Quicksilver
Neal Stephenson

The Baroque Cycle

Book 1: Quicksilver

Those who assume hypotheses as first principles
of their speculations . . . may indeed form an ingenious
romance, but a romance it will still be.

--Roger Cotes,
preface to Sir Isaac Newton's
Principia Mathematica,
second edition, 1713

Boston Common
October 12, 1713, 10:33:52 a.m.

Enoch rounds the corner just as the executioner raises the noose above the woman's head. The crowd on the Common stop praying and sobbing for just as long as Jack Ketch stands there, elbows locked, for all the world like a carpenter heaving a ridge-beam into place. The rope clutches a disk of blue New England sky. The Puritans gaze at it and, to all appearances, think. Enoch the Red reins in his borrowed horse as it nears the edge of the crowd, and sees that the executioner's purpose is not to let them inspect his knotwork, but to give them all a narrow — and, to a Puritan, tantalizing — glimpse of the portal through which they all must pass one day.

Boston's a dollop of hills in a spoon of marshes. The road up the spoon-handle is barred by a wall, with the usual gallows outside of it, and victims, or parts of them, strung up or nailed to the city gates. Enoch has just come that way, and reckoned he had seen the last of such things — that thenceforth it would all be churches and taverns. But the dead men outside the gate were common robbers, killed for earthly crimes. What is happening now in the Common is of a more Sacramental nature.

The noose lies on the woman's grey head like a crown. The executioner pushes it down. Her head forces it open like an infant's dilating the birth canal. When it finds the widest part it drops suddenly onto her shoulders. Her knees pimple the front of her apron and her skirts telescope into the platform as she makes to collapse. The executioner hugs her with one arm, like a dancing-master, to keep her upright, and adjusts the knot while an official reads the death warrant. This is as bland as a lease. The crowd scratches and shuffles. There are none of the diversions of a London hanging: no catcalls, jugglers, or pickpockets. Down at the other end of the Common, a squadron of lobsterbacks drills and marches round the base of a hummock with a stone powder-house planted in its top. An Irish sergeant bellows — bored but indignant — in a voice that carries forever on the wind, like the smell of smoke.

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He's not come to watch witch-hangings, but now that Enoch's blundered into one it would be bad form to leave. There is a drum-roll, and then a sudden awkward silence. He judges it very far from the worst hanging he's ever seen — no kicking or writhing, no breaking of ropes or unraveling of knots — all in all, an unusually competent piece of work.

He hadn't really known what to expect of America. But people here seem to do things — hangings included — with a blunt, blank efficiency that's admirable and disappointing at the same time. Like jumping fish, they go about difficult matters with bloodless ease. As if they were all born knowing things that other people must absorb, along with faery-tales and superstitions, from their families and villages. Maybe it is because most of them came over on ships.

As they are cutting the limp witch down, a gust tumbles over the Common from the North. On Sir Isaac Newton's temperature scale, where freezing is zero and the heat of the human body is twelve, it is probably four or five. If Herr Fahrenheit were here with one of his new quicksilver-filled, sealed-tube thermometers, he would probably observe something in the fifties. But this sort of wind, coming as it does from the North, in the autumn, is more chilling than any mere instrument can tell. It reminds everyone here that, if they don't want to be dead in a few months' time, they have firewood to stack and chinks to caulk. The wind is noticed by a hoarse preacher at the base of the gallows, who takes it to be Satan himself, come to carry the witch's soul to hell, and who is not slow to share this opinion with his flock. The preacher is staring Enoch in the eye as he testifies.

Enoch feels the heightened, chafing self-consciousness that is the precursor to fear. What's to prevent them from trying and hanging him as a witch?

How must he look to these people? A man of indefinable age but evidently broad experience, with silver hair queued down to the small of his back, a copper-red beard, pale gray eyes, and skin weathered and marred like a blacksmith's ox-hide apron. Dressed in a long traveling-cloak, a walking-staff and an outmoded rapier strapped 'longside the saddle of a notably fine black horse. Two pistols in his waistband, prominent enough that Indians, highwaymen, and French raiders can clearly see them from ambuscades (he'd like to move them out of view, but reaching for them at this moment seems like a bad idea). Saddlebags (should they be searched) filled with instruments, asks of quicksilver and stranger matters — some, as they'd learn, quite dangerous — books in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin pocked with the occult symbols of Alchemists and Kabalists. Things could go badly for him in Boston.

But the crowd takes the preacher's ranting not as a call to arms but a signal to turn and disperse, muttering. The redcoats discharge their muskets with deep hissing booms, like handfuls of sand hurled against a kettledrum. Enoch dismounts into the midst of the colonists. He sweeps the robe round him, concealing the pistols, pulls the hood back from his head, and amounts to just another weary pilgrim. He does not meet any man's eye but scans their faces sidelong, and is surprised by a general lack of self-righteousness.

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"God willing," one man says, "that'll be the last one."

"Do you mean, sir, the last witch?" Enoch asks.

"I mean, sir, the last hanging."

Flowing like water round the bases of the steep hills, they migrate across a burying ground on the south edge of the common, already full of lost Englishmen, and follow the witch's corpse down the street. The houses are mostly of wood, and so are the churches. Spaniards would have built a single great cathedral here, of stone, with gold on the inside, but the colonists cannot agree on anything and so it is more like Amsterdam: small churches on every block, some barely distinguishable from barns, each no doubt preaching that all of the others have it wrong. But at least they can muster a consensus to kill a witch. She is borne into a new burying ground, which for some reason they have situated hard by the granary. Enoch is at a loss to know whether this juxtaposition — that is, storing their Dead, and their Staff of Life, in the same place — is some sort of Message from the city's elders, or simple bad taste.

Enoch, who has seen more than one city burn, recognizes the scars of a great fire along this main street. Houses and churches are being rebuilt with brick or stone. He comes to what must be the greatest intersection in the town, where this road from the city gate crosses a very broad street that runs straight down to salt water, and continues on a long wharf that projects far out into the harbor, thrusting across a ruined rampart of stones and logs: the rubble of a disused sea-wall. The long wharf is ridged with barracks. It reaches far enough out into the harbor that one of the Navy's very largest men-of-war is able to moor at its end. Turning his head the other way he sees artillery mounted up on a hillside, and blue-coated gunners tending to a vatlike mortar, ready to lob iron bombs onto the decks of any French or Spanish galleons that might trespass on the bay.

So, drawing a mental line from the dead criminals at the city gate, to the powderhouse on the Common, to the witch-gallows, and finally to the harbor defenses, he has got one Cartesian number-line — what Leibniz would call the Ordinate — plotted out: he understands what people are afraid of in Boston, and how the churchmen and the generals keep the place in hand. But it remains to be seen what can be plotted in the space above and below. The hills of Boston are skirted by endless flat marshes that fade, slow as twilight, into Harbor or River, providing blank empty planes on which men with ropes and rulers can construct whatever strange curves they phant'sy.

Enoch knows where to find the Origin of this coordinate system, because he has talked to ship's masters who have visited Boston. He goes down to where the long wharf grips the shore. Among fine stone sea-merchants' houses, there is a brick-red door with a bunch of grapes dangling above it. Enoch goes through that door and finds himself in a good tavern. Men with swords and expensive clothes turn round to look at him. Slavers, merchants of rum and molasses and tea and tobacco, and captains of the ships that carry those things. It could be any place in the world, for the same tavern is in London, Cadiz, Smyrna and Manila, and the same men are in it. None of them cares, supposing they even know, that witches are being hanged five

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minutes' walk away. He is much more comfortable in here than out there; but he has not come to be comfortable. The particular sea-captain he's looking for — van Hoek — is not here. He backs out before the tavern-keeper can tempt him.

Back in America and among Puritans, he enters into narrower streets, and heads north, leading his horse over a rickety wooden bridge thrown over a little mill-creek. Flotillas of shavings from some carpenter's block-plane sail down the stream like ships going off to war. Underneath them the weak current nudges turds and bits of slaughtered animals down towards the harbor. It smells accordingly. No denying there is a tallow-chandlery not far upwind, where beast-grease not fit for eating is made into candles and soap.

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