



PRINT! DOCUMENT :: SERIES ONE

The Sword of Things

TONY HOFFMAN

the trouble with bartleby
in collaboration with
exit strata creators collective







Coming of Age in the Intertidal Zone

My childhood straddled the transition
between land and sea, strewn with the housings
of mollusks and snails, foreclosed upon by time.
A jetty clove the shore in two; in its lee a tidepool,
long and narrow, a bit too wide to jump across.
Not the pool from which our lobe-finned forebears
may have crawled when our planet was younger
but the one my brother, friends and I reveled in
when our lives were newly tapped mystery.

A pool patrolled by minnows, which fled our nets
into rock-shadows and seaweed clumps.
Abode of mussels, periwinkles, tiny calico crabs
critters we'd catch and carefully bucket
only for them to perish
on the four-mile drive home.

Not long ago I drove the 50 miles up the coast
in the car that my mother had owned
to reabsorb the magic of this place
but I'd neglected the tide.

When I arrived, the beach was a thinning strip,
the jetty's steppingstones overtopped with slosh,
the tidepool vanished, swallowed by the sea.





Life as a Spiral

I've sought my genealogy
in ram's horn and whelk,
staircase, garden maze, galaxy,
tried to glean resemblance
in descent of dying satellites
or autumn leaves, seeking to loop
back upon myself.

I've devoured mathematics—
helix, vortex, Golden Mean,
Hohmann transfer, loxodromic curve.

I've trawled human symbolry,
petroglyph, logo, even barber pole.
Murex on papyrus, charcoal on parchment.
Graphite on paper, pixels on phosphor.





I've mindfully considered metaphor
the heroic journey, ever curving,
outward into new domains
or inward toward the well of all.

I've perused linguistics,
spiral to spirit
to inspiration, respiration,
breath of life, divinity,
pronounced the progressions
like yet unlike.

I've scoured all these ephemera,
symbolic and corporeal
and still come up void.

No matter. Spiral I remain
as constant yet mysterious as pi.
Boundless, indomitable,
anchored in air.





Inconstant Sun

In the time of inconstant Sun
(which is anytime, know it or not)
through the safety of filtered glass
I gaze at our star's roiling face
barely an hour after the latest flare blew—
Brightsnake writhing in that livid orb portends
geomagnetic mathem hurtling our way
to mess with the airwaves tonight.

I turn the 40-meter dial
twist through cacophonous clashes,
incomprehensible oceans of noise.
T-storms over the Ohio Valley
or perhaps maybe the Amazon.
I key the circuit into the gale:

--- -- . - - --- ---

Kiss me now.





The Problem of Peace in Our Time

As geese is the plural of goose,
shouldn't Zeese be the plural of Zeus
and peace, why, be plural for poose?

But there are no Zeese, so there can't be Zeus
and the road to peace must lead through poose—
which may be why peace is so elus-

ive.





Rorschach

Death is a Rorschach—
but just for the living.

The dead, ensconced [or not]
in their [or our] know-not-where
lie beyond our access,

leave us to balance
that vast stone,
our jumbled psyches,
families, friendships, lives

to miss them with all we've got—
though we'd freak
if they actually
returned.





We harry all the might-have-beens,
things unsaid or overdone
undone or oversaid.

To not be—inconceivable
so we confabulate,
in a futile ploy
to comprehend unbeing
while cringing at our own mortality.

Death is a Rorschach
I proclaim
even as I turn
to contemplate the blot.





Monkfish fra Diavolo

Squat Buddhafish
with hinged jaws,
head sprouting fleshy lures
enticing prey into temptation—
Satan in the guise of a fish
yet here we've lured it
off of the abyssal plain,
onto the dinner plate.
Monkfish fra Diavolo—
delectable duality.

It's said that Satan moves
among us, disguised as a monk,
and Christ was a fisher of men.
A carp, slated for gefilte fish
shouts in Hebrew that the end is near.
Darwin fish and Jesus fish
square off on cars,
as Westernized Buddhists
seek nirvana in frutti di mare.





Angelheaded hipsters, deviling crabs,
burning for that connection
to phosphorescent plankton wheels
whirling through sea and sky of mind,
where portents of our karmic destiny
lie tangled in the arms of brittlestars
to emerge our collective sea,
spectral kitchen whipping up
its smorgasbord of dreams.

Culinary absolution is at hand,
Judas-ear fungus, back in vogue.
Why must our swim to reason
be so steeply upstream?
If lungfish all crawled back
into the sea, and humans followed,
would we then be free?





*CQD MGY**

It's twenty-twelve, we have no icebergs here—
well, maybe a few puny ones, but we've
got F-104s rigged with Sidewinder missiles,
sonar and radar and microwave beams,
robotic dolphins, submersibles seven miles deep.
We'll pump greenhouse gases
to par-broil the atmosphere,
thaw all those little bergs out.

It's twenty-twelve,
there be no dragons here.
No more gray edges
on maps (Apple excepted),
no frontiers except the doorway
to the dream—Only the husk
of bravado remains.





It's the freaking third millennium, folks!
We'll fluff you with Plasma TV.
We've got Gigabit Ethernet,
nanotechnology,
iPhones with light-saber apps.
Our hadron colliders
make mincemeat of particles,
our neutrinos zip
faster than light.

We've got all of the latest in cyber-security.
Our malware protection stops 10 million viruses.
Our downtowns all bristle with videocams;
geiger detectors at all ports of call.

There's even insurance to guard against asteroids!
Yeah, but try and find someone to pay it out—
or, for that matter, to collect.

**The distress call of the RMS Titanic*







Tapestry

Beyond all ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there....—Rumi

Paradox: You know the Dos Equis ads about the “most interesting man in the world”? One claims he's never had an awkward moment. But how interesting could he be, if he's never said the wrong thing, or the right thing at the wrong time, or hit on someone he had no business hitting on, or this, or that? Sounds like the most boring man in the world.

Confabulation: He was Freebo Rhybozzabeams, the Bonynotchhead bowman, defender of the realm. Tasked with patrolling the near side of the ravine. That is, except for where the cliff overhung the water and was impassible. It was said that a clutch of shibboleths nested in the cliff face. Though he spent hours standing tree-still, with bow drawn and at the ready, he never saw them, though they could hear their cries. When a croquet ball or a kickball rolled into the ravine, if it came to rest too near the cliff face, not even he would retrieve it.

Eclipse Saga 1: As one of 16, I went to China, in a sweltering July, relieved I wouldn't spend my trip in swine flu quarantine. On the next to last full day, a total solar eclipse. Even as the dragon nibbled the sun, dragon and sun were devoured by clouds, the eclipse itself eclipsed. The clouds then barfed up acid rain.

Reflection: Jim Morrison exhorted us to break on through to the other side. But maybe life is like a Moebius strip: There is no other side. By the way, the battle for the Moebius-strip world was a one-sided struggle.





Maybe the answer is not to break on through, but a more subtle approach. “These things must be done delicately,” as the Wicked Witch of the West said, as she prepared to off Dorothy. But come to think of it, that approach didn’t work out that well for the Witch.

Meteor Magic 1: At our company picnic’s softball game, I couldn’t the ball. It would split in two, and I didn’t know which to swing at. At night, the stars would split in two. Fearful it could be a brain tumor, I hid from the truth. A week later, our tallest towers become aerial tombs. My own mortality seemed insignificant; I saw the doctor unafraid. He sent me to a neuroophthalmologist, one of the world’s best he said. He had me scanned, and tested my visual field. A 4th-nerve palsy: though it might clear up on its own, chances are that I’d need surgery.

Memory: On landing, three women boarded the plane, fanned out one per aisle, approached each passenger, pointed rod to forehead, and pressed. They swept the cabin systematically, missing no one. I didn’t have long to wait—soon the woman stood in front of me, pressed the rod to my head, triggered it—and it came up green. Saved from the H1N1 gun, I arose, free to deplane in Beijing.

Transmigrations: Seasons speed up, geese wing south in jagged echelons. The Monarchs fly to Mexico; the sky for an hour fills with dragonflies. We all once came out of Africa, traversed the globe in waves. (There’s a Russian Orthodox church in Antarctica now.)

Family History: My mother came from a land of shifting borders, a place where surnames are mostly consonants, where Christian women wear head-scarves, where the ancients built homes of mammoth tusks. A land overrun by invaders





east and west. Lypowski, of the linden—they hid in the Linden trees when the Tatars came. A farming village just north of the road from Lviv to Ternopol. A house with the town's first tin roof.

Observation: I am a hunter of nebulous things.

Memory: As a child, on a trip to Ft. Lauderdale, we took a cruise on the riverboat (or more likely, intracoastal waterway boat) *Jungle Queen*. At one point our guide pointed seaward, to a palm-studded islet, and exclaimed “and way over there, you can see Africa.” It took me a number of years for me to realize I hadn't seen Africa.

Eclipse Saga 2: On March 7, 1970, I took a train from Connecticut into Manhattan. After a visit to the orthodontist, I went with my father to Central Park to see the solar eclipse, not quite total (95.6%). In the Sheep Meadow, the sky was filled with kites. I watched the Sun thin to a crescent in my pinhole projector. A few times I snuck glimpses at the Sun, despite the admonitions in the press. The sky darkened, but not dramatically so, and the eclipse passed. I took a train back home; that night I had a headache. I'd feared that I'd burnt my eyes out, and I'd be blinded for life.

Phrase: Melted truth on raw burger, studded with ginormous grains of salt.

Monologue: Why couldn't the angel bring guacamole? Would you know an angel if it looked you in the eye? We all may be intercessors from time to time.

Observation (on freewriting through a hurricane): The power holds, another line of squalls moves through. It's on nights such as this that the veil between worlds is thinned. A mounting rush like a night express; a whip of branches lashes the air.





A vision of animals romping cross the sky, furry, bitey, plush, pastel. The shades won't draw, however much I pull; I worry that the windows will implode.

Meteor Magic 2: I tried some eye exercises to no effect, looked to the sky (as we did all too often those days), only to see airplanes and other distant things as double. I went to my Mom's house in the Catskills for the 2001 Leonid meteor shower. I woke a few hours before dawn, when Leo was high in the sky. The display was spectacular enough that I woke my mother for her to see. I turned my head like a turret, as meteors zinged and later took the bus home. That night, while lying in bed, I felt an electric-like tingle around my eye. The next day, to my surprise, my vision was normal again. My doctor later said it happens now and then. Perhaps my head's twisting every which way freed the nerve: I think of it as a little star magic, though.

Observation: When I was young, I liked the drive better than the arrival. The opposite of "Are we there yet?"

Future Imperfect: What's the zombie apocalypse? A yeti snowpocalypse? A Nessie seapocalypse? A Borg spacepocalypse? A mad-cow mindpocalypse?





Rock-Paper-Scissors

“I hit Cracko, Cracko hits Teppo, Teppo hits me.” Bela Oxmyx, *A Piece of the Action*, *Star Trek*

Hollywood adores zombies. Zombies slurp brains. Brains hatch ideas. Ideas foment revolutions. Revolutions topple orthodoxies. Orthodoxies repress heretics. Heretics challenge dogma. Dogma demands obedience. Obedience engenders servility. Servility breeds resentment. Resentment sparks violence. Violence provokes retaliation. Retaliation fuels conflict. Conflict seeds memoirs. Memoirs inspire films. Films employ actors. Actors infest Hollywood.

* * *

Cosmic Fear: I remember as a child being terrified to hear from a friend “In 6 or 60 years an asteroid 1/8 the size of the Earth is destined to hit our planet.” That 6 years has long since passed, as have the better part of 60 years, and no such puppy plies the near-Earth skies: That’s Armageddon-size. Maybe Apophis in 2029 or 2036—that rock, the size of a football stadium, would do a number in the unlikely event that it hits, but it’s no “Ellie” (Extinction Level Event).

First Memories: Being held to a window to see a fire across the street—a mattress was burning. Wet sand sifting through my hands. The house on Roseville Road. In back a Van Gogh field, always autumn gold. A man named Leon lived across the field. A sandbox, where my brother Paul and I played. I had my own bedroom, toy trains and plastic sea creatures. When I went to sleep in summer it was still bright outside, while in winter I could see the stars.







To Billy Collins at the Bearsville Theater

(upon his recital of a poem about his dog, Dharma)

You just don't get it, man. Here in Woodstock,
if you opened your door to call your dog,
yelled "Dharma!" as loud as you could,
nobody hearing you would think it
the slightest bit odd.





The Church of the Nondescript

Nowhere is somewhere,
she'd answered
then walked onward
from where he'd stopped his van,
asked her if she'd needed help
(no thanks) and what she was doing
out there in [does nowhere even
have a middle?] the road
from Wells to Ely
through the sere infinity
a thousand-score footfalls
between one crossroads town
and the next.

Nowhere is somewhere
hissed the wind
at her sunscuffed face.
She toed the roadside
Packless, waterless,
yet rife with intention,
straddling a duality:
thin human corridor,
unforgiving land.





Nowhere is somewhere
rattled the pebbles
against the bottom of his van
as she shrank to a point
and vanished
from the mirror in which
he remained, dust-caked
and unshorn.

Nowhere is somewhere
a phrase to ripple through the years.
How rare to recognize
those seeming voids
in our lives' atlases
may be profoundly filled
with all we're not yet prepared
to see.





Technomancer

Ben didn't slay his Jabberwock—
instead he'd zapped it
with his cyberplasmotron
(science's answer to the magic wand).
He stashed its empixeled essence
in an encrypted cage,
firewalled, biometrically sealed
bound by command-line protocols.
He stored his improbable monsters
in his laptop, in their own directory
(C:\My Documents\My Bestiary).
Sometimes when booting it up,
he swore he could hear them howl.

He'd trodden the stone streets
of ancient capitols—Budapest, Prague
Istanbul, Bukhara, Xi'an, Samarkand
pursuing specters, wraiths, and shades.
He was their dominator and nemesis,
they'd never caught him unawares.





He worked the world,
enlisting mages, sorcerers, sages
drank yage with brujos in vine-draped nights.
He'd lured a dragon from its Carpathian eyrie,
a frost-worm from the caverns beneath Mt. Mjolnir,
a fire-djinn from the Sea of Liquid Sand—
pray that your caravan never strands you there.

Yeti, Sasquatch, Nessie—the cream of cryptozoology.
dybbuks, bunyips, gaunts and manticores—
he'd bested them all, empixeled them
as cyberplasmic ghosts in his machine.

He'd never expected the zero-day worm,
JackInTheBox.32B, unleashed by three Romanian teens
to co-opt computers into their spambot army.

An unpatched vulnerability let it slither
through Ben's guard, to launch buffer overloads
a cascading dismemberment of his PC's defenses.

How long he lasted,
no one was around to see—
freaked by his obsession,
his wife had long since left.
No one saw the re-emergence en masse
of all his critters into this reality.
His laptop never came to life again.
I fear that through his looking glass
he found what lurks within
the Blue Screen of Death.





Sleepwalking in Space

Chinchillas munch the enchiladas
that fill the craters of the Moon
while alligators in armadas
patrol the lunacies at noon.

Piranhas chomp the chimichangas
that line the lost canals of Mars
while anacondas writhe in congas
beneath the quesadilla stars.

Tyrannosaurs consume carnitas
aboard the killer asteroid
that's doomed to bonk the Yucatan
and send their brethren to the void.

Newts and adders lick the platters
that Earthlings know as Saturn's rings.
Cosmologists play chutes and ladders
while tangled up in superstrings.

Chinchillas barf the enchiladas
down on our hapless world below
yet somehow it's transmogrified
to fall to earth as downy snow.







*On these pages, I present a selection of my poems from recent years, ranging from the serious and reflective to the fantastical and absurd. Compiling this chapbook has refreshed my own sense of wonder at the power and versatility of language, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my work with those who may find it of interest. I call the middle section—which emerged out of a period of intensive freewriting—*Tapestry*, as it seeks to weave together a number of distinct threads. It's not quite poetry nor fiction nor journaling nor essaying, yet it's a little of all of them at once. And in a way it's a metaphor for my life, as I so often strive to reconcile seemingly disparate elements: the logical and the emotional, the spiritual and the scientific, the verbal and the inexpressible.*

Tony Hoffman, 2013





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TONY HOFFMAN

an admission, as a warning against
the value of our conclusions
ALEXIS QUINLAN

Strange Coherence
BILL CONSIDINE

Talk About Man Proof
LANCELOT RUNGE
& JOHN KROPA

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