

2004 was a watershed year for me. Most of my six published novels are either set in, or double back on, that year. In *Blackchurch Furnace* (2018) I refer to it as “the dawn of the apocalypse.” 2004 was the year that my first two-act play *Chasing the Wolf* premiered, my first novel *A Prayer for Dawn* was published, the year that I got married. It was also the year that two of my heroes, Hunter S. Thompson and Dimebag Darrell were killed by bullets (the former self-inflicted, the latter from a psychotic fan on stage). It was the year that the incompetent war criminal, the very nadir of American electoral politics at the time, George Dubya Bush was oiled up and squirted back into the White House (it was a simpler age).

It was the year that my best friend died.

To call 2004 *tumultuous* would be an understatement, at the very least. To be sure, all these years later, I’m still processing it. All of it. And as I page through *In the Stomach*, the Semantikon review from 2003-2004, those tumultuous memories awaken in my mind like a small tornado. I’m reading pieces that I haven’t read in well over a decade, created by writers I admire very much, but haven’t considered in far too long: Bess Rose Miller, Krista Franklin, the late and much-beloved Aralee Strange, so many others. I feel like I’m looking through a photo album, but it’s all in words.

It took quite a while to make my peace with calling myself a writer of any sort. I always figured I’d be a professional musician, exclusively. I spent the 1990s and into the 21st century blowing out my eardrums on stage (when I wasn’t dodging billy-clubs in the street), and always saw that as my true path. But around the turn of the new millennium I started to get very interested in writing, and spoken word performance. Admittedly, I didn’t know much of anything about spoken word at the time. I’d never even seen a spoken word show the first time I got on-stage to perform my writing. But I thought that maybe, just possibly, the same energy and ferocity that we were able to bring to the stage playing in metal bands could be transferred to solo spoken word as well. What the Beat writers had done with jazz, and the slam poets had done with hip hop, maybe could be done with metal and punk too. Maybe? Why not? It turned out that this idea was not unique to me, as I soon found myself sharing the stage with other like-minded word-slingers like Nick Barrows, Luke Radkey, Michael Crossley, Patrick Sebastian, and Mark Flanigan, who shared my enthusiasm for using poetry and narrative to create an unholy ruckus. And, indeed, ruckus seemed to be forever on the dance card.

I have to admit that I was not thinking “long term” back then. I loved the immediacy of the spoken word stage, and as my first sputtering forays into publishing had lead to chaos and upheaval (ask Flanigan about that sometime), it seemed that the ephemeral rush of the stage, and the anything-goes approach we took to performance during that time, would be how my art lived. I could never be *exclusively* a playwright after all, or a poet, a performance writer, a composer/musician, or actor, or a short story writer, or novelist. Not exclusively. I can’t be a “post-modernist,” a “satirist,” an “absurdist,” or a “surrealist” . . . unless I can be *all of them*. I suppose I could have at least tried to buckle down and chose any one of these disciplines as my focus, but nah. A multi-disciplinary approach to the creative arts, and an interdisciplinary approach to scholarship have suited me the best. If I were going to publish my work, it would have to be with a publisher who shared that vision. Thankfully, I’ve been able to find a small handful of publishers over the years that do. Lance Oditt was the first.

The bottom-line is, I lacked the discipline for anything more focused (I still do). In my novels, my characters often break into rhyming jags and stylized thematic riffs, very much as I

do in my solo spoken word performances. When I started writing *A Prayer for Dawn* my intention was to simply attempt to deal, satirically, with the notion of art and culture in a conservative climate, which morphed suddenly into the reality of a *frightened, angry, shell-shocked*, conservative climate (the events of September 11th 2001 happened when I was about two months into writing). What purpose, I wondered, does art serve, particularly in times of war? Surely we know that art can heal, but what about art that is not *meant* to heal? What responsibility does the artist have to his/her society? Is there a limit to what a society should tolerate from its artists, and what is that limit? These are some of the issues I attempted to address in this book, all with a bent toward the satirical, the absurd, and at times, the surreal. (Present day America feels very surreal to me. It did in the early 2000s as well.) I also attempted a rather risky experiment in the writing of the piece, and that was writing the fiction in “real time,” *as real events occur*. Essentially, that means that although I had a basic concept of the work and all of my characters set, their reality, and the environment of the story, was constantly in flux. It is terrifying writing in such immediacy, but it is exhilarating as well. I wrote straight through with no “filter” or second thoughts for six months, keeping the “writing” going 24/7, which meant that I wrote significant chunks of the book in front of live audiences. Some of those very pieces were first published in Semantikon (but perhaps I’m getting ahead of myself).

Two writers that I most admire are William Burroughs and Kurt Vonnegut. The aspect of both of their writing that most appeals to me is their appreciation for *relativity*. The idea at work here is that nothing is intrinsically “good or evil,” “sacred or profane,” “moral or immoral,” except that with which we have collectively (and perhaps arbitrarily) decided is such. And to further that idea; *imagination has no morality*. An artist may very well be an extremely scrupulous and ethical individual, and I should hope that she is, but her imagination, if said artist is anything of an artist at all, has no morals. A moral imagination is a stifled imagination. The common thread throughout all of my work my fiction – my music, my poetry, my spoken word, and was central to my doctoral dissertation – is the concept of “prison.” Physical prisons, economic prisons, social, spiritual, sexual, emotional, etc. Like Jean Genet, some of my characters appear in actual, state operated prisons. But all of the characters are in *prison* in one form or another. And each character is given pretty much “equal time.” In that regard, I have borrowed elements of the short story, and playwriting as well, to further my narrative. Each character has a personal story to tell. Each character deals with his or her own individual prison. Even *A Prayer for Dawn*’s third-person omniscient narrator finds herself in a prison of sorts. The purpose of all art, perhaps, is for the artist to free herself from walls, bit by bit, stone by stone.

I can say all of that now, but like I said before; back then I wasn’t thinking long-term. Thankfully, Lance was. Sometime around 2002 or 2003 Lance convened a group of us at some bar somewhere (memories are foggy and awash in whiskey). He had a big idea he called “Semantikon,” a collective-run arts journal published by his Three Fools Press that would feature an entire gamut of multi-disciplinary artists. This would be a journal without confines, without boundaries or limitations, without boxes, curated by the artists themselves, misfits and talented weirdoes all.

“So wait,” I asked, “we can curate issues ourselves?”

“I WANT you to curate them,” Lance said.

“And we can feature artists that we want to?”

“That’s the idea.”

“Damn. Aiight!”

2004 was a long time ago, or at least it feels that way. But as I look through the Semantikon archives I can't help but notice how *vital* all of this material still seems to be. No one's work (except, perhaps, some of mine) feels particularly dated. Did I have any idea back then that we would ever be preparing to have this stuff archived? Saved for posterity to be enjoyed by future generations? Please. I couldn't have even fathomed it. *But I'll bet that Lance did.* As I said above, Lance always seemed to be thinking long-term. And for that, and for giving me the opportunity to first see my work in print, I shall always be grateful. This work is a time capsule, a document, a journal, but it still lives, it still breathes. It still hits me in the heart, and in the stomach.

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