

Towards Toronto

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Philosopher's Walk I : Toward an Interpretive Psychogeography of Toronto

2006 07 21

Urban life is governed by the Janus-twin pulls of structure and change, and differs from rural reality only in the sense that in cities we rely more greatly on the solidity of structures to guide our own turbulent movements. Visionary American urban planner **Kevin Lynch** wrote,

Change and recurrence are the sense of being alive - things gone by, death to come, and present awareness. The world around us, so much of it our own creation, shifts continually and often bewilders us. We reach out to that world to preserve or to change it and so to make visible our desire. (from *What Time Is This Place*, 1972)

But at the same time, the city eludes our efforts to delineate it: it is as discontinuous and evasive as our desires. Commenting on the slipperiness of the "grammar of urban life," travel writer **Jonathan Raban** observes,

at moments like this, the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or for worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. ... The city as we imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps ..." (from *Soft City*, 1974)

And so in cities we find ourselves alternately reaching and rearing back, launching forward into the glittering swirl, leaping backward when it bites at us. Only occasionally do we simply let the city flow and eddy around us, currents tugging, liquid forms mouthing at us like thousands of silver fish. We might rest here, on a piece of shale unmoored by the current, and consider the direction, pacing, and purpose of its flows.

It is a principal task of psychogeography[1] to explore our responses to the spaces we inhabit and move through. Despite its rural precursors, perhaps chief among them the English poet **William Wordsworth** and the American naturalist **Henry David Thoreau**, psychogeography has become primarily an urban movement and is associated most visibly with **Walter Benjamin's** narrative of the flaneur[2], a figure who ambles through the city, drawn by its smells and sounds and seeking to immerse himself in their texts and subtexts. Toronto has an active psychogeography Society[3], one of whose chief proponents, **Shawn Micallef**, publishes a regular psychogeography column in Eye Magazine[4] called Stroll[5] and employs a psychogeographical philosophy in his work with [murmur][6] and Spacing[7]. Toronto's psychogeographers do much to remind us of the subtle flows and passages of the city, affirming their value and meaning in a vibrant, living metropole.

And yet I find myself a reluctant psychogeographer. In part my reluctance stems from the suggestion that the *flaneur* is a man (as **Anna Bowness** points out in her *Literary History of the Flaneur*[7], in literature he was almost invariably a man) with the leisure and liberty to stroll through the city without contract or commitment. By relying so persistently on the passive or voluptuarial characteristics of the *flaneur*, it seems to me that psychogeographers risk devaluing the habits and responses encoded in daily activity, the half-voiced inferences we make while travelling to work or while shopping, selling hot dogs, pouring concrete, or prodding unruly children through the zoo. If the *flaneur* is essentially a voyeur rather than a

participant, s/he risks becoming nothing more than (as Benjamin writes, quoting **Georg Simmel**) "someone who sees without hearing." And as **Rebecca Solnit** points out in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), "urban walking seems in many ways more like primordial hunting and gathering than walking in the country", underscoring the active, engaged, participatory nature of the urban experience. An interpretive psychogeography must heed all these rhythms, even the confused and contradictory and rushed ones. Describing city streets as "the rivers, canals, and streams running between the land masses [buildings], Solnit writes,

just as narrowing a waterway increases flow and speed, so turning open space into the spillways of streets directs and intensifies the flood of walking. ... walking, witnessing, being in public, are as much part of the design and purpose as is being inside to eat, sleep, make shoes or love or music. The word citizen has to do with cities, and the ideal city is organized around citizenship - around participation in public life.

And so, what do we make of an engaged, interpretive psychogeography? We might do so without purpose, as Benjamin's flaneur does. We might do so with a political purpose, as the Situationists did (and do), and in Toronto, as the **Toronto Public Space Committee** might be said to operate. Or we might move in the urban stream wherever we can find footing, somewhere between the sheltered banks and the turbulent middle, carrying with us an active, engaged sense of attunement. For me this attunement is necessarily phenomenological, meaning that it is preoccupied with the character and meaning of experience, including those experiences so intense or hurried or even banal that perspective comes only in fleeting insights, like light flashing into the subway train as it crosses the Bloor Viaduct. Bright spots of meaning, flashes of being that might nonetheless be subject to thoughtful scrutiny.

Tomorrow, and through the coming week, I will further this discussion, offering phenomenological readings of a number of Toronto sites, entities, and events, beginning with the city's laneways and proceeding through considerations of stray cats, night, garage sales, garbage, raccoons, abandoned lots and buildings, and unwanted flora.

1. Psychogeography
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychogeography>
2. flaneur
<http://www.othervoices.org/gpeaker/Flaneur.html>
3. Psychogeography Society
<http://www.psychogeography.ca/>
4. Eye Magazine
<http://www.eye.net/>
5. Stroll
http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_06.29.06/city/stroll.php
6. [murmur]
<http://murmurtoronto.ca/>
7. Literary History of the Flaneur
<http://www.psychogeography.ca/pdf/anna.pdf>
8. Situationists
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Situationist>
9. Toronto Public Space Committee
<http://www.publicspace.ca/>

Philosopher's Walk II: A Natural History of the Alley

2006 07 22

When it rains, I think of the laneway behind our Junction area home as a creek, flowing intermittently like those sunken runnels at the edge of rural cow pastures, shaded and stagnant in the midsummer heat but swelling to gurgling fullness after a rain. Alive with frogs, whose deep grunting utterances are low echoes of the high trilling voices of peepers in the spring.

It isn't like this in reality, of course. The laneway is poured concrete and slopes between storm sewer gratings designed to catch runoff before it can muddy and undermine the sills of the wooden garages lining the alley like so many weathered boathouses. But when it rains, the alley flows, briefly, like a creek, and eddies at the detritus left along its banks: beer bottles, shopping carts, bike tires, and (by rumour) the occasional syringe. And if it does not teem with frogs and minnows, our alley does produce its share of wildlife. At twilight a family of raccoons descends a nearby Manitoba Maple and gorges on the kibble we put out for the local cats, and sometimes a skunk makes its passage through the undergrowth, silent and invisible until surprised by a foolish and regretful dog. A colony of carpenter ants has occupied a garage down the lane: during walks at night last summer we would stop and listen to thousands of jaws chewing its timbers, leaving a fine dust on the concrete below.

In *Emerald City: Toronto Visited* (Viking, 1994) **John Bentley Mays** (art and architecture writer and Toronto's original psychogeographer) notes that most of Toronto's 233-odd kilometres of laneways were built between about 1850 and the 1930s to serve functional rather than aesthetic purposes. Notwithstanding the current romanticism among some urban planners and architects for laneways and mews, Mays observes, "if you do have a lane out back, it's fairly certain you've bought into what was and may still be a workers' neighbourhood." And in this sense, laneways may be understood as a consolation for properties too narrow to accommodate a proper drive, providing needed breathing channels in neighbourhoods where sometimes only a stray cat can slip through the space between houses.

But it is clear that Toronto's laneways have become consolation for so much more. Not only have Toronto's laneways begun to draw interest as desirable sites for residential intensification, they have become sites of considerable creative interest as well, particularly for photographers fixated on recording the city's graffiti, its most urban art. And it seems to me that graffiti artists themselves (or *vandals*, if the canvas chosen is your own garage) favour alleys not only because they are secluded places where such acts can be completed undisturbed, but also because alleys are a kind of incompletely claimed territory, a resonant urban canvas drawing in creative energy like a vacuum attracts air.

And if the city is understood as a living archaeological site, then its alleys are the layers most visible below the tip of the tel. They are liminal spaces, neither fully private nor completely public. If the front facades of most Toronto homes are carefully and tidily maintained, alleys provide a view of real life: discarded plastic furniture, dirty rear windows covered by a bedsheet, piles of bricks from unfinished projects, abandoned hockey nets, a car on blocks, all providing a glimpse into the real and often messy lives lived all across this city. Alleys gather the city's detritus together into organic and slowly flowing channels, objects that resurface months or years later like runoff at a spillway in the spring.

And it is my view that our current fascination with urban alleys has a lot to do with a desire to reconnect with those solid pieces of our past, discarded or hidden but not entirely forgotten. If the city is a site of destruction and renewal, a plastic locale in continual shift, then alleys may

be seen to reflect entropy and slow change. There is something solid, something tangible and corporeal and organic, about a somnolent urban alley lined with ancient wooden garages sagging gently on their sills in the afternoon heat, or flowing with forgotten bits of the city's passage after a rain.

Alleys are the causeway of the city's memory.

Philosopher's Walk III: Night

2006 07 23

The secret lifting wind on these evenings buoys me
above the houses and streets and into the radiant night
shooting stars bright purple iris emblazoned light
longing cricket longing me roadside grass swish night air.
(*"Night Air"*, 1999)

In deep summer the night is rich and alive, and the city smells of the day's heat still rising from the pavements, the air thick with asphalt and lake murk. Here in the Junction the night is cleaved by the crashing of train cars shunting in the rail yards until eleven, the drone of air conditioners, intermittent radios, raccoon snufflings. In the bright lights of a parking lot at Runnymede, moths and mayflies immolate themselves, their carapaces dropping onto the roofs of overheated cars and into unguarded open-topped soft drinks. The marble moon rides high, and we glide upon it, deep into the night.

When I was a child we lived in east Riverdale, already a nascent Little India, several blocks east of Gerrard Square. Sometimes at night, if my father was working a late shift, he would wake us upon his return so we could walk together through side streets and back alleys and through a hole in the fence beside the railway tracks, to the shopping centre to buy groceries at the 24-hour supermarket. At midnight people's voices were muted, muttered, smoke curling like turbans above their shadowed heads, their bodies disappearing into the darkness of the laneway. The lights in the Miracle Mart were overbright, the meat cutters surreal, bloody boogeymen who grinned and shouted '*kalimera!*' at my father to goad him into an argument over the best way to wield the blade. We would return home as the darkness turned toward dawn, in the deepest hours before the subway trains awakened and called out in high, primordial voices from the Greenwood yards.

At night the city tilts toward stillness, but seems to move faster than during the day. It is dreamlike, drunken, like biking rapidly over pavement between streetlights and muddled shadows, like waking to find the moon riding away with your memories of loss and longing. At night it is possible for sounds to be amplified across the entire city; gunshots, catcalls, guttural cries of grief or pleasure, all echoing between buildings and bouncing above the ravines, transmitted through the singing rail lines or carried along the electrical wires, the city a single field of energy coursing with light and dark matter.

Until dawn, when we awaken and find ourselves fallen, and drown ourselves in the indistinct currents of the day.

Philosopher's Walk IV: City of Fear

2006 07 24

Returning from school, I'd start calling half a mile from home. Never timed how long it took. Fast. Incredibly fast. He'd be leaping for my face within a minute – long before any human being would even have heard my calling.

So there he'd be, leaping for my face. While I was ducking, spinning, weaving. Once in a while, he'd knock me over. There was no avoiding it then – his tongue slathering my face from brow to jaw.

Rocky wasn't my dog. Not officially. His people lived over a hundred yards down the street. We were inseparable, though. We were best friends. And that's saying something, since I used to run with all the dogs in the neighbourhood. I used to run with the dogs – and the dogs all ran with me.

And there was the game. One kid would play quarry while the rest of us gave chase. Whooping and barking. A good quarry might climb over stone fences, or scramble up trees, fanning our excitement to total pitch. The excitement of chasing.

There's no better game. Like fox-hunting without anyone hurt. Mostly. Except for the final time we played. This new kid on the block wasn't familiar with our game, and the dogs started chasing him before we'd had a chance to select quarry. The rest of us joined the chase. We shouldn't have – and we wouldn't have, had we thought about it. But we didn't think. We were too excited to think. It was unmistakable, exaggerated, his feeling himself set upon by a wild pack – his feeling in fear for his life. It boosted our excitement, enhanced the game – that, for him, our game was real. We knew better – but we didn't stop to think. It was too exciting.

He did get hurt. Not by us, of course. We were nice kids and nice dogs, all of us. He just fell badly.

That was the final time we played the game. There followed too much outrage, and punishment, for us to keep playing the game. There was too much outrage in my old neighbourhood, in the city I grew up. Which, obviously, wasn't Toronto.

Of course it wasn't Toronto. Not any of it could have happened here. Here, but for designated exceptions, dogs must invariably be leashed. Also, since fairly recently, some breeds may only go muzzled. And, come to thinking, some breeds may not breed.

Couldn't happen here. No way. It was horrifying, from my current, 30 year later Toronto perspective. Wouldn't even have remembered any of it, from my Toronto perspective. So reminiscent – so redolent of Lord of the Flies. Best forgotten.

I wouldn't have remembered, but for something quite odd happening not too long ago.

What happened was I came out the front door right onto a pit-bull running around our front yard. Had a collar on, but nothing else – no leash, no tags, no nothing. Anyway, I froze. Too scared to run. And no ignoring realizing my reaction to the pit-bull in the front yard was identical to the reaction of that new kid on the block.

Continents away and over 30 years later – but just about identical. Except that he, at least, had run.

Anyway, Amy came out the house and fearlessly proceeded approaching the animal. At which point, nudged by silly gender protective impulses, I did as well. We then brought the animal into our house. Subsequent to which, following numerous adventures – including running the streets with the animal on a makeshift leash, hoping it would lead us to its home – and with telephone help from the Toronto Humane Society, there resulted a fortunate, tearful reunion between the escaped animal and its fraught people.

But the episode got me thinking – and remembering events over 30 years past. Because, back then, I would not have frozen. Not in reaction to circumstances involving a dog. Absolutely not in reaction to any dog providing every cue, every indication of being lost and excited – but by no means whatsoever aggressive. Yet, nevertheless, I froze. How come? What happened to bring about such change?

Living in Toronto over the intervening years is what happened. For here, in Toronto, a dog slipping its leash signifies danger as definitively and more surely than a convict escaping jail. There's no opportunity to acquire cue discriminating familiarity – as between, for instance, a curious and an aggressive dog. No chance. We have defined off-leash dogs to signify hazard and danger. Consequently, we are bound to over-react – regardless what cues dogs might provide. We have become far too dogmatic to pick up on cues.

Trouble is, of course, that not picking up cues and chronic over reacting do nothing to enhance safety. Just the opposite. Impoverishing experience to such extent transforms all unplanned event, however innocuous, into hazard.

Admittedly, our game – over 30 years ago, in Haifa – wasn't really innocuous. But the hazards of excessive safety are greater. I can conceive no greater. There's no rescuing from mortality via eliminating danger. What follows from excessive safety is failing to live.

Philosopher's Walk V: Toronto the Wild and Weedy

2006 07 26

A kind of latter-day class snobbery exists among Toronto arborists and horticulturalists with respect to the city's flora. Some of Toronto's most robust and abundant trees and plants are subject to regular pogroms or are, at the very least, viciously impugned. Two of the city's common trees -- Manitoba maple (*Acer negundo*, also known as box elder), and Chinese sumach (*Ailanthus glandulosa*, also known as "tree of heaven"), are widely denigrated as "garbage" or "junk" plants. Indeed, the City of Toronto's Urban Forestry Services Department [10] has issued a Fact Sheet[11] (.pdf format) explaining how to eradicate Manitoba maples, and the Task Force to Bring Back the Don laments the presence of the "invasive" Chinese sumach. The City is slightly kinder to weeds (dandelions, creeping charlie, broad-leafed plantain, and the like), which it describes as "annoying interlopers", claims are symptomatic of unhealthy lawns, and suggests choking out by hand.

But we are faced with an urban conundrum. The City's "get a free tree"[12] program, in which City crews will plant a tree on your front lawn or boulevard within the City-owned road allowance, is commendable but does not in practice keep up very well with the aging of Toronto's urban forest. There are also numerous areas of Toronto where neither the City nor

property owners pay much attention to the character or health of trees and plants. And it is in these areas that the very "garbage trees" and "weeds" the City maligns are best suited to thrive. These areas include abandoned properties and lots under construction or demolition, the fringes of parking lots, alleyways, industrial scrubland, passages along the city's major roads, unmaintained ravines and parkland, and rail corridors. It is not that these areas might not be improved if they supported whole glades of domestic species -- sugar and silver maples, red oak, black walnut, honey locust -- native to the mixed deciduous forests that grew here before Toronto did. But the reality is that they do not and perhaps (because the soil is disturbed or contaminated by chemicals or concrete and rubble) cannot. And so, at least in the interim, these unkempt spaces are occupied by interloper species that manage to do the same job of contributing oxygen to the air, holding the soil, and providing animal habitat that the elect species would do in the same locations. As naturalist Wayne Grady writes in *Toronto the Wild* (Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1995: 147)[13], "it is in the nature of wild plants to take over waste places, and cities provide a lot of waste places." Accordingly, it is my view that these trees and plants should be valued as ecological placeholders in the same way that farmers in the past valued (and indeed sowed) the clovers that grew in fallow fields between periods of cultivation. I do not suggest the city necessarily encourage the cultivation and tending of Manitoba maples, but that it should not mandate the wholesale eradication of them, either. I would rather see a vacant lot overgrown with Manitoba maples and garlic mustard than one denuded or planted with an inappropriately placed native tree destined to be cut down when the land is converted in five or ten years.

I will admit to a liking for the Chinese sumach. We have two growing in our back garden, and one is highly ornamental, its lower branches silhouetted against the garage like a tree of life. I enjoy their heady, musky scent in June (which the people over at Spacing Wire[14] have reported[15] give rise to the tree's vernacular name, "cum tree"). We also have three Manitoba maples, cutting and cultivating two of them to provide privacy in places no other tree or shrub will grow: an overlooked advantage of the Manitoba maple is that it is nearly impossible to kill, meaning that careful (and regular) pruning will turn it into an attractive and functional hedge. (For the record, we also support more socially acceptable trees -- cedars, several maples, a mulberry, a red ash, and a honey locust, which rub shoulders with the unwashed legions of 'lesser' trees on our 25 by 120 foot city lot.)

I confess a similar admiration for weedy plants as well. While researching this post I discovered that the attractive biennial growing beside our front verandah is Garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), a plant high on the City's list of undesirable weeds. On our front lawn, too, we have cultivated an as-yet unknown (to us, anyway) plant we call (like the Borg) "the meadow", which grows better and more attractively than grass and provides a low jungle for the neighbourhood cats to lie and pounce in. The first year we began gardening seriously, a neighbour (one with a fanatically maintained front garden) asked, incredulously, why we were so carefully transplanting creeping Charlie. And it is not that we do not also grow more usual garden plants, either. We also support an array of echinacea (purple Coneflower), shasta daisies, chrysanthemums which grow as perennials, evening and cowslip primrose, four kinds of iris, lavender (of course, being my namesake), a dozen other kinds of herbs, a climbing rose, and a sweeping mat of different groundcovers. We also provide housing for spreading ornamental plants which have escaped from neighbours on both sides.

On the whole, our view about gardening is faintly Darwinian, in the sense that we grow what the soil will support. And as with most residential properties in Toronto, that can be a tall order between a century's worth of rubble buried beneath a few inches of topsoil and the clay-sand mix that seems to top the shale and limestone that underlie the city's soil strata. To add

to that, Toronto's summer climate can often be characterized as a kind of humid drought which is devastating to plants needing significant amounts of water. In this respect I am warmly inclined toward Wayne Grady's view on weeds, about which he observes,

Clearly, the definition of "weed" is a matter of personal preference and has very little to do with the behaviour of plants in nature. ... [I]t may also be that in the city, where plants have a utility beyond commerce, we can afford to be more tolerant. (ibid.: 146)

I think, also, that it is worth remembering that the favoured plants of childhood are almost always weeds: dandelions, with their golden blush and stalks suitable for making into bracelets and chains; pineapple weed, with its evocative blooms late in the summer; shepherd's purse, named for the little, satchel-like leaves on its stem; bell flowers that look like fairy hats; violets, that seem to grow specifically at a child's-eye view. It seems an erasure and undoing if we wipe out such memories by killing off these plants. Moreover, many of the weeds we chafe and pull at have culinary or medicinal properties and are considered herbs. Plantain^[16], for example, is reportedly used as a herbal remedy because of its mildly astringent and antispetic qualities when the leaves are made into a poultice helpful for bites, rashes, and cuts. Indeed, in Rosemary Aubert's Toronto novel *Free Reign* (Berkeley, 1997), a vagrant ex-Judge living in the Don Valley (who serves as the novel's protagonist) does this very thing in an effort to soothe and heal abrasions and an infection picked up in the polluted river.

I suppose, though, that I do not need to protest too much about the value of weeds. Whether we loathe or tolerate them, they are are likely as termites to stick around.

10. <http://www.toronto.ca/trees/>

11. http://www.toronto.ca/trees/pdfs/Fact_3_Controlling_Invasive_Plants.pdf

12. http://www.toronto.ca/trees/tree_planting.htm

13. <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780921912903>

14. <http://spacing.ca/wire/>

15. <http://spacing.ca/wire/?p=798>

16. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plantago>

Philosopher's Walk VI: The Cat Who Walks by Himself

2006 07 27

Rudyard Kipling wrote, "But the wildest of all the wild animals was the cat. He walked by himself, and all places were alike to him."

Sometimes the wildest of all the wild animals slips in at night, haunted and hungry but wholly self-possessed. He will not stop and rest, but vanishes into the night after eating, after offering us a glimpse of his wild dignity. He is usually one of several visitors, but they each come alone. They seem to leave more often than they arrive.

These aren't hip cats. These aren't cool cats. These cats are strays.
Like a scream in the night. Like children in traffic.

When people ask how many cats live with us, I am never sure how to answer. Two and a half, I'll suggest, before qualifying. Sometimes cats live with us full-time, occupying various roosts and corners of the house, claiming domestic territory as their own. Others sleep inside only in the winter or when it is especially rainy. Still others stop by only to eat, some because they live with our neighbours and others because they are too fearful or feral to enter the house. Still other cats are only ghosts now, the memory of their silent padding and wisps of their hair drifting in the corners of the house long after they have left us in person.

But cats are like that. Don't try to herd them.
Don't try to fix them. Even people won't always be
prisoned in shelters at your whim. Nevermind cats.

Don't interfere. Let them do what comes natural.
Even if you can't.

Fang came to Peter one winter, thin and hungry and wild. For years he seemed to leave more often than he arrived. He would not let us touch him, other than to stroke his head for a moment before he would rear around and warn us with a claw. And yet, when he was hungry he would sit, looking up at Peter with an expectation that became trust and later, love. It didn't matter that his bowl was already full of food. What mattered was Peter's act of filling it.

Most of all. More than anything else. Don't be offended.
They're doing what comes natural. They never fell
from the circle of being. They never fell from grace.
They define it.

After each winter Fang trusted us more. He would sleep beside my head, his purr loud and liquid in his throat. He would lie on the chesterfield between us, kneading and mediating our conversations. But he always made it clear that he belonged to himself, first. And still he seemed to leave more often than he arrived. And after the last winter, he was hit by a car.

Don't interfere. Just take a bit of responsibility.
For it's our traffic they're children in. It's in our
machine they become ghosts.

We buried him and grieved as violets and bellflowers rose over his grave. We felt his presence and his peace, and later, his forgiveness. And we waited, in the ache and the absence of his wild self.

Find the cheapest cat food. Put a small bowl outside
at night. There won't be no population explosion if you do.
What there will be, in time, is a couple of strays
that recognize you. Even appreciate what you do.

And this summer, as the meadow rose into a low jungle, through it and up onto the porch and
into the house walked another small grey cat with green eyes, his bearing pure and self-
possessed. He came to eat as if he had always known where the food would be, and who
would bring it. He waits until we do so, even if the bowl is already full. He won't let us touch
him, other than to stroke his head briefly before he warns us with a claw. And he seems to
leave more often than he arrives.

And that, my friend, will remind you. If not who you
are then perhaps who you might yet be. Despite
everything.

You can't buy grace any cheaper.

(Poem written by Peter Fruchter)
<http://www.electronicsage.org/>

*source: **Reading Toronto** : a city is a book with a 100,000 million poems*

Reading Toronto looks at the city through the eyes of many of its most creative artists and
arts institutions. The growing ubiquity of high-speed Internet connections allows visitors
from around the globe to experience the city in ways never before possible. More than that,
they can contribute their own stories, experiences, and ideas about Toronto. As descriptions of
the city accumulate, we expect that new ways of reading Toronto will emerge.

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