

True story. I was at the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, Maryland the other weekend, and I ran across Stephen Notley, the guy who draws "Bob the Angry Flower." He was in the huckster room, flogging his cartoon collections, and he was wearing a bright yellow cardboard circle of flower petals around his head. He caught my eye and in a hearty voice said, "Hi! You need to buy one of my books!"

Then I saw that when he wasn't talking, he had to keep his mouth open so that his jaw stayed forward enough to keep the cardboard petals from slipping off his ears. And in that instant, I flashed back to one of the most existentially horrifying moments of my life: I was driving home from a convention with Marianne, my wife, and at 1:30 a.m. on a Sunday, we found ourselves stopped at a red light alongside a Bob's Big Boy on White Horse Pike in New Jersey. There was a Bob's Big Boy standing by the edge of the road, eight feet tall, waving mechanically to the cars with one hand.

"Is that a costume or a machine?" I asked Marianne.

"I don't know," she said. "Let me find out." She rolled the window down, and waved at the thing.

Then - here's the horrifying part - it turned toward us and waved enthusiastically back!

"Oh, my god," I gasped, "there's a human being in there!" I wanted to call the police. I wanted to rescue the poor man. But there was nothing that could be done. The economic forces that had placed him inside a cartoon suit of a smiling fat boy at one-thirty in the morning were beyond my powers to remedy.

Nobody knows how many circles of Hell there are. But a man who's been forced to wear a cartoon flower tiara stands not far upslope from the one who's been locked into a Bob's Big Boy for his sins. I was aghast. I wanted to say to him...

But then I thought, What would Bob the Angry Flower do? Bob the Angry Flower experiences all emotions at exaggerated levels. He builds giant killer robots, he deploys world-destroying lasers. He's sort of like your id with an unlimited budget. The cartoons involve irrational and surreal menaces that are resolved, usually, through abrupt changes of mood and subject.

So I smiled back largely. "Sure," I said, "if you'll autograph it to my son."