all is written in stone? Can we in this place of subtlety still leverage our fate?)

Edna. Venerable Arhat, what say you?

Arhat. Nothing I say really matters in the end. You will do as you do.

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Edna. I love all animals—of the ocean, of the land: horses, pigs, cows, birds, and most of all, dogs. On the county road, acres of green pasture fed upon by hundreds of steers and cows. They don't know, do they? That soon they will be butchered. I wanted to set them free in the dark of night, a knight for the misused and abused. I see it now, a life devoted to animal rights. Not animal welfare, which seeks to make the lives of animals in captivity somehow better, but much better—the right to live and to be completely free! Must show compassion to all sentient beings. There is no enduring self, but the continuously evolving consciousness. All must be free.

If there is no soul, then what is reborn?

Arhat. Do you not recall Dharma? Edna, heart always in the right place. But oh, monkey mind! Out of compassion for all living beings, you could not bear to witness suffering on the part of any sentient being.

Edna. Avert, I must not avert my eyes!

Arhat. How you wanted to scroll past footage of a chimpanzee subjected to cruel experiments, but it was too late—

Edna. Bolted down in metal box, turning head, humanlike, oh the horror comes back to me!

Arhat. The caption from the Humane Society...

Edna. Oh, Arhat, Searcher, Seer, help me see!

Arhat. "Imagine how scared she is. Held against her will, used for painful research experiments her entire life. We know this is hard to watch, but scrolling past isn't an option for us—because it isn't an option for her. Please, donate now to join us in our mission to end harmful animal experimentation and all forms of animal cruelty." The horror of the helpless, how it moved you to tears.

Edna. Right action, right action.

Arhat. You made a one-time donation of \$25.

Edna. Is that really all I can afford?

Arhat. Considering that you inherited a considerable sum from your father's estate upon his passing.

Edna. I wanted to, in another life, another lifetime.

Arhat. You searched always for a satisfying life. You lived long enough to dwell in two homes. The first was that of your childhood to adulthood, the second you acquired with your father's help and a bank loan. When you first decided you wanted a house, you consulted with your partner. He did not want to be a suburbanite. Nevertheless, he agreed with you that living in an apartment had become far too cramped with all your animals—two cats and one dog—with your plan for more. Had you realized that taking out a loan of that amount would cost a lifetime to pay off? Now, having achieved one of the greatest symbols of the American Dream meant you'd have to give up the dream of traveling the world freely. Yet, you determined it was time—in your late 40's—to settle down. The day you moved in, you immediately found flaws: Misaligned shelves in the kitchen cabinets, a chip in the granite countertop. You (hesitantly) called the construction manager, asking that he make the repairs; your request tinged with a nervous laugh because you never did like confrontation. Then when you had the garage remodeled, you found cracks in the foundation, that made it even more evident that this house had been hastily erected. You questioned your hasty decision to purchase a home. Should you have thought things through more carefully before signing off?

Your journal entries:

"If only we can move away from the red state of Texas to one dominantly blue. Oregon, Washington, or California—oh how I miss you. But we both have stable jobs, and I invested thousands into this house already."

Edna. True, I poured nearly \$20,000 of my father's inheritance into upgrades: Solar panels, linoleum flooring, a new washer and dryer, a new wall-mounted tv, more than half the backyard landscaped with rocks in to keep my new puppy from digging, and finally remodeling the garage as a room for the cats; I suffered from bad allergies, and the cats needed a safe space away from our two dogs.

Arhat. You thought of donating more money to a charity (your heart in the right place), but this right intention took a backseat to what you considered more immediate needs.

"If only I could finally quit teaching and do something that I'm truly passionate about. Make a living through writing (never going to happen). Editing, publishing. Working with dogs? I don't really enjoy teaching. Hate it. 'Those who can't, teach.'"

Arhat. You burned out on teaching even before the pandemic, but every time you tried something different, it fell through.

Edna. Wished to be true to myself, is that not right intention, right view?

Arhat. You read books that spoke to your sensibilities, that railed against the mandatory school system: *Weapons of Mass Instruction* and *I Love Learning; I Hate School*. Spoke to a feeling you had for a long time but were been unable to articulate.

You had always dreamed of owning your own business, a bookstore to be specific, but that would likely require the whole sum of your savings. So you went small scale by buying an old van. This venture costed you another \$20,000 for repair and restoration. You went all out to to make your dream come true. You paid for a

unique logo for the wrap, a paint job in the color of electric green, purchased books, games, and gifts for inventory.

Edna. Yes, yes, I did! I loved that van, a Westfalia Vanagon, to be specific, I'd desired either that or the classic VW bus for the longest time, and my dad's money made it finally come true!

Arhat. You had right intention, to help your local community by offering free tutoring services to families who purchased a book. The owner of the local farmer's market even waived the fee to set up on weekends.

Edna. I failed, didn't I. Stuck in an endless cycle of indecision and fickleness.

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is (1)____, and I am pleased to present this letter and my resume in application for the position of (2)____. I believe my extensive background as a (3)____, (4)____, and (5)____, qualifies me as an excellent candidate for this position.

Boiler plate template allowed for jobs of all kinds:

- (1) Edna
- (2) Foster Care Coordinator
- (3) teacher
- (4) writer
- (5) and my abiding love for animals

-OR-

- (1) Edna
- (2) Library Assistant
- (3) teacher
- (4) published writer
- (5) and my passion for the written word

Fill in the blanks and I could b.s. my way into getting hired for just about anything.

- Freelancer
- Academic Coordinator
- Campus Organizer
- Canvas Manager
- Career Coach
- P.E. Coach
- (Work for a start-up nonprofit called Civi-Tech, with benefits!)
- Development Associate (So many associate possibilities, too many to list)
- Digital Communications Assistant (Same goes for the very generic "assistant")
- Forest Ranger (by far, the biggest stretch)
- School Bus Driver (for which I am grossly overqualified)
- Vet Tech
- Food Network
- Graduate Admissions
- Instructional Designer
- Interior Designer (super stretch since I had no experience or knack for this type of design)
- Leasing Consultant (thought about going for my real estate license)

Tweak cover letter here and there, highlight strengths using Job Description bullet points. Focus on what I had to offer. Which is why I got called for just two interviews from dozens and dozens of applications, my head dizzy from typing in the same reference information, job and education history. Bragged about my background in teaching and publications, which limited the interest I'd get from jobs that had nothing to do with either of those skills.

Lifetime possibilities:

- (1) Hungry Ghost from the Middle Ages?
- (1) Animal Rights Extremist
- (1)

Monkey Mind! Obsessed with what-might-have-been. Let us move on, Edna. Poor Edna. For once in your lifetime, be decisive, be strong.

*

Edna. Thank you for your patience everyone. I think I might be having a breakthrough.

After 20 years in the Navy, Papa—was lost. He didn't know what he could qualify for. He didn't know what to do. He started one business venture after another: I remember how he worked as security for the Broadway, then insurance representative. He tried selling butane candles; for a time, he made good money and even gave me and my sister ten dollars each for allowance. He bought a machine that did gold plated etching, and then discovered he was good at vinyl repair. When he died, the remains of his ventures piled up in the toolshed: the very expensive gold plating machine rusted, the vinyl repair equipment collecting dust and spider webs. We had to hire a junk hauler to clear it out because we didn't have the heart to do it ourselves. All this to say that I am a lot like my father and my father like me. After all the money I spent on improving my van, after awhile, I lost interest and the unsold inventory sat on a shelf in the garage (along with dozens of unsold copies of my first book).

Arhat. Two lifetimes ago, Edna, you were somebody else.

You know who? You mean my life as a drifter? Monetarily poor, but spiritually free. It's all coming back to me.

Arhat. You might wonder what your previous lives have to do with your future fate.

Edna. If my life before Edna was one of strong will, one who acted freely without worrying what others thought, then Edna—I, had I regressed? If so, is there any chance I'll be a better person the next time around? Or better yet, finally achieve Nirvana...

Arhat. That is the question. Only you can answer...

Edna. And yet, I cannot imagine a time when I did not exist, nor can I imagine a time that I will not. Is that the way for you too?

Arhat. Us all, oh monkey mind! At the most mundane moments—while brushing your teeth, spitting into the sink, washing dishes, it all becomes too much. Sometimes your eyes brim with tears. *This too shall pass*, as all things do.

Bert. Why can't you all just muster resolve, as I once did, when I cast off the chains of false religion. Or should I say, all religion! But this is not about me.

Arhat. You, Edna, your existence immediately prior, if you do not recall, allow me to fill in the gaps; you died in the womb, not a fully developed human being. Why this Karma, you wonder, which led to your rebirth in the form that would become Edna? Had you lived a lifetime such that you would regress? And then upon the death of the unborn child, return yet again to the realm of human beings? Where are you now on the continuum?

Edna. I don't know. Please, you tell me.

Arhat. To understand your present, you must look to your past. You grew up with stray dogs and cats.

Edna. I remember, Mama took in stray cats all the time. There was Bootsie, the black and white kitty and the grey and white mangy cat called Misty, when I was a teenager, slashed the entire length of my forearm when I tried to pick her up. Mama would shovel up road kill and bury them in our backyard—thinking back, it was very strange; our very own pet cemetery. We also grew up with dogs. The hot dog dog--don't remember his name, that licked my back when I took naps in summer, in my parent's house by the Tijuana border, in the patio with awning for shade. There was Benji the mutt that humped our legs—nasty dog! He always seemed to be in heat, probably because our parents never took our pets to the vet to get them fixed or for anything really. I'll never forget how when I looked out the bedroom window, the one that faces Tijuana, I saw just yellow eyes glowing in the dark. And that's it; Benji must have died of Rabies. There was Keku the neighbor's collie, they asked us to look after while they were on vacation. My oldest sister kicked him in the chin doing cartwheels, made his chin bleed. Then of course there was Odie, part German

Shepherd and part yello Lab. One of Beigey's puppies. Beigey was a shelter dog we had adopted, she had a big litter, had them all on her own in the backyard. I remember finding dead puppies on the lawn. Papa said Beigey probably killed them as soon as they were born. I couldn't understand why. We couldn't afford to keep all the pups, but I begged to keep at least one, and cried when my parents took Beigey and the rest of the pups to the Dog Pound, where surely she was put down. Odie grew and grew, then I outgrew him; I chained him to the toolshed in the backyard for days on end.

Sad, very sad. Dogs are sentient beings.

Arhat. Your parents fed Odie leftovers, including chicken bones, sat rotting overnight, attracted maggots and flies. Your mother would dump the Filipino leftovers like Mongo and rice, and leave it there until it went bad. Poor hungry dog would bury his poop and then dig it up later to chew. When you returned from a week-long trip to Oregon, your mother found your dog dead. No one had thought to check in on him the night you arrived home from your trip. You went to work the next morning and it was your mother who called you at work to tell you they found Odie's stiff body hung over the neighbor's backyard. In an attempt to run away, he had leaped over the fence.

Edna. I never saw him again, I never saw him dead because by the time I got home, my father and brother had buried him under the tree.

Arhat. Was this traumatic event the reason for why you spoil all your pets that came after?

Edna. Nothing but the most expensive food and toys. I regret a lot. I regret keeping pets in the first place.

Unnamed. We animals, we should be free.

Edna. I agree, Unicorn. I regret keeping a rabbit as a pet. A gray and white bunny, I named her Dutchess, she froze overnight in her cage because I forgot to take her

inside. It rained heavily that night. Before Dutchess's unnecessary death, my best friend had scolded me for keeping her in a cage under the shelf in the garage directly in the pathway of the car's exhaust. That must be why I moved the cage outdoors, but then I forgot all about it.

But this is all in the past, is it not? A past life. I am no longer that person, am I? Another chance. I wish to turn from ignorance to Enlightenment. To do all I can to end the suffering of all sentient beings under my care.

There's a difference you know, between animal welfare and animal rights activism. I wanted to convert to full on Veganism, but kept debating it back and forth. I believe I had a passion and desire to work with animals, to advocate for animal rights. Right intention. Why could I not act?

I read books related to the ethics of animal rights, starting with Peter Singer's writings. I read his essays and forced myself to watch footage of animal cruelty, and to not avert my eyes. I couldn't sleep for nights. By the time I nearly turned Vegan, I had made up my mind to support the animal rights movement fully. I decided to support my favorite animal welfare/animal rights groups: PETA, The Human Society, Austin Pets Alive, and Alley Cat.

You know, I remember with fondness how I finally went on a 10-day silent retreat at San Francisco Zen Center. I had always wanted to go on one.

Arhat. Good, good.

Edna. Yes, yes, to seek redemption for wrong action, right intention.

If afforded another lifetime, I would take my desire to work for animal rights to its logical conclusion.

I would release my pets from subordination so they could live, rather than as slaves, as individuals and to live by natural instinct. I would work undercover for PETA and

expose and shut down slaughterhouses and factory farms. I would muster the courage to pursue a career I could feel passionate about.

Arhat. Oh Edna, this desire to right the wrongs of to the past and to plan for an uncertain future, while the river of existence moves right along! You cannot be certain of who or what you will be reborn as! While you may take on a new body, you cannot choose the texture and pattern of the next life.

Edna. Then I died having discovered no grand meaning, no ultimate purpose for which I was born.

Arhat. What do you remember at the last?

Edna. Birds chirping and singing, the sound of water gushing and flowing. When I looked out the window, the wings of the hummingbird beat frantically.

Is that Enlightenment?

★

Arhat. Concepcion, you have remained silent all this time.

Concepcion. My name is Maria Concepcion, but everybody calls me Connie.

Arhat. Perhaps in another lifetime, you would have squished that cascading spider, flush it down the toilet, rather than let it finish its descent. In your most recent life as Maria Concepcion, Connie, you came to the belief, at the end of it all, that all life is precious...

Connie. Si, toda la vida es preciosa.

Arhat. All life is precious, even that of an insect. Not because it might be a human reborn, but because it is a living.

Unnamed. Yes, yes!

Connie. I have waited until now to speak my one question.

Arhat. And yet you hesitate. Please do go on, Connie, we are listening without judgment.

Connie. If Karma is cause and effect, does that mean victims deserve whatever awful things are done to them?

Arhat. Simply put, Karma is the direct result of a particular action or pattern of action enacted. Karma may come in the same lifetime as the act or in the next life. This nature of Karma as direct result of *actions* helps one to not lay all judgment and blame on the *actor*, inflictor of pain or suffering.

Bert. You speak in riddles, in aphoristic truisms. I think Connie wants to know, as we all do: In the philosophy of reincarnation, do victims of violence or injury deserve what happens to them? Did they earn this treatment in another lifetime?

Arhat. Connie, is this true? Is this the essence of your question?

Connie. Yes, Bert says what weighs heavy on my heart.

Since I was a child, I suffered from the itch, on my fingers, face, thighs, even on my feet. My parents took me to the local shaman—they could not afford a real doctor. The shaman had cured my brother of fangs he had been born with. I witnessed it myself. He covered my brother's eyes with a blindfold, chanted and spat, slapped the back of my brother's head, and the fangs fell out! When we returned, this time to address my ailments, the shaman saw my breakout of hives all over my body, he said the healing process would take longer, for the roots of my illness—like the roots of all evil—went much deeper than the roots of my brother's rotted teeth. His eyes narrowed, and he whispered words I could not understand. When I grew up and got a job with health benefits, I could finally go to a real doctor and get a proper diagnosis. Or so I thought. I first saw an allergist, who diagnosed me with Chronic Urticaria. I got shots for nearly three years with not much relief. My attacks

continued even with shots every two weeks. Then I got tested for Lupus, which came out negative. Or so they explained there's not an actual test for the actual disease, but the results indicated it was highly unlikely. Then came the nightmares about my brother—the one who lost his fangs. And the ones about me running and running and trying to make my way home, but always getting lost.

In the nightmares, my brother who was not my brother still had his fangs; he was and was not a vampire. I believe these dreams were meant to tell me something, of what happened decades ago. My brother brought it up on a day when the sky was baby blue, and there were no clouds, when he had come over to my parent's home in Mexico to take his shift to look after our father as he lay resting in the master bedroom, recovering from his last round of chemo. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, for everything." And then just like that, I fainted; when I came to, he offered his hand to lift me. I shrugged him away. As I rose up, my knees were so shaky, our eyes met, his pleading, mine fogged over with disbelief, and I saw it all again: how he pulled a crumpled twenty from his jeans pocket, and asked me to pull down my shorts and lay on the bed. And I let him. Oh, the shame! How it became routine, at least once a month. Being the only girl among four boys, I was given my own bedroom. I was the only one with her very own room, the smallest. I remember after my brother's confession, he was weeping, and me? I sweat though I felt cold, I knew what I had to do. I had to forgive and tell him to never mention it again. For Jehovah says if we are to be forgiven, then we must forgive.

What I wish to know is, will Jehovah accept me in heaven, among his anointed, the 144,000? Will he forgive me my transgressions?

Arhat. What transgressions if you don't mind me asking?

Connie. Because I feel it and I know it in my heart, with Jehovah my holy father is where I belong, if he'll have me. For as Jesus our savior said, "For if one looks at a woman with lust, he has already committed sin in his heart."

★

Connie. If our eyes hadn't locked under the strobing lights of the disco ball or

if you were not a black-out drunk, if you hadn't said, "I think you're gorgeous I'm tempted to take you home tonight," or

if you didn't look like Ed Norton with the sex appeal of Johnny Depp,

then I wouldn't have fallen for it all, or read your texts at two or three in the morning for booty call.

I would not have kept pursuing you even after it was clear you were just not that into me. Even after we met up one more time before you left for Europe and I offered casual sex (even that you rejected).

I wouldn't have held out an impossible hope that somehow you would come to your senses and realize I was the best one for you, because of my patience, my compassion, my kindness, and my desperation and the need for confirmation that I am attractive enough and deserving of love.

Edna. Baloo dug again, in the backyard, and I grabbed him by the collar, dragged him to the laundry room, shoved the muzzle onto his snout, and slapped his face hard. His head drooped and he scooted timidly to the corner, his tail tucked, and his puppy brown eyes sad. My heart contracted and I silently promised, I could not, would not ever do it again. But wondering, would he remember that mommy is someone to fear?

Unnamed. I once was a bait dog. My masters taped my muzzle so I could not fight back. Tied to a tree, thrown into the fighting pit, ears got torn off, my rump ridden with open wounds. Punching bag for the real fighting dogs to teach them how to maul and kill weaker dogs like me. But even I, born for suffering, found a loving, caring home. Someone who accepted me as is and then did all she could to heal me. She even sewed, by hand, dozens of headbands to hide the spaces where my ears should be, and donated regularly to the Humane Society. My newfound joy was short-lived. Years of abuse caused irreversible damage and my body caved to its

injuries, despite all her efforts, all the money she spent to fix me. And I wonder, what had my human done in a previous life to deserve this?

Bert. I am sorry. This is so pathetic. If we're talking regrets, it is pointless now, isn't it? With Arhat, I agree on that. Now the future, well, I hope to grow old, never retire from philosophy and to die in my sleep.

Edna. Sad, sad, stubborn man. We are, all of us, dead! Yet, you cling to the illusion of a fixed identity.

Bert. I was, am, and always will be Bert. I take full responsibility for what you'd call a chronic attachment to my identity. For this, I'm not the least bit ashamed. One more trip down memory lane, then. One more for the road, whatever that may end up being. With this excursion into my past, I will prove Arhat wrong, with all due respect.

Arhat. Bert, strong of will. Please, go on. If you feel it's relevant.

Bert. Some time ago, you tried narrating my life, you assumed my friend to be my first love. She was not. I was fond of her, but in a purely platonic way. My first (and last love) was bipolar and a thrill-seeker, and I loved him for all that. I thought of him rather than her when I played Pippin and she played Catherine and we kissed.

Let us say that rebirth is reality. You insinuate that we have a choice in the matter. That we can either choose to stay in the cycle of Samsara or choose Nirvana by letting go of all attachment. But if there is no self, as Buddhism teaches, then what is reborn? I argue that given the inherent contradiction, that the idea of rebirth is definitely an illusion.

Edna. You said this before!

Bert. And I say it again, for emphasis.

Arhat. Subtle mindstream, Awareness itself is what is reborn, not the selfsame individual of the previous life...

Bert. Again, there is no way to prove with logic, science, or philosophy. We can only speculate. I have all my faculties.

Even if re-birth is real, because of Karma, it is still not up to us what our next life will be. Is that correct?

Arhat. Essentially, yes. With Karma, you do not choose consciously, but how you are reborn depends on how you acted in your former life.

Bert. Then the choice has already been made for us, has it not? Even if I want the cycle to end in Nirvana, here in what appears to be an intermediate space, I cannot escape my Karma now, can I.

Edna. We are here to realize our fate. Bert, in the off-chance that re-birth is real, why not accept that you will be reborn? You and your lover might even meet again in another lifetime...

Bert. Let's see: He an archeologist, me an inanimate object dug up from the ruins of some buried, ruined civilization. Just kidding, inanimate objects are not sentient beings. Or maybe we will merely cross paths in a fleeting love affair in some exotic location, and will have to wait for yet another lifetime before we can touch hands. What would it matter if we are reborn, if we are no longer the same persons we had been when we had been in love. We would not know who or what we had been in all other lifetimes because we are stuck in Samsara and thus not "Arhats" like you, enlightened beings. Whoever or whatever I am to be in future lifetimes is thus moot. The choice is not mine, nor ever will be, in any lifetime, not even in this intermediate state. When I *really* die, that will be it; I will not be this unique individual, no matter what this Buddha or that Buddha says about a continuous flow of consciousness.

Arhat. It is true, the "self" that we call I, is constantly changing each moment, never remains the same from one instant to the next. And yet, you are here, are you not, you who used to be and still appear to be, Bertrand, in this "purgatory," in the Interim? In some sense, *you* live on, in the continuum of moments of mind; this takes rebirth. As for your friend to whom you were expected to be engaged but did not, was she not the first person you felt a genuine love for? In Christian scripture, they call such unconditional love Agape, or perhaps Philia, brotherly love. You would never admit it, you were hard put to feel either type of love for your biological family, not in the way you wished you could. What you felt for them was obligatory.

Bert. Don't you dare...

Arhat. "You cannot choose your family," was this not the motto of the main character in the one act drama you wrote and published?

Bert. It was fiction...

Arhat. But you stated in an interview that it was semi-autobiographical.

Bert. There you have it. That play was only partially based on my real life. Don't try to change the subject. You dare to lead us from uncertainty when you are uncertain yourself.

Arhat. What do you mean?

Bert. How long have you been here? When I arrived, you were here already, mumbling some sort of gibberish, like a madman, really. One year, two? Be forthcoming please, for one of your stature surely cannot tell a lie.

Arhat. Of course, of course, I seem to have lost track of time, here, where none are constrained by the limits of...

Bert. Yeah, blah blah blah, time as a human construct. Yet, you are closer to Nirvana than any of us here, are you not? Are you not enlightened enough to be granted

entrance into the state of Nirvana? Have you asked your friend there, what did you call him, Master Rinpoche?

Arhat. Now, now, let me tell you a thing or two, Bert the Great Philosopher! First you assume Master is a male. And you assume the same about me. Well, my life as Venerable Arhat I led as female.

Bert. Pardon me for my mistake, still, for you, what's it going to be?

*

Arhat. As one who wakes from anesthesia to bright lights, confusion sets in, lost if but for a moment—I came to and remembered you, oh my sage, Master Rinpoche, you who sat beside me at my deathbed and held my hand in my final moments. Just before the last breath (I could not know it was at the time, but I remember, I remember now) you said nothing, silence, the best gift you could offer.

Edna. Oh beautiful, I wish for such a death! I wish to see this your Dogen, Rinpoche! And what were you before this, Honorable One?

Arhat. In all honesty, I do not know. Unlike a true Buddha, I cannot recall all my lifetimes, just the one prior to my waking to death and that last moment of reassurance from my Master and her full presence. If there is an essence to a person that lingers on through all lifetimes, I do not know what I am in essence, but if pressed, perhaps I can offer a few small musings: I love the taste and texture of smooth and silky chocolate, daily walks in nature, dogs (I owned four), and trees. My favorite is the Magnolia, but I also favor red oak and sunflowers. I spent my childhood building mud pies, growing tadpoles in paper cups, and catching slugs to race with my cousins, but then setting them free. I had (have) a dark side, a hair-trigger temper, given to illogical outbursts, which was what led me on the path to Zen in the first place. All the teachings I have recited to you I gained from Master Rinpoche, my first and last teacher. All this is true. I am not all self-knowing, only I do sense that I—Vijnana—lived many times, spanning across a large swath of time. Master nurtured me for Nirvana and reassures me now that I am ready, yet upon moving into this space, I felt compelled to this calling, to volunteer to spend my time

here in the Interim focused on helping you all rather than realizing Nirvana finally. Like someone possessed, I know you and your wealth of lived experience, like a famed historian with a photographic memory, I recall all your lives. My ability to recite so much information shocks and surprises even me. Master says I am ready for Nirvana, even though I feel the urge to linger longer. It seems you each have decided. You who had been Edna, Unicorn of the Sea, and Concepcion most recently. Yes, even you, Bert, even if you disbelieve.

Sidpa Bardo (Bardo of Rebirth)

Unnamed. I, Samsara. May I return to the animal kingdom, the forever present. It is in the animal kingdom where I am in my element, where there is no heirarchy. We non-human animals play on the same plane, we beluga, we narwhal, we sperm whale, we one and all.

Edna. What else? I had my chance. I, Nirvana.

Connie. Samsara, I am not done with you yet. I must advocate for those silenced by sexual violence. No more putting it off. No more "in another lifetime."

Arhat. And you, Bertrand the Doubter, at this late hour, have you decided to still doubt?

Bert. In that you are correct. To be a true philosopher is not to have all the answers, but to question, always. Whether or not I am alive or I am dead is neither here nor there. It is what it is. What will be will be.

★

Oh Master, you say that I am ready, that I have been since my entry to Chikai Bardo—Bardo of the Dying. But I have found purpose in this place. See here—Bert the Doubter, Edna, Connie, Unicorn of the Sea—because of me they have realized their destiny! Surely, I can help others, if I remain here indefinitely.

Yes, I know I am pushing the limits of the Interim, but will you please accept me as a Bhodisattva, my sacrifice for the sake of the lost ones...

But I am not ready...

Let me refrain from entering the unutterable to save others...

I am not ready...

for all feelings, memories, and thoughts to dissolve forever, to never return to that brutal and beautiful world again...

Will you not let me choose?

