

This story collection deals with the magical relationships between various realms of human consciousness, from birth to death and beyond, then back again. The reader might also find romantic flirtations with compassion, gratitude, eternal love, and moral fortitude; and there is humble appreciation for nature and all its wonderful mysteries.

Wandering Between Then and Now

By Terry Rogers

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WANDERING

Between Then and Now

A Story Collection



TERRY ROGERS

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AND NOW

A STORY COLLECTION

TERRY ROGERS

Menda City Press

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1. DIG

YOU'RE trapped in the dirt, and the sun is just a memory from another lifetime, it seems. You haven't felt the warmth of its rays for... you actually have no idea how long you've been digging, how long you've been stuck in this... this hole, or wherever it is that you are stuck. Panic has set in and then dissipated, set in and then dissipated, so many times that your nerves do not know which mode is the norm. There *is* no norm, other than darkness.

The only "light" you occasionally see is internal, from the brief psychic projections of images which seem to occur in random and insentient singularities; but even this does not happen often enough.

You lie sometimes on your belly, but mostly on your side, scooping handfuls of dirt, gravel, small roots, and worms from directly in front of your face and pushing it all just low enough to eventually slither over it, or through it. The tiny pocket of dank air between your forearms is all that you own. Taking anything more than half a breath at a time is a challenge, which provokes constant estimations of how much time is left before suffocation occurs. There can't be more than a few minutes of oxygen here, you surmise. But you've been surmising this same conclusion for as long as you can remember, and still you are here. Still you are breathing.

No matter where you are, you reason, and how deep you are buried—and you *do* realize you are buried, this much seems obvious—you should have surfaced by now. You wonder if up is actually up. You wonder if the given laws of nature still apply

where you are. The weight of your torso rests on your belly, with the heaviest force of gravity pushing downward toward your legs. This assures you, with common logic and elementary physical science, that you are in fact digging upward at a strong *incline* and thus should eventually reach the surface. You know this. You know this truth just as surely as one would know that morning follows night; and yet the laws of gravity seem to remain as unhelpful as the sun.

It is impossible to fully regain failing composure with only half-breaths. Your three most loyal companions are Frustration, Aggravation, and Fear.

Internal vision: A grouping of dark-skinned people in tattered clothing gather in a loose circle among sagebrushes on a sparse lunar landscape. Some cry, some point and bark at the sky in a lunatic sort of way, others just squat pathetically in the dirt on their haunches and remain silent. You hear the thump-thump-thumping of helicopter rotors somewhere nearby, but only as an oblique audio attachment to this clip.

Currently—in this hole or cave or tunnel—the space around you is restricted so that your elbows must remain folded at an acute angle with your knuckles always near your head, which proves functional for digging but is, of course, nearly impossible to sustain without excruciating cramps in the muscles and ligaments. Your wrists and forearms and deltoids scream for mercy. Your fingers are numb and always have been, as far as you can remember. As you dig, you are cognizant of a distinct scraping sound, similar to that of—actually, there is no sound similar to that of raw bone scraping on hard-packed earth.

The warmth of the blood which oozes constantly from your fingertips and seeps into the dirt forming wet clods around your collar bone is a vaguely comforting reminder of your vitality, or so it would seem. Ironically, you're not completely sure at this point if you actually are still alive, or ever were alive; or, for that matter, what "life" really is.

Has this *always* been your life? Were you born here, in the dark, deep within the earth? Were the memories that periodically flash into your brain in the semblance of some other life

just products of a desperate imagination? You have even wondered, just a moment ago, if you perhaps have been reincarnated as an insect, or some other lowly vermin.

You see mental images of a large house with windows everywhere, and glaring sunlight. You remember a carpeted staircase, with wooden banisters and railings, the stairs hugging the perimeter of a cavernous foyer with gold-leafed trim. You have no recollection of where that staircase led, but you distinctly feel that it was yours.

A tiny pebble lodges beneath your eyelid and painfully gouges the eyeball, which only reminds you of that organ's relative uselessness now.

You fantasize about the smell of expansive lawns and lush gardens consisting of roses and fuchsias and irises and rhododendrons, but are not positive of the existence of any of the above outside your own fantasy. You seem to know what joy is, but you let the apparent memory pass with minimal consideration, for in your current predicament this emotion's triviality is somewhat of an annoyance. You knew love at least once. There was severe grief and sadness involved, but you are not certain if the pain was dealt or received; the difference still seems insignificant to you, and maybe always will.

A tiny critter of some sort crawls onto your forehead and travels down the bridge of your nose. You blow at it through the side of your mouth and wiggle your face against your forearms, and the critter scampers into the tangled nest of your hair. It would be wise to eat the insect—you know this—but strangely you feel no hunger whatsoever. While continuing to pull dirt, you press the back of your head onto the damp earth until you hear the crunch of the insect's body and feel its innards mashed against your scalp.

There is a feeling that in the "recent" past you were severely disrespected in a harsh manner. You feel the overwhelming need to vindicate your honor, to chastise the enemy, to debate any false accusations—but at this moment you don't remember any specific enemies or friends; it's unclear whether you ever had either.

Perturbed, you focus on slowing your breathing as you turn the dig sharply upward again, or in the direction you *think* is up.

Your tongue is a solid mass of dead flesh entombed in the dryness of your soil-encrusted mouth. You attempt to spit, to no avail.

There was an argument—you now recall it vaguely, first as an observer and then as a participant. With another brief flash of imagery, you glimpse the face of the man you are arguing with. You know him, or knew him once, but you're having difficulty placing his identity. He's seated next to you on black leather upholstery in the rear of a large vehicle. It is dark outside the vehicle, or the windows are very darkly tinted. The man is visibly angry or frustrated, perhaps at you, but this is difficult to ascertain now. In this reflection, you cannot clearly decipher his words. His language seems not foreign but mixed, garbled. It is as if his mouth is full of rocks and dirt, like yours is now; or perhaps the audio and video playbacks of your memory are not fully synchronized. He is accentuating the obvious anger of his tone with a frequent pounding motion of one fisted hand into the palm of the other.

You hear an odd little giggle. You hear a click. You see a flash. You hear a gunshot.

Your bloody fingers stop digging and you try to focus on this memory. But now there is nothing more to see. That is where the playback ends; your visions will go no further. This much is consistent and certain.

The inconsistencies and uncertainties lie in how much you remember from the vague gaps, the interims between cyclical constants—the holes, if you will—which grow minutely smaller each and every time you repeat your perpetual act of penance.

Possibly, at some point in this repeating loop, you will recall that your given name is Rey Dephyra. You may ascertain that you were once a very affluent businessman, though your current predicament will never again allow you to persuasively convince yourself of any positive balance in your personal accomplishments. The greatest uncertainty lies in whether you will remember that your business made a considerable fortune guiding

illegal immigrants across the border. This may forever remain blurred. You may or may not recall your own personal disdain for the immigrants, whom you considered a lowly caste of peasants—*ignorant little mongrels*, you often called them—and the blatant disrespect you held for their customs and beliefs, which you considered primitive.

You may very well remember negotiating deals with law enforcement and other government officials, but most likely will never be able to tie together the complex ring of political relations you nurtured, harvested, and cherished for so many years. You'll probably never recall that there was once great pride in your bragging that of the *thousands* of immigrants your guides—your “coyotes”—smuggled across, very few individual travelers ever made it beyond the reach of awaiting border agents. Those few individuals each held enough savings to continue their journey northward.

Your business plan was simple: Solicit would-be immigrants; receive payment from immigrants; bring immigrants illegally across the border; ensure that smuggled immigrants are “caught” by border agents; receive payment from government officials for this positive publicity; and repeat. You'll probably never feel one ounce of guilt for the inhumanity of your corruption and hypocrisy.

Other items you may or may not remember: There was a very intimidating figure, the angry man in the large tinted vehicle, whose young relative was killed by a border agent while trying to cross with your corrupt coyotes. The man knew that you were the one to blame for his personal tragedy. Surprisingly, he was willing to give you another chance, a generous opportunity to amend the situation by simply ceasing your multi-faceted, insincere, business practices. You laughed in his face.

At the time, sitting in the back of that man's limousine, your brazen response of laughter surprised even you. Ridicule is certainly not an action one might recommend with this particular businessman. You knew his power; you knew his organization's reputation for bloody ruthlessness. It may well have actually been

more of a nervous giggle you exuded, a reflexive discharge of bundled energy; but that minor detail was irrelevant to this particular circumstance. The laughter you heard in that backseat, the odd little giggle that you will in fact hear again and again for all of eternity, sounded nothing like your own. Unfortunately, it was.

Then the click of the hammer. Then the flash from the muzzle. Then the shot.

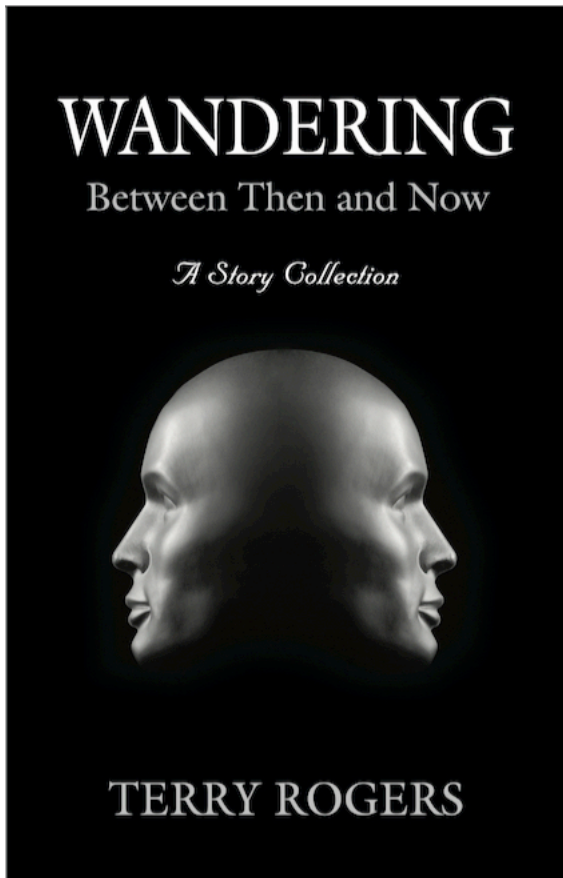
Whether or not you will ever remember the totality of that life is any mortal's guess. Right now all you remember is dirt. Dirt, dirt, and more dirt. It's apparently the single most consistent and certain thing to be found in your eternal existence.

And soon, your bloody fingertips will break through to an open space. Adrenaline will surge through your vessels as you dig frantically in hopes of finally reaching the surface. You will believe that you can already taste fresh air. You will feel exhilaration.

But after countless horrible hours of digging you will find that you are now encapsulated in some sort of narrow wooden box, in complete darkness, with no recollection of how or when you got there. You will not be able to push the box open. You will search desperately for an escape route. There will be screws on the panel nearest your head, which you will loosen with great effort from ripped fingernails. The opening is just barely large enough for your body to squeeze through. And the dig will begin...

There was a beetle, or some other sort of small critter, that ran across the bridge of your nose and ended up mashed into your hair—you remember this with clarity, only because it happened just a moment ago. Beyond that, everything seems hazy.

And the sun is just a memory from another lifetime, it seems. There is no light where you are now. The only light you occasionally see is internal, but even this does not happen often enough.



This story collection deals with the magical relationships between various realms of human consciousness, from birth to death and beyond, then back again. The reader might also find romantic flirtations with compassion, gratitude, eternal love, and moral fortitude; and there is humble appreciation for nature and all its wonderful mysteries.

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