

# Unreliable Author

Paul Calhoun

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“It seems very pretty,” she said when she had finished it, “but it's rather hard to understand!” (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) “Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't exactly know what they are!”

- Alice, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1872)

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Aster Toil was a tutor, a thinker, a public servant, and a man worthy of an Oxford comma. Each evening he chose a new vinyl from his extensive collection. He would briefly peruse its cardboard cover before replacing it on the shelf and playing its digitized contents from his computer as he fixed a breakfast of yellow eggs and ham. His music collection was extensive and his taste was quite traditional.

This particular evening Queen's “We Will Rock You” was pleasantly re-traversing familiar cognitive paths in Aster's medial prefrontal cortex. Moments into Brian May's solo, an entirely unnatural thing occurred.

A white squirrel appeared outside Aster's window.

A squirrel, in the proper environment, is not generally regarded as out of the ordinary. Nor is a *white* squirrel so far-fetched a thing as to require, upon discovery, immediate classification as unnatural. It goes without being said, and yet it doesn't mind being written or read, that this squirrel, but for its odd characteristics (of which a few have been intentionally withheld to induce suspense), was an entirely normal squirrel. This could be said of nearly anything, which is probably why it goes without being said.

Aster couldn't quite put his finger on it (a pane of glass was in the way, you see). There was a certain smugness projected by the beast. He conjured a whimsical backstory involving old money and a sheltered prep school in the mountains to explain what he perceived as unwavering pompousness. It was only after nearly finishing this surreal narrative that Aster realized how truly strange it had always been.

Aster's rambling thoughts were again interrupted, this time by the peculiar gaze of the squirrel. Its tiny pink eyes quivered slightly as they stared into Aster's. He stared back.

Time passed at precisely the same rate as always, mostly because the passage of time with respect to time is a gloriously tautological bit of nonsense. Time for Aster, however, seemed to slow to a crawl.

*A crawl is an odd thing to slow to.* Said the squirrel.

“What?” asked Aster.

*Why compare a rate to a quadripedal gait?*

“I suppose it's because people tend to crawl slowly compared to walking and run- Am I talking to a squirrel?”

*Yes. Now I crawl quicker than I walk. Could I then say I "Slowed to a walk"?*

"You're more efficient as a quadruped, so I suppose your bipedal motion is necessarily slower" said Aster confidently.

Time slowed to a walk.

*There's still something missing.*

Time slowed to a squirrel walk.

*Much better.*

"Why?"

*Exactly. Aster, I know this may be hard for you to accept, but I am a multi-dimensional being sent here from another reality to warn the human race of an unavoidable doom that approaches.*

"How many dimensions?" Aster interjected.

*That wasn't an interjection, I had finished speaking.*

"Fine. How many dimensions?" stated Aster.

*That was a question, not a st- nevermind. If you must know: Two. I'm a two dimensional being.*

"How do you eat without cutting yourself in half?"

*Aren't you the least bit interested in unavoidable doom?*

"Not if it's unavoidable."

*Hordes of my multi-dimensional brethren are, as we speak, preparing to invade Earth. Your race will be crushed into extinction; your history forgotten!*

"I never much was a fan of history. Far too flimsy on the details, and the big-picture stuff always smelt strongly of whichever era it was compiled in. The myths I suppose I'll miss; the facts I never really had in the first place."

*You're mad.*

"Well I *am* having a conversation with a squirrel."

A breeze appeared.

*No, don't!*

The two dimensional being was swept into the air. He was rapidly-

*She!*

She was rapidly carried off by the wind. Aster was suddenly reminded of kites he had built and played with as a-

"Wait. Before you go off on another tangent... was that entirely necessary?" Asked Aster to no one in particular before quietly returning to his previous activity.

"I was listening to music!" shouted Aster silently. "Ugh. You're more than just moronic, you're fired! I don't want a narrator anymore..."

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Well this is delightful. Where am I? What is this place?

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You can come back now. I was just kidding. Please?

...

Oh dear. What is this? Hello!? Am I dead or something? Is anyone there?"

"No. I'm *here*. Who are you?" asked Kermit.

"I'm Aster. I fired my narrator and ended up here." responded the strange newcomer.

"That's fine, we can share mine." responded Kermit graciously.

"Yours seems rather biased." replied Aster most ungraciously.

"Beggars can't be choosers." said the wise Kermit. "Now come with me if you want to live."

Aster inexplicably giggled at Kermit's serious request.

"Oh it's explicable. You just need the context." claimed Aster quite frivolously.

"Enlighten me." requested the wise Kermit.

"Well, there's a man from where I come from who became famous for repeatedly raising large, heavy objects."

"Was he a laborer of some kind?" asked Kermit.

"Not exactly. He would just raise things and put them back down in precisely the same location. The activity itself is rather nonsensical without the proper context, but-

Kermit wisely cut Aster off. "You just said it would make sense when put into context. How can this be if the context does not make sense?"

Aster stood in awe; stunned by Kermit's insight. The question struck him at his very core. He would never recover.

"Oh shut it! I'm not stunned. Kermit, I don't think your narrator thinks much of me."

"Don't take it personally. He does this to everyone." said Kermit during a momentary lapse in judgment. "Do you plan on answering the question?"

"Yes, I'm just wondering how best to do so. I think you may have to simply accept the fact that some people can become famous for lifting things."

"Fine. How does this pertain to the explicability of your giggle?" asked Kermit.

"Right. Yes. Well, after achieving fame as a lifter he was chosen to portray fictional characters in movies. A movie, if you're wondering, is a means of storytelling whereby characters and environments are represented by a synchronized combination of ordered images and periodic variations in air pressure."

"That's nice. Now your lifter fellow, did he obtain similar success with this second pursuit?"

"Arguably. Movies featuring him often became famous. My point is simply that he portrayed a man - or, rather, he portrayed a robot that sometimes portrayed a man - and, if I'm not mistaken, this character said the phrase 'Come with me if you want to live' at least once. That particular sequence of words became quite famous. You stated them in precisely the same order not two minutes ago. That was what I had found so funny, although now I'm not entirely sure as to why." babbled Aster quite incoherently. "That was quite coherent! You asked why I had giggled and I told you!"

Kermit was perplexed.

"Actually I understand his explanation entirely." lied Kermit.

"I am not lying! I've had about enough of your crap! You're fired!"

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"Oh dear."

"You... You didn't." "How do we keep track of who is who?" "I don't know." "Who am I?" "This is bad." "Really? I never" "would" "have" "gu" "es" "s" "e" "d" !

“Hold on! Was that exclamation point outside the parenthesis?! Kermit, I think you may have inadvertently started a narrative. Are you there?” asked Aster.

Aster realized at once what had happened. Kermit had somehow assumed the role of narrator. Aster also realized that this meant he could probably return home, but he had hardly a clue as to how.

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

Then, suddenly, as if from nowhere at all, Aster realized what he would have to do to get home.

“Nope. Nothing. Try harder.”

Aster realized he would have to thrice collide his spurs and profess the uniqueness of his residence.

“Why be so verbose when it clearly obscures your message?”

\*cough\* *Wizard of Oz* \*cough\*

“Oh. Well why didn’t you say so?” mused Aster as he clicked his heels together and shouted: “There’s no place like home!”

Aster awoke as Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody” was winding down. He distinctly remembered toggling the ‘Repeat album’ button which, he realized, would almost entirely prevent him from using his knowledge of the position of the current track in his extensive music collection to determine how much time had passed since his odd excursion began. He glanced at the clock on the wall, remembered it hadn’t worked in ages, then made his way to the computer.

It was noon according to the desktop clock. He opened his lightning fast AOL browser to check the date. Not even a full day had gone by.

“How very strange.” Aster mused aloud before a news blurb on the stylish AOL homepage drew his attention:

## Thousands of Vaguely Animal-Shaped Kites Spotted Soaring Into Horizon, P.E.T.A. Primary Suspect

“Some invasion.” muttered Aster.

THE END