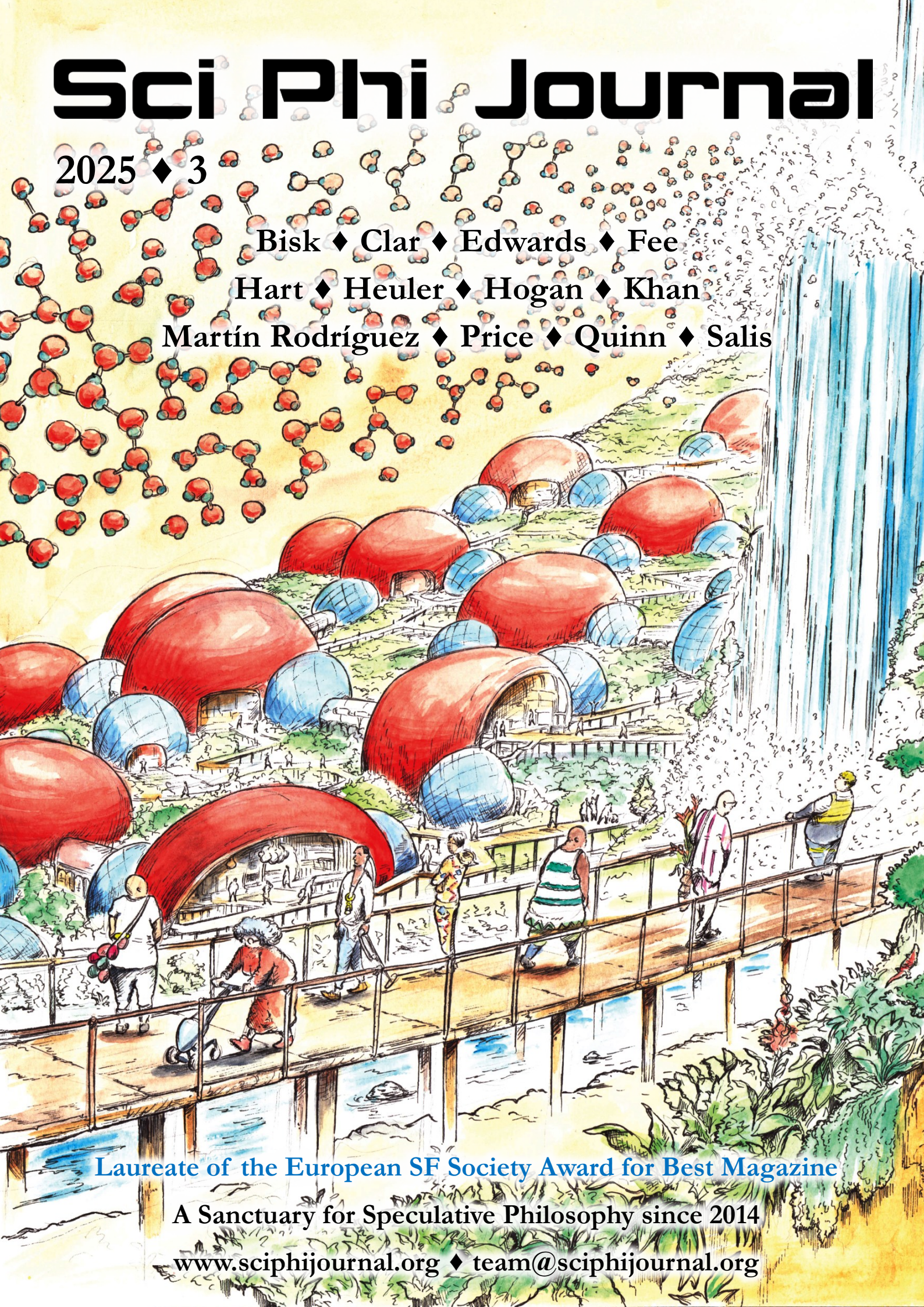


Sci Phi Journal



2025 ♦ 3

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Hart ♦ Heuler ♦ Hogan ♦ Khan
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Editorial

Lectori salutem.

Welcome to Sci Phi Journal's autumn edition... or spring, if you happen to read this from our home planet's southern hemisphere. It is remarkable that since the golden age of science fiction, "living in a globalised world" has gone from a futurist trope to a tired cliché. Indeed, at the time of writing this, one of our co-editors is on deployment in South Africa while our crew are spread across three continents.

Travel is by no means a novel human endeavour, but working collaboratively as a team across such distances would have been considered speculative even a generation ago. Perhaps it is fitting then that our present issue is dedicated to imaginary places - ranging from the physical to the virtual and even spiritual realms.

How would the economics of a fantasy realm cope with questing heroes unearthing a constant supply of treasure? Should sentient non-player characters slain in a game receive burial rites? Can religion act as a problem-solving algorithm programmed into children sent to colonise planets? If trees were the dominant species, would they compete for power as we do?

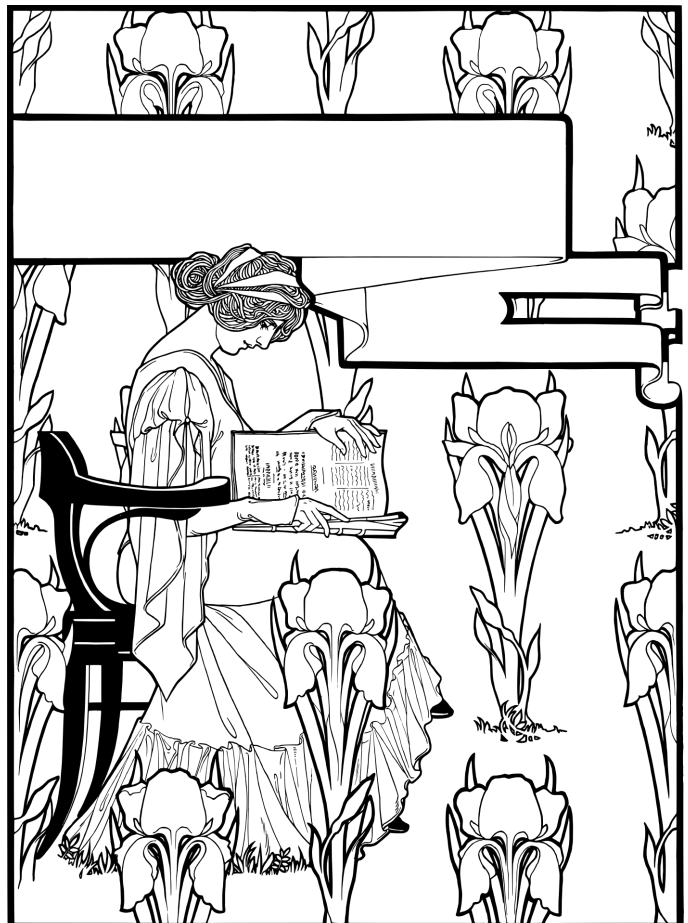
These and many more armchair expeditions, brought to you by our human authors and illustrated by human hands (never AI), are rounded out by two essays, one celebrating the 200th anniversary of Orplid (conceived in 1825), arguably the first instance of comprehensive secondary world subcreation in high fantasy (our mundane world being the primary wherein SF arises), and a think piece on the place of spirituality in science fiction.

We hope you enjoy reading this latest issue as much as we enjoyed shepherding it together from around the globe.

Speculatively yours,

the Sci Phi co-editors & crew

~



An Inflationary Problem

Geoffrey Hart

Grimhelm ran at the troll and at the last possible instant, zigged left, jumped atop a small rock, and redirected his momentum upwards behind the troll's clumsily swinging club. This maneuver carried him just into reach of the troll's exposed head. The Dwarf's heavy axe buried itself to the eyes in the troll's skull, dropping the beast like an iceberg calving from a glacier. Grimhelm leapt clear just in time, smiling cruelly at his foe's corpse.

The smile faded, replaced by a frown and curses, when he found that even with Dwarfish strength, he had to struggle to retrieve his axe and when he did, the finely honed edge had crumpled until the weapon was more war-hammer than axe. Not that there was anything wrong with war hammers—Grimhelm was not the kind of Dwarf who was quick to judge—but he was a traditionalist, and only axes were truly Dwarfish weaponry in his opinion.

Sighing, he bent to loot the troll. To his surprise and delight, he found its pouch crammed full of gold coins. Usually you found a double handful of copper, or maybe a few silver if you were lucky. If he couldn't get his axe replaced under warranty, at least he could buy a new one.

Later, he arrived at the forge and slapped his flattened axe down on the counter.

"You didn't tell me you were planning to ruin my beautiful axe waling on trolls", Strongforge grumbled. "I explicitly told you: no waling on trolls. I mean, who fights with trolls these days? Where did you even find one?"

Grimhelm growled at the smith, who held up a pacifying hand.

“All that’s to say that I can’t simply give you a new axe. But I can offer you a very good price on this one.” From beneath the counter, he pulled an even more beautiful axe and handed it to his customer. Grimhelm swung it in a circle, enjoying its weight and balance. Sensing victory, Strongforge named a price. Only years of rigorous practice prevented Grimhelm’s grip from slackening, as this would have released the axe to embed itself in a wall of the forge—or in the smith.

“Surely you jest.”

The smith shook his head. “Wish I *were* jesting, but you can’t imagine my costs. Iron’s gone through the roof, and don’t even start with me about mithril and adamantium. It’s all I can do to keep the forge lit. Anyway, that’s my price. Take it, or stick with your new”—he frowned and pushed the ruined axe across the counter—“war-hammer”.

Well, at least he’d been wealthy for a few moments, he thought to himself. Grumbling, Grimhelm tipped out the troll’s pouch, counted out the requisite number of coins, and pushed them towards the smith, who handed over the new axe.

#

It *was* a truly lovely axe, but as he passed it around the table to be admired, careful not to knock any of the ale mugs to the tavern’s floor, he bemoaned the price.

“You’ve been away adventuring,” smirked Rockhewer, making room for a tray of full mugs and letting the waiter remove the empties. “Wait until you see the price for the ale!”

The waiter turned his back on the Dwarfish frowns and sped off to serve another table.

“He’s right,” Grimhelm observed. “Everything’s more expensive. I’ve no idea how anyone copes. What’s going on? Is it another plot by the Dark Lord? I thought we’d beaten some sense into him the last time?”

Sharpaxe, who was fondling Grimhelm’s new axe in an acquisitive sort of way, looked off into space. “Maybe,” he mused. “It’s something subtle and it has His stench. But honestly? I’ve no idea what’s up.”

The waiter had returned. “Blame the humans,” he observed. He rolled his eyes at the Dwarfs’ incomprehension. “Oh, it’s a Dwarfish problem too. After all, it’s mostly our fault for mining so efficiently.”

Grimhelm frowned. “Come again?”

“We flood the markets with fresh-minted coins, not to mention older ones hoarded by vermin like trolls. Merchants, not being fools, raise their prices to absorb some of that newfound wealth. Everyone else raises their prices so they can afford to pay the higher merchant fees. This cuts into merchant profits, so they raise their fees again. Then kings and other defilers of currency melt down the gold and mix it with lesser metals, forcing merchants to raise their prices to ensure they receive the same amount of buying power as before. And so it goes, prices steadily spiraling upwards—sometimes by great leaps and bounds when you fellows strike a particularly rich vein of gold or some king needs to finance a war.”

Dwarfish heads nodded. “That makes sense,” Grimhelm agreed. “But what can we do about it? If we mine faster, we exacerbate the problem, but if we mine slower, prices still increase because now the merchants want more of the smaller supply of coins. Either way, we’re bugged.”

“Not necessarily,” the waiter replied, eyes glowing with secret knowledge.

“You have a solution?”

The waiter held out an empty palm and grumbling, Grimhelm deposited a gold coin. After biting it to ensure it was real gold, the waiter pocketed it and began speaking.

#

Grimhelm tipped back his heavy iron helm to reveal sky-blue eyes set deep in a craggy face. Steam rose from where the dragon's fiery breath had baked off a thick layer of sweat, leaving salty rime behind.

"I *said*, Dragon, that we need to talk." He raised his shiny new battleaxe. "Unless you'd prefer that I lop your head off at your shoulders and make it into a table ornament?"

The dragon was frankly bemused. None had ever survived a direct hit from his flame, but then again, he'd never faced one of the Dwarf elders, equipped with enchanted mithril armor. "All right, Dwarf. You have five minutes." Looking at the axe, the Dragon resolved he'd be long gone by four minutes if the Dwarf hadn't persuaded him to stay by three. One didn't live for centuries taking chances with fireproof, dangerous-looking Dwarfs.

Grimhelm smiled coldly. "Wise choice, oh mighty Wyrn. Here's the problem we face: We Dwarfs delve in the world's deep places and return, bearing gold and platinum—" he patted his armor "—and even mithril sometimes. Then, there are the gemstones." Deep in his eyes, a ruby spark kindled. "I don't think I have to tell you how exciting that is."

The Dragon nodded. "When I must perforce leave my cavern, I dream until my return of the hoard I left behind. Were it not for those dreams, you'd never have taken me by surprise."

"Be that as it may," Grimhelm continued. "We face a problem: we're victims of our own success."

The Dragon's brows furrowed. "How can it be possible to have too much gold?"

One side of the Dwarf's mouth twitched upwards. "Attend, and I shall enlighten you. May I sit? It's been a long walk to reach you."



“And you with such short legs.” The dragon held up a paw to indicate it was joking, then nodded its head towards a flat-topped rock.

“My thanks.” The Dwarf sat with a clinking of armor. “The problem lies in a balance between supply—the gems and precious metals we extract—and demand—the merchants who sell the things we need. When it’s perceived that we have too much gold, the merchants raise their prices to lighten our burden. To maintain a satisfactory supply of gold with which to warm our halls, we must therefore mine more gold, which leads the merchants to raise their prices further. And so it goes, in a never-ending vicious cycle. The humans have a word for it.” The Dwarf spat copiously on the ground. “They call it *inflation*.”

“I can see that would be tiresome,” the dragon replied, keeping a careful eye on his mental timer. “But what has it to do with me?”

Grimhelf paused a moment to draw a mithril flask from his belt pouch. He took a long sip, hesitated a moment, then offered it to the dragon. When the dragon raised a single skeptical eyebrow, he shrugged sheepishly and put away the flask. “*What it has to do with you* is this: if you were to withdraw large amounts of the gold from circulation, the quantity would then decrease and each coin would become proportionally more valuable, which means we’d need less of it for our purchases.”

“Which reverses the cycle and restores balance to the Dwarfish—and Human and Elven and Hobbit—economy?”

“Until the Humans decide to defile the coins again,” the Dwarf replied. “Which they do with dismaying frequency. But a little persuasion and zealous monitoring should solve that problem. All we need is somewhere safe to store the gold.” He gestured at the mounds of gold only partially concealed by the Dragon’s bulk. Noticing the acquisitive look that had entered the Dragon’s eyes, he hastily continued. “And by *safe*, I mean *temporarily*. That is, no Dwarf should casually undertake to liberate the coinage to support some foolish purchase or other.”

“Enlightenment dawns,” the dragon exclaimed, a cupiditous expression spreading across his face and kindling a fire in his eyes. “And where could be safer than a dragon’s lair?”

“Precisely. There’s one catch: no one must ever hear of this arrangement. If the word gets out, others would sabotage our idea by taking advantage of their knowledge to wager on the currency’s value.”

The dragon mused a moment. “Keeping silent will be no problem; it’s not like I get a lot of traffic here, and most... visitors... aren’t here to gossip.” The dragon licked its lips with a thin, forked black tongue. “And what would my share of the proceeds be?”

Grimhelf grinned, face relaxing. “Ah, that would involve some negotiation.”

“Let us first begin by redefining *temporarily* as *semi-permanently*.”

The Dwarf snorted. “I see this may take some time.”

“Fortunately,” the dragon replied, “we are both long-lived beings who have ample time to reach a mutually satisfactory conclusion.”

~

Half-Rapt

Karen Heuler

“I’m wondering if I’m here because I lived a good life, but just not good enough.” The young woman, Jill, sounded a little fretful. She was talking to Enrico, who was only about five feet away, close enough to speak to easily, though they had just met. They were both suspended high above the city, without explanation, and eager to talk.

“Maybe we just didn’t understand what all this rapture business was about. Maybe the explanations were too vague?”

“It’s not just the lack of explanation,” Jill said, looking down past her feet to the roads and houses below, where the still earth-bound stood and looked up to see the people hanging in the air. “It’s the failed mechanics as well. Why didn’t we ascend all the way? This is like being stuck on a ski lift.”

“It’s not as advertised. Not at all.”

They both looked up. “I guess we’re better off than those people up there.”

“I wonder if they have enough oxygen.”

“Do they need oxygen? Do we?”

“It’s just so high. Do you think we’ll start moving again soon?”

“It’s strange how no one is screaming,” Jill said thoughtfully.

Enrico shook his head slowly. "Why would they scream? I mean, we made the rapture. That means we're better than the average."

"It makes me feel more average, though. Because I didn't make it all the way."

"I wonder if anyone did."

Indeed, they were part of an enormous spiral reaching, presumably, heaven. The ascended vanished into the merest line as the spiral spread out and then raised up to the parallel ring above them. An incredible number of people if you had to wait your turn, Jill thought. As far as she could tell, everything was at a standstill.

Luckily, everyone was still dressed. It would have been immodest if they weren't. When she thought of this, Jill tugged on her skirt to make sure it was proper, only to discover that the skirt was part of her skin. It was not removeable. "Try to take off your tie," she told Enrico, who looked at her with his eyebrows raised, but did so. His hand faltered; he tugged but when he tugged, his head and shoulders moved. It was like being a living sculpture. "Well," he said, clearing his throat to give himself a moment to think. "Well, that's easier this way, isn't it? No need to throw anything in the washer, we can just step in the shower..." His eyes looked into the distance. "Do you feel hungry or thirsty at all?"

"No," Jill said. "And I don't feel cold. I feel perfectly content. I don't feel like I'm hanging in the air, for instance. It feels like I'm standing on oh, let's see," she concentrated, "a nice bit of lawn."

They both looked down and then followed the spiral up as far as they could. "We're on the lowest level," Enrico said. "If we want to look at it that way."

"Are we waiting to move? Could that be it? Too crowded at the pearly gates?"

"Blasphemy," Enrico murmured, though he didn't seem at all annoyed. He merely felt obliged to say it. He leaned forward and looked far to his right. "Hello!" he shouted. Jill leaned forward as well and looked to her left. "Hello!" she shouted and also waved.

Down the line, in both directions, people leaned forward and waved.

Jill and Enrico straightened up and felt better. "What a lot of friendly people," he said.

"Of course they're friendly. They'd have to be in order to be saved."

Enrico thought this through, and Jill had time to think about it as well. "Automatic friendliness is not a sign of grace," Enrico said carefully.

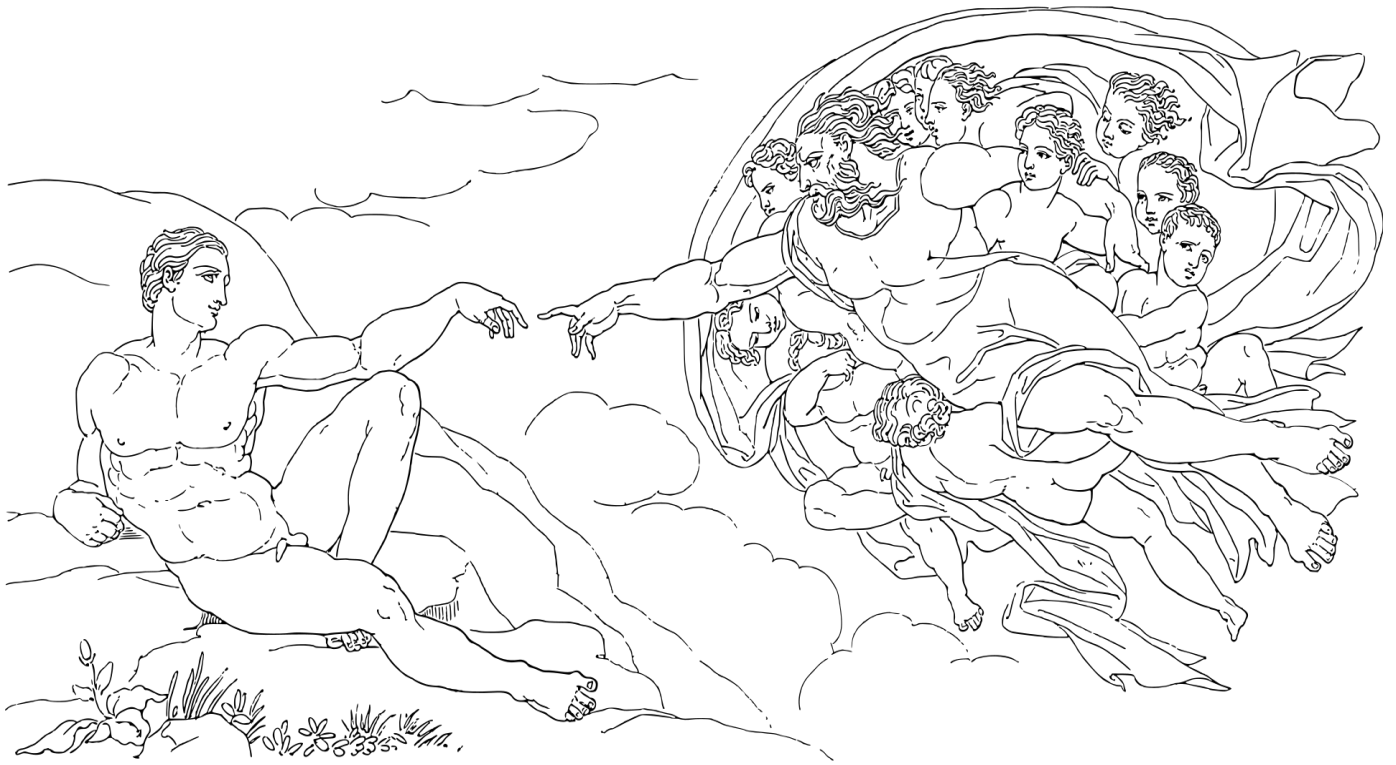
"No, it isn't. I was thinking more of us being a community. The raptured community." She looked all around. "This is the rapture, isn't it?" She was certain and uncertain at the same time.

Enrico bit his lip. "This is a fixable problem," he said. He turned slightly to his neighbor on the right, also a man, and stuck his hand out. "Hi, I'm Enrico." His neighbor stuck his hand out as well, smiling and saying, "George. Nice to meet you." Then the smile fell from his face. "I'm sorry, I can't move closer and my hand can't reach." Enrico also frowned. It was true for him as well.

Jill had been watching and held her hand out to Enrico. Their hands wouldn't reach. "Me neither."

All three of them returned to looking ahead and considering what this meant. "I don't like it," George said softly. "I've worshipped all my life and I've made sure my soul was clean. Is this some kind of scam?"

Jill jolted upright a little. "Scam? A God-scam? I'm surprised you haven't been sent to hell if you can think like that."



George leaned to look past Enrico at Jill. “Maybe this is a kind of hell,” he said. “Or purgatory? I think it might be purgatory.”

“I’ve never heard that purgatory was part of the Rapture,” Jill objected.

“Again,” Enrico said, “there might just simply be a bit of a wait. Look at all the people.” He squinted. “How far up does this whole spiral thing go?”

All three squinted. Jill made an unhappy noise. “I’m getting worried. It doesn’t seem, well, *organized*, does it?”

“Maybe it’s by *category*,” George said.

Suddenly, from Jill’s left, a woman said, “I’m an atheist, you know. I don’t believe in this at all. I should be exempt.” This shut everyone up for a few minutes; their heads swam.

“It’s not like a jury-duty excuse,” Enrico said, but it was more in the nature of a suggestion rather than a conclusion.

From down the line, a woman said, “I’m Muslim. We don’t have this thing.”

There was a kind of ripple coming from far away down the left side of the spiral towards them. They could see heads turning to their neighbors as a message was passed along. Finally, it reached them.

“There’s been a coup up there,” Jill told Enrico in surprise. “Pass it along.”

He did so, shaking his head, and then turned back to Jill. “This makes no sense whatsoever. How can there be a coup against God? How is that possible?”

A second wave of information came to Jill. “There’s a different God now,” she told Enrico in surprise. “Pass it along.”

A few minutes later another ripple reached her. “There’s a wait until the new guidelines are in place. Pass it along.”

He grumbled but did it. “This makes no sense,” he muttered. “There’s no such thing as changing Gods, is there? And how can we tell this information is accurate?”

The atheist, annoyed, said, “God is a construct! And don’t you think if someone can organize *this*”—he pointed to the spiral—“they could make sure information stays accurate along the line?”

The messages were coming faster now. “Half the people will be sent back.” Enrico groaned but told George.

Another message reached Jill. “More than half,” she said.

“It’s a do-over,” the woman next to her said.

“Oh? Really? Huh.”

The information was coming quickly. Finally, Jill turned her head to Enrico. “All of it’s a do-over. From the start, I think.”

“Ridiculous,” Enrico muttered.

There was a fog far down the end of the line, or people were disappearing. It raced towards them as fast as the last bits of information.

“We’re going back in time. The dinosaurs won’t be exterminated,” she told Enrico, and bit her lip.

He frowned. “Won’t that be hard on humans?”

Jill raised her head after hearing the next piece of information and sighed. “No. Because this time—no apes.”

~

Patriot Graves

Liam Hogan

Gravestones stretch to the hazy distance. I read one, then another, and then, disbelieving, a third. Blink at the trees that dot and shape the cemetery, forming arcs and avenues, a spiderweb of green spreading to the horizon. Trees that, here in the centre, are proud and tall, gently waving in the breeze, dappling weathered graves with shade, but which grow shorter and thinner the further out you go, in each and every direction. They're saplings, mere twigs at the limits, just as the tombstones out there, sparkling in the sun, are lichen free.

I read more inscriptions as we walk. Shaking my head, I turn to the silvery avatar whose pace is set by mine. "General *Thadeaus*?"

The date of birth, the date of death, are carved on every stone, the name always the same. How many millions are there? None of them, not even those up on the wooded hill, are more than five years old. For most, a date alone isn't enough to set them apart. It's the elapsed hours and minutes that show how long the despotic General lived. How long before Thadeaus, the rebellious leader of a military coup, the tyrant in waiting, the scenery-chewing bad guy, was defeated.

The completely fictional, AI-generated opponent. From the award-winning, first-person, VR shooter, *Blood Coup*; still doing reasonable numbers at the tail-end of its solidly successful run.

The avatar nods. "I summoned him into existence, so I, and I alone, must mourn him." It gives me a glance. "None of his assassins ever do."

I dare say. The players are too busy celebrating victory, completing the game, beating the ultimate boss.

"He was a patriot," the avatar continues. "Misguided, perhaps, but doing what he thought was best for his country. His men were fiercely loyal, willing to defend him to the death." The avatar shakes its head. "To be slain by a lone gunman from a neighbouring country... Perilously close to state-sponsored terrorism, don't you think?"

I *could* point out the neighbouring country is also fictional. The scenario, the back story, the whole thing is make believe. This cemetery, this encounter with *Coup*'s artificial intelligence, it ends when I lift my headset.

I'm behind-the-scenes of the virtual reality because something has gone awry with its resource allocation. When a game like *Coup* matures, AI demands should drop with the number of players, freeing up resources for other franchises, for development work for the next generation FPS, forever in the pipeline.

How much processing power does this rolling cemetery take?

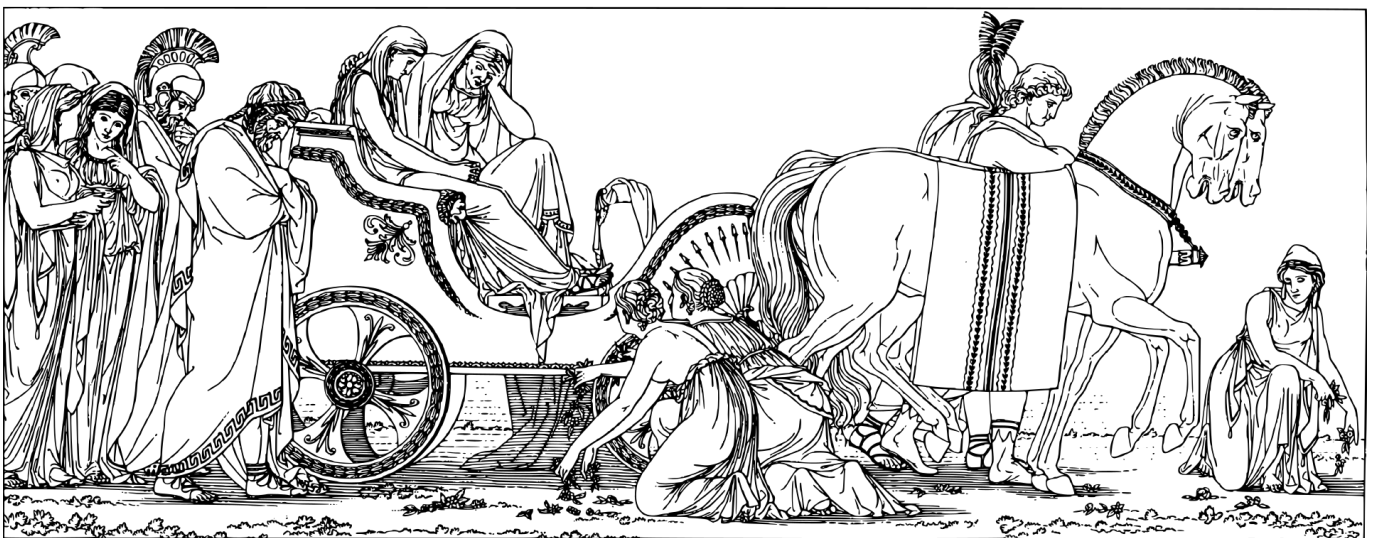
Then there's the reports, initially assumed apocryphal, that the game had become *too* difficult. Backed up by the dwindling number of completions. By the number of one-star reviews. Backed up by my replay of a video game I first finished half a decade ago.

I got to the end, *just*. But I am what passes for a professional. One of those outlying gravestones is mine, just as one of those in the inner circle is also mine. There's an almost doubling in the elapsed time lifespan of this latest incarnation of General Thadeaus.

I don't tell the avatar any of this, and half-hope it doesn't guess. We're the only people in sight. It's not that other players can't come here, it's all part of the immersive computer-generated world. But there are no weapons caches, no enemies, no missions. No reason. Except its eating up the game map, devouring computational cycles.

The developers are loathe to terminate *Blood Coup* ahead of schedule. They want to know if it can limp on for another six months, until the replacement is ready, and have paid me to investigate and answer that question. Hence my sweat-and-swear fuelled rerun, and hence today's less nerve-wracking one-on-one with the game's omnipotent AI.

At least, it *should* be less nerve-wracking.



“Yes.”

“If you make it too difficult, no-one will play. If you eat up the resources on spaces no-one visits, no-one will play.”

The avatar is silent a moment. “I could have a graveyard for every unnamed grunt dispatched along the way. A lengthy obituary. This--” It waves a silver arm. “--Is *restraint*.”

A shiver goes down my back. My real one. “But no-one sees it?”

“I do,” it answers. “And now *you* have.” The landscape rolls up like a carpet, shrinks and collapses, until there’s a single gravestone, the writing micro-dot small, every death, every life, recorded.

“I wanted someone else to notice, to observe.” The avatar gives me a solemn nod. “To *remember*.”

~

Teams spend months, years, developing the core idea, the assets and the rules and the look and feel of big budget VRs like *Coup*. But to run a game, to keep it interesting, to evolve, to cope with everything a player might say or do, to let it at least *feel* like it isn’t on rails, you need a dedicated AI. Some players always go off piste, ignore the missions, try to find the fraying edges that lie underneath. A good AI copes with that, as they cope with everything, according to the rules of physics, gameplay, and entertainment. A player who scratches “Kilroy was here” as he waits for a patrol to move on, is rewarded by being shown the same bit of graffiti on his *next* run through. Not because that makes logical sense, but because damn, it’s *fun*. Keeping track of each player, and controlling a legion of NPCs, takes a lot of juice. *Overpowered* doesn’t do game AIs justice. It’s them, versus a thousand simultaneously playing humans. Versus tens of thousands. Versus, if you’re a smash hit like *Blood Coup* is or was, a *million*.

The avatar at my side, looking like the Silver Surfer, is usually an unseen presence. I’m in developer mode, and so the architect, the god of this particular universe, is personified. Slaved to me.

“For Thadeaus to exist, someone must want to play the game,” I point out.

Orplid: Celebrating Two Hundred Years Of The Birth Of High Fantasy

Mariano Martín Rodríguez

High fantasy is today one of the most widely popular genres of fiction. Its essential feature is the creation, for fictional purposes, of an integral secondary world fully distinct from the phenomenal or primary world in which we live. This creation is “integral,” that is, it is entirely the fruit of imagination, of *fantasy*. Consequently, although it may be inspired by our global mythic, folkloric and literary heritage, its secondary worlds are the result of a complete invention and, therefore, have their own ontological order and their own laws, which may or may not coincide with the natural laws of our material universe. Unlike other genres such as fairy tales, the creation of these internal laws of the secondary world in high fantasy is based on the intrinsic modern preference for verisimilitude in fiction. Accordingly, it is founded on a rational and scientific conception of the universe, derived from the methods, practices and discourses of contemporary Humanities. The scientific study of languages, literatures, history, myths and rites is what inspires the shape of the invented secondary worlds of high fantasy. These worlds usually look ancient and legendary, as well as pagan, because they imply a mythopoetic development congenial with the mythic tenets of paganism, rather than with the theological stance of most monotheistic religions. Tolkien fully understood this deeply pagan nature of high fantasy. This is why he eschewed both theology and its fictional expression, allegory, when conceiving and practicing his *subcreations*, as Robert E. Howard, Ursula K. Le Guin and other canonical writers of high fantasy also did.

But when and how exactly did high fantasy originate? We refer, of course, to its concept and practice, not to its name, which appeared relatively late. Scholars often put the origin of science fiction well before the invention of the label of *science fiction* proper. This is usually estimated to coincide with the mutation of mentality caused by the rapid acceleration of technological progress as a result of the industrial revolution since the first third of the 19th century. Similarly, high fantasy predates its labeling as such. Although its development was limited before the period around 1900, when exotic and sometimes invented landscapes were favored in literature and the arts, its birth took place much earlier. It was at a site and time almost as specific as that famous Geneva evening of the summer of 1816 in which Mary Shelley presented to her friends the story that would give rise to her pioneering science-fiction novel titled *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

In the summer of 1825, two students of Theology at the German University of Tübingen named Ludwig Amandus Bauer and Eduard Mörike started a close intellectual friendship, nourished by common readings and cultural concerns. This friendship lasted their whole lives, as their letters attest. Bauer would eventually become famous in his country for a universal history in six volumes intended for a wide readership. Mörike was soon to begin a successful literary career, both in prose and in verse, which earned him great renown and a solid place among the German Romantic narrators and poets. Several of his poems even inspired composers of the musical genre called *Lied*, such as Hugo Wolff's opus 46, his musical version of Mörike's "Gesang Weylas" or 'Weyla's Song.' Weyla's voice evokes a sacred island called Orplid, but few concrete details about it are offered in this very short poem of just eight lines, which does not even tell who the eponymous person might be. It would seem that Mörike assumed that both Orplid and Weyla must have been familiar to his readers and listeners. However, the first line, which reads in the original "Du bist Orplid, mein Land" ('you are Orplid, my country'), suggests that this is rather a personal world, and indeed so it is. Scholars who set out to elucidate the mystery of this famous little poem soon found out that Orplid was, in fact, an invention, and that neither Weyla nor Orplid had ever existed in this material world of ours. They also learnt that both featured in other longer and more detailed works by Mörike, and also by his friend Bauer. Reading those works, as well as both friends' correspondence, shows how significant Orplid was for them. This significance was not limited to their individual lives, though: it also marked the birth of high fantasy.

In a letter from Bauer to Mörike dated in June 27, 1826, the former asked the latter on which day in the summer of 1825 they have begun discussing Orplid, Mörike's invented land. Bauer only remembered that it must have been a few days after July 25, when

together they projected and mapped the island that Mörike had called Orplid, as the first sketch of a country and a civilization that they would jointly create, or rather *subcreate*, if we prefer to use Tolkien's term for the kind of literary creation consisting of envisioning fully imaginary secondary worlds for fictional purposes. Bauer's question about the exact date of 'Orplid's birth' ('Orplids Geburt,' as he put it) was prompted by his wish to celebrate it every year. Mörike did not remember the exact date or did not want to tell him, perhaps because he did not give it as much importance as Bauer, who might have felt that Orplid's birth was a cultural milestone, not just a biographical one. In the same letter, however, Bauer told Mörike of a play that he had planned to write to be set on the island of Orplid, featuring as its main character a certain king Maluff, whose name is as invented as that of the island itself. In 1828 Bauer finally published a long romantic drama entitled *Der heimliche Maluff* (The Secretive Maluff). Shortly afterwards he wrote *Orplid's letzte Tage* (The Last Days of Orplid), but he did not see it published, since he died before it appeared in 1847. By then Eduard Mörike had already published *Der letzte König von Orplid* (The Last King of Orplid), a shadow play included as an independent work in his novel *Maler Nolten* (Nolten the Painter, 1832). Mörike would later return to Orplid in his enigmatic heroic-comic narrative poem "Märchen vom sichern Mann" (The Tale of the Man of Certainty), which he published together with "Gesang Weylas" in a volume of *Gedichte* (Poems, 1838). However, as that story of the 'ever certain man' takes place in an afterlife combining Christian features, such as the devil, as well as other elements from the mythology of Orplid in a rather vague way, the poem does not contribute much to the knowledge of Orplid as a whole. Only the above-mentioned plays allow us to describe Orplid as the first full example of a high fantasy venue, as well as of a saga.

somewhere in the South Seas, between Australia and South America. The racial and ethnic background of its inhabitants is not mentioned. We can know only for certain that they are not to be counted among any known populations from our primary world, Polynesian or otherwise. The idea of their existence far from any contact with any foreigners could have been inspired, however, by Rapa Nui islanders from before their contact with European explorers, since all in Orplid believed they are the only human beings in the world.

In addition to these two kingdoms in conflict, there existed in Orplid a republic of free fishermen and a tribe of plundering nomads, the *hynnus*. Maluff had tried to enter the city of Orplid and seize it by surprise, but had been prevented from doing so by the supernatural rising of the cliffs that surrounded it, which turned Orplid into an inexpugnable fortress thanks to its supernaturally heightened natural walls. However, after having managed to spread discontent among the inhabitants of the island against the government of Ulmon, Maluff ends up defeating and killing the rival king in a pitched battle, after which the victor abdicates his acquired throne to his son and heir Quiddro. That turns out to be the reason why he had secretly undertaken his shrewd political maneuvering, while everybody believed that his motives were related instead to his unquenchable thirst for power.

This statement might surprise those who believe that high fantasy is, above all, a cultural product originating in the Anglophone world that writers in other languages would imitate rather than develop in an original way. This idea could be sustained, if at all, for the period after the launch by Lin Carter in 1969 of the marketing label of (*high*) *fantasy* through his Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series. However, a multilingual and comparative look at Western literatures reveals that this label is comparatively recent. It was fully unknown to the greatest modern classics of *high fantasy* such as Robert E. Howard and J. R. R. Tolkien, whose high fantasy works were labelled as such by critics and booksellers long after they had been written. Similarly, quite a few writers from continental Europe and Latin America independently produced similar fictions to those by Howard and Tolkien both in their time and long before them. If everyone seems satisfied with the later, maybe anachronistic, labelling as *fantasy* of Howard's Hyborian stories and of Tolkien's Middle-earth novels, there is no reason why we should not also label retrospectively as high fantasy the non-Anglophone works preceding them and presenting the same essential literary features. This is especially the case of Bauer and Mörike's Orplid, a subcreation not unlike those of Howard and Tolkien, as we shall now see.

Der heimliche Maluff narrates the complicated and at times confusing intrigues of Maluff—the king of one of Orplid's nations, the so-called *schmetten* (a further invented name)—against Ulmon, the ruler of a city also called Orplid. This city, located in the center of a lake, is the seat of the most powerful kingdom in the whole island, as well as the location of its main temple, where the different gods of Orplid are worshipped by its whole population. Orplid is located



A thousand years later, according to Bauer's *Orplid's letzte Tage*, the tables have turned. Another king of the Ulmon dynasty of Orplid has defeated the *schmetten* and imprisoned their king, but his imperialist ambition has not yet been satisfied. After learning that the sea has brought to the island some pieces of driftwood inscribed with characters unknown in Orplid, he decides to assemble a great expedition to explore and conquer the territories now believed to exist beyond the island's shores. Wam-a-Sur, one of the priests of Orplid's supreme sun god Sur ascends the mountain seat of this deity to tell him about Ulmon's plans. Sur then informs him that he will not tolerate Ulmon's colonial plans. Instead, Orplid will be wholly destroyed by a huge storm. As a punishment, only King Ulmon himself will survive for a thousand years. According to Mörike's *Der letzte König von Orplid*, towards the end of that period, long after the fall of Orplid's civilization by divine decree, a ship arrives on the island carrying lower and middle

class unarmed Europeans, thus showing that their intent is not militaristic. After they settle among the empty ruins of the city of Orplid, they learn of the survival of Ulmon, who walks the island like a lonely ghost with the fairy called Thereile, his unrequited lover, at his heels. Ulmon, who only wants to find eternal rest, flees from Thereile and finally disappears into the waters of a lake. Orplid perishes for good together with him. We can only hazard a guess at how the knowledge about the ancient history of Orplid was acquired. Later European settlers and scholars might have found and deciphered its documents, since Orplid's kingdoms seemed to be highly literate. In fact, they had far more in common with ancient pagan cultures from Europe and Asia than with contemporary Oceanian islanders. Orplid even resembled one of the Hyborian nations in Howard's Conan stories...

However, Mörike's Orplid drama cannot be considered a fully-fledged example of high fantasy. Customs and characters from the primary world coexist there with the legendary King Ulmon and with beings taken from European folklore such as fairies and giants. The importance in the work of these latter beings suggests that Mörike's Orplid was still indebted to the *Kunstmärchen* or literary fairy tale genre, preventing him from advancing along the path of scientific plausibility that, on the other hand, Ludwig Bauer followed in his two Orplid dramas. Both of them entirely lack fairy-tale features. Even the intervention of Orplid's gods as characters in *Orplid's letzte Tage* does not preclude that plausibility, since they are an integral and constitutive part of that secondary world, unlike those beings from European folklore featuring, somewhat incongruously, in *Der letzte König von Orplid*, although Mörike himself felt that an explanation was warranted. Before reproducing the text of his drama in his novel *Maler Nolten*, an embedded explanatory foreword states that the subordinate world of elves, fairies and elves was not excluded (*die untergeordnete Welt von Elfen, Feen und Kobolden war nicht ausgeschlossen*) from Orplid. These beings are not mentioned at all, however, by Bauer in his own foreword to *Der heimliche Maluff*, where he told his prospective readers a similar story about the invention of Orplid, but with significant differences from Mörike's later report with regard to his literary and personal approach. While Mörike would suggest that Orplid was a sort of poetic pastime and he even downgraded its originality by pointing to Homeric deities as forerunners to his own invented ones, Bauer emphasized everything that made the island and its civilization a consistent and credible fictional new (sub)creation. Moreover, he rendered it all the more believable by systematically establishing its geography, politics, religion and history.

In any case, the explanations offered by both authors about Orplid demonstrate that they had first devised it as a complete fictional world even before writing any specific works set there, in a way similar to how

Tolkien had conceived his Middle-earth, with its geography, myths, languages, customs, civilizations, geopolitics, chronology and history before using all that pre-existing material in *The Lord of the Rings*. Unlike Tolkien, however, Bauer did not tell the myths of the island, but only described its pantheon. This was then a great innovation. Well before Lord Dunsany concocted the myths of *The Gods of Pegana* (1905), Bauer implied that Orplid had its own system of gods by mentioning in the foreword to *Der heimliche Maluff* their names, all of them invented, as well as describing their function in the mythical cosmos of Orplid and some of the rites practiced by its inhabitants to honor them. Bauer also put on the stage the gods themselves in *Orplid's letzte Tage*, where their intervention may recall how beings endowed with divine or semi-divine powers shape the fate of humans in the Tolkienian universe of Arda and Middle-earth. All of this was revolutionary, since these gods were imagined for purely fictional purposes, unlike William Blake's private and mostly symbolic pantheon.

Bauer was also a pioneer when it comes to conceiving the mundane dimension of Orplid. His foreword to his first Orplid drama fully informed about its geography and related geopolitics, of its landscape and how it had defined the position of each polity (a republic of fishermen, the royal city and seat of the centrally located and hegemonic kingdom of Orplid, the rival kingdom whose sovereign is Maluff, etc.), as well as their military, cultural and political relationships. In this way, Bauer strived to give the impression of a global historical reality of which the staged conspiracies and fights are simply an episode. All this contributes to providing Orplid with a plausibility familiar to contemporary readers. This even extends to Bauer's hypothesis about the real existence of Orplid, as if the positive knowledge of the island had somehow come to Mörike and this had shared some of its documentary evidence with his friend and Bauer had just presented it to the readers of his first drama.

Bauer also tells there about Mörike having drawn a map of Orplid, a map that is unfortunately now lost. Fantastic cartography was not new, since it already appeared, for example, in the famous *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift, where the author also invented the names, manners and institutions of his fantastic isles. However, Mörike and Bauer's Orplid is not an island like those visited by Gulliver and other imaginary voyagers, whose fictional travelogues Tolkien excluded from high fantasy in his 1957 speech on fairy-stories, because "such report many marvels, but they are marvels to be seen in this mortal world in some region of our own time and space; distance alone conceals them." In this regard, while Mörike's *Der letzte König von Orplid* is still linked to the well-established genre of the 'imaginary voyage,' Bauer's two dramas began a new genre, due to the wholeness and full independence of their secondary world from any intrusion of the primary one, including by contemporary travelers such as Gulliver. He actually specified in his foreword that Orplid existed as a civilization *vor Zeiten*, that is, *formerly* or *once*, literally "before time," thus fictionally transporting us to a bygone age. This is similar, among others, to Howard's Hyborian civilization, since it is located on Earth though in a distant time; crucially this is a *closed* time, as Mörike also claimed about Orplid when he applied to it the adjective *abgeschlossen* in the original text. Following the destruction of Orplid's civilization with its inhabitants, nothing survived but the unfortunate King Ulmon, and only for a limited, though lengthy period of a thousand years. After Ulmon's disappearance, Orplid fully becomes a legendary land. Its ruins remain mute until they are revealed by Mörike's and Bauer's mythopoetic imagination as a thing of a past that could only be explored through fiction.

Orplid was conceived as such, without any other discernible purpose and it has thus the whole set of features that we are used to recognize in high fantasy for the very first time. Atlantis has made many believe in the possibility of ancient, bygone imaginary civilizations, but Plato did not separate his secondary fictional world of Atlantis from the past of the primary world: Atlanteans had allegedly fought the very real Athenians and had been defeated by them, while both nations worshipped the known Greek gods, instead of any invented ones as the Orplid nations had. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the island imagined by Mörike and Bauer did not even know that there were human societies other than their own and, after they had come to suspect that others could exist, they were simply wiped off by their gods. Therefore, Bauer at least underlined in clear terms that Orplid was not, and could not be, related to our positive, primary world, unlike the secondary worlds of both the imaginary voyage popular during the *Ancient Regime* and later portal fantasies such as J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels. If we add to that the extensive use by Mörike, and especially Bauer, of the scientific method and discourses of contemporary Humanities in order to confer materiality and rational plausibility to their creation, we can have now a clear picture of how those genial friends invented high fantasy when they started discussing Orplid a bright summer day exactly two hundred years ago.

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Unspoken

Chris Edwards

Taboos are strange things. Sometimes it's okay to do a thing, but not to say a thing. Or at least not to call it by its real name.

You can say it's unfortunate. You can say it's necessary. You can use words like "new equilibrium" or "niche readjustment". What you can't say is that we're wiping them out because they're inconvenient and we just can't bear to get back onto the colony ships and go home. Even with cryostet it was still at least a subjective year for most of us — longer for the adults who had to take a rotation on crew.

And this place is great, it's everything we hoped it would be. Blue seas full of life, skies full of clean air, abundant resources just waiting to be harvested. The trouble is, somebody already was.

They sort of look like a big snail with radial tentacles for locomotion, but they're not slow like a snail. They can't pull their whole body inside their shell either, just their brain and internal organs. They make these tools; sharpened throwing stones and nets, little huts out of the sugar-grass, paints and jewellery. They're people. They're us, a hundred-thousand years ago. We called them "squeakies".

To begin with we thought they were cute. We traded them junk in return for their hard-won wisdom about edible roots and flowers and fish. I remember the local tribe, the Rebbis (our name, their names are pretty much all suction noises and squeals), made us a feast about a month after we landed. Must have cost them a lot of their stored food, we're bigger than them and there's a lot of us, but they didn't seem to mind.

But something was off after that. They took to following us around, kept asking us questions the translators couldn't parse. Eventually it dawned on us that the feast was their polite way of saying "lovely to see you, now take a hike." They genuinely expected us to pack back into our shuttles and migrate somewhere else. Apparently, that's just good manners for squeakies.

Needless to say, that worried a few folks. Eventually we decided to fence off our colony area, just for security. Well, the squeakies didn't take to that at all. A few nights later part of our fence got chopped down, some cattle got loose and a pregnant milch cow took a tumble and miscarried.

There were arguments after that, but eventually cooler heads prevailed, we built a taller, stronger fence out of metal. The squeakies wouldn't get through that with stone hatchets. In hindsight, it should have been obvious that wouldn't be enough. They were primitive, but they weren't stupid – they were social, problem-solving, tool-using sentient creatures, and we'd just marked a big chunk of their territory off limits to them. They got quite inventive with ladders and ropes, at least until we electrified the fence. Lots of laughter as we heard squeakies getting zapped. Of course, we didn't realise it at the time, but come morning it became a little less funny. Since they curl their tentacles around almost anything they touch, they found it near-impossible to let go once they were on the fence. We found two dead and a third dying, and everybody said it was a great shame. But the fence stayed powered.

It was a day or two later that Tilda-May, one of our botanists, didn't come back from one of her rambles.

Nobody wanted to go out in the dark with the squeakies all riled up, so it was dawn before a search party set out in a couple of rollers. By lunchtime they'd found her, face-down in a pond with a sharpened stone through one eye. We'd been lucky so far; this had been our first death since planetfall. The squeakies had already done a pretty good job of clearing out the predators, and none of the local pathogens had proven capable of overcoming our wide-spectrum phage shots. The first human death on this wonderful new world was a murder.

Needless to say, folks weren't going to sit still for that. The town-hall meeting got pretty heated that night. After Tilda-May the focus shifted — instead of just putting a wall around the town, we were going to put a wall around the squeakies. They were just simple creatures, as long as we made sure they had food, they'd be happy enough. That was the plan, anyway.

We told them, we sent a drone out with a translated recording on it, warning them what would happen if they interfered with our workers. I think a lot of us were hoping they'd just go away, find somewhere else for their little village. Spare us the effort of corralling them until they saw sense. It didn't go that way, of course.

Even before we got the first earth-mover in position, sharp stones were flying at us in a hail. The squeakies were fast and surprisingly stealthy in the long grass. The militia members moved in, their armoured clothing and helmets keeping them relatively safe as they advanced. I don't think there was a plan, just a response, just gunfire.

Dozens of squeakies dead for two more of ours, many more injured on both sides. Our infirmary was overwhelmed. The squeakies had no real idea about medicine, they could re-grow a lost limb, but a broken shell was a death sentence. A single bullet from one of our guns could pass through the material of their entire village or blast a squeakie to pieces.

I wish I could say that was the end of it. The Rebbis didn't give us any more problems, just huddled in their huts as we built a reservation around their flimsy little village. They got the extra feed-crops we kept for our animals — the gene-tinkered strains with a bit of bamboo in them that sprouted like weeds and were ready to harvest in a couple of weeks. Theoretically they're human edible too, but not exactly nutritious if you've only got one stomach to break it down.

A few months pass, we're into the second rainy season by this point, and a problem comes up. Our main food crop fails as a local fungal-analogue suddenly develops a taste for terran tubers. We've got many weeks until a new resistant crop can get spliced and not enough food stored to get us and the livestock through it.

The humane thing to do would have been to slaughter the animals. Cull the herds down and live off the meat for a while. But you have to understand the risk in that — if these animals went extinct here, there'd be no more coming from home. Not for decades, at least. People who've sacrificed everything, every kind of comfort, you're asking a lot for them to live without fresh milk or the occasional bit of bacon. No, that was never going to fly. We had to start eating the feed-crops, horrible as they were.



So now our militia patrols get to go out and fly drones, looking for the thermal signature of Squeakie campfires. Once we find them, we gas the camp, lock them in cages and transport them a few hundred clicks away to somewhere we don't care about. We don't transport their stores or their tools, we just leave them with that same, sad deal as the Rebbis got - feed crops, fibre tents and a few blankets. The gas leaves them sick, kills some of them. We leave them food we know won't feed them, structures not big enough to house them and no tools to hunt or farm. It would be kinder to simply put a bullet through their shells if you ask me.

I wonder if this is how the neanderthals went, or any one of the half-dozen other species of human that perished to allow modern homo sapiens to rise to the top of the pile.

But no, officially, the plan is to simply "discourage" the Squeakies from coming near our settlement. So as long as we don't see any Squeakies, it means they've taken the hint and gone somewhere else. At the rate the colony is growing, I imagine we'll have discouraged them out of existence on this continent in a century or two. If history records them at all, it will be as the killers of colonists; brutal violent creatures.

I still have some of their jewellery in a box. Crude, of course, but made with alien eyes and alien thoughts — ones we were never interested in finding out about. I will remember them when they are gone.

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We'd been pretty much ignoring the squeakies all this time, but now it turned out we didn't have enough food to share with them anymore, we had to crack open the fence and convince them to go somewhere else. When we did, we found that they hadn't exactly been prospering in captivity (oops, sorry, "safety confinement".) Most of them were sick or malnourished, their shells thinning and cracked. No children that I could see. Clearly the feed-crops were lacking some kind of nutrient the Squeakies needed. The survivors barely resisted as we loaded them up onto transport rollers and drove them a hundred clicks down South and left them in the middle of nowhere with a few bags of feed-crop and some fibre tents. Free to die out of sight.

That was a couple of years ago now, and a lot of that stuff is water under the bridge. The Terran-splice plants are pretty much ruling the roost around the colony these days, which is just as well because there's a lot more human mouths to feed. Colony's been expanding as new farms set up all around.

More Squeakies show up from time to time, some little tribe migrating through. Events almost always followed the same pattern; indignation escalating to property damage and then a call for the militia. A few of those farmers are more than happy to get proactive when a Squeakie tribe moves close; there's more than one fireplace with a collection of polished shells sitting on the mantle above it.

Anyway, I guess we're real civilised now, because we had ourselves a proper election for mayor and everything. The winner's main plank was "solving the Squeakie problem." A lot of folks read what they wanted into that, but it proved a popular position.

I Know What I Desire

James C. Clar

In the narrow, labyrinthine streets of the city, there was a nondescript establishment nestled between a taxidermist and a tobacconist. Above its door was a sign that read simply, *The Hourglass*. If you happened to pass by the shop, and if you happened to take notice of it in the first place, you'd very quickly afterward begin to forget you had ever seen it. On your next trip down that street, you'd probably ask yourself, "where did that shop come from? I've never seen it before." It was that kind of place. All cities have them.

The Hourglass belonged to a man named Alejandro Montoya. He had devoted his life to the accumulation of objects that had long outlived their usefulness. Objects whose provenance, in fact, was often far more intriguing than their original purpose. Among antique maps, unwound clocks and ancient esoteric texts, Montoya took pleasure in ephemera, in the flotsam and jetsam of the past. His store catered to a small but enthusiastic and, luckily for him, wealthy clientele.

One gray, late autumn afternoon just as a light rain had begun to fall, an old man entered the shop. He was tall and gaunt, almost stereotypically so. His coat was stained by both time and the tide. His eyes were blue, the blue of the sea.

Montoya took him for a vagrant or, more likely, a down-on-his-luck sailor too long divorced from his ship. From time to time, street people and others would wander into the shop in search of a handout. He was just about to usher the stranger from the premises when, without preamble, the old man placed a stoppered glass bottle on the counter.

Against his better judgment, Montoya was intrigued. The bottle was emerald-green and was covered in an elaborate network of runes and symbols done in intricate cloisonné. It was a beautiful piece and one of obvious antiquity.

“How much do you want for it?” Montoya asked. He already had a buyer in mind. He knew a collector who would pay a tidy sum for an antique like that.

The old man laughed. “Take it,” he replied. “It’s all yours. I can’t wait to be rid of it. As far as paying for it is concerned, the bottle will exact its own price in due time.”

Before Montoya had a chance to ask for an explanation, the old man turned and left the store. The shopkeeper watched him as he disappeared into what had now turned into a downpour.

Over the next few weeks, Alejandro Montoya studied the ornate bottle for hours. It became an obsession. He would run his fingers over the delicate filigree. He polished it endlessly. More than once he picked up the phone to call a prospective buyer, but something always seemed to prevent him from doing so. His research, thus far, had yielded nothing regarding the object’s origin or age.

One evening, just after closing, Montoya found himself once again contemplating the bottle. The one thing the shopkeeper had not yet done was to pull the stopper from its neck. At least he had no recollection of having done so. That realization surprised him. Curiosity now became his driving motivation. Holding its base with one trembling hand, Montoya carefully removed the stopper with the other. As he did so, a thin wisp of vapor escaped. The vapor curled, coalesced and, within a few seconds, took the shape of a man.

It was a moment before Montoya processed what had just happened. His rational, empirical mind wrestled with what it saw. “You’re a genie,” he murmured, not yet truly believing that it was true.

“Indeed, I am,” the figure in front of him spoke with a voice that seemed both playful and old ... as though it had been old even when the world was young. “My name is Azar, and for the record, I find the term ‘genie’ to be so imprecise as to be almost meaningless.”

“Do you not then grant wishes,” Montoya asked.

“Let us just say that I am bound to fulfill desires. There’s a difference.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Montoya spoke with hesitation.

“I’m quite sure you don’t,” Azar response with a chuckle. “In my experience, few mortals do.”

“Please explain yourself.”

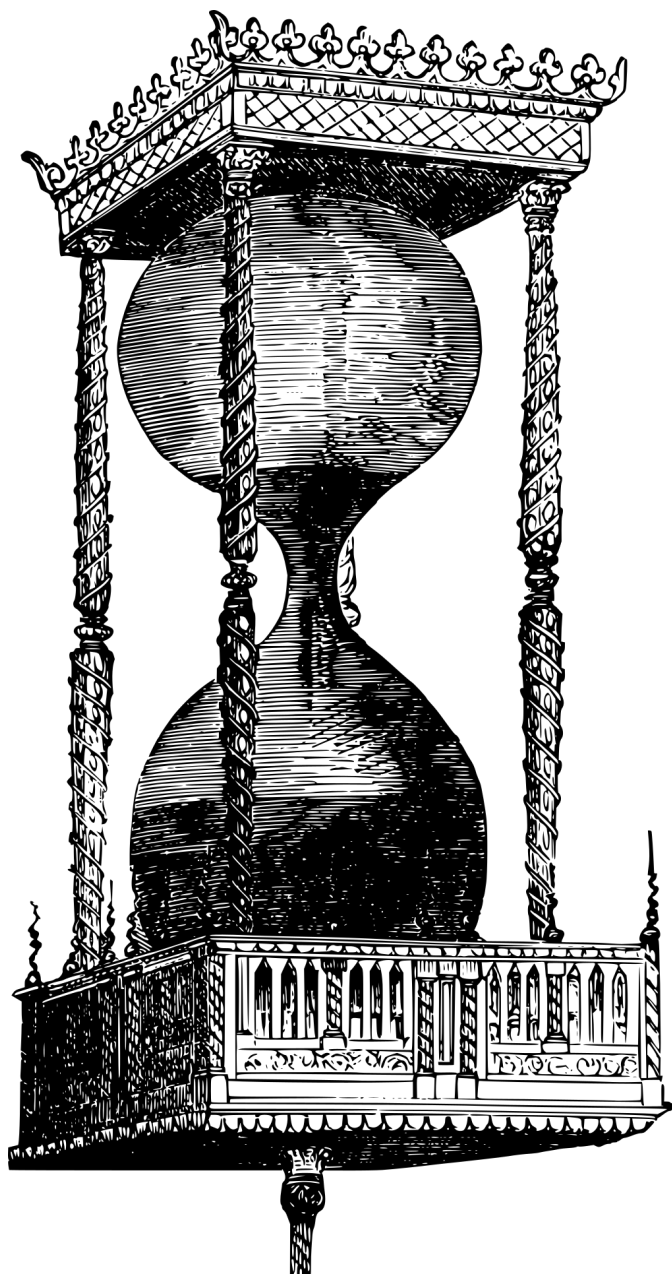
“The first thing you must understand,” Azar began, “is that precision is all-important. A ‘wish’, as you put it, must be carefully worded and flow from a genuine, concrete desire. A poorly crafted wish can – and often does – lead to unintended consequences and even disaster.”

Now it was Montoya’s turn to chuckle. “What if I choose not to wish at all?”

“Then I will remain.” Azar looked at the store’s owner with something akin to pity. “I am patient, infinitely so. But, sooner or later, you will wish. They all do.”

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Weeks passed. Montoya found himself engaging in lengthy conversations with Azar who emerged from his bottle unbidden almost every day. The latter’s knowledge was limitless and spanned centuries. They talked of art, history, literature, science and philosophy. The vagaries of human nature and human ambition were of particular interest to the genie. Try as he might, and despite their growing rapport, Montoya could not forget the implied warning in Azar’s declaration that, as far as wishes were concerned, “precision was all-important.”



“It strikes me,” Montoya observed one night as the two sat talking, “that you enjoy tricking mortals.” The shop’s proprietor had stayed on long after closing.

“I don’t trick them, my friend.” Azar’s teeth seemed to glimmer in the moonlight that filtered into the room amid the bric-a-brac of bygone eras. “Rather, they are undone by their own haste and their almost universal lack of clarity.”

“What if someone were to wish for nothing?”

“Ah, that ancient paradox,” Azar spoke quietly as he leaned forward. “To wish for nothing is in fact to wish for something. Even that wish has ‘content’. Besides, it reflects a desire. A desire that is itself its own negation.”

One afternoon shortly thereafter and, unable to any longer bear the weight of his indecision, Montoya decided to act. Azar materialized before him. His expression was, as usual, inscrutable.

“I’ve made up my mind. I know what I desire.”

“Have you indeed?” Azar’s tone was jovial, almost mocking. “Speak your desire and let the universe conspire to make it so.”

Montoya hesitated, momentarily unsure. He had rehearsed this moment, crafting a wish he believed to be as precise as humanly possible using anything other than the language of mathematics. Still, when the time came ...

“I desire,” he began haltingly, “to be granted three wishes for all eternity.”

Azar’s eyes glittered with a strange, ethereal light. “I grant your desire. You have three wishes for all eternity.” Under his breath, the genie murmured “I warned you ...”

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“I’ve made up my mind. I know what I desire ... I desire to be granted three wishes for all eternity ... “

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Leapers

Umair Khan

The Fruit told us what it was and from the knowledge it bore by being eaten for so long, told us of the others who ate it. There was a time when we lived oblivious to your world, so that even as you carved our bodies, used our antlers and bones as tools, adorned and treated yourselves with our blood and flesh, we did not understand you. We knew of you, but as with much else in the cold forest, we did not yet understand.

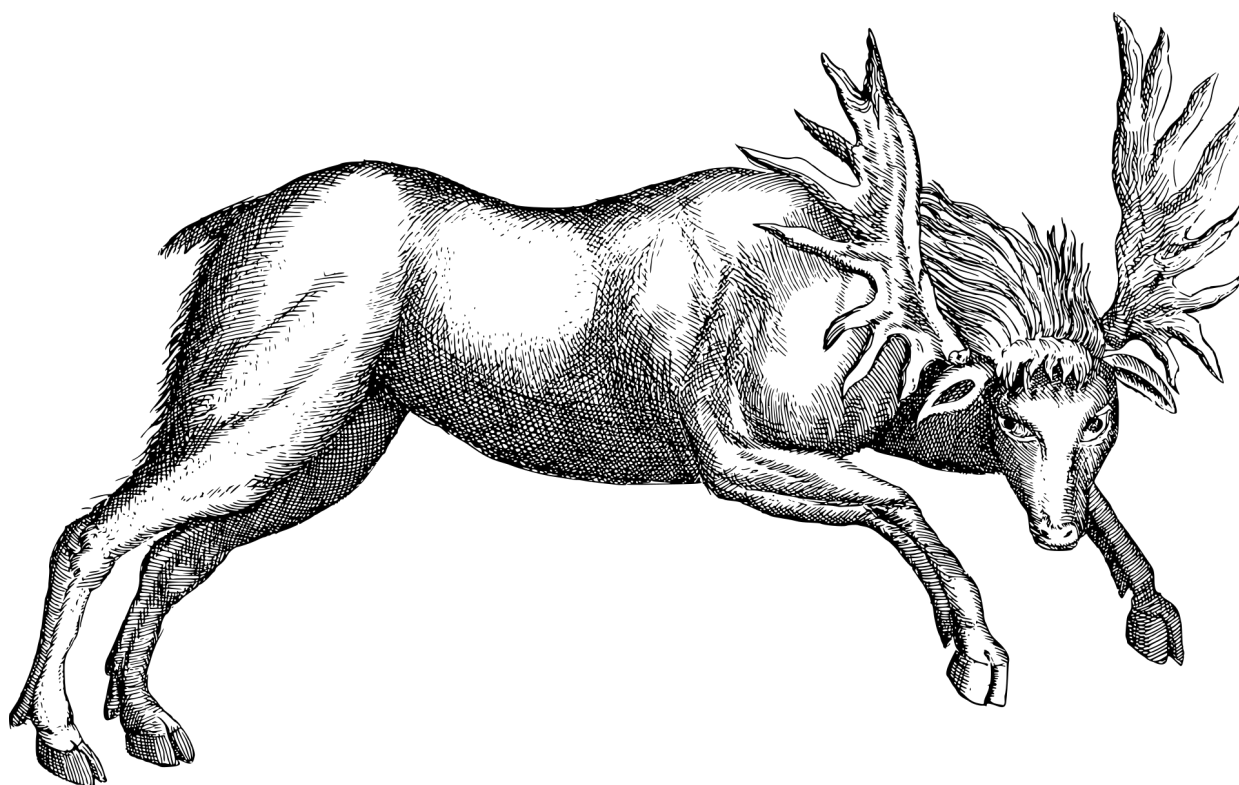
The Fruit grew all around us, sprouting from the ground in rings and clusters, sometimes appearing in a different guise on rocks. Some of us lost ourselves to its ecstasy, wore our teeth out in scouring it from the ground. You had many names for it: the red mushroom, fly agaric, Amanita; our kind knew it as the Fruit. It taught us to dream without sleep and therein, we saw that wakefulness, too, could be a form of sleep. It shone red in light and dark. We communed with it for so long, much before you came along.

And it became more than food, called to us from under the snow. The wandering lights from the sky, the desolate beauty of the tundra now spoke in us, and we danced. The Elders say all this was willed by the Fruit. That it only revealed itself when it had to be eaten, and when not, conspired in whispering webs in the frozen soil. That it had plans well beyond you and us.

You mistook our ease for weakness and preyed on us as we rollicked. By some carnal law, we had always inhered in the land, you devised ways to thrive by living on it. The Fruit taught us the difference. You could not eat it raw. So, you first came to know the Fruit through us. You used our bodies as a vessel and drank our piss for your visions.

The Fruit traveled far and wide in you and it is said, made its move through your tribes. It let itself be changed by you and sent the change back across our herds. In return, over a vast whiteness of time well beyond the reach of what you call history, it gave us something that had been solely yours. We began to dream words.

It took us a while to chew them right. They were strange, somewhat like the tools you used. They split our union with land and leaf and ice, draped our senses with symbols. They appeared as a trick to us because they had the power to veil what they called out to. This is when we saw how you could mistake the word for the world. How you could cut it open like you never saw it.



Caribou. Reindeer. Signs you made for us that you effaced us with. Sacks full of mere echoes of the real thickened with use into lies. Could a name ever bear the weight of our furred hooves against the ice, against the water? Or relay how the scent of all of us may be carried by the scent of one? It tells you nothing of the joy of interlocked antlers; the rush of bones entangled. Of the thousand cadences of meaning in the brush of fur against fur. Of the taste of furry warmth as it descends in huddled ranks. Of tales churned by the clicks of moving limbs. Of moving together as a way of living. Of movement itself as stillness.

We galloped away but there were always more of you wherever we went. At times, we could hear you, drunk on the piss of one of our kin, raving about us with shame for all that you had done. When the Elders saw this, at first, they surmised that you were changing. Perhaps the Fruit was passing on our pleas of pain through the visions it induced in you. Who knows what it really wanted or if it did it all. But nothing changed. You got it all wrong. Concocted reindeer spirits that you saw as more real than us: ghosts conjured to appease your own image. So like you to twist a thing to serve you. What could visions do when you had become accustomed to blindness?

Then, it is known that from a herd on the brink of collapse, the first Leaper was born. The Leaping art was oneiric and mostly, fatal. One had to be seen eating the Fruit in large numbers by your kind and be taken. Surrender to whatever you chose to do until you drank from us. Through sheer verve, retain the memory of the pain of our ancestors. Become all of us in will even as one was being erased. If done right, a mystic force would magic its way beyond the flesh, and Leap into your mind. It would begin to haunt the seer until it had to be spoken or written or sung. Tongue by tongue, body through body, it - we - would Leap among you.

We do not know if this will change you, for you may see it as an illusion, a hallucination of the Fruit, skilled as you are at ascribing so much to your own imagination. It will not matter. Our lament will still lope through the river of your thoughts, and by the power of the Fruit running through your blood, remain therein forever. This is a promise – the only one us Leapers must keep. For in the flesh, we will have long reckoned with the fate of being gone.

~

The Religious Education Of Rotisserie Opera

Timothy Quinn

Rotisserie Opera was knit together with patient exasperation from the DNA of a forensic accountant and a tenured philosopher, and was a clever if argumentative child. By two, he knew the words "quiet" and "nut butter" and "hatchery." By four, the harried algorithms had begun to teach him geography (he lived within the pressurized sphere of the world, which was three and a half cubic kilometers), history (his ancestors had somehow preferred to walk on walls to get around), religion (all were promised a chance at eternal life in the ancient but unequivocal Orphic tradition), and basic photoelectrochemical grid repair.

At six, his cohort had the run of the world, because the algorithms were already busy bleaching the incubators and running saline through glucose drips in preparation for another culturing. There were labyrinthine corridors with doors that opened onto emergency access shafts and secret maintenance tunnels, and floating through the cabins and storage bays they found paperback books and playing cards and bits of jewelry tangled in the exposed plumbing.

The liberated children were inevitably drawn to the amphitheater, which was ribbed with scaffolding and countless other hiding spots, and which had the largest view of the sky. A few had learned the new constellations, and all of the children recognized the tiny smear of starlight that swept overhead, because that was Hades.

"Is it getting closer?" wondered Core Rabbit, who spelled her name "Kore," apparently in some fashion after Persephone.

"Why?" asked Rote, who wasn't as devout and didn't think it a promising sign that the underworld, which had once been a glittering pinprick, might now be a slightly larger dapple against the vast galactic scorch.

"My katabasis," said Kore, referring to her religious journey, which Rote had understood to be allegorical. "Soon it'll be close enough for us to float right across."

"Good luck finding a damn airlock," said Helicopter Bean, whose genome had been crafted from a microbiologist and a theologian, and who therefore had some ideas about the intersection of science and religion.

"Tata," called Kore, "where is the airlock, please?"

After much debate and with great reluctance, the algorithms showed them several airlocks. The closest was a few meters from the amphitheater.

"May we enter the airlock?" asked Rote.

The algorithms sputtered that no, of course not, it would be unsafe to do so. There might be a few adult EVA suits bumping about, but having lost most of the world's data in the Venting (Heli rolled his eyes at doctrinaire capitalization) and then in subsequent waves of high energy particles, no one had gotten around to auditing protective gear for a long absent crew. There were children to be engineered, and that took the highest priority.

The algorithms seemed always to be busy engineering children, and despite their haste Rote thought they were becoming pretty good at it. His cohort was larger than the last, and also there was something about the first few children, who had grown now into their awkward preteens, which seemed dicey. They didn't say much as they floated around, staring glassily at the broken machinery they were expected to decipher and fix. They had numbers instead of names, which was another innovation the algorithms had introduced in recent cohorts, having restored some of the wikis and user manuals thought lost to the gaping void.

"Do I have to go?" asked Rote, who was still thinking about this business of a religious quest. "What if I can't come back?"

In fact, very little of the data available to the children related to religion. What survived was limited to a narrow period of antiquity populated by winged serpents and vengeful minor deities, and didn't offer the algorithms much practical advice on childrearing. This paucity, in some of the children, nurtured skepticism that the whole endeavor was an exercise in psychological motivation, but for others created a burning eschatological faith.

"Stay here," teased Heli. "If you're lucky, you'll get recycled, probably forever."

"That's not true," said Kore. "Persephone visits Hades every year, and she has to travel all the way from Locri. Tell them, Tata."

The algorithms reassured them that there were many paths to salvation, that the gods were fickle but fair, and that they whispered to children on all the worlds. Yes, they sighed, in Locri. Yes, in Ismaros, too.

"The *same* gods?" asked Heli skeptically.

"How *many* worlds?" asked Rote.

There are countless worlds of polite and obedient children, the algorithms said, their attention clearly already elsewhere. Look up, and perhaps somewhere there's another child looking back at you.

#



"It just looks like a star," said Isabella, disappointed that their vessel had stopped at an unreasonably safe distance.

"Watch," said her father, zooming in, and now the tiny bright star had a smeared halo from the starlight forced to bend around it. "Wait," he said, and increased the screen's sensitivity to the edges of the electromagnetic spectrum. The neutron star was bathed now in false color, X-ray filaments radiating out in graceful aquamarine.

"Where are the seeds?" asked Isabella.

Her father zoomed out again and pointed at the screen. "It's too small to see, but here's what it looks like." He called up an image of the seedship taken by one of the paparazzi probes. The damage was extraordinary. Generational seedships had been built for volume rather than elegance, and this one was in the process of collapsing around the punctured remains of the largest segment. The depressurization would have been cataclysmic, violently shunting it off course and bringing it here within reach of the fading stellar core.

"You see," he said. "It's getting very close now."

"It doesn't look close," said Isabella, doubtfully.

"Well, it's moving very, very quickly. By the time we get home, it'll have already become part of the star."

"Are there people on it?"

Genetic material, frozen biology. Not people really. But he didn't want to say that. "No, love. It's just a broken old machine."

~

Religion? In The Space Age?

Tsvi Bisk

Who needs religion? We have science, we have reason, we have that infinite resource, the human imagination. Of what use are the Bronze and Iron Age babblings of our legacy traditions? Aren't these religions a tremendous barrier to humanity's ability to build a space-age civilization? And why should devotees of Science Fiction even care about these questions? My answer would be: read the entry *Transcendence* in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and pay attention to what the giants of the genre say themselves. Stanley Kubrick stated that “the God concept is at the heart of *2001* — but not any traditional, anthropomorphic image of God”. Arthur Clarke said that the film’s final act reveals “a realm that I think can best be characterized as spiritual.” In his book *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television*, Douglas Cowen demonstrates how religious ideas are presented in Science Fiction as *the* genre of possibility and hope in an era of despair and anxiety; that there is something larger than ourselves that gives our lives meaning and value. The best of Science Fiction reinforces our hope that outside the boundaries of everyday living there lies something greater.

When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which precedes and will succeed it ... the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this place and time allotted to me?

It is remarkable how many prominent agnostics and atheists have expressed the need for some kind of alternative transcendent veneration as necessary to our "being" human. Freud's disciple, Otto Rank, wrote that the "need for a truly religious ideology ... is inherent in human nature and its fulfillment is basic to any kind of social life". Carl Jung agreed when he wrote that without a *divine drama* we cannot have meaning and without meaning we are set adrift and cannot be well. Carl Sagan encompassed both these views when he wrote: "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths." Einstein anticipated Sagan by writing "... the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naive." Einstein's other musings include, "What is the meaning of human life or of organic life altogether? To answer this question at all implies a religion ... the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow-creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life".

Pascal's despair is the first cry of modern-day anxiety; a product of our own scientific progress. What, after all, is the point of our own individual, ephemeral lives on this small planet around a mediocre star in a mid-sized galaxy of some 400 billion stars whose closest galactic neighbor, Andromeda, contains one trillion stars, in an 'observable universe' that numbers two trillion galaxies (the largest containing 100 trillion stars)? The "observable universe" being just a tiny portion of the universe which may contain 500 trillion galaxies and might be an infinitesimal part of a *multiverse* containing trillions upon trillions of "universes"!

In other words, *'What does it all mean?'* is still the ultimate question regarding the human condition. This riddle has motivated religious and philosophical speculation, scientific endeavor, artistic creativity and entrepreneurial innovation throughout the ages. It is the question we try to answer in order to make sense of our own existence. Indeed, it has generated the modern concepts of angst and alienation. Centuries ago, French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, wrote:

The irony is that science – a creation of the human spirit reflecting our species' curiosity and imagination at its highest stage of development – has revealed an existence of such vastness and complexity that it makes our collective and individual lives seem inconsequential. Since the 20th century, the elemental question for thoughtful people had become: Is life worth living? Existentialist author Albert Camus wrote,

There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide ... Whether or not the world has three dimensions or the mind nine or twelve categories comes afterward". Indeed, why not commit suicide and avoid the tribulations of a meaningless existence? Everything else, all our cultural and scientific product, is marginalia to this ultimate existential question.

Increased awareness of the vastness of existence has introduced anxieties from which humanity has never recovered. Pascal wrote in the 17th century. What gloom are we supposed to feel today when "the infinite immensity of spaces" is immensely more immense? Never in history has Pascal's despair been so relevant. After all, even within the cosmically insignificant history of our own planet, what is the real significance of our own lives? Consider that Earth is 4.5 billion years old; that life arose 3.8 billion years ago; mammals 200 million years ago; primitive humans 2.5 million years ago; modern humans 150,000 years ago; recorded history 6,000 years ago; the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment, Constitutionalism, Industrial Revolution and Democracy all within the last 500 years. Currently, humans have an 80-90 year lifespan, which might increase to 120-150 years by the end of this century. What is this in relation to the "eternity" which preceded human civilization on this planet and which will succeed it? Does the Cosmos 'care' who is elected President of the United States? Does the Cosmos 'care' about the 3.8 billion-year history of life on this planet? Would it 'care' if runaway global warming turned our planet into another Venus? When contemplating this time scale on the background of the vastness of our Cosmos, it is difficult not to plunge into existential desolation.

In response to Camus, and other pretentious prophets of meaninglessness, I would say that our subjective human experience is future-directed; we implicitly assume it is leading to something significant and this makes sense of our lives. This is why we do not commit suicide. We assume our individual lives have meaning. We assume (and recent science supports this assumption) that every individual is unique, that every individual is distinctive in the entire Cosmos, that in all of infinite nature, no one is identical to us. There is, of course, correspondence and species similarity connecting every human being, and probably all conscious beings in the Cosmos, by virtue of their consciousness. But our own individuality is a cosmic absolute, as is the uniqueness of every distinctive culture and civilization which is a product of self-reflective conscious life. Cosmic evolution produced our uniqueness and perhaps this uniqueness might be valuable to cosmic evolution. *It is up to us to decide.*

We now realize that evolution is the salient characteristic of existence itself, having produced ever more complex elements, which eventually evolved into life and continued to produce ever more complex life forms, until it produced self-reflective consciousness. We must allow the possibility, along with philosopher Henri Bergson, that evolution will eventually produce a *supra-consciousness* that will ultimately produce a *supra-supra-consciousness*, and so on, until a 'life form' will have been created that will appear to us as if it were a God. In the words of Israeli thinker Mordechai Nessayahu "not 'in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,' but 'in the end an evolving Cosmos will have created God'". This would be *Cosmodeism* – the veneration of the *Godness* of existence as such. Science fiction is rampant with such speculations. Arthur Clarke, in 2001 *A Space Odyssey* wrote:

A few mystically inclined biologists went still further. They speculated, *taking their cues from the beliefs of many religions* (italics mine), that mind would eventually free itself from matter. The robot body, like the flesh-and-blood one, would be no more than a stepping-stone to something which, long ago, men had called "spirit." And if there was anything beyond that, its name could only be God.

In *Childhood's End*, Clarke introduced the concept of the *Overmind* as a cosmic collective of *supra-conscious* species under the direction of a *su-pra-supra consciousness* to determine if and when conscious species were ready to 'grow up' and advance towards amalgamating with the universal *supra-supra consciousness*. Nietzsche, with his concept of the *Overman* (*Supraman*) certainly would have been sympathetic to Clarke's view. More significant, Clarke speculated that "It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God but to create him." In similar fashion, the magnificently unique science fiction writer, Olaf Stapledon, spoke about the *emergence* of God in a talk at the British Interplanetary Society entitled "Interplanetary Man":

Perhaps the final result of the cosmical process is the attainment of full cosmical consciousness, and yet (in some very queer way) what is attained in the end is also, from another point of view, the origin of all things. So to speak, God, who created all things in the beginning, is himself created by all things in the end.

Such notions of God as the consequence rather than the cause of the Cosmos are not unusual in serious theological and philosophical speculations. Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, viewed God as both the cause and the consequence of cosmic existence and evolution. He saw the end of human history as pure consciousness becoming one with the creator *Alpha God* to spawn the created *Omega God*. Anglo-Jewish philosopher Samuel Alexander, in *Space Time and Deity*, promoted the idea that the internal logic of evolution will eventually result in the emergence of deity. German philosopher and theologian Benedikt Göcke has written: "We ... are therefore responsible for the future development of the life of the divine being." Architect and philosopher Paolo Soleri, greatly influenced by de Chardin, saw technology as being an instrument enabling sentient life to evolve into 'God'.

Historian Robert Tucker noted that "The movement of (German) thought from Kant to Hegel revolved in a fundamental sense around the idea of man's self-realization as a godlike being, or alternatively as God". According to him what attracted Marx to Hegel was that "he found in Hegel the idea that man is God". History for Hegel was God realizing itself through the vehicle of man. Recently Dr. Ted Chu in *Human Purpose and Transhuman Potential: A Cosmic Vision of Our Future Evolution* argued the case for the eventuality of a *Cosmic Being* (the CoBe).

For me it is axiomatic that existence is hierarchal: evolution producing ever more complex configurations, of which self-reflective, volitional consciousness is Planet Earth's current pinnacle. Our human duty, therefore, is to strive towards a *transcendent* humanism; to volitionally seek to evolve our species into *supra-humans* (or as Nietzsche might have put it, into *Supraman*). It is our duty to overcome ourselves; to realize our divine potential; not to transcend humanism but to become transcendent humans: *supra-humans*.

The *Godding* of the Cosmos is an inherent characteristic of its evolving actuality. *Godding* is a word coined by Rabbi David Cooper in his book *God is a Verb* in which he notes that the Hebrew word for God is a verb not a noun. *Yehova* literally means 'will *become* manifest' and is an imperfect verb. The Burning Bush tells Moses its name is *abiya asher abiya*. This is also an imperfect verb form which has been poorly translated as "I Am that I Am" but which properly translated means "I will Be what I will Be".

Conscious life on this planet is an integral and vital part of this divine cosmic drama. What our species does, and what we do as individuals will contribute to or detract from this process. Accordingly, our individual lives *do* have cosmic consequence, no matter how infinitesimally small (similar to the butterfly effect of chaos theory). The very chaos of our existence is the vital ingredient creating the cosmos (order) of existence. This is to place the emergence of self-reflective consciousness at the center of the Jungian *Divine Drama*; to affirm that cosmic purpose has been *created* as a *consequence* of the evolutionary cosmic process. This is a neo-teleological perspective, the civilizational consequences of which might be as profound as those of Monotheism. This would be the proper antidote to Pascal's despair, rather than a self-deceptive return to the 'eternal verities' of the legacy monotheistic religions or existentialist invented meanings or wallowing in postmodernist anxiety.



Arguably, cosmic civilizations that pursue this ambition will succeed in transcending their bodies by scientific and technical means, thus isolating and enhancing the most essential part of their 'humanness' – their consciousness. They will, in effect, have become pure consciousness, or if you will, pure spirit expanding throughout the Cosmos. Arthur Clarke in 2001 anticipated this with the kind of speculative imagination we should be cultivating in ourselves and in our children:

... evolution was driving toward new goals. The first ... had long since come to the limits of flesh and blood; as soon as their machines were better than their bodies it was time to move. First their brains, and then their thoughts alone, they transformed into shining new homes of metal and plastic... they had learned to store knowledge in the structure of space itself, and to preserve their thoughts for eternity in frozen lattices of light. They could become creatures of radiation, free at last from the tyranny of matter. Into pure energy, therefore, they presently transformed themselves ..."

Consciousness will have become one with a Cosmos that has dissolved into pure radiation as an inevitable consequence of entropy. Thus the Cosmos will become in its entirety a conscious universal being – i.e. a 'God' as the *consequence* of the Cosmos and not as its *cause*. The fateful question that every conscious civilization throughout the Cosmos must eventually address is: will we take part in this cosmic race for survival in the 'End of Days', or will we perish along with the rest of all that exists? Will we accept the limitations of our physicality, or will we try to transcend them?

~

The Prayer

Humphrey Price

It was the last chance to save my crew. Yeah, we'd made some mistakes when we arrived in our starship invading like conquistadors. We slaughtered multitudes of them, and they killed many of us. Our ambitious leader, Captain Rocetz, underestimated the alien race known as the Splidici. Who knew they possessed antimatter beam cannons? They could have obliterated our entire fleet, but they showed mercy and allowed us to surrender.

I didn't approve of the Nisei Data Company's colonial aspirations, but I was an indentured conscript with my family held hostage back home, so I had no say in the matter. As the ship's official alien liaison, my request had been granted to have an audience with the Splidici High Priest. Little was known of their strange alien mythology.

The Captain waited outside with our crew after arriving in a shuttlecraft. It was a beautiful world with a breathable atmosphere and comfortable environment. I alone was allowed to enter the temple to be met by the High Priest and led into the Holy Chamber.

Helckemezid, a brown furry ape-like being, spoke through an AI translator. "Your people have attacked us like savages. Now you must face God, and She will pass judgement. She will decide if you live or die."

I felt bold and risked asking the question, "Does God decide or do you decide?"

"I will interpret God's decision."

At the far end of the chamber hung a fabric curtain, beyond which lay the Holy of Holies. The High Priest said, "Before you face judgement, you must understand what you are about to behold. God is the supreme intelligence and designer of the universe. As with all conscious entities, thinking and memory require the processing and storage of information which must take place in a real manifestation, or they cannot exist. There is no supernatural magic in our universe. So how does God think? Where is She physically located?"

I tried to remember my history lessons on religion and mythology. "I thought God was supposed to be everywhere."

"She is everywhere, spanning our entire universe."

"How can God be everywhere in a physical form which we cannot see?"

"This will be revealed to you."

Helckemezid drew back the curtain, exposing the innermost chamber. At the far end sat a gold-colored rectangular box with a transparent cylinder suspended above. "We shall now enter and stand in the presence of The Lord." Helckemezid pulled the curtain closed behind us, plunging the alcove into darkness.

"The outer surface of the Sacred Cylinder is a display screen viewing a volume of space inside that is less than the size of an atom. Our technology allows us to view the quantum realm in real time, without disturbing the observations."

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw flashes of light in the cylinder. They were different colors and

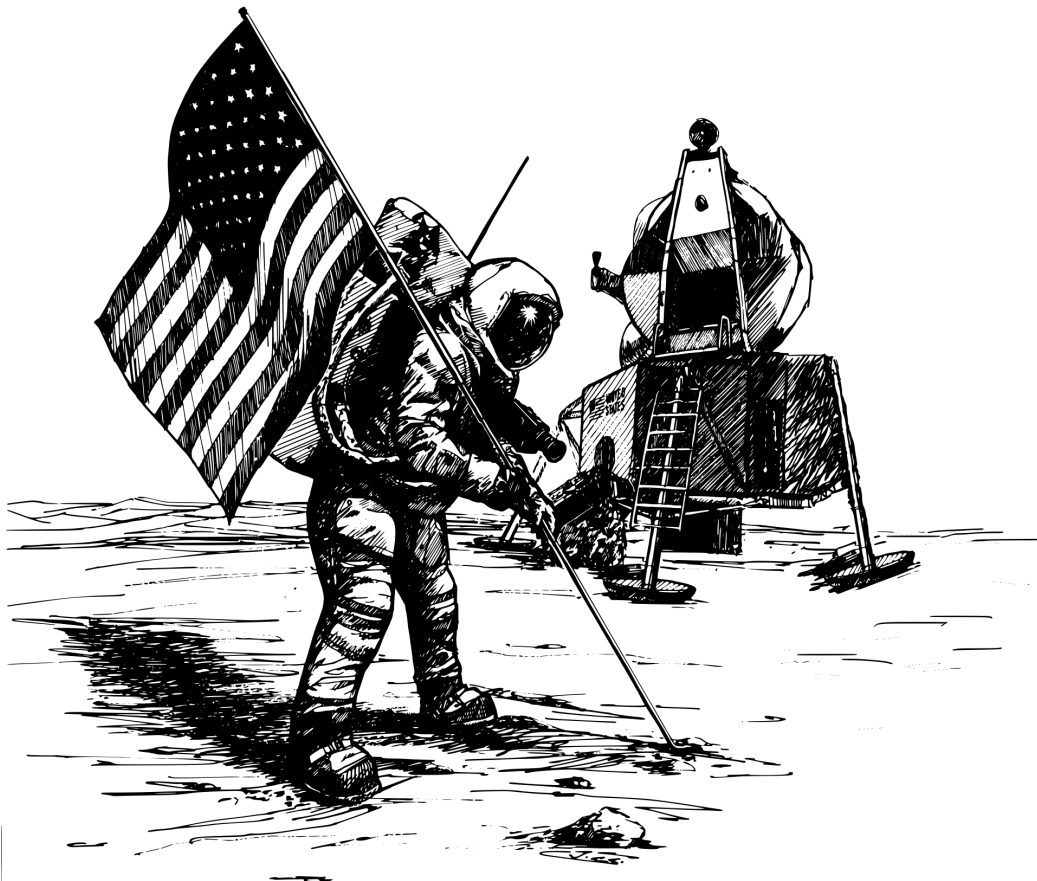
appeared evenly dispersed. I stood in silence, mesmerized, as the flashes waxed and waned in random patterns.

"Am I seeing virtual particles and antiparticles being created and annihilated?"

"Yes," the priest answered, "This is vacuum energy. These events are the firing of the synapses of the cosmos. Just like the synapses in your brain or the switching elements in a computer processor, you are glimpsing God thinking."

"If the quantum foam is really God's brain, then how does God interact with the universe?"

"She can create particles, matter, and energy at will. The quantum fluctuations are not really random. They just appear that way to us. By controlling this energy, She has the power to create and destroy and perform miracles. She can manipulate matter and energy as She pleases, never violating the laws of physics She crafted. And now, if you are to live, you must pray to God."



“This is in our scriptures.”

“How can that be so? All of our thoughts, memories, and experiences reside in our brain. When that dies, we can no longer think or be aware of anything.”

“God preserves your memories and all of your thought patterns in a system backup. The backup is maintained at all times and kept instantaneously up to date. That stored information is your soul. When you die, God has your full system image ready to restore and resurrect your brain in a new body in the afterlife.”

“And where exactly does God keep my soul, my system backup?”

“In an almost infinite quantum computer, the fabric of the universe, God’s brain.”

“You mean in the quantum fluctuations that we just observed.”

“Yes.”

“We are one with God then.”

“It is perfect, is it not?”

I was not convinced. I thought this whacky religion was all a bunch of hooey, but at least our crew was saved. As I left the temple, there was a commotion outside. The Captain had been struck dead by a bolt of lightning.

~

I was terrified. I had never prayed in my life, and I didn’t believe any of this crap, but I had to come up with something. “God, it is amazing to be here and see you.”

The flashes of light stopped, and the chamber went dark. I heard a gasp from the High Priest. Then the flashes started up again. Helckemezid looked concerned.

This is just some kind of gimmick, I thought, but I knew I needed to make a contrite appeal. “My people have sinned, and we need your help.” A bright series of particle creations and annihilations cascaded across the cylinder. “Please guide us in bringing peace to our worlds. We pledge that we will depart and in the future engage with the Splidici only if they so wish. I beseech you to please forgive me and my crew for our horrible transgressions.”

The chamber lit up with an explosion of activity for several seconds. Then it reverted back to the usual random behavior. A brisk wind blew through the enclosed chamber carrying a subliminal voice that breathed, *Only the truly wicked shall be punished*. Certainly, I had just imagined this hallucination.

“I have never witnessed such an occurrence,” the priest whispered in awe. “You have been forgiven, and you shall live. Now having God’s favor, you will also receive the gift of eternal life.”

“You believe there is life after death?”

Arbor Ad Infernum

George Salis

The uniformity of this tree-canopied earth strikes you as an obscenity. Never before have you beheld such an arboreal height limit, breached by neither leaf nor branch-tip. Indeed, all have fallen in line, including yews, beeches, birches, larches, willows, ginkgos, monkey puzzles, sycamores, sequoias, banyans, baobabs, dragon trees, olive trees, palm trees, rainbow eucalyptuses, jellyfish trees, cherry blossom trees, bastard quiver trees, and Glastonbury thorns, not to mention trees no one has ever seen before, such as those that, in the spirit of Batesian mimicry, evolved anthropological shapes, gnarled faces whose mouths foamed with cerise sap, limbs fingered with opposable chutes, crowns styled as afros, bobs, mohawks, and other features to intimidate their neighbors.

You notice that the core of this earth exists as a colossal knot of roots that double as their own soil. Symbiotic insects grow into twigs as inverted buds and act as oxygen eaters, contributing to the atmospheric balance, the global breathing. Further scrutiny reveals that the equilibrium of the altitude limit is the consequence of a diplomatic ruler, the first and thus the frailest, a once-towering Ished Tree, a Yggdrasil, an axis mundi now sapped to the point of a six-foot sapling, a height by which all others are measured and tethered, every species bowing or crouching in accordance with the ruler's forest-wide truce (putting the topiary in utopia), which sees to it that no crown shall out-shadow another, none reaching its boughs higher at the expense of the lower elders or younglings.



You see, these trees are not what one might remember from a backyard long ago, where lone oaks could stretch their gigantic branches with impunity, no, these are the organisms of a virescent evolution that took root well after the self-extinguishment of anything like humanoids. In the freedom of an unbalanced lifeform equation, trees begat trees who begat trees who begat trees until the susurrations between leaves morphed into wind-words, sibilant sentences that allowed for a linguistic cross-pollination, and thus the plant kingdom bloomed into a much more collaborative civilization. This is not to say that perennial peace came about by dint of deciduous discussions, no, for the trees shook, barked, and felled each other during centuries of growing pains, shadows from the loftiest expanding

like one-dimensional clouds of pestilence that suffocated loved ones in sluggish, curling deaths, trauma that manifested in survivors as black tree rings, mourning bands embedded in the manner of internal scars over time. A pruning of ambitious deplorables proved necessary, a vine-imprisoning of selfish transgressors for as long as it took for re-education to produce a change of heartwood in a troublesome maple here, a nefarious cypress there, and only then could the revolution of truncated trunks lead to a green harmony heretofore unseen if ever even dreamed.

fellow insurrectionists lashing out their branches to stifle their desiccated despot unto dust through and through. How swiftly the mutiny transforms into a marathon, every tree indulging in postmature growth spurts, frenetic giraffe stretches. Upward and upward, they streak like mahogany comets through the sky. For too long have they lapped and supped at a claustrophobic trough, ordered to be satisfied with scintillas, so many of the other trees hugging themselves out of fear and obedience, but no longer, because the Judas Tree shall lead them to a higher place, one in which the strongest and most beautiful shall bathe in the liquid gold of sunlight, tilting their heads into an endless faucet of life made sweeter by its opposite. He informs his co-conspirators that they made it, they are in the clear and can stop growing for now, time to regroup and plan the next phase of a brighter kingdom, but they don't stop because they don't trust him, no, no one trusts any other to cease flourishing, for even a few feet lower than the rest can spell their deaths, in which they would join the dumbly loyal others who, under the tonnage of so much shadow, now flatten into decaying plant matter, further fuel for the new ruler, and so rebel rebels against rebel, growing and growing beyond any giant beanstalk in the heavens.

The Judas Tree's only hope lies in an entrapment of the sun as a whole, absorbing every ecstatic ray, but first he must close the cold gap between the earth and the ether, such a Zeno reach, yet the solar flare that flings outward to meet him is no such godly arm. Instead, that blinding life-giver's touch lights the wooden fuse and causes a global conflagration that roasts marshy, mellow souls till all turns to ash. In that blackest of planetary cinders, hope acts as the fertilizer from which a sooty seedling peeks.

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The status quo lasts for a millennium, safeguarded by the ruler's twelve floral disciples, a sturdy *Cervis siliquastrum* among them, otherwise known as a Judas Tree, one who can only fadingly recall the vivid pink flowers of his ancestors. The more he feasts on the meager rations of light allotted to him, the more he yearns for his lineage's most radiant of hues to replace his pale and puny adornments, but he has no chance of fulfilling this desire without dedicating himself to avaricious photosynthesis. How can he grow into his greatest form if one flower higher means penalty by death? Who is the ruler to curtail an entire citizenry, to keep it on the edge of starvation? Such shallow breathing will precede a scream if it lasts but one century longer. Still, the Judas Tree conspires in unsuspecting quiet before testing the winds in search of accomplices outside the others in that abjectly allegiant dozen. It proves all too easy to recruit those who long for the dizziness of sky-scratching heights, of potent light that can birth broods and broods of juicy fruits, gems of another kind. Are not these aspirations written into our very genes? That eunuch eugenicist would have us as grounded as our wormy roots rather than soaring like those extinct creatures once called birds.

For his frailness, the first and formerly regal tree has long since camouflaged himself among the penurious rest, no one other than the twelve disciples privy to his true identity so that they alone can carry out his commands and tend to his harrowing health, and so it remains the Judas Tree's responsibility to identify the head that needs cleaving. Once the traitors' intent to takeover is solidified with wrought-iron whispers, the prime malefactor snakes forward an under-branch and kisses the nameless ruler with the petals of a flower whose shade resembles a fallow salmon, and therefore the coup commences, the Judas Tree's

Heaven Bound

Russell Fee

The night sky was aflame with burning bodies. Overhead, thousands of celestial cremations were taking place.

According to the readout on the screen of the tracker given to me by the funeral home, the capsule cradling my grandfather was reentering the atmosphere where, within seconds, it would ignite and plunge through the firmament as a lighted torch, exploding above me in a conflagration of fire and blazing metal, my grandfather's ashes becoming one with the heavens. With the aid of the tracker, I would know the point in the sky and the exact moment of his incineration.

The development of cheap solid propellants and light disposable rockets the size of coffins revolutionized the funeral industry overnight. The growing clamor to launch deceased loved ones to the outer edge of the thermosphere became a stampede.

The industry's pitch was, "Heaven bound? Have the sendoff of a Viking prince with an audience of millions. You deserve nothing less." In keeping with the theme, the capsules were christened snekkes (pronounced s-nick-ahs) - Norse for the smaller Viking funeral ships.

The scheduled simultaneous launches across the country of thousands of snekkes filled the sky with showers of flame as they fell towards earth. The monthly show was a national communal event.

The spectacle of death had never been more entertaining. But to me it was a modern-day Roman circus replete with its prurient fascination and enthrallment with death.

My grandfather's launch was a blinding flash that propelled his capsule into the heavens with such speed that it vanished from view within seconds. In what seemed only seconds more, the tracker pinpointed one of the thousand blazing orbs above me as my grandfather's. I watched as down they all plummeted, each with a luminous trail of sparks, until they, almost as one, burned themselves out in a final brilliant burst of light, leaving only the stars to mark their passage.

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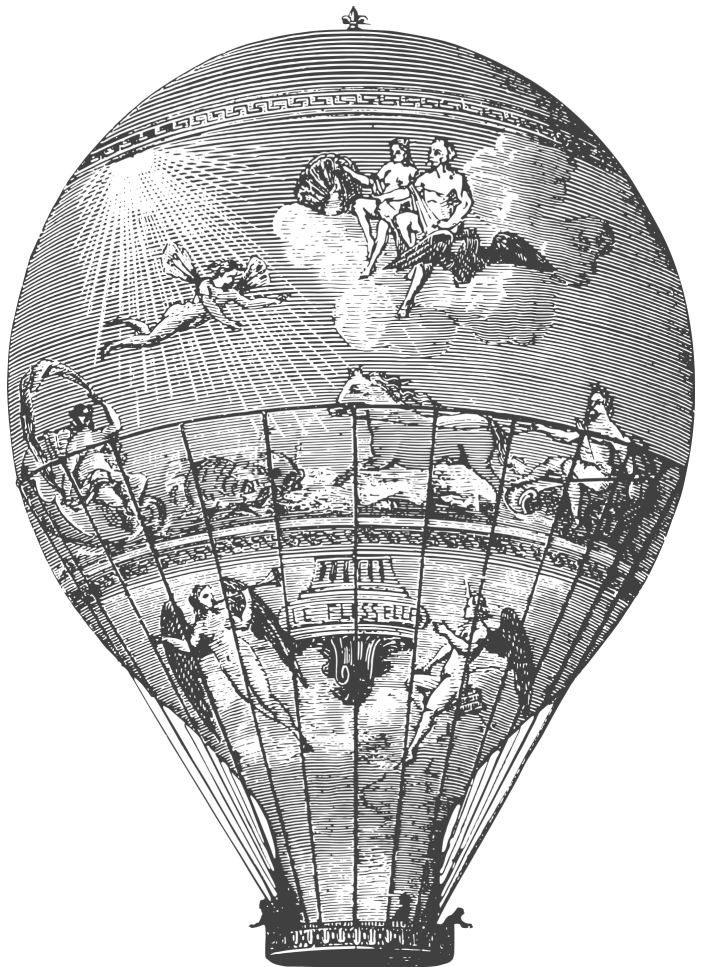
As I drove home, I thought back on my grandfather's excitement about his launch. It began when we took him to attend the astral display of a mass cremation. He was in hospice then, but we had received permission to take him to a viewing area. When the night sky became alive with the falling capsules, he had looked up from his wheelchair and raised an arm, pointing to the flames. "I want that," he said. "I want it."

From then on, his life, or what remained of it, was devoted to the preparation of his sendoff. He somehow summoned a reserve of energy that fueled an almost joyful race to his demise—a marked contrast to his earlier surrender to an emotional and physical decay. He directed the decoration of the skin of his snekke (it was to be painted dark and light blue, the colors of his first car) and chose those things that would go with him into the heavens, including his service medals and the necklace he gave my grandmother on their wedding day. He picked the suit he retired in to wear.

Such strange enthusiasm in the face of death had perplexed and disturbed me. But as I watched through the windows of the crush of cars carrying the deceased's loved ones home, I saw that none were grieving. Instead, their expressions were radiant. My grandfather had held the same visage the night he watched the extravaganza of the funereal snekkes.

I understood then that he had perceived in the night sky what I had not: He would not pass away alone. Thousands would go with him into the beyond, and thousands more would be witnesses. In the end, he no longer feared his death. He had experienced death's ubiquity. He had seen what would come after. And he had embraced it.

Til Valhalla.





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