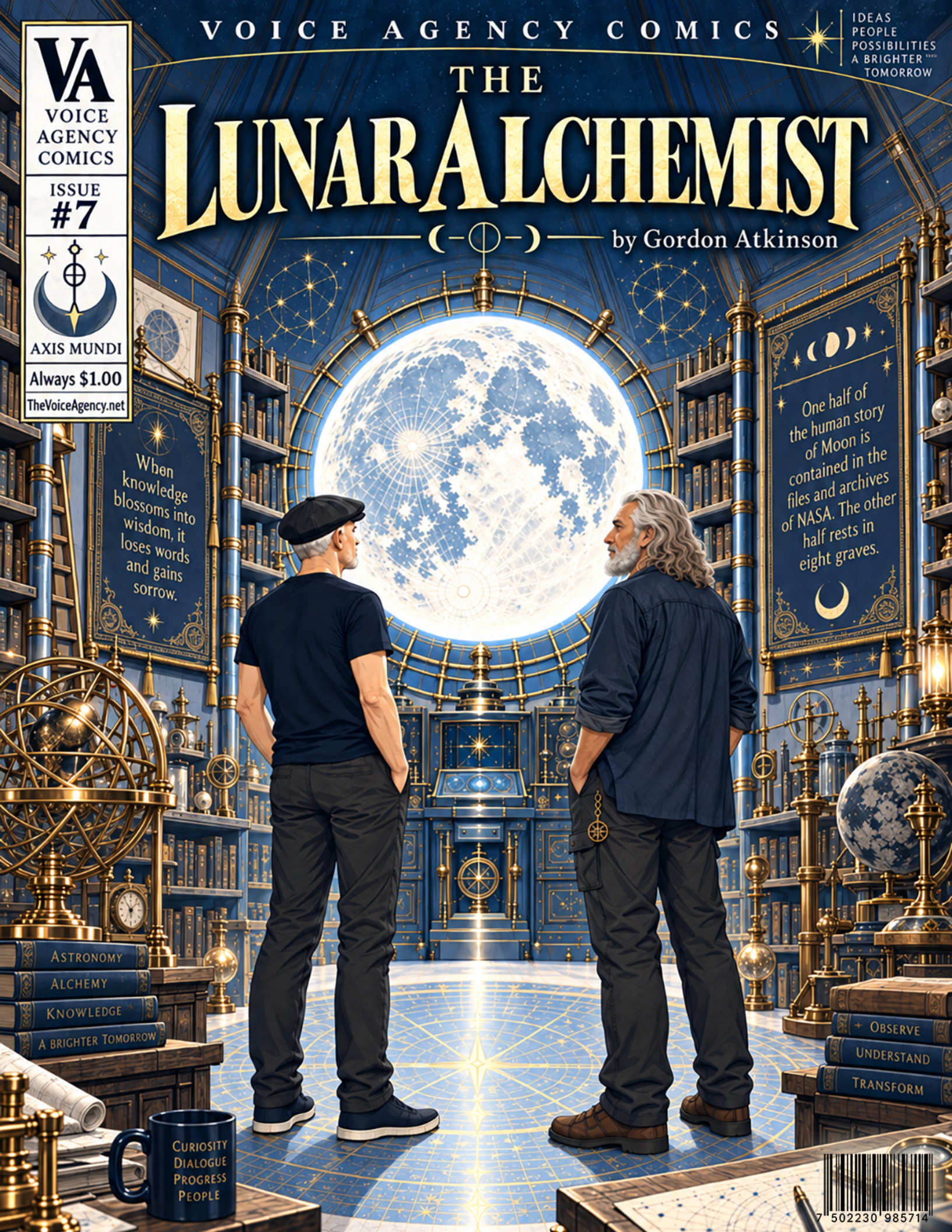
VOICE AGENCY COMICS
IDEAS PEOPLE POSSIBILITIES A BRIGHTER TOMORROW
VA
VOICE AGENCY COMICS
ISSUE #7
AXIS MUNDI
Always $1.00
TheVoiceAgency.net
THE LUNAR ALCHEMIST
by Gordon Atkinson
When knowledge blossoms into wisdom, it loses words and gains sorrow.
One half of the human story of Moon is contained in the files and archives of NASA. The other half rests in eight graves.
ASTRONOMY
ALCHEMY
KNOWLEDGE
A BRIGHTER TOMORROW
OBSERVE
UNDERSTAND
TRANSFORM
CURIOSITY
DIALOGUE
PROGRESS
PEOPLE
7 502230 985714

The Lunar Alchemist is a development issue of Voice Agency Comics: a story I am writing, illustrating, revising, and releasing in public while it is still becoming itself.

Years ago I found myself staring for hours at new footage of the lunar surface. I began imagining how Moon came to look as she does, and for reasons I still do not fully understand, I forbade myself from reading scientific explanations. I wanted to approach her in an older way: not as data to be mastered, but as mystery to be contemplated. A classical alchemical approach to knowledge and wisdom.

Then I had to abandon the work and move to Austin, where I spent six years as artist-in-residence at the Wizard Academy.

Now I am returning to this delightful story in a new way. The issue you are reading is not a finished artifact rescued from an archive. It is a live experiment in how Voice Agency Comics can be made: prose first, images as companions, the writer revising as the work takes visual form.

Each time you return, more of the story may be written. Passages may sharpen, vanish, or reappear changed.

The Lunar Alchemist is both a story and a record of its own making.

The Lunar Alchemist

It was thirteen years ago when we last spoke and I told you what happened to me in New Orleans. I was fifty-two then, if you recall. I'm sixty-five now, which is pretty old to be finding a new way to live. Funny thing about being a man my age. You've been ridiculous enough times to know how to avoid it. At the same time, you know in your gut that it's usually being ridiculous that saves your soul.

I have not been idle since the dark Prophets of New Orleans case me out into the darkness to wander, soul-less it seemed to me, in the wild places. I have been from one side of the metaphysical world to the other, and I have learned one of the deep truths that all the masters teach.

On the other side of fifty, nothing of worth comes from the conscious side. That side is first-half-of-life bullshit. After fifty, seek instead the sweet marrow of life, the pull and push from the deepest parts of your Unconscious.

After fifty, stop trying to control and start following.

Now you can say you will follow. You can pray for the strength to follow. You can sit in Quaker silence and contemplate the deep

wisdom of following. You can read expensive books that make clear the spiritual importance of following. And you can purchase beautiful leather journals to record the first shy murmurings of your soul as it learns the wisdom of following.

But all the while, you're probably still steering the ship. It's what men do.

I had learned, after thirteen years of costly absurdity, that the trick is to stop lunging at meaning. Meaning is skittish. It will bolt if you come at it directly. You have to let it wander into the clearing. You have to lie there like a tiger sunning in a meadow, confident that in time something warm and living will pass close enough to notice.

Which is how I came to notice the sign.

I do not mean that I saw it for the first time. That would be a cleaner story, and therefore not true. I had seen it many times, as it is on one of my favorite walks. I had passed by that door again and again, reading the words without receiving them, which is one of the more common ways we miss our lives. Then one day the letters arranged themselves properly in my mind, and I saw them.

Lunar Alchemist.

And even then I did not open the door. I looked at it

I don't know how many times I passed by the Lunar Alchemist's office before curiosity finally tipped some inner scale and I opened his door. The day I did, I discovered that it's not so much an office as a laboratory.

I am under strict orders from LA not to reveal the location of his office, workshop, lab, or whatever he calls it, but I can tell you it is in the Montrose area of Houston, tucked away in one of those little neighborhoods with cool houses and adorable shops here and there. Find the most perfect Montrose intersection, start looking for unusual doors, and you might find the Lunar Alchemist for yourself.

The place did not announce itself. That is the first thing to know. No crystals in the window. No purple cloth. No painted moon with a serene woman's face in it. No pewter dragons or incense burners or laminated certificates in cheap frames. It was a narrow little room in an old building with a door that had been painted many years before by someone who had not cared for painting doors. The paint held the memory of green without actually being green anymore. The glass was old enough to turn the afternoon faintly yellow.

Inside, the air smelled of paper, dust, machine oil, coffee gone bitter in the pot, and some faint mineral tang I could not identify. Shelves leaned against the walls with the tired dignity of old men who have carried too much for too long. There were boxes

under tables, charts rolled into tubes, pieces of brass equipment whose purpose was not obvious, and everywhere the sense of work interrupted but never abandoned.

The Lunar Alchemist looks to be about sixty years old. I didn't ask him, though. His clothing always looks the same. Soft but durable work pants that have been worn so long they seem to have taken the shape of his body. Soft, faded t-shirts under flannel shirts that sometimes had a few of the buttons fastened. His shirts seemed more like smocks to me. In warmer weather he wore t-shirts, shorts, and sandals.

He did not look mystical. This disappointed me for about two seconds, which is a measure of my remaining stupidity. We want our holy men marked for easy identification. Robes. Beads. A staff. Eyes like caves. Something to let us know we are not wasting our time.

He had none of that.

A bell tinkled when I walked through the door, and he turned his head away from a pile of items on a work table to look at me.

"What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure. It's just I never heard of a lunar alchemist before, and I found myself curious about it."

He recited a practice speech in a bored monologue.

“I can teach you everything you need to know about lunar geology. That’s geology, not geography, though I know more than most about that as well. I just don’t care for the human labels, that’s all. They get in the way of my work.

“Lunar geology. I can only account for the current epoch Moon is in. I don’t give a shit or know anything about how she was formed. I have some predictions about how she might die, but we’re only interested in how the present-day face of Moon came to be and how it is changing and progressing during this epoch.

“I can teach you everything you need to know about that.

“And I’ve never read a serious book about the moon in my entire life. Nor will I. Ever. Don’t even allow them in the shop.”

He stopped speaking and stood looking at me.

There are silences that are invitations, silences that are accusations, silences that are punishments, and silences that are merely the absence of sound. This was none of those. This was a gate.

I looked back, thinking he was playing some game with me, and I thought to see how far he would take it. We looked at each other for some time.

He smiled, but said nothing.

Finally I broke.

“Okay, I admit this sounds very interesting and I’m interested in at least learning a little more about it. Was that some pissing contest we were in where whoever speaks first loses?”

“No. I pause because most people leave either during that speech, immediately after, or after a few moments of awkward silence. And it’s good that they go. It isn’t smart or clever people who need to work with me, and I’d not want to waste their time or mine. The few who stick around get to see my lab and hear my terms. Still interested?”

“Absolutely.”

Of course I said absolutely. What else was I going to say? I had been spiritually hungry for thirteen years and had just found a man in a shabby shop in Montrose who claimed he could teach me lunar geology without knowing anything useful about the Moon. A reasonable person would have left. But reasonable people are often preserved from the most interesting mistakes.

He locked the front door and beckoned me to follow him as he walked to a door at the back of his office. It opened into complete blackness.

“Aren’t afraid of the dark, are you?”

“No. As a matter of fact, I like darkness very much.”

“Good. Moon likes people of darkness.”

You have to understand how that landed in me.

Moon likes people of darkness.

Not “the moon.” Not “lunar symbolism.” Not “night people.” Moon. As if she were not an object but a person. As if she had preferences. As if she had been waiting, with that cold milk light of hers, for those of us whose souls had learned to see by absence.

He closed the door, and we were in pitch blackness. Absolute dark. No light at all. I heard a key scrabble in a lock and another door opening. Soft yellow light revealed a small observation room with a table in front of a large window that showed only blackness beyond it. There was a computer, technical-looking equipment, and a couple of chairs. He sat in one and motioned for me to sit in the other.

It was not the room I expected. There were no candles. No altar. No chalk circle. Nothing theatrically occult. It looked instead like the forgotten observation booth of a small-town planetarium, or a county emergency office built by someone with a military surplus catalog and a limited budget. The table was scarred. The chairs were plain. The machines had the blank authority of equipment that did not care whether you understood it.

He sat easily, like a man who had given this speech many times and did not need to improve it.

“This is the part where you hear my terms.

“Technically, I cannot teach you about Moon. I can only teach you to learn from her. Moreover, what you learn will not be understood or accepted by anyone else. If you try to explain your ideas about Moon to others, they will laugh or think you to be a crazy person. What you learn here is for you only. There is no practical application for it, no money to be made from it, and no one but you and I will see any value in it.

“Please do not underestimate how lonely and unpleasant what I’m describing might be.

“I work with one person at a time. I will be carrying out my work and show you how to start yours. You’ll assist me at times and work alone at other times. I don’t care when you come or how often, as long as you are here working at least eight hours in a week. You can be here forty hours if you want. It doesn’t matter to me. But if you can’t commit to at least eight, it’s not worth our time.

“Think of this as an apprenticeship. No money changes hands either way. I teach, you help me with stuff, you leave when you’re ready. Had someone stay two years once. A fair number last a year. Most hang around for a few months. It doesn’t matter to me. I think people drink from this well until they are filled. Some have bigger gullets than others, I guess.

“This last bit is important. You may talk about anything you learn here in any way you like once you leave. Publish a book, give lectures, become rich and famous, or die a deluded pauper. I don’t care. But you are never to mention me or the existence of this workshop to anyone until after I am dead.

“How do those terms sound to you?”

It was a terrible offer, which is to say it was exactly the sort of offer I had become capable of recognizing.

There would be no certificate. No method. No doctrine. No community of fellow travelers to nod warmly when I said something brave and vulnerable. No book club. No weekend retreat with good coffee and name tags. No new identity with which to replace the old one.

Only work. Loneliness. A secrecy that would prevent me from making even my own transformation into usable material.

In other words, it sounded clean.

“Wonderful. It’s almost the perfect arrangement. I’m kind of a loner.”

“Of course you are. As am I. No one walks through that door except loners.”

He let that sit between us for a moment.

That was the first thing he taught me, though I did not know it at the time. Loneliness is not always a wound. Sometimes it is an organ of perception. Sometimes it is the only part of you still sensitive enough to detect what the world is trying to say.

“Okay. You ready to see what you’ll be studying?”

“Yes.”

He put his hands to some switches on the table and looked out the window into the darkness. I followed his gaze.

And then the Moon exploded into light before us.

I do not mean a picture of the Moon appeared. I do not mean a video started, or a screen brightened, or a projector warmed to life. I mean that darkness became Moon. The black window filled with her, and the room changed its allegiance. One moment we were two men in a dim observation booth in a historic Houston neighborhood, and the next we were in the presence of a body so old and scarred and luminous that every thought I had brought with me seemed suddenly provincial.

The outer room had a giant model of the Moon that seemed to be floating in the air. He walked out of the office and over to it. His shadow appeared next to it and he placed a hand on it and the Moon began to rotate. Using his hand, he easily spun the Moon around so it could be viewed at many angles.

It was obscene, almost, to see him touch her that way. Not disrespectful. Not quite. More like seeing a man place his hand on the shoulder of a queen, and realizing only then that he had permission.

He walked back into the office and flipped another switch. Bright lights came on in the outer room, and I saw a large white globe hanging from the ceiling by a glass rod.

“Had a guy from NASA spend a year with me. He was kind of a bigwig and got me one of these. It’s a bunch of curved monitors forming a smooth globe. Software runs on the computer back in the office. Don’t ask me how it works.”

“A NASA guy studied with you?”

“No. We don’t study anything. We learn together. But yeah, I get a lot of them. Once you start looking at Moon, if you’re the right sort of person, you fall in love with her. Once that happens, a lot of these sciencey types don’t know what to do.

“I teach them what they need to know about Moon. They already know the other stuff.

“Anyway, that’s the deal. Whaddya think?”

What did I think?

I thought of Bayou John. I thought of New Orleans. I thought of every church I had left and every church that had left me. I thought of the old velvety symbols of Christendom, the candles and chalices and gentle words spoken over bread and wine. I thought of Quaker silence, Buddhist breathing, Jungian shadows, and all the strange little tributaries by which a man tries to find his way back to the river after losing the main road.

I thought of myself at fifty-two, walking into a voodoo shop with the residue of ministry still clinging to me like incense in an old robe.

I thought of myself at sixty-five, standing in a hidden room in Houston while a man in worn pants and sandals spun the Moon with his hand.

And I thought, with a clarity that came from somewhere beneath thought, yes.

"I'm in. One hundred percent."

"What's your name?"

"Gordon Atkinson."

He looked at me then, not hard, exactly, but directly enough that I felt the old reflex rise in me. The reflex to explain myself. To make a little résumé of my wounds and credentials. Former pastor. Writer. Man of depth. Man of sorrow. Man who had suffered enough to be interesting.

I said nothing.

Maybe I was learning already.

"You can call me Lunar Alchemist. Just Lunar Alchemist. Not the Lunar Alchemist because there are many others. And not a Lunar Alchemist because I'm the only one. Both of those are true, and your first assignment is to ruminate on that until whenever it is I see you.

"Or you can just call me Luna. Most do that."