

Portrait of Cass, the Hermit
by John Schengber

Accompanying TJ Rinoski's exhibition, *Hermit*,
at Cob Gallery, London (2026)



COB

84a Lamb's Conduit Street, London, WC1N 3LT

Portrait of Cass, the Hermit

By John Schengber

At this house it was just me, him, and he. We had been there for a long time, as long as any of us could remember, though none of us strained to remember very far back. The house was an old Victorian set on a barren peninsula that jutted out into a balmy sea. The shore was not sand but a kaleidoscope of shells and rocks which made musical sounds to step on. The skies were often hazy.

We each had our own room upstairs which looked out across the sea, and sometimes we caught each other staring through the glass.

"Are you looking for something?"

"What would I be looking for?"

"Just looking, then?"

"Think so."

We had never seen anyone out there. No boats, no lights, no planes; just birds. If we ever did see a boat—I remember now that we did see boats on occasion—they never came closer.

It almost felt like a dream, but that would be too simple; reductive; and just wrong. I could pinch myself and feel it. I put pen to paper to write this, and after that I drew a sea gull. In a dream that wouldn't be.

Our days were not empty. Dickman came into the living room that afternoon, as he had many times before. "I am almost through with it," he said, holding up a small wooden board upon which was mounted a delicate model arch, extending over a wide, muddy river. The keystone section of the arch was complete but was missing the exterior metal plating which covered the rest of the structure. It was ugly but almost more impressive without this plating. You could see its guts, the miniature model wiring and the model internal stairwell and even the model citizens and tourists. Who would want to crawl up the internal stairs of an arch? Dickman's tourists.

"Angelo!" I called loudly, knowing he was likely up in his room.

Dickman, beside me, glared and theatrically plugged his ears. A series of thuds came down the stairs until Angelo emerged into the living room.

He held an enormous grandfather clock. It was tall with dark brown wood, golden gear work and hands, and a spire that ended in a bronze eagle. It sagged in his arms. We rushed over to help and we struggled, none of us very strong anymore, to elevate the base just enough to place it on the table. Then we stepped back and Angelo pushed it away from the edge of the table. "It is nearly fixed," he said, panting, "listen." We stood there training our old ears, having plied this exercise, too, it seemed, no less than Dickman's arch. The gold pendulum swung back and forth to a tranquilizing tick-tock.

Angelo turned to me and said, "And how about you, Cass?"

I walked them into the mudroom where I had left the sieve over-top the sink. I had just washed everything down, so it all glistened still—the sieve's square brass frame; the shells; the teeth. I had never found both a conch, a welch, and a tooth in one day, let alone a thrasher shark tooth.

I wondered about that phrase: let alone. Principally used for emphasis and comparison: you can't possibly do this, let alone that. But where does it come from? What does it have to do with the state of being alone, worse, being let alone by another? If there is any meaningful difference at all.

Dinner was fish, with a faint pink lateral stripe, whole and grilled, that I had caught in the gill net after beachcombing. We toasted to ourselves. I don't know if we put words to it. Dickman discussed his plans to complete the arch. Angelo delighted in the clock ticking in the living room. We moved in there for drinks after, without touching the dishes. The setting sun was painting our blank interior walls orange.

"What would we hang, if we wanted to?" Angelo said, seated across the room, with his back to the bay window, so that he was looking at the blank wall behind my head. I turned around. It was dripping honey.

COB

84a Lamb's Conduit Street, London, WC1N 3LT

We had discussed this many times before.

"Mountains, perhaps?" Dickman said. "Meadows?"

"All those are for people who don't have the sea," I said.

"People, then, perhaps?" said Dickman.

The three of us looked at each other.

"Why would I want a picture of Dickman on my walls?" asked Angelo.

We laughed.

Once quiet again, Dickman intoned: "How about family?"

That familiar loss rang us.

I raised my glass. "Family is for people who don't have the sea." I said it boastfully and pridefully, hoping to ward away whatever cloud had descended over us, but it dispersed nothing.

Angelo raised his glass in turn. "The sea is for people who don't have family."

We grunted and cheers'ed.

Outside the sea birds were flocking in a V above the water, heading to their sleeping grounds.

"Are we on schedule for next week?" I asked.

"I should be. You saw it today—I'm very close," said Dickman.

"If I'm not ready, you can string me up by the hour hand," said Angelo.

The sun dripped a deeper shade of orange, until twilight took over.

The next week, in the morning, after breakfast and coffee, I put on my tie. I gathered my clipboard and best pen. I wrote "juror" on the last of the sticker sheets and tore it off and pasted it on my lapel. I walked downstairs, knees creaking louder than the wood.

The others were similarly suited and prepared; standing there looking anxious.

We began with Dickman. His arch was on the table, shining in the morning light, its stainless steel plating finally complete.

He demonstrated its key feature—its curve. "The arch is a catenary. It is not a true parabola," he said, pausing. He took a ball from his back pocket. "If you throw a baseball in the air at an angle, its path forms a parabola; it has only the force of gravity working on it, and it is pulled down evenly across its flight path." Dickman looked at us keenly. We were still attentive, so he carried on. "A catenary, though, is more like the shape of a freely hanging chain or rope when it is tied between two posts. The chain not only has the force of gravity acting on it, pulling down, but also the tension of the two ends of the chain, pulling out on its anchors."

Angelo grabbed the baseball that Dickman had laid on the table, tossed it up, studying it.
"What's the point of all that?" he asked.

"The catenary is subtly less steep and sheer than a parabola. In other words, gentler on the eye."

Angelo now stood there respectfully with his arms crossed, nodding his head. He bent down and inspected the arch. If Angelo and Dickman could align on one thing, it was a fondness for engineering. I couldn't stay further away.

"Tell us about, mmm," I stuttered, "its meaning to you."

Dickman looked up at me with his sunken eyes, expressing a face that went from surprise to, of course, in a matter of moments.

COB

84a Lamb's Conduit Street, London, WC1N 3LT

"Tell us what it means, Dickman," Angelo added.

"It should be a gateway," he said hesitantly. "I want people to see it as a gateway of some sort."

"Gateway to what? Or where?" I asked.

"Time. Not an actual gateway—just a reminder. Time is not fixed. You can shrink it, you can expand it, depending on how you use it." He paused. "Have you ever done something new, over a day or two, maybe a weekend, and it feels like a week?" His eyes glistened earnestly. "That's expanding time."

"Your arch does that?" I asked.

"No, but they're related ideas. Time's cousin is space. You can shrink or expand space, too. An arch expands space, even though it occupies volume."

Dickman watched the twitch of understanding cross my face. He continued: "And I like to think the way it changes space can also change the way its viewers see time. Maybe, if you have space, you have time."

The three of us looked at each other, unsure if anyone expected such an insightful presentation from Old Dickman.

"Do you think," began Angelo, "if I stood under your arch forever, I would never grow old?"

"Angelo, you're already old."

"Thank you very much, artist number one," I said. We all shook Dickman's hand. Angelo and I ducked away separately to scribble notes on our clipboards. Dickman lingered quietly by his arch, as if other jurists may come to inquire. When no one did, it was Angelo's turn.

By then, the morning was becoming day. We went upstairs. Angelo's room was tidier than usual, almost spartan. His bed was lifted on its side and pressed flat against the wall; his tools and materials and his chair were shoved into the closet.

The display was simple. The tall grandfather clock stood erect on the small table at the center of the room, surrounded by a scattering of smaller, wall-mount pendulum clocks. All of them were ticking in perfect unison, but none of their times aligned. Dickman was quick to notify the artist.

"That is the point," said Angelo.

He went on to explain. There are only three natural units of time (which he prompted us to guess). The lunar month, the solar day, and the solar year. Only recently have we been able to measure time in more precise units, e.g., hours, minutes, and seconds, thanks to mechanical and digital devices. He gestured to the table, and to his nightstand, where a small digital clock radio sat by an old beige lamp.

But if we think about it, Angelo insisted, humans have been measuring time in another way—for eons.

How?

Angelo's artist statement, of which there was only one copy, read as follows:

This exhibit interrogates the divorce of modern timekeeping from what is arguably its historical antecedent: the maintenance of time through sound and rhythm. Humans have been 'keeping time' through music well before any timekeeping devices came into being. By repairing this series of pendulum clocks to working order, while simultaneously scrambling their actual time readings, the artist reminds us of humans' impulse to experience time through music and sound.

Of course, the artist does not pretend that music is as useful as a clock in measuring time, and certainly not in a passive manner. Rather, his work suggests that clocks are especially beautiful when they retain a sonic element, and that, relatedly, clocks which omit the sonic element veer toward a conception of time which is tastelessly calculated and inhuman. The word 'clock', after all, derives from the medieval Latin word 'clocca,' which means 'bell.' This exhibit serves as a reminder: We should not forget to ring our bells."

Dickman and I must have looked impressed after we finished reading the artist statement because Angelo was

just standing there smiling coyly with his sun-damaged skin and smile lines. His smugness was just childlike enough to not be annoying.

We approached the table and inspected the clocks. The back side of the tallest clock had a delicate carving. "What is this inscription?" I asked.

"My mother's mother's initials."

"So, your grandmother?"

"Sure. But I never knew her."

I nodded.

He continued. "Beulah Patrice Arrington. She lived in the country alone, after all of her children had moved to the city. When my mother returned one weekend to visit, she found the house recently burned down, everything destroyed. There was a note on the door—directing her to the office of the county administrator and the coroner. When she arrived, they informed her that her mother was dead. There were only a few possessions saved for her taking, and one of them was this clock." He paused and looked at us fearfully. "Somehow a wooden clock had survived the fire. Somehow, it was still ticking."

We did not gasp because nothing he said was truly surprising; by the way he cared for this clock, we had always assumed that it held some deep meaning. But our ears, if they could, would have gasped. As the ticking continued now, our ears recognized the tune as the same ticking that ticked through the fire, ticked through his mother's mother's death, ticked now and onward during these latest days of ours.

"An incessant reminder," I said.

Angelo nodded. "It became too much. My mother hid it in our attic. I only discovered it after she died. Of course it had lost its accuracy and it needed a lot of work, but it was still ticking when I found it." Tears came out and he lost his breath and covered his face with his hands. Dickman touched his shoulder, which seemed to give him the power for one more utterance. "I realized, when you lose someone, you wish that you had a clock ticking in your ear that whole time. A clock to keep you honest about time passing all the while."

Angelo cleared the tears from his face and blew his nose. I walked around the table again, feigning inspection to cover my own contemplation.

I would not have needed a sea of clocks to track all the lives I was supposed to cherish. I would need even less now. I glean that the same was not true for Dickman and Angelo.

Even so, would the percussion of a thousand clocks have been appealing? I do not know. I do not resent silence. But perhaps we should all wish for a deafening chorus of clocks, rather than the silent, perfunctory reading of the day and time.

After several more beats, Dickman clapped his hands: "Unfortunately, Angelo, I will not be buying your brand of clocks. I gather from your presentation that they are a constant reminder that death is coming, but you don't even know the time. Such that you don't even know if supper is soon!"

We laughed with a certain desperation, knowing it was a poor but welcome effort to move us along. "You are right my friend," said Angelo, appearing renewed. "It's coming. It's always coming, but there is no telling how soon. We can only hope that we are well fed right before."

I clasped Angelo by the trapezius. "Nor will I be buying your clocks," I said, "because I am poor. But I take your point. You don't claim that your clocks help tell the time. Instead, they help you listen to time."

At this, Angelo looked at me delighted. He lowered his head toward the tall clock on the table. He pressed his fingers against the back of his upper ear, pushed it toward the clock. He collected the ticking sounds like a currency, closing his eyes.

When I look back on it, as I am now, I do not have any regrets about that day. It was one of the most beautiful days that we shared together. I only regret that they made their final request so passionately, and that I had no option to decline it.

We had gone out to the dock after a brief intermission. It was my turn. The sun was lowering on the water and the wind was blowing steadily from the north, turning the sea into a rippled quilt of indigo and orange. My piece was on the leeward side of the dock, so the water was calm.

“Come, come,” I said, waving them along to follow me to the floating dock.

We went backwards down the railing one by one, and I waited for them to gather around me at the bottom. When they were ready, I stepped up to the winch and began to raise the lift from the water. I had to put my whole body into it. The banded steel went coiling around the winch’s drum like licorice dripping salt water. When the piece emerged, they did finally and appropriately gasp: a right whale skeleton, complete, intact, and cleaned. It showered sea water, which puddled and reflected the sun.

“What the hell, Cass? How did you do this?” said Angelo.

“And how did we not notice?” added Dickman.

I explained. I had found it on the beach of the other peninsula during an extended beachcombing session. That’s how they didn’t know. It was decaying and being picked apart by vultures, so all I had to do was wait. Then I hauled it over one night without them noticing. I only worked on it in the dark, since sleep is scarce already for me. I covered the ribs in shark teeth; the spinal cord in starfish; the jaw in sand dollars. Theoretically it will never be complete, as it seems I can add limitless shells upon the seemingly limitless skeleton, but I was pleased enough to present it.

They asked almost immediately.

“Bury me with it,” said Angelo. “I mean, add my bones.”

“Me too,” said Dickman. “Surely our manly, petite frames will accompany the whale’s in fine fashion.”

I did not initially protest, because I did not initially take them seriously. But soon it became apparent that I was wrong.

“Gentlemen, I would rather not,” I said.

“Why?” they asked.

“I don’t know. I would rather not make you art pieces.”

“Why should we not be art pieces?” said Dickman. “Perhaps Angelo is no art piece, but you must concede that I am.” He twirled, coming dangerously close to slipping into the water.

We went on like this for a while. I blamed not wanting to pick apart their corpses, nor let the vultures do it for me. They said they would help me build a desiccation chamber, to dehydrate the bodies quickly. “There won’t be much on these bones, anyway,” said Angelo, measuring the size of his wrists. I expressed that I wasn’t sure I wanted to look at their bones for the rest of my time. They said hooley and asked why I was okay looking at whale bones for the rest of my time, which are just as much bones-of-death as human bones are. I said I did not want to mix the bones of sea creatures and humans, fearing it would make a mixed metaphor. They laughed at this, and then they pushed me in the water.

When I came up for air, they were pointing and yelling at me, as if afraid.

“Sea creature!” they yelled.

I got out, shivering, and pulled them in. The pool of orange and indigo rippled around us in tatters.

I deliberated for a long time after they were gone. I replayed that day over and over in my head, for weeks. I wrote it down, hoping to exorcise the memory, but it lingers, months later, in my ears, in the creases of my hands, in every room of the house.

So I decided. Everything is laid out on the table now. Nails, screws, wires, bolts. How else to affix bone to bone? All of the bones, organized by anatomy, sit in neat little piles. All of the bones except the skulls. As they requested, I will put their bones on the whale, except I will hang their skulls on the living room wall. Even Dickman's.

The sun is rising.

Behind me: friends, family, emptiness. In front of me, I have the sea.

John Schengber is an emerging writer based in New York. He is currently working to complete a debut novella, expected this fall.

John Schengber's "Portrait of Cass, the Hermit" is a short story written to accompany TJ Rinoski's Hermit, the painter's second solo presentation with Cob Gallery. The story serves as a meditation on male loneliness, aging, and creative practice. Much like the works in the gallery, it straddles the border of imagination and reality, seeming to exist outside of defined time and space, while anchoring to accessible emotional concerns and physical observation.

Mechanically, Schengber wrote the story after viewing "Hermit II," Rinoski's painting of a house on an isolated peninsula, on display here. The story is an adjacent interpretation of Rinoski's work and draws on Schengber's recent personal experience watching his grandfather move into an assisted living home, as well as Schengber and Rinoski's family histories. In particular, the characters in the story are based on Schengber and Rinoski's grandparents and great-grandparents, among whom were: a politician who commissioned the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri, USA; a clockmaker; and a beachcomber. These inherited figures blend with invention and fabrication, extending the exhibition's exploration of solitude, memory, and the creative life.