

The Meek

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“The Meek” is a post-nanotechnological fable that reworks (as, in the story, nanotech reworks the very fabric of the world) a post-nuclear piece first published when I was 19, in the Monash University Arts magazine *Ancora*.”

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And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain:

and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

The Gospel of St. Matthew, 5:1—5

I

In the childhood of the garden there is much I remember, much I regret. And much has brought me pleasure. I see in memory the great spindles floating effortless as snowflakes, bright against the sky's iron. The rust of time obscures these memories but when I see the cold clear moon I see also the ships of light.

They came once, in an angel's song, in silver fire, and they come again in the garden, the garden of my dreams.

Now bright birds swoop in a spray of tropical hues and the river whispers secrets to the lake. You could say I am happy, though the future is gone and the earth rolls lonely as a child's lost balloon. They are gone and I am glad and I am sad. The garden is a place of peace, but the flame has guttered out.

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Once I was a man in my middle years and the world was a bowl of molten, reworked slag, a lethal place where the stuff of the soil humped up into delirious fractal corals that glowed blue and crimson in the night. Now fireflies flicker, and warmth rises where it is needed. But no warmth in the soul, no fire, just the moonglow of age and a forsaken dream.

I was young and the earth was a sphere of maddened terror, for we had unleashed a beast so small we could not see it, only its accumulating handiwork, so hungry that it ate up everything except flesh, some privileged flesh. And I was mortally afraid, for I saw my death, and my wife's death. There would be no children to grieve us, no mourning after.

All the earth was blind to the stars, the sky a cloud of dull steel, the nano dust of death in the air. Then we knew fear. And remorse, for in the murder of our world we had killed ourselves.

Our choice had been blind, and at second-hand. But death accepts no excuses.

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The day the world ended was Wish Jerome's birthday, and at forty-one he was guileless as a child. He possessed that blithe detachment from any sense of danger which is the menace and the joy of innocence. Professor Aloysius Jerome—'Wish' to his wife—was a man of philosophy, a creature of gentle habits and soft words, the wonder of the Faculty. He ate toast for breakfast, dunking it in black coffee.

One eye closed, the other surveying the crumbs on her plate, his wife said: "It certainly seems there'll be a war. They'll kill us all with their damned nano toys."

Wish look sadly out the window, past the ruffled curtains. The morning was bright with the promise of

spring.

“‘To Carthage I came’,” he said, dunking toast, “‘where there sang all around my ears a cauldron of unholy hates.’”

“St Augustine of Hippo, slightly trampled,” he told his wife’s eyebrows a moment later. “I prefer Pelagius. Perhaps a twenty-one gun salute, but hardly an ecophagic war for my birthday, Beth.”

Domesticity and Wish’s peculiarly unassuming goodness had made them a happy marriage. Beth Jerome, fair, fey, fertile of spirit and barren of womb, had founded an empathy between them twenty years before, from the first day they met. Empathy had grown into love, if not passion. The warm sun brought her little of the wash of peace that swept around her husband. On the table at her elbow a conservative daily screamed headlines about military grade nanotechnology.

“I refuse to educate the minds of the young on such a glorious day.” Wish finished his toast and stretched luxuriously. “We shall take the car and drive as far from this warren as we can, and we shall eat our food beside an honest-to-goodness fire, and we shall forget the madmen and their war posturing.”

Beth rose and put their dishes in the washer. “It is absurd,” she said, peeved. “Still they insist on adding foaming agents to these detergents. What fools they must take us for.” She shut the door and set the dial. “An excellent suggestion, darling. Better call first and see if Tod or Muriel can take your classes.”

She wet a dish-cloth and wiped the crumbs off the table, and Wish leaned back on two legs of his chair and fired up a joint. The sun was a pool of warmth, and he soaked in the contentment of the joy of life.

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For a million years and more Homo sapiens fought on equal terms with the world, fought the worst the world could throw at the species. Today I lie in the balm of an eternal afternoon, half-asleep, and the world sleeps with me. The flowers bloom and the leaves fall and bud anew, but humanity lies in the calm of Indian summer, and there is no blast of wind. I recall the days when men were violent and men were cruel, yes, and women, too; dimly, but there it is, taunting me. And the ships from the stars, falling from the skies like manna, call to me from the depths of time and their call is lost in the breeze. Too late, too late.

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The sky was egg-shell blue, fragile, edged with cottonwool clouds. The little valley was a green bowl sweeping up to meet the luminous blue dome halfway between heaven and earth. Why should it be a sartorial disaster to wear blue and green together, Wish Jerome asked himself dreamily, when nature gets away with it to such good effect? He finished chewing a greasy chop, licked his fingers, settled back happily into the grass. Something with many legs examined his bare arm, and sleepily he flicked it off. Beth put the tops back on the jars, folded the picnic cloth and placed it in the basket. She yawned; the day was warm without being hot, weather for wandering hand in hand beside a creek, or whispering, or snoozing. She shook her blond hair in the sun and sat down beside her husband.

Wish put his arm around her. A screen came across the sky, like a filigree of diamonds and sapphires, fell everywhere, drifting on the wind, like glittery snow. A tall old tree on the hill turned brown and sagged, and burst explosively into leaping yellow ribbons of structure. Heat rose from the valley as a trillion small machines opened up molecules, releasing energy, twisting it to their mad purpose. Wish and Beth alike screamed. There was no sound beyond the crackle of crystalline growth. Sixty kilometers away a city melted into shapes from migraine: battlements, turrets, fortifications, the primordial geometries of the unconscious.

They did not see the mushroom of hot white light that tried to burn away the enemy infestation. They were the lucky ones, Beth and Wish, two of the thousand or so who escaped the holocaust of the bomb that wiped away three million human lives. In other cities, other bombs charred flesh, and steel girders twisted into melted toffee; there were the few others who got clear.

The man and the woman lay in each another's arms while the heat flared and went away, and then they ran for the cave in the hill and huddled in it, and Beth cried and cried and cried like a child, and they lived.

* * * *

They found each other, the survivors, gradually, but they had no comfort to share, no hope. The brave fought, the cowards acquiesced in the diamond and iron cloud; death seeped down on the brave and the cowards through the porous fog. They suffered appallingly, the last stragglers, the few bleak children; they grew gaunt and ill, and sores festered in their bodies. And even those who fought knew it was bitter, meaningless, for though they should live a few months more there was no future.

Dispossessed like the rest, Wish and Beth wandered the desolate, remade landscape in the horror humans had unleashed. They ate rubbish and what they could find unmolested in cans, and drank bottled water that the nano weapons whimsically left untouched, and slept when they could between their nightmares, and prayed, and when the day came at last that the fog opened in a drift of silver light and the ships brought their salvation, there was no rejoicing.

Suffering had drained them utterly. The survivors, the quick and the vulgar and the brave, all of them together went to the ships. On the wrecked plain, amid the glassy crevices and turrets that once had been green with living things and busy with people, the spindles stood like awesome mirrors. Their polished hulls gleamed back the diamond speckled sky, and the survivors saw themselves reflected in a leap of light that hid no item of their degradation.

Wish Jerome was the first to laugh.

He stood in front of the sweeping edge of a star spindle and saw himself in the burnished gloss. He looked at the burned eyebrows, the singed patchy hair, the emaciated scarecrow frame under the scraps of clothing.

“The wisdom of the ages,” he said, without animosity. “What a piece of work!” Bitterness was alien to Wish. He viewed the ravaged spectacle of philosophical man with amusement.

Beth crept up beside him, from the crowd of skeletons, like a child to a protecting arm. Their roles were reversed; this was a strangeness only innocence might face with equanimity.

Wish laughed again, and the small crowd shuffled noisily, somehow relieved, and through their muttering a voice spoke to them. Meaning echoed without words in their minds. The people of the ships spoke.

“We heard the cry of death from your world,” the voice told them. “It was a shout of lamentation and grief that crossed the void in the moment your world died. We took it for the cry of one murdered, and find instead that you brought this blight upon yourselves.”

In the silence, in the awful reproach, Wish looked across the land where life had come with expectation four billion years before and had perished in suicide. The fog arched overhead, an iron-grey pall glistening with points of light, a looming covenant of death. The voice spoke only the truth, and it was beyond human power to redeem their crime. He clenched his hands. Beyond the ships, the ground curled and shifted in harsh, sluggish peristalses.

“It is not within our power to remake your Earth. The biosphere is slain by your small stupid machines. We can resurrect only a small part of it. We will exact a payment, but some of your world at least will be now, again, green and fresh.”

The last humans stirred then, mindless life crying for a chance to live again.

“Yes!” cried humanity, cried life. The tattered group passed instantly beyond identity in its paroxysm.

“Yes!”

“We will meet your fee, whatever it is.”

“Only let us live again!”

Silence returned to the plain, save for a whining wind that carried insanely creative dust across the wasteland. A vision came into the minds of the survivors: the sea of darkness, an ocean of blackness blazing with the light of stars. The spindles hung there, another kind of shining dust, life and consciousness, consumed in a battle with those from the shores of the galaxy, or some folded, deeper place.

“They are murderous and beyond our comprehension,” said the voice. “They have come from the places between the islands of stars, come with a blind, unreasoning hatred which cannot be turned aside except by lethal force. We had thought your world a victim of their murder. Instead, we find something worse, a world that has taken its own life. It is too late to offer our aid, but at least we can build you sanctuary, if, in return, some of your number will come with us, to fight.”

“To fight?” A woman screamed in rage; her face ran with weeping wounds. “Is all life so stupid? Do you condemn us as murderers of our planet and then ask us to repeat the madness? No, we will not fight. Go away and let us die in our shame and folly.”

“It is for each of you separately to make this choice,” the voice said. “Understand this: they attack without quarter. And they are winning.”

The price of life is death, Beth told herself, pressed against her husband’s arm. Those who went from among this pitiful number surely would not return.

“Only some among you will suit our purpose,” the voice explained. “The predators, the fighters. They must come with us. The others will remain, and we will restore to them a corner of their world. Come, you must decide. The stars are dying in our galaxy.”

It was beyond most of them, this vision of a war between gods. Not gods, though, Wish Jerome told himself. Merely life, exerted in an unconscionable violence to safeguard its own seed.

Fear blew across the group, chilling as the wind, but their decision, too, rose like a wind, beyond fear.

High above them, an opening dilated in the silver hull. The last of humanity went forward for their testing.

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That was the way of it, sings memory, here in the dusk. They took our soul and gave us the comfort of emortality amid a new-built Xanadu. The stars came clear in the dark of an unclouded sky. We can look into the black night and know that somewhere out there the spindles are warring against an enemy too terrible for understanding or compassion. And our soul is with them, sweating, slaving in the agony of death and victory. We spin on, we and our quiet garden, in an anesthesia of contentment.

I see a hawk soaring on a high wave of song. His cry hangs in the air, and his lofty feathered body. Now he stoops, falls like a projectile, opens his wings, stills magically, climbs the sky again. It is cozy here, in the warmth of the sun. I seem, though, to remember a word from the past, from the repeated past. Why do I feel a stir of horror as I gaze upon my imaging hands? Did my innocence save me then? Perhaps, but I am innocent no longer. Our life will stretch on, for our bargain is sealed, and the sun is warm on our peace.

Still, the horror remains, as the memory remains, that the meek have inherited the earth.