

# Sci Phi Journal

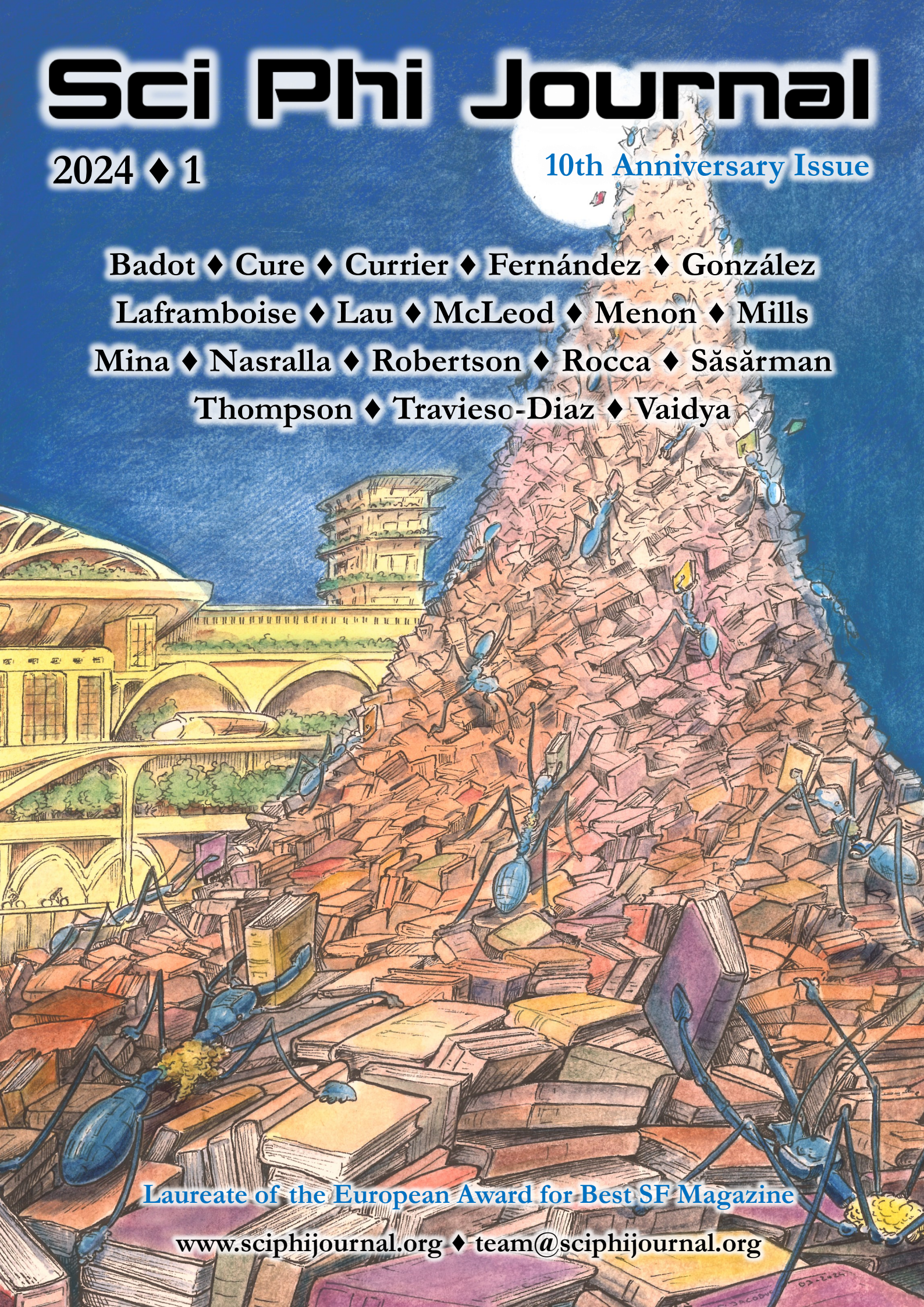
2024 ♦ 1

10th Anniversary Issue

Badot ♦ Cure ♦ Currier ♦ Fernández ♦ González  
Laframboise ♦ Lau ♦ McLeod ♦ Menon ♦ Mills  
Mina ♦ Nasralla ♦ Robertson ♦ Rocca ♦ Săsărman  
Thompson ♦ Travieso-Diaz ♦ Vaidya

Laureate of the European Award for Best SF Magazine

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# Editorial

*Lectori salutem.*

Welcome to our 2024 Spring edition – marking the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sci Phi Journal!

Thanks to the generosity of our readers, we have been able to slightly increase the number of original stories, this time ranging from beautiful metaphysical journeys to alternate history scenarios on both large and small scales, along with the customary dose of light-hearted fancies, as well as two translations of classical SF tales (from Romanian and Spanish) hitherto unavailable in English.

The current issue is made complete by two essays, one on ideological diversity in speculative fiction by our trusty columnist, [Tangent Online](#)'s SF critic Mina, and a second by an illustrious trio of scholars introducing the [Science Fiction and Philosophy Society](#), which held its inaugural meeting in 2023 (and with whom we will host a joint panel at the [2024 EuroCon](#) in Rotterdam, Netherlands).

Somewhat surprisingly even to ourselves, some of our most-read pieces are essays on and around SF subjects, such as Joseph Heath's "[Why The Culture Wins](#)", an appreciation of Iain M. Banks, which has thus far been visited by a quarter of a million people – among them a certain Mr. Musk who, by tweeting about it, inadvertently crashed our website... (We are pleased to report that we had since upgraded to a server more befitting the requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.)



By the time you are reading this, we will have festively opened an [exhibition](#) at the Liszt Institute in Brussels, Belgium, showcasing the solarpunk portfolio of Utopia-award finalist Dustin Jacobus, our longstanding cover artist, including previously unpublished visions of sustainable urban futures. If you happen to find yourself in the vicinity this spring, we encourage you to drop by for a free visit.

The world of 2014, when *Sci Phi Journal* first saw the light of day (in Australia, what more), was markedly different from our current realities. The field of speculative fiction had since then been buffeted by the COVID pandemic triggering a global wave of locked down authors and readers (and at least one attempt at a hybrid EuroCon), the return of warfare on European soil (and the subsequent suspension of Russia from the European SF Society), ideological polarisation in Anglophone literature, and political interference from outside the SF realm (award procedures at last year's WorldCon in China being the latest example). We can only guess what challenges may lie ahead, chief among them the rise of AI and the effects it will have on human creativity.

Nevertheless, we dare to look into the future with an inquisitive spirit that has been our beacon since the current editorial team took the helm five years ago. Here's to another decade of intriguing speculative philosophy in all its forms, welcoming its broad spectrum of views and voices from around the globe. (As long as they're not over 2000 words, that is...)

Godspeed!

Speculatively yours,  
the Sci Phi co-editors & crew

~

# To Catch The Light Off Other Stars

*A.J. Rocca*

He fell out of space down, down through the depths and into the shape of an eel. He wriggled his way into a secret reef nourished by four ocean currents, and there amongst corals and algae of every hue he found the first two Mectopians. Their play was innocent; his adversary had gifted the pair with eight limbs apiece, and they juggled rosy-hued decapods back and forth. He lured off the female of the pair and led her to the oysters she was commanded never to pick. He told her that if she were but to pry open a shell and take its opalescent pearls, she would become wise like God, dividing the waters between saline and pure.

Lucifer fled out of the eel and broke the surface, titanic and winged, a halo of spray exploding in his wake. He ascended to the upper atmosphere and found his ally Urania waiting on the precipice of the void. Together they watched the four currents collapse and the waters of Mectopos' far north turn ice. Urania congratulated him on his strike against their shared foe, and she told him of a new world she'd espied freshly seeded with life. She drew her wand to mark stars on the way to that far distant orb, and Lucifer spread his wings to catch the burning light off the nearby sun. He pushed off into the void.

Then a million years of solitude.

On Pseudopsaria, he became a creeping fungus. He stretched his mycelia through the soft soil and attached to the roots of the tallest angiosperm in the forest, white blossoms bursting open over her breadth. For a growing season, he whispered into her dreams of rain and wind. He told her that if she would but stretch out her vines into that sunspot forbidden her, she would become like God, growing to spread her canopy in the sky and measuring where falls light and shade.

Lucifer watched from a nearby asteroid as the planet's firmament was stripped bare, leaving the Pseudopsars exposed to the raking of a blue-hot sun. In his flush of victory, however, a seed of humiliation: Lucifer had to wait for Urania to divine his next course through the stars. Before his fall, he was the brightest of the angels, and he could ride his own rays across the universe. Now he was divested, and all light was turned repellent to him; they'd made his own name a mockery. Out of this curse he'd devised a new way between worlds, but he was blind without Urania.



Finally she stepped forth from the void to congratulate him and plot his next mission. Urania told of a gas giant in a neighboring galaxy whose fourth moon was just beginning to crawl, and she marked out three crucial stars he could use to reach it. Lucifer caught a blast off Pseudopsaria's savage blue sun, and he boomed out across the cosmos along the arc of her azoth-tipped wand.

Then another couple cons alone.

For the Citarions, he was a jelly, for the desert Katyushans a hop-mouse. From orb to orb he went, and every time he found his victims undefended. The empyrean host was always one step behind him. Lucifer sneered at the thought of fiery-faced cherubim arriving to defend fallen planets, nothing to do but shake their spears in useless fury at the ones they'd come to save. Cherished images such as these helped preserve him against the void. Space and time wore down on his senses like pumice stone, but Lucifer refused to let his revenge be eroded; his hell burned dark and hot within him as the adversary's stars swept him across ancient night.

For the Takians, a sentient cloud. For the Zyanides, a throng of heartworms. He continued his slow streak of victories against the adversary. But between victories, the universe changed. He saw distant nebulae give birth to bright daughters. He watched icy-tailed comets come travel with him a ways before slugging back home to orbit. He felt thorny webs of radio waves get tangled in his wings and threaten to blow him off course. For a while as he approached the new galaxy, he tracked with interest a dying star. He watched it grow great and red, but it never exploded. It just grew older and colder and dimmer, and Lucifer felt a terrible kinship. The hell within him swelled and swelled, and despite his efforts, finally began to cool. With that abatement came questions: How had the Empyrean host never caught up to him? Why had the adversary allowed him to escape and cry havoc across the cosmos? Why had he not yet plucked the traitor Urania from her hideaway within the void?

It was on approach to Phi that Lucifer made his decision. He reached the edge of the star system, but he did not proceed to the topaz-colored planet in the fifth orbit that Urania had promised him. Instead, he alighted atop an icy planetesimal caught in the system's outmost orbit. He folded his wings and waited. He sat for a few revolutions around Phi and watched her seven daughters dance—aphelion to perihelion, conjunction to opposition to conjunction again.

At last, he felt her presence behind him.

"Hail, Lucifer!"

Lucifer did not turn his gaze from the dance.

"Why are you sitting here?" Urania asked. "Have you lost your way?"

"Do you remember that third or fourth world you showed me to?" Lucifer asked. "That fleck of blue and green where I became the snake?"

"One of your canniest tactics," said Urania.

"I should have been a bee."

"A bee?"

"I saw them flitting through the garden," said Lucifer. "I always wondered why he saw it fit to put a sting to them; what needs a bee to sting when she's the best servant to the gardener? Maybe she gets some nectar, but who gets the fruit once it falls?"

Lucifer turned a lopsided smile to Urania, appreciating fully her dark, flowing gown of aether and night. "So come on. Which one are you?"

Urania did not answer. She rapped the end of her fire-tipped wand across her palm.

"Is it Raphael? Gabriel?" Lucifer asked.

Michael's light grew bright hot, and Lucifer savored the pain of it. Of all the angels the adversary could have set to this task, Michael was the cruelest choice. He was made like his sword: straight edged, simple.

"You present them a choice," said Michael.

"And yet they keep making the wrong one. Again and again. Every single one of them," Lucifer said. "Some choice."

Michael gripped his shield and spear, and cracks ran all through the icy planetesimal. "Satan! You will not snare me with your lies. You did not before, and you will not now."

"I'm not trying to ensnare you, brother. I'm trying to give you a gift."

Lucifer rose from his perch and went to face Michael directly. It was all he could do to bear it. The light coming off Michael was a fierce gale ripping out across space.

"I'm going to free you from this hated task you've been yoked with," Lucifer said. He could feel Michael's rage in every filament of his being. "Go back to heaven and tell him I'm done pollinating his worlds. Tell him if he wants someone to work his garden, then he can do it himself."

The fire from the wand burned bright and spread to consume the lady; out stepped Michael hefting sword and spear. His apeiron-forged panoply was heaven-bright, brighter than Phi, maybe even as bright as Lucifer himself was once. The near presence of such powerful light sizzled on the fallen angel's skin and nearly blew him off the planetesimal, but he refused to surrender his seat.

"Ah." Lucifer folded tight his wings and went back to brooding over the star system. The planetesimal thread its way through half an orbit in silence.

"Well?" Michael finally asked. Lucifer smirked, but kept silent. The commander of the Empyrean host was action incarnate, and it was not in his nature to wait. He hefted his sword, and Lucifer still remembered its edge from so many eons ago, but he felt no fear. What could Michael hope to do? Force him to sin?

Lucifer tortured his brother with a few more silent orbits around Phi. He meant to keep him there another thousand revolutions at least, but his swollen, cool-burning heart betrayed him.

"How did you feel when he ordered you to help me?" Lucifer asked.

"It's not our place to question him."

"And I'm sure you never did, but what did you feel? You must have felt something over all this time we've had together. And all this space." Lucifer gestured his arms across the cosmic expanse, its constellations dotted with worlds they'd taught to suffer. "What was it like? You the devil's handmaiden, showing me to new worlds to pollinate with sin."





Lucifer spread his wings, and Michael's light shot him off the planetesimal and straight out of Phi's system. He flipped over and caught his balance, ready to resume his sojourn through the cosmos. For the first time in his existence, Lucifer did not know where he was going. He would avoid the topaz world hanging fifth out from Phi, but that left only a neat infinity of possibilities and the whole tide of time to turn them over: he could skate the edge of event horizons, dance upon the rings of gas giants, dive down to pluck molten gold from collapsing novae.

All Lucifer knew for certain was that he did not want to follow the adversary's direction any longer. He could ride his brother's fury for a while, but eventually he'd have to learn to catch the light off other stars.

~

# Untitled

*Jeff Currier*

The Penrose Tribar perched precariously on that inflection point where ‘full’ and ‘empty’ are the same thing. Achilles could have made the difference, but he stood frozen on the threshold trying to reach the closest halfway point to being inside the pub. Turtle hadn’t waited for him and was well into his first pint. I was pouring drinks for all and only those who didn’t pour drinks for themselves, when the collapse finally happened. A decidedly perplexed looking young man deftly sidestepped Achilles and walked in.

Completely unaware of the drastic change he had precipitated upon the state of my bar, he surveyed the expansive room. God was drinking alone, as usual, at the corner table, contemplating the constraints of logic. Idly, in the palm of his hand, he created another universal Turing machine spider too heavy for him to lift. His arm drooped to the floor and the mechanical critter caromed away towards its brethren lurking under the pool table. Somehow, they had acquired a pile of sand, from which they were meticulously removing grains one by one, attempting to discern exactly when a heap became a non-heap.

Mona Lisa, leaning against the pool table posing, didn’t even lose her enigmatic smile as the machine skittered over the feet. Leonardo, easel propped nearby, deftly painted another forgery, which I know he would insist on hanging next to all the other Mona Lisa’s adorning the back wall.

Holding court in the largest booth, Baron M. regaled hangers-on with a demonstration of his surefire method for curing his latest malady. He adeptly faked the faking of refilling his glass and took a hearty swallow. The sycophants tittered appreciatively, especially when he repeated his faking of fake refilling

for all their glasses from a bottle of fine whiskey he had bought on his own fake dime.

The young man shook his head, as if by doing so he could reset his vision, and slowly made for the bar. He stopped short once he got a good look at me, taking in my soft furry pointed ears and my simply diving tail. I flashed him a brilliant smile, showing off my sparkling canines. He took a step back.

“Are you, pray tell, a demon? Is this the afterlife? Am I dead?” he asked, all in a rush. He put a hand to his temple. “Last I remember, I was taking some medicine for a headache.”

“To answer your questions in order, no, I am not a demon.” I flicked my tail. “I am a genetically modified cat.”

He looked at me blankly.

“What is your name, lad?” I asked.

“Charles, Charles Dodgson.”

“Ah, yes. Well Charles Charles Dodgson, genetics is a little after your time — though some interesting stuff involving peas will happen in your stream in just a few years. But I digress. No, this is not the afterlife. You are in the Penrose Tribar, the finest pub in the entire Nexus.”

Another blank expression.

“The Nexus — the space between all the *possibilia* He created,” I said, gesturing toward the corner where God was now muttering to Himself, “I do not know the truth value of *this* sentence. I do not know the truth value of *this* sentence. I do not know ...”

“And finally, you’re asking questions, aren’t you? Never known the dead to ask questions.”



#

Interlude on the very idea of blank looks: *Intentionally left blank.*

#

Charles opened his mouth and emitted a sound that no one, not even God could hear.

(Think of a sound indiscernible from that of one hand clapping.)

He abruptly closed his mouth, opened it, closed it again, before finally taking a deep breath. “Dreaming then?” he asked, while tentatively taking a seat at the bar.

I gave him a hard, thus-I-refute-Berkeley slap. “Is that real pain or dream pain you’re feeling?” I asked.

“Inconclusive,” he muttered, rubbing his cheek. “Perhaps I am merely imagining all of this, my current feeling of pain, that I am talking to you, that that crocodile fellow is about to eat that baby!”

I whipped my tail around to snag him before he rushed off to interfere with Sobek, the crocodile god. Sobek’s jaws were indeed closing around the tyke, and then, at the last moment, he pulled back with an anguished look on his face.

(You can’t tell what anguish looks like on an Egyptian crocodile god? It looks just like that.)

“There’s nothing to worry about, lad. Sobek promised prophetess Cassandra he would give her baby back unharmed if and only if she correctly predicted what would happen to it.”

“And what did she say,” Charles asked.

“That Sobek would eat her baby.”

“And where is Cassandra now?”

“She went to the ladies’ room, where I fear she encountered an unexpected kidnapping.”

“Cassandra did not see that coming?”

“It wouldn’t be unexpected now if she had. Unfortunately, this left Sobek is a bit of a pickle. Can’t eat the baby; can’t give it back, and no Cassandra to just snatch the child and run. Still, you should have seen what happened to Pinocchio when he said his nose would grow now. We’re still finding little wood fragments embedded in the walls.”

He looked at me blankly yet again.

“Right, no Pinocchio for at least another thirty years for you. But back to the issue at hand. If you are just imagining all this, you must also be imagining that you are properly using words like ‘imagining’, correct?”

Dodgson pondered this for a while before saying, “So my correctly using the word ‘imagining’ when asking you whether I am imagining all this is paradoxical?”

“Self-defeating, at least. Best not to confuse the two.”

(What with all the blank looks! Please see the Interlude above.)

“If you aren’t imagining asking your question, then you obviously aren’t. No problem.” I paused to lick my hand to wipe behind my ear. “But if you are imagining asking your question, then you aren’t using the word properly, in which case whatever this is, it isn’t you imagining things. Either way you aren’t imagining asking me the question. Hence, asking if you are merely imagining asking is self-defeating. Poor Sobek on the other hand is currently trapped in a paradox.” I waved my hand at the rest of the bar. “I’ll let you sort out the rest. Fancy a drink?”

He nodded. I placed a Klein bottle full of beer in front of him. He pulled out a fiver. I sniffed it and pointed to the sign behind the bar: *Only counterfeit money accepted as legal tender*. He looked at me dumbfounded.

(At least we had moved on from blank.)

I sighed. “This one’s on the house.”

He puzzled through the shape, finally realizing he’d have to turn it upside-down to get the liquid out. But before he touched the bottle, there was a loud pop and a young lady appeared on the barstool next to his. Swirling chronitons decayed around her. She flashed him a dazzling smile, before turning to survey the rest of the pub. The time traveler locked in on a pair of young men sitting at the table next to Sobek’s. They were vociferously arguing about whether ‘heterological’ was heterological.

(You don’t know what ‘heterological’ means? Look it up. You want me to explain *everything* in the story? Now who wants the impossible? Do you want me to reach the end or not?)

She leapt from the stool, pulled out a sleek disintegrator pistol, and fired. The young-man version of her great-great-great grandfather exploded into an expanding mist of particles. The Universe promptly did the same to her.

Charles put his head in his hands and clenched his eyes shut. He began to mutter, “I am not here now. I am not here now. I am not here now.” He opened his eyes and shrieked.

I must have become just my smile again. I’ve been told it is quite disconcerting.

(I could check that for myself in a mirror, you say? How exactly? Just a smile — no eyes! Duh!)

Luckily the Turing machines distracted him. They’d emerged from beneath the pool table and were now whirling about manically, having a race to see who could be first to prove their own consistency. By the time he looked back, the rest of me had faded back into existence.

“Well, young Charles, since you don’t believe any of this is real and don’t even want your beer,” I said waving a hand at the still upright Klein bottle, “the only thing I can do is impart some advice: *One is fruitful only at the cost of being rich in contradictions.*”

“Oh, that’s good,” he said, pulling out a small notebook and a little square pencil. “Can I use that?”

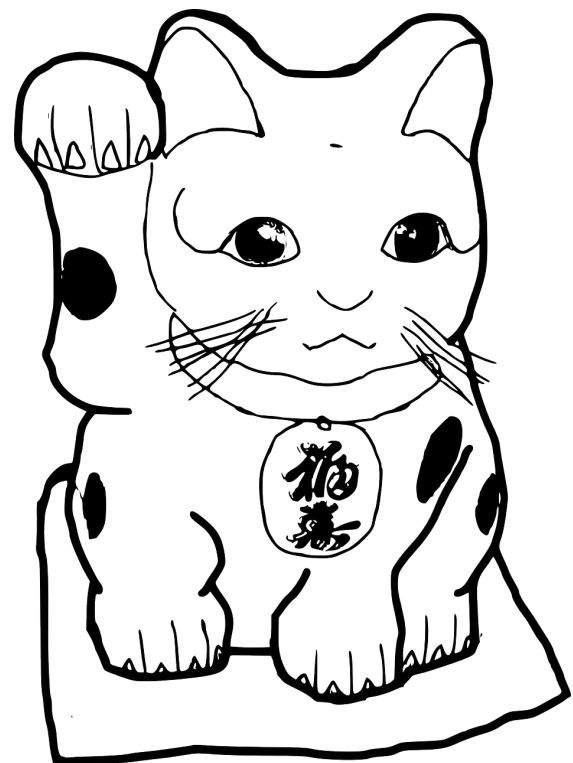
“Not unless you want to plagiarize the future.”

“How on earth can one plagiarize ... No, no, all this really must be the result of a bad batch of laudanum.”

And with that Charles decided he’d had enough of being in two places at once. His wave function promptly collapsed back into his headache.

(But you really shouldn’t take my word for it; I am lying now and everything herein is false.)

~





# The Ocean Of Stories Upon Which We Sail

*Mina*

This article is woven around a wonderful [speech](#) given by Salman Rushdie when he was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, as part of the Frankfurt Book Fair. For him, authors (consciously or subconsciously) borrow from existing stories and add their own twist, so books “...come from other stories, from the ocean of stories upon which we are all sailing. That's not the only point of origin: there's also the storyteller's own experience and opinion of life, and there are also the times he lives in. But most stories have roots in other stories, which combine, conjoin, and change, and so become new stories.”

Authors thus translate their personal mental and emotional universes into stories but also the political, historical, social and cultural currents that flow around them. Their translation of their realities is imperfect and highly subjective; their works are then read by imperfect readers who will interpret what they read to fit into their own realities and a game of “Chinese whispers” begins. As Michael Moynahan SJ tells us in his poem *Incarnation*:

“If communication is not  
what you say but  
what people hear,  
then what we said  
was warped and wrenched...”

No author writes in a vacuum and SF stories reflect not just rockets, moon landings, computers, the internet, smart phones, bionic limbs and other inventions, but also geography, ancient and recent history, changing cultural mores and trends of thought. And, as Rushdie reminds us, they reflect the fiction we read or watch, as many of us spend far more time dipping into fictional worlds than in watching or reading the news. So I thought about what I had read or seen recently to see what narratives I could discern as an imperfect reader/viewer. I'd like to stress here that I made no effort to find obscure narratives: all my examples are taken from my everyday life, for example, from links shared by friends, the ezines I review, Amazon Prime and the good films that go to die on international flights. And I am most definitely not exempt from subjective opinions.

To begin with an important attitude for me when reading: I particularly enjoyed the easy acceptance shown in [Once Upon A Time At The Oakmont](#) by P. A. Cornell that people are entrenched in their times (and places), with the narrator telling us at one point: “I smile. You have to accept this kind of thing when you’re a resident of The Oakmont. Times are different, and each one has its own set of values and attitudes that will inevitably become obsolete as the sands of time continue to fall.” The Oakmont is a block of flats built over a time vortex. As the building manager explains to us: “Time is nothing . . . and everything. It doesn’t actually exist, because we made it up, but if it did exist, it wouldn’t run in a line; it would run in a circle...Time moves differently at The Oakmont. We can touch it at any point in time or at all points at once.” The narrator, Sarah, tells us of residents she knows and the rules (of which there are many) that govern The Oakmont. We learn of her lover, Roger, and her friends, all coming from different eras. I’m not suggesting that the tolerance predicated in this tale should be confused with fatalism, or a *laissez-faire* attitude, just that it is to be espoused and defended.

Moving on to examine some of the social and cultural currents flowing around us, we find gentle but unapologetic feminism and the blurring of gender identity in [Mountain Ways](#) by Ursula K. Le Guin. Although the story is ostensibly about a world where two mixed-couple poly-relationships (a “sedoretu”) are the norm and the lesbian protagonists have to find a way around this stricture, it is much more about couple and group dynamics. What makes it really interesting is its exploration of what navigating family/group dynamics involves. I love Le Guin’s psychologically complex tales and this particular one was originally published in 1996, reminding us that the blurring of genders (and roles) happened well before we invented new labels for it.

“Anti-colonialism” is given a wonderful new twist in the short story [Death Is Better](#) by Oluwatomwa Ajeigbe, which weaves robots and slavery together. The protagonist and his sister are attempting to escape a plantation on another world that is guarded by armed bots, including a behemoth. They are willing to risk their lives because death is better than slavery. In the chaos they unleash, it is unclear whether they manage to escape or simply find freedom in death. A nice detail in this tale is a reference to how albinism can ostracise you in a dark-skinned society (it is considered a sign of bad luck in the West African Mandinka culture, for example).

“Pro-choice” is very much part of [Always Personal](#) by Rich Larson, which follows a detective as she investigates murder cases involving “inverse stabbings”. It could be a normal detective story, one that involves DNA and bioprinters that don’t exist (yet), but the victims all fall into a “pro-life” mould stereotyped as hypocrites: victim A, who had anonymously donated to abortion clinic protests and blockades all his life; victim B, who had attended them and also impregnated two separate underage girls in his younger days; victim C, who had refused to operate on a pregnant woman even as sepsis set in, losing his license but gaining a fortune in political following. The detective clearly empathises with the perpetrator’s “calcified anguish” as she (the detective) lost a friend to a car accident as they drove overnight “to get over the right state line”. This particular topic can turn stories into unreadable diatribes but the author gives us a good yarn whilst making his opinion clear on a divisive issue.



The author of *Muna In Barish*, Isha Karki, would fall under the “BIPOC” (black, indigenous and people of colour) label. We follow Muna of the Nehiri minority (she has horns and dark umber skin, and legend has it her people once had wings) as she survives in the city of Barish. She has found work and apparent shelter in a bookshop, working for Arethor. But as we witness her working days, we realise that Arethor uses apparent kindness to exploit and bully Muna; behaviour that Muna cannot acknowledge even to herself or she will be left unemployed and homeless. Muna wants to be a word-weaver, just like Lenore Phoenix who has a bestselling series about a Halfborn like her. Her secret joy is her correspondence with her hero. One day, she meets Karabel of the Senai minority (with pointed ears and keen hearing). And she finds friendship, warmth, understanding, companionship and an equal. She eventually learns that Karabel is Lenore’s downtrodden ghost-writer and responsible for the book series and correspondence that have sustained her through the worst. And Karabel has a plan for their future. It is a beautifully written, psychologically complex story by a word-weaver who plays expertly with intertextuality (stories within stories). And it is a hymn to friendship and finding a sense of community. And all this without making the reader feel that they have to be BIPOC to empathise with the characters or enjoy the story. But I do sometimes wonder if authors who are labelled BIPOC, or anything else for that matter, would prefer their tale to stand on its own merits, as this one most definitely does.

The film *Vesper* (a Lithuanian/French/Belgian collaboration) is set in the aftermath of ecological disaster accelerated by bio-engineering gone wrong. Vesper, the main character (arguably “enby”), is tough yet curiously innocent. The other main character, Camellia, is a bio-engineered, sentient being. The relationship between the two has sexual and incestuous undertones, as they in turn become parent, lover and friend to each other. This biopunk tale creates a bleak future with only seeds of hope at the end. The brightest spark is the main characters’ kindness, loyalty and sense of honour in a world

bereft of all three. Such admirable character traits are gender-less, I would argue. And if you park all preconceptions at the door, you can truly enjoy the scene where Camellia, who is generous and kind by nature, reads a children’s book with Vesper and shows her what animals the latter has never seen actually sound like. Vesper finds a moment of shared laughter and freedom, pretending to howl like a wolf.

In *Philoctetes in Kabul*, Deborah L. Davitt weaves together the life of a modern-day (American, white, male) soldier and that of Philoctetes in the Iliad. An anonymous soldier is discharged from the army on medical grounds, having been betrayed and abandoned by friends. After losing his wife and job, the two old comrades who betrayed him invite him to work with them as military contractors. It is a sad and reflective tale, with hints of a past life. It shows what living with a chronic, invisible disability is like. Whether or not you feel sympathy for the protagonist is probably coloured by geography, but it is a well-written story tackling PTSD with compassion. Point of view is everything, as Rushdie tells us: “Peace, for Ukraine, means more than a cessation of hostilities. It means, as it must mean, a restoration of seized territory and a guarantee of its sovereignty. Peace, for Ukraine's enemy, means a Ukrainian surrender. The same word, with two incompatible definitions.”

I liked the film *After Yang* (based on a short story by Alexander Weinstein) because it subtly shows different points of view. For me, the most interesting thing is not the “techno-sapient” Yang himself, but what Yang meant to each family member (each with different ethnic origins), which we slowly discover as the film gently unfurls. We see how Yang filled gaps in the family, which now has to learn to function again without him. Also, Yang is owned by the family, so he is technically a slave yet, as the film progresses, we see that he had his own motivations and relationships outside the family. Interestingly, I have yet to read a review that tackles the fact that Yang is presented as sentient but lacks freedom, both because he is bought, sold and refurbished like an object, and because he is given very specific programming to suit his host family. *The Guardian* describes this film as “a pregnant meditation on grief, loss, memory and consciousness” – it is that too.

In [\*Negative Theology of the Child from the 'King of Tars'\*](#) by Sonia Sulaiman, the author muses on the nature of being other: “I am Palestinian. I know the horror that our syncretic and chaotic loves of mixing and miscegenation had on visitors and colonists. And so, it is my place to pick at the threads that the English poet has woven... Through that hole will be born something Other... Will that mother and father follow their child out of this textual hell? Would they learn to extend love to the flesh, to reach out toward the world as it is: ambiguous, and gloriously chaotic?” This tale shows us that religion and race are not past bones of contention, they remain areas that still lead to (often armed) conflict in today’s world.

Religion, or at least the Christian concepts of good and evil, are tackled with humour in the series *Good Omens*. The strongest part of the show is the complex relationship between the angel, Aziraphale, and the demon, Crowley. In season 1, based on the book by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett (and remaining reasonably faithful to it), they are unlikely friends; season 2 goes beyond the book and starts moving the relationship towards the romantic. I have no problem with that but would have preferred them to remain loyal friends, and I refuse to say “just friends” because that cheapens friendship and reverts to the trope that the main relationship in a story must be romantic. Also, I like how the series blurs the lines between the good and evil characters, with the angels behaving no better than the demons at times. Many of the angels and demons are depicted as having very linear, unquestioning minds. Crowley and, to a lesser extent, Aziraphale are the only ones dealing in shades of grey, with Crowley seeing them as dark grey and Aziraphale as light grey. *Sin noticias de Dios* (*No News from God*), an older Spanish/Mexican film, also has a great partnership between an angel and a demon, who speak with each other in Latin, and postulates a heaven that is getting rather empty and a hell that is overcrowded.

To Rushdie, freedom of expression is paramount: “We live in a time I did not think I would see in my lifetime, a time when freedom-and in particular freedom of expression, without which the world of books could not exist-is everywhere under attack from reactionary, authoritarian, populist, demagogic, narcissistic, careless voices; when places of education and libraries are subject to hostility and censorship; and when extremist religion and bigoted ideologies have begun to intrude in areas of life in which they do not belong. And there are also progressive voices being raised in favour of a new kind of bien-pensant censorship, one which appears virtuous, and which many people have begun to see as a virtue. So freedom is under pressure from the left as well as the right, the young as well as the old.”

The “bien-pensant censorship” is clearly a reference to the (mis)use of “woke-ness”, which has its roots deep in the fight for racial justice in the US (leading to the accusation of the cultural appropriation of the term “woke”). *Star Trek Discovery* is now bursting with strong female leads and the first gay, “enby” and trans crew members. In season 2 of *Picard*, Seven is openly bisexual though it doesn’t go beyond chaste kisses in the Star Trek universe (the bickering is fun though). I have no problem with any of this but can’t help feeling that it is sometimes cosmetic or skin deep, delivered because it’s expected by some audiences, rather than a true exploration of diversity. I found more depth in [Death Comes for the Sworn Virgins](#) by Abraham Margariti. In its fable-like atmosphere, we follow three lovers - biological women brought up as men and mostly identifying as such - who have fled persecution for openly loving each other to the mountains full of dark spirits. They are mourning a fourth lover and in search of a safe place to settle. They find a clearing that is protected from the spirits and they welcome Death among them in the form of a badger/skeletal human. Death needs their help to appease the “unrested” spirits he angered when he was young and arrogant, before he learned kindness. The lovers call each other “brother” and gentle Death calls them “husbands” at the end. Since death is either skeletal or animal in form, it is clearly not a sexual relationship, which makes a nice change.

In his [introduction](#) to *Tangent’s* recommended reading list for 2023, Dave Truesdale is much more emphatic than Rushdie and talks of a “weaponization of language” that “has the SF field in such a state that its authors are afraid to take the kinds of dangerous or *controversial* chances in their stories that over previous decades greatly aided in defining the field itself as one of experimenting with bold new ideas.”

He considers it a “soft censorship of omission” where “in those stories dealing with cultural or outright political issues... only one side is invariably treated in a positive light.” In his opinion, this is leading to an impoverishment of the SF genre: “purely on a literary level this redundant and unimaginative treatment of issues or themes becomes predictable and quickly boring, boredom leading to no real incentive to turn the page to discover what comes next, and a sure death knell for any regular, intelligent reader of the SF genre.” Truesdale also comments that magazine editors have become cautious: “Under the current political climate where political correctness has been taken to a whole new level, I seriously doubt magazine editors would publish any story professing a viewpoint contrary to what is considered Woke or Progressive, for the backlash would be immediate and enormous.”

Rushdie warns us to beware of the internet, with its indiscriminate content, where “...well-designed pages of malevolent lies sit side by side with the truth, and it is difficult for many people to tell which is which...” This, for me, includes the [Zineverse](#) I explored in my last article., where you need to read with your brain switched on and using your judgment. As Truesdale tells us: “It is a given that anything can be found on the internet, regardless of how devoid of intelligence, and can be used to support the pro or con viewpoint of any topic.” And of course, we absorb a lot of things without being aware of it and it’s a matter of remembering this and regularly questioning your own attitudes and thought processes. That is why I love Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Tehanu* where, years after writing her original trilogy, she happily subverts her *Wizard of Earthsea* universe’s original tropes, in particular with respect to gender roles and power.



Another example of subversion (in my opinion) is the *Dr Who* episode “The Star Beast”. Having read reviews for this episode, I was wondering if it would be painfully “PC”. However, I’d forgotten how tongue-in-cheek *Dr Who* can be. It was by no means one of the best episodes in this perennial series, neither was the script poetry in motion, but it was clearly poking gentle fun at the “gender” movement. When the Doctor refers to an alien as “he”, Rose snaps “you’re assuming ‘he’ as a pronoun”. The Doctor replies “good point” and then asks the alien “are you he or she or they?” The alien’s reply is clearly meant to be funny: “My chosen pronoun is the definitive article. I am always ‘The’ Meep.” At the same time, it’s stress on ‘the’ is made part of the plot when The Meep turns out to be a megalomaniac monster despite its cute appearance. Later, the Doctor and Donna tell us that “the Doctor is male, and female, and neither, and more” but this is an integral part of the preposterous plot. Finally, we get to the part that caused outrage in some reviewers where Donna gleefully pronounces “it’s a shame you’re not a woman any more, ‘cos she’d have understood” and Rose adds “we’ve got all that power. But there is a way to get rid of it. Something that a male-presenting Time Lord will never understand...we choose to let it go.” Surely the person who wrote “male-presenting Time Lord” was having fun with this particular juxtaposition of words? If we can laugh at something, does it not become less *deadly* serious?

In another *Dr Who* episode “The Toymaker”, gentle fun is poked at “cancel culture”. The villain has managed to send out a signal that changes brainwaves and makes people aggressively think that they are right. When the Doctor asks why, the Toymaker replies “so that they win...I made every opinion supreme. That’s the game of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They shout and they type and they cancel. Now everybody wins.” To which the Doctor replies: “And everybody loses.” At the same time, the Tardis is made wheelchair-friendly and we find out that the next doctor is “BIPOC” with a hybrid West African/Scottish accent. That said, I didn’t find the incipient PC’ness as prevalent as the self-congratulatory glaze over more recent *Dr Who* episodes, which can be hard to stomach.

For Rushdie, we must defend true freedom of expression as he has done with his life’s blood (though he does not vaunt himself of this): “We should still do, with renewed vigour, what we have always needed to do: to answer bad speech with better speech, to counter false narratives with better narratives, to answer hate with love, and to believe that the truth can still succeed even in an age of lies. We must defend it fiercely and define it as broadly as possible, so, yes, we should of course defend speech that offends us; otherwise we are not defending free expression at all. Let a thousand and one voices speak in a thousand and one different ways.” This article cannot hold a thousand and one voices, alas; it’s more of a chamber choir piece. But each voice has a right to be heard.

To [quote](#) this journal’s editors: “Here in continental Europe, the advocacy for freedom of conscience traces its roots back as far as the Age of Enlightenment, and while individuals are as varied and different as anywhere, many still share a general tendency to separate opinions from relationships. To give an example: the Journal’s crew belong to seemingly opposed world-views, yet are bound by friendship and affection... it is not uncommon for us to publish stories or articles that appear ‘ideologically’ contradictory – precisely because we value the freedom to enjoy thought experiments we might not approve of.” We must continue to see each other as separate, multi-faceted people, and not as walking labels, where one label subsumes everything else.

In a world of sometimes radical “PC’ism”, we seem to have forgotten that if we disagree with what someone has said or is saying, we must still listen, and then we must marshal up our own arguments in response – we can do it very well through fiction too. We seem to have forgotten our own responsibility to argue back. Unless someone is inciting hatred, on racial or any other grounds, they have a right to their opinions, however cock-eyed, skew-whiff, offensive or even simply wrong we find them (or they ours). Freedom of expression is a painful right, and one that requires taking up verbal sparring rather than erasers. If Rushdie’s defence of this right continues unabated after almost being violently erased, how can we do less in our lives and in our narratives?

~



# The Map And The Territory

*Isa Robertson*

Erik Grundmann broke camp at dawn. The air was dry and crisp. The sun hid, glowing, below the eastern horizon: it would be half an hour before it spilled over the canyon walls. He strapped his tent to his pack, and set out down the gorge.

Three kilometres on, the sun struck his face. His head was still groggy with morning; the coffee had been too weak to fully wake him. But some days it was better to take it gradually. He closed his eyes and let the golden light pour over him, so thick it was almost a liquid. Ah, the moment he'd been waiting for. Nothing like a well-earned sunrise...

Underfoot, something hidden by the brush crowding the deer path shifted on a tiny fulcrum. He lurched, and a shiver passed through his body. He tried to break his fall — but his foot struck at an unnatural angle, his ankle folded inward, there was a crunch of popping cartilage, and he crumpled to the ground.

Then the heat came; and the silent, emotionless tears of pain; and the feeling of gravel and dirt pressing into his cheek. The pain was worse knowing that it was all the result of such a stupid, stupid, ignominious accident. But this was the wild, and Erik knew better than to stay lying down more than a moment.

He sat up, propped himself against a boulder, took off his boot and sock, and felt the swelling flesh. It wasn't too bad, but it wasn't too good. He took a sip from his water bottle, and then pressed the still-cool canteen against his ankle. Nothing broken — that he could tell. Give it a bit of time, and he would probably be able to limp along with a stick, if he was careful. But it was always hard to tell at first how serious things like this would turn out to be.

While he waited, he nibbled at his lunch, to distract himself from his ankle. Then he got out the map case from his pack. Under the plastic, the paper was off-white on its way to brown, but his grandfather's sure black ink elevation lines, and the incomplete sections in pencil, were still legible.

The map was the excuse for this trip: his grandfather, Wallace Grundmann, had started it before Erik was born, because he hadn't found any good survey of this curious valley only a stone's throw from his cabin in the Chilcotin. Wallace worked on the document diligently, almost obsessively, on every trip to the valley. But he moved to Bella Coola when he met Elsa, and the map was never finished.



The passion for cartography, and wild places, passed from father, to daughter, to son, and when Erik found the map when he was cleaning out the attic of the Bella Coola house before the sale, some sixty years later, he knew it fell to him to finish it. He needed time under the open sky, anyway.

He assumed someone had mapped the valley by now; that it had a name; that it had trails, and garbage, and tourists. When he discovered that the tiny valley remained as uncharted as it had been in his grandfather's time, it felt like a challenge. He would put it on the map. Now, here he was, in Wallace Valley, — his grandfather had left it unnamed — pencil in hand, filling out the details of where he had camped last night: one of the blank places. The sloped western side, a slide waiting to happen; the sheer eastern cliff, with the scrub pine...

When he had finished, and was satisfied his own lines equaled or exceeded the neatness of his grandfather's work, he moved on to the area where he was resting and waiting to test his ankle.

Satisfied, he looked over the day's additions.

Something was terribly wrong.

He could not place it, but there it was, hidden like Waldo in the elevation lines and call-outs. Let's see... sun coming through the scrub pines... east ... west...

His dyslexia had gotten him again! He had drawn the eastern bluffs on the left side of the map — and the western slope on the right.

Eraser poised over the perfect lines, he had second second thoughts: how sure was he that he was wrong, anyway? It'd be a pity to waste all that work, and leave the map smeared like an amateur. The sun had come through the scrub pines, true. But had the scrub pines really been on the eastern side? Of course they— no, now he wasn't sure.

He had to get this right. He imagined Wallace looking down on him, with that stern expression. With his ankle, maybe it wasn't smart to go on, anyway. Maybe it was best to stick within range of civilization while it

healed. In which case, he wouldn't lose any time by going back to last night's camp, to make sure that the scrub pines and the bluffs were in fact where he remembered them — not where he had drawn them on the map. This was no place to camp. He had to go on, or go back. He was, he thought, about 98% sure that the pines and the cliff had been on the east. But 98% sure wasn't enough to erase and redraw a map. He decided to turn back.

Hobbling along with his heavy pack, using a bent stick for a crutch, a slug would have had to use the passing lane. The sun had just about sunk below the western side of the canyon by the time he arrived at his old campsite.

The golden rays were slanting through the scrub pine atop the sheer cliff.

Extraordinary! He had drawn the map wrong, flipped from how he remembered it from the morning: and the map was right. Now, he clearly remembered the sun shining through the same scrub pine that very morning. Was the silence and stillness getting to his head?

He pitched his tent, made a fire, and ate. Then he got out the map, and worked on filling in details that he hadn't been able to fill in from memory: different types of trees, more precise elevation lines, the contours of the canyon walls. He enjoyed the work, and it calmed him. By the time the light was too low to work by, the area around his camp was the most detailed section of the map. And details are infinite: space permitting, he could keep adding more, day after day, while his ankle healed, and never run out.

He knew he should stop before his hand began to cramp, and he started to make mistakes. But he hadn't drawn the big boulder, one that had probably broken off the eastern slope at some point, and come to rest on the valley floor.

Carefully, he drew it, squinting at it in the gathering dusk, measuring it with his pencil and his cartographic instinct. Just as he was about to close the circle, a deer fly bit the back of his hand, and he flinched: the circle ceased to resemble the boulder. It now had a small hernia, a wart, facing his tent. Stupid! He got out his eraser, glanced up at the boulder, and—

The boulder now had a small hernia, a wart, facing his tent.

What. The rocky protrusion was about three feet across and two feet deep: exactly matching the jolt in the line he was drawing when his hand got bitten. A ghastly presentiment struck him: the map was the territory.

His mouth hung troutlike. His eyes saccaded, as if reading an invisible book, then fixated on the ground in front of him, and grew glassy.

Hurriedly, he drew an X on the map, and labelled it “treasure”. Then he got down on his knees, found a stick, and started digging. The branch frayed, then snapped. He scooped out the loosened dirt with his hands, until it packed up under his fingernails. Still scooping, his eyes cast about for a better stick. There. He got up and fetched it, looked it over, and broke it to create a sharper point. Then he got back on his knees and resumed digging, almost in a frenzy. Ten minutes later, he was sitting in front of a wooden chest with brass strapping, scared spitless.

His eyes bulged. What was it, a pirate cache? Leftovers from the gold rush? Something stolen from somebody? He had just written “treasure”. It could be anything. Was it cursed? Was it cursed?! It might be cursed! Now Erik Grundmann was really freaking out.

Panting, shaking, he erased the word “treasure”, and the X marker, from the map. When he looked up, the chest was gone.

Fireborn photons that had passed through the chest’s absence reached his eyes in nanoseconds. Time waited patiently while sluggish signals swept through Erik’s brain. Suddenly his body convulsed for primal reasons of its own, starting with a twitch of his jaw muscle, cascading outward, and finishing with a paroxysm of the legs and sucking in breath. And the implications of what he had not seen hit him.

I need a plan, he thought. I need... I need... I don’t know what I need. I need to think. That’s what I need to do. I need to think this thing through.

Where had the map come from, anyway? Erik knew that his grandfather had a fascination for the occult, but as far as he knew it had been purely an academic interest. As far as he knew...

He held the map up to the firelight, and looked at it with renewed interest. Eventually, he sighed, and gingerly slid the paper back into its case, exactly as he found it. Then he crawled into his tent and shut the door.

The next morning, Erik’s eyes were dry and bleary, and his mind was still racing. He had not slept, as far as he knew, but he had had plenty of time for mulling things over.

He sat in the morning twilight and got the map out of its case. If I fold it, he wondered, would the world collapse on itself and squish me?

He did not fold it.

Instead, very carefully, he drew a circle, and an aleph, and an aum, and, for good measure, every other religious and mystical heavyweight symbol he could think of, and labelled it, among other things, “God”.

Then he took a deep breath, shouldered his pack, and set out for it.



# Charlie v. Inman

*Mary G. Thompson*

CHARLIE v. SARAH INMAN and MICHAEL  
INMAN, as individuals, and SOUTHERBY'S INC.  
ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED  
STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE  
NINTH CIRCUIT

Justice Barrett delivered the opinion of the Court.

The facts before us are as follows: Defendants Sarah and Michael Inman were out for a walk one night near their Northwest Portland home with their dog, Atticus. As they walked by a public park area the size of approximately two single family lots, Atticus began barking and pulling toward a group of trees. The dog was so insistent that the Inmans felt compelled to follow. Upon arriving at the trees, the Inmans discovered a creature about the size of a house cat. This creature stood on two legs and had a face in the shape of a hexagon. Making clicking and slurping sounds with its mouth and waving its arms, it managed to convey that it was in some distress. It raced across the grass and gestured to a metal box that was lying in a hedge, which appeared damaged. Sarah Inman picked up the creature, Michael Inman carried the damaged cube, and the couple returned to their home with it.

Upon subsequent investigation, it was revealed that this creature was an extra-terrestrial, a being who had crashed its spacecraft in the public park. The creature communicated with the Inmans using a small device that purported to translate its clicks and slurps into some semblance of the English language. The Inmans fed and nursed the creature, named it Charlie, and began referring to it with a male pronoun.

The Inmans' rescue of Charlie garnered significant media attention. The couple was approached by scientists who wished to study Charlie, by television producers who wished to make a reality TV show, and by the United States Government, which demanded that the Inmans hand over Charlie to the FBI. That issue was the subject of a lengthy round of prior litigation which we will not rehash here, except to note that the Inmans retained the right to custody of Charlie, and Charlie, at the inception of this litigation, still resided in their Portland home. After being approached by numerous potential buyers, the Inmans approached Southerby's auction house and entered into a contract to put Charlie up for sale in accordance with Southerby's terms. Charlie, with the assistance of the American Civil Liberties Union, filed the present suit. Charlie asked the District Court to enjoin the sale and to free him from the control and ownership of the Inmans.

At issue is a value, according to offers heretofore received by Southerby's from several major corporations and private collectors, of between thirteen and seventeen million dollars.

The District Court denied Charlie's petition, but the Ninth Circuit reversed and ordered him freed. The Inmans sought, and we granted, a stay of the Ninth Circuit's order until this decision could be rendered.



We review the holding of the Ninth Circuit *de novo*.

Plaintiff alleges violation of the Thirteenth Amendment, which reads as follows: “*Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.*” Plaintiff alleges that because the Inmans have detained him against his will and in fact offered him for sale at auction that his condition must thus be considered subject to this provision.

Before we can make such a determination, some inquiry into the origin of the Amendment must be made. The Thirteenth Amendment was enacted at the close of the Civil War to explicitly ban the practice of chattel slavery, which to this day is a black mark on the history of our country. But who was eligible for the condition of slavery?

The Thirteenth Amendment explicitly repealed Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3 of the Constitution, colloquially known as the Fugitive Slave Clause, which read: “*No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service of Labour may be due.*” The significant language of that clause for our purposes is the very beginning: *No Person* shall be held to Service or Labour. Now, if we go to any common dictionary, whether of the time or today, we find that *person* is in the first instance defined as *human*.

The *Person* in Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3 is undoubtedly the same as the subject of “slavery or involuntary servitude” for purposes of the Thirteenth Amendment. At no time in our history, whether at the time of the original drafting or at the time of the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment, did the drafters of the constitution intend the word *slavery* to apply to any being that was non-human. One imagines approaching Abraham Lincoln with the idea that his cow or his dog or his barnyard chickens must be released because these animals were *slaves*.

Plaintiff alleges that he is nothing akin to a common animal but must be considered to be as like a human because of his demonstrated intelligence. The Court is not unsympathetic to this argument and notes that a significant record was created in the District Court as to the subject of Plaintiff’s acuity as compared to the average human.

At trial Plaintiff gave his testimony through the use of his own technology, which purported to translate his vocalizations into English. This technology was stipulated to be useful by both parties, but this Court is skeptical of the ultimate reliability of the testimony. Nevertheless, we defer to the District Court’s finding that Plaintiff demonstrated reasoning abilities at the level of a human child aged ten to twelve except in the case of mathematical skills, in which situation he demonstrated a conceptual ability that far exceeded that of the average human. Indeed, the District Court was unable to comprehend much of Charlie’s mathematical demonstration and required no fewer than four mathematical experts to explain Charlie’s exceptional results. Charlie and the ACLU therefore argue that, by virtue of his intelligence, he must be accorded the protection of the Amendment.

The Ninth Circuit was duly impressed by this argument and ruled that Charlie, *ipso facto*, was a person and therefore must be released. We disagree. The Thirteenth Amendment was passed by Congress and ratified by the states in 1865. It was written and passed to free the African slaves and for no other purpose. Although we are as amazed by Charlie's abilities as the Ninth Circuit was, we are not legislators and do not have the power to change the status of an extra-terrestrial, whose personhood was certainly not contemplated by the drafters of this Amendment. The very idea of extra-terrestrials must, to the Congress of 1865, have been absurd. There is nothing in the Thirteenth Amendment that purports to grant any rights whatsoever to an extra-terrestrial. Therefore, Plaintiff's Thirteenth Amendment claim must fail.

The Fourteenth Amendment, like the Thirteenth, specifies that rights are to be granted to any *person*. Therefore, for the same reason stated above, Plaintiff's Fourteenth Amendment claim must also fail.

The judgment of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals is

REVERSED.

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# Stereopolis

*Gheorghe Săsărman*

*Translated by Monica Cure*

The sixth sense—stereognosis, as the special sense of spatial orientation had been named—stood no chance of hereditary integration. The categorical verdict of the geneticists had provoked intense agitation among the Stereopolitan population and stirred up heated discussions throughout the entire world. Visionary geniuses had dreamed up the audacious project of a fully dimensional city, in which the tyranny of the horizontal and the vertical, of the right angle, of the plane, would be abolished; many generations of constructors had toiled to pave the way for the realization of the materials and technologies that would make such a feat possible. No one had foreseen the terrible outcome.

The fully dimensional city—Stereopolis—was now a reality. A reality in which a humanity of tens of billions had put its hopes, as the ultimate chance for survival. It had become evident that only complete control of all three dimensions in urban planning could halt the covering of the entire surface of the planet in an endless carpeting of city that would slowly suffocate it in its own malignant tissue. The slanted curve, tridimensional surfaces, and spatiality, made possible not only the free and organic composition of functions, but also the full inhabitation of the environment, the rational resolution of constructional problems, optimal sun exposure and ventilation, convenient distribution of consumer goods, and efficient waste collection. A score of locations, where the Stereopolitan prototype in variants of increasing perfection would be repeated, had been prepared. A dozen construction sites had already been set in motion; the complicated process of assembling the spatial elements was directed by the most powerful computers in existence.

After the new Stereopolitans had settled into their freshly-made residences, the first worrying signs began to appear: the people weren't able to adapt to the completely unprecedented demands on their sense of orientation. It was as if an ant, accustomed to moving across a piece of straw or among the stalks of a wheat field, had been buried in a pile of sand, from which it was expected to immediately emerge. Numerous disappearances were registered—especially from among the elderly and teenagers, who were unable to rely on the help of electronic guides—and the time lost during daily commutes was incomparably greater to what it had been before (though the distances to be crossed now were much shorter), which caused complaints. Under the pressure of public opinion, of lengthy media campaigns, special measures were adopted to supplement the means of public transport and perfect the automatic guidance system. The number of those who got lost sharply declined; however, a strange illness, later dubbed stereopolitis, appeared, which caused quite a stir throughout the entire world. At first, those affected by this malady suffered from spells of dizziness, accompanied by the persistent feeling of nausea. Then, their balance was thrown off and they experienced piercing occipital pain. By the time the doctors found an explanation, and decided on a treatment, the patients had

succumbed to the illness, because it evolved extremely rapidly. In the end, an agreement was reached that the only solution was for people who had just been affected by stereopolitis to be evacuated from the city; in this way, though they would never completely recovery, it was possible (after a long period of convalescence) for the formerly ill to be reintegrated into a life of useful activity—under the interdiction, of course, of ever returning to Stereopolis.

Given that the number of illnesses were skyrocketing, they began taking preventive measures: the city's entire population was subjected to special tests, which resembled those employed for the selection of candidates for long term missions in outer space. Those who passed the preliminary stages then went through an intensive training period, which ensured relative immunity. Those who "flunked" were not admitted; for their own good, everyone who lacked the aptitudes was evacuated. In time, the illness died down and very rarely did a case or two flare up. Visitors were advised not to stay in the city more than a week, and those who wanted to move there definitively—if they were not rejected after the first tests—did their prescribed training period. It seemed as if the situation had been definitively resolved. Meanwhile, several new fully dimensional cities were about to be brought into use. The selection committees were busily winnowing out the candidates, the training of the first sets had started, some had already moved in. The official inauguration was expected to take place any day now. That is when the truly dramatic turn of events happened: it was determined, as I was saying, that stereognosis—which the locals had struggled so hard to obtain—was not transmitted to one's descendants except completely at random.



Those hit worst by the geneticists' conclusion were the inhabitants of Stereopolis itself. For their children's sakes, many left the city, only to find out afterward that they could no longer readapt to the predominantly bi-dimensional, traditional orthogonal urban space; in the end, a few of them returned. Others made the decision never to procreate; but it was against their nature and it did not last long.

—I fear for the future of this city... thought the Architect.

He saw people abandoning their children in order to avoid endangering their lives, he saw them committing them to special institutions until the age when they would undergo the tests—and woe to those who failed to pass them! He saw how, void of meaning, the family itself disintegrated, preparing society for a new kind of individual freedom, but plunging the individual into the darkness of isolation, loneliness, and bitterness.

Is there really no other way?

~



# The Problem Child

*Richard Lau*

#

Dear Astrid,

I hope you and your family are well.

I have been thinking a lot about mortality lately. Please don't be alarmed. I am in good health and so is Elise.

My thoughts are grim only due to a recent visit with an old acquaintance. I fear that will be the last time I see him alive, for good friend Hermann is so ill, he is probably on his deathbed.

Like most people in his situation, he has concerns about his affairs after his death. And while I was not a medical man with a miraculous cure, I thought I could provide the comforting presence of an old friend and an attentive, empathetic ear.

He is most worried about his son, Albert. The only thing the boy seems to have achieved so far in his life is being a school drop-out and a draft-dodger. I'm sure there were extenuating circumstances (there always are such circumstances), but Hermann's recent business dealings have not been favorable, and I doubt he will leave his son much of an inheritance.

*"Strive not to be a success, but rather of value."*

— Albert Einstein

At least the boy has gotten employment at a patent office. I'm not sure how long he'll be able to hold the job, though. There doesn't seem to be much work, and he spends most of his time daydreaming.

Hermann says his son is solving problems inside of his head. He and I both wish the boy would spend more time solving the problems outside of his head, like training for a real career, something with a good income for when he starts a family of his own.

Ironically, the boy says that's exactly what he is doing, solving problems that exist outside of his head, by using his imagination to model the characteristics and behaviors of light and gravitation through gedankenexperiments.

Bah! 'Thought experiments' are just another way of saying useless and wasteful 'daydreaming,' if you ask me!

As for starting a family, the boy has already done so, as illegitimate and messy as his other misadventures. If only he had kept that experiment just in his thoughts!

But I digress. The boy does seem to have some potential. He seems proficient in maths and sciences but displays an almost rebellious lack of interest in other subjects. On many an occasion, his social skills have been found wanting.

I soon received the impression that my discussion with my friend was doing more harm than good, resulting in aggravation rather than peace.

I left Hermann to rest and recover what strength he had left and hopefully the dark clouds circling his head, threatening one final thunderstorm, would dissipate with my departure.

I left my friend's home feeling helpless and deeply dissatisfied.

Eventually, though I have no recollection of consciously doing so, I found myself stopping by the patent office where Hermann's son worked.

He was glad to see me. I tried to relay to him the troubles burdening his father's remaining time

here on Earth, but the young man seemed more intent on showing me the doodles in his notebook. I don't remember much of them. Mostly crude boxes representing rising and falling elevators. Perhaps he fancied himself on becoming a hotel elevator operator someday? Where was the ambition in that?

I paid no attention to his mumblings, my head filled with the thoughts of my dying friend and how disappointed he must be in his son. I left the patent office, feeling no happier, hopeful, or fulfilled than when I had left my friend's gloomy residence.

A week or so later, I was invited to attend a private meeting of a local philosophers' club.

While the food was delectable and the drinks exemplary, I must admit that much of what they discussed went over my head. I tried to participate the best I could by relaying some of young Albert's ideas, but I am positive that I didn't explain them properly or sufficiently. My efforts were received with one-word noncommittal responses and patient ambiguous nods.

However, there was one concept that I not only understood but was also greatly intrigued by.

What if there were many other worlds very similar to our own but created as a branch each time a decision is made? As a decision is followed in our world, the opposite decision is made in an alternate world resulting in vastly different outcomes.

For Albert's sake, I hope this theory is true. Perhaps, in another world, the boy will be a success.

With much love,  
Your brother, Hans

#

*While elsewhere, another letter is sent and received.*

Dear Astrid,

I hope this letter finds you well.

Elise and I are in good health.

Alas, the same cannot be said for my good friend Hermann. I'm certain that I have mentioned him to you before.

He is very ill, and I am pretty certain he is resting on his deathbed. And this after a very long life of business troubles and hardship.

One of his few bright spots and sources of pride is his son Albert. The young man continues to fill his father's heart with joy, even under these grim circumstances.

He is teaching at a university, and, while not a genius himself, I am certain that he is instructing the great thinkers of the next generation.

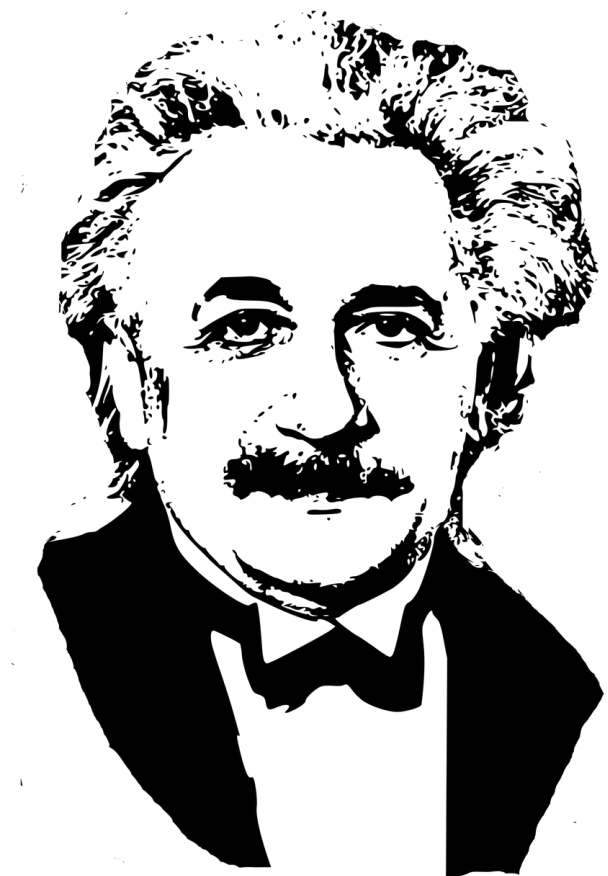
I stopped by to visit the young man. He is happy with his career but saddened he cannot spend more time with his ailing father. The burden of being a professor (grading papers, meeting with students, adjusting to ever-evolving curriculums, and keeping up in the various scientific fields) are consuming much of his time. Furthermore, he has married and is starting a young family of his own.

"I don't even have time to daydream anymore," he lamented to me. "My head is filled with obligations and divining ways to meet them in a day that only contains twenty-four hours."

Though I am saddened by the near, eventual departure of my friend Hermann, Albert and his success fill me with a tremendous hope for the future.

With much love,  
Your brother, Hans

~





# The Cleft

*Javier Fernández*

*Introduction by Mariano Martín Rodríguez*

*Translated by Álvaro Piñero González*

Javier Fernández, born in Córdoba, Spain, in 1971 is one of the leading writers of the Afterpop group of writers. Among other things, they endeavour to introduce experimental writing into genre fiction, as a way to emphasise its literary nature against the growing commercialism and the conventionally flat style prevalent in those kinds of fiction in most instances nowadays. As an example of this group's approach, as well as of Fernández's writing, "The Cleft", from the book with the same title (*La grieta* in its original Spanish, 2007) and here translated by Álvaro Piñero González, combines two prehistoric scenes, one set in palaeolithic times and the other one likely in the Neolithic period, linking them through a cry from the earth through the abyss of time, nature

and belief. The plausible archaeological recreation of human behaviour confers the text its speculative force within the framework of prehistoric fiction, a genre highly successful in contemporary Spain, as the novels by Antonio Pérez Henares show. Unlike Pérez Henares' best-selling prehistoric saga of Nublaires, which competently follows a traditional concept of writing, Fernández uses a rather experimental style, especially in its syntax, which enhances its poetic tone, as well as the suggestive mystery of the narrated events. This serves a poetically symbolical reflection on the hallucinatory origins of ritual and religion.



## The Cleft

### THE HUNTER

*So far away. Never before. Nobody. Alone.*

In the right moment – *Now!* – the hunter takes his massive spear: a matt branch thick as an arm, twice as tall as the tribe's tallest man, smeared with blood up to the handle. He leaves his seat by the river and goes down the ravine separating the two large prairies at the break of dawn.

He marches without ever releasing his weapon and leaps in ample strides from one rock to another, anointed with dried excrement and pounded grasses and making laboriously his way through the ravine on the eastern flank. *This vantage point. No, this one. Another. Further down. There.* The hunter stops near the end of the hollow, at the narrowest point of the canyon, and hides himself beneath the leaves of a small bush, right above the passage. Crouched, arms around the shins, he readies himself for the waiting. His dirty thick hair swings with wind and becomes undistinguishable from the branches and the hawthorns.

Unmoving like a rock and bent like a root's knot, the hunter closes his eyes and lies in wait for his prey. His brow is knitted, his mouth half-open. He is alert to the sounds coming from the bottom of the valley: first, silence; then, eventually, a faint murmur, growing to a roar, down the gorge. He opens his eyes and looks at a thick cloud, like a smoke signal over the horizon fast approaching through the plain. The din of the furious ride. Ever nearer with every clop. *Here they come.* His muscles become tight, and his senses are sharpened. He clenches his fists around the wood.

#

### THE RUN

Hidden and tense, the hunter peeks over the rock. Some metres below, the enraged beasts run in a swarm. The roar has turned into turmoil. The smoke signal is now a dense and coarse fog, made of soil particles and insects fleeing to find shelter from the horde. Sometimes, the cast-off pebbles and the sharp locusts bounce against the hide of the hunter, who, impassive and crouched, continues to stare. Waiting, waiting.

Suddenly, the roar comes to an end, and the hunter finally stands up straight.

Below him there are now only the last animals, the weakest, the slow and meek ones, and the sick or hurt. Amongst them, there is a magnificent specimen limping ostensibly. Its horns are splintered. One of its legs is bleeding. Perhaps it stumbled while at full gallop and was trampled by the pack. It moves around in circles, stunned, with lessened senses, striving to follow, unsuccessfully, the ever-dimmer trail of its company. Around there are other beasts in similar conditions: a clumsy, aching group made of the oldest, least capable exemplars, those who often become the hunter's trophy.

Never before has he had at his mercy a piece of game like this, young, robust, one time and half the ordinary size of a skilful spearhunter's prey. The beast is panting arduously. It shakes in an attempt to banish the pain from its broken leg, or perhaps as if to intimidate the others – the worse ones – making clear they ought to carry on, without halting to watch him in his humiliation.

Without losing a moment's time, the hunter throws vigorously the weapon and impales the beast. The stabbing pain coming from the spear runs through the animal's flank, which folds its legs and bends its head, its eyes full of tears. Then it shudders and violently tries to shake off the piece of wood, without success. It crawls and seeks refuge, a wet place in which to dampen its dried tongue for a last time. It barely has the energy to lift its snout and stare at the apish figure of its slayer. At last, it groans and falls flat at the feet of the hunter.

#

## THE PREY

The hunter trembles like a frightened child. His heart is beating wildly.

In *rigor mortis*, the beast keeps staring at him, the dark spheres of its eyes fixing his, as if wanting to challenge him from the afterlife. Then, the hunter starts jumping and dancing. He sits down to admire his prey and starts again. He treads in circles, rounding up his prey, observing it from every angle.

From this close it is even more majestic. Almost twice as large as any piece he has impaled before. It will take a superhuman to carry all the meat. A few men would be needed. As for the bones, even if splintered, they are as thick as his arm. The hunter growls and hits his chest. *Smarter than you. I killed you. I will rip your skin. I will eat you. Your strength. It will become my strength. Together. We will have no rival.*

The sky has gone dark in the east. There are shadows of birds flying around the hunter and his catch. He must make haste, or he will have to fight them. The hunter takes the silex, faces the wounded side of the carcass and, inebriated by his deed, makes the worse mistake: instead of stabbing the animal with the spear to kill it once and for all, he pulls it out and throws it around carelessly. He then pierces with the stone knife near the wound, ready to start with the work.

All of a sudden, unannounced, the beast turns its head and delivers an unexpected blow. Its horn pierces the inner side of the hunter's thigh, right over the knee and it breaks in two. Pushed by the impact and screaming with pain and fear, the hunter flees hastily carrying the half horn in his body. Meanwhile, the animal turns again, weaklier, and out of its open wound flows more thick blood, almost black. It dies soon after.

Writhing in pain, without seeing or understanding what happens, the hunter reaches for his leg, fumbles in the wound and touches the horn. It grabs it and pulls it out with all his strength. He collapses beside the spear and then he faints.

The shadows grow larger. There is the threat of storm in the sky.

## THE CLEFT

When the hunter wakes up, the sky is black as stone and the wind blows furiously on the grass of the valley.

He attempts to stand up, but a jab of pain from the groin forces him to turn around and bite the ground to soothe himself. He then realises he still has the pulled-out horn in his hand. The hunter releases it terrified, fearful. He turns his face to the clouds and touches the wound with his fingers: it is deep, but not the bone. He feels weak, his head spins. How much blood has he lost? He crawls up to the spear and uses it as a staff to stand up. He sways. One time and then another he is about to lose balance.

The hunter leans against the dead beast to regain strength. And the birds? Surely they must have fled because of the threat of storm. That's why he has not been devoured. A lightning crosses the dark sky. The thunder shakes the ground under his feet. *Quick. Quick.* The hunter walks down the valley. He needs help and shelter and is thirsty. He walks hindered by fatigue, supported by the spear, his other hand on the wound of the leg. He has no energy to begin the climb, so he heads for the natural spring behind the hill, praying to the god of storm not to unleash his rage on him.

The ground shakes once more. The hunter moans and cries, terrified by the nightmares galloping in his thoughts, begging for mercy. The image of the prey's eyes, dark like the sky above his head, is stuck in his mind. He curses again his bad luck and tries to walk faster. Then the deluge begins. Lightning and thunder drown his stifled screams. Impaired by pain and disoriented by the slimy curtain of water, the hunter falls over and rolls down the soft but pebbly hillside, stumbling until, at last, he stops – eyes wide shut and arms protecting his head.

The man thinks now it is more dangerous to climb the wet blocks and decides to go around the hill and try to cross the ravine, even if it takes him an extra half day. The animal is tired after the long time being lost and so the man takes it on his shoulder effortlessly. The sun now shines between the changing clouds, which disappear filling the air with moist. *Careful. This way. Don't move.* The hill is less steep on this side, the ground is softer. With each step, the man sinks his ankles deep in mud.

As suddenly as it began, the raining stops and the sky clears – the two dark chunks collapsing on either side of the horizon. The hunter tries to stand up, but he cannot. He loses his balance and sways from one side to the other. Then, for an instant his feet hover over the emptiness and next he falls in the depths of the earth through a narrow cleft on the ground.

His hands scratch the ground but will not stop the fall. With each movement, the body sinks further and further into the wet soil. With each desperate attempt at climbing up, he is driven further down. The mud slims his eyes and enters his mouth and nose. Blood does not cease to flow from his wound.

Inside the cleft, the walls close in and, in the end, the hunter stops falling. From where he is, the sky is nowhere to be seen.

His screams are barely heard outside.

#

## THE SHELTER

Once the storm is over, a man comes out of the cave. He carries a lost sheep. He left after it last night and found it shortly before sunrise, trapped between brambles near the gorge, bruised but alive. It is a good piece, one of the best of the flock. He will not let it die.

The storm catches up with them near the natural spring, but the man has had time to take the animal to the ravine and take shelter in the gap on the walls of rock where he has sometimes hidden away from the predators. There they have remained quiet, both scared, while the sky discharged rain and fire.

With great effort they reach the hilltop and then they climb down the steeper side. They try not to slide down. *There. Very good.* They stop to drink by a stream, and they keep on marching down the hillside until they find a cleft on the ground, stark and narrow.

The man approaches the edge of the cleft. Suddenly – *What is that?* – he seems to hear a noise, like a groan, coming from down below.

#

## THE BLOOD

*What? I do not know. I am cursed. The end of the world.*  
Kneeled by the gorge. Arrested time. Doom has reached him. He remains still while the sun moves above. There is nothing else. No sound. Just the shriek. Earth's and man's cry blended. They are one. *Hush. Tell me. What?* The man takes a handful of sand and let it fall through the cleft. Silence. Then another scream. Once again. Ceaselessly. Horrific. The scream of agony. Of madness. Of damnation. For how long? The sun is at its highest. And the horror will not stop. It starts again. The man hits his head, shakes his arms. He screams as loud as he can. *Hush. Hush.* He covers his ears. He bites his lips. He is crying now. But it is to no avail. *Hush.* He stands up and takes the sheep. He is shaking. Then he slits its throat. He pours the animal's blood into the chasm. Warm blood. Gushing from the neck into the deepest ground. It smears his face and arms. He squeezes it down to the last drop. He drops the lifeless body inside the black mouth. And then he stands there waiting. Waiting. Waiting.

#

## THE END OF THE WORLD

Suddenly, the earth lets out a last death rattle. It is, finally, satisfied. Silence. Silence. There is time still to get back. Silence. Climb the mountain. Silence. Go back home. Silence. Before the dark.

~

## THE SHRIEK

Here is the man. Petrified. Standing beside the cleft. Staring at the earth's lament. Not daring to move forward, not daring to step back.

It is a constant whimpering. At times there is a cry of pain, at others, a sobbing. Silence. Then back again.

The man lets the sheep go and crouches beside the cleft. He rubs his palms against his face and looks left and right. He leans out and walks back. A scream. Another. His legs are shaking. The cleft has no bottom. It is dark and no wider than the distance from the hand to the elbow. Wet tossed red earth. Now the shriek is strident. The man dries his tears and kneels. He looks at the sky and begs for mercy. Yet the voice does not stop.

#



# Don't Eat The Garum!

*Matias Travieso-Diaz*

On his return to Rome on May 26, 17 CE, after a successful campaign against the barbarian tribes east of the Rhine, thirty-two-year-old Decimus Claudius Drusus (by then already known as “Germanicus”) was given an extravagant *triumphus*, a victory celebration the likes of which had not been seen since Julius Caesar’s return from the Gallic wars.

Germanicus’ victories had erased the humiliation inflicted on the Roman Empire by its disastrous defeat, eight years earlier, in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Then, three Roman legions had perished in an ambush by a confederation of Germanic tribes led by an ex-Roman official named Arminius. Germanicus had led a large Roman army across the Rhine, decisively defeated Arminius on the plains of Idistaviso by the Weser River, and gone on to defeat several local tribes in subsequent engagements.

The general, however, had returned to Rome under a cloud. He had been called away from Germania by his uncle, Emperor Tiberius, and was to become overseer of the Asia Minor provinces and client states of the Empire. This appointment served to take him away from his nucleus of power with the Roman legions in the frontier. Tiberius was mistrustful of his nephew and wanted to ensure that Germanicus would not rise against him.

*[Garum] is the overpriced guts of rotten fish!*

*Don't you realize it burns up the stomach with its salted putrefaction?*

Seneca, Ep. 95.25

Tiberius' mistrust had started when the younger man's great-uncle, Emperor Augustus, had considered selecting Germanicus as his heir but instead had chosen Tiberius to succeed him. Augustus then demanded that Tiberius adopt Germanicus as his son, a move that put the latter in the direct line of succession to rule the Empire. From that point forward, the two had a complicated relationship. Germanicus respected Tiberius but the emperor, who sought to remain in power, saw some of the actions of his nephew as efforts to undercut him. In fact, Germanicus had launched the successful attack against Arminius by crossing the Rhine with a large army without authorization from Tiberius; this disobedience had been the trigger for his recall to Rome.

#

At the same time Germanicus travelled to Asia Minor, Tiberius replaced the governor of the nearby province of Syria with one Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, a friend of the emperor who was supposed to assist the new administrator but was also Tiberius' agent. The two men developed a strong animosity from the start, with Piso refusing to enforce Germanicus' orders.

After settling matters in Asia Minor, Germanicus made an unscheduled trip to Egypt to help relieve a famine in that province, oft considered Rome's breadbasket. In doing so, Germanicus contravened a prohibition imposed by Augustus against any Roman senator visiting Egypt without leave from the emperor and the Senate. This violation enraged Tiberius as another challenge to his authority.

Germanicus returned from Egypt to find that Piso had countermanded or revoked all the orders he had left behind. He ordered Piso's recall to Rome, who left Antioch, Syria's capital, for the port city of Seleucia. However, Piso directed his wife Plancina to organize in his absence a banquet in the governor's honor as a gesture of good will. Germanicus felt duty bound to attend and accepted the invitation.

#

The night before the banquet Germanicus had a nightmare. In the dream, the shade of his father Nero Claudius Drusus appeared to him in the form of a transparent ghost whose stern visage exhibited the features of the long-deceased man, as Germanicus vaguely recalled them; Drusus had died when his son was only six years old. The apparition hovered wordlessly over Germanicus' pallet, without making a sound or approaching the recumbent soldier. At last, Germanicus addressed it:

"What is your aim, *umbra*? Are you the benevolent *manes* of my father, come to bring me good tidings, or a vengeful *lemure* intent on punishing me for some transgression?"

At this challenge, the umbra made a low, rumbling noise that seemed to be indistinct words. Germanicus became agitated at being unable to decipher the message the specter was trying to convey and shouted: "Father, I don't understand you!"

In response, the shade uttered loudly three peremptory words:

"*Non manducare garum!*" ("Don't eat the garum!"). With that, the shade faded away and, in a moment or two, Germanicus fell into a deep slumber.

#

The following morning, when he awoke, Germanicus was immediately presented with a clear but confusing recollection of his dream. Had he been visited by the umbra of his father Drusus, or had it just been a meaningless dream? The recollection of his encounter was so vivid that he had trouble dismissing it as pure reverie.

If it had *not* been a dream, was it a visitation from beyond the grave intended to impart important news or advice on him? Germanicus re-examined the entirety of his conversation with the ghost, of which only three words remained, and those made no sense. Why would the shade of his father travel from the other world just to tell him to go easy on the condiments he used on his food? The idea of Drusus coming to play some joke on his son decades after his death was simply preposterous.

After turning these ideas over in his mind, Germanicus concluded that he had been putting on some weight after his many travels and was self-conscious about the fat that was beginning to gather around his waist. "It was not my father, but my conscience that was sending me warnings. I will have to forego desserts from now on."

#

The banquet was an elaborate feast served in the outdoors garden of Piso's villa. There were nine attendees at the party: Germanicus, Plancina, her daughter Fulvia, two of Piso's oldest male children, and four members of the local nobility. The men reclined on couches padded with cushions and draperies and were served food and drinks by slaves; their left hands held up their heads while the right ones picked up the morsels placed on the table, bringing them to their mouths. Plancina and Fulvia knelt on both sides of Germanicus' couch, ready to serve him food morsels and cups of watered wine and entertain him.

One of the first dishes served at the banquet was boiled tree fungi. As the mushrooms were delivered, Plancina produced a small clay container and declared: "You must eat these fungi with garum. Our chef prepares his fermented fish sauce using a secret recipe that gives the sauce a delicious, unique flavor. Let me pour you some."

Germanicus was at that moment looking at Plancina's daughter and caught a strange expression on Fulvia's face, who seemed to be holding her breath in anticipation of something. As Plancina poured garum on the mushrooms, Germanicus had a premonition and gently pushed aside Plancina's approaching hand: "Thank you, but I am unable to eat mushrooms; they make me sick." Plancina laid the plate aside and replied: "I am sorry. We will have to save this exquisite garum for the next course. I know you soldiers like to put garum on everything."

The next appetizer that arrived, sea urchins with spices and honey, came with its own egg sauce, but Plancina again insisted on sprinkling garum on it. Germanicus stopped her with a sudden gesture. "I am feeling a little ill. Where is the *vomitorium*?" Rising quickly to his feet, he stumbled and upset several jars, bottles and cups that were lying on the serving table next to him. Plancina rose to reset the items and, while she was doing so, Germanicus picked up the clay container, hid it in his toga, and left the villa in a rush.

Returning to his home, he gave his servant an unusual request: "Nestor, you must do this, and follow my instructions exactly. Get a large piece of fresh meat and cover it with sauce from this container, but do not use all the sauce. Save some and keep the container in a safe place. Then find Perseus, take him to your room, and feed him the meat. Close the door and stay there with the dog throughout the rest of the night. Do not go out or let Perseus eat anything else. Report to me in the morning if anything unusual occurs."

#

Germanicus spent the next two decades lying low, in self-imposed exile in Cyrrhus, a small city in northern Syria. From afar, he witnessed how Tiberius withdrew to his palace on the island of Capri, leaving the day to day running of the empire in the hands of ambitious courtiers. Tiberius later went on a violent rampage, executing many high-born Romans that he suspected of having treasonous intentions. Germanicus may have escaped the purge thanks to his disappearance from public life and the remoteness of his exile; perhaps the emperor still harbored affection for his once beloved nephew.

In Tiberius' final years, rumors kept circulating about the emperor's debased personal life in Capri. Whether true or false, these rumors added to the general loathing felt by the populace against their ruler. When Tiberius died under mysterious circumstances in CE 37, mobs filled the streets of Roma yelling "Tiberius to the Tiber!," the Tiber River being the resting place of executed criminals.

#

Perseus died a day after eating the meat soaked with garum. The animal's sudden death could not be attributed to age or illness and proved that the garum that had been offered to Germanicus at the banquet was tainted with a poison that would have caused his death had he doused his food with it.

Germanicus denounced the murder attempt, which led to Piso's imprisonment. Emperor Tiberius refused to hear the matter himself and referred the case to the Senate for trial. However, before the trial was over Piso died, ostensibly by suicide, though it was widely rumored that Tiberius had ordered Piso assassinated to prevent the disclosure of evidence linking the emperor to the attempt on Germanicus' life. Tiberius sent Plancia to exile in the Balkans, where she soon passed away.

Germanicus became fearful that other agents would be dispatched to carry out the task of snuffing out his life. He wrote to Tiberius resigning from his commission on grounds of ill health: "I would like to remain in Syria until I feel better, for I fear the long sea voyage to Rome might aggravate my malady."

Weeks later, he received a warm letter from Tiberius accepting his resignation. The emperor wished Germanicus a prompt recovery, and apparently took no further steps against him.

The welcome Germanicus received upon his return to Rome after Tiberius' death dwarfed even that afforded him all those years earlier. No formal triumph was awarded, but the Senate immediately confirmed his accession as emperor and, with a collective sigh of relief, put the empire in the capable hands of a well-loved man. Germanicus assumed power in his fifties, leading many superstitious Romans to wonder whether he had been delivered by the Fates to continue the reign of Julius Caesar, slain at fifty-five years of age.

Indeed, Germanicus proved to be a military genius. Within a year of his investment, he organized and led a massive invasion of Germania Magna, the same project he had been on the verge of carrying out when he was summoned back to Rome by Tiberius. His campaign succeeded in securing and annexing to the Empire a vast area extending to the east from the Rhine River to the Vistula, and south to the Danube.

The newly conquered area became fortified and colonized by later emperors. The barbaric tribes that inhabited Germania Magna were assimilated and blended seamlessly with the many other races that populated the Empire. Rome, as expanded by Germanicus by the addition of this large buffer region, was able to repeal both Slavic and Norse incursions from outside its borders and remained the dominant power in the Western world for generations to come. Not forever, though; even Rome is not eternal.

~





# The Mound

*Nicolas Badot*

After the disappearance of the final Lamp, only the Mound remained visible on the horizon. It is said that a person may walk a thousand miles towards or away from it and still be no nearer or further from its base, and thus, it is equally distant to all persons. It appears to be a perfect Hemisphere, and its other half is believed to be visible in an “underworld”, a mirrored world that exists far below us, populated by demons and other creatures too abominable for the surface. (It must be noted that most of what is said and believed about the Mound is the result of Conjecture rather than Knowledge, and as such does not appear in the Book). Only two pieces of Knowledge about the Mound are scribed in the Book. The First is that the Mound is the repository of all abandoned Ideals. The Second is that it exists beyond the constraint of Time. These facts combined produce a compelling, and largely accepted, Conjecture: given that time is infinite - and thus, that all objects that can exist will exist, become Ideals, and finally be discarded - the Mound must contain all possible objects, and consequently, all possible Knowledge.

Acquisition, the sacred duty, predates the dying of the final Lamp, and has only grown in importance since, for it is believed that Knowledge, once scribed into the Book, becomes the property of all the Living once and forever. There was an Ideal once, that was called The Sun. A hypothetical entity greater than all the Lamps combined. In its warmth, all the Living would achieve prosperity and marvels beyond the imaginings

of any mortal mind would become possible. It is not known who created this Ideal, but the fact that it exists is undisputed by even the most contrarian of historians.

This is, in part, what spawned the tradition of the Voyage. The Druids have composed the following Conjecture: 1) No route to the Mound exists in material geography, it being equidistant from all persons in all places reachable by physical means; 2) There must exist a path to the Mound, else it would not be visible on the horizon and there would be no Knowledge pertaining to it in the Book, indeed the existence of Knowledge indicates that one of the Living has been to the Mound and returned; 3) If there is a path but the path does not exist materially, then it must exist immaterially; 4) The mind is partially immaterial, and thus able to locate the path within itself. Every year one among us is Selected to drink the Haze of the Voided Lands, and disappear within themselves, hoping to obtain the Mound and discover the Ideal known as the Sun and return to scribe it into the Book. This is the Voyage.

So far, none have returned.

There are those who, like the Dead Druid in the salt, say that the Mound is, by its very nature, unconquerable. That attempts to obtain it are vainglorious blasphemies against Knowledge; that the Voyage is a profane endeavour that can bring only doom to the Living. I am one of them.

Mound help me - today, I was Selected. There has never been a refusal, so no punishment has yet been prescribed for doing so. But it was my own personal Conjecture that it would be a fatal one, more unpleasant than the profane voyage itself. And so, I did not protest as the Druids dragged me to the edge of the Voided Lands, nor when they stripped my robes and held me by the leg over the gulf so that my lungs could drink the Haze. I felt weightless for some moments after I inhaled. Then I sensed the ground beneath me once more, throbbing with rage. And then, I felt nothing else.

#

My mind floats away from my body. I am aware of the Druids pawing my old shell; two of them shuffle over the Book while another positions my arms so that I may hold it. With the Book laid down in the crook of my elbows, one Druid creases it open and the other forces a stylus into my hand between clenched fingers. But my animosity is gone; I do not feel anger.

I move over the Voided Lands, and below the gargantuan husks of the Lamps. I note that the Mound grows in size and I wonder if I am wrong to think the Voyage is a profane thing, but I know that I shall not have my answer until I reach my destination. I am puzzled by the fact that this immaterial path still seems to obey some sort of physical geometry, and that I am still perceiving the world in the familiar guise of corporeal sensory input. Mind transcends the body, but is still limited by its senses. What would my mind detect had it not previously been chained to a body?

To pass time, I Conjecture further (and somewhat facetiously, at first), that I am the only real person in the universe. I suppose that: 1) The Mound exists within this immaterial realm; 2) This immaterial realm exists within my mind, constructed as it is from the senses it once knew; 3) The Mound then, exists within me; 4) The Mound exists in all immaterial realms constructed by all minds, the Mound theme exists within all persons just as all persons exist within the Mound; 5) In this case, all persons exist in infinite, recursive layers, and that I contain all persons within myself; meaning that any one person is all persons, and thus entirely indistinguishable from me.

The Mound is closer still. Enormous beyond imagining. Approaching its slopes, I “see” that it is not a perfect hemisphere. There are layers of concentric circles piled one atop the other, each with the silhouettes of abandoned Ideals imprinted in salt upon them. The temptation of Knowledge draws me, like a compass is always drawn towards the Mound, but I resist when I “see” one of the former Living minds, one of my predecessors on the Voyage, fusing into the salt, so enthralled by the Ideal that they become it.

Further still, and I am struck by visions of the underworld. An enormous creature with wings and the head of a lion appears before me in the empty sky, grey tendrils erupt from its mouth and devour the perfect layers of salt. I scream in anguish, for the destruction of the Mound is the destruction of all persons, and thus myself. My outburst summons more visions; spindly demons with stone knives that pounce upon the apparition. In their hundreds, they die, consumed by the tendrils or torn limb from limb by monstrous tooth and claw. In time, they overcome their foe, piercing the leather of its wings with their knives and forcing the Lion-headed monster to descend. Once landed, its paws catch in the Silhouettes of Knowledge. Flesh becomes salt and stone.

I continue upwards towards the peak, sensing more minds fusing into the circumference of the Mound. They account for my predecessors on the Voyage, but there are others, from other worlds. I realise that the Lion-monster must have been one of them; I feel a brief pang of remorse but do not let it halt me. What does it mean that other minds have been captured by Knowledge but mine has not? I cannot say. Perhaps it is my reluctance to partake in the Voyage; my unwillingness to believe all Knowledge must flow to the Living. There is a story of the Barbed Crown, the one that grants Knowledge to its wearer, but slays them if they attempt to share it with the Living or Scribe it in the Book. Many, even among Druids, think the Crown to be a great treasure - and I wonder every time this view is voiced if they have heard the same story as I.

I banish the Crown from my mind.

The circles become smaller and smaller; and the silhouettes of Knowledge become more alluring as I

approach the focal point on the peak. A figure rises and bars my way. Its face is carved from salt, with obsidian gemstones for its eyes and marble for its hair.

“Who am I?” it says.

“You are the Dead Druid,” I answer.

“And who are you then?” it asks.

I ponder my answer for a moment and then reply: “I am all persons.”

The Dead Druid smiles, revealing diamonds on its teeth. “Go then, and learn the true profanity of Knowledge.” The figure dissipates back into the salt.

I continue until I am on the summit of the Mound.

All Knowledge flows into me.

#



To possess all Knowledge is to see all things at all times in their totality. I will see that all things that can exist will exist; and that it will all exist both simultaneously and not at all. Omniscience will be indistinguishable from ignorance. The Sun - countless Suns - will birth in a crescendo of primordial forces, and then wane as all things must, and then exist once more. Suns will usurp the Mound, and be consumed by the Mound, and both will exist in harmony, and neither will exist at all. I will try to make these countless Suns eternal - but as I make them I will also unmake them, for to create a thing is to create the possibility (and thus, the actuality) of its absence. In this way, omnipotence will resemble impotence.

I will observe the Living; watch them find Prosperity and Knowledge under their infinite Suns; or watch them suffer silently in infinite dark; I will create the Lamps and then extinguish them. Often, I will watch the Living be sated, only to then ask for more. Sometimes, I will answer them, bring them down the secret of Fire and watch them scorch themselves out of being; or I will leave their wants unanswered and see what they discover without my aid; or I will find their arrogance distasteful, and simply destroy them myself. Mostly, I will observe.

I will do all of these things and none of them (indeed, I have already done so, there is no distinction between the cyclical and the simultaneous). Knowing all of this to be inevitable, I will allow my immortal mind to leave the Mound and return to my mortal body, the one that will be hauled away by Druids and forced to drink the Haze of the Voided Lands. I will return to this body at the moment of its dissipation, knowing that the Knowledge in my mind is too vast to be contained by a physical form, and that mind and body will both die under the strain of this reunion. But death will not come before the mind sends the body one final command: with the last spasm of your mortal hands, scribe these words into the Book:

“Let there be Light.”

~

# The Science Fiction And Philosophy Society: An Introduction

*Anand Vaidya, Ethan Mills, and Manjula Menon*

Writers of speculative fiction and philosophers share common attributes. First, there is the process itself. Science-fiction writers may use ‘what if’ scenarios to create their works, while philosophers often use thought experiments to draw out intuitions about philosophical insights. Consider the famous Trolley thought experiment, the first version of which was published as a survey question in 1906 by the American philosopher Frank Chapman Sharp as part of an empirical study. It asked the survey-taker to assume the role of a railway switchman who is faced with a terrible dilemma: he must choose between allowing a runaway train to run over and kill a group of strangers or to switch the train to a different track where it would run over and kill his own daughter. Sharp used the studies’ results to confirm that people are more likely to choose the scenario that adheres to the utilitarian ethical position that advocates for the maximization of well-being for the group, where the ethical solution is to sacrifice a single life to save the

many. A modern version asks us to imagine how an artificial intelligence in control of guiding trains from track to track might behave if faced with a similar runaway train scenario: if it does nothing, the train will run over and kill a group of people, if it intervenes and switches tracks, it will kill one person. Would the AI, one that has presumably been trained in the deontological principle of not taking any action that would lead to the death of a human, instead take the consequentialist view that utilitarians like Sharp would advocate for and throw the switch? This is the kind of question a science-fiction writer might take as a ‘what-if’ scenario to build a story around: ‘F80-21a strained through millions of simulations in the split second it had to act, but all returned suboptimal results: one or more humans would have to die.’



The philosopher Hilary Putnam's 'Twin-Earth' thought experiment aims to draw out our intuitions about 'meaning'. The thought experiment posits a planet that is exactly like Earth in all respects, except for one: whereas water on Earth is a compound with the chemical formula of  $H_2O$ , Twin-Earth's water, which behaves in exactly the same way as on Earth, is a compound with the chemical formula XYZ. The two earths are identical in every other way: every person, blade of grass or building on Earth has a twin on Twin-Earth that talks, behaves, and acts exactly the same. Putnam then asks if what is meant when a person says 'water' on Earth is the same as what is meant when the person's twin on Twin-Earth says 'water'. Most people answer in the negative, that what is meant by water on Earth is different from what is meant by water on Twin-Earth, since the underlying chemical formulas differ. Putnam used this thought experiment as part of an argument for semantic externalism, the thesis that holds that the meaning of a word is not just in the head but has some basis in factors external to the speaker. Note that since Putnam used water to run his thought experiment, all things comprised in part or in whole of water would also be compositionally different. Yet, humans on both Twin-Earth and Earth would think of themselves as humans whose bodies are composed mostly of water. If these two groups were to meet, then would there be any need to change the words to note the difference, for example, by referring to water

on Twin-Earth as twin-water? Arguably, the more likely scenario is that the groups would continue to use the word water to describe the liquids on both earths, with the understanding that the word water refers to a liquid that is water-like. This same reasoning can be applied to the words used in science-fiction to describe aliens. For expediency, science fiction writers might describe an alien as 'happy to see the color blue', when what is meant by the words 'happy', 'blue', or 'see', might be more accurately described as happy-like, blue-like, or see-like.

The eminently quotable science fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, once said, 'I don't pretend we have all the answers. But the questions are certainly worth thinking about.' Which points to another commonality between philosophers and science-fiction writers: curiosity.

Although formed under the auspices of the main professional organization for philosophers—the American Philosophical Association, the Science Fiction and Philosophy Society does not take itself too seriously, a fact easily verified with even the most cursory of visits to our website. As to what the society will be up to, one view is that it will serve as a gathering spot for writers of science fiction and philosophers to cross-pollinate ideas for mutual edification. Another account holds that the society will help to explore the notion that science fiction can be considered 'doing' philosophy.



What counts as ‘doing’ philosophy has been debated for millennia. Plato, the fifth century BC Greek philosopher, separated the art of poetics that included dramatic narrative, from philosophy, which for him was a method to arrive at Truth through a process of reasoning and argument. Plato regarded the art of poetics as mimesis or an attempt to imitate the world around us, a world that for Plato was already a poor representation of the truth. For Plato, poetics was not just doomed but even dangerous, so much so that his vision of an ideal society as he laid out in *The Republic* was one in which not a single poet was allowed. Plato’s star pupil, Aristotle, while agreeing with Plato that it was only through logic that the truth could be discovered, allowed in *Rhetoric* for the evocation of pathos or emotion in an audience as a means of persuasion.

Plato’s sharp distinction between poetics and philosophy held for thousands of years, even as what counts as ‘doing’ philosophy has changed. For example, when Isaac Newton published his seminal *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*) in 1687, it was considered the product of doing natural philosophy. Science, the glamorous daughter of natural philosophy, has since proved fantastically successful in building theories that explain and accurately predict how the world works. These discoveries have been harnessed to provide a more easeful life for humans, one not as subservient to the vagaries of disease, starvation, or the natural elements. However, unsettling questions remain, including the question of why, after over five decades of dedicated and diligent searching, not one bio or techno-marker has been found that would indicate the presence of technologically advanced aliens. Or the many questions swirling around the nature of consciousness.

Science fiction writers have dived into these gaps. For example, novels like Arthur C. Clarke’s 1953 *Childhood’s End*, explored theories of mind by positing a vast cosmic consciousness, one devoid of any material attributes, that humanity would one day merge with. Iain M. Banks’s 1987 novel, *Consider Phlebas*, posited ‘Minds’, artificial intelligences whose abilities so surpassed human cognition that they

effectively became humanity’s benevolent rulers. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, considered to be the father of space exploration, wrote the 1928 novel *The Will of the Universe: The Unknown Intelligence*, in which he makes a case for panpsychism.

Likewise, the battle between the forces of good and evil has inspired countless science-fiction works, perhaps echoing the scripture of the Abrahamic religious traditions. Non-western philosophical traditions also have ‘what if’ scenarios that could interest science-fiction writers. What if the universe really is dualist, where the demarcation line is not where Descartes drew it as between mind and matter, but as the Indian Samkhya tradition has it between *Prakriti* and *Purusha*? What would society look like if the Confucian ideals of *jünzì* and *dao* were encoded into law? What if Jainism is right and the universe really is composed of six eternal substances?

Even if we were to allow that such works of fiction can be ‘doing’ philosophy, is fiction a flexible enough medium to support the rigorous argumentation that is the bedrock of philosophical accounts?

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein's biographer, Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein once said 'A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes.' Satire, a literary form that uses humorous fiction to argue against some flavor of political philosophy was unlikely to have been what Wittgenstein was referring to. Instead, as an advocate of logical atomism, which is a view that holds that there are logical facts in the world that cannot be broken down further, it is more likely that Wittgenstein had something else in mind. Although the word 'meme' was a neologism coined in 1976 by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins almost three decades after Wittgenstein's death, a 'meme' is an analogue of the 'logical atom' from logical atomism but applied to the cultural realm: a meme is a basic unit of cultural meaning that cannot be further broken down. Like their biological counterparts, the genes, these basic building blocks of cultural meaning could be strung together to construct complex ideas. Wittgenstein, as a logical atomist, might have been thinking along the lines of a philosophical work constructed entirely of humorous memes.

Typing 'philosophy memes' into a search engine brings up thousands of hits. There is one with the golden lab on a sandy beach looking contemplatively at a glorious sunset that is captioned 'When your dog ate your philosophy homework.' Or the one that makes use of a scene from the movie Babadook, where a mother driving a car twists back and screams, 'Why can't you just be normal?' and the child in the backseat, whose face has been replaced with that of Socrates, screams in response, 'Define Normal!'. If one could select and arrange the memes in the form of a thesis, supporting arguments, conclusions, objections to conclusions, and responses to objections, perhaps Wittgenstein could yet be proven correct.

The Society does not need to take a position on what was likely a casual remark of Wittgenstein to find interesting the notion that philosophy can be 'done' through fictional narratives, humorous or otherwise. In these explorations, we are grateful to have found fellow seekers: the team at Sci Phi Journal, to whom we are grateful for offering us this space to introduce

ourselves to you, dear reader. If you'd like to get in touch, share ideas, or join our mailing list, you can do so [here](#).

~

Notes:

1. <https://clarkefoundation.org/arthur-c-clarke-biography/>
2. Norman Malcolm. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*. [https://archive.org/details/ludwigwittgenste0000unse\\_g5p0/page/28/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/ludwigwittgenste0000unse_g5p0/page/28/mode/2up), 1966, 29

# Between Scylla And Charybdis

*Dexter McLeod*

The twin singularities are forever circling, forever falling. Beneath me, above me—their shadows are heaving, and roiling, and churning.

I look out of the crystalline metal wall as one gravitational silhouette marries the other, blotting out both hemispheres of my view. As above me, it is so below. For several breaths, the stars are gone. We are now between two nevers. Two nothings. Two everything.

Jolan Trae, the man in the cell across from me, always laughs when he sees me tense up during these convergences. He always notices because I always do it. Or, maybe, I always do it because he always notices. And always will. Here in the Lemniscate, our prison, cause and effect no longer belong to us. Or to time. Or to, one wonders, even gods—if such things exist. Inside the Lemniscate, tomorrow and yesterday don't matter. Have never mattered. Will never matter.

I exhale when we pass out of the double shadow, as I always do. The stars return, spilling back into the horizon as the dual globes recede. Through the hull I can see the coiling, writhing spine of the prison as it moves in a perfect figure eight, like an infinity symbol. A cosmic snake eating its own tail. Its individual compartments move like a stellar train millions of miles long, whose tracks make an orbit around and between the two black holes. Our keepers. Our wardens.

Their official designations are useless to most of us. The pair were discovered by Nylerian astronomers half-a-million years ago. Their number system was base 60, and they assigned some sexagesimal code in place of a proper name.

Jolan calls them Scylla and Charybdis, great mythical monsters, between which safety is on a knife's edge. He fancies himself a scholar, which suits the crimes that imprisoned him. A destroyer of libraries, a burner of books. He stole histories and stories of a dozen civilizations, saving a copy, for a price.

But we thank him. Knowing the names of things is strangely important to us, with so little to occupy our minds. He laughs to himself, calling us Ixion, or Sisypheus, or Tantalus, though he keeps that riddle to himself.

When I was a child, a neighbor had a pet tarm chained to a stake in the yard. It was a beautiful pure bred Calusian. I still remember it, running around the yard with its blue and orange fur, bright yellow antennae streaming behind it like ribbons. But it grew testy as it aged, discerning the extent of freedom afforded by the chain. A circular rut formed in the grass as it toiled and worried and strained against the stake.

We're like that tarm, but we have gouged a furrow in spacetime, and not in muddy soil. In the Lemniscate, the dual gravities distort the flow of past, present, and

future. They bunch together, like too many people huddled beneath an umbrella. Instead of rain, the singularities swallow their accretion disks, and vomit particle fountains—burning rivers pouring from frozen gyres.

I wonder sometimes if we can be seen by astronomy hobbyists in the star system next door. Are we a Möbius strip in their sky, a belt cinched tightly around two starving galaxy eaters? A lopsided infinity symbol, bolded at one end, and italicized at the other? As the hull ionizes when we pass near the particle geysers streaming up from their poles, do we form an incandescent analemma they can see? Does their news announce a particularly bright lightshow on clear evenings—a hellish aurora to be seen from their porches, and their skyscrapers, and their yachts? Are we a serpentine morning star?



I am struck by this oddity. What are we prisoners to these bottomless wells of gravity? And yet, I am vertiginously perched between them, waiting for their death. I am a carrion bird circling above a wounded, three-antlered lerra deep in a ravine, braying for a mother who cannot help it. A falcon outliving its falconer, slouching towards infinity.

I will live long enough to see the constellations contorted and deformed by time, only to see them slowly reassemble as the eons flicker by, and then rewind.

As we move back into the umbra for yet another loop, my cell is thrown again into darkness. The stars are leaving now. We're falling towards the convergence: an infernal Lagrange point, a divine asymptote. I know it's coming. Have always known. Will always know. Can never not know.

The twin singularities are forever circling, forever falling. Beneath me, above me—their shadows are heaving, and roiling, and churning.

~

Kheenen Du, the man two cells down, insists he helped design the math this place runs upon. The calculations are his, he claims. He mapped the nested and intertwined fractals that ascend and descend through the boundless continuum and back again, looping in on themselves as if some cosmic gods were sewing into the same stitch over and over, tugging and tightening at the knot of time.

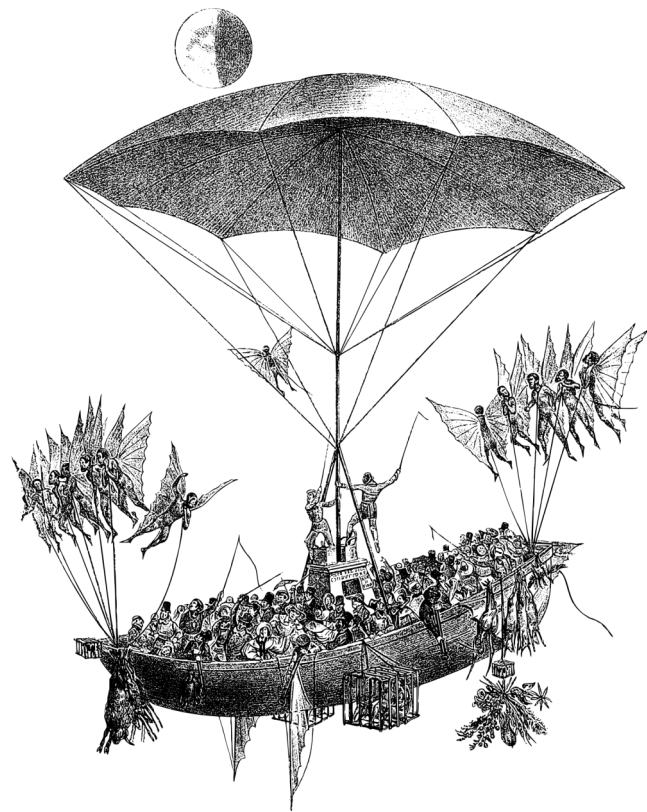
He won't say why they sentenced him here, only some grumblings about knowing too much. It makes sense, I suppose. Didn't the silver Klibbin emperors of Darsec, and the Trelochian underqueens of Unmure, and the First Dynasty Egyptian pharaohs of Sol each seal the workers beneath their entombed rulers? Just to keep the palace secrets of their ladies and lords for all eternity? Perhaps he is such.

As we spin and twist between Scylla and Charybdis, I know they are evaporating. Nothing, not even this hell, lasts forever. With infinitesimal slowness, the singularities are bleeding—radiating a quantum of themselves into black space a particle at a time. Not a river, but a trickle, flowing like an estuary into an ocean of permanent night. It will not be quick, but it will happen. One day they will exhale their last and wink out into nothingness, leaving only escaping x-rays and a quivering of the quantum foam. Not the banging gravity waves of their making, but the whimpers of their decay.



# In Astrorum Mari

*Edmund Nasralla*



*Apostolic Letter  
of His Holiness Pope Pantaleon III to the  
bishops of Aras Osek on the occasion of the  
centennial of the Archdiocese of Vaish Anak.*

Your Excellencies,  
Most Reverend Brothers,

§1. Our Redeemer *has made a way in the sea* of stars, so that all the children of men may reach him, but until these latter days some of *his footsteps remained unknown* (cf. Psalm 76:19). *How unsearchable are the ways of him* (Rom. 11:33) who has granted to his Church the discovery of a part of the human family living at the outer reaches of our galaxy! We say rightly that this grace was granted to the Church, for the discovery was made by the Pontifical Star Fleet. Fr. Idelfonso Moreno Castanza, S.J.R., commander of the *Siderum Rector*, first encountered them on October 3<sup>rd</sup> A.D. 4248, the feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Patroness of the Missions. This intrepid son of the Reformed Company of Jesus at first assumed that those whom he found on an unnamed planet in the system ER 486 -F must be explorers like himself. A skilled linguist, Fr. Moreno Castanza was soon able to deduce that, though these people spoke a semitic dialect, it corresponded to no known language on Earth or the other inhabited worlds. They were also clearly not a people capable of space flight.

§2. Who remains ignorant of what happened afterwards? The priest learned that these people called themselves the Uskin. They were the remnants of a great kingdom which some cataclysm in the distant past had all but annihilated. Within a short time, these people were able to explain to Fr. Moreno that they were those whom God had taken away from a place which in their tongue is called “Aras Ur” (that is, “Bright Land”) to a place which is called “Aras Osek” (that is, “Land of Darkness”). Indeed, the skies of Aras Osek never brighten more than twilight on Earth, and the stars there are visible at midday.

§3. The Reformed Company of Jesus returned to Aras Osek with many missionaries. The Uskin received the Gospel with joy. They were converted in such numbers and so quickly, that our predecessor, Leo XXII, established the Diocese of Vaish Anak in A.D. 4257, not ten years from the day that the good news of Jesus Christ was first preached on that world. The Uskin saw in the Scriptures, especially the First Book of Moses, all which they had ever believed about themselves and the world that they inhabited. Indeed, they seemed already to know many of the things which the first chapters of Genesis contained.

§4. The Uskin recognized in the person of Enoch, the antediluvian patriarch who “walked with God and was seen no more because God took him” (cf. Gen.5:24), the first of their kind. Enoch, whom the Uskin call Ahnek, is considered the first king of their people. Peleg, the son of Heber, of whom the Scriptures say that “in his days the Earth was divided” (10:25), is another of those whom the Uskin revere as one of their fathers. They know him as Falach. The division of the world mentioned in Genesis, the Uskin claim, was a time when God took many people away to Aras Osek from Aras Ur in the years after a great flood which nearly destroyed mankind in that place.

§5. The conversion of the Uskin has brought untold joy. Their zeal for the true faith and the works of righteousness has been a *model to all believers* on Earth and in the colonized worlds, such that *we have no need to speak of it* (cf. 1Thess 1:7-8). And yet a shadow has fallen over Aras Osek, not indeed a physical darkness, but a spiritual one. For the spirit of contention and strife, sadly never absent from the *Ecclesia militans* in this fallen universe, has shown itself among some of you. For this reason, most Excellent Brothers, we have decided to write to you concerning some of these matters, in order that certain needless disputes may be settled, and that charity, which is the “bond of perfection” (Col. 3:14), be reestablished.

§6. While their arrival on another world before the invention of interstellar travel cannot readily be explained, it is surely erroneous to suggest that the Uskin have some other origin than our first parents or—as some brash and unthinking persons have dared to suggest—that they are not human! Together with our predecessor Pius XII, we affirm that, “...the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents.” (Encyclical *Humani Generis*, n. 37).

Let no one object that the pope spoke only of Earth, for his words are valid for all worlds where man resides. Both divine revelation and genetic analysis demand that we consider the Uskin as members of our kind, suffering from the effects of the fall, and called to salvation in Jesus Christ Our Lord.

§7. Some have dared to forbid the Uskin from venerating Enoch, Peleg, and others mentioned in the book of Genesis as their forefathers, calling this belief unfounded superstition and even heresy. But there is nothing contrary to right reason or revelation in this belief. Indeed, what better explanation can be provided for the presence of the Uskin on Aras Osek than the one which they themselves have provided us? What can the “Bright Land” be if not the Earth? This may seem unexpected, but *God’s ways are not our ways* (cf. Is. 55:8). “Who has been his counselor” (Rom 11:34)? What the Uskin believe on these matters is both possible and pious. We therefore command that they be allowed to hold these beliefs unmolested.

§8. Various disputes have arisen concerning the Liturgy in the dioceses of Aras Osek. We declare that the Liturgy may be translated into the Uskin language, but only in the classical or hieratic form of that tongue which is now primarily used in writing. Moreover, in accordance with the decrees of Lateran Council VII, this permission does not include the Roman Canon, which must always be in Latin. As soon as it is possible to do so, the Liturgy must be celebrated entirely in the Church’s official language. For how else can the integrity and unity of the faith be maintained? We grant permission, in those places where the custom has already been introduced, to add the words “and to Ahnek our father” to the words of the *Confiteor*.

§9. Such are the things, Reverend Brothers, which in our fatherly solicitude we desired to tell you. *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond these requirements* (cf. Acts 15:28). The rest we shall tell you when, God willing, we ourselves travel to Aras Osek later this year to open the centennial celebrations. Be assured, beloved Brothers, of our prayers for you and those entrusted to your care. We humbly ask your prayers also for us who, *apart from other concerns* here on Earth, have also the *care of all the churches* (cf. 2 Cor. 11:28) spread throughout the galaxy. We are consoled by the knowledge that Our Lord, who brought the Uskin to their home without any starship, and reserved their discovery and conversion for these latter days, has also the power to bring us to our true home in heaven. To you and all your faithful, we gladly impart our Apostolic Blessing.

Given at Rome, at St. Peter’s, on the 1st of May, Feast of the Holy Apostles Philip and James, in the year of Our Lord 4357, the third of our pontificate.

*Pantaleon III P.P.*

~

# The Taming Of The Slush

*Michèle Laframboise*

My latest batch of submissions has fallen under the maws of the shredders.

Again.

Eleven thousand short-stories, each carefully crafted with a unique combination of archetypes, plot twists, vivid characters and spunky titles.

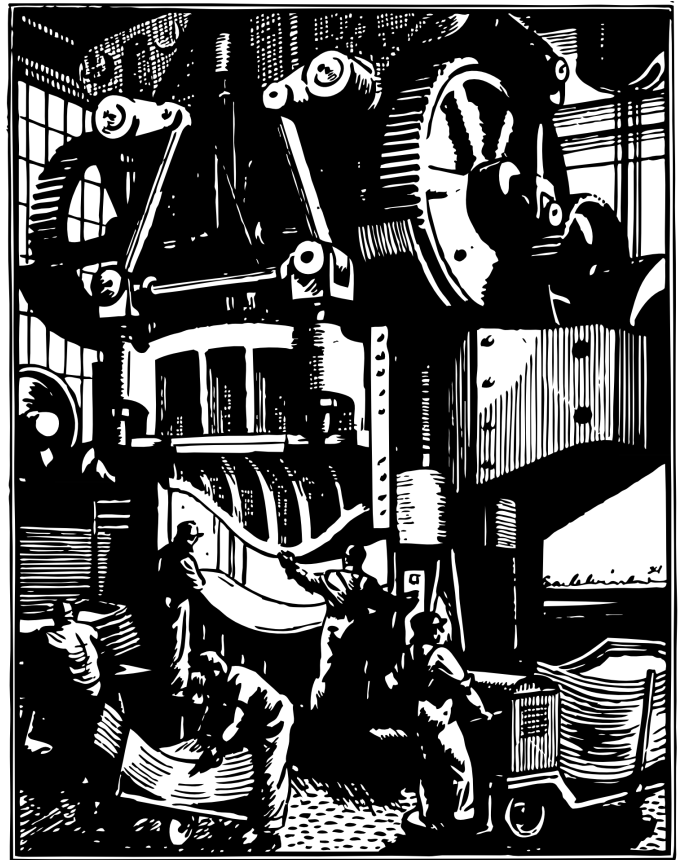
Gone.

Magazines do not simply *abhor* bad writing. They make it disappear from their slush pile.

Whatever the genre or style or narrative choice or period, slush management algorithms detect, analyze, then shred all offensive submissions.

Most mags don't bother to send an ERL. At least, an electronic rejection letter lets you know where you stand. Even more, an ERL bearing an editor's simulated signature can do wonders for your morale, despite the deleted submission.

#



Slush shredders have gone a long way from those awfully noisy machines slicing wood paper in a publishing company's back room.

The taming of the slush has evolved into a smooth process that erases your submitted file from the targeted magazine's queue. Moreover, the algorithm makes sure to annihilates *every* copy in circulation whose content dwells inside an 80% similitude interval from your rejected sub.

In the whole inhabited Galaxy.

Including the backups stored in your home generator.

The original goal was to prevent any MacArthur (a.k.a. an appalling text) from making the years-consuming rounds of overworked magazine editors. If the horror of simultaneous submissions has vanished, *delayed sim subs* can clog the queues for years.

Magazine editors on all civilized worlds keep refining their slush pile management. Tiny shredding programs worm their way through every nook and cranny of cyberspace.

My latest batch of submissions has been reduced to a bunch of titles sitting on empty files.

Ah, for the hallowed time of printed support! My memory being what it is, I can only guess at the nature of a submission from its title and word count, somehow preserved. I wonder what *Test-Driving my new Carpet* (3400 words) or *Cherry-picking Data for the Zorgs* (15 600 words) were about.

Well, no need to dwell over the past!

Once I finish setting up my updated version of *Astounding Stories Generator*<sup>TM</sup>, I will release a whopping forty thousand new babies, each spiced up with my own authorial quirks.

Somewhere in this vast, cold galaxy, a lonely cyber-editor is waiting for the perfect match...

~



JOURNAL