Only beautiful things lead us out to join the world beyond our heads.
–Matthew Crawford

Once, in the late 1990s or early 2000s, I visited Christopher Alexander at the Pink house in Berkeley. The Pink house was a good place for him to live because fans stalking him would never guess he lived there. I don't recall why we met because what happened later was uncanny.

He took me to lunch somewhere in Berkeley—if I had to guess I'd say it was a Middle Eastern place. We drove in his big Jag and the lunch was slow and long.

After lunch I said to him: "let's do an experiment; are there any houses around here that you designed and built?"

He said there were.

I said, "then how about you take the long way home, the long winding way home, and drive by one of them. Don't point it out, don't slow down, just let me try to guess which one it is."

The route he took was sure silly, winding like a river on the flat seeking the best channel. I twisted and craned while he drove slow, up, down, and around hills. He drove staring straight ahead.

In his big Jag.

It was like twenty minutes of roads and streets lit by autumn's dusty light. Maybe thirty.

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"That one,'" I said.

I'd never seen legible photos of any of his projects at that point, except perhaps Julian Street. I recall a strong sense of flash recognition—I had no time to reason out the characteristics or perform an analysis. It wasn't any small set of things. My mind simply shouted, "this one," and I believed it.

Christopher Alexander turned to me and said simply, "Yes."

Richard P. Gabriel PhD MFA
Poet, Writer, Computer Scientist
California
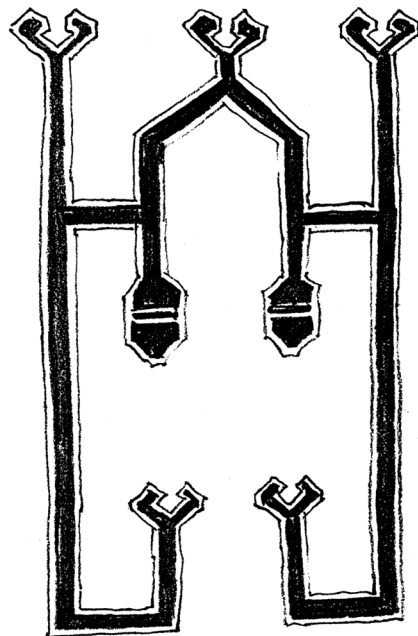
Seljuk Being
Hand Drawn by Christopher Alexander
for "Patterns of Software"