



# The Burning Sapiens

by Zoe Tuck



This work is dedicated with love to Brittany Billmeyer-Finn.

#### Acknowledgments:

To the rest of this year's Dusie Kollektiv for the beautiful chapbooks I have received and will receive.

Many thanks to Brittany Billmeyer-Finn for proofreading this text.

The idea of, "a world like this one, only a little different" comes from a Jewish mystical tradition by way of Ben Lerner's *10:04*.

The idea of an owl who oversees the library of the immortals is taken from the children's animated series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943), published in english as *The Little Prince*, was first translated by Katherine Woods.

I learned the epithet "shitbird" from a former professor, who used it to refer to the painter Paul Gauguin.

Willie Nelson recorded "On the Road Again" in 1979. It was released in 1980.

John Denver wrote "Leaving On a Jet Plane" in 1966 and recorded it under the title, "Babe, I Hate to Go".

*D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*, by Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, was first published by Doubleday in 1962.

The image of the mouse was taken from page 208 of volume 3 of 'The Works of Alfred Tennyson, etc' published by Strahan & Co. in 1872. It is accessible s part of The British Library's collection of mostly public domain scans on Flickr Commons.

The Muse faces away  
from Hermes and towards  
heart, towards the dead  
past whence moisture

arrives. The Mountain sits  
between the Muse in the  
clouds and the Forward  
-thinking Woman:

how do we get the  
land for the garden?

how do we build up  
the soil?

how do we honor what's  
already growing?

What number do we call before  
digging to avoid striking  
a municipal gas line  
and what, oh what

should we, the women  
who face two directions  
the twins, the sisters, the  
lovers, the friends,

grow within its  
fence?

*A note on the text:*

My real collaborator on this text is Rachel Pollack and Robert M. Place's The Burning Serpent Oracle, a contemporary deck of Lenormand fortune telling cards. While I have some experience with the tarot, this is my first serious encounter with a non-tarot cartomancy deck. This text was composed before I started learning how use this deck and as a way of getting to know it.

i. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry this read is rude,  
rustic—a clown in her  
clown car getting t-boned  
at a crosswalk by a feeling.

Like, who is the engine driver?  
Who's holding the flail  
that keeps me at the  
cross instead of the  
clover, driving me,  
as my Dad says, to an  
early grave.

Colloquially, we call him  
the Man, wearing the  
traditional garb of a  
Scottish shepherd  
lately become the  
uniform of the modern.

He carries a staff like  
Thutmose and keeps  
his van dyke trim  
even in 'Movember'

The message he carries  
is made of money which  
travels fleetly from  
its origin in the efforts  
of a woman whose dog  
roams the harvested fields,

looking for a mouse to  
sate her own hunger  
before the sun, looking  
for all the world like  
a gold doubloon, rises  
over the same fields,

crisping the same stubble  
and driving the mice  
underground.

underlying aspirations towards  
bourgie cottage and garden,  
these and more have  
died and given (I almost

said *in order to give*) life  
to the heart's future or  
the future which belongs  
to the heart.

And so we arrive at The  
Mountain, which I interpret  
as a literal or spiritual  
Denver.

Was it John Denver  
who sang, "on the road  
again? I just can't wit  
to get on the road again?"

No—that's Willie, but  
"the life I love, making  
music with my friends,"  
I might leave that in

a jet plane, in order  
to refine my song.  
I know that I am leaving  
because I am facing

towards, rather than away  
from The Mountain  
which sits, fittingly enough,  
in the house of the Clouds,

a chilly spot—the future  
of precipitation we might  
say—the realm of the  
Muse from which we

torrent ideas.

For the woman who looks  
left, Hermes  
the Messenger is the future  
of the Fox, who said to

the Little Prince, "Remember  
you become forever responsible  
for what you have tamed."  
He is in the house

of The House on the Hill.  
He augurs a visit, the visitor  
a slow red trickle from  
the point of the needle

or the red welts of the  
beleaguered follicles of the  
beard. He's criming  
for good and the object of

his con is the trim house  
of a happy body.  
The beginning of the future  
belongs to the hear from

which a rose blossoms,  
supported by a hand,  
whose palm and fingers  
are the trunk and

branches of The Dead  
Tree, in whose house the  
heart abides.  
The woman who faces

backwards (not Left—  
what was I thinking?),  
the indecision of the  
forking path, the shameless

guile of the fox, the  
dead letter, the loss under  
the cross, Hermes-who-  
should-know-better, the

Bend a cross and hitch  
a chain to it and its  
called an anchor.

As if to say,  
we're staying put for  
a while.

As if to say,  
we have commerce here,  
where we have been  
instructed to come by  
the Man's brother who  
gives orders from the tower  
but reluctantly because  
his passion is the garden:  
lush, orderly, productive,  
fenced in—  
spatially from the sides  
and symbolically with respect  
too its being property.

But no fence can keep  
out the moon, which I  
was expecting to be a  
comfort but which looks  
for all the world like  
another kind of money,

the kind which we  
imagine to sit enslimmed  
in the bellies of the toads  
or tortoises whose job  
it is to support  
the houses from their  
position in the crawlspace.

Snakes too—because of  
the crawling, see?  
And a snake like a  
finger can wriggle into  
a ring—another kind  
of little house that kids  
can crash in.

Having imaginal fingers  
larger than their actual ones,  
I suppose mice could be  
under the house just  
as well—this is the  
plot of many books, the  
city mouse and country

mouse—otherwise known  
as the rustic—but they  
are not under the house  
but in the library, where  
someone has been snacking

elsewise the kitchen, where  
someone has been reading.  
They are very much a they  
and they are very much  
leaning their heads—ear  
down—to the open book  
in the hope that it will

speak to them as it did  
to the cat and if it  
at length speaks, will it  
tell the mousey secret  
of Isis—  
not so much of how  
Osiris was a coterie

of mice acting as one  
and whose dismemberment  
was more of a  
dismouserment but of  
how they could achieve  
such a thing,

so as to woo the  
human woman who  
held their hearts like  
a rind of cheese or  
a tome or the pinking  
shears of the Man's  
brother.

a little different

Many Sundays the priest would  
go on and on about Jesus,  
the rock in front of his  
tomb, his absence like the

butterfly from its cocoon.  
His alleged or allegorical  
return is referred to as  
the Good News and news

is at the center of this  
spread, an envelope in the  
beak of a pigeon, The  
Letter in the house of The

Owl & The Mouse. A letter  
from the present speaks  
of a thieving mouse who  
has stolen lines of poetry

only to be swooped up  
by the owl who oversees  
the Library of the Immortals.  
At the threshold of the

future glides Hermes the  
Messenger, the charming  
little shitbird from D'Aulaire's  
Book of Greek Myths

all grown up.

Presently Left, or the  
Former Fox, arrives at the  
rusted cross, coincidentally  
cattywampus to the

crossroads of The Path.  
It stands in the house  
of the Flaming Tree.  
Left thought of her old

parish church named for  
Monica of Hippo, patron  
of difficult marriages,  
disappointing children,,

survivors of adultery,  
unfaithfulness, and verbal  
abuse, and conversion of  
relatives. Left

looked at the stones around  
the base of the cross  
and thought of the  
stones her mother left

at her brother's grave.  
Kneeling or standing  
there, eyes closed  
did she see a flaming

tree, fruiting left &  
flowering right? It  
grows in a kind of  
nonplace. A place between

places and a time between  
times where the ancestors  
go, where we imagine  
knowledge and wisdom to

accrue; a bucolic place,  
sometimes a little boring,  
honestly, possibly on the  
border with Idaho in a

world like this one, just

If the book refuses to  
speak, the mice will  
hoist anchor and pursue  
the jumping fish who  
issues wishes to their  
captor,

and if that fish  
don't ish  
the mice will go to  
the serpent who writhes,

burning without being  
consumed at the mouth  
of the well,

who will give them  
the physical key  
which leads to the  
emotional key which  
I am told can eventually  
lead to the spiritual  
key, but I am only

a first level adept so  
I only know this from  
gossip and hearsay.

It leads to a bear,  
crankily rising 'neath  
the still bitter withes  
of spring.

They can tell the bear  
of their unrequited love  
but the bear doesn't care.

2. The woman who looks  
left is not the same  
woman as the woman  
who looks right.

For one thing, the woman  
who looks left, let's call  
her Left for short, is in  
the house of the cat-o'-  
three-tails—a place of

old quarrels and recriminations,  
which can always find new  
kindling for those willing  
to stoke them. Why would  
she return to that kind  
of life?

Well, there's no pain  
like an old pain.

The woman who faces right,  
or Right, as she is rightly  
called, abides in the garden  
but what is the garden

she sees in her mind's eye?  
Is it Mosswood Park or  
the yard of a private residence  
in Montclair? Filled with

water and soil which have  
been transformed on account  
of sun and moonlight into  
fruit and flowers, it is a

place of courtship—whether  
of self with soul or of lover  
with beloved.

When you're in pain,  
you have to make a choice.  
And it just so happened  
that the path—two roads

diverging at a herm  
was in the house of the  
voyage, so off Left went  
—the picture of self-deceit

in a new city. A fox  
in the house of the  
burning serpent. A thin  
wan self-pitying fox turning

corner after corner in a  
pathless meander whose  
object was satisfaction, which  
was only to be had by

shedding the skin,  
getting rid of it, I mean  
Burning It Off.