

MEMORANDUM

Privileged and Confidential

TO : ANTI-VIGILANTE TASK FORCE (GROUP)
FROM : AGENT DALE PETEY
DATE : SEPTEMBER 26, 2019
SUBJECT : Fogdancing

The morning after the calamity in Greenwood, the dust has settled but our nerves have not. Martial law remains in effect throughout the city as Haz-Mat teams continue to collect the remains of Unidentified Subjects #1 and #2 (the conspicuous absence of ██████████ and ██████████ give us an indication as to the identities of the remains, but given their condition, DNA testing will be required) while the other corpses are intact and once removed from the wreckage, should be more readily identified. One of them may be Agent Blake.

It has been 36 hours since I heard from her. I don't know which instinct to trust: the one that wants to believe that Agent Blake, a gritty, indomitable survivor, found a way to persevere; or the one that worries that our former colleague has been claimed by the hail of destruction that rained down on Tulsa last night.

As I struggle to make sense of everything, I find myself thinking of the discoveries I made while investigating Detective Tillman's squid shelter. They include a piece of literature whose title provides an apt metaphor for navigating the murk of mystery here. Most people had to read Max Shea's *Fogdancing* in college, and some actually think they understand it. But if you managed to dodge this difficult homework back in the day, here's some cliffnotes. Shea, a former writer of acclaimed, genre-bending pirate comics (including the thrice-filmed "Charnel Messiah"), wrote the novel in 1972 while working at a VA hospital in Cleveland. Facilitating an art therapy program for soldiers suffering from PTSD, Shea was struck by their testimonials — their awe of serving under the god-like Dr. Manhattan; their guilt of committing atrocities with the Comedian; their rationalizations about going from liberators saving a people from communism to conquerors seizing a country for capitalism. Their poignant stories of shattered worldview and conscience inspired Shea to capture the confused state of America's heroic character.

Produced in five weeks under the influence of Bierce, Burroughs, and an addiction to Benzedrine, *Fogdancing* was poetic, ironic, and aggressively ambiguous. Most readers agree on how Shea's fragmented, stream-of-consciousness prose makes them feel (loneliness, humbled, painfully mortal), but it's rare that any two of them would summarize the plot the same. The book caught one of those lucky gusts of counter-culture chic that occasionally blew through the Nixon era and became a bestseller. Its renown was further helped by two movie adaptations, one by David Cronenberg, the other by the Brothers Quay. Indeed, the novel was deeply influential with artists in all mediums, inspiring more thoughtful treatments of soldier psychology and war trauma, and, more negatively, a trend of now-cliché nihilism, surrealism, and unreliable narrator storytelling. (I recommend *Jacob's Ladder* and *Shutter Island* as examples of exceptional *Fogdancing* homage.)

In the mid-eighties, Shea disappeared along with several other notable avant-garde artists, including the grandfather of J.T. March III, who prior to driving me crazy with *American Hero Story* produced an award-winning "remix" of *Fogdancing* that was so risqué in its provocations that it helped catalyze the introduction of content warnings on television. (I never watched it.) Some believe Shea was silenced by the Nixon-Ford regime during its alleged "purges" of dissident voices. Others — including extremists like the Seventh Cavalry — believe the convoluted conspiracy theory spun by *New Frontiersman* editor Hector Godfrey that 11/2 was

a hoax and that Shea vanished — or was killed — to hide his involvement in it. For both sets of believers, *Fogdancing* has become a totem.

The history of masked vigilantism tells us that *Fogdancing* also had a peculiar appeal with costumed adventurers. Byron Lewis, aka Mothman, read the novel obsessively during his final years at the Overlook Asylum in Kennebunkport, Maine. Adrian Veidt, aka Ozymandias, once called *Fogdancing* “the second best book ever written.” Dr. Manhattan was known to randomly quote lines from the text, such as “Up is a relative concept.” Copies of *Fogdancing* were also found in the apartment of Walter Kovacs, aka Rorschach, and Edward Blake, aka the Comedian.

Given that Detective Tillman both fought crime with a mask and had an unhealthy obsession with 11/2, it's not too surprising to find a dog-eared paperback of *Fogdancing* in his doomsday shelter. But I was surprised to also find a complete set of *Nothing Ever Ends*, a now defunct periodical from Pyramid Press devoted to Shea's life and work. I know it well, as I, too, was a subscriber. In fact, I once submitted an entry to the journal's annual “recap” contest. The goal was to create a definitive summary of *Fogdancing*'s opaque plot; the winner received a bronze bust of the novel's signature symbol, a gas mask. My recap, published in the 2005 edition, finished fiftieth out of the fifty entries published. (I was penalized for dismissing the novel's framing device, set in India, as a dream. For some readers, the India stuff is all that matters!) It was a gutting loss for pretentious, teenage Dale Petey, already obsessed with masks and hungry for insight into hero psychology, and so arrogant about his intellect that his only response the low appraisal of his Fogdancing summary was that the editors of *Nothing Ever Ends* were old, stupid, and wrong. I often wonder if my failure catalyzed my resentful suspicion of fiction and my absolutist zeal for factualism in history. You could say my humiliation in the pages of *Nothing Ever Ends* was my origin story.

Finding that edition in Detective Tillman's gloomy bunker (what are the odds?) and reading my own words of years ago by its dim light, was a veritable Campbellian experience, an encounter with my innermost self in some dreadful cave of reckoning. What I saw — what I see — in that reflection exposes limits and flaws that I've never outgrown. This entire adventure in Tulsa has shown me that I am not the enlightened intellect I thought I was, but remain compromised by blinkered, assumptive, know-it-all thinking. I feel challenged to engage our culture with a more generous and empathetic spirit. (Perhaps I'll start by giving the fiction of *American Hero Story* a second chance.) If I've just confessed to any incompetence that should cost me this job, I accept that.

Agent Blake once told me that masked vigilantes often get two origin stories in life. The identity that circumstances create for you, and the one you choose for yourself. Perhaps the same can be true for me.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dale Petey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, prominent 'D' and 'P'.

Special Agent Dale Petey

Anti-Vigilante Task Force/Research Unit
Fogdancing in Tulsa