



IN THE LABYRINTH  
A JEREMIAD  
JOHN G. MCDAID

For Jack

Cover art by John Pierard

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### **Introduction**

In early September, I started jotting in my sketchbook about the intertwined myths of King Minos, Daedalus, Icarus, and the Minotaur. The present effort represents a stand-alone chunk of that.

Maybe it was the Septemberness of the time—vestibule of October, which sweeps down on us with all that's dark and spooky—that infected this project from the start, but it got dark fast. Even for me. And it began to take shape as a series of voices, something between a podcast and one-act musical. This is not intended to be a performable piece, but more what in theatre is called a "closet drama," not meant to climb up on its feet, but whose structure informs private reading.

About the repetition. I will confess that I was, and still am, very much under the influence of Spencer LaJoye's "Plowshare Prayer," which I had just heard at Ellis Paul's New England Songwriters Retreat. And I have never forgotten the visceral impact Harlan Ellison achieves with the technique in "The Region Between," one of his most wondrous sf stories. I remember reading it while picking up dry cleaning with my mom, in early 1970, immersed in my SF book club hardcover. Of course, Lothar and the Hand People's *Space Hymn* is the Ur-text for musical hypnotic induction. And the work of poet, performer, and professor Adeena Karasick is a continual inspiration.

I was finishing this the week Robert Coover passed. He was a visionary writer, a warm and generous author and critic, and one of the best friends my writing ever had. I still use a quote from his *NYTimes* review of the *Funhouse* because, damn, Robert Coover. All writers and readers live in a bigger, more authentic world because of the weird fictional groove that Coover inhabited, extended, and validated in American letters. Thanks, and farewell.

**In The Labyrinth**  
**a jeremiad for nine voices**

(V.O.)  
In the labyrinth (repeats)

Buddy  
In the shadows

The Chemist  
Under the eye

Ariel  
We follow closed timelike curves

Emily  
Cooking breakfast

Aelita  
Never having answers

Billy  
We ride the Bull of Heaven

Roland  
We watch Beauty and the Beast waiting to cross Fifth  
Avenue

The Professor  
We radiate quantum gravity

Tight Five  
We'll take that to go

Aelita  
We are walking with the goddess

Emily  
We ask the right questions

Ariel  
Our parents were coherent

The Professor  
We follow left hand walls

Emily  
We hunt and gather

Ariel  
Forever confused

The Professor  
Seeking tokens

Buddy  
Buying time

Tight Five  
Squeezing by

Buddy  
Down among the dead men

Roland  
Holding short of the active

Ariel  
Seeing the flash before the boom

The Chemist  
Character armor weighs you down

Emily  
A time for dressup and makeup and play

Roland  
The end of ends, the *ricorso á ouroboros*; please pardon this  
brief rupture in the fabric of the consensual hallucination  
that is our notionally shared reality

Buddy  
Bye and bye slides by in the rear view mind's eye's soft  
misted streetlights of a Donegal evening strolling over the  
River Eske

The Professor  
Nostradamus lost his way

The Chemist  
We finally got the message of beta decay

Ariel  
No one's found a place to hide

Aelita  
People rent their lives, just to get by

Billy  
We pretend to be walking with the king

Buddy  
We are having deep conversations about ultimate questions

Roland  
We are alone

Ariel  
Grinding through desperate years

Roland  
Certain only in the knowledge of death

Aelita  
The smell of that cocoa, faint notes of marshmallow and  
melting snow, turning to look out the window and seeing  
only one set of boot prints

Emily  
You hang, inverted

Buddy  
Rilke's caustic light

Roland  
Hurry up please, it's time

Billy  
Does this bus go to Brighton Beach

Ariel

*Last Summer in Marienbad*

Roland

*In hoc signo vinces*

The Professor

We fritter away so much, adrift in the empire of signs

Billy

2+2=5

The Professor

Humans evolved without speech

Ariel

The breeze holds a breath of Fall

Roland

Formal cause obtains

The Chemist

Truth and illusion and George and Martha

Buddy

Hung over on Golgotha

The Professor

Snakes live to tempt you

Emily

You must bring home the bacon

Roland

By the hand of Apollo, flung from the sky

The Professor

The vision of an order behind the visible that the gods supply is the chef's kiss of a self-sealing system

Ariel

No one asks followup questions

The Professor

Words vanish as they appear

Buddy

We live forever in the smell of oil: bunker fuel, diesel, regular unleaded, kero, Jet-A; it marks the nature of our passage

Tight Five

We spin illusions

Roland

Time means nothing

Emily

Tea and sympathy

Billy

This is not our first rodeo, Titania

Ariel

No one knows your name

Emily  
We are all late September bees

Billy  
Crashing in from orbit, retros firing, all superhero spandex  
and chrome

Emily  
The fruit hangs heavy, still, from subtler trees

Ariel  
Jane Jarvis plays the Thomas organ

The Chemist  
The darkness closes in

Aelita  
There exist temporary autonomous zones

Buddy  
Your parents got the turkey in the oven while you watched  
*March Of The Wooden Soldiers*

Aelita  
You feel the tug of those strong, early memories, the ones  
you never admit to anyone

Roland  
It's alright ma (i'm only bleeding)

The Professor  
The medium is the message

The Chemist  
Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law

Ariel  
The sky was preternaturally blue that day

Buddy  
Never Count Chocula, always Frute Brute

Roland  
Heat death, big rip, vacuum decay

Aelita  
Morning imperceptibly transitions from birds to crickets

Billy  
Render unto caesar if and when he sees ya

Tight Five  
The second mouse gets the cheese but it's usually the third  
or fourth jackal that gets the brain

Aelita  
We are all free

Ariel  
No one has to hide their face

Aelita  
Heaven's just a concrete fist

Roland  
Everything is fine

Billy  
The weather suits the stones

Ariel  
Caught nameless by the tide

Aelita  
Walking sideways down the sand

Ariel  
With sea and sky the only way

Emily  
We throw ourselves, ourselves...our selves, away

Aelita  
Like leaves, like tears, like wind-blown silk

Emily  
But gravity is the eldest god

Buddy  
And the priest said to Solon, "Oh, what a blow that  
phantom gave me"

The Chemist  
See it in the hard scattery mesonlight and the soft silvery  
muonlight

Tight Five  
Give me your keys

Roland  
It's never too late until it is, but trust me, you'll know when  
that time comes

The Chemist  
*Catena hac nocte*

Aelita  
We earn our daily bread

Ariel  
I lost my place

Roland  
We search for *arête*

Aelita  
We eat the bosses

Billy  
No one sees it coming

Ariel  
We are learning in the turning

Roland  
We pause, suspended, in the heartbreaking paroxysm of  
final parting

The Professor  
A thread exists

Buddy

Unconstrained, the real tripods have terraformed location  
978 into the planet of gold and lead

The Professor

Frame by desperate frame we sink into the tar

The Chemist

Drizzle, drizzle, drizzle, drome

Roland

The light finally reaches us

Aelita

Every old sock finds an old shoe

Ariel

We can connect the dots looking forward

Tight Five

We stumble upon a giant untouched cream-filled snack  
cake

Buddy

The everyday conundrum: that these things which  
surround you will outlive you; that is the true *mono no*  
*aware*, Margaret

Roland

The implosion happens faster than we can perceive it

The Chemist

In some frames of reference, you have been dead for eleven  
million years

Billy

We all face the sun and squint a bit

Ariel

We are not even a pixel on the pale blue dot

Tight Five

We need more cowbell

Ariel

If you don't mind me asking

Roland

We secretly long for a believable priesthood

The Professor

Many of the things we say are lies

Emily

We languish under its sulfurous gaze, its sightless obsidian  
gaze

The Professor

The doctors all blur together

Emily

Maxwell, Maslow, machinima, Mishima

Billy

We all have our party tricks

Roland

We always break out the good whiskey

Aelita

We live in a brutal, angry land that needs some goddamned heroes

The Professor

No one else is on your side

Ariel

Freedom cost your child an eye

Roland

Everyone deletes their cookies

The Chemist

Elvis shakes with Richard Nixon

Roland

On to Chicago and let's win there

Buddy

*Ein jeder engel ist schrecklich*

The Professor

There is no traffic on the eights

Roland

Entropy overtakes the thief

The Professor

The sun is always overhead at noon

Billy

What you want is in their limo; opening the door signifies acceptance of the terms and conditions and irrevocable grant of license in perpetuity to your brainwaves, proteome, and corpuscle for any legal purpose, in any form of media now existing or ever dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio

Ariel

The end of all vanities is stealth camping next to the dumpster out back of that strip mall on 24

Buddy

Sequins sparkle

Billy

Dogs howl

Roland

Primordial strings shall tremble their web

The Professor

Yer jest 800 grams 'a phosphorus up th' flue

Tight Five

Your head will reel and your bones will roll

Ariel

You are perpetually rattling around inside the cacophony  
of your time

Aelita

You walk in the presence of the past, considered as a  
cumulative, serried, intersectional web of truths and  
oppressions, and whose weight can occasionally be felt  
when one's foot comes down

Roland

We pretend we are immortal

The Professor

Until of course one day we are not

Billy

It does make the sandwiches taste better, thanks, Warren

Emily

Once you have known flight, you will walk forever with  
your eyes turned skyward

Ariel

All religions are necessarily wrong

Emily

The opposite of any great truth is also a great truth

Tight Five

Your dinner is dying in the window

Roland

It's the season right after the ball

The Professor

Under abyssal rain, slewing like slow sleet

Tight Five

The chamber slowly fills with risotto

The Chemist

Every death we experience is threaded, popcorn on the  
darkest of holiday strings, back to our first bereavement.  
we remember that every time.

Tight Five

You can choose a sandwich or a schmear, *essen* or *glace*

Aelita

Everything closes early on Sunday

Billy

We wait, hushed, behind the great wall, for the king's  
arrival at the sacrificial table

The Professor

Each word meticulously carved into the black basalt  
obelisk

Ariel

Feral cats yowl

Roland

Repetition, and repetition, and repetition at all times  
through all channels, aiming to provoke fear and anger

The Professor

We shuffle always among devices and screens

Roland

We approach the past at  $9.8\text{m/s}^2$

The Chemist

You are shocked back into normal rhythm

Tight Five

We feed the losers to the volcano

Ariel

We've got all doors open

The Professor

We watch *The Sorrow And The Pity* on a loop

Tight Five

Nothing but olives

Aelita

We tweeze splinters of the True Resolute Desk from  
beneath our fingernails

Ariel

Please don't eat the daisies

The Chemist

You might spare a thought for the control arm

Billy

Words will be minced

Roland

The code smell is resistant to refactoring

Aelita

The owners call in the Pinkertons

The Chemist

Our universe, like the atom -- like our lives -- is mostly  
empty space

Buddy

The grit in the oyster is you

Roland

Some things just won't tile

Billy

Checkout time is high noon on main street

Tight Five

Hit the button for the elevator

Roland

We shape our buildings and thereafter they shape us

Ariel

House to half and hold

Emily  
Set pagers to stun

Buddy  
Check out the concession stand

Roland  
Non Von, non Euclidean, non Aristotelian, *non e vero e bene trovato*

Billy  
Grab your crotch and call for Jesus

Buddy  
Stand right, walk left

Aelita  
Things are what they remind you of

Ariel  
Who you are is where you were when

Emily  
It's always five o'clock somewhere

The Chemist  
You can sometimes see the skeleton winking at you  
through the skin if you look at it right

Tight Five  
A melon for ecstasy

Ariel  
Please and thank you

Roland  
Stick of gum makes you hum

Tight Five  
We're gonna cath you, sheriff, and we're gonna cath you  
slow

Roland  
You can occasionally see about fifty yards ahead

The Professor  
You never know what's on the consent agenda

Tight Five  
Haters gonna hate

Buddy  
You always ask yourself, what did i do or not do

Billy  
There is a vague taste of blood in your mouth

Aelita  
The hiss of sanctimony is never far away

Ariel  
Don't you worry your pretty little head, we're going to  
shoot this with lots of coverage

The Chemist

Things are beautiful and warm then the water drains from the sky and your generation ship is decanted, *blows against the empire* style, and you are eating tuna salad on a roll over your trash can in a whitewashed 1930s retrofit office on Madison Avenue with only the vaguest notion of how your day-to-day work aligns with the organization's strategic priorities, but you do have a dim sense there could have been more than this, once

Roland

You don't want to be in a split screen

Billy

Records were made to be broken

Emily

You are on the fastest route

The Professor

*Dubito ergo sum*

Roland

We are all, god help us, Santa's elves

Ariel

Wipe slates, see late lates

The Professor

I would like to go, Z-12

Billy

That same old tune on the hydrogen earbuds

Roland

*Mene mene tekel upharsin*

Ariel

We all do what we are told

The Professor

Sand is worth its weight in gold

Buddy

She loved the spy who came in from the cold

Billy

There's a dog in every manger

Roland

*Jusqu'à ce que nous soyons finalement détruits par cet obscur objet de désir*

The Professor

Dogs bark but the caravan moves on

Tight Five

The first taste is always free

The Chemist

The sacrifice of Isaac every hour on the hour; the reset is laborious

Buddy

Down from room two-thirty-seven to the fish and goose soiree

Aelita  
We slowly push in to yet another patriarchal tail-eating  
spurious creation monomyth

Ariel  
You are rewired: beep. bop. boop.

Emily  
The president is absolutely not one hundred feet tall

Roland  
That smell...you know that Anthropocene smell...

Emily  
What's past is prologue

The Chemist  
The kid was probably dead by then. All the cops saw when  
they got there was the two polar bears fighting over a leg

Emily  
We dig our own graves

Billy  
The mojo wire throbs for us all

Ariel  
The clouds have rocks in them

Tight Five  
Fifty million toasters can't be wrong

The Professor  
Don't move your head so fast you'll get whiplash

Ariel  
Summer sublets are available

Aelita  
We lounge in the buttery light of the Hudson River School

Roland  
We spot movement back of the tree line

Ariel  
We speak in tongues

Billy  
We make our own gravy

Aelita  
We chalk it up to experience

Buddy  
The crickets and dogs in the opening soundscape of  
*Amused to Death*, transcluded herein by reference

Ariel  
We're looking for the eleven o'clock number

Tight Five  
Fantastic opportunity! Limited time offer!

The Chemist

We don't know how preliterates experienced the attentional metacognition that we call consciousness; it's something we consider a normal inhabited state because of the affordances we've built up around it

Aelita

We say it like a fortune cookie postscript

Tight Five

We're only two paychecks from lucrative oral presentation opportunities in the hospitality sector as upstart attackers in the brick-and-mortar b2b marketplace with service offerings targeting logistics endpoints

Tight Five

Blowjobs. that's blowjobs in truckstop bathrooms if you don't speak résumése

The Chemist

If codeine isn't working try fluoxetine, then ketamine

Aelita

Am i free to leave?

Buddy

*Hoc est corpus*

Aelita

The regret of the unsaid

Ariel

We climb toward the distant light

The Professor

We adjust the titer

Emily

Sweet sixteen evaporates to final four

The Chemist

There is nothing to be afraid of

Roland

Forward looking statements are asterisked

Aelita

It's critical to stay hydrated

Tight Five

Your mileage may vary

Billy

No pain, no gain

Roland

You will most likely never know why there is something rather than nothing

Tight Five

Check, please

Emily

The eagle never lost so much as when it stooped to learn of the crow

The Professor  
Only connect

Aelita  
He counted on the inscrutable alien subtlety of his facial gestures; she could read that midwestern style like a book

The Professor  
You need to understand that change is an incremental, multi-year process, and we have to think in the long term, maintain a big tent, and not get too far out over our skis

Billy  
Stuck in traffic with lou, backed up to 39th street

Roland  
Folx are grinding metal, working 18-hour-days couchlocked into the Apollonian dream, ordering local burritos that are better than they have any right to be from that Mexican slow food place just off Seventh Ave, man, this thing is the size of a baby's head. Dude. Baby head burrito. You wrap opsidentally, and put a dollop of sour cream on the fontanelle.

Ariel  
It's the kind of dive bar where you intend to have a couple with friends and you find yourself in the middle of a cornfield at three in the morning holding a foam Minecraft sword

The Chemist  
Casaba

Tight Five  
Fingers in your ears, class, it's time to test the nuclear siren

Billy  
Johnny got his gun

Ariel  
And still, everyone went to school today

Aelita  
As falls Seneca, so falls Seneca Falls

Billy  
It's been a ride, you think, looking back. nod. smile. Then you realize. It's five years later. and somewhere in there, you lost them. You remember thinking you had to do something, a nagging reminder that they were still out there. In the snow. Somewhere. And now, forever, they are not.

Buddy  
And you -- you catch glimpses of yourself, in glasswaxed windows, blood smeared handkerchiefs and veils

Aelita  
Time moves fast; time moves slow

Ariel  
*After Bathing At Baxter's*

Roland  
After the first refusal

The Chemist

Hairlines recede, arteries narrow

The Professor

We are always managing the fugitive noetic universe

Buddy

We wander through the first floor of A&S in 1984, and she is working at the perfume counter

Ariel

Photos of the past lure us, like sirens, to the Symplegades

Buddy

And so, we precess through the cryoablation of the fungiform papillae, in fourteen stations, as we celebrate the Sorrowful Mysteries

Aelita

We are here, and then we're not

The Chemist

And those in a Geertzian thin slice of culture grasp frantically to capture bits of the scene, tears in rain, how it felt to *be*. In the village, on a Fall evening, in 1984. Closing Eddies with the media ecology crew, passing a joint by the arch in Washington Square, listening to a thousand boom boxes bloom, steeping in the magic chemical biogenesis of a warm summer city. Bliss it was in those nights to be alive. but to be young was very heaven.

Ariel

You are in a maze of twisty passages

Tight Five

It is pitch dark. You are likely to be eaten.

Billy

Here, at the center, you find him. The oddly regal monster. He is surprised to see you. he does not expect visitors.

Emily

You have heard all the stories. He is a mutant. A horror. Killer of children; father of lies.

Aelita

But then, such stories come from Minos and his paid courtiers. Minos the duplicitous, Minos who, to assuage their night terrors, engaged you to design a most elaborate prison without walls whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere

Buddy

The center holds not just the minotaur, but the final mirror

Roland

The center, says Joseph Campbell, is the heart of the quest

Emily

The center, says the Tao Te Ching, is the emptiness that renders the rest meaningful.

Aelita

The virgin, the mother, and the crone walk into a bar and they say the center is that of which you cannot speak, and we know a thing or two about that, so shut your pie hole

The Professor  
And time stood still

Roland  
And you could, for just an instant, see everything, as if in a crystal, ever unfolding, ever ramifying, like the Borges aleph, and there you were, floating silently above -- and, for the first time -- seeing the shape of the labyrinth. Finally understanding that shape as a shape you had known all along, latent in the sky, deeply embedded in the fundamental nature of your being, all shifting and locking and electrochemical, and you hover, watching. And you begin to count backwards, slowly, from ten, and as you hover, you will begin to feel more relaxed, more weightless, more aware of the vibrations of everything around you. Ten. You are floating freely in space. Nine. So relaxed, Gently rocking in a warm ocean at sunset. Eight. Everything you see is peaceful and relaxed. So calm. So smooth. Seven. You begin to sense beyond you the mind that made the labyrinth. there is nothing negative here, only beauty. Six. So relaxed. Everything is beautiful. Five. The labyrinth is the necessary shape of the cosmos. It is as it is. Four. You relax into an even deeper level of radical acceptance. Things are as they are. There are many colors of guitar. Three. You are another level deeper, sinking into smooth clouds that support you like melted marshmallow. Ooey. Goey. Marshmallow. It's delicious. You are delicious. The smell is all childhood, and fun fairs, and good times. Two. You are so deep now. Just you, floating peacefully in the huge blue bowl of sky. One. You. Are. One. You. Are. One.

Emily  
In the word, in the  
world, you and i.  
we are one, we are one,  
in the word, in the  
world, you and i

Buddy  
You and i, and a cat named  
spy, we are one, we are one,  
silent watchers of the sky, in  
the world, silent watchers of  
the sky, long ago you and i

#### THE MINOTAUR'S SONG

You were young and you were strong  
When we were old and wrong  
You've been with us all along  
By our side  
You are fire you are ice  
You're the thing we sacrifice  
You're the spirit that has never died  
Bring us war, bring us peace  
Bring control, bring us release  
Bring the thunderbolts that chase away the night  
With the water break the stone  
Cuz we're children all along  
And we cannot face the forces that we fight

#### CHORUS

It's been a long time  
Waiting on the dark side of the moon  
A long lonely night  
In the corner of my room  
Until you come  
Oh, until you come

You were promised from the first  
But we know what promises are worth  
They're not worth the world they're spoken through  
You were latent in the sky  
At the back of every eye  
Everything that I have ever been was you  
From the corona of the sun  
To the sea where life's begun  
Now feel the boundless web of nature stretch through  
space  
Hidden behind  
Every thought form in my mind  
Has always been  
The outline of your face.

CHORUS

OUTTRO

Hmmmmmm....

(spoken, over)

Like panthers in a cage in Rilke's zoo

Tight Five

And suddenly, it becomes clear what you have to do, and you move smoothly and efficiently to an escalator that appears deep in your subconscious, a marvelous helical escalator that you are now riding up and up and up inside this gorgeous cenote in Belize, all dapply water and sparkling blueness as you rise in a slow glass bubble corkscrew turning, turning, turning, toward the bright surface, rising inexorably toward that moment of chaotic transition at the interface and then, (sound effect) ahhh, here you are. Please watch your step leaving the vehicles.

some contents may have shifted. baggage claim is to the left. Oh, good, someone sent a limo. Wait, what?

Aelita

Fuck them and their limo. Develop some goddamned class consciousness and partner with the minotaur. I'll bet you could ride the fucking minotaur out, eh? Betcha nobody's tried that move. Together, slay the king for hubris, and then burn down all the fucking palaces of all the ones who just couldn't bring themselves to walk away. It may be too late for Daedalus, but at least some of the real monsters will taste justice.

Ariel

Watch the closing doors please. next stop for the theater of your imagination is childhood wonder. How does it feel to re-inhabit that child mind? You now have the plasticity required to grok that the force of gravity, the speed of light, the cosmological term, the lifecycle of the proton, yea, the great globe itself and all which it inherit, once thought to be absolutes, in reality are epiphenomena, values that fall out because of the current way of being of this thing, this flux, this happening, this *hyle* we all poke at from within, which we don't know what the fucking fuck it is

The Professor

The hubris of a point surveying a line

Ariel

Where would you like your last ambulance ride to be?

Tight Five

Always ask for a rain check

The Chemist

The present moment in your spacetime comprises the only  
thing that actually exists

Aelita

Freedom is what it is

Roland

The grandkids skip by and gently place a few pebbles  
before being distracted by the Mister Softee theme calling  
from out on Woodhaven Boulevard

Billy

We count our losses

Roland

Sonnet 73, included herein by reference

The Professor

We recite it like ancient performative ritual to appease, to  
exhort, to attract, to warn and repel, older than masks, the  
firelight cave faces of comedy and tragedy

The Chemist

*Quaerendo invenietis*

Emily

Your nearest exit may be behind you