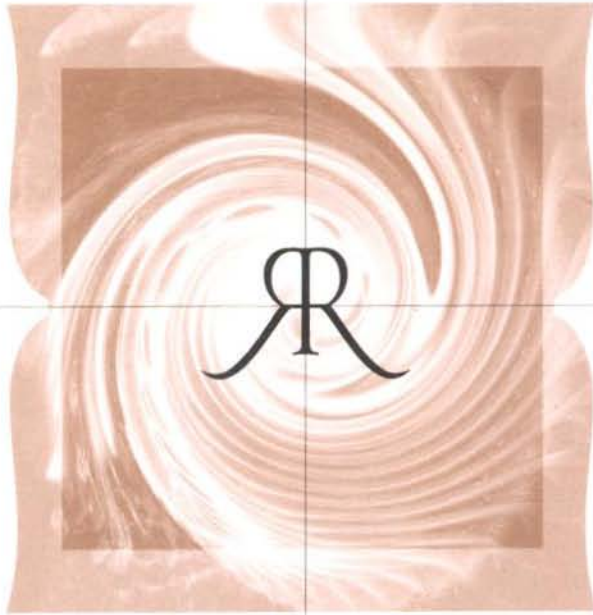


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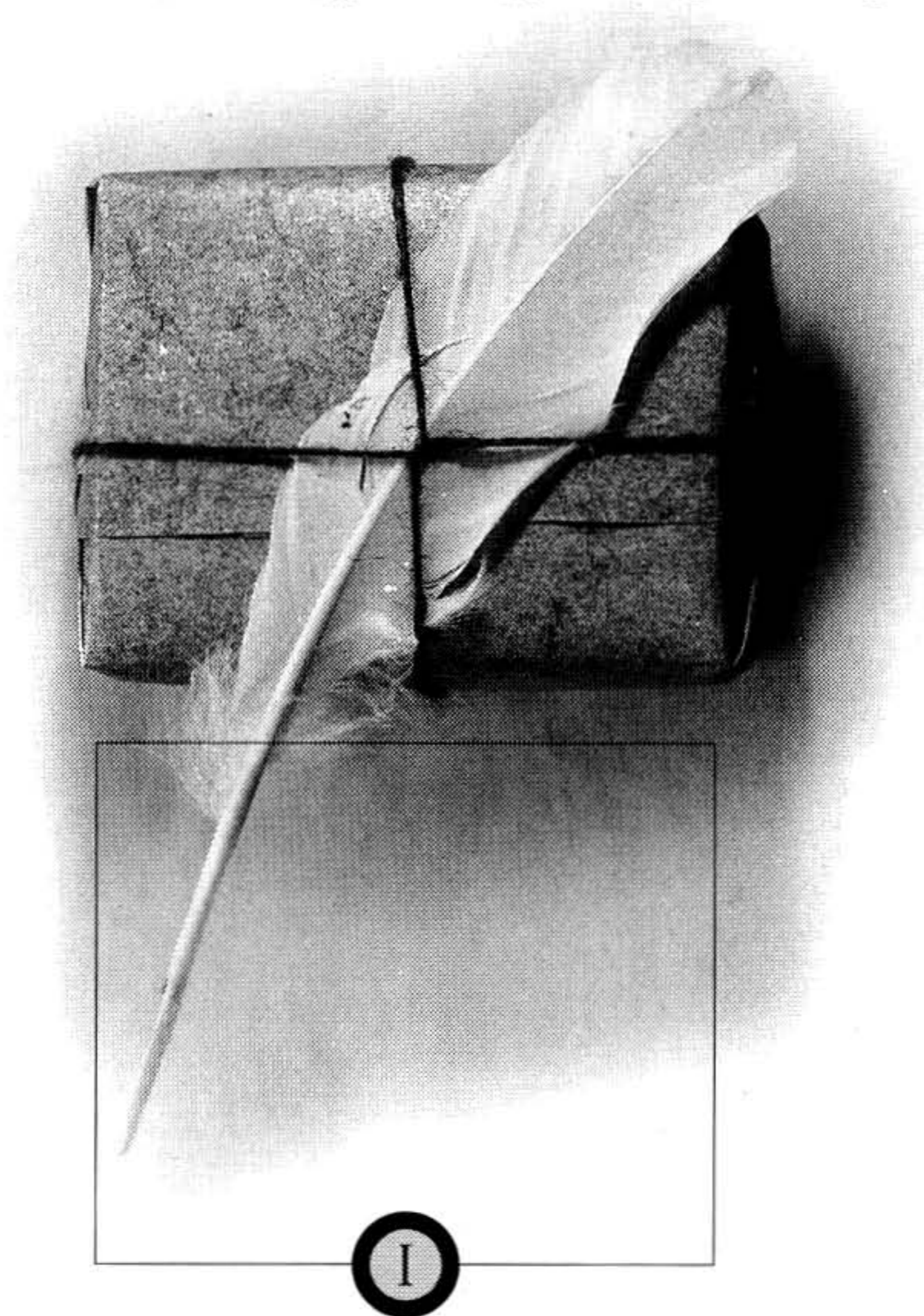
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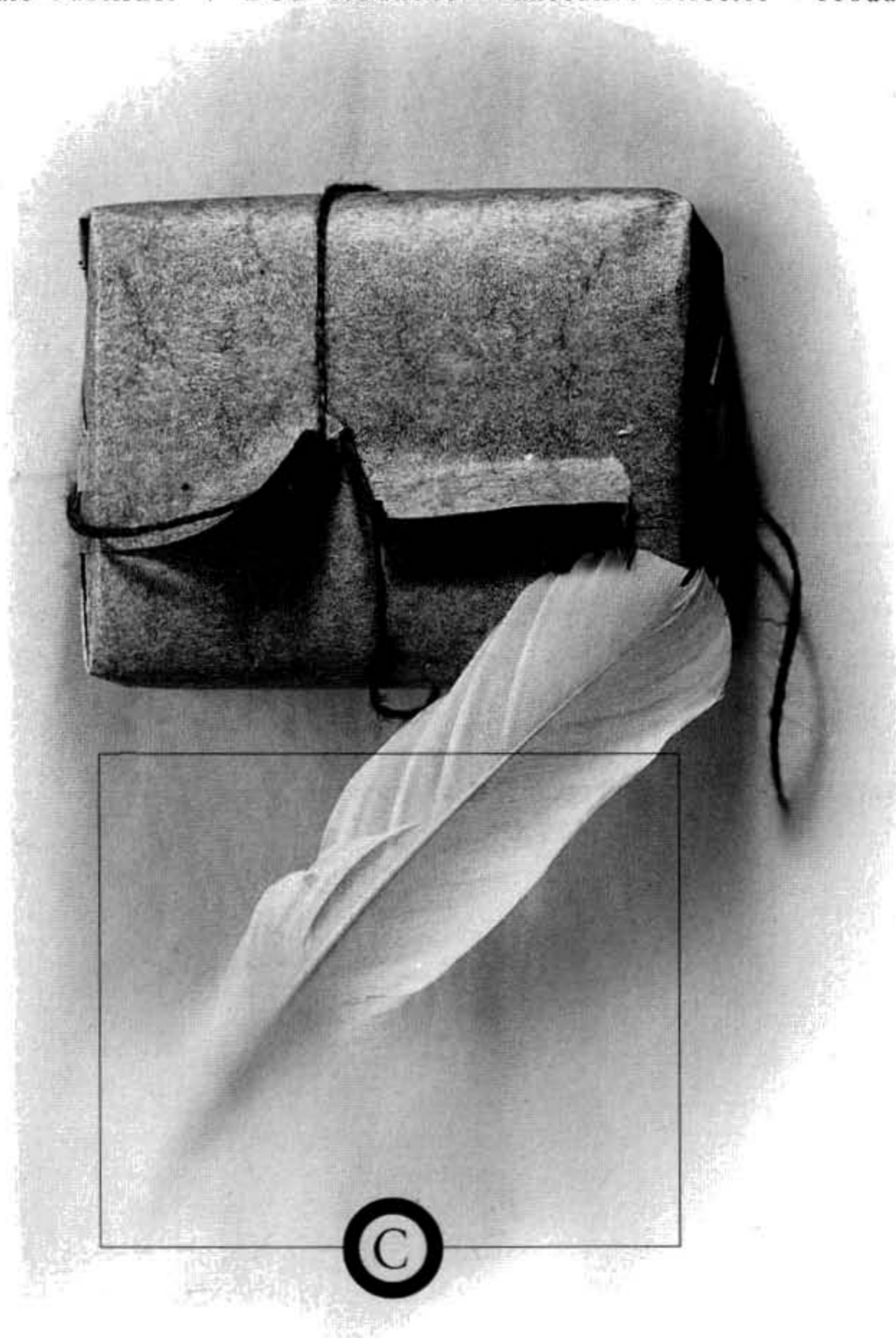


ILLUSTRATED BY DAVE MCKEAN

TEXT BY RACHEL POLLACK

INTRODUCED BY NEIL GAIMAN

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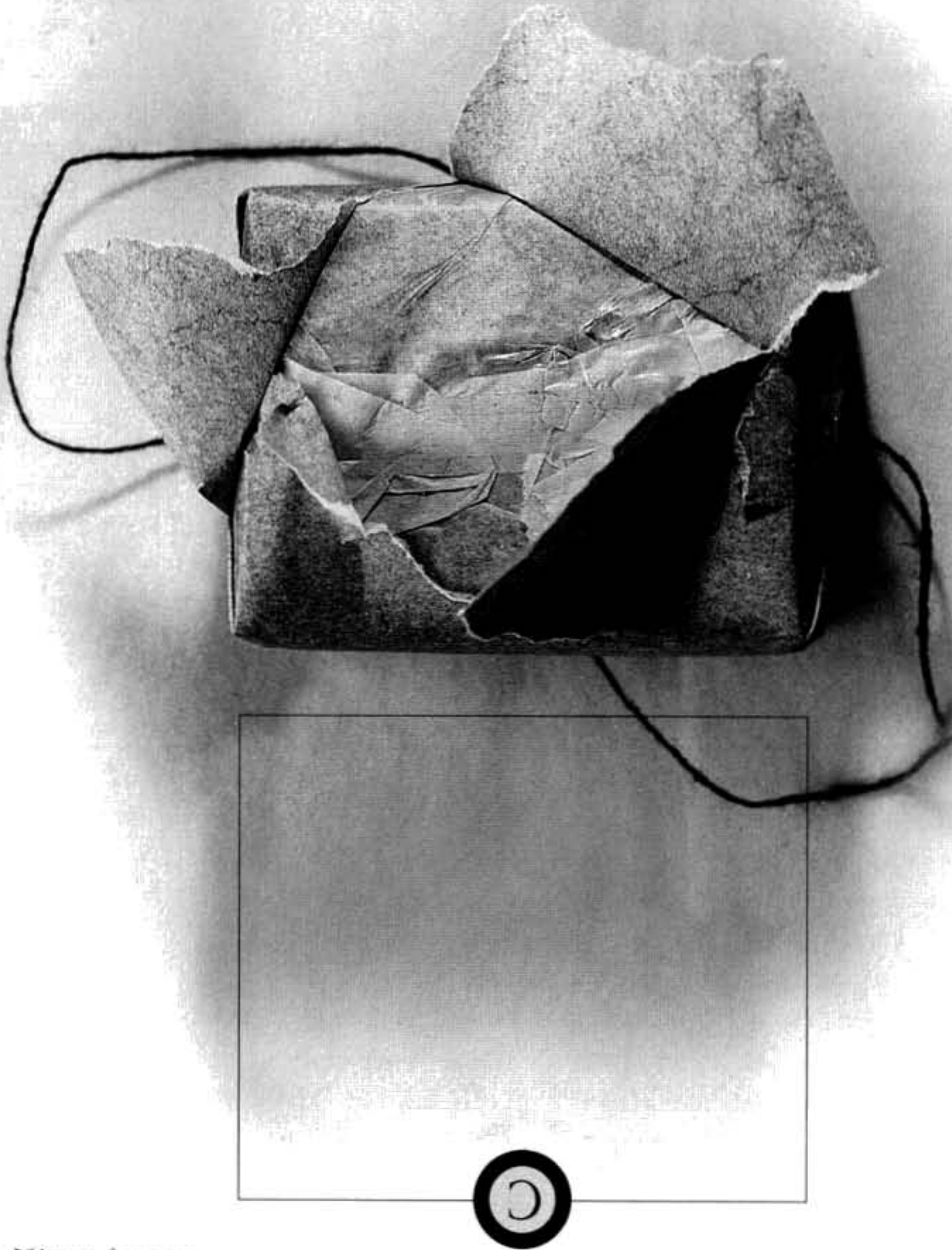
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i n t r o d u c t i o n
Neil Gaiman

Shuffle the cards. Lay them out. Turn them over.
Find a place to begin. Let's see...

The year was 1985, and I think we all felt a vague sense of anticlimax of the kind we shall probably not see again until 2002, and I didn't know very much about the Tarot.

I was in Birmingham, England, which is an odd place for anything to begin; after all, Birmingham is one of my least favorite cities in the world. I like the people well enough: but it was in Birmingham, several years before this, that the madman tried to strangle me; it was on arriving in Birmingham on this 1985 trip that I'd stepped over the knifed body at the top of the escalator, coming out of New Street Station. It's a rare trip to Birmingham that doesn't have a small disaster connected with it. It was September, and I was attending the British Fantasy Convention, and I had with me a small hardback copy of *Salvador Dali's Tarot*. I was going to interview the author of the text that accompanied the Tarot.

The author was a lady named Rachel Pollack: tall, fey, husky and elegant.

Pick out the card for Rachel: the Priestess, perhaps, or the Empress.

It was at that same convention that I met Alan Moore. He showed me Xeroxes of the first four issues of a comic he was doing with Dave Gibbons, called *WATCHMEN*, and I was stunned. I got Alan to show me what a comic script looked like, an action that was, in retrospect, going to have many ramifications for my future.

Lay down a card for Alan. Still somewhere in the Major Arcana: the Hermit, or the Magician.

I went, with Rachel, from Birmingham to Milford-on-Sea, a little English seaside town with no distinguishing marks or features, for a week-long writers' workshop. And it was there that I had my first Tarot reading (not by Rachel, but a year later, from author Mary Gentle), and it was there that I learned most of what I know that made me any kind of halfway decent writer, and it was there that I got to be good friends with Rachel. We had a common fondness for really weird arcana. She was the only other person I'd met who knew the details of what happens when the Messiah comes back (all the Jewish men have a party in a huge tent and eat Behemoth and Leviathan) and she knew details I'd never heard of (all the Jewish women are out the back doing the washing up and having baby boys). She told me the coolest necrophilia joke I'd ever heard. She read comics, and we talked about the relationship between comics and the Tarot. She was also, in company with critic John Clute and author Gwyneth Jones, the person from whom I learned the most, about reading and about writing, over the course of that week.

Milford ended. Rachel returned to Amsterdam. I went home, to my wife and my toddler and my baby. And 1985 moved from environment into memory.

1986 was a year of odd coincidences and strange meetings. In the summer of 1986 I met an artist named Dave McKean. (He was still at art school, but he was, no doubt about it, an artist.)

Dave is, and was, dark-haired, bearded, pony-tailed, with sharp eyes and a sharp sense of humor. He's a gentle person, very practical, very funny, who does not suffer fools, gladly or otherwise.

A card for Dave? That's a hard one. Dave is, without any doubt, The Artist, if ever there was one, in archetype and reality. Perhaps The World...

We got on well, Dave and I, and began to work together.

In 1986 Rachel returned from Amsterdam for the next Milford writers' workshop, and I brought a story I was working on which would wind up being called *Violent Cases* when Dave drew it. More Tarot conversations; a Bill Sienkiewicz Superman pinup in, if memory serves, *ACTION COMICS* #400, prompted a conversation about doing a Tarot of DC Comics characters.

Rachel spoke of doing a Tarot of her own, with artists she admired — Bill Sienkiewicz, for example, or Dave McKean. A few years later she spoke to Dave, but nothing ever came of it — her vision was too personal, and she eventually wound up realizing the only person who could draw it was her. (It's called *The Shining Woman Tarot*.)

Flip the cards. Feel them in your hands. Sandman turns up in 1988. Dave paints — or builds — or photographs — the covers. Mike Dringenberg drew the first Sandman Tarot card, one of the illustrations for the text piece in *SANDMAN* #8.

Rachel came to England from Amsterdam while I was working on the *BOOKS OF MAGIC* limited series, and she helped me with Madame Xanadu's four-card reading in Book Two. (We went into a small Tarot & Suchlike Esoterica shop in Camden, to pick out a card set for me, and I found myself feeling like I'd just gone into a record shop with someone who, to my surprise, turned out to be one of the Beatles, as Rachel modestly admitted her identity to the lady behind the counter, and signed autographs.)

I designed four Tarot cards for *BOOKS OF MAGIC*, which Scott Hampton painted beautifully in the comic, and I discovered the joy of designing Tarot cards, a bug which bites and never quite lets go.

Every now and then, people would send me letters, physically or electronically, suggesting that we do a Sandman Tarot — some people would even list their suggestions for characters. I'd pass their suggestions on, but nothing came of it.

Moments of convergence and confluence. Cards stirred, and brought together. Events and actions and people...

Rachel wins the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Best SF Novel of the Year (for her remarkable book *Unquenchable Fire*), moves from Amsterdam to New York State, and, through a series of odd coincidences of her own, becomes the writer for DC's *DOOM PATROL*, a title in the nascent Vertigo line, succeeding the irreplaceable Grant Morrison. People at DC know that Rachel is an award-winning writer of mythic science fiction. Nobody knows that she is a goddess of Tarot.

Sharon Kattuah, in charge of generating DC's own merchandising program, is a Tarot reader of old — a dark-eyed lady who, dressed appropriately, would not look out of place in a Romany caravan. We met for the first time in Atlanta in 1993 at the Diamond Distributors conference, where we sat on high stools and drank squashed fruit drinks. We talked about *Stuff We'd Love To See* — a statue based on P. Craig Russell's drawing of Dream in *SANDMAN* #50, a Death Temporary Tattoo, the silver ankh (with a long thin Death minicomic in the box), and then I mentioned the idea of doing a Vertigo Tarot...

I did not know that Sharon was a Tarot person, although I found out very quickly. I certainly didn't expect her to go into high, dark places, and persuade some very skeptical people in suits that a Vertigo Tarot really would be a cool, practical idea, and really, people honestly would buy it. But she did. (She also made all the Atlanta Suggestions except the ankh into reality, even the Death Temporary Tattoos.)

I mentioned to her that Rachel was an honest-to-goodness Tarot Authority, and sent a pile of books on the Tarot to Karen Berger, Vertigo Empress (which gives us Karen's card); and in the autumn of 1993, the four of us, Karen, Sharon, Rachel and I, found ourselves in a hotel suite in New York, surrounded by a strange collection of Tarot Cards — the Shakespearian Tarot, The Mythic Tarot, The Amusing Cats Tarot, The Nouvelle Cuisine Tarot and suchlike, saying things like "Well, if we're going to do it, I hope it'll be better than this one. I like their packaging job, though."

The room was on the 24th floor, and I was astonished to find that the windows opened all the way, something which seemed deeply unlikely in suicidal high-rise New York. (Two weeks later I read in the newspaper, with a grim told-you-so satisfaction, that someone had just thrown themselves out of that very selfsame window.)

We all immediately agreed that John Constantine was the Fool. After that our opinions were spirited and varied...

The actual process, of deciding which of the Major Arcana should be which character, was one it would be impossible to describe without destroying the sense of magic and mystery which is essential to all true Tarot decks. It is possible that wing-footed Hermes, in his guise as Thoth of the Egyptians, revealed himself to us, and suggested strongly that, for example, Black Orchid should be Strength. It is equally possible that some cards were only agreed upon after one or more of the four of us threatened to throw him-, her-, themselves-, out of the only functional 24th-floor window in New York. Let your imagination be your guide here.

Rachel took our notes and conclusions, and sent them, together with background of her own, across the wide Atlantic Sea to Dave.

Dave McKean began work on the cards. He was fascinated by the idea of creating Tarot images using the computer — the blending of streams and traditions, the mixture of old and new. And, as printouts of the cards began to appear, the rest of us became increasingly excited. What we were getting was indeed a Vertigo Tarot, but, more important, it was a contemporary Tarot. A Tarot perfectly appropriate for the cold and lonely end of the twentieth century. They were as strange, as beautiful, as detailed and as accessible as we had hoped.

Rachel's text is entertaining, informative, and educational — a perfect accompaniment to the cards themselves.

And it would never have happened, at least, not in this form, were it not for a succession of odd coincidences and confluences, of convergences and characters. Of whom, I suppose, in retrospect, I am also one. As, now, are you...

Pick a card. Any card.





THE VERTIGO TAROT
Rachel Pollack

The Tarot is an ancient teaching disguised as a game. The Tarot is a fortune-telling device based on universal symbols. The Tarot is an art form used for fortune telling. The Tarot is a game disguised as ancient teachings...

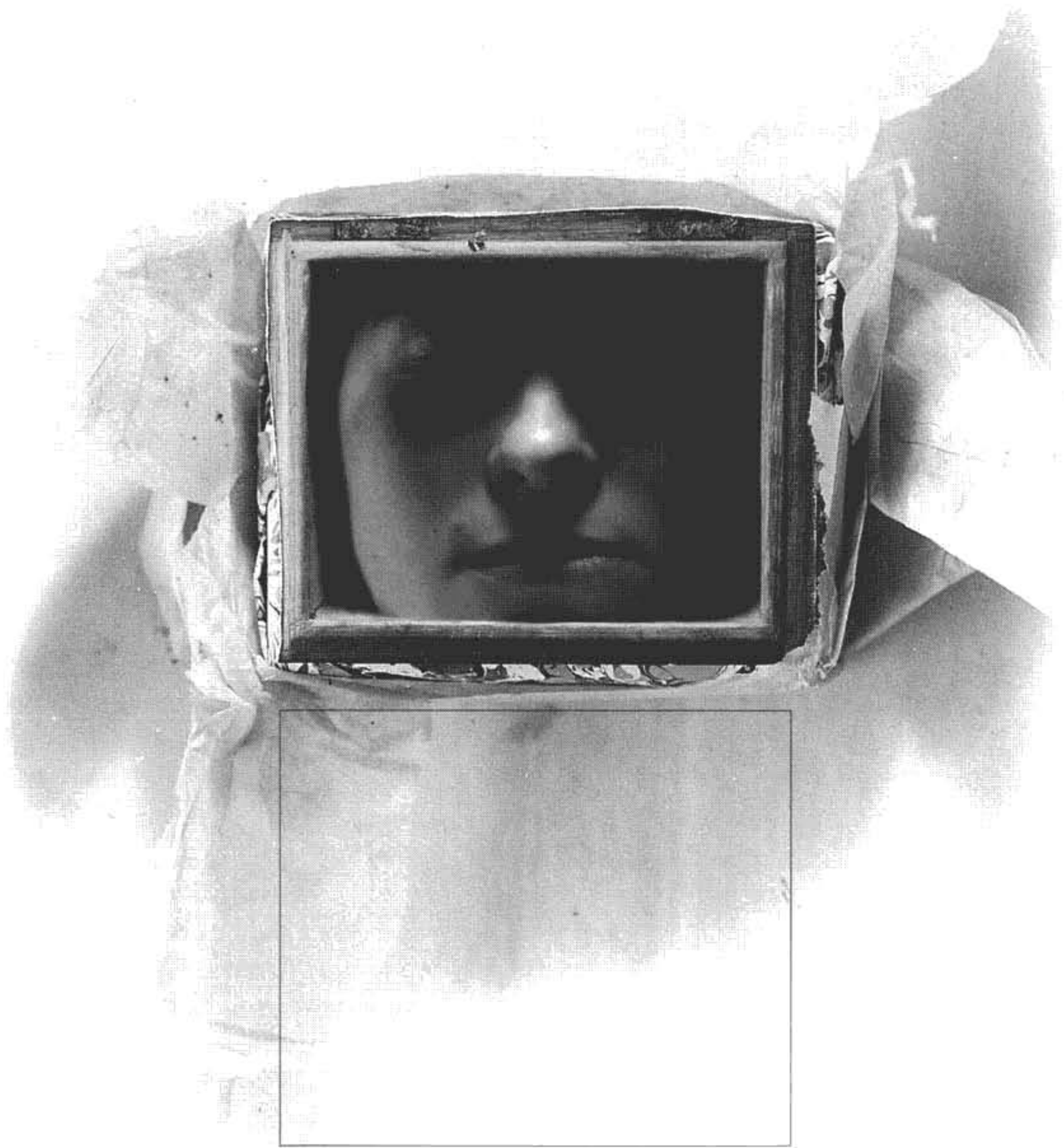
People studying the Tarot love to debate its origin. Hardline rationalists insist that the Tarot is nothing more than a card game, and only a fool (the first card in the deck is called the Fool) would fall for the idea that it comes from some secret source. Most people, however, prefer to think of secrets. Since the late eighteenth century, many sweeping theories have arisen regarding the Tarot's beginnings (how fitting for a Tarot based on comics, a medium where every character has a "secret origin"). People have claimed the Tarot originated in ancient Egypt, Atlantis, or with a secret convocation of spiritual masters in the Moroccan city of Fez in the year 1200. Some have suggested that the Tarot comes out of matriarchal witchcraft, Tantric Goddess worship, Romany (Gypsy) lore, Jewish mysticism, Chaldean astrology, as well as many other sources.

Unfortunately for these theories and their supporters, very little evidence exists to support them. What we *know* about the Tarot is that it first appeared in Italy around 1450 (playing cards of any kind are mentioned in Europe around fifty or so years earlier). The earliest known Tarot decks are handpainted cards presented as a wedding present between the Sforza and Visconti families (the Viscontis ruled Milan).

Whether or not it was anything else, the early Tarot certainly was a game, the ancestor of bridge and whist. The Italians called the game *tarocchi*; when the French adopted it they named it *les tarots*. People still play it in southern Europe and North Africa.

And yet... Certain images in the Tarot seem to cry out for a symbolic, even an esoteric, interpretation. Death, the Devil, Judgment—these all suggest religion. The Magician implies occult wisdom and practices. In another way, so does the Hermit. And what of the image of a Female Pope (predecessor of the modern card, the High Priestess)? Does that ring of heresy? In the 13th century a sect called the Guglielmites predicted that Christ would return in the year 1300 and usher in a golden age, led by women popes. As the new century approached, they elected a woman named Maria Visconti as the first woman pope. The church put down the heresy and burned Maria at the stake. Some 150 years later, the first known Tarot deck appeared at a wedding of that same Visconti family. And the Hanged Man, that mysterious image of a man dangling by one foot—he may have originated in the Italian practice of hanging traitors upside down, but if so, why does his face appear so radiant? The evidence for mysterious sources for the Tarot lies primarily in the symbolism. For example, The Hindu god Vishnu is often shown with four arms, holding a disk, a lotus, a club, and a conch. At least two of these, the disk and the club, correspond to two of the four suits in the early Tarot deck. Something more directly European—many myths and allegories exist around the image of the Holy Grail, Christ's cup from the Last Supper. Often the stories also tell of a sword, a lance, and a disk. These four objects are exactly those of the four suits (the lance and the club are variations of the same suit, now called Wands). Did the Tarot designers borrow them from the Grail stories, or did both derive from secret symbolism that has been lost to us?

The most compelling connections for the Tarot lie with the complex system of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah. Along with the four suits, the Tarot contains twenty-two trump cards. Kabbalah bases much of its ideas on the secret meaning of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Those four suits also find a reflection in Kabbalah. Kabbalah describes four "worlds," or stages, by which God created the cosmos. Each Tarot suit contains ten numbered cards, Ace through Ten. In each of the four Kabbalistic worlds we find a Tree of Life with ten energy centers known as *sephiroth*. The suits also contain four Court Cards: Page, Knight, Queen, and King. Kabbalah (and Judaism in general) places a great deal of emphasis on God's four-letter name, known in English as the Tetragrammaton.



There is only one problem with all these examples of symbolic links between the Tarot and esoteric systems. No actual evidence exists to support any of the theories. In all the many thousands of pages of Kabbalistic texts we find no mention of anything resembling the Tarot.

The Tarot deck emerged at the time of the Renaissance. The intellectuals and artists of this time were very taken with esoteric ideas and symbolism. We find images similar to Tarot in alchemy and allegorical street processions. Possibly, the cards began as a game, but the designers found it natural to base the game on spiritual and even secret ideas. And maybe the Tarot does not belong to any particular system. Maybe this lack of any hard ideology is what gives it its stunning resiliency, so that all systems, all traditions, all mythologies—including the growing mythology of a certain line of comic books—can shine so wondrously in this simple pack of cards.

The Kabbalistic interpretation of Tarot, and in fact, the entire occult tradition, began in the late 18th century when a French occultist named Antoine Court de Gebelin proclaimed that the “Book of Thoth,” the supposed book of all knowledge from ancient Egypt, had not been lost after all, but existed in plain sight—as the lowly Tarot. In the late 19th century, another French occultist, Eliphas Levi (originally Alphonse Louis Constant) carried de Gebelin’s ideas further, with more complete links to Kabbalah.

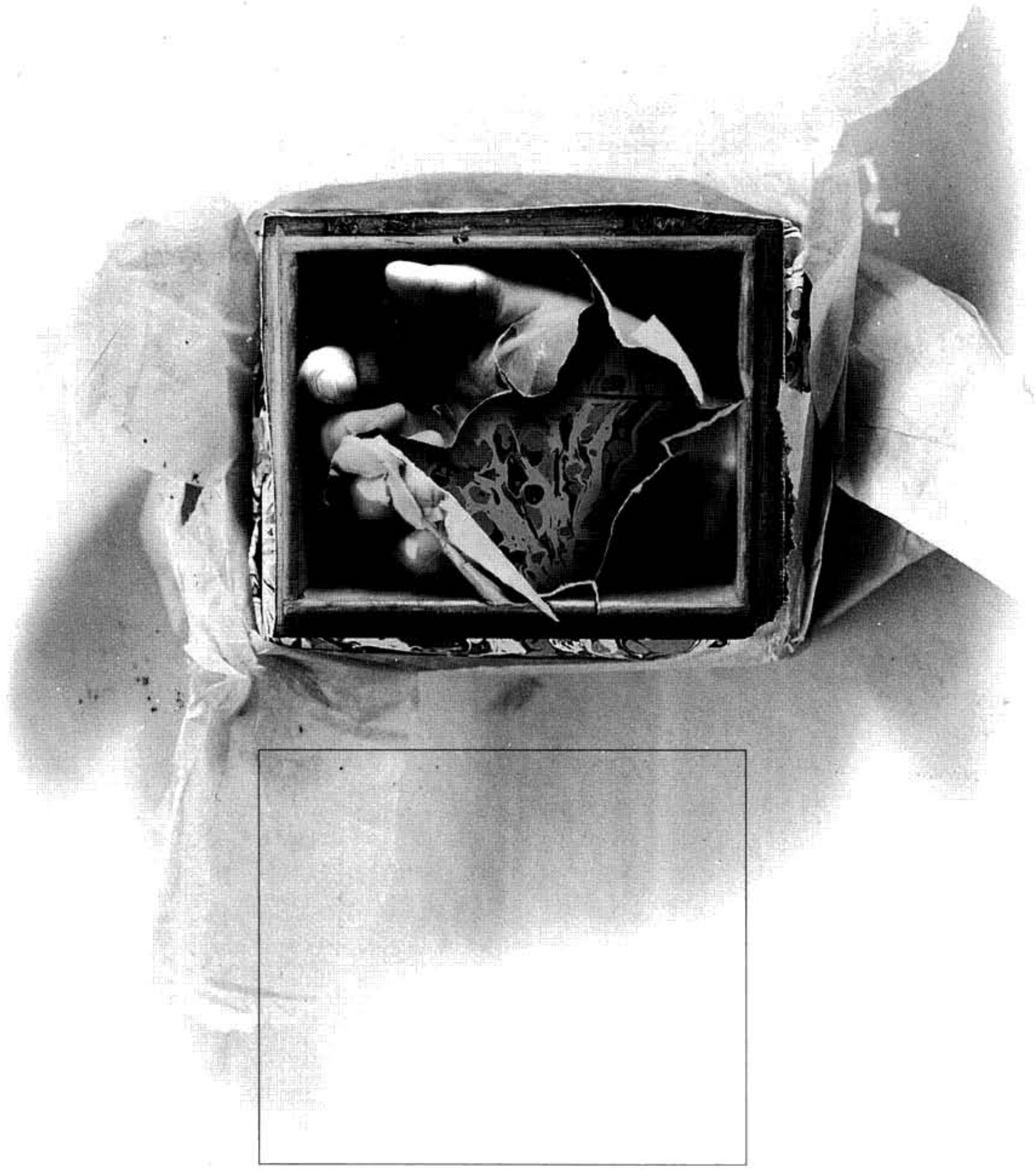
The links became fully established at the end of the 19th century with the work of a secret occult group called the Order of the Golden Dawn, based on Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. A group of ritual magicians, the Order used complex ceremonies and magical devices to raise themselves to supposedly godlike levels. William Butler Yeats was the most famous member, but there were many other artists, writers, politicians, and even scientists. The Golden Dawn lasted for about fifteen years, but its influence continues even today, not just in its actual ideas and practices, but also in its very image. When we see groups in robes casting mysterious spells in comics, or movies, we really are looking at a debased version of the Order of the Golden Dawn. As part of their work, they developed a vast system linking every Tarot card with Kabbalah, astrology, angels, demons, names of Gods, etc. The astrological attributions on the trump cards of the Vertigo Tarot are based (with variations) on the work of the Golden Dawn.

Today, the Tarot draws on this complicated occult tradition, but the uses and ideas have expanded. Modern Tarot creators have linked the cards to various cultures (Native American, Persian, Mayan, Celtic, Voodoo, and many others), specific mythologies (Arthurian, Norse, etc.), abstract pictures designed to induce psychological states, art for art’s sake, goddess worship, alchemy, nature, herbal medicine, and science fiction—to name a few.

Once we separate the Tarot from fixed ideologies, we can begin to look at it as a special work of the imagination. Our culture has a certain bias against images and fantasies. We *believe* in systematic intellectual constructions; we look doubtfully at stories. But stories and images carry a power that can outlast the most complex philosophical systems. That power is the ability to touch us at a deep level we cannot explain in normal terms. We feel it in a tingling throughout our bodies, in a sense of pleasure, or fear, or simply awe. We recognize a truth we cannot pigeonhole or explain. The Tarot works because when we take away all the books, and theories, and linkages, what remains are the pictures. Provocative, mysterious, making use of all those traditions without ever getting stuck in them.

And something else about the Tarot. We can shuffle it. The Tarot resembles a comic book in that it contains pictures showing characters doing things. Turn them over one by one, or set them down by number, and a story may emerge (this is particularly true of the trump cards, but it can hold as well for the four suits). Unlike a comic book, however, the cards are not physically attached to each other. We can create a whole new book just by rearranging the cards.

We can learn a great deal about the cards by looking at their sequence. For example, the fact that the Devil, card 15 of the twenty-two trump cards, follows Temperance, number 14, and precedes the Tower, 16, tells us something about the Devil’s “meaning.”



This book, like most others, examines the cards one by one. But once we have done all that, we can take the deck, mix the cards, and then look at them in a whole new way. And new relationships, new stories, will spring to life in front of us.

The great Italian writer Italo Calvino called the Tarot “a machine for telling stories.” He described it this way in the afterword to his book *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. The narrator of the novel tells how he and a group of travelers, all unknown to each other, find themselves stranded in a castle. A curse prevents any of them from speaking, but a Tarot deck lies at hand. Choosing certain cards and laying them down one by one—like the panels of a comic—each traveler tells his tale. Only, we do not actually learn what each traveler wanted to say. Instead, we get the narrator’s *interpretation* of the pictures.

Longtime readers of the Vertigo comic *Sandman* may recognize a resemblance to the *Sandman* story “Worlds’ End.” There, too, a group of stranded travelers tell stories to each other. There is one important difference, however. The travelers in the *Sandman* story can speak. By using words, they can make their stories more precise (though in fact, like all stories, these may convey messages the speaker never consciously intended). Comic books have words. Tarot cards do not. The situation of Calvino’s travelers in itself resembles a Tarot reading. No one can say definitively just what message a Tarot reading is telling us. We can only point to certain interpretations—stories—implied by the pictures. Thus, the truth of a Tarot reading does not depend on any absolute set of meanings. Instead, we create that truth, through the play between the pictures, the facts of our lives, and the instincts of our imaginations.

Vertigo too explores the possibilities of story. Many of the Vertigo titles have their roots in mainstream super-hero comics, with characters who sometimes go all the way back to comics’ so-called “Golden Age” of the ‘30s and ‘40s. But just as Dave McKean’s art is more complex and sophisticated than the kind of pictures we’re used to seeing in standard comics, so Vertigo has opened the way for contemporary innovative approaches to fantasy and characterization.

Any thoughts that comics and Tarot cards make an odd mix, or that a comic book Tarot somehow belittles the Tarot’s ancient wisdom, would probably stem first of all from the habit of not taking comics seriously. Of course, we also should remember that many people will dismiss the Tarot itself as trash, and see a comic book Tarot as a strange alliance of two kinds of nonsense. Happily, these kinds of assumptions have begun to change. One of the great openings of our time is the willingness to look at despised parts of our culture, especially those considered childish, or ignorant. It’s no coincidence that the modern blossoming of Tarot has taken place in exactly the same time period, the last thirty years, as the resurgence of comic books.

Both Tarot and comics affect us so powerfully because of the immediacy of their form. Whether they’re used for storytelling or symbolic ideas, pictures impress their intensity on us. This is partly why many religious traditions have used sequential pictures to educate or inspire. Hindu comic books teach the stories of the gods, a group of characters very similar to American super-heroes. Religious groups in America publish comics from the Bible, often with more of an emphasis on mighty deeds (Noah leading the animals, David killing Goliath, Jesus raising the dead) than any moral teachings. In France some years ago I went to look at a small country church dating back to the Middle Ages. All around the walls a series of sequential pictures—comic-book panels—told the gospel story of the life of Jesus. There was no narration or dialogue, but we can imagine the priest supplying the missing elements.

The legend mentioned earlier of the Tarot’s origin in Morocco in the year 1200 tells us more about the power of pictures than it does about history. According to the story, a group of spiritual masters from around the world met in the city of Fez. Despite their various nationalities, they shared a great esoteric system of knowledge, originally from Atlantis according to some versions. Unfortunately, the sages knew that this universal knowledge was in danger. The world was fragmenting, and soon the splits between all the different cultures would make it impossible to retain the genuine teachings. Every society would adopt its own version. Each tradition would get some things right,



but other things wrong, and still other things would become covered over by local superstition. The sages debated what to do and finally came up with an answer. They would encode their wisdom into pictures, using precise symbols disguised as a card game. The uninitiated would play the game, but wiser people would know to look at the symbols. And when all the teachings had become lost, or confused, the card game would carry the true knowledge forward, available for those with the wisdom to know, and to understand.

The links between comic books and myth, even religion, are much greater than many people realize. Many people studying mythology or mysticism might trace their interest back to such “cosmic” comic books as Jack Kirby’s *New Gods*, or some of the early versions of *Dr. Strange*. Many of the Vertigo titles have deliberately mined esoteric ideas and images for their storylines. For example, *The Sandman* is famous for its arcane lore from many countries. The writer, Neil Gaiman, has said that he is not an esotericist, that he simply reads widely. In other words, he does not follow any ideology or system. He follows stories.

Another Vertigo writer, Grant Morrison, often uses esoteric ideas in his storylines. In particular, he borrows images and concepts from the same Kabbalah which Court de Gebelin, Eliphas Levi, and the Order of the Golden Dawn, described as the secret origin of Tarot. Morrison has, in fact, used Tarot cards in a number of his comics. We can find similar examples in the work of any number of other Vertigo writers.

The deepest connection between Tarot and comics may stem from a common source, that of shamanism. Probably the oldest form of religion, shamanism is a loose term (the actual word “shaman” comes from the Tungus people of Siberia) for very direct experiences of ecstasy and magic. Shamans are found all over the world. They go into trances and travel to the realms of the spirits, where they get help from the gods, battle demons, and return with special powers and tools to help their tribe or community. Often, shamans will use various devices for divination. Many people believe that esoteric systems and teachings originally begin with shamanic ecstasy. The resemblances are strong. Like shamanism, esoteric religion stresses direct encounters with God. Jewish mysticism, for example, is filled with techniques for journeying to the “palaces of heaven.” As an outgrowth of the esoteric tradition, Tarot teaches us to follow our own path to salvation. It begins with a Magician, shows images of death and rebirth, and moves through the darkness of the unconscious to the light of revelation. In short, it gives us a blueprint for our own shamanic journeys. What is “heretical,” and dangerous, about the Tarot is the implied idea that we don’t need priests to intercede between us and divine experience.

In recent years, a whole range of comics have drawn on shamanic traditions and images. These have included Vertigo titles as well as more conventional super-heroes. The shamanic connection, however, goes much deeper than a series of storylines. The shaman dresses in elaborate costumes. He travels to other worlds. He gains miraculous powers, sometimes based on the qualities of animals. Using his powers and magical weapons, he fights monsters and malevolent beings with equally fearsome powers. He further uses his powers to help and protect the community of ordinary humans. Does all this sound familiar?

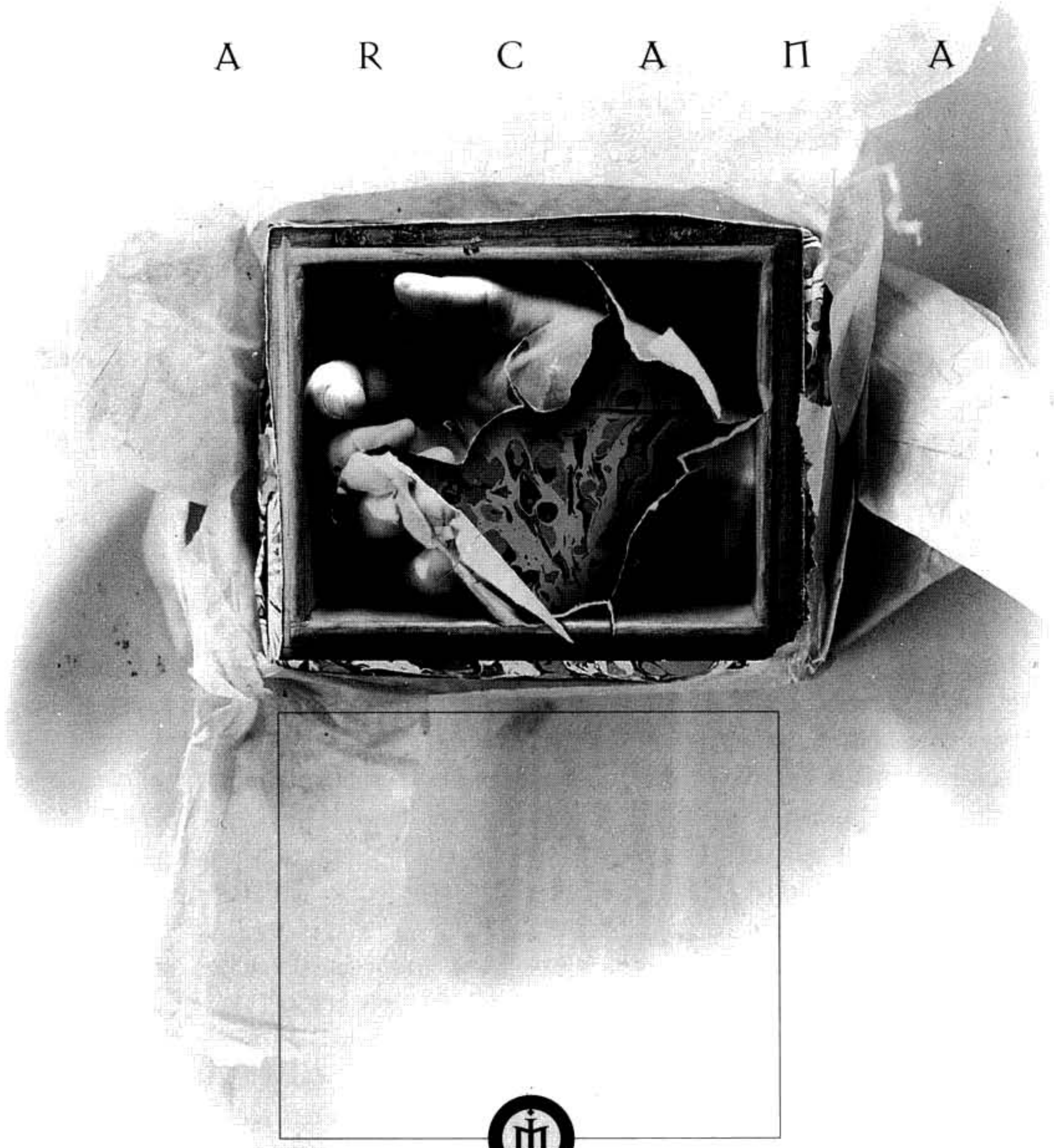
I am not suggesting any historic connections between tribal shamans and super-hero comic books. Instead, it seems to me that some of the same human impulses have given rise to both creations, that some of the people who first brought up the idea of the costumed hero may have been tapping into a kind of sublimated version of the energy that in other times and places has drawn the shamans into their trances.

The Tarot can serve us as a tool for our own journeying. Maybe we will not make actual trance visits to other worlds, but we can let these strange and magical images trigger our own imaginations. The Tarot cards carry a complex set of symbolic meanings from their long tradition. If we bring to the cards a whole new group of images, with their own collective history, the effect can make the journey deeper and more intense.

T H E

M A J O R

A R C A P A



The standard Tarot deck consists of seventy-eight cards—"seventy-eight degrees of wisdom," as Charles Williams called them in his novel *The Greater Trumps*. The seventy-eight further break down into two parts, the four suits, each with fourteen cards (fifty-six in all), plus the twenty-two trump cards. People using the Tarot for divination (readings), or simply studying them for their symbolic meanings, refer to the twenty-two as the Major Arcana, and the fifty-six suit cards as the Minor Arcana. "Arcana" means "secrets," so that "Major Arcana" implies secrets of greater importance and power.

The distinction between the two parts of the deck carries through in the card game. Charles Williams's expression "greater trumps" derives from the rules of *les tarots*. In each hand, one of the players gets to designate a particular suit as "trump" (the same as in bridge). However, if someone plays one of those cards, and someone else can follow with one of the twenty-two Major Arcana cards, then this greater trump will triumph over the lesser one (the word "trump" derives from *trionf*).

This rule from the game says something about the relationship between the two parts of the deck on the esoteric level as well. The Minor Arcana signify the daily experiences of life. They show us our joys and our pains. At one time or another, each of the suits will take precedence—in other words, the qualities symbolized by Swords may dominate our lives at a particular time, but then a few weeks later, the qualities associated with Cups will take over. The Major Arcana, however, represent something deeper, something more spiritual, more archetypal. When these kinds of experiences appear in our lives, they take precedence over the more mundane issues that usually will occupy our attention. They overtake the mundane in the same way that the World card will trump the King of Pentacles. The titles of the cards themselves have always made clear the distinction between the two parts of the deck. The mysterious or majestic names, such as the Magician, the World, or the Hanged Man, all belong to the Major Arcana. The Minor cards have had to make do with titles as straightforward as Five of Wands, Seven of Swords, Queen of Cups.

The pictures too have always separated the Major and the Minor, even in the days before Court de Gebelin, when almost no one thought of the deck as a symbolic message. In virtually all Tarot decks before the twentieth century, the artist painted elaborate, fascinating pictures for the twenty-two trump cards, but only the simplest patterns for the suits. For example, the Chariot might show a powerful warrior in a decorated chariot drawn by magnificent horses, one black, one white. Or the Wheel of Fortune might show an ornate wheel surrounded by animals, including a bear turning the wheel by a crank on the axle. By contrast, the Five of Cups would show little more than five cups arranged across the card. The Court Cards, the Pages, Knights, Queens, and Kings, carried more elaborate pictures, but they tended just to strike formal poses, like an official portrait of the monarch. They could hardly compete with the Hanged Man, suspended by one foot from a tree branch, or the naked people rising from their coffins in the card of Judgment. To this day, many Tarot readers have the most difficulty interpreting the Court Cards, simply because the pictures appear so static.

Just as the card game gives prominence to the twenty-two Major Arcana, so have most writers on the Tarot's esoteric symbolism. Until very recently, books on the Tarot have tended to go into great detail interpreting the trump cards, only to add on a very short chapter at the end describing the suits. It is not unusual to find a three- or four-hundred-page book going into the tiniest details of the Major Arcana, with no mention at all of the Minor. What do we mean when we say that the Major Arcana represent "spiritual," or "archetypal" experiences? First of all, we do not mean that they preach any particular religious doctrine. We have seen how different people have put forward different theories for the Tarot's underlying message. But the Tarot eludes all these attempts to pin it down. Instead, it teaches something more fundamental.

The cards show us a vision of the universe as alive and vibrant at all levels. And they show our progress through life as a journey of joy and mystery. The Major Arcana tell a story, a tale of adventure. It begins with the Fool and takes him through a series of tests and revelations, until he becomes transformed. He goes out in quest of something and discovers that he himself is the prize.

The term "archetypal" refers to images, or story elements, that appear throughout human history, in many cultures. Each place will give the archetype a local flavor, but the underlying image will remain the same. Examples of these archetypes include the wise old man, the benevolent mother goddess, the demon monster, and the miraculous rebirth. Each of these, as well as others, appear in the Tarot (in order, they are the Hermit, the Empress, the Devil, and Judgment).

One very powerful archetype is the Trickster. Some cultures even bring this figure to life, as well as including him in their stories. A person, or a group, will take on the behavior (and wild clothes) of the sacred clown, playing tricks on the priests or officials, or else undercutting the rigid roles of society with their outrageous jokes. In the Tarot, the Trickster appears as the Fool, the wild card (many card historians believe that the joker in the modern playing deck descends from the Tarot Fool). Those people who try to establish a fixed set of symbols for the Tarot find themselves arguing over the place of the Fool. Does he go at the beginning? The end? Somewhere in the middle? Like the Vertigo character John Constantine, the Fool does not belong anywhere. He is an outsider,

subverting the established order of the deck. We can call the Fool the hero of the Tarot precisely because he cannot be pinned down. He travels through all the other cards.

There are archetypal stories as well as images. Think of all the fairy tale stories we read as children. Remember how in so many of them the hero, usually the youngest brother or sister, is described as a good-for-nothing, a simpleton—a fool.

Just as we can find a vast range of religious and esoteric teachings within the structure of the Major Arcana, so we also can find a wide variety of stories. The Tarot writer Mary K. Greer has taken the Oedipus story, as laid out in the plays of Sophocles, and shown how we can map it onto the Major Arcana, card by card. Others have done the same with King Arthur. One of the stories I have followed through the Tarot is that of the Greek Goddess Persephone, who was kidnapped by the God of Death, and returned to the living world through the struggle of her mother Demeter. Demeter is often linked to the Empress, while the Star can represent Persephone. In Vertigo, Persephone makes an appearance in the *Sandman* story of the Dreamlord's son, Orpheus. In the Vertigo Tarot we see hints of her in the Empress, the card usually connected to Demeter.

The Major Arcana matches so many myths and fairy tales for the same reasons that it matches so many religious and esoteric teachings. Its underlying structure comes from deep in the human imagination, the same source for all those different tales and traditions. As we follow the Vertigo characters through the various cards, we will see how these figures too, with their many different stories, match the images and symbols of the Tarot. Each card in the Major Arcana acts in (at least) two ways. First, they teach us individual lessons. The Magician tells us something about power and consciousness. The Devil exposes our fears and desires. The Empress arouses our passion for life. But they also form a sequence. This is the great story in which all the smaller, individual stories take part.

Here is an overview of that great story. The Fool (card 0) sets out on his journey. He has to be a fool to give up a normal life and venture into this dangerous unknown world. He encounters the Magician (1) and the High Priestess (2). Each of them possesses power, but they also represent the great principles of existence: light and dark, male and female, conscious thought and the deep well of the unconscious. The Fool encounters nature and society in the form of the Empress (3) and the Emperor (4). The Hierophant (5) attempts to teach him traditional ideas, but, being a Fool, he falls in love instead. He emerges from his Lovers (6) experience seemingly more mature and in charge of his life, able to drive his own Chariot (7). But he knows there are adventures he still hasn't experienced. He finds the Strength (8) to give everything up and become a Hermit (9). Now he seems to have gotten older and acquired wisdom. But at heart he remains a Fool. He sees a vision of his own destiny in the Wheel of Fortune (10). Fearlessly (another aspect of the Fool is his wild courage), he accepts the Justice (11) of who he is. For really the first time, he makes the move from unconscious instinct to conscious self-awareness.

Now comes a turning point. The Fool offers himself on the Tree of Life. Reversing everything society has tried to teach him, he literally turns himself upside down by hanging by one foot. The Hanged Man (12) is crucial to the Tarot's blueprint for enlightenment. He represents all the different kinds of initiations devised by all the world's esoteric traditions, from the ordeals of Siberian shamans and Tibetan Buddhists to the vision quests of the Lakota Sioux to young Aborigines meeting the spirits in the vast deserts of Australia. In the Vertigo Tarot, the Hanged Man is Shade, the Changing Man. In his comic book, Shade is attached to a power called the Madness. To the outside world, the Hanged Man does appear mad, as well as foolish, for he reverses his whole life to find an inner truth. The Fool appears to die. Hanging on his tree, he shows his willingness to sacrifice his very life. Instead, what dies are his fears and defenses. After Death (13), he sees himself reborn as the powerful angel of Temperance (14). Now he faces his greatest test. With his new powers, he descends to the underworld and confronts the Devil (15). An explosion destroys the Devil's fortress, the Tower (16). But in fact, the Devil is really himself, his dark shadow, and the lightning bolt that destroys the Tower is his own divine energy. He finds himself in the dark night, with only the Star (17) to guide him and give him hope. He must pass through the strange dreamworld of the Moon (18). When he emerges into the Sun (19) he finds himself reborn yet again, not as a powerful angel, but simply as a child. He hears the horns of Judgment (20), telling him to take up his new life. Finally, he returns to the World (21). One way to organize our understanding of the Major Arcana is to see it in groups. If we set the Fool aside as the wild card, this leaves twenty-one cards, or three groups of seven. Three is a sacred number in many cultures. We might think of such trinities as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost in Christianity, or Maiden, Mother, and Crone in Goddess worship, or Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva in Hinduism. Seven in many ways symbolizes the physical world. Yoga teaches us of the seven chakras in the human body. Each chakra glows with a color. These colors match the colors of the rainbow, but only when the body is upside down, another clue to the importance of the Hanged Man. There are seven openings in the human head. Our week contains seven days because the naked eye can see seven planets, including the sun and moon. Three, therefore, represents the power of the gods, while seven symbolizes human experience.

The three groups are 1-7, 8-14, and 15-21. Each of them ends with a kind of victory over the challenges of that line. The first ends in the strong will of the Chariot, the second in the calm angel of Temperance, and the last in the World, with its vision of the whole universe as a living organism.

We can learn a lot about the cards by comparing them to the ones above and below them. That is, the Magician, Strength, and the Devil each occupy the first position in their lines—cards One, Eight, and Fifteen. What do these three have in common? How are they different? In what way does each of them start a line of development? We also can compare cards by their numbers. Five and fifteen suggest a relationship. When we look at the Hierophant (High Priest) and the Devil, definite associations might come to mind. In the Vertigo Tarot these two are old enemies, Morpheus and Lucifer. But they may be more alike than either one would want to admit. Another number relationship: the number fifteen is written as a one and a five. If we add these two we get six. This gives us a connection between the Devil and the Lovers. Traditionally, the two cards signify two sides of sexuality, “pure” relationships versus dark lust. In the Vertigo Tarot the connection becomes reinforced when we learn that the Lovers card shows an angel from heaven in a love affair with a demon from hell.

Another way people have approached the Major Arcana is to compare it to other symbolic systems. People have linked the cards to Hebrew letters, alchemical signs, Runes (the Runes are a German/Scandinavian alphabet that was used for divination and magic as well as ordinary writing), I Ching hexagrams, and in particular, astrology. The astrological links which most Tarot people consider traditional derive from the Order of the Golden Dawn, with some modern revisions to bring in the discovery of the outer planets.

On the Vertigo Major Arcana cards we can see the astrological symbol along the bottom margin, laid over the name. Dave McKean has mostly followed the Golden Dawn system, but with some interesting variations. Several planets appear on two cards, suggesting a special link between them. The Empress and the Star are both Venus. The Emperor and the Wheel of Fortune are both Jupiter. Death and the World are both Saturn. In each case, the higher card (the Star, the Wheel of Fortune, the World) displays an extra flourish on the planetary symbol. If we wish to think about what connections these links establish, we might think first of all about the two cards, what they have in common, how they differ, in what way could the second one represent a “higher” version of the first. And then we can think as well about the planet and what that symbolizes. For instance, the planet Saturn signifies limits. Death might mean reaching the limits of our ordinary way of living, while the World might symbolize a transcendence of all our limitations.

The most interesting astrological “link” in the Vertigo Tarot comes between the Hierophant and the Devil. Neither one bears any astrological symbol at all. We already have seen a connection between these two cards from their numbers, their traditional meanings, and their Vertigo characters. Now we can think about what it means that neither one is linked to any of the stars and planets.

So far, most of the ways we have looked at the Major Arcana come from their traditional symbolic images. But what makes this deck unique is the source material for the characters on the pictures. Each card linked to a particular Vertigo character gains a whole new range of meanings from that character’s history and qualities. At the same time, the Vertigo line as a whole gives a special quality to this particular Tarot deck.

There is no single Vertigo style, but there is a kind of shared Vertigo sensibility. The qualities involved include dark fantasy, sophisticated characterization, a sense of irony, and self-aware wit. The Vertigo Tarot brings many of these same qualities to Tarot tradition. The pictures themselves are physically dark. The characters seem to half emerge from intense blackness. Often, they are partially lit by sharp golden light. Sometimes the light becomes red, as if turning to blood.

Another feature running through these cards (Minor as well as Major) is the use of text. We have seen how one difference between the sequential pictures of Tarot and those of comics is the fact that comics have words and Tarot cards do not. In many of these pictures, Dave McKean has added fragments of letters or lines of type. In almost every case, the surrounding images obscure the actual words, making the text unreadable. The effect emphasizes the cards’ mystery and the inability to pin them down to specific meanings.

The Vertigo sensibility also comes through in the choice of characters to match the particular trump cards. While in some cases the character and the card fit perfectly—most obviously, with the use of Dream’s older sister, Death, for the card of Death—often the two seem like extreme opposites. For the all-powerful Emperor, who in most decks sits rigidly on his throne, we find the Geek, a living rag doll, who can hardly sit upright. For the angel of Temperance, majestic in his calm and moderation, we see Delirium, totally swept up in her own intemperate nature. These mismatches are not just perverse. By undercutting the traditional trump figures, the Vertigo Tarot allows us to see them in a new way, in much the same way that Vertigo comics show us fantasy from a new perspective. They subvert the standard images in order to give them fresh life.

The various Vertigo characters do something else for the cards as well. They give them a new life, the life of their own stories. When we look at the Hierophant we can think of all the symbolism associated with the card. We can think as well of the various traditions of high priests, from tribal elders to popes. But now we also can think of Morpheus, the Lord of Dreams, of all his tales, of the magical worlds of the Dreaming, and of all our own dreams and fantasies inspired by reading *Sandman*. The Major Arcana, repository of so many traditions, has opened itself once more, absorbing and adapting a whole new mythology.

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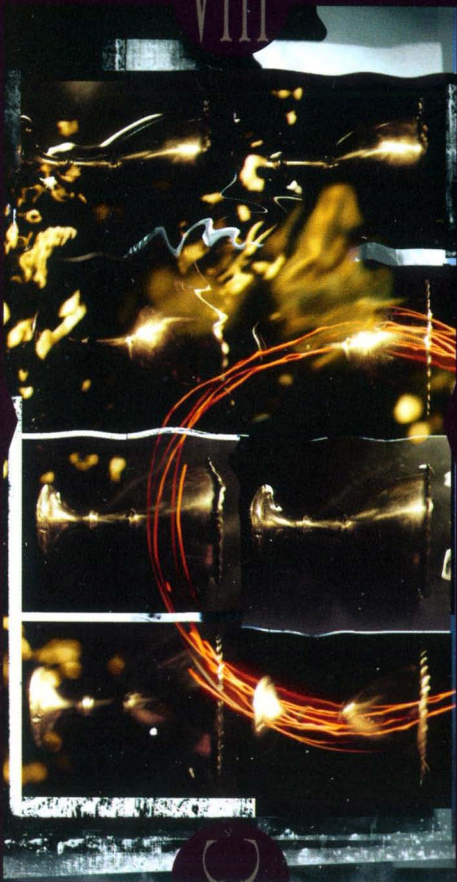


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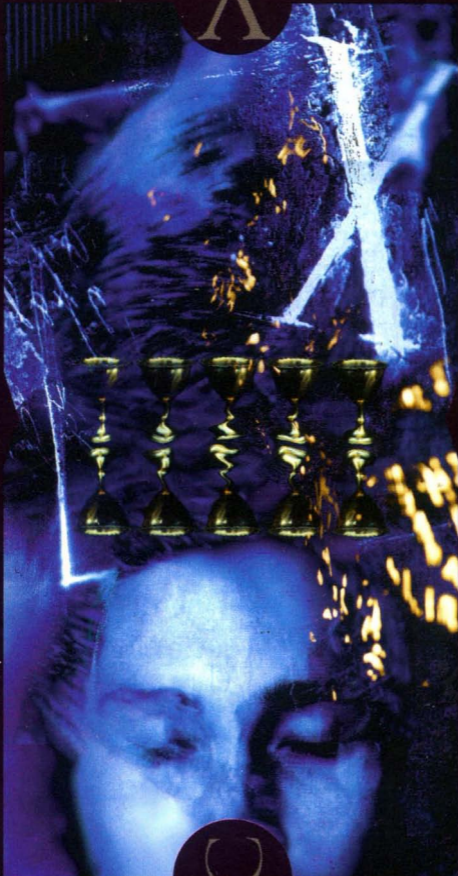
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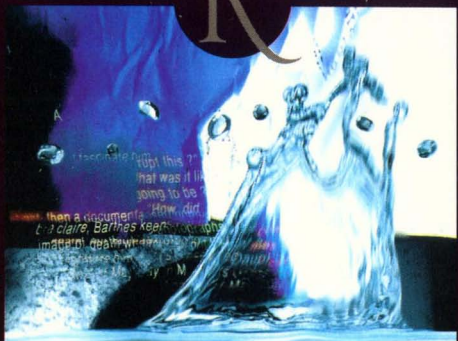
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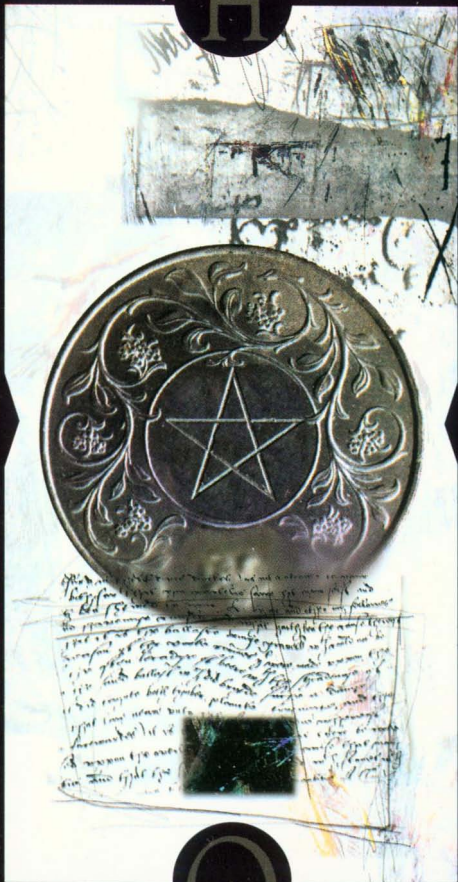
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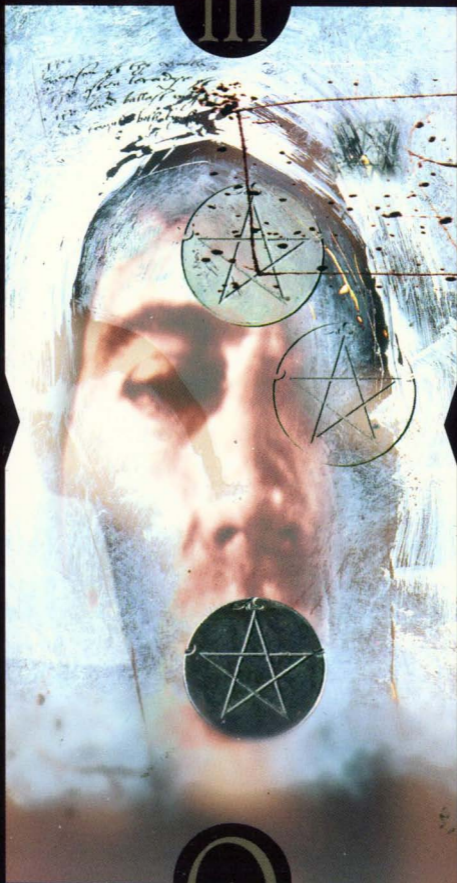
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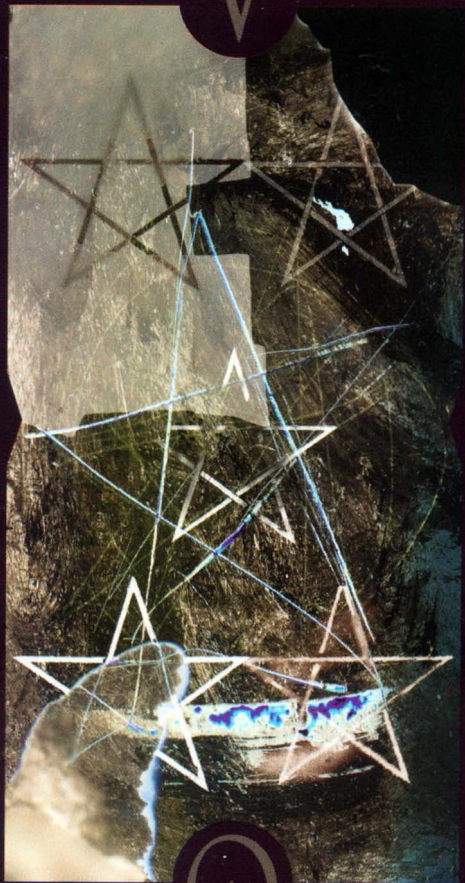


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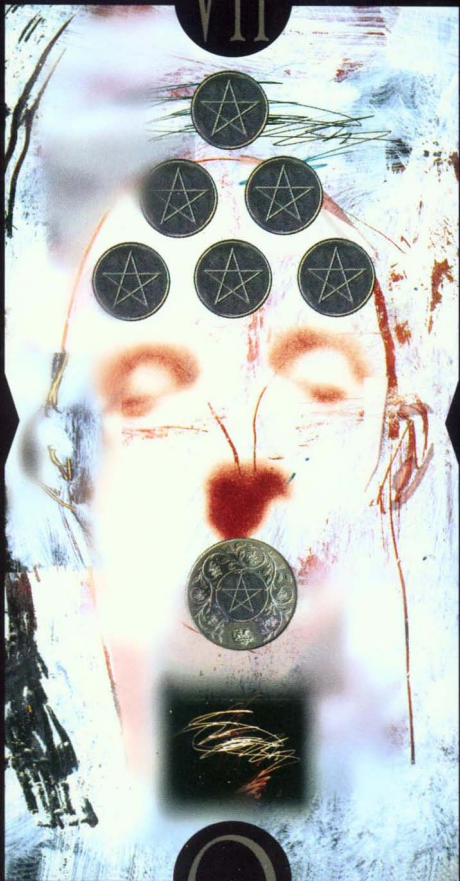
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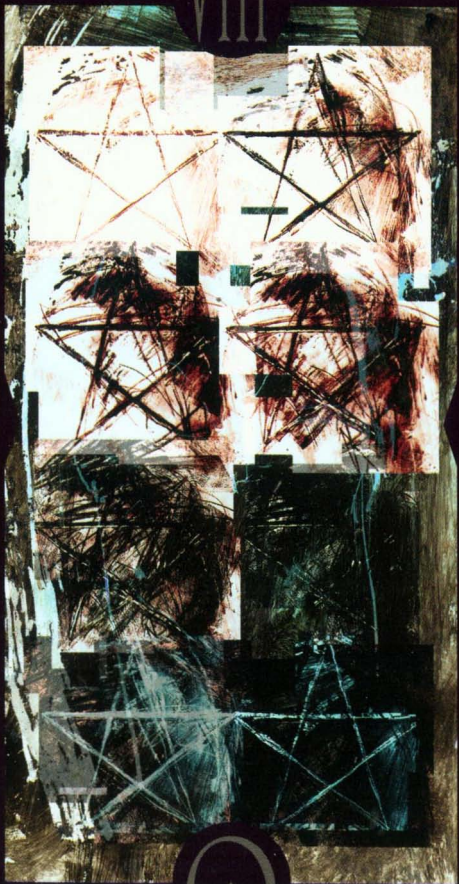
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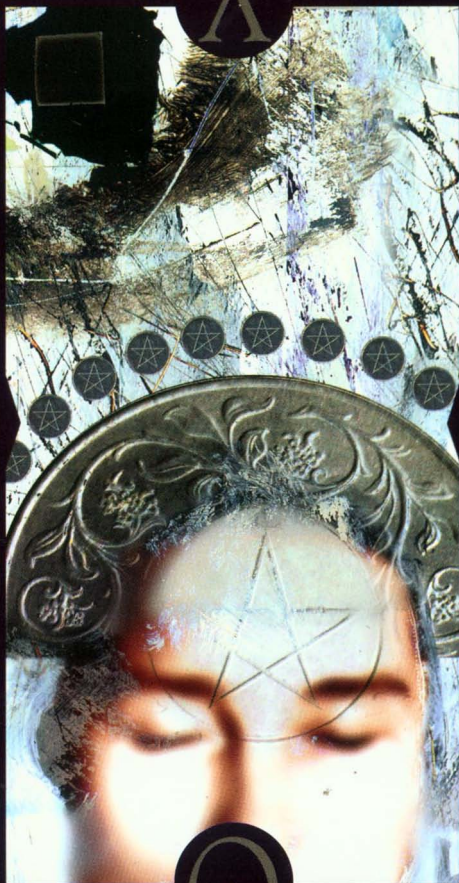
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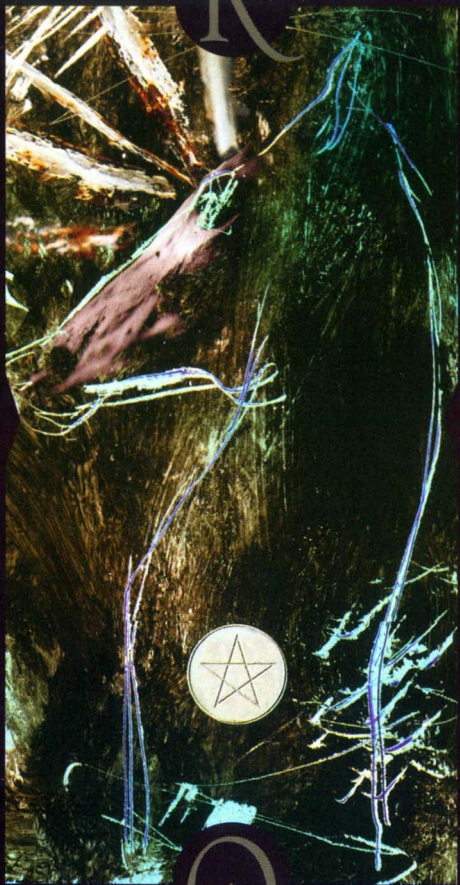
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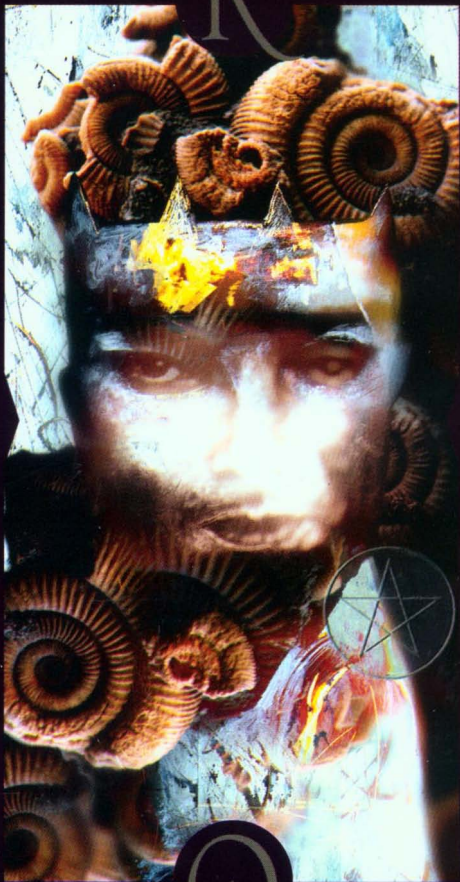
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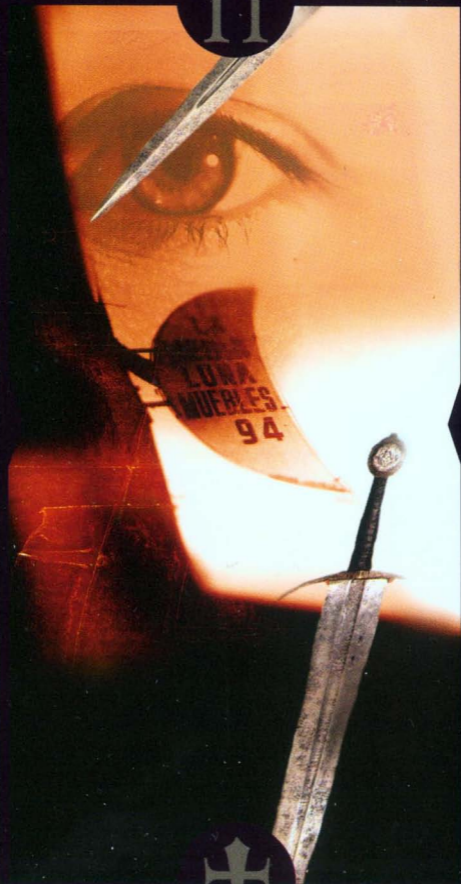
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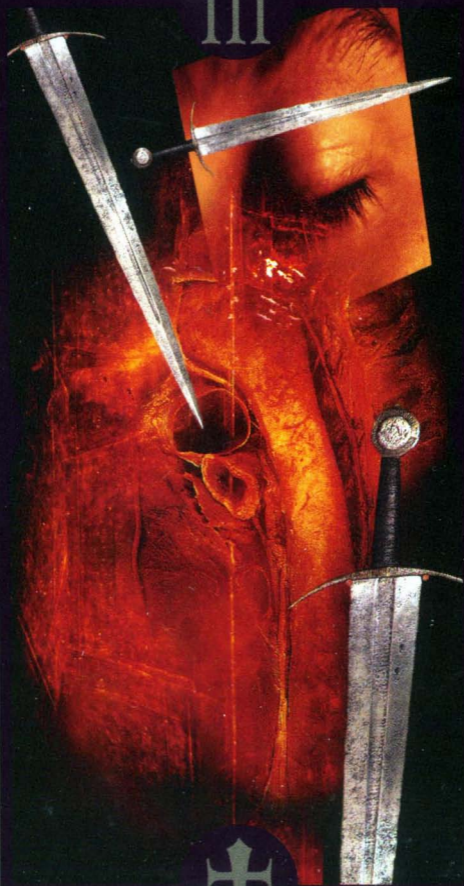
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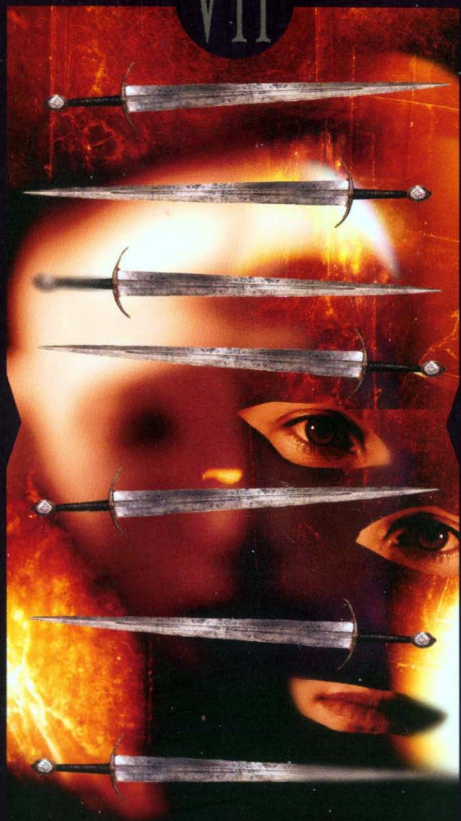
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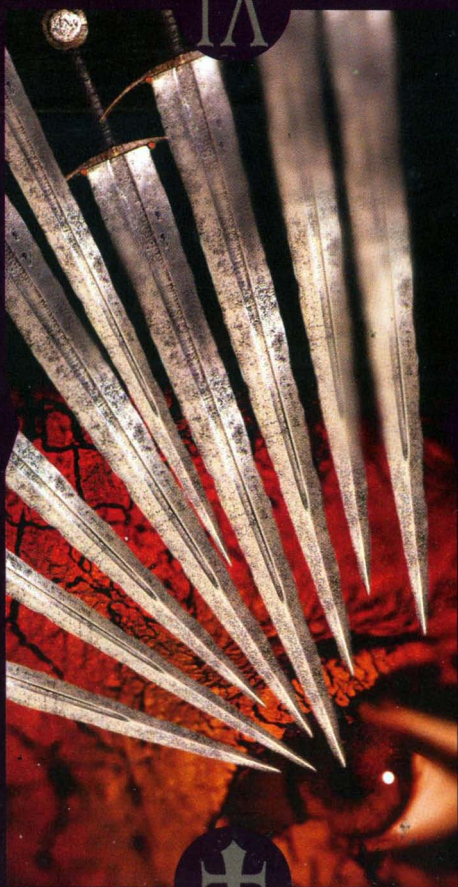
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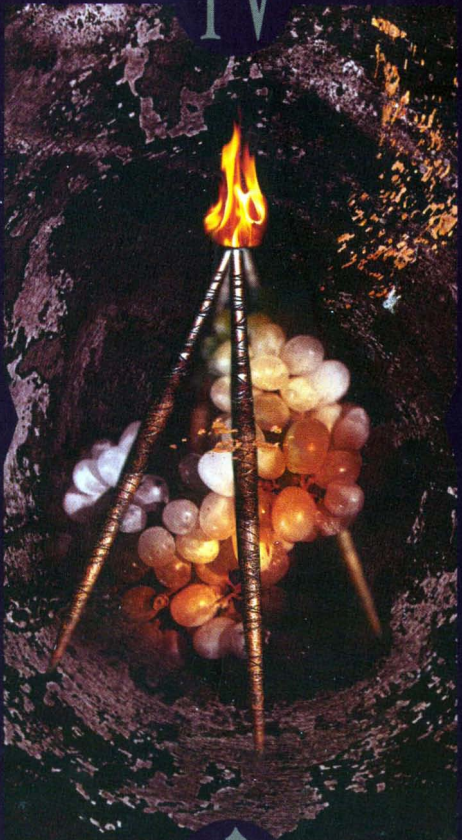
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