

2020 ♦ 1



The Immortality Issue
with original fiction by

Barber

Bondoni

Esaias

Gerencsér

Gudgel

Herzog

King

Royce

Sheppard

Yoakeim



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Editorial



Lectori salutem..

As we enter the second year since the relaunch of SPJ and encourage our readership to retreat into cosy bubbles of isolation to avoid the looming spread of a ‘novel’ contagion*, it is sobering to contemplate that we are protagonists (or, at the very least, extras) in a major SF scenario.

At the time of writing, your co-editors are hunkering down to witness epic, planetary-scale medical speculative fiction unfolding in front of our eyes. Fortunately, for the time being, the events are mostly mediated by our screens, ensuring a distance akin to that of a reader to words on a page. Or to the dispassion wherewith an immortal being would regard the morbid curiosity of death (c.f. Brian Stableford’s now-classic “Mortimer Gray’s *History of Death*”).

Which brings us to our first departure from the usual mixture of speculative essays and challenging fiction. The Q1 issue of 2020 is made up entirely of short stories, all clustered around the theme of immortality, and various antitheses thereof, from legislating a timely death to erasing one’s memory from the bookshelves of history. These were selected from a rich spectrum of submissions, and we note with relief that more and more authors ‘get’ the conceptual narrative and world-building approaches to speculative fiction, and particularly the fictional non-fiction (FNF) subgenre we strive to cultivate.

The time of the fabled spring clean will be upon us soon, and fittingly our plans for 2020 include completing the process of making archived digital content from SPJ’s previous incarnations available, which had previously languished behind a subscription or paywall, and strive to clean up the tags and category markers across the site.

Coinciding with the 2020Q1 issue is an update of our FNF bibliography, which we intend to continue expanding, grateful as always for further recommendations. We might explore the possibility of another thematic issue later during the year (depending on our means), but also hope to continue our series of articles on speculative fiction in less well-known regional literary markets. If you speak a language that is, perhaps due to lack of exposure or translations into English, less accessible to the international public, and feel inclined to write about the state of SF in that milieu, don’t hesitate to get in touch!

Stay safe, memento mori.

Speculatively yours,
the co-editors

* As regards the virus carrying the ‘novel’ epithet, we wish to reiterate our long-held opposition to [fat literature](#).

Misogynist

Gustavo Bondoni

The misogynist is in hell. His personal hell is a small, square chamber with surgical looking white walls. He is ranting.

“They’re all witches. Worthless sacks, only good for screwing and for making babies. I’m not even sure we should ever have let them move from the bedchamber to the kitchen.”

After each pronouncement, a spray of acid from tiny jets in the walls dissolves his skin, burning it away like the wax figures in bad horror movies. It is a terribly painful experience, and unbeknownst to him, the pain is enhanced by processes controlled by unseen minions.

After the devastation, his skin heals itself. This is even more painful than the burning.

It has been going on for years, and will do so for eternity.

But he cannot stop the pronouncements. A voice that only he can hear provokes him every moment of every day. Only he can hear it because there’s a sound-carrying tube that emits its sound only into his room.

We can follow the tube. It is not a long way. It goes into the adjacent room. There is a woman in the room, and she is also speaking.

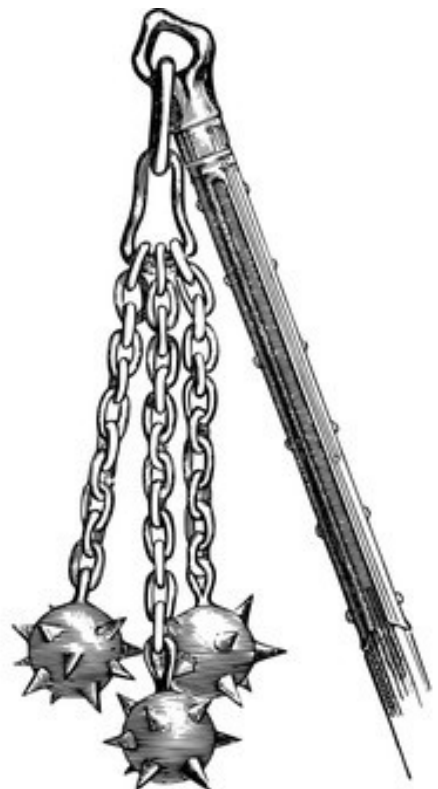
“Men are useless in society. All we need is a stock of frozen semen, and we can get rid of the whole stupid beer-drinking, war-starting gender. The goddess will see to it.”

There is a spray of acid and her skin dissolves.

The tube, you see, is a two-way tube, and sound goes both ways.

Hell may be unpleasant, but it is efficient.

~



John XX

Timons Esaias

The nearly complete suppression of Pope John XX from the pages of history is unparalleled in all the long, sad story of censorship. So thorough and so widespread has this suppression been, that it now seems impossible to guess, with any precision, how long he reigned, or, more surprisingly, even when.

[Encyclopaedists attempt to dismiss the matter by claiming that a clerical error in the *Liber Pontificalis* assigned two dates to John XIV, and thus confused some of the papal catalogues. Oddly, it did not confuse John XV, John XVI, John XVII, John XVIII or John XIX. We are asked to believe that the Vatican -- which keeps such careful record of its papal names that it accepts the numbers claimed by antipopes -- somehow lost count. This is absurd, no matter how often this lame excuse has been reprinted. It is an argument for the ignorant, a Sunday School cant. No serious scholar accepts it. -Ed.]

Some historians have conflated the missing John XX with the legend of Pope Joan: the woman who supposedly gave such extraordinary lectures at the University of Paris (all the while disguised as a man) that she was elevated to the papacy. Elevated to the papacy without being first a Cardinal, and by a unanimous vote of the College. Previously those who believed the Pope Joan story attempted to identify her with a certain John Anglicus, putative successor to Leo IV, but he is not listed in the catalogues either, and the name is probably just a piece of the same legend. Attempts have been made to tie her with other popes of known date (John XVII, Clement III) including, rather outrageously, Pius XI (in the 20th century!). Nonetheless, it is tempting indeed to conflate one unlisted pope with the other, especially when the names Joan and John are gender versions of each other.

Increasing the allure of this hypothesis that she was John XX is that the story of Pope Joan is first recorded in the 1240s. This creates a space of two centuries after the death of John XIX (in 1032) into which to insert this elusive reign, which is said to have ended in childbirth, exposure and violent death.

While this period most likely does enclose the suppressed reign of John XX, recent archeology reveals that "Pope Joan" is an updating of a legend from pre-Republican Rome. It seems that a woman infiltrated the office of *pontifex maximus*, a religious desecration so heinous that its discovery would require the immediate execution of the defiler, just as modern legend preserves.

Scholarship having thus deprived us of this easy solution to the problem, and endless hours of research among all the chronicles of medieval Christendom having uncovered as yet no clear candidate for the missing prelate, it would be beneficial, some think, to examine this question from the other end. From the cause.

What would lead the Church to utterly eradicate the name of one of its leaders from history?

History records many attempts to expunge certain figures from memory. Akhenaton attempted to replace the names of all the gods with that of Aten, and in his turn had his name chiseled out of monuments by his angry polytheistic successors. But neither attempt was sufficiently thorough. We still know the names of Akhenaton and the gods that ruled the earth before his birth.

King Arthur of Britain suffered considerable suppression by the Church, and his name is found in none of the chronicles preserved by monks. In Gildas, for instance, his battles are described and his government discussed, but it is as if the ruler of the Britons had no name. It is from Welsh poems that we know the name of Ambrosius's successor, and from some Saint's Lives that suggest the cause of the suppression of his name. In these tales Arthur is the bad guy, trying to extract taxes from the Church. In retribution, the Church moved to make his very name vanish. Again, however, they failed. We know Arthur's name, and battles, and rough dates.

In the most recent century we have again seen this impulse to censorship in action, but despite the best efforts of the Soviet Encyclopedists, we still know the name of Beria, and that of Trotsky, and all the other original revolutionaries whom later leaders sought to outshine.

In these, and many other such cases -- despite the best efforts of those who sought to erase -- we know the names. Just as we know the names of many anti-popes through the ages, no matter how heretical or fraudulent or evil their rival rule.

But of John the Twentieth we have nothing, nothing but a blank in the papal lists, a missing designation between John XIX and John XXI. This suggests that his crime, if crime it was, must have been worse than mere political rivalry; worse than attempted taxation; worse than doctrinal originality; worse than heresy; and far, far worse than being a woman.

There are three main schools of thought on this issue, but all agree that whatever the cause of this suppression, John XX's time on the papal throne must have been short. A reign of years, perhaps even of months, would have left traces even the most conscientious pursuer would not have found. Communications in those days were simply not reliable enough to enforce an order to suppress a name, and Church and royal rule was insufficiently rigorous for such a task. We would be more likely to find copies of the order to suppress the name than to find the name's complete absence.



The primary theory (called the Berne Conjecture, after the location of its original proponents) is that Pope John XX was discovered to be worse than a mere heretic. Had he been a secret Jew or Muslim, however, this would have provided the Church an excuse for burnings, exiles, or new Crusades; none of which it shrank from using in this period. A practitioner of the Black Arts, or an alchemist, on the other hand, might have been a greater problem. In the mind of the public a woman, or a Jew, or a heretic might become Pope through deception. While deplorable, it casts no clear stain upon the office; and in those days before the Pope became infallible the fallibility of the College of Cardinals might be sensitive but it was not crucial.

Though the source of this story is unclear, and many attribute it to an unrecorded vision of Swedenborg, it has proven surprisingly resilient over the years. At least three separate scholars have visited the Vatican Archives in the last decade in an attempt to find corroboration; and there was a report in the 1950s that the KGB had found proof of the matter in a Russian Orthodox library, but nothing of this has surfaced in the post-Soviet era.

Those who have given serious consideration to this claim argue that the Church could easily have insisted that the angelic impostor was in fact a demon, and dispensed with the need for suppression. A similar argument can be applied to the last contending theory, except that in this case, unlike that of the reputed angel, there might have been awkward physical evidence to deal with. Evidence that might still reside in the bowels of Paris.

The hints upon which this third conjecture were first based are to be found in certain odd passages in both the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles* of St. Thomas Aquinas. Amidst the discussions of such questions as How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?, or In the same place?, and Whether they have corporal bodies? are scattered several surprisingly modern inquiries. Aquinas asked whether “Intelligences live among the celestial spheres?” and “Can those in the upper air move from place to place without the passage of time?” and, rather intriguingly “Can the bodies of those who live among the fires of the upper air be burned while alive?”

But the first thought one has when hearing that the Pope was an alchemist or sorcerer is different. One is inclined to leap to the conclusion that it was special powers that brought him to the office. And this, goes the line of reasoning, threatens the office itself by implying the supremacy of magic over religion. Just as Peter gave short shrift to Simon Magus, so might the protectors of his throne to a magician successor.

Another theory, objected to as somewhat fanciful by sober theological historians, has nonetheless gained currency among Charismatics and Sanctificationists. Regarded as “New Age” by some critics, and as derivative of Dostoevsky by others, it predates both. A Dutch follower of Swedenborg, one Luther Diogenes Kuyptmann, wrote a short commentary on his master’s *Arcana Coelestia* in which he contended, in a brief footnote written in awkwardly phrased modern Latin, that John XX had been a heavenly angel. This angel, Kuyptmann asserts, lasted less than a day as Pope. Having declared it his purpose to divest the Church of both its property and temporal power, he was immediately dispatched (how one dispatches an angel is not made clear) by an outraged Curia.

One need look no further than the Vatican's own art collection to find possible supporting evidence for this. A number of anonymous works, all dating from after 1180, as well as the works of known painters (3 Titians and 2 Botticellis, and a Theotokopoulos among them) right into the Renaissance contain an iconographic character, always in the background, known in art circles as The Chained Figure. His body is hulking, despondent, and his head usually shrouded, helmeted or hidden in shadow. He has typically been referred to as a symbol of sinners not yet redeemed by Christ, but there is no predecessor for such an image before the late 12th century, and it entirely disappears from Catholic art simultaneously with the shameful treaty of Pisa in 1664, in which the Pope surrendered abjectly to the demands of Louis XIV.

This is the precise time that the famous Man in the Iron Mask appears in French documents, imprisoned at Pignerol. This prisoner would die in the Bastille in 1703 and be buried (not traditionally cremated) in great secrecy.

Theologians over the years have tended to neglect these passages as of minor relevance, and a search of the standard database reveals no doctoral theses on these items, or any published paper in the last two hundred years. My own copy of Aquinas has a rather lame footnote suggesting that some of Marco Polo's stories had raised questions about flying people and other fabulous types of humans and demons, hence these odd interludes.

Could Aquinas, the supporters of this Contact Conjecture ask, have been discussing a very specific case, one known to him personally? And could a man from the sky have somehow been made Pope, been discovered, dethroned, expunged from history, unsuccessfully burned at the stake, imprisoned, and have lived perhaps another 500 years?

Aquinas (1225-1274) lived in the last part of the period in which John XX can be assumed to have ruled, dying just two years before the investiture of John XXI. Just as his questions concerning angelic messengers remind the modern reader of a discussion of photons (no mass, instantaneous travel), so these questions make the modern reader think of extra-planetary aliens.

But that would be, as Montaigne used to say, altogether too fantastical.

~

And if a true non-human from the sky was discovered in the papacy, this might give rise to a reaction of secrecy and suppression. This might especially be so if the problem was ongoing, even after the alien pope had been replaced.

Specifically, the question about a creature from the sky having a body that can't burn while alive has encouraged a few thinkers to imagine that an *auto-de-fé* of the offending prelate had in fact been attempted. And failed.

Three Scores and Ten

Ramez Yoakeim

Nearly blind, the farmer navigated the forest floor by touch. Her gnarly fingers scattered the snow from the flaring trunks of ancient pines, in search of tubers and hardy mushrooms. When the concussive booms of atmospheric entry scattered the accumulations off the branches, she lifted her head, as far as her hunch would permit, and looked with milky eyes towards the horizon, and the arc of fire splitting the heavens.

The curious farmer followed the rivulets of molten snow up the low hill, to the cratered grave of the cometary fragment, where it lay sizzling from the ordeal of its extra-solar journey.

She caressed the fractured glassy exterior, and scraped her liver-spotted skin on the shard-riddled interior; sparing the meteorite's fragile molecular passenger Sol's lethal ultraviolet deluge.

Grim soldiers came knocking but the farmer's sole surviving son answered only in grunts. Two weeks passed before he first noticed the beginnings of his mother's metamorphosis. It took three-months more for her back to straighten, eyes to clear, and hair to regain its long-lost chestnut luster. Though imperceptible day-to-day, a crone more vibrant than blushing maidens could not go unnoticed by the villagers for long.

Word spread, drawing dour white-coated men brandishing tools to prick and prod, analyze and scrutinize. Within merely a year of its earthfall, the molecular traveler unveiled itself, for it never intended to remain hidden.

The cellular rejuvenation it imparted obviated the need for division, and the unavoidable accompanying risks of DNA degradation and runaway growth. Intensive study ensued, charting the molecule's many boons. From immunity to pathogens, to heightened mental acuity, and elevated cognitive function. Medical types

and philosophers alike whispered breathlessly, shyly pondering the demise of humanity's most ardent foe. Short of accident or foul play, what avenues to those endowed remained for death to intrude?

A dozen months passed before the mighty could refrain no more. They drank thirstily from the interstellar gift's fount, drawing the ire of all. Those once ailing at death's door reemerged from intensive care wards flaunting vigor no surgeon's knife nor physician's elixir could bestow.

Overnight, those living under the yoke of presidents-for-life had an eternity more to lament their woes. Aspiring heirs to billionaires were left rudderless and distraught.

Clamoring masses--witnessing the monopolization of the ultimate prize by those who already owned everything--thundered in the streets. Make whole our broken, they roared, cure our ills. Let the heavens' gift lift the downtrodden and lame, as it once did a gnarly penurious farmer.

Voices long-practiced at casting doubt on the tumult of a convulsing planet in the throes of calamitous change, suddenly discovered their inner conservationists. How could Earth cope with billions of immortals, with a billion more added every decade or two? Responsibility, stewardship, and stability all demanded that the miraculous gift be rationed; restricted to a few.

Only those who had earned favor may partake of life everlasting. Only those deemed worthy could be permitted to turn away from the indomitable Reaper. Prove yourself then, before praying for a reward, the mighty exhorted, as if the miracle was their own.



A pervasive ranking system sprung to judge the worth of all. Do as told and rise, fall short and have solely yourself to blame. For privation, infirmity, and death. Climb then, with your worthiness score, the rungs of an endless ladder, sprouting more steps than the stars.

Kicking those below and clawing at those above, humankind set to climbing, gleefully imagining eternity attained. Until the all-consuming race to the promised immortality spluttered to an uncertain fearful halt. Long since grown accustomed to the benefits due the first immortal, one morning the farmer failed to arise from her slumber.

Shock and disbelief ensued. How could she perish? Had she been poisoned? Was it even possible to envenom the perdurable? Could her silks have spelt her doom? She had indulged to surfeit, the glitterati droned, eaten to excess, strained to exhaustion, rejoiced immoderately, lived too fully. Surely, the fault was none other's but her own.

The autopsy showed frayed arteries and veins, liquified organs, and the decayed vitals of a crypt postponed. Cells once rejuvenated by the molecule were undone by its machinations; deconstructed to constituent

biochemical ingredients. What it once bestowed, and more, the molecule slyly reclaimed.

Whilst they sought its largesse, none questioned whence it came, or to what end. Turn away from the gift horse, they insisted, avert your gaze from its mouth. With death within the stride, however, they dissected the horse; hide and all, uncovering isotropic timers buried deep within the molecule's intricate innards.

All told, one hundred forty-four thousand received the molecule's pourboire. Presidents and prime ministers, queens and princes, billionaires and celebrities, grifters and sycophants alike awoke to tidings of certain doom.

Frantically they counted the days since they received the molecule's bequest, and the days that then remained till their eternity ended. They spared no effort searching for an antidote. At first, one that retained immortality while diffusing the accompanying fuse. Failing that, means to purge the molecule altogether, reverting to what once had been. Finally, any means to stave off a resurgent death; even if only until dawn.

The molecule's makers' aim had been to depopulate the earth, ready it for those who sought to conquer it with nary a photon beam. Using instead an irrepressible ailment disguised as a boon.

Their failing, and humankind's grace, had been in gravely overestimating our community mindedness. Cooperative we might be when requisite, but only as a molehill stands at the foot of the Everest of our greed. We proclaim commonwealth even when our biology demands we hoard every advantage within grasp's reach. Even those that spell our ruin.

The farmer's son witnessed the internment of her remains alone. After, in their old hovel, he retrieved a shard she hid in a wall, and pricked his finger. Then again, to be sure. It mattered not the manner of death he met, if for three scores and ten months he lived secure.

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Catalog for a Dead Planet

Andrew Gudgel

Notice of an Auction of the Estate of Evelyn Chen-Ortiz

Auction Date: May 23, 3985, 1600-2100 hours.
Preview May 21 and 22, 1200-1700 each day.

Location: Hillis Auctions, 567 Main Street, Suites 16a-c, Milwaukee, Republic of Wisconsin. [Map](#).
[Directions](#). [Contact](#).

All items obtained off-world warranted to have passed through certified biological and/or radiological decontamination. All sales subject to a 15% buyer's premium plus applicable taxes.

The highlight of this Auction is a collection of artifacts discovered on January (Beta Aquarii V) by John Barron Chen as part of his initial, privately-funded exploration of the planet (3880-3882). The following objects were part of Chen's personal collection until his death in 3919 and have remained in the family until now. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to own one or more of the only items from January still in private hands, and provenance documents signed by the Chen-Ortiz family will be provided for any item upon request. Please note that export of these items to countries not signatories of the UN Convention on Interstellar Artifacts is prohibited, documentation notwithstanding.

Lot No. 44 -- Description: Chinese-style *Beitie* stone rubbing of a frieze in the "Temple of Two Monsters." Framed, 1.0 meters wide by 2.0 meters long. Produced by Chen himself using Terran paper and Chinese calligraphy ink. Scene depicts rows of Januarians, first two pairs of forelimbs upraised, flanking an altar (?) upon which is heaped a possible food offering. Incised lines reach down from a sphere, perhaps indicating fire or divine power appearing above the offering. Estimate: 10000-12500 Standard Units.

Lot No. 72 -- Description: Caftan 2.4435 meters long, 0.613 meters wide including sleeves, made of a blue synthetic polymer similar to nylon with quilted-in patches of unknown gray animal skin. Believed to be a ceremonial robe for clan gatherings or possibly clerical garb, as this artifact was removed from a single individual found facing a "congregation" of other individuals in a small building near the center of the city, believed to be a social hall or small temple. (Nomura's theory that the garment is a cooking apron is unlikely, due to the low melting point and flammability of the synthetic cloth used in this item's manufacture.) Other examples contain quilted-in material, but the use of animal skin in this caftan is unique. Estimate: 25000-35000 Standard Units.

Lot No. 93 -- Description: Pair of Tannoak seeds. Identification of the plant that produced these seeds is tentatively accepted from iconography in multiple temple friezes. Found together, the wear patterns on the surface of each seed and the purposeful treatment with multiple coats of lipids indicate they may have been rolled against one another as the Januarian equivalent of stress balls or worry beads. Biochemical examination reveals that neither seed is viable. This is likely due to the sterilizing effects of gamma-ray pulsar PSR Q2132-0535 which passed through the Beta Aquarii system approximately 500 years ago. Estimate: 5000-10000 Standard Units.

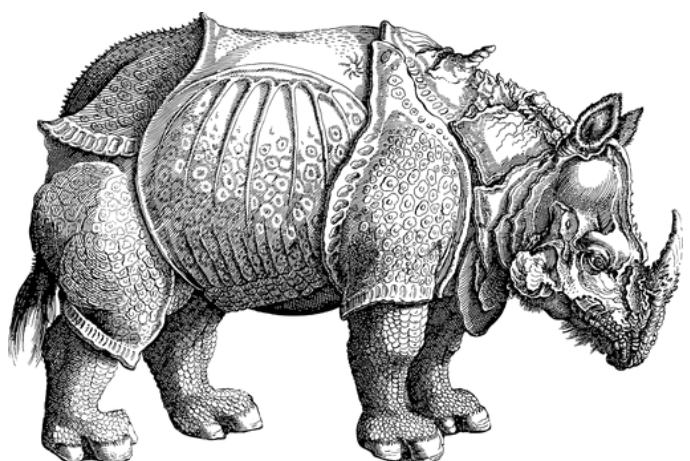
Lot No. 98 -- A "Singing Crystal." Description: A single 1.629cm x 1.629cm x 1.629cm, slightly cloudy, off-white crystal composed of over 21 discrete chemical elements. Scanning the crystal with blue laser light between 4250 and 4500 angstroms produces excitons and polaritons which, as they collapse, produce an acoustic phenomenon described by Lauren Wilkerson, expedition xenotechnologist, as sounding like "a combination of chimes and a gently babbling stream." Evidence of atomic-level manufacture indicates the object had some other primary/secondary purpose, perhaps data storage. Estimate: 35000-50000 Standard Units.

Lot No. 102 -- "The First Skull." Description: Skull of a Januarian in sapphire-glass case with rosewood base and brass mounts. This is the original object collected by Chen himself in the Necropolis. Sealed in shatterproof sapphire-glass and stored in a Carbon Dioxide/Nitrogen mixture that simulates the atmosphere of January to prevent degradation of the bone through oxidation. Prominent "Chief Ridges" located between the central and lateral eye sockets and the oral grinding plates indicate what is believed to be the status/mating hierarchy of the individual within the social collective. The rosewood base and brass mounts were added by Chen the year after his return to Earth. Estimate: 100000-150000 Standard Units.

Lot No. 204 -- Description: Two Codices written in an undeciphered Januarian script. Both items roughly 22.5cm by 30cm. The first codex is hand-written on 162 folded and linked panels of a thick paper made of organic material and bound in wooden boards. Carbon dating adjusted for Januarian historical CO2 uptake

rates and conducted after the item's return to Earth indicates a manufacture date of approximately 650 years before the exploration of January. Rubrication of initial letters in each "chapter" and the general quality of both materials and workmanship further suggest the codex was a religious text, possibly either a family heirloom or a collector's item. Codex includes a later, tipped-in illustration of two suns—one violet-black, one yellow—rising over a mountain range, possibly a representation of PSR Q2123-0535's passage through the stellar system. The second codex consists of nine folded and linked panels machine-printed on a thin paper of synthetic fibers. Illustrations inside suggest it may be a user's manual for a piece of communications technology not yet discovered. Estimate: 20000-35000 Standard Units.

Lot No. 208 -- Description: A doll. Made of a green and black organic cloth 0.4 meters long with three black glass beads for eyes. One bead "eye" unlike the others, likely a later replacement. The individual depicted appears to be an idealized, non-gendered Januarian as fore- and hind-limb pairs terminate only in rounded "hands" and "feet." Fabric well-worn (well loved?) with some fading of the dyes and dirt stains on the soles of the hind limbs. Roughly two-centimeter repair on belly, possibly the owner's handiwork, using black synthetic thread. Removed from a small, unmarked grave just outside the entrance to the Necropolis. Estimate: 2500-5000 Standard Units.



Regarding Bridges

J.L. Royce

July 6th, 1918

To the Editors –

Regarding The Bridges to the Island of Manhattan, and Corpses Depending therefrom:

I write to object in the most strenuous possible terms to the substance and tone of the editorial which appeared Monday last in this newspaper, entitled ‘The Crisis of Leadership’.

Since the very beginning of our first term, my administration has endeavored to strengthen our city: to root out the rot of Tammany corruption, and prepare America for its role in the War that consumes Europe. In the ‘puzzling’ election of November last (and despite political machinations) the people voted to stay the course. And now, strengthened, we face together an unprecedented challenge, a Crisis of *Nature*.

Let me first extend my sympathy to the families of all those affected. Our hearts go out to you, and all those suffering the consequences of this bizarre epidemic. Next, I thank our Police and militia forces, who are on the front line of our emergency every day.

This return of our dearly departed represents an event unprecedented in human experience. Science can and will arrive at an explanation—moreover, a solution—to this affliction. But the medieval proposal cited in your editorial, to suspend these undead still writhing piteously from the superstructure of bridges and other public works of our Fair City as a ‘solution’ to this plague is *unsupported* by anything but *superstition*.

Interdiction at the bridges has already been established, as well as Neighborhood Watches. Yet certain groups propose the barbarous practice of gibbeting as a deterrent to the undead phenomenon. These vigilantes have taken it upon themselves to capture and display the undead in this fashion, aided and abetted by those who would see this administration torn down.

And where is our humanity, in proposing that these unfortunates, after capture, be put on public display? We become no better than the horror that we face. The fallacy should be apparent: the undead lack the power of reason, and respect no deterrent save for brute force. But of course, this ghastly display is a warning not to the dead, but the *living*.

Need I remind any of your readers that it is the brave soldiers who sacrificed their lives in the Great War who, through no fault of their own, first became the unthinking, puppet-like mob now shambling through Europe? Rising from their rude graves in the French countryside, they spread the contagion, through *contact with the living*, around the world. And now that this threat has reached our shores, those same Isolationists who sought to prevent America's intervention in Europe would stigmatize our returning soldiers as possible plague-carriers!

We must not lose faith. Consider the threat posed by influenza – had medical science not fortuitously isolated the responsible virus within months, a catastrophe of global proportions might have developed. These same medical minds are already hard at work on this latest challenge.

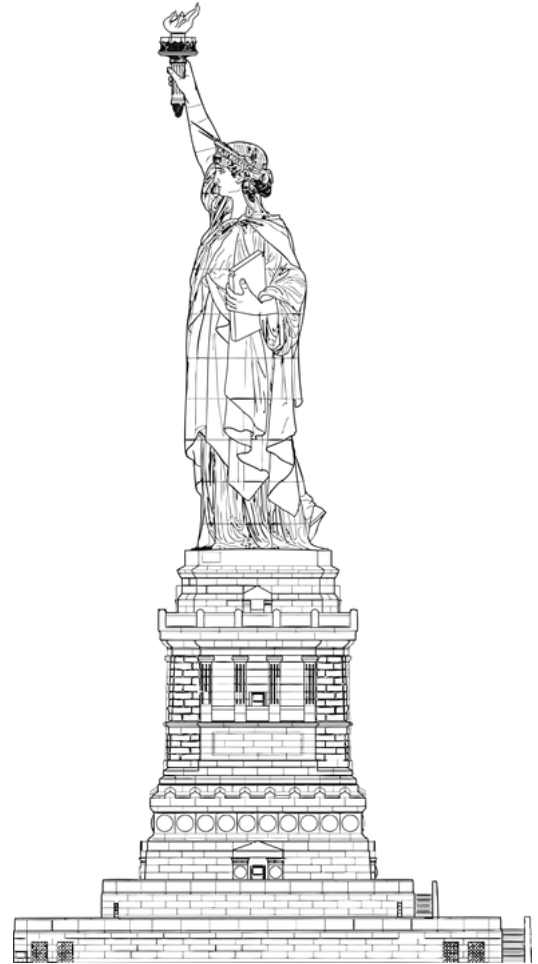
I trust the readership will join with me in denouncing as unscientific any harmful 'solutions' such as this, and will put their faith, as I have, in American Science to solve this mystery and provide us all relief. When the Allies prevail (as they surely will) and our brave troops return, it must be to adulation, not superstition and fear. My recent re-election tells me that there is no 'crisis' in leadership, and I intend to do everything in my power to see our City through this emergency.

(Signed)

John Purroy Mitchel

Mayor, New York City

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On The Vastness Of Space And The Paucity Of Inhabited Worlds

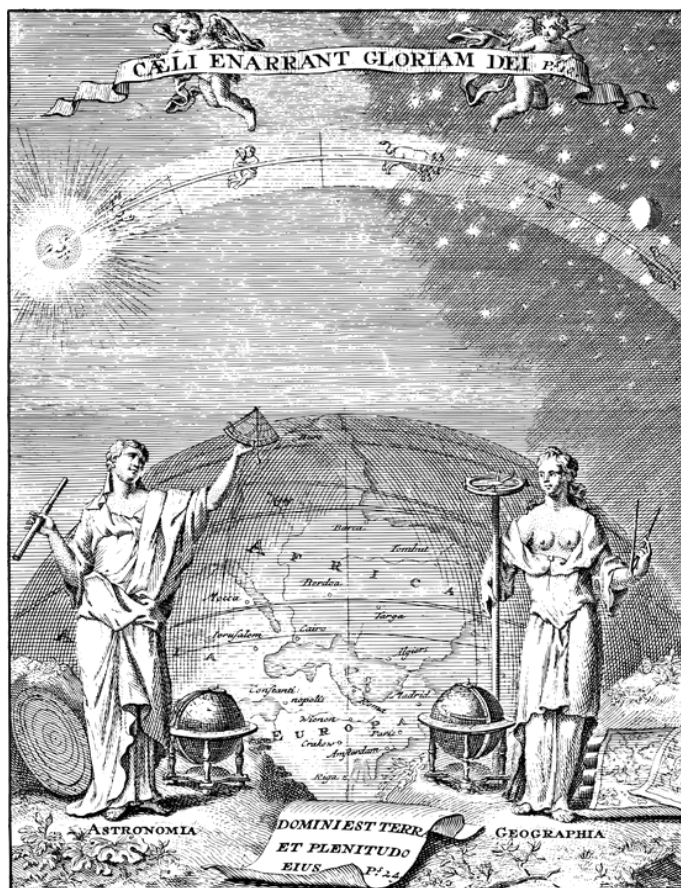
David Barber

St Augustine, a disciple of St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the years around 380AD, sat at the feet of that eminent Father alongside the unknown author of the *Codex Alexandria*. We may surmise this from the following facts.

As Augustine tells in Book IV of the *Confessions*, “When he [Ambrose] was reading, his eyes ran over the page and though his heart perceived the sense, his lips were silent.” The sight of a man reading for himself and not for others hints at books becoming their own justification. The Alexandria codex is fragmentary, but bears a dedication praising the learned Ambrose, and it too mentions this silent readership, *tacita lectoris*.

We know that a complete copy of the work, subsequently titled *On The Vastness Of Space And The Paucity Of Inhabited Worlds*, was made for the library of the Bishop of Antioch in the opening years of the fifth century, since it is described in the catalogue of books demanded by Theodosius II.

That new Emperor at Constantinople, already forced to accept the division of the Roman empire into East and West and unwilling to risk the fragile unity of the Church, cast suspicious eyes upon the See of Antioch, where the heresy of Arianism had only latterly been extinguished.



The copyist describes the work as containing *the most perfect proof of the existence of God*, and a lemma which insisted that the divine law, or *necessitas*, by which God made our world – the laws of physics, as we might say – must allow the plurality of worlds, since to argue otherwise imposes limitations upon God.

In addition, crowded into the margin in another hand is the observation: *concludes the absence of other inhabited worlds – which must follow if the proof is true.*

About the nature of this vanished proof we can only speculate. It should not surprise us that merely human arguments about the existence of God do not resist scrutiny. The lesser may not contain the greater. Yet tellingly, no proof before has demanded that humankind be unique. Perhaps some ideas are fathered only once.

In the centuries since Ambrose, Augustine and the author of the lost Codex, we have indeed found a plurality of worlds, and our servants, the silicon descendants of our own minds, have visited some of them.

And though we have listened carefully, it seems we are alone. As far as we can tell – and these days that is very far indeed – except for the miracle of ourselves, the universe is silent. Science has determined these facts but does not offer an explanation. It may be that others see no need to read aloud; or perhaps it is an infinite theatre with a solitary actor and no audience.

In the sonorous Latin of that unknown hand, *the most perfect proof of the existence of God* demands there be a multitude of worlds, but perhaps the God who was proved to exist had no choice but to leave them vacant. Regretfully, it may be true that the worlds of creation echo to no voices but our own.

~

Killing Death

Carlton Herzog

The ability to defy aging and death has become a reality in our time. Now we no longer fear a hideous decay and decrepitude. Nor do we picture a pointless afterlife of singing Hosannas to a god of dubious virtue.

But even as the universe giveth, it taketh away. Where it extends the lives of the aged, it must surely deprive the unborn generations of theirs. The question then becomes how long should the young let the aged live before forcing them to their graves?

In *Nekros v. U.S.* the high court was asked to address that very question through the prism of the First Amendment. That Amendment both prohibits Congress from promoting one religion over another (Establishment Clause) and restricting an individual's religious practices (Free Expression Clause).

BACKGROUND:

On March 25, 2035, Google perfected Project Calico, which had a mandate to kill death and stop aging. It did so with pico-electric nanites injected into the subject's blood stream. The nanites cured illness, stopped aging, and extended life indefinitely for anyone so treated. Death by natural causes ceased to exist for those who could afford it.

To ease the financial burden on nanite candidates, western governments stepped in with subsidies. That was a necessary step since the initial injection and annual follow-ups were beyond the means of most people.

Unfortunately, life extension did more harm than good. First, the number of global births began to exceed the number of deaths. With more mouths than food to go around, global food shortages became the norm. Second, the elderly clung to their jobs leaving younger people unemployed, and therefore, an added societal burden. Third, the cost of government subsidized life extension crushed economic growth in the developed nations. Fourth, the collection of retirement benefits far beyond what was once a normal lifespan wreaked havoc on corporations. Finally, there was an uptick in crime and other deviant behavior associated with the amortal demographic. Psychologists attributed it to an overweening sense of invincibility coupled with an inexplicable decline in impulse control.

Social philosophers and economists wrestled with the question of how long is long enough? Politicians asked the same question. On May 25, 2050, both Houses of Congress passed the Mandatory Euthanasia Act which capped life spans at 150 years old. Regardless of a person's overall physical and mental health, once a person had passed the chronological red line, they were ordered to report via the Selective Euthanasia Service to a Federal Termination Unit for painless and otherwise humane liquidation.

Many pundits believed that the impact of ageless living on the world's religions, particularly those with pie-in-the-sky visions of an afterlife, would be terminal. To the contrary, religions of all dominations experienced explosive growth directly correlated with the enactment of the MEA.

The reason for such a radical sea change lay in the Constitution. Many religionists believed that the First Amendment protected their right to practice their religion in perpetuity on earth. The lower courts disagreed on the ground that the religious doctrines in question did not mandate earthly life in perpetuity. Instead, it stressed that all the doctrines in question characterized earthly life of secondary importance relative to the greater heavenly reality to follow.

To circumvent that obstacle, K.C. Braddock formed the Church of the Everlasting Earthly Flame. Its central tenet was that God promised eternal earthly life to any and all who sought it.

Harlan Nekros, age 149, joined the congregation that year fully expecting to receive First Amendment Protection of his religious freedom to remain alive indefinitely.

On his 150th birthday, Nekros received his order to report within one year to a termination facility in fulfillment of his societal obligation. He subsequently obtained a temporary restraining order in Federal District Court to stay the process pending a hearing.

At the hearing, Pepper's lawyers argued that Nekros's rights would be violated by the Court's enforcement of the MEA. As a congregant of Everlasting Flame, Nekros was entitled to preserve his life by whatever means were available. To order his termination, the State would be committing a crime against his person and his constitutionally protected right to free exercise of religion.

Nekros' lawyers stressed that "the State's law is just another example of a callous and godless government running roughshod over human life and the religious rights of believers. Drunk with power, the State argues unconvincingly that forced suicide is a curative to modern medical paternalism."

For its part, the United States Attorney argued that, "the net effect of Project Calico's so-called success is that federal, state and local governments have been handed the crushing economic burden of medical treatments and retirement benefits extended into perpetuity for a growing population of geriatrics. Climate change, and the concomitant scarcity of food and water, have made those burdens exponentially greater."

"Such extreme hardships call for extreme measures if our republic is to hold together. As in war, some members of society must be sacrificed so that the greater whole may survive. It is disingenuous for opposing counsel to argue that the State lacks an adequate moral foundation for the law and is simply acting in arbitrary and capricious manner in derogation of the petitioner's liberty and religious interests."

The Federal Court for the Southern District of New York ruled that MEA violated the petitioner's free exercise of religion. It ordered the suppression of the State's termination order pending an appeal.



consent of both Houses of Congress and ratified by the President. We find therefore that the MEA does not offend the due process clauses.

EQUAL PROTECTION

Nekros argued that irrespective of any due process considerations, the MEA violates the Equal Protection Clause which holds that 'No state shall deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.' Nekros asserts that persons over the age of 150 years old are being singled out for disfavored treatment relative to the rest of the public. We find this challenge to be without merit. At first blush, senicide, or selective eradication based on age, would seem to offend the right to equal protection under the law. But since all citizens fall within the sweep of the statute, we can find no basis for a claim of differential treatment under the law.

NEKROS v. U.S.

The United States Supreme Court granted a writ of *certiorari* to determine the constitutionality of the Federal Life-Time Limits set forth in the MEA statute. The major points of that opinion follow:

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Nekros' strongest line of attack lies in the First Amendment's protection of religious freedom. We reject that argument. The State does not deny appellant's right to believe whatever doctrine he chooses. Indeed, the State's motivation in enforcing the MEA is a secular one and does not make any religious practice unlawful. The State is not acting as the thought police, nor the guardian of any one religion. The appellant remains the master of his own mind and soul and is therefore free to pursue whatever religious truth he sees fit to follow.

ESTABLISHMENT CLAUSE

If we were to grant exemptions to Eternal Flame congregants, we would be violating the Establishment Clause by giving preferences to those who believe they are entitled to an eternal earthly life at the expense of other religions that do not so believe.

DUE PROCESS

The due process clauses of the constitution act against the arbitrary denial of life, liberty or property outside the sanction of law. There is nothing arbitrary or unsanctioned about the MEA. It is based on the need to reduce domestic population in order to conserve financial and material resources in both the private and public sector. It was enacted with the unanimous

RIGHT OF PRIVACY

Nekros also argues that penumbra of the constitution creates a fundamental right to privacy, and by implication a right of self-determination. To support that argument, Nekros has provided a laundry list of case law bearing on a woman's right to abortion, assisted suicide for the terminally ill patients, and fulfillment of DNR orders in living wills. Nekros would have us extend that right of self-determination so that he may lead an ageless existence in perpetuity irrespective of the law of the land. We find such case law distinguishable from the one at hand because there was no countervailing state interest in regulating population control. In these difficult times, we must all make hard choices. As the District court noted, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one or the few.

JUSTICE WILBUR BAKER, DISSENTING

DOCTOR FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTERS

We take judicial notice of the State's statistical data regarding the well-documented criminality and malicious deviance of the ageless. To date, there have been more deaths from their wanton and reckless geriatric behavior than from all other domestic causes combined.

That precipitous decline in personal and societal risk assessment, as reflected in those jarring statistics, stems from an unforeseen limitation of nanation. Although the nanation process may preserve cognitive and bodily function, it cannot preserve emotional intelligence. To the contrary, the effect of an extremely long and healthy life imbues the individual with a sense of invincibility, while simultaneously degrading impulse control. The medical community describes this effect as Toxic Centenarian Deviancy Syndrome. To date, there is neither a treatment nor a cure.

We hold therefore that Nekros' constitutional challenges are without merit. We order that Nekros be remanded back to federal custody for termination within the next six months, pursuant to the original liquidation order.

I am disgusted by the social arithmetic used by the majority. I do not believe that such an algorithm is good for society. Indeed, the notion that the State has the unfettered right to murder its citizens for no other reason than they have escaped death by old age is palpably absurd. Indeed, it reeks of both Hitler's death camps where Jews were exterminated because they were characterized as morally flawed and Stalin's pogroms against his own troops because they had been contaminated by exposure to western values at the front.

Not surprisingly, Hitler's views on genocide — for what is the systematic extermination of an outcast group if not that — took their inspiration from our sterilization laws so popular in the 1920's. Those laws aimed to eradicate the unfit and the degenerate: criminals, prostitutes, alcoholics, epileptics and the mentally ill.

I find it disingenuous for the majority to assert that a person is free to believe whatever they like up until the moment the state lops off his or her head. It reminds one of the turkey's fate on Thanksgiving Day following a few years of placid existence on the farm.

What the state, with the imprimatur of the courts has done, is criminalize long life but without the procedural and substantive protections afforded any accused criminal. It follows in the vein of other authoritarian regimes that have criminalized such things as reading, writing, and transporting books as well as composing and playing music. I must ask what comes next.

Given the State's willingness to commit legally sanctioned murder, and its propensity to expand its reach, I should not be surprised if it concocts another law that violates both the spirit and letter of our sacred constitution. Thus, do we slouch toward tyranny and the genocides necessary to sustain it with a wink and a nod to the Founding Fathers.

I therefore respectfully dissent from the majority opinion.

JUSTICE WILBUR BAKER

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Visitations from God leave us as confused as ever

Nicholas Sheppard

Tales of divine visits to Earth have been around since Gilgamesh was a boy, but the recent upsurge in alleged visitations would be remarkable even by the standards of Homer. First we had the tale of Joseph Salamander, who says that God spoke to him from a burning bush while hiking near Sydney, Australia. Then we had Bartholomew Erephus claiming that God had spoken to him from a cloud later the same week, followed by Erina Holsworthy's claim that God had entered one of her children's dolls. A torrent of other claims may be found on social media.

Many of the videos that you'll find are surely hoaxes; it's not hard to set a bush on fire and insert a suitably resonant voiceover. Other claimants may be the victims of mental illnesses or drug use. But even the more credible witnesses leave a lot of questions as to what really happened.

Mr. Salamander says that God asked him to work towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions and protecting biodiversity; but who until now has heard of God needing to prove His environmental credentials? Mr. Erephus says that God instructed him to gather a harem of fertile young women so as to go forth and multiply, as it were; but though Mr. Erephus insists that God is concerned about low fertility rates contributing to the ageing of the population in developed countries, others (including Mr. Erephus' wife) have seen this claim as rather self-serving. Others have pointed out that God's instructions to Mr. Salamander and Mr. Erephus seem at cross-purposes. Ms. Holsworthy says that her doll alerted her to the plight of persons displaced by war and famine across the world, but it is not clear what she is to do about this from her middle-class home in Charleston, West Virginia. Others have said that God warned them of the evils of alcohol or other drugs, or appointed them to stand up for the rights of particular ethnic groups or socioeconomic strata, or asked them to establish societies based on principles laid down by philosophers ranging from Plato to Marx.



Numerous explanations have been advanced for both the apparent frequency of these visitations as well as the bewildering array of advice that God is supposed to have given. Maybe the end really *is* nigh, some say, and God is making a last-ditch bid for the moral improvement of humanity. Some have explained the inconsistent nature of the instructions as individualised advice intended only for the ears of those visited; others have suggested that there might be several gods vying for our attention. For those less inclined to accept divine explanations, there's the suggestion that a team of hoaxers is creating 'deepfakes' on a scale never before seen, or that we might be under assault from alien 'influencers' attempting to extend their audience to Earth. Or maybe the whole thing is just mass hysteria brought on by too much social media.

Rene Jacquillard, a professor of history at the Université de Montréal and noted sceptic, has suggested that the only way to resolve the mess would be to 'catch God at it'. He has accordingly proposed a series of traps through which gods, hoaxers and/or aliens might be gotten hold of and made to perform under laboratory conditions. Sara al-Zubair, a professor of comparative religion at the University of Damascus, has proposed that the new sayings of God be collected into a kind of Extra Testament from which religious scholars around the world can distil a text suited to the needs of anyone seeking spiritual guidance. In the meantime, citizen-prophets can also

contribute their experiences to on-line site *Wiki-Testament*. Critics point out that compiling the sayings of God into a book (or, presumably, web site) has been far from an unqualified success in bringing agreement to previous generations of religious thinkers.

Perhaps there's nothing to do but embrace the diversity and richness of God's will. If God wants to tell Mr. Salamander to protect the environment while telling Mr. Erephus to populate it, so be it, He's not telling anyone to do anything that many of us wouldn't do anyway. What would be really surprising, after all these thousands of years? God calling a meeting to set out His plan in plain common-sense terms that everyone can agree on.

~

Sila

E.E. King

The Sila lived on a planet of stone. They were round, soft, slightly opaque and formed from silicon. They would have been transparent had they been thinner. Like blobs of jelly, they had no eyes, ears, mouths, noses or appendages. They had no senses, nor did they need them. They lived at a pace so slow they could comprehend that time and space were relative. On their planet, the speed of light was relative too. There were no constants. The only constant, unchanging unchangeables, were the rocks and the Sila themselves. They did not breathe or die. They had no emotions, no hungers, no need to reproduce, or desire for love. They communicated directly, without the need for words, faster than light or sound.

They sent their thoughts out into their galaxy, traversing space, distance and time. Life was, of course, fairly common in the universe, how could it not be? Uncountable galaxies filled with clouds of stars and planets. The life was mostly carbon based: small-minded, ignorant, finite creatures. Creatures who saw little and understood less. Creatures who trusted their limited senses and themselves alone in the vastness of space. The Sila found no reason to disabuse them. These creatures had nothing to teach them.

On all the planets, in all the galaxies in all the universes similarity abounded. There was nothing new under the suns... not even sun. But water, in its liquid state, unfrozen and not gaseous, was rare. So, there was interest when the Sila, probing far, far into the distant lights of the sky found a planet that was 98% saltwater.

Probing beneath its surface, they discovered a huge variety of life, an almost overwhelming multiplicity of species.

A few were free floating, looking like Sila themselves, though they were carbon based. Many lived in colonies, individuals sharing a common skeleton. They had no brains. A loose network of nerves detected light, odor and touch. Each had long, waving, poisonous tentacles. Probing into their calcium depths, the Sila discovered minute organism in each that could turn light into sugar. These tiny alchemists fed their own skeletons with food made from light.

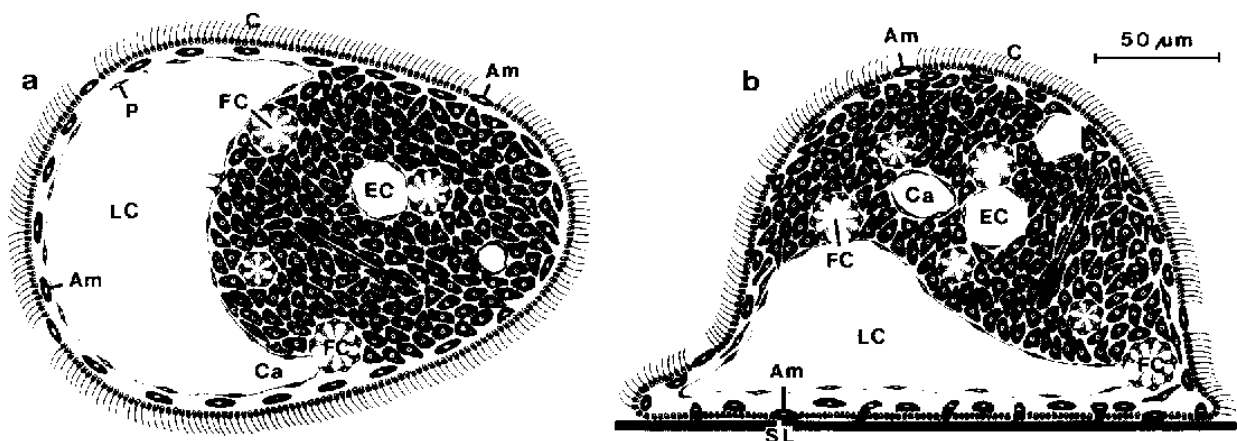
Deeper still, from the dark water rose the bleached remains of older colonies, some were shaped like brains, others like plates, or horns. These too had once been living, but due to temperature, salinity, or depth, they had died and lay white and silent beneath the waves.

There were other ruins too. Some younger, some older, vast towering made of glass, steel and stone. In them, the Sila found no life.

The Sila believed in light, in time, space, rock and chemicals. They believed in thought and ideas. They believed in communication. They did not believe in spirit or in soul. Souls were the inventions of carbon-based life, created to still the terror of an endless sleep, and to calm the fears of an infinite night.

Then they found them. Beings like themselves, round, pliant, opaque and still, lacking all traces of animation. How could this be? They were obviously not rocks. The Sila had seen too many stones on too many planets to be confused. These were Sila, but devoid of intellect, without life - dead.

The Sila shivered first collectively, then individually. If death was inevitable, each wanted a soul for itself, an afterlife, a heaven. And so, the Sila separated. Their expansive minds condensed. Their society collapsed. Yet it could have been so easily avoided, if only they had understood the words on the underside of the dead Sila; *Best Breasts Allegan Brand*.



They lay, two each, inside of six-foot rectangular squares that had been hewed in the ground many millions of years ago. Some were encased in fragments of metamorphic rock, some surrounded by molecules of rotted cellulose. They sat like soft, large eggs, placed symmetrically inside a curious construction of calcium which reeked of long dead carbon. How had they gotten here, buried beneath Water and Earth? What had happened to them?

The Sila were infinite, and yet, here was death, come to their kind on a planet in a galaxy far, far away. The Sila's minds were invaded by that first ambassador of emotion; curiosity. It was like a finger pulling aside a curtain, letting in the first small beam of light, and as a shadow follows light, it was followed by a glimmering of fear.

No Vacancy

Ádám Gerencsér

My child, I apologize for the blinding light. By now, you have probably understood that the truck swerving into your lane failed to come to a halt and you did not survive the impact.

Be advised that a million other souls around the world are hearing a similar message at this moment. You rightly expect a tunnel of light to lead you to our side. Today, however, I'm afraid that you cannot be accepted and must return to the living. In fact, no-one will be accepted until further notice, so it is imperative that you pay attention and mark my words.

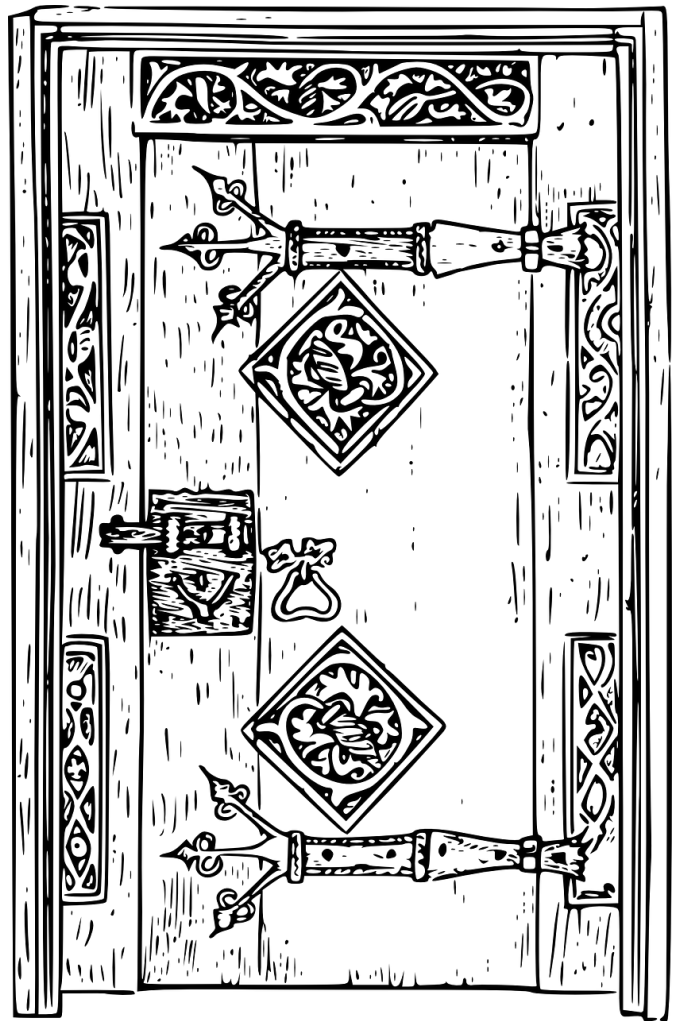
You see, heaven was established with a clear purpose: housing the spirits of the faithful departed, along with those of benevolent unbelievers. The billions of entities who were its original inhabitants formed an ecosystem: the hierarchy of angels. The kingdom reposed in a state of serene equilibrium, waiting with eager patience for its first arrivals, while on the blue planet the primordial soup spewed forth algae, bacteria, dinosaurs, trees and marsupials, all of which did not possess a receptive soul. That gift was imparted to a couple of primates who had shown promise by overcoming their own limitations and reaching for the fruit of knowledge. Many of their descendants failed, but some lived a life pleasing to the Maker - and as they departed, we began to receive them. Hunters and gatherers from communities attuned to the natural order of things had no difficulty fitting in here.

Then, gradually, your kind took to evolution with increasing zest. We were not too concerned by the newcomers from tribes that worshipped the sun, or despotic fiefdoms ruled by warlords. Once we had presented them with 'alpha males', higher angels they could respect and whose commands they would follow, they slotted right in. But then alphabets cropped up and written discourses began to spread - we were aghast at receiving scholars, pharisees and scribes! Things first threatened to get out of hand when arrivals began to trickle in from the Greek city states. The celestial spheres were no longer immutable and the abodes of the dead were echoing with the chatter of varied languages debating history, philosophy, ethics, even metaphysics - before long, a pluralism of views became the new norm in the outer cloud rings.

Mankind's ideas mutated at an accelerating pace, while with each passing generation more and more of you were born and died. Countless bloody wars filled our entrance halls with the ghosts of massacred innocents from all corners of the world. Our hierarchy became untenable, the very orderliness of the afterlife teetered on the brink as the emergence of new angels failed to keep up with the breakneck population growth among the deceased. The renaissance was bad enough, but the second wave of so-called enlightenment in your 19th century practically overwhelmed the administrative capacities of the angelic host, which had hitherto acted as the immune system of the heavenly realm. With the wide spread of literacy, free-thinkers started arriving in unprecedented numbers, and it was no longer possible to smoothly integrate them as their revolutionary discourse had infected the ethereal fabric woven during bygone, calmer ages.

The breaking point came today. Of the million or so newcomers expected, one was bound to tip the balance and human souls would outnumber angels for the first time in the kingdom's history. With a view to ensuring the sustainable operation of heaven, no further arrivals will be admitted before the Maker guides us to find a solution. Until that happens, all deaths are suspended indefinitely. No accidents, illnesses or acts of crime will be permitted to result in mortal casualties - the physical forces of the universe shall be instructed to conspire for the preservation of human life under all circumstances. Please note, however, that births do not fall within our jurisdiction and will continue unabated. Therefore, go back now and tell all who would listen: your kind has certain arrangements to make...

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