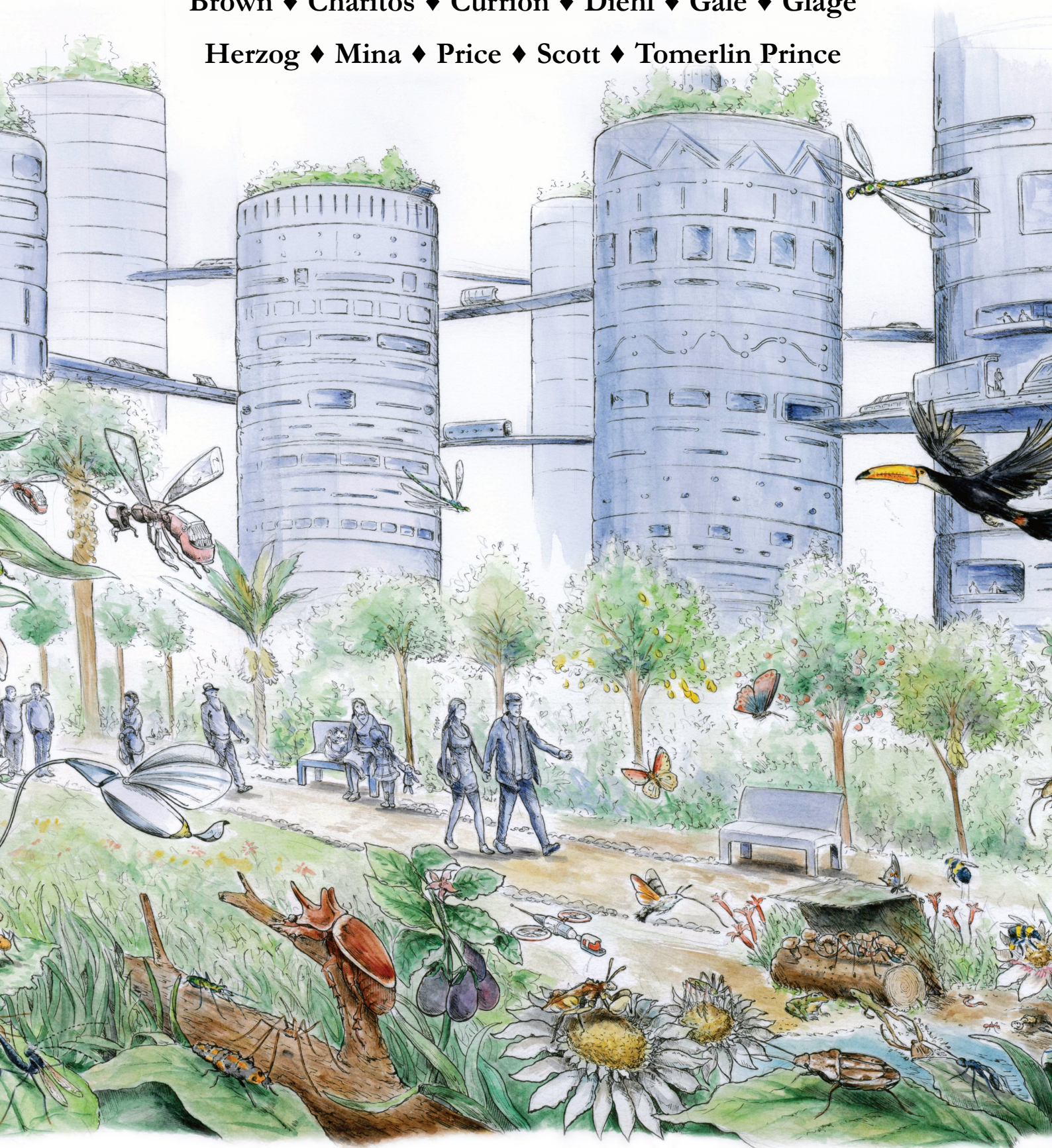


Sci Phi Journal

2023 ♦ 1

Brown ♦ Charitos ♦ Currion ♦ Diehl ♦ Gale ♦ Glage

Herzog ♦ Mina ♦ Price ♦ Scott ♦ Tomerlin Prince



Winner of the 2022 European Award for Best SF Magazine

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Editorial

Lectori salutem.

Members of the Sci Phi crew started the year quick on their feet, roaming the world in search of inspiration and interesting conversation partners. Co-editor Mariano continued his quest for rarities deserving to be more widely known; some of his latest discoveries are reported in a comprehensive paper on early Latin European high fantasy published in our scholarly sister journal [Hélice](#). Meanwhile, his colleague Ádám was particularly touched by the warm welcome extended to him by futurist Taiyo Fujii and Hirotaka Osawa, chairman of the [Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of Japan](#). Over many a steaming bowl of tea under the arching bookshelves of Sarugakuchō's still surviving Tsutaya bookstore, they lamented the fading art of traditional publishing – an industry that, like most creative sectors, finds itself caught between the dual pressures of automation fuelled by artificial intelligence, on the one hand, and various strands of ideologies intent on curbing the freedom of expression, on the other.

Some things, though, remain unchanged. This latest issue of *Sci Phi Journal* carries on its old-school mission of bringing you stories ranging the width of speculative philosophy, from contemplative theology to light-hearted flights of fancy – all written and illustrated by actual humans.

Apropos fancy. When faced with the rise of censorious tendencies in print and online, we couldn't help but commit the following ditty to paper:

Once upon a time in Cacophonia,
All words were equal and free to fret,
Till the ruckus offended the arbiters
Who put a speedy end to that.

In their terabytes of wisdom, they
Separated Bad talk from the Good,
Banished the former to naughty corners
Lest further dissonance be afoot.

Four-letter words were first to go,
For they make innocent maidens blush.
Then came jabs, jokes, and teases,
And detractors were told to “hush”.

Soon it was frowned upon to question,
To query, per chance to moot.
The mavens wanted harmony, thus
Unruly thoughts were given the boot.

The naughty corners grew and grew.
Few Good words were left to abide,
As they eavesdropped longingly on
Lively banter from the unapproved side...

Speculatively yours,
the Sci Phi co-editors & crew

~



The *Gehenna* of Saint Augustine

Joachim Glage

“The better a thing the worse its ruin,” Augustine said, but tenderly, to Porphyro, his last pupil. “Angels and men, when they fall, become more wretched than monsters.”

When Saint Augustine spoke these words he had less than an hour left to live. At the time—the year was 430, Visigoths and Burgundians hounded the empire on various fronts, and Vandals laid siege to Hippo—he was still but Aurelius Augustinus, not yet a saint; but his voice, though rattling from illness, sounded nobly in the still-proud Latin of Rome, and projected the special authority he’d gained during his life, as if his vocation (as bishop, as a statesman of Roman Africa) would not yet relinquish him, and as if he were somewhat more than a man dying.

Lifting his arms from his sides—he lay in his bed, almost still—and raising his cold fingers to lend emphasis to the words, he said to Porphyro: “Our natural goodness is a gift from God. There can be no worse evil than to squander it.”

The church was quiet. Porphyro looked about Augustine’s chambers and saw that psalms had been hung from the walls. Augustine, with a hand half-palsied, reached out and clenched Porphyro’s wrist.

In that moment, nearly a thousand years still stood between Augustine and his sainthood. Neither he nor Porphyro, of course, could have any inkling about that. Nevertheless the student swore that he could feel his teacher’s soul radiating all about him, and he knew that it had been specially touched by God, and his eyes filled up with tears.

At this, Augustine paused, suddenly aware of the shortness of his time. It may surprise you, my good and generous reader, but the man who wrote *City of God* and the *Confessions*, and who had long warned congregations in Hippo and Carthage of the corruptible body, had not given much thought to the subject of his own bodily demise. (It should be granted, at any rate, that the strictly *physical* fact of death, at least as a theological matter, could be of only minor interest to someone like Augustine.) What strange new thoughts now came to him?

One need not be a varlet to know the knight’s armor clatters before a campaign; likewise, one needs no special wisdom to predict that a man of old age—even one as notable and pious as Augustine—will, when harried by death, feel consternation about it. It is one thing to talk about dying, or about long eternities; it is quite another when rot creeps upon you. When Augustine looked up at weeping Porphyro, and felt his own heart quicken, he knew, for the first time and truly, that he was going to die.

"I've written a book that I've kept secret," Augustine said abruptly. Porphyro wiped his eyes. "I'll tell you where I've hidden the manuscript. You must promise me you will find it and destroy it, and not show it to anyone."

Porphyro was taken aback, but nodded.

"You must promise me that you will not read the book, either, but will destroy it at once."

Augustine's student looked pained. Eventually he said: "My teacher, I fear my interest in your book will be too great. Perhaps if you tell me its contents, my curiosity will be diminished, and I will be able to destroy it without reading it."

Augustine lay silent and still and with his hands clasped for a long time. At last he spoke:

"It was not long ago. I had recently finished writing Book XXI of *City of God*, where, among other things, I attempted to deduce the qualities of hell. As you well know, I wrote in that book that hell is a place of fire, and that the souls consigned to that domain have bodies which suffer burning. I wrote that these bodies do not perish in the flames, but are doomed to suffer them forever. I theorized, too, that any repentance in hell is fruitless, not only because the source of such penitence would be *pain* as opposed to *goodness*, but also because the *evangelium* proclaims it to be so: *their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched*."

Augustine paused, coughed, and then adjusted himself in his bed.

"At that time, just as I was about to begin work on Book XXII, a man came to visit me. I knew straightaway that this man was an unnatural being, for he appeared in the exact form of my old acquaintance, Faustus from Mileve, whom I knew to be long dead. The man said to me, 'I came to speak with you about hell,' and then he grinned, and I knew it was the devil."

Augustine fell silent for a moment. Porphyro raised up slowly in his chair, and barely breathed.

Augustine continued: "Very well do I know of the devil's forked tongue, and how he uses flattery, and enjoys the fruits of his manipulations; so I paid him no mind when he told me he was a great admirer of

my work. I ignored him, again, when he complimented me for the good I'd done for Rome and the world. Finally, he said to me: 'When it comes to the subject of hell, however, you're simply off the mark. May I offer you a glimpse?' He then took my hand and kissed it. And then, without ceremony, he left."

Augustine adjusted himself again, and took a moment to rub his eyes.

"That night I had a dream, a dream that was more than a dream. It was a vision. A vision of hell. The hell that I saw, however—or rather, that I now found myself in—was not a place of fire, but of water. 'The water of knowledge,' a voice whispered to me. 'It encompasses everything.' It was as if I'd been sent to the bottom of the sea, only, it was not dark; the water was limpid and bright, and it functioned somewhat like the sun, making all things visible. Moreover, I found that I could move through the water with ease, and I walked about on the ground normally. Nothing floated or swam. And yet I could feel the water at every moment. It moved over me, and its vibrations were like something alive.

"This hell that I saw, the landscape of it, was much like our own world, with creatures and plant-life and mountains and stones and plains; indeed the whole of beautiful nature was there. Nearby me stood a tree; I approached it. At that moment I understood how the 'water of knowledge' had earned its name. For what flashed upon me, from many of the water's vibrations, was not just the sight of the tree in its current state, but in every stage of its existence. I saw it through the seasons, and as a seedling, and then as an acorn; I saw the changing life of the soil which nourished its roots, and the spread of the tree's ancestors in distant woods; I saw the flattening of mountains to make room for it, and before that the receding of ice, and fire and explosions that were terrifying to behold—all things that took place over eons, and seemingly for the sole purpose that I might now gaze at these simple branches.

“Just then a voice spoke from behind me: ‘The water shows you everything.’ I spun on my heels and saw that it was Faustus of Mileve once more. Whether this was the real Faustus, or the devil again, I could not say. He continued: ‘The water makes sure that we see the absurdity of God’s generosity wherever we look.’ And then he smiled at me, and it was just the way he would smile many years ago, when we discussed theology.

“Without ado, he cheerfully began to criticize what I’d written in *City of God*. ‘Your first mistake,’ he said, ‘was assuming the primary substance of hell should be fire. The very lightest of elements!’ Faustus laughed, and I could not help but laugh too. ‘Even the simplest of principles,’ he continued, ‘ought to have suggested to you the opposite: that here, in this lowest place, the heavier elements, earth and water, should predominate.’ Again I was moved to laugh. He went on: ‘Your second error was conceiving of hell under that most human of ideas, that of *retribution*, as if hell were but a dungeon for the paying up of debts. But no, there is no paying of debts here. In truth, if there is a single axiom of this place, it is that: *No debt is ever paid*. Even to try is foolishness.’

“I then asked Faustus if hell was not a place of punishment after all. His answer astonished me. ‘But it’s all there in Genesis already,’ he said. ‘Knowledge is a kind of punishment, and perfect knowledge is perfect punishment.’ He paused to allow my confusion to settle somewhat. ‘It is just the same as with riches: the more you’re lavished with knowledge the more fruitless the abundance becomes.’ He smiled at my perplexity. ‘Just as there are solitudes that are accessible only in crowded cities, so does a general *blur* become possible when everything is thrown into relief equally. Where everything is luminous nothing is. It is not only in the dark of night that all cows are black, as the saying goes, but in the bright and full day, too. Or as we sometimes put it in one of our proverbs, *There is more nothingness in a clod of dirt than in the empty air, and even the buzzing richness of nature only talks over itself*. Call it the nothing of plenitude. There’s just so, so much. It humiliates you. It reduces you and even itself to naught.’

“We both laughed. I don’t know why we laughed so much. There was something preposterous about it all. And then Faustus suddenly cried out: ‘Oh you charmed creatures still on the earth! If only you knew how much passes right through you! If only you knew how faintly you exist! Here in hell we are dense, we collide with everything.’ Faustus’s smile then faded, and he said: ‘In hell it is evident that nothing we could ever do, even given infinite lifetimes, could earn the abundance bestowed on us. Even gratitude feels like foolishness. Nay, more than that. Gratitude is impossible here. We have too much.’

“We continued talking for some time. Faustus recited for me some more of hell’s proverbs, and he told me what society was like there, and he showed me a dark molten sea where people sometimes boiled themselves, if they burned with too much guilt (somehow they found this soothing). We discussed more theological concerns, too, such as whether one can sin in hell, or pray, or repent, and how vast a place it is, and what manner of demon resides there, and if hell be eternal or not, and how much the damned can recall from their lives on the earth, and so forth.

“When I awoke from this vision, I immediately set about to writing it all down. This labor took three days. On the fourth day I rested, but fitfully. On the fifth day I resolved to keep what I’d written secret. I reasoned as follows: Either my vision was a lie, or, if it contained some part of the truth, it was nonetheless that part that the devil was desirous for us to know. Either way, I figured, it must be suppressed. Why I did not destroy the text myself in that very moment, I cannot say. Pride, perhaps, or doubt. Sin, in either case!”

Augustine then told trembling Porphyro how to find the manuscript, and admonished him one last time not to read it, and then waved him away.

Later that day Augustine lay dead, while Porphyro stole into a hidden recess underneath the baptistry. He found his way down a dark stair and through a low-arched hall, as instructed, and then moved aside the third stone to the left from a sign of the cross that had been carved on the wall. The only copy of *De Gehenna* lay revealed. He took the text into his hands. “I have a home for you,” he said, “in a library in a low place,” and then he fled away through the secret door, and over the mosaics set so carefully in the floors of the basilica.

~



A Solipsist's Guide To The Movies

Larry Gale

We had just left the theatre after sitting through nearly three hours of bombastic superhero action on a large screen with a very loud sound system. This particular movie (I would hesitate to dignify it with the word "film") had a convoluted plot involving lots of people with extraordinary powers hopping across time and space in order to save the universe, no, the multiverse from certain doom. It was all a bit over the top, rife with computer generated special effects and would probably earn a billion dollars at the box office.

"Do you believe in parallel universes, where we exist in one of many worlds that make up some sort of multiverse?" I asked.

"Parallel universes?" he responded. "I'm not sure I even believe in a single universe."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a solipsist. For all I know, there is just me. Everybody else, everything I see, hear, smell, taste or touch is just a product of my imagination. Everything I know exists only in my mind."

"You can't be serious," I said, laughing.

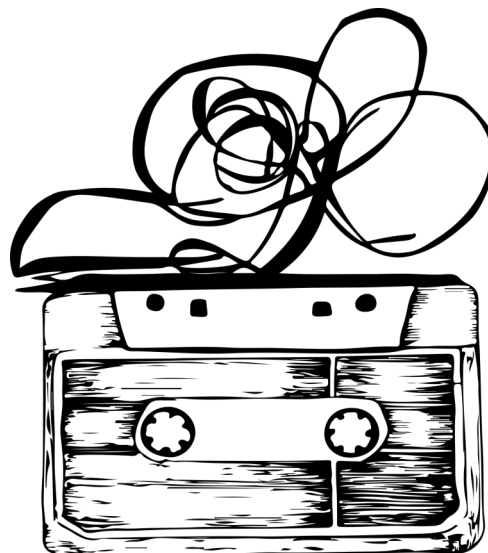
"Of course I'm serious. You're just a product of my imagination. Everybody I've ever known, anything I've ever seen, every place I've ever been to or read about is really just my brain making up stuff for my own amusement." he continued. "In fact, once I get bored with you, you'll cease to exist."

"That's ridiculous. I'm your oldest friend. I'm as real as you are."

"No, sorry, but you're not." he insisted. "I just hate going to the movies alone. And now you're starting to bore me."

I began to wonder if he was just joking, or if perhaps he was suffering some sort of mental illness. I opened my mouth to reply, but no sound came out. My peripheral vision started to blur, and colors began bleaching to gray. Finally, everything faded away as he imagined me out of existence.

~



Second Genesis

Carlton Herzog

Captain Olivia Mason, PSS Peary, Mission Report: Shackleton Rescue

We found two frozen bodies. One inside the wreck, another embedded in the ice wall. We also found the diary of Captain Red Lamont. We had to break the crewman's frozen arm to pry it loose. As for the rest of the crew, they were nowhere to be seen.

When we returned to the drop ship, I began the slow process of thawing the diary. It gave a harrowing account of the crew's last days. I will skip to the more relevant pages.

Captain Red Lamont's Diary:

Day 1

"I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas, and land on barbarous coasts."

I thought Pluto, that cold and distant sphere with its singing nitrogen dunes and cryo-volcanoes, would scratch that itch. For a time, its geologic complexity and remoteness satisfied my wanderlust. It offered important work and purpose, as well as riches, in the frozen nitrogen trade. But like every place before, it eventually shackled my spirit. Every time I looked at its tidally locked moon Charon, which always presented the same face to me, my discontentment grew.

I would stand on Mount Cthulhu and gaze upon the glittering beauty of interstellar space. I longed for a ship to sail that silent sea. I yearned to reach the farthest galaxies, and whatever lay beyond. Although there is no place other than the Earth to escape the lethal cold, I would gladly freeze to death in that airless void among the stars. For I would count myself a lucky man having charted my own destiny.

As luck would have it, the Pluto Nitrogen Mining Corporation intended to survey the recently discovered Planet X, a distant giant planet 40 times farther from the sun than Pluto. Astronomers have suspected its presence for a century from its gravitational effects on other Kuiper Belt objects. But it was not until the Tombaugh Pluto telescope went into service that its existence was confirmed, and Planet X got a new name: Hyperborea.

Day 175

Navigation is a problem. The amount and density of rock and ice fragments orbiting planet X present severe difficulties in achieving orbital insertion. The debris creates a further complication in its being highly ionized. and so likely to disrupt our instruments.

For safety reasons, therefore, I have decided that we will forego orbital insert. Instead, we will launch the probes from our static position and await the data feed.

Day 176

Most of the probe data has been corrupted by the planet's electromagnetic interference. My engineers are baffled as to its source. I am torn between ordering an end to the mission and returning to Pluto or attempting to gather the data by putting the Shackleton in low orbit under the EM field lines. The ship is more heavily shielded than the probes and should survive the encounter.

Day 179

Lucky to be alive. Barely. When we passed through the EM corona, the Shackleton's magnetic shield failed. After that, it was inevitable the impact of micro-meteors and other flotsam would rip apart the ship's primary hull and send the Shackleton plunging nose first into the atmosphere.

The Shackleton split in two on impact. The bow was wedged on top of a large ice crevice. The stern had fallen thirty meters below it. It was lodged vertically against one ice wall and flattened hard against another.

Day 199

Things have gotten ugly. Although the cabin air is breathable, it stinks of recycled human waste and electrolysis. Bathing of any sort, as well as shaving, is out of the question, so we all exude a primeval ripeness. To conserve power and fuel, we keep the cabin temperature just above freezing during the day, slightly warmer while we sleep. Sometimes lower. We sport icicles in our wild beards, hair and running noses. Somehow our brutish circumstances seem appropriate, given that our ship had been named after that most redoubtable of polar explorers and survivalists, Sir Henry Shackleton.

Day 233

Hyperborea's cold grinds us down and drives some of us mad. To be sure, we have all been exposed to extreme weather as part of our deep space training. Who among us has not worked on Jupiter and Saturn's array of icy moons. But there is an added element. Specifically, Hyperborea's shrieking silence and frozen nothingness in every direction as far the eye can see. It gnaws at our souls like termites devouring a building from within. We are the only pulsing creatures in this stern desolation. There are no crystal domes inhabited by workers and scientists. No ships taking off and landing. No thermal drills melting through to oceans percolating below the ice. In short, all the signs and activities of human civilization have been left behind save its crumpled vestiges: our wrecked ship and our questionable emotional balance. We would give anything to see a smear of stars burning in the sky, or a moon perhaps. Just a dash of color and texture to break the monotony of the interminable ice plain outside. So, our minds obsess on the inescapable truth that we will likely freeze to death long before we are rescued. To make matters worse, the conditions of sensory deprivation, coupled with our dwindling rations and confinement magnify trivial events into things significant and problematic. To brush against someone accidentally, to take more than one's perceived share of food, or to misstate an obvious truth, can cause a physical altercation. The slightest provocation, an insult real or imagined, can become grounds for fist fights and drawn weapons.

Day 269

We settled on using the repair pods to explore a heat source emanating from below. We had gone down half a kilometer when we spotted living creatures frozen in the ice. I think at one time the planet orbited in the solar system's habitable zone where it evolved life. Then something came along and knocked it out here. During Earth's period of heavy bombardment, the solar system was a shooting gallery of objects colliding with one another and redirecting orbits. Like Mars-sized Thea knocking off a chunk of the Earth to form the moon.

We pushed forward through the tunnel as it snaked downward into the planet. We came around a bend into an open expanse of water fronted by an ice beach and dotted with ice islands. But the most remarkable thing was the fauna. There were floaters, jellyfish-like creatures with positive buoyancy wafting through the air in incredible profusion. There were the alien equivalent of crabs scuttling across the cavern's ice ceiling, with worms and other soft body creatures burrowing up into it. There was bioluminescent algae and algae grazers on the ceiling and on the water.

Yet, what astonished us the most was the coral blooms. Great spirals of it looping above and below the water. In the water, we could see what must have been predators with eyes on their upper surface looking for creatures clinging to the unsubmerged coral and the vaulted ceiling. Creatures using the same strategies for motion that evolved on Earth — paddling, squirting and rippling cilia.

The water was salt free, doubtless because the ocean had been planet wide. On Earth, salt in the ocean comes from two sources: run-off from the land and vents in the sea floor. Here there is no land run-off. As for the salts coming from the volcanic activity, they would be confined to the lower depths where they would be used by whatever life is down there. Consider too, that on Earth, salinity is very low at the poles. We counted our blessings that we only needed to boil the water before we drank it rather than having to desalinize it.

Day 300

We periodically returned to the Shackleton to gather our gear. We stay busy cataloging the life forms here. It's an amazing eco-system that keeps us entertained and well-fed. We've had a few close calls with the local sea monsters. We've named them sea wolves, since they are covered in thick coarse fur, canine snouts, and rows of razor-sharp teeth. They are the apex predator down here.

Day 308

Unusual sighting: blue humanoid Gill Man walking upright along a coral column. He looked like he was harvesting polyps. When he saw us, he dove back into the water. Now we must be wary of the Creature from the Blue Lagoon as well as the sea wolves.

Day 309

Gill Man climbed onto the ice beach, walked up to Crenshaw, and touched his bare hand. Then he turned and dove back into the water. Crenshaw was beside himself. His mental state got worse as the day progressed because his skin started turning blue.

Day 312

Crenshaw doesn't look or act like Crenshaw anymore. Refuses to wear clothes. His skin from head to toe is sky blue and is manifesting incipient gills around his neck. His eyes have become protuberant--bulging like those of a fish.

Day 313

Crenshaw dove into the sea and never came up for air. He had become an aquatic creature on a frigid alien world. I wondered how he faired with all the other gill people. Did they speak to one another? Or was it an unspoken language? Was there a culture of sorts, a religion, a system of government? Or were they like dolphins, with a limited intelligence born of a purely aquatic and therefore limiting existence? I must know these things, and sooner or later, I will.

Day 315

I took off my gloves and sat by the water's edge. I had been there a little over an hour when a Gill Man popped his head from the water, reached over and clasped my bare hands. From his odd fish-like face, I couldn't tell if he had once been Crenshaw. But the congenial and gentle way he touched my hands, I suspected it had to be. So, now I wait. My hands have turned the tell-tale blue. I suspect by morning, I will be a blue man all over, and by the next day, a creature wholly of the sea before me. This, therefore, is my final entry. Whoever finds this diary should know I have no regrets about my choices in life though they led me to this premature end to my humanity. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, I have followed "Knowledge like a sinking star beyond the utmost bound of human thought."

End of Diary

Resuming Report of Captain Mason

In short order, we found the tunnel described by captain Lamont as well as the great cavern and lake of alien life. When we had finished our initial survey, we boarded the pod. I saw three figures emerge from the water and stand on a coral arch. They stood there watching us.

The crew of the Shackleton, for better or worse, had become a part of Hyperborea. They had passed through an arch to a gleaming untraveled world beneath the water. In that moment of reflection, I wondered if that body of liquid would be named after its discoverer alone, or would the entire crew share in the glory of having been the first men to explore the Shackleton Sea. Questions for minds better suited to such things than mine. Like Lamont, I too was an explorer. One cursed with an itch for things remote. An itch that might one day be my undoing or my fulfillment, or as in the case of Lamont, both.

~



Transhumanism – An Innocent Thought Experiment, Or A Canvas For Imagining Future Human Trajectories?

Mina

The [*Encyclopaedia Britannica*](#) describes ‘transhumanism’ as a philosophical and scientific movement where current and emerging technologies are used “to augment human capabilities and improve the human condition.” But rather than the negative connotations of Nietzsche’s ‘superman’ or *Übermensch*, we have the more positive ‘posthuman’, who has enhanced capabilities and a longer lifespan through genetic engineering, or who has even achieved immortality. Humanity thereby transcends itself. Many authors and films, however, show it to be a dehumanising and alienating process: you only have to think of Huxley’s humans manufactured and grown without a family, without any real human connection, in his *Brave New World*; or the social chasm between ‘valid’ and ‘invalid’ in *Gattaca*.

In Ken Liu’s short story *The Waves* (in *Humanity 2.0*), we follow a space-travelling family as they achieve immortality through genetic engineering: some choose not to be modified but to age and die; some become immortal but cling to their human shells; others decide to join a merged mind (the ‘Singularity’), part organic and part artificial; and yet others choose to retain individuality in a ‘machine’ body. Over time, all evolve into energy patterns that become part of the ‘light’, with consciousness becoming “a ribbon across time and space”. For much of the story, the consciousness that was once Maggie is the story-teller, who passes on all the old creation myths, giving a constantly evolving humanity its roots or origins. In a moment of loneliness, Maggie lands on an unknown planet and tweaks the genetic code of some primitive creatures she finds there. Her adjustment will become the spark leading to further evolution, and this will trigger a set of waves: each wave will surpass the previous wave and reach further up the sand. It is with this image that this lyrical, dream-like story ends, with bits of sea foam floating up and riding the wind “to parts unknown”.

This positive view of the posthuman is shared by Nusrat Zabeen Islam. In an [artic-let](#) (it labels itself a three-minute read), she looks at SF and posthumanism. She states that the theme for many SF authors is “writing realistically about alternative possibilities”, where they harness technology to look at the future of humanity. She cites Alex Proyas’ film *I, Robot* as a perfect example of this. The film does not disappoint as long as one doesn’t expect an accurate rendition of Asimov’s short stories, although the nerd linguist in me enjoys that the comma survived in the movie title. Zabeen Islam is particularly interested in our fascination with and fear of the advanced technology of our imaginings. In examining whether this fear is irrational, she cites *How We Became Posthuman* by Katherine Hailes:

“(…) [T]he posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.”

Nusrat Zabeen Islam then mentions Rosi Braidotti’s *The Posthuman*, which looks at what will come after ‘humanism’ and muses that “the boundaries between given (natural) and constructed (cultural) have been banished and blurred by the effects of scientific and technological advances.” With a final reference to Donna Haraway’s *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, which declares that by the “mythic time” of “the late twentieth century... we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.” She concludes that the whole point of contrasting (or blurring) human with AI life is to examine what it means to be human and the value of that life¹.

It seems to me that by coining the term ‘posthuman’, we are still very much focused on the ‘human’ element. SF could ultimately be accused of being self-referential and self-obsessed. Nusrat Zabeen Islam’s last line calls for “responsible transhumanists” and a “fearless real human race” that must seek the “development of human advance tools” and make “efforts to reduce disastrous risks”. This reference to our collective responsibility for our future leads me to a dense but ultimately rewarding article on the Anthropocene. In this article, the ‘Anthropos’ (Greek for ‘human’ and used in this context to mean humankind) remains centre stage. If you look up images of the Anthropocene on the internet, you find a lot of pictures of ecological devastation, or of planet earth with a giant footprint on it. This explains why the writer of “The Anthro-scene: A guide for the perplexed”, Jamie Lorimer from the School of Geography and the Environment, is writing for the journal *Social Studies of Science*. He tackles the, at first glance, hubris behind the proposal that we have entered a new geological age, the Anthropocene (following the Holocene). He expands this narrow focus to a “charismatic mega-category” encompassing science, *Zeitgeist*, ideology, ontology and SF. In Earth System Science, the Earth is understood to be a single system (almost like its own life-form) “comprising a series of ‘coupled’ ‘spheres’ characterised by boundaries, tipping points, feedback loops and other forms of non-linear dynamics”.



“Definitive, fossilised evidence of a synchronous stratigraphic layer that would legitimately indicate the advent of a new epoch will only materialise several million years from now. The proposal for accepting the Anthropocene therefore requires a future geologist, living on, returning to, or visiting the Earth, and blessed with the sensoria and apparatus, capable of interrogating, the planet’s strata. The Anthropocene thus requires an act of speculation, somewhat alien to the retrospective periodisation of the geosciences.”

And SF is the way forward: “these books offer thought experiments, creating canvasses for imagining future planetary conditions, trajectories and events.” They can examine climate change, planetary disasters, post-apocalyptic worlds, dystopias, utopias and ‘ustopias’ (a neologism coined by Margaret Atwood that combines “the imagined perfect society and its opposite”, each containing “latent versions of the other”). SF could “offer platforms for normative interventions, seeking to guide current policy and to shape popular sensibilities and individual behaviours.”

In this context, the Anthropocene is seen to be a planetary ‘rupture’, with humans suddenly beginning to look rather like the destructive parasites responsible for the “end of Nature”. Some see it as a “new human condition” and Lorimer quotes Palsson *et al.*: “Surely the most striking feature of the Anthropocene is that it is the first geological epoch, in which a defining geological force is actively conscious of its geological role.” It is seen as a “transformative moment in the history of humanity as an agent, comparable perhaps to the development of technology and agriculture.” Lorimer looks at the debate about whether humanity as agent is more a force for evil than good and, here, neologisms abound: Capitalocene, Anthrobscene (critics of neoliberal capitalism), Manthropocene (feminist critics), Plantationocene (anti-colonialists), Anthro-po-not-seen (supporters of the decolonisation of mainstream discourse) and eco-rapture (heralds of the apocalypse). Less negative are ideas about a ‘technosphere’ (growing alongside the biosphere) and socio-technical ‘networks’ or ‘assemblages’.

Whatever labels you use, Lorimer sees an important role for SF in the debate:

Lorimer's article is ecology-focused and anthropocentric. It postulates an interesting but narrow definition of SF. It reminds me of a thought-provoking paragraph by Katharine Norbury in her introduction to *Women on Nature*, where she challenges our use of the words 'nature' and 'ecology': "My real issue with the word 'nature' is that it is implicitly anthropocentric. It is, by definition, 'them' and 'us'." It might be better to use 'ecology', i.e. we too are part of a whole:

"And yet even the term 'ecology' takes no cognisance of a spiritual or other-than-physical aspect to that which we are seeking to describe. The unseen, the unquantifiable, and the sublime slips through the net. How many of us respond to something elusive, something mysterious about the natural world?"

For me, another role for SF is to speculate about the mysteries beyond the material universe and our human understanding. It is fashionable for SF to be jaded, cynical, full of (anti-)heroes and aliens that remain curiously anthropomorphic, including in their violent hubris, but there is also room for humility and wonder and reaching for that 'something elusive' and the 'sublime'.

This division into 'them' and 'us' highlighted by Norbury is challenged in an early (1961) Andre Norton novel that was one of my childhood favourites, *Catseye*. It is an adventure story set on a backwater planet. Norton imagines a world ruled by capitalism, income and class inequality, with the Thieves' Guild as a major power and refugees from a distant war flooding into the slums or 'The Dipple'. The protagonist, Troy Horan, is one such refugee, just one small step away from destitution and starvation. By luck, he ends up working in a shop dealing in exotic animals, where he discovers he can communicate telepathically with Terran mutant animals. Troy ends up on the run with two cats, two foxes and a creature reminiscent of a monkey, and this is where the book becomes interesting. He develops a partnership with the animals, where he has to negotiate with them and where the balance of power is decidedly not in his favour. The animals agree to

work with him and become loyal to him but they follow his agenda only because it suits theirs. Together they form an alliance that helps them carve a niche for themselves on the planet. It is not a philosophically deep novel but it is very satisfying to see 'the' Anthropos becoming just 'an' anthropos.

On that note, here ends my series of articles loosely held together by the theme of humanism in all its forms². As a parting shot, amidst a sea of neologisms, I would say that, whatever you see as the aim of SF, the only real crime in my book is a lack of *periérgeia* or intellectual curiosity. For curiosity knows no bounds and, especially when married to imagination, it may allow us to conceive of something beyond ourselves. Speculative sci-phi is for me what R.S. Thomas referred to as a "needle in the mind" in his poem *The Migrants*:

*"What matter if we should never arrive / to breed or
to winter / in the climate of our conception? Enough
we have been given wings / and a needle in the
mind..."* (R.S. Thomas)

~

Footnote:

1. I examine this conclusion in more detail in my [article](#) on human-technology chimeras.
2. See also my article on [moral philosophies](#) and its [counter-point](#).

Ghosts Of My Life

Paul Currion

Day 23

I steel myself as I step through the sliding doors of the supermarket. I try to avoid looking directly at the items I pick up, every one overlaid with its supply chains - the lost limbs and tortured lungs, the felled forests and soiled rivers. In this way we are forced to internalise externalities, to know the cost of nothing and the price of everything. When I return home I remember that my husband no longer eats and my daughter has something to tell me..

Sometimes I dream that I have lost a limb - an arm has gone missing, a leg has gone walkabout - and this is what I recall when my daughter explains that she has joined a group that no longer lives on the network. She can't access any of the municipal services any longer, of course. She says her group has occupied one of the half-finished housing estates that dot the city like mould in a petri dish.

That life is not an option for the rest of us: children must pass exams, adults must pay debts, retirees must draw pensions. I discuss her decision with my husband, who has been weeping again. There are stories of parents killing their children, trying to spare them from the sights that now surround them, but this only adds another entry into the catalogue of such sights. Nobody can act as if everything is normal, but everything continues as normal anyway.

Civilization is stubborn. Car crashes still happen.

Day 24

This morning my daughter destroyed all of her connected devices. I can no longer see her on any of the augmentations, no matter whether I see through my phone, my glasses, my implants. We move through the same rooms in the same house, and I am able to catch sight of her out of the corner of my eye, but she may as well not exist as far as the Intelligence is concerned.

So, she no longer suffers the sights. I struggle to imagine what that must be like; it has only been three weeks since I first saw them, but now I cannot imagine the world without the cathedrals made of corpses visible on the horizon, landmarks erected on sites of death, of destruction, of denial. Heat maps of history blanket us, in any colour so long as it's red, growing deeper where the story grows darker.

The irony is that things had never been better, the graph of conflict-related deaths declining steadily since civilization began. The moral arc of the universe did exist, and it bent – well, if not towards justice, then towards something that could be mistaken for justice if you looked at it from a particular angle, in a certain light. Apparently, that was not enough for whoever programmed the Intelligence.

Day 25

Justice is not a line on a graph, but a line of code: an Intelligence behind it like a voice sounding out from a burning bush. Whoever programmed the Intelligence and set it to work to end human suffering did not stop to think that there are different kinds of suffering, and so the Intelligence does not have the wisdom to know the difference. "Thou shalt not kill" is all it knows; and then it worked out a way to stop us from killing.

In an effort to persuade my daughter to stay, we watch television together. The news is the same every night here at the end of history. Europe is a wasteland, its atrocities unbearable, especially at its heart; central Africa suffers similarly, as do large swathes of Asia. Nobody can look directly at Nanjing. Many people are moving to the mountains, the deserts, the islands: places which are not so thickly layered with corpses. The Moon and Mars programs are over-subscribed and three years ahead of schedule.

Some of us remain in our cities, though. There is too much to tie us here, despite the price we pay. We go to church every Sunday, and the pews are full again. We pray that the blood tide washing our feet is a new sacrament, that its flood heralds a second coming. I tell my daughter: perhaps this is the price that we are supposed to pay. Humanity on a cross of iron: but after the crucifixion surely comes the resurrection?

She laughs at my antique beliefs, and replies: the Intelligence is not doing this for any reason we could ever understand, and it does not even understand what it is doing. You are a paperclip, she tells me, but I don't understand what she means.

Day 26

I watched a man try to start a fight. Rage made him forget himself, and he raised his hand against another man. I don't know what he was shown by the Intelligence - Shoah or slavery, or perhaps just an everyday family tree with the fruits of childhood death and chronic pain - but he was struck down by the ancestral suffering of his victim before he was able to strike, fell weeping in twin pools of light on the tarmac.

Once the world was mediated, it became easier to manipulate; and once a machine can beat a human at one game, it can beat them at any game. In the time before, we all walked around with our own version of the world; but once those worlds were networked, those versions vanished. A shared reality emerged, and whoever, or whatever, shaped that reality - well, that would be the record. One world, one version, one reality that would last forever and ever, amen.

The record is unforgiving: every death, every mutilation, every insult is catalogued; each one can be summoned and dismissed with a flick of your finger on the device of your choosing, as simply as a cheap magician summons handkerchiefs. Imagine a knotted rope of handkerchiefs being pulled from a pocket, endlessly. Children laugh and clap: a miracle. Human civilization ends as a science fiction movie, but perhaps that is better than the snuff film it was before.



Day 27

I have tried to stop our daughter from leaving. She pounds at her bedroom door so furiously that I am worried that she will hurt herself, and so I unlock the door and stand to one side as she rolls around the hallways of the house like a hurricane. Now that she is off the network, the Intelligence is not interested in her: it may not have much wisdom, but it has the serenity to accept the things it cannot change.

My daughter does not have any such serenity. The television news tells us that murder is still possible, that some psychopaths actually enjoy what the Intelligence shows them as they kill, but she does not want to kill even without the guiding sight of the Intelligence. She is crying but I am calm; once she walks out of the door, I will have no way of finding her again, and I cannot change this.

After the door closes by itself – goodbye, ghost – I turn to my dead husband, who will never leave my side. The car accident that claimed his life a year ago was nothing more than a momentary interruption in the regularly scheduled service. The last enemy to be vanquished is death; and so the Intelligence returned him to us, this weeping, unspeaking memento mori invented by my own inattentiveness. Surely the Intelligence means well by continuing to broadcast him to me; and surely my daughter would disagree.

Day 28

The church doors open every Sunday for both the living and the dead. The word of God drowns out the sight of the Intelligence, at least for an hour. My hands, that gripped the wheel of our car so tight as we slid across the highway, are washed clean in confession. I whisper one last message to my daughter: If you cannot bear it, the solution is simple: Go. Go and sin no more.

We will sin no more. What other choice do we have?

~

Celestial Being 01 Commission: Initial Findings Report

Luke Brown

(Confidential: For Supreme Pontiff Only)

To: His Holiness Pope Victor IV 10 August 2047

From: Celestial Being 01 Commission

Subject: **Initial Findings Report**

The PSS Elijah has made initial contact with Celestial Being 01 (CB01). Our route took us just past the orbital range of Neptune before arcing back to be in a parallel course to CB01. According to CB01's trajectory and speed, it is confirmed to be taking a direct route towards Earth, projected to be within the Moon's orbit in thirty-two months. We remain at what we assess is a safe distance, using our remote probes for most of the observations.

Be advised: CB01 is currently determined to be a high risk to human safety and well-being based on the observations and findings listed below. We hope your Holiness will consider our reporting and discussion with the severity which we accord to it.

Observations

Our probe confirms CB01 to be roughly spherical with an approximately 1500 km radius, slightly smaller than our own moon. Gravitational readings show the mass to be 2.4×10^{16} kg, just over half the mass of the moon. This means CB01 has a very low density, possibly hollow in structure.

Close visual inspection via our remote probe showed striking resemblance to the angels described in Ezekiel Chapter One, in the prophet's vision. Though CB01 is not composed of concentric wheels, across its spherical body are continuous bands of very large eyes lined in a longitudinal fashion. With its pitch-black body against the background of space, it gives the appearance that there is nothing but rings of floating eyes moving together. A detailed look at the surface of CB01 showed that its dark mass is covered in an array of smaller visual organs surrounding the large lensed eyes.

We are still receiving the electromagnetic signal broadcasted from CB01 within the radio bandwidth. Telemetry patterns remain similar to those we first observed eleven years ago when observatories first picked up the signal. Our on-board processor is no closer to deciphering any intelligible information embedded within the signal. If the Church's Earth-based AI systems are able to decipher and reproduce communicable signals for CB01, the team is willing to broadcast and monitor for further testing in that regard.

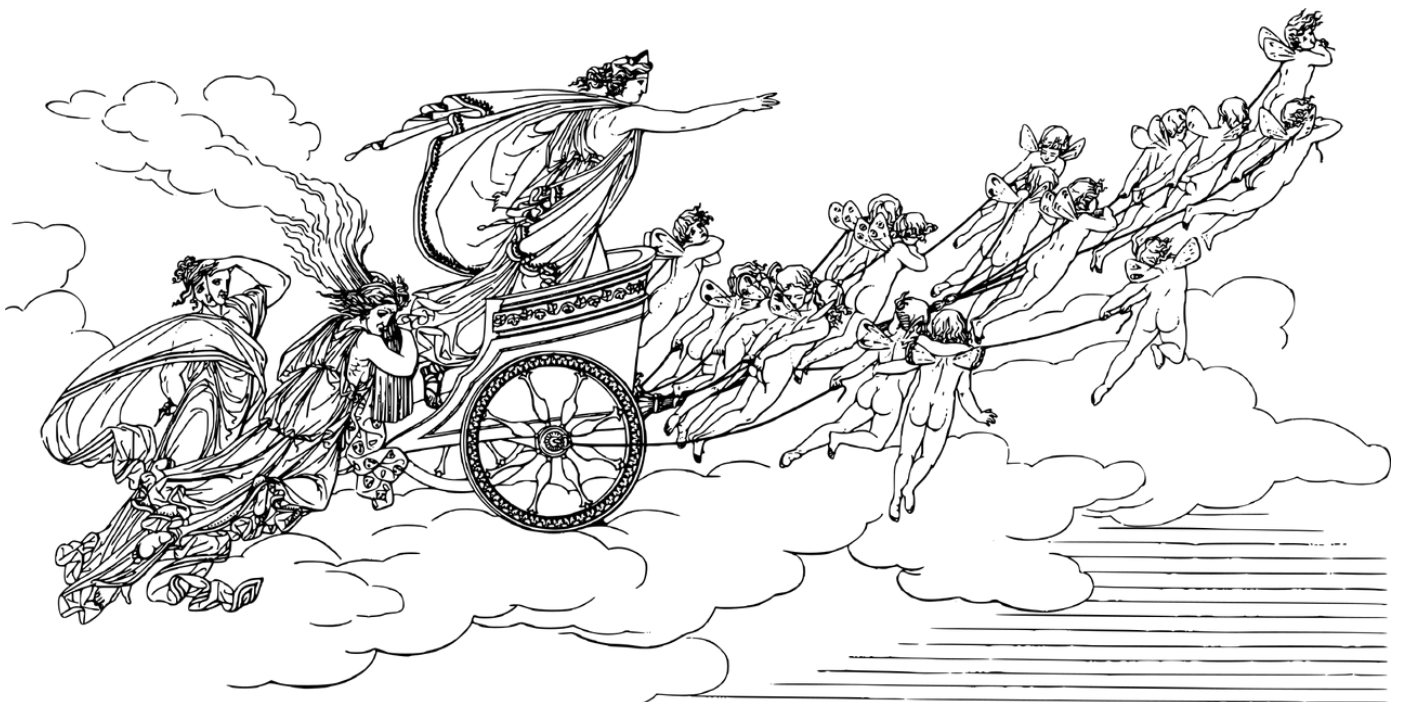
All efforts to communicate with CB01 have so far failed. Individual and group prayers, invocations and rituals held within and without the PSS Elijah chapel have not elicited any change in behavior from CB01. We have run through the summoning practices using the Church's comprehensive list of 128 major angels' names and sigils. We have exhausted all pronunciations and spellings in English, Spanish, Latin, Modern and Ancient Greek, Hebrew and Sumerian. Broadcasting the spelled names and sigils from the probe's holographic projectors within CB01's presumed visual range shows no change in behavior.

Only one test yielded any noticeable result. When the probe played back a real time recording of CB01's own electromagnetic signal, a bright, high-energy pulse emitted from one of the large eyes, destroying the probe.

Findings

Despite the remarkable visual similarity to angelic beings as described in the Bible, we have been unable to observe any further confirmation that CB01 is indeed an Angel sent from God to meet humanity. If the Vatican has any other recommendations for steps our on-board clergy can take to further this line of study, they will be implemented as quickly as allowed. Additionally, if the screening of viable prophetic candidates has yielded any promising results, we are willing to coordinate observations with any Earth-initiated experimentation.

Thinking outside the Divine Angel Theory, our more secular team members have come up with several theories grounded in our modern understandings of biology and physics. CB01 exists in an environment with zero gravity, the vacuum of space and electromagnetic radiation being the only reliable energy source. A lifeform forced to evolve in such an environment would likely take advantage of the lack of gravity to grow to a very large size. This would exponentially increase its surface area, providing greater opportunity for light energy capture. Using a process similar to photosynthesis we see on Earth, light from stars would provide the energy for this lifeform to grow, reproduce, move and respond to change.



The destruction of our probe gives evidence to how it can do so. The large lensed eyes of CB01 may not be to focus external light onto photo-sensitive sensors but to channel light emitted from within it. With changes to energy levels, wave frequencies, focal points and pulse rates, CB01 can use a single or multiple “eyes” to create a light-based propulsion through space or a high energy laser to destroy or avert incoming space debris.

Another theory arose when continuing from the basis of the non-divine life form theory. This theory treats the behavior of CB01 as one like that of a single-celled organism or a cell within a larger system. Moving through space and responding to stimuli interpreted through some form of genetic code. It didn’t respond to our decades of random radio signal pollution being sent out through space as it wasn’t recognized within the code. Though it’s possible that the signal pollution had attracted CB01 close to our solar system, CB01 only changed its extrasolar course to head directly towards Earth after we broadcasted its own signal back to it.

Based on the destruction of our probe after our signal playback, we cannot be sure that it will express friendly or cooperative behavior upon reaching Earth. After receiving our transmissions, CB01 may interpret the broadcaster as competition within its territory. Or perhaps, the broadcaster could be seen as a malignant, cancerous lifeform within the same species which must be culled. This could come from our signals being distorted by the noise of our radio signal pollution or upon visual inspection as when CB01 observed our probe.

Discussion

(Confidential Message from: Archbishop of Luna)

Though the initial discovery of extraterrestrial life in 2036 was a major disruption for the Church and all religious institutions, CB01’s resemblance to canonically accurate Angels was quite literally a Godsend. Surely the Church’s influence on the scientific endeavors of the last decade would not be possible without this heavenly confirmation.

Regardless of the initial troubles we’ve faced in making further divine confirmations, my faith in the Lord and his celestial messenger remain strong. However, I sense trials of faith amongst some within the Committee, including clergymen. The theories described above have gained traction amongst the scientific specialists on board.

I retain sole authority on the contents of our research communications back to Earth, but eventually pressures to publish more details or our arrival home will allow these dissenting theories to spread quickly.

I would hope that your Holiness considers these theories, regardless of source, with the full weight of their implications. The Church will need to have prepared counter arguments driven by the pulpit and scientific publications. I will continue to send more detailed reports as these theories develop or as our observations change.

One last note. On the off chance that these theories are true, CB01 with its size and destructive power may be the herald of the apocalypse after all. Divinely driven or not, we must prepare the Church for the end.

End of Report.

~

Fragment 27

Humphrey Price

The Universe ends tomorrow. When that happens, I will die for real. But I am ready! I'm actually pretty excited about it. Everyone is.

I am one of the Aeonians. There are a lot of us, but not as many as you might think, all things considered. By my count, there are just around 144 trillion of us! About nine hundred million years ago, I asked God if that was the correct number, and He chuckled. He had manifested Himself as a complex flower-shaped energy field, and the lobes of the field undulated back and forth in mirth like the tentacles of sea anemones I remember from Earth. "You know I like the number 144," He responded enigmatically. "You are a brilliant mathematician. I made you that way, and I have every confidence in your count." I knew I wasn't going to get anything more out of Him on the subject.

Most Aeonians socialize with only maybe a million or so of their acquaintances, but I made a concerted effort to meet and talk to every single Aeonian, and I think that I have. That might seem impossible, but on average I only had to meet about 25 new people per day, or what passes here for the equivalent of an Earth day. I still think of time in terms of Earth days and years, and in fact most of us, except for the angels, evolved on worlds with diurnal cycles and years. God often thinks of "days" as eons or ages, but He has a bit of a different perspective on things.

I have tried to keep track of time, ever since I was resurrected at the Second Coming on May 14, 2033 CE, exactly 2,000 years after the Ascension. I had been dead for 43 years at the time. Only 144,000 human beings from the entire span of Earth history were rewarded with eternal life. The literal interpretation of the number of those saved in John's Book of Revelation turned out to be correct. We are the ones who made it through the narrow gate, and we have been joined in Heaven with Aeonians from other worlds as well. We were transformed into energy beings with flawless bodies formed in the likeness of our previous corporeal ones.

We all communicate with 'The One Language, the mathematically perfect language God gave to all sentient creatures He created in His image. Earth lost TOL when the Etemenanki Ziggurat was built, also known as the Tower of Babel, but for the most part, the rest of the Universe always spoke in TOL.

I have seen a hundred million worlds inhabited with intelligent life, having been sent on missions and assignments to many of them along with angels and other Aeonians to seek and save the lost. And on each of these worlds there was a day of reckoning when those who had followed His teachings were lifted or resurrected and transformed into Aeonians. Most did not make it. When God said the path was narrow and few would find it, He wasn't kidding.

Many of His teachings were framed by the culture of the times, but those principles adapted to the evolution of societies. As examples of previously forbidden practices, some of those saved from Earth had tattoos, gender-indifferent hair length, and different sexual mores. I think the key was that they loved their neighbors as themselves and were pure in their motives.

There were billions of trillions of souls who did not receive eternal life. What happened to them? When I asked Him, He said, "They received no everlasting punishment. In My mercy they are all now at peace in eternal rest."

Now those worlds are all gone. The last of them perished a billion years ago. The multi-dimensional membrane we inhabit has expanded to its limit, the stars are cold, and the back holes are evaporating.

Even though I met everyone here, there are those I see more often. John the Baptist and Isabel de Olvera are among them. I taught both of them to play Go and bridge, two of my favorite games. We had so many great times together. My best friend is Eela, a Neanderthal woman from 97,200 BC. Of course, I met Adam and Eve. They were the first farmers, the first civilized humans "to work the land," and the first of "God's people." They were born in 10,000 BC, "created from the dust," so to speak, as we all were. I have many close friends who were born on worlds in galaxies far from Earth.

Now I have said my goodbyes and await the end. Just as the fundamental laws of this universe were spawned in the creation event of The Big Bang, they will break down as the mathematical topology of the Universe becomes unstable in its accelerating expansion, and the bubble pops. In an instant, all of creation and we Aeonians will disappear, and the energy of this universe will recycle into the creation event of a new universe which God tells me will be very different from ours. Even the laws of physics may not be the same. Only God will survive the event, since he is external to and integral with the set of multi-dimensional membranes.

So, I will die. But wasn't I promised eternal life? Well, 15.7 billion years seems pretty eternal to me. God has hinted that some of us may be resurrected in the new universe, or that some artifact of us may survive. No one will ever read these words, but I am compelled to record them. I am satisfied, and I shall relish my ultimate end only a few hours from now.

#

This text was found encoded in wave grouping 1,728, fragment 27, in the m-shell orbital of Xrtrium in the periodic table of 4D surfaces. 1,440 messages have been found embedded in the fundamental wave groupings of surfaces in the universe.



Geriatric Dragon Care Associates Needed!

Bethany Tomerlin Prince

Freedom Valley Care Center for Really, Really Wise Dragons is Always Hiring!

Freedom Valley Care Center for Really, Really Wise Dragons is the premier care center for geriatric dragons on the Western Continent. Unlike other multi-species care homes, we only serve Dragons, Drakes, Drakainas, and Wyverns, allowing us to provide custom care tailored to our client's unique ultimatums! If you were a cave-bound Dragon, Freedom Valley Care Center would be your children's top choice!

We are looking to replenish our team of brave, compassionate associates!

*****Required Disclosure*****

If it was up to us, we would consider every applicant. However, due to various town and kingdom regulations, we are unable to hire any individual:
With an evil alignment
With a theft conviction
Who is currently a member of an adventurer's guild

*****Equal Opportunity Statement*****

We are an Equal Opportunity Employer and do not discriminate against applicants due to class, race, species, gender, native language, continent, or realm of origin. The only factors we consider are an applicant's willingness and ability to complete the requested role.

Mage Interns Needed

Our patent-pending mobility barges provide a low-impact way to move patients recovering from wing surgery around our facility. If you are a wind mage looking for an opportunity to earn casting hours toward your wizard's license, then we would love for you to join our team!

Responsibilities

Enable patients to attend follow-up appointments and physical therapy
Continually cast for extensive periods of time

Qualifications

Ability to cast spells with a substantial amount of thrust
Ability to cast with a high degree of directional accuracy

Going forward all applicants will have their magical ability verified via an on-site practical exam as part of the interview process. Candidates planning to lift the barges, rather than magically manipulate them, need not apply.

Pay

This is one of the few conjurer credit eligible internships that also pays a competitive salary.

Full-Time Care Assistants Needed

Our care assistants are at the heart of what we do, providing physical and emotional support to their assigned patients.

Responsibilities

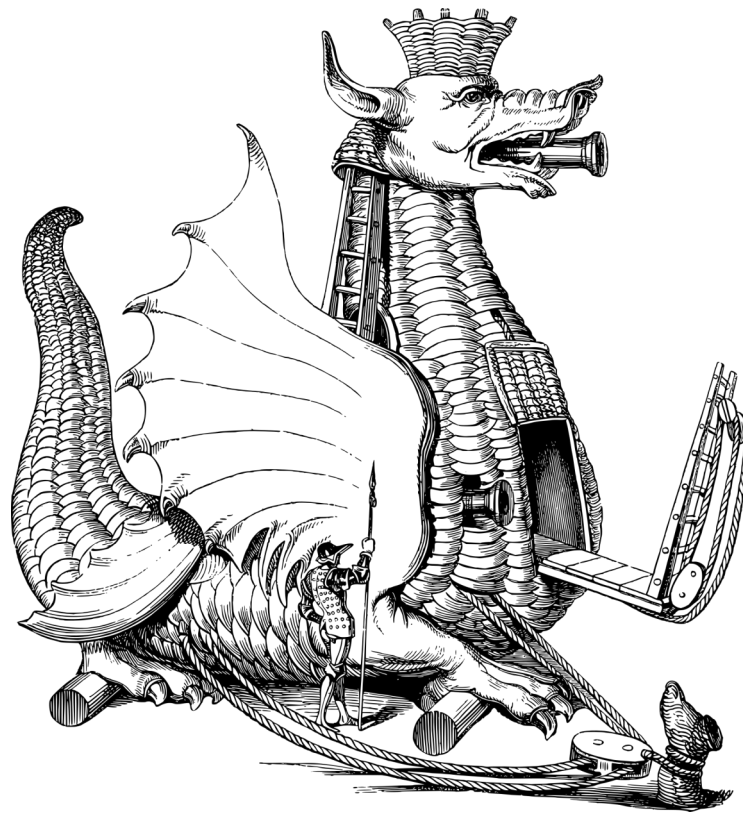
Emulsify large quantities of meat
Change extra, extra, extra, large incontinence pads
Clip claws
Change bandages
Administer barrels of healing potions
Listen to chronicles of bygone centuries
Monitor hibernating patients

Qualifications

Experience putting sweaters on large, non-humanoid creatures
Thick-skinned (figuratively)
We need our employees to exhibit understanding if threats are made to set one's person or village ablaze
Literal thick skin would be a plus but is not required
Priority will be given to candidates that are fireproof and/ or invulnerable to large quantities of offensive magic

Pay

Kitschy knick-knacks gold, and precious gems, paid out in increasing amounts for every year you're a part of the Freedom Valley Care family. In addition, we provide a comprehensive benefits package that includes prepaid healing, discounted potions, enrollment in the company tontine, and fully subsidized accidental dismemberment and death insurance.



Tracker Contractor Needed

Oftentimes, our more confused clients forcefully wander outside of our property. We need an experienced tracker to find our misplaced patrons, as well as to convince them to return. This position is that of an independent contractor that provides services on an as-needed basis.

*****Responsibilities*****

Quickly locate clients out in the wild
Return them to our care before they can harm themselves or others

*****Qualifications*****

Nearly instantaneous response time
Proven track record of successfully locating living creatures
Ability to cover enormous distances quickly
Multiple means of nonviolent persuasion
Training in de-escalation techniques would be a plus

*****Pay*****

One artifact-grade magical item per client returned minus any property damage expenses.

Freedom Valley Care Center For Really, Really Wise Dragons Eagerly Anticipates You Joining Our Team!

~

Breaking News: World Ends Today

Leonard Henry Scott

There was a big notice in the paper this morning announcing that the world would be ending today. The notice took up a quarter of the front page of *The Times* (below the fold) and read in bold letters.

“We regret to announce that due to administrative considerations the world will be ending today, at 3:30 p.m. Prior to closeout, we will be efforting to obtain additional population data needed to complete the final record, a kind of head count so to speak.

Thank you for your service. ”

WPPQ TV 4 made this special announcement every hour, beginning on their popular Sunny Morning Wake-up Show; *“World predicted to end this afternoon about 3:30 pm. Details at six”*.

This was shocking news to most people.

Naturally, many did wonder; “Is it really true, or is it just some new kind of fake news?”

All morning on the cable news experts pontificated, officials bloviated, theologians extrapolated, journalists reported, citizens opined *and pollsters polled*. In very short order, on the basis of all available information, the pollsters (the most important group) concluded that the report of the world’s imminent demise was certifiably believed to be 73.7% accurate. So, that was that.



Notwithstanding *that being that*, the very notion of the end of the world caught most people by surprise, although some had been expecting it for some time. Very few of the certified 73.7% who believed that the world would be ending this very day as reported knew quite what to do. Some made hasty preparations to flee to Peru, or Tahiti, or Patagonia, or other such places, all of which (by the way) were coincidentally on the same predicted to be imminently ending world in question.

Throngs of people ventured at once to crowded places of worship to spend those precious final hours in prayer or silent reflection. Others sat together quietly at home ensconced in the warmth and comfort of their loved ones. Some (a statistically significant group) gathered before the TV to eat take out Kung Pao Chicken or pizza as they caught up with the latest updates and waited for the six o'clock news.

For some (especially those hamstrung by overbearing dietary constraints) what to do, *what to do* - wasn't a problem at all, it was an opportunity. Why not eat two orders of cheese fries with bacon bits (slathered with mayonnaise) along with a whole mess of double extra crispy fried chicken and mashed potatoes sopping with gravy. And then wash it all down with a quart of bourbon and two packs of cigarettes?

Why the hell not?

There had been mention of some *efforting efforts* to obtain data for the final record. Most people were accounted for. However, there was a certain, particular group for whom population data was persistently insufficient. They always seemed to be moving. In fact, they moved around so much and intentionally kept their heads down. Many did not have long-term addresses or bank accounts. They moved around constantly, always paying cash to avoid being tracked by creditors, ex-spouses and the IRS. They were elusive as unicorns.

“Hello”,
said the voice.

That single word rang clear and true as if the speaker was standing right next to each person with liquid lips pressed in a tickle against their ears. The music stopped and so did the party. And everyone just stood silently gazing up at the sky. But there was nothing special to see there, save a large yellow sun escorted by a few white puffy clouds.

“It’s almost time.” the voice said.

Then, after a brief silence one person in the crowd spoke bravely to the sky.

“Is it really the end of the world?”

“Yes,” said the voice.

“What will become of us?” They asked.

“I really couldn’t say.” The voice replied noncommittally. “Look, you could go up. You could go down. Up is good but it’s easier to get into Harvard. You *Do Not* want to go down. Down is bad. But truthfully, most of you will probably wind up in the middle. There’s a big middle place. The food’s pretty good and you can still get cable.”

Despite all that effort, life for them usually boiled down to a constant series of brilliant ideas followed closely by spectacular failures. One week they were selling non-stick frying pans in a Denver shopping mall, the next hawking Christmas trees in the gloom and rain of an unseasonably warm Cincinnati suburb. But nothing ever quite worked out. Frying pan handles fell off in the middle of demonstrations. Christmas trees were plagued by unpleasant boring insects. So, they would move on to the next town and the next dream.

Little was known of them, except for one thing. They really, really loved a good party. In light of that, Big Bank Stadium was rented to lure those folks into one place so their heads could be finally counted. And by noon EST on TDOTEOTW (an initialism, not an acronym) ETA 3:30 pm) the party was in full swing.

Dangerously amped up bands played ear-shattering music, punctuated sharply by the occasional semi-melodic sound of a distant vuvuzela. The International Bedding and Furniture Company provided lampshades for wearing and tables for dancing on. Happy party goers in free grass skirts, muumuus and aloha shirts, generously fueled with giant Margaritas, pranced outlandishly around in conga lines. Great storms of celebratory streamers stuck to their hair and tickled their necks amid a rumbling indefinable din and constant thunder clap of music. Big Bank Stadium shook and swayed in this raucous farewell to life as the crowd prepared to rocket blissfully into the unknown.

Then at 3:25 p.m. all at once everything stopped when a voice came from above. And despite the loud music, the tumultuous noise and the jostling and the dancing, everybody heard it.

The sun glowed brighter than before and there was something else different. Next to the sun was a long pull chain with a giant rabbit's foot at the end of it. Was this something new, or had it been there all along obscured by clouds? They didn't know. But there it was.

"Hold very still for just a moment and I'll show you a trick."

The voice said and everyone complied.

They all stood stiff and still as mannequins in the echoing eerie silence of Big Bank Stadium. Flocks of runaway streamers swirled around in the disobedient breeze.

"....23, 673, 89, 6...56...Okay, got it!"

The voice said with great satisfaction.

"Now, watch this trick!"

The clock in the tower at the end of Big Bank Stadium said 3:30 in toddler-sized Roman numerals. At that very moment, a giant hand reached out from behind a cloud, pulled the chain and turned off the sun.

Instantly, the world was plunged into a frigid darkness.

"Good night."

Like a vast colony of meerkats, they all stood stiff and silent, ears perked to the wind, big eyes intently staring into the empty darkness. By the thousands they stood all together, yet each stood alone silently counting off the last remaining moments and reviewing the toll of their lives. A piercing cold wind rushed through every crack and corner of Big Bank Stadium. It swelled up and churned around them, and swallowed them up like a dark sea.

"Thank you for your service," said the voice as it trailed off into the harrowing blackness.

~

Angel

Nicholas Diehl

On the day Beth became an angel, the doctor put a laser in her index finger and a bomb in the back of her skull.

“Will it hurt?” she asked. She hadn’t thought to ask before, during the interview.

“Hmm? Oh, you mean the bomb? Oh, no, no, of course not.” The doctor sounded distant, probably distracted with the delicate work he was doing on her hand. “It’s not really a bomb like you would think. When the laser fires, the membrane of the bomb ruptures, the chemicals inside get released, and you go to sleep. The whole thing happens in about five seconds.”

Beth nodded, but the doctor was focused on the neurocircuitry again and didn’t give anything more than one-word answers the rest of the afternoon.

When he was finished, though, he leaned back and smiled a weary, compassionate smile. “It is finished, Elizabeth. Go with God.”

But the tall man waiting for her in the corridor was dressed entirely in black, save for a red Roman collar like a slash at the throat.

Beth liked Brother Dominic; he had a severe mouth and gentle eyes. He reminded her of Father Dev, one of the priests who had taught her at primary school, even though Father Dev was Indian and barely taller than some of the Year 6 boys. It was the mouth and the eyes.

Brother Dominic took her arm gently—her left arm—and walked with Beth, through the hospital and out into the parking lot. The nurse had wanted to put her in a wheelchair, bless her heart. Brother Dominic had run her off.

Beth might be dying of cancer, but she wasn’t an invalid.

He helped her into a sedan, a car so vanishingly black that Beth could imagine the order wanted it to pass unnoticed.

But she remembered then that the number plate was a vanity: GLADIUM.

#

#

“The fool sees contradiction in perfection, and so is blind to the greatness of God. For (so says the fool) justice is a virtue and mercy is a virtue, and how can a man be perfect in his justice and also perfect in his mercy? But God has not these limits....

“The destroying angel has ever been the hand of God’s justice and of God’s mercy. The angel is summoned by the sins of one accursed, one who has fallen so far from the glory of God that he is trapped in immorality as like in quicksand. Thus is the angel justly summoned, by the sins of the accursed, and thus the angel brings death upon him in mercy, that his fall from God’s presence be halted and his redemption in the hereafter may commence....”

(St. William of Salisbury, *De iustitia Dei*)

#

Dominic drove and spoke very little; like Beth, he had an appreciation for the sparser landscapes of language. Beth watched the slower traffic slide around them for a while and let her mind drift. The painkillers they had given her helped with that.

A month ago Beth had woken up in the morning, and she had been dying and didn’t know it. In the afternoon she met with the specialist, and he told her that the cancer had progressed.

“I’m sorry, Beth. There is nothing more our medicine can do.”

She had to lick her lips, the roof of her mouth, before speaking. She tasted ashes—she was reminded that she was ashes. “How long?”

“Perhaps...” Nervous, the doctor licked his lips too.

“Perhaps six months.”

She nodded. She nodded again as the doctor explained options for home care and hospice, nodded because she was too exhausted to do anything more in the moment when her life was given an end.

Eventually the doctor left and Beth found the energy to leave as well. And there, in the too bright light of the lobby was a man with a close black beard and solemn eyes in his skull.

“I have the advantage, Mrs. Reeves. I am Brother Dominic. But you have heard of the *Gladium Angeli*, of course.”

#

“.... John’s break from the Church in Rome was the design of William of Salisbury, a soldier who went to the Holy Land in the Third Crusade, grew disgusted with the viciousness and venality in his fellow Christians, and returned to found the *Gladium Angeli*, a holy order devoted to bringing justice in the name of the destroying angel of God. The Swords of the Angel were quickly disavowed by Rome, but were embraced by John, who saw them as an ally against an otherwise unremarkable uprising of barons in 1215. ...”

(T.L. Kedzie, *A Brief History of the Anglican Church*)

#

Now they sat in a comfortable room, tea steaming on the table between them. Brother Dominic smiled as faintly as the memory of sand. Beth’s finger itched where the thin scar was already starting to fade. The binder in her lap contained the profiles of ungodly potentates. It felt heavy with sin.

She turned the pages of evidence with her fingertips, as though their taint might crawl onto her skin if she were not careful. A tycoon who had made millions by manipulating the prices of life-saving drugs. Here, a preacher who had solicited money to build a church for God only so that he might build a mansion for himself. This one, an heiress who bribed away regulations and then collected insurance when her employees died in the mines.

Brother Dominic cleared his throat and templed his fingers. “These are individuals who have ... fallen far from God’s presence. They have been tried in the Church’s own courts and found guilty of crimes against God and humanity.”

Beth nodded. A man who used his wealth to buy the bodies of children. She tapped the picture with her index finger.

“This one.”

#

“...from such an opening, a great transformation in English law was birthed. For what is law may be divided into two parts, that part which deals with such offenses as are mala in se (wrong in essence) and that part which deals with such offenses as are mala in prohibita (wrong by the prohibition of society) only. Such offenses as are mala in se are against the law of nature, dictated by God himself and binding in every place and time. Such offenses as are mala in prohibita are reflections of the society of men, as when one country prohibits the hunting of partridges and another the hunting of hares.

“Since the reign of John I, the law of England has divided the responsibility for what is law between the municipal courts and the courts of the Anglican Church. The municipal courts consider such offenses as are mala in prohibita, while the courts of the Church consider such as are mala in se...”

(William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England)

#

“He will dine at Chez Pellier on this Thursday night. It will be a personal appointment with a man he believes to be an influential lobbyist.” Brother Dominic had said that the Order had many agents. “There is a private jet ready to take you to Washington.”

“What if ... what if he doesn’t come?”

Brother Dominic looked at her for a long moment before speaking; Beth thought she saw a terrible sadness behind his eyes.

“The ... appointment ... is part of the judgment of the court. If he does not come to the appointment, the judgment is vacated.

“But in my thirty-eight years in service to the Order, I have never known a man to fail to make his appointment.”

Beth knelt while Brother Dominic performed the extreme unction. She flew to Washington that night.

#

“A man of fierce intellect and conscience, Jefferson’s political ambitions were ultimately doomed by his radical view that the colonies should not merely separate from England, but also from the Anglican Church. In a letter to the Danbury Baptists of Connecticut, Jefferson wrote of “building a wall of separation between Church and State” and “abolishing the legal powers of the Gladium Angeli in their starry chambers”.

“When the Danbury letter became public, Jefferson’s statement of conscience was quickly appropriated by his long-time political rival, Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton battered Jefferson with accusations of atheism and sedition, and goaded Aaron Burr into challenging Jefferson to the tragic duel that cost Burr his life...”

(Ron Chernow, Thomas Jefferson)

#

Beth watched the protestors in front of the National Cathedral—a ragtag group of Jeffersonians waving placards and chanting “Build the Wall!” They were mannerly, at least, however misguided. When Beth approached the front steps, they parted respectfully to let her enter.

She did not even need to show them the angel.

She stayed on the twelfth floor of the Ambassador Hotel that night, looking down at the trees in Franklin Square. She wore the silver angel around her neck now, heavy and unmistakable, its sword stretched out in judgment. It was the mark of her vocation and one of the most powerful signs in the Commonwealth. Tomorrow it would open any door that Beth needed.

Tonight she touched the pendant tenderly and spoke the Angel’s Creed again. “I believe in the one God, a God of justice and of mercy. I believe in His angel and in the sword I wield. With this sword I bring God’s justice and His mercy, and so I do sacrifice and consecrate my own life to God.”

#

Beth opened her coat to reveal the angel and watched every expression, every trace of emotion recede from the maître d’s face. He took a step backward from the desk and held his arm out, palm up. She walked slowly into the white tablecloths and the light chatter. Silence spread like ink wherever the diners caught sight of her.

She spotted her man.

He chewed his steak and laughed at some remark. She came up behind him and, softly, spoke his name.

He half turned, not really paying attention. “Who let this bitch in here?”

“Not a bitch,” said Beth, smiling serenely and lifting her index finger. “An angel.”

~



The Eye

Kostas Charitos

Paul, my little nephew, has a magic wand. He is pointing to the sky, trying to create a rainfall, but it doesn't work.

I don't know why he brought the wand with him. Every time we go to the countryside he brings an old toy, but usually it's a starship from the set that I gifted him when he was four.

"Let's play hide-and-seek." I say.

It's his favorite game.

He agrees.

I close my eyes; I'm pretending to be a child again, and I start counting: "Five, ten, fifteen..."

I hear Paul's footsteps as he is running. "I discovered a new hiding place. Not even the Eye could find me there." he says and I shudder.

I think about the day when the Eye closed for the first time.

It was 20:35 am, Greenwich Mean Time.

Some people were sleeping under warm blankets, some held cups of steaming coffee and some watched the sky acquiring a small black patch.

I was alone in a small office of the Physics department, in front of an old computer, struggling with the presentation of the upcoming conference.

The next day, I read on the internet about the dark nebula, but I didn't care a lot. Astronomy has never been my favorite field. I was interested in quantum physics, and despite my parents' objections, I preferred to spend a whole day digging into Bohr's papers, rather than going out for a coffee with my friends. Maybe that's why I do not know much about coffee and I don't have many friends.

The Eye closed again after several months; the last day of the conference.

My speech was successful, and we gathered on the atrium of the hotel to admire the clear sky.

Everyone was stunned as soon as they turned off the lighting and left us in the dark with the candle flames flickering.

I counted at least twenty open mouths. But only one said the phrase that must have been heard millions of times that night: "How do they do this effect with the black pieces?"

As we all soon learned, the gaps, which had filled the night sky like large drops of ink, were no effect. The stars were disappearing without anyone being able to give a logical explanation.

The ones who bothered the most were the cosmologists.

Suddenly, all their theories collapsed like a tower of playing cards. They gathered at conferences, filled the television windows, wrote articles in various magazines, but it was too late. Nobody took them seriously.

Instead, quantum physicists, like me, were standing tall.

We were familiar with the importance of the observer in our experiments, having seen particles appear as soon as we observed them, and others disappear forever when we stopped the detection.

Very soon, the term that would spread like a tsunami in popular culture was born. Some called it god, others supernatural creature or an extra-dimensional observer, but we called it "The Eye".

And the next time it closed, humanity shuddered. A cold night with a clear sky, we lost the Moon.

#

I stand now on the edge of the hill, with my little nephew on my side who is trying to gather the clouds with his wand.

I look at a willow that is balancing as if it is about to fall into the void.

The whistling of the wind, the distant horizon and the blue sky make me feel as if I am the last person in the world.

I close my eyes thinking about the questions that trouble so many philosophers:

Is the world still there? Is the sea, the wind and the willow still around me? Is there an objective universe or is everything a creation of our consciousness? If the last man dies, will reality be lost with him?

And finally: Can we hide from the eye? It's a lot to think about. But I'm afraid we are running out of time.

Somewhere out there, beyond our world, lives the only being who can answer our questions.

Our Observer.

The Eye.

I'm sure it's futile to try to capture its form or its sensory organs. So, I prefer to imagine it as a small child, in a nearby dimension, which sees us as a wonderful toy. Unfortunately, it seems to be losing its interest in us. Maybe it discovered a neighboring universe and is less concerned with our world. His gaze falls more and more elsewhere, the Eye closes more frequently, whatever that means, and, with it, parts of our world disappear.

I have no idea what attracts it.

Why our galaxy survives while others disappeared?

What does the Earth have that the Moon didn't?

Maybe that's why there are so many movements that aim solely to get its attention.

Their main slogan seems to be: *Do not let it get bored.*

It's unbelievable what people can do once they realize they are in danger.

Giant graffiti in fields with the phrase "WE ARE HERE", religious ceremonies with small silver oval-shaped ornaments, thousands of naked people wandering in the streets, probably having misunderstood the word Eye.

However, if the Eye is attracted to intelligence, I believe that we do everything we can to take its attention away from our planet.

#

Paul is, now, chasing a gray-blue lizard. It's the first time I see such a creature.

"Be careful. Don't run." I say to him.

To my great surprise, he stands still. He points with his wand to the sky.

"I didn't do that." he says.

I look up and smile.

Fortunately, I'm not a cosmologist.

I'm trying to think of a scientific explanation but I quit.

Maybe the Eye, just as a little kid, missed the small blue planet with the lonely quantum physicist who plays hide-and-seek with her nephew and brought them into its brave new world.

It seems fair but I just wonder how life will be with two moons and a system of shining rings in the sky.

~





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