

I

30th Street *Totems and Time-Travel*

Words and Photography by Kennie Ting

“Spirits and demons [...] are only projections of man's own emotional impulses. He turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his internal mental processes again outside himself...”

Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*

“It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane.”

Philip K. Dick, *VALIS*

It is entirely appropriate to go insane on 30th Street, particularly as the street is inherently unstable, lapsing between whimsical and menacing, as though it can't decide what shape and form it wishes to settle into, and has thus resigned itself to a kind of random, serendipitous proliferation.

Exploring the street is like stumbling haphazardly through a series of portals – spell-cast or relativistic – that propel one backwards and forwards through time and through space, into half a dozen hermetically-sealed worlds with their own species of humankind and their own unique ecologies, each functioning in satisfied self-containment, without the least regard for the other worlds that lie just around the corner.

There is the post-apocalyptic wasteland far west, with its sinuous, snaking, stone-dead railway line abruptly doubling back on itself at the edge of the water: a black road to nowhere hovering twelve feet above the intrepid time traveller, who trudges through this no man's land, this Gotham, populated by no one, thinking dark thoughts about the dawn of humanity, mankind's extinction and the return of the Saviour.

Byzantine Alexandria makes a brief appearance, before the time traveller is then thrust anew into a bustling, multi-cultural Babel of a bazaar town sprawling across multiple blocks at the heart of the street; a space-age Istanbul or Isfahan overgrown with art deco and cast-iron clad skyscrapers, and heaving with neo-Persians, -Greeks, -Irish, -Jewish, -Somalians, -Cote d'Ivoirians, -Indians and -Chinese, hawking a dizzying, pungent array of wares: furs, rugs, foods, spices, scents, vestments, spells and potions.

Past the bazaar-town: an impossibly quaint and colonial Boston, clinging on desperately to the fabric of reality, appropriating architectural tropes from a dozen other pasts to re-create a sort of facsimile *genteel American turn-of-the-century*, coloured with townhouses and homesteads in brilliant shades of ochre, vermilion and emerald. It is a welcome though fragile oasis in this proliferation of worlds; an oasis that ends as quickly as it begins, replacing utopia with

dystopia as the time-traveller is spat out indecorously onto a vast open windswept plain where hulking, tyrannical concrete blocks pack in humans like agonized sardines, where gleaming azure towers belie unspeakable bio-genetic experiments underwritten by unscrupulous multi-national corporations, and where the City's most infamous madhouse – Bellevue – continues to register new inmates.

Throughout the street and in all these myriad worlds powerful totems abound: representations of animal spirits, mythical creatures and other more abstract, primitive forms that are alternately protective talismans or potent time-travel spells; carved painstakingly by proto-shamans into the walls that loom on both sides of the path one hurtles along, unrelentingly. The Way to invoke these totems has been lost in the passage of time, and they sit today as mute reminders of the potential of symbol to manipulate reality; to suggest whole histories and alternate universes beyond those that are immediately observable.

Paramount amongst these totems is a pair of beautifully rendered stone foxes, standing at exquisite attention some four blocks into the street. *Proceed at your own risk*, they seem to say as one passes them by, entering the dream-like worlds that lie on either side of them, and which, one eventually realises, resemble the fevered imaginings of a madman.

* * * * *