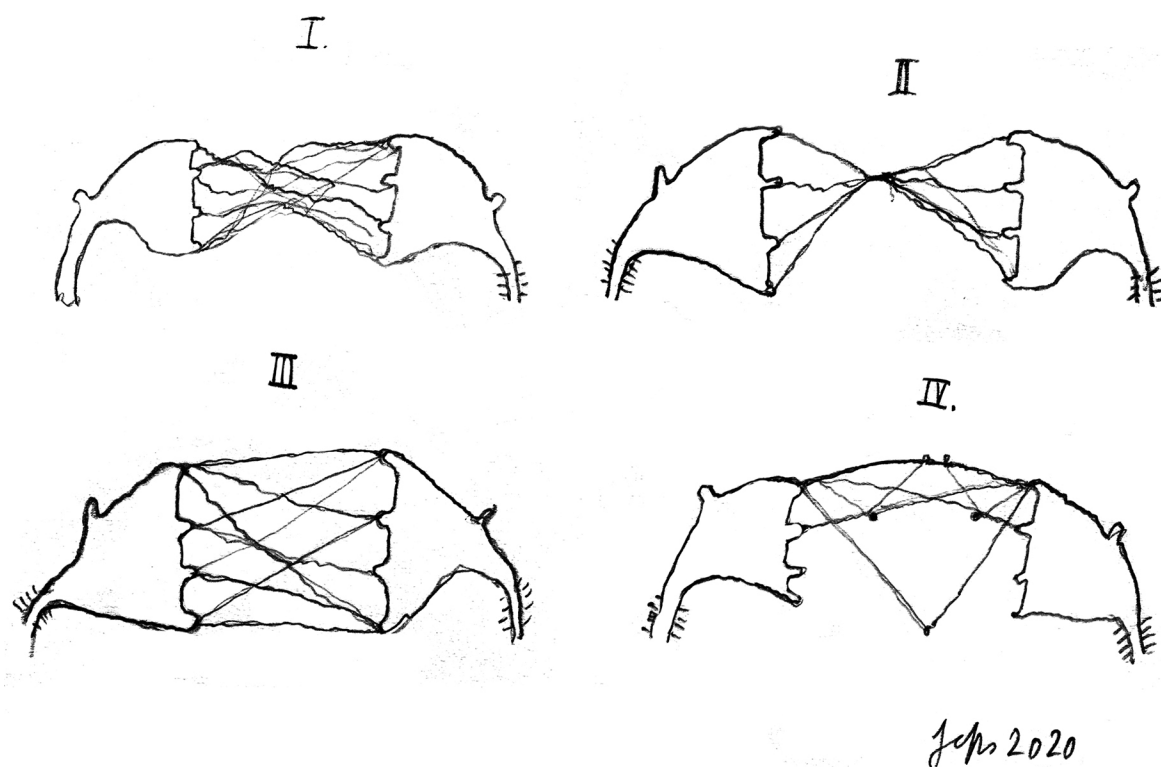


STICKY WICKET

Corona XIX – no damn cat, no damn cradle

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Hey there! I hope it is as beautiful where you are as it is where I am, which is really beautiful indeed (I seem to be getting a lot of these nice days – I’m not complaining). If you are only just now joining us, we’ve been discussing this Terrible Pandemic (or TP, not to be confused with the TP that never seems to be on the shelf in the market), over the past eighteen weeks. Yes, I’ve been counting, which is why this is number nineteen. So, let’s talk about the end of the world. Really, we’ll both feel better. (I am a very bad scientist. I will do anything to make a human being feel better, even if it’s unscientific. No scientist worthy of the name could say such a thing.)

That last bit, the parenthetical one, is not me talking. It is a quote from Kurt Vonnegut, in his wonderful book ‘Cat’s Cradle’. I’m actually a pretty okay scientist, I think (at least, I hope so). But I’m currently reading ‘Cat’s Cradle’, and I needed a segue. Actually, I’m re-reading it, but the last time was almost half a century ago, and I remember loving it then, too, although probably for different reasons. It’s a book about the end of the world.

The book is narrated by John, an author who wants to be called Jonah (although nobody does), who is writing a book called ‘The Day the World Ended,’ about the day Hiroshima was bombed in the Second World War. But, of course, the world *does* end in the book, since it is Vonnegut, and by ice, not fire. (As Robert Frost tells us,

“I think that for destruction, ice, is also great, and would suffice.”) Eventually, John winds up in San Lorenzo, an island nation that God, in his wisdom, created to have absolutely nothing of value, and that therefore had been passed among nations without contest, then a large corporation, and finally, bloodlessly freed to be led by an autocratic dictator. On the island, nearly everyone practices the religion of Bokononism, created by Lionel Boyd Johnson (who had washed ashore decades before and took the name Bokonon). Bokononism is composed entirely of lies, or *foma* (“harmless untruths”) and its practice is punishable by horrible death on “the hook,” an idea Bokonon came up with himself, to give his religion “zest.” As Vonnegut tells us in the opening line, “Nothing in this book is true.” Which, of course, is a lie.

I’m not going to spoil the book for you, you should go read it yourself (because you probably need fun things to do, right?). But there are a couple of things in it that will not give much away, and that bear talking about during the TP. Ready? Or did you go off to find a copy of ‘Cat’s Cradle’?

First there are the Bokononist concepts of *karass* and *granfalloon*. Your *karass* is a group of people in your life who are, apparently by chance (and of course, nothing is by chance in this philosophy), playing a critical role in shaping, influencing, and guiding the trajectory of your life. (Actually, *karass* is defined as “a

team of people who do God's will without knowing that they are doing so," but in my experience, it amounts to the same thing. Which, of course, is a lie.) My own *karass* includes two artists, a naturalist, a magician, a doctor, and a biochemist. In contrast, a *granfalloon* is a false grouping of people around a common element. For example, several famous scientists all grew up in one small section of Brooklyn around the same time (this is true), but their association is a *granfalloon*.

Much of what we are living through, the TP, feels surreal, and many of us are taking time during our isolation to think about our lives and associations. Perhaps you are doing this, too. In addition to all of the committees, seminars, lab and faculty meetings, I am also engaged in meetings of other kinds, with people around the globe. One of these is with a group of remarkable people with whom I had the privilege to go to university. While I like them very much and enjoy our meetings, we are a *granfalloon*. But another frequent meeting is with my friends Red Fox, Quokka, and Dolphin, and they feel more like a *karass*. Busy, busy, busy. ("Busy, busy, busy, is what we Bokononists whisper whenever we think of how complicated and unpredictable the machinery of life really is.") Is this important? Probably not, but it is perhaps a perspective. We are isolated and reaching out to others in ways that would not have been possible only a few years ago, and some of this feels rich and rewarding, and some of it is empty and shallow. (Of course, core operation oversight committee meetings are never shallow.)

But this isn't what I wanted to talk about. ("Really, Mole? You got side-tracked?" Your sarcasm is noted.) The title of the book comes from a string game that is played by almost every society, with independent origins in Africa, Eastern Asia, the Pacific Islands, Australia, the Americas, and the Arctic. The name is obscure, but was first mentioned by Abraham Tucker in 1768, in his three-volume opus, 'The Light of Nature Pursued'. No, I haven't read it, and have no idea why he would have discussed a game with string. But it does seem remarkable that this process of twisting strands of twine into shapes appears to be part of what it means to be human. Busy, busy, busy.

One of the characters in Vonnegut's book (Newt, the son of the "father of the atomic bomb") suggests that this little game is one source of all that is wrong with the world. Adults show children how to go through the series of transformations, resulting in the final

pattern of Xs, and ask them to "See the cat? See the cradle?" "No wonder kids grow up crazy," says Newt.

And I suggest that we are looking at several cat's cradles right now. Russia just announced approval of a vaccine for SARS-CoV2, based on a Phase II trial, admitting that careful efficacy testing will be needed, so 'approval' is not really approval ("When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'" Okay, wrong book. Maybe this, the title of one of the Books of Bokonon: "On the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it"). Despite the meaning of 'approval', it is already looking like this strategy of hailing preliminary results as 'mission accomplished' will be the game plan in my own country, thanks to the approaching election and the *pool-pah* that is our federal response to the pandemic (I'm afraid that I cannot define *pool-pah* here, except perhaps as a tempest of excreta). We greet the press releases of partially analyzed results with optimism (and we should be optimistic) but await more specific details. And I worry a lot about this. For example, one interim report noted an anaphylactic response in two percent of subjects; this is a life-threatening outcome that could be cataclysmic if this vaccine is rushed to millions without understanding the source of this response.

And meanwhile, we in my country are opening schools without a coordinated plan or guidance, the pandemic is out of control, and we are receiving daily cat's cradles about what a fantastic job we are doing. See the cat? See the cradle?

Of course, I understand that we are all anxious for a vaccine. And most of us know that any vaccine must be thoroughly tested for efficacy and adverse effects. This is happening, and at a pace that we have never previously seen, which is a really good thing. But press releases are not carefully analyzed papers (not even those that have not yet been peer reviewed, and it is great that these are being posted); they are more cat's cradles, and we are being shown the Xs. No damn cat, no damn cradle.

Maybe I'm thinking too much, here. ("She hated people who thought too much. At that moment, she struck me as an appropriate representative for almost all mankind.") Maybe we won't rush into things and mess up our last best chance. Maybe there is a *karass* that will see to it that we get this right. Hey, could be. It's not like it's the end of the world, right?

Busy, busy, busy.