

Ludic Writing: The Real Leeds Part 8 (Country Roads)

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | October 13, 2018



Ludic Writing is a series of narratives generated through play, exploring the prospect of “Games as Writing Prompt.”

Bartlett’s Memory is an extended work of fiction in three volumes, inspired by a play through Yves Tourigny’s Arkham Noir: Collector Case #1 – The Real Leeds and by the collected fiction of “new weird” author Matthew M. Bartlett. In addition to the story, [Part 1](#) of this series includes an analysis of the Arkham Noir card game, while [Part 2](#) features a review of the two short fiction collections—Gateways to Abomination and Creeping Waves—that inspired many of the details in Tourigny’s card game and, by extension, this work of ludic writing.

Volume I of Bartlett’s Memory traces the investigation of two missing persons, Bill St. Clair and Susan Dimmsler, in the haunted village of Leeds, Massachusetts. It consists of five parts: [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#) | [Part 3](#) | [Part 4](#) | [Part 5](#)

Volume II reopens some old wounds and a cold case: the disappearance of our narrator’s cousin, Rangel Bantam, in the early eighties. This is the third part. [Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

Volume III has yet to be broadcast.

Rumors of a fourth volume are unfounded.

The story will continue in roughly weekly installments until the final case is closed or the transmissions cease.

Part Eight: The Return

Bartlett's Memory

Elevator Doors

Muzak is music that is put in a Laundromat. It's been bathed; and all of its passion gotten rid of. It's there; it doesn't make a wave. It's just a kind of amniotic fluid that surrounds us; and it never startles us, it is never too loud, it is never too silent; it's always there....

—Prof. Gary Gumpert, qtd. by Joseph Lanza in *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak*

I rose and entered the elevator, the doors automatically closing behind me, sealing without break or seam. The light no longer burned my retinas. I had been cleansed, reformed; I was a new man. My name tag read GUY STANTON.

An array of buttons lined the walls, more floors than I knew Cooley Dickinson to house. Most displayed negative values. A few were letters, some of which I recognized: R most likely stood for Roof, L for Lobby, A for Atrium. (Is it possible for a building to have both a lobby and an atrium?) Others were more obscure; there was a K, an X, a PL. Some buttons made use of non-Roman alphabets: I spotted an aleph, a ka, a smattering of Chinese pictographs. One sigil, way down on the bottom left near the alarm button, resembled the decoration on the key I'd found in Rangel's case file.

I dug the key out of my pocket. The grime I had so fastidiously washed away had already started to reaccumulate, gathering in the folds and divots, but it was recognizably the same shape, the same symbol. I tried depressing the button, but it stuck fast, as though merely painted on.

There was a small keyhole beside the array of buttons, as you sometimes see in elevators, for emergency or restricted access. The key didn't look like it would fit—it was heavy and old-fashioned, and the keyhole was small and modern—but I tried it anyway. To my surprise, it slid in smoothly. I turned the key and, leaving it inserted, pushed the button again. This time, it yielded readily to my touch, and an amber halo sprang up around my thumbnail. My body grew imperceptibly lighter as the elevator started to descend.

The descent took a long time. The texture of the Muzak changed from blanched melodies on saxophone and acoustic guitar to something more closely resembling Big Top music. There was the rattle of a snare drum, the lament of a grind organ.

Come to the Leeds Secret Carnival, I remembered. Ask and you will be Shown the Way.

A clear bell and a sudden lurch announced my arrival. My mouth flooded with saliva and the doors peeled open, unveiling the Real Leeds like a bride or a corpse or a freak show.

The Secret Carnival

And you enter, all of you, into the cathedral of bone, where maggots in formalwear undulate on the parquet dancefloor, where insect clouds contract and expand in the gaseous blue heavens, where ruined oyster-flesh slides down a spine of marble.

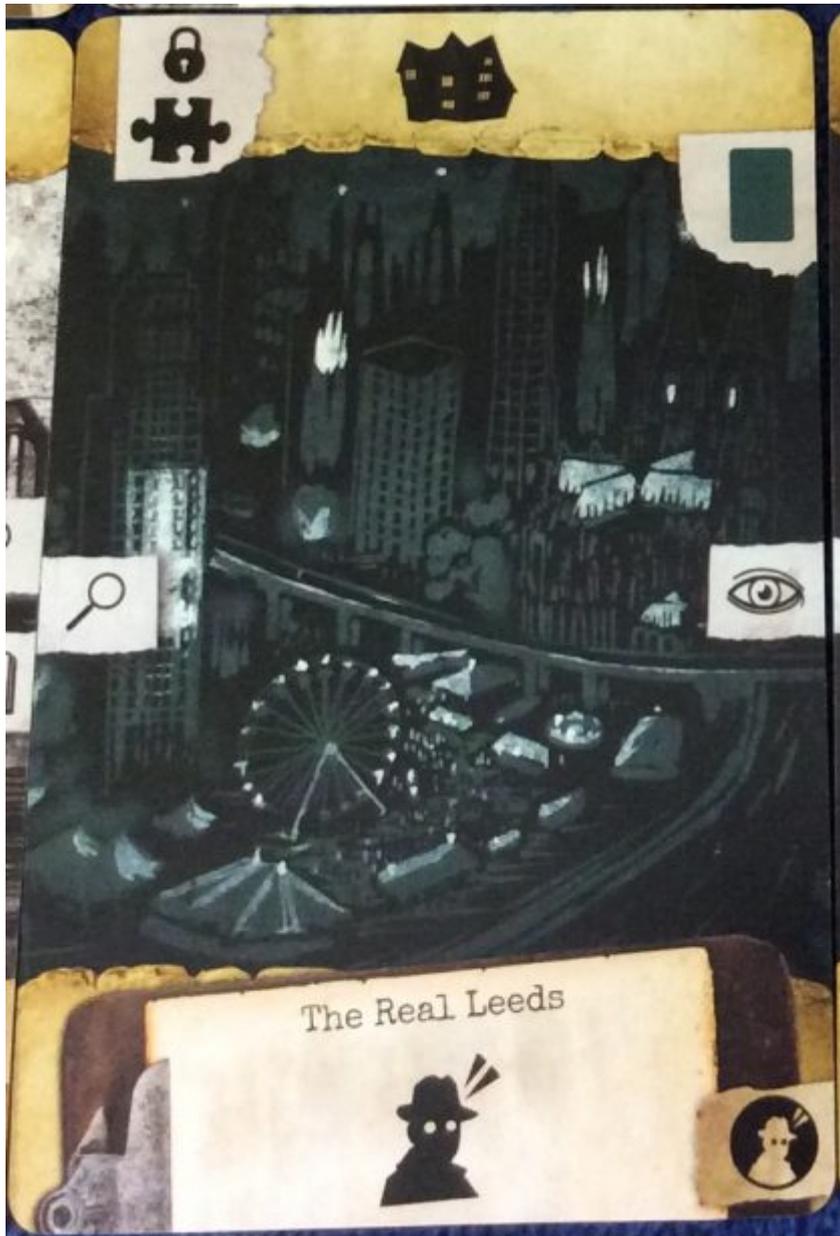
—Matthew M. Bartlett, “The Segmented Man,” Of Doomful Portent

It took a minute for my brain to make sense of what I was seeing. I’m not sure it ever fully did.

Picture a lake bed choked with tarry silt. Over time, dead things sink to the bottom: fish carcasses with their cartilaginous skeletons, snapping turtles half-mummified in their shells, and some larger things, bucks and bears and lizards and raccoons. The living avoid the lake bottom; all that decomposing flesh poisons the water around it, nitrogenous waste suspended in a no-swim-zone that gets wider each year. Every five years or so, a kid swimming in the lake dives too deep and contracts the wasting disease known locally as Lake Bottom Fever: poisons absorbed through the skin. Other swimmers surface with syphilis, embarrassing warts, a specialized strain of herpes contracted through the mucous membranes of the eyes; the lake is an incubator for such filth. Some don’t surface at all, and it’s told in the town that they were caught by the ankle-thick worms that toil blindly in the silt, the only thing that can survive the ammonia-heavy waters. They even thrive in it, growing fat and slippery, rising up every so often to drag a duck or a dog or a bather down to the boneyard that’s said to exist beneath the impenetrable layer of black sediment.

Now imagine that the weather’s shifted; the water table has receded until the entire lake’s dried up, and the fluid in which the silt’s suspended evaporates, exposing things long-buried to the light. Imagine that you are a beetle crawling over this landscape of bone and tar and refuse.

That’s a rough approximation of what I saw beyond the elevator doors. Except the bones were strange, not recognizably mammalian or reptilian; it was impossible to imagine how they might fit together to form any kind of functional organism. Any creature built from these bones, I was sure, would be a wheezing, crawling, pain-racked thing, all exposed muscle and loose bowels. Flies the size of bulldogs buzzed overhead, except they were not flies but black-skinned cherubim with distended bellies and swollen, sore-puckered genitals. They leered at me through eyes set too far apart. The sky was the color of cigarette ash mixed with honey.



I picked my way over mounds of HIV needles, lotions, lubes, torn colostomy bags, bedpans, brown-stained bandages, worm-infested tampons, sample containers storing assorted vital liquids, *Highlights* magazines, prescription pads scratched with juvenile cartoons of bare-breasted women vigorously rutting with a menagerie of barnyard animals, condoms smeared inside and out with shit and blood. The stench was indescribable. I was glad for the shower caps over my shoes.

The elevator had closed its doors and sunk into the mire somewhere behind me. It was no longer anchored to a shaft or any notion of architecture; it jugged crookedly from the earth like a loose tooth. With the doors closed, the Muzak was no longer audible, but something akin to it could be heard ahead, a kissing cousin of the tune, more raw and vital; the instrumentation was exotic, zithers and drones and percussive slaps that sounded like a man being flogged, but the general shape of the melody was the same. The air was still, allowing the vapors to settle at my ankles and the sound to carry from great distances. I moved toward it, crawling over a rotting hulk that I at first took to be a fallen redwood and only later realized was the desiccated

remains of a colossal worm. The cherubim tunneled jubilantly in its withered flesh.

I reached a spot where the skeletons had rearranged themselves into a sort of broad avenue. Elaborate scrimshaw decorated the largest of the bones, some of which were topped with lit torches despite the light and the heat of the day. Smaller bones were sculpted into obscene totems in the form of toads, bats, priapic satyrs, and vivid renderings of some overdosing addict's terminal vision. I turned from these, repulsed, and went back to the carvings. There were patterns in the scrimshaw that I couldn't quite resolve. They nagged at me like a forgotten childhood, like a language once learned but long since banished from my memory.

I must be losing my mind, I thought, for neither the first nor the last time.

Distracted by the carved columns of ribs and the bones of unrecognizable design, I failed to take notice of the change until it was already upon me. A bandstand had erupted from the tortured corpse of the earth, and a quartet of musicians had converged upon it. Their skin was grey, putrescent, their faces slack. The bone structure spoke of chromosomal abnormality. One pounded on a stretched skin drum, slick with perspiration, the little hairs still on it. Another plucked a kind of banjo strung with sinews to which rotting meat still clung. The strings originated from beneath the painted nails of a woman's hand; the player was able to modulate the tone by popping the knuckles into new configurations, while adjusting the elevation of the wedding ring seemed to effect more subtle acoustical changes.

The third member of the band pumped and squeezed and pinched and twisted reedy, whimpering sighs out of some sort of accordion that looked to be constructed from a pierced, emphysematous lung. The remaining instrument was indescribable in both form and function. Its player wore a sweat-slick grimace; it was difficult to discern where his grey flesh ended and the instrument began. It clung to him like an absorbed twin, slowly draining him of his vitality and transfiguring it into notes of inconceivable pain and beauty.

The third member of the quartet, a squat man with toad-like features and greasy moustache hairs that descended like catfish whiskers, opened his toothless black hole of a mouth and belched out a melody. "Come with me and you'll be in a world of your imagination," he croaked. The words were almost right, but the tune was wrong, a deranged sea shanty as interpreted by Les Claypool. The drummer ceased his pounding long enough to stretch a lanky arm behind him, his long nails gesturing at a pyramidal canvas tent behind the bandstand, sprung up out of what passed for soil. The tent was the color of red velvet, the hue of opulence, candy red, playhouse red, but you could see the capillaries in the material, where the sunlight struck it just so. Supporting the structure, stretching it tight, were curved bows of semi-translucent cartilage. A flap directly in front of me hung slightly open, beckoning me inside, to the cool and the dark.

"What you'll see will defy explanation," the accordion player belched mournfully.

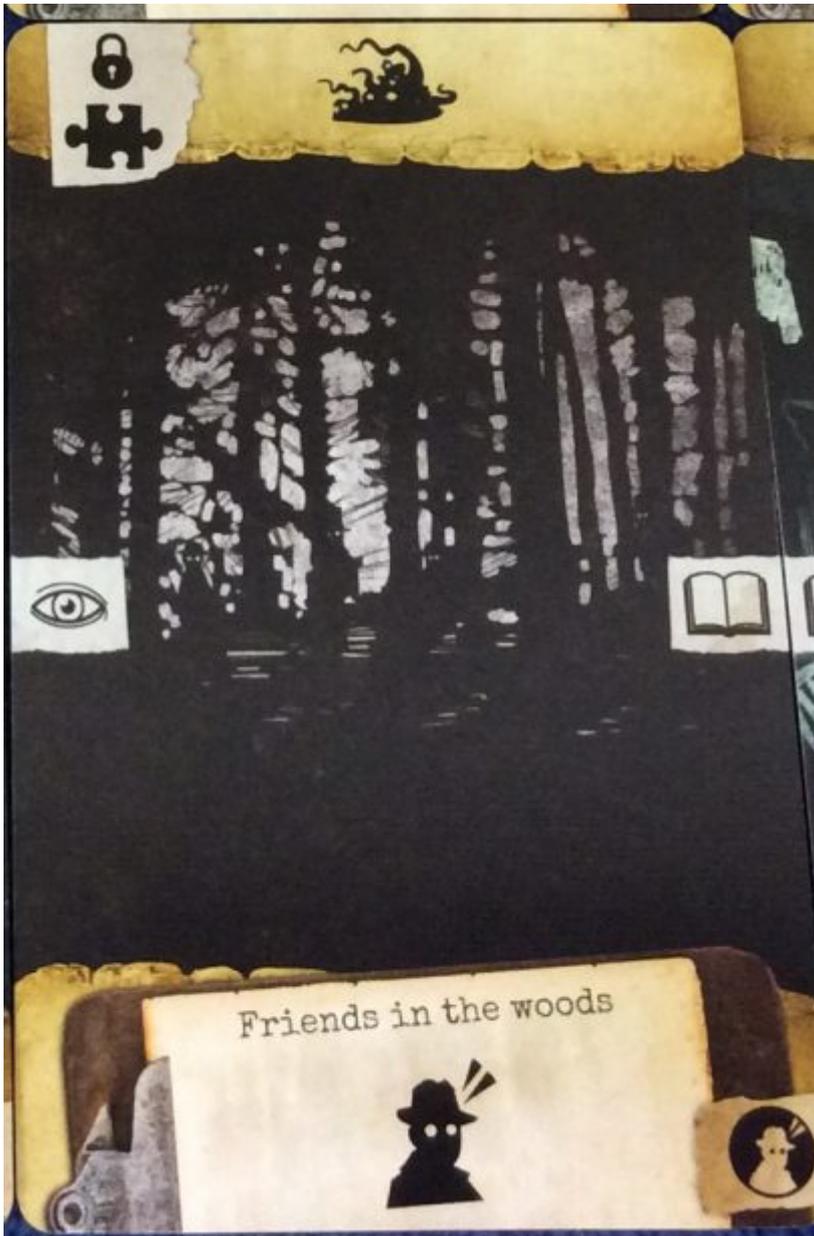
It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the gloom within the tent. I smelled roots, fungus, decomposition. And something else: a powerful musk, pungent, ripe. I could make out shapes, animal but inhuman: things that slithered on their bellies, things that clopped around on all fours. The crawling things of the earth.

I was standing, I realized, in a sort of cabinet of curiosities. As my eyes adjusted further to the gloom, I strolled among the glass cabinets and gilded cages housing taxidermied chimeras, each as repulsive and unlikely as the Fiji Mermaid. Suspended from wires overhead was a giant fruit bat, posed with its tattered wings outstretched, shriveled lips pulled back to reveal its canine grin. A wig of blond human hair had been stapled inexpertly to its skull, veiling the flying mammal's eyes. In a shoebox-sized terrarium, its glass the same brown color as medicine bottles, a coral snake was frozen in a coil, one fang chipped away beneath a Fu Manchu mustache, bare patches showing in its pattern of red, black and white like burned-out letters in a neon sign. At the heart of the coil, where another species of venomous snake might house a rattle, its flesh had been fused to that of a gangrenous human foot wearing a tattered stocking. A big toe poked up through a hole in the stained fabric.

"If you want to view paradise," the singer's voice drifted over from the bandstand, "simply look around and view it."

There were other displays: a chipped rhinoceros horn; a collection of stick insects pinned to a square of balding velvet; a pickled fetus, skull swollen like a balloon about to pop; a fox in a lily-white dress, posed hungrily before a tea service; a pitcher plant, belly full of half-digested flies; a chafing dish filled with various stones and tumors extracted from the human body, including one that looked a little like a knuckle bone and a little like a radio speaker; a squid-faced mole leering at a gentlemen's magazine; an assortment of sainted bandages nailed to a board; a stuffed bear with human hands and feet gingerly adjusting the dial of a radio. At the very back of the tent, buried in the deepest gloom, a goat was tethered to a little wooden stake. Within the tether's radius, the floor of the tent was littered with delicate bones.

Next to the goat was a hand-painted sign. The lettering was that of a child. I half-expected it to say "To The Egress." Instead, it read, "Unkle Benjamen and his Forest Friends."



The goat opened its mouth. Blood and maggots spilled out. "Living there, you'll be free if you truly wish to be," it sang.

It had gotten rather dark and close inside the tent. I looked up to see the fabric aswarm with black shadows, the potbellied forms of the fly-like cherubim. When I looked back down, a little girl was standing next to the goat, stroking its neck. It was Rangel, just as I had seen her more than thirty years ago, just as I had seen her last night in my dreams. She was Rangel except for one detail: her hair and eyes were darker, like pools of black mud. "Isn't he precious?" she asked eagerly as the walls collapsed around us. I couldn't tell whom she was addressing, me or the goat.

Closed Cases (Part 2)

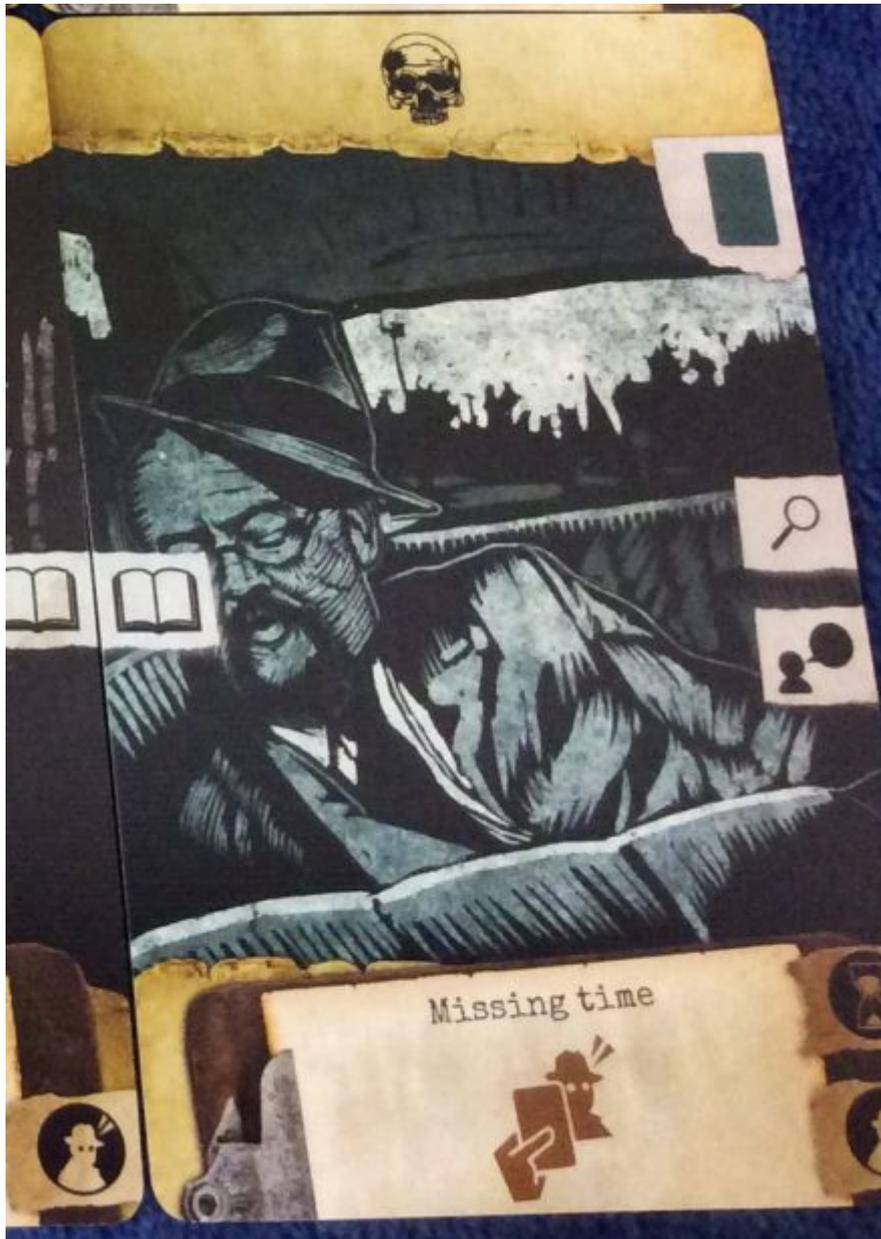
Jeb liked to tell us his theories, and they were many and they were grim. He would hold up Gram's old Bible to the ulcerations on his

pooched stomach, mark down the words that were bespeckled with blood, and tell us THAT was the real Bible, the hidden Bible, that God was Cancer and it spread through Man to help him but only destroyed him, and if Man only knew the Hidden Bible as he, Jeb, did, you could live forever with—and AS—cancer...

—Matthew M. Bartlett, "The Theories of Uncle Jeb," Gateways to Abomination

There are sometimes gaps in my memory, holes where I know memories should be, and then the holes themselves collapse and there isn't even absence anymore. The Rangel-dreams swallow everything.

I was in my room at the Leeds Stop-N-Sleep, under the sign of the leech. I still wore the latex gloves, the respiratory mask, the shower caps over my shoes. The shower caps were caked in grime; a series of round, wrinkled stamps told the story of my passage from door to bed. I peeled them off, tossed them into the wastebasket beside me. I disposed of the mask and gloves in like fashion, took my first breath of cool, unfiltered air in what felt like days, luxuriated in it, felt the chill as the sweat on my skin evaporated.



I switched on the radio. It was still tuned to WPLY, but Constance had gone off the air, back to whatever hippie hovel or babbling brook she normally occupied. The programming had switched over to ambient music, all glass cylinders and tubular bells. I spun the dial down, down, plumbing the airwaves for *that station*.

Then I found it, remarkably clear, as though the musicians stood in the room with me, invisibly sawing and squeezing and blowing and banging a kind of off-kilter dirge. The singer moaned wordlessly.

“This is WXXT,” the deejay said, his voice like the wrong path in a whiteout, the path that leads to obliteration and ruin, “the rot in the marrow of the Pioneer Valley. You’re almost home now. Welcome home, ____.” I didn’t hear anything after that. The radio was still playing—I could feel its speakers trembling when I put my hand to them—but its voice was hidden from me. I sat in a bubble of anti-sound.

I stood up, walked two feet to the little table with the low-wattage lamp and indestructible telephone shackled to it. I looked at Rangel’s picture for a

long time. Was this the little girl that I had seen in the Real Leeds? The more I stared, the more she seemed to disappear, swallowed up like a persistent blind spot by whatever anti-sound poured from the radio. When I closed my eyes, I only saw the other her, the *real* her.

Without really knowing I was doing it, without knowing why, I flipped over the Polaroid and began to write my report. By the time I was finished, I had filled every centimeter of the white almost-square. Every centimeter except for a tiny wedge of space in the bottom-right corner, no larger than a little girl's pinky nail. There, I wrote the secret name of Rangel's—the *real* Rangel's—child. Dark of eye and hair, just like her father.

I read the report over to myself, but there was nothing to add or remove. I committed it to memory. Then I put everything back in the manila folder, just as I had found it—including the Polaroid, including the empty envelope (the key was still stuck in the elevator, wherever *that* was). I pushed the folder out through the letter slot of my motel door, and I lay down on the bed to await my next assignment.

