

SON OF MAN

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Robert Silverberg



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For it was not to Angels that God subjected the world to come,
of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere,
“What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man,
that thou carest for him?”

—Hebrews 2:6

for

Bill Rotsler

Paul Turner

fellow voyagers

Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken:

And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

—Matthew 24:29–30

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Shrink not from blasphemy—'twill pass for wit.

—Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*

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We know what we are, but know not what we may be.

—*Hamlet*, IV, v, 43



HE WAKES. Beneath him the black earth is cool and moist. He lies on his back in a field of scarlet grass; a soft gust of wind comes by, ruffling the blades, and they melt into a stream of blood. The sky is iron-blue, an intensely transparent color that briefly sets up a desperate clamor in his skull. He finds the sun: low in the heavens, larger than it ought to be, looking somewhat pale and vulnerable, perhaps flattened at top and bottom. Pearly mists rise from the land and swirl sunward, making vortices of blue and green and red lacings as they climb. A cushion of silence presses against him. He feels lost. He sees no cities, no scars of man's presence anywhere in this meadow, on those hills, beyond that valley. Slowly he lifts himself to his feet and stands facing the sun.

His body is bare. He touches it, discovering his skin. With quiet curiosity he examines his hand, spread out below his chin against the dark hairy mat on his chest. How strange the fingers are: ridged at the joints, lightly tufted with hair on the flat places, two knuckles skinned a bit, the nails in need of a trimming. It is as though he has never seen his hand before. He lets the hand slip slowly down his body, pausing to tap the fingertips into the drum of hard muscle at his belly, then to study the faint puckered line of his appendectomy. The hand goes lower and he finds his genitals. Frowning, he cups his testicles, lifting them slightly, perhaps weighing them. He touches his penis, first the shaft, then the rim of soft pink flesh at the head,

finally the head itself. It seems odd to have such an intricate device attached to his body. He inspects his legs. There is a broad bruise, purple and yellow, on his left thigh. Hair grows on his insteps. His toes are unfamiliar to him. He wriggles them. He digs them into the soil. He flexes his knees. He shrugs his shoulders. He plants his feet far apart. He makes water. He looks straight at the sun, and it is a surprisingly long time before his eyes begin to throb. When he looks away, he sees the sun behind his eyeballs, embedded in the front of his brain, and he feels less lonely for having it in there.

“Hello!” he calls. “Hey! You! Me! Us! Who?”

Where is Wichita? Where is Toronto? Where is Dubuque? Where is Syosset? Where is São Paulo? Where is La Jolla? Where is Bridgeport? Where is McMurdo Sound? Where is Ellenville? Where is Mankato? Where is Morpeth? Where is Georgetown? Where is St. Louis? Where is Mobile? Where is Walla Walla? Where is Galveston? Where is Brooklyn? Where is Copenhagen?

“Hello? Hey? You? Me? Us? Who!”

To his left are five rounded hills covered by black glossy vegetation. To his right the field of scarlet grass expands into a choking plain that streams toward the horizon. In front of him the ground dips gently to form a valley that is something more than a ravine but something less than a canyon. He recognizes no trees. Their shapes are unfamiliar; many have swollen, greasy brown trunks, limbless and plump, from which cascades of fleshy leaves dangle like festoons of shiny white and yellow beads. Behind him, smothered in long and inexplicable shadows, lies a maze of formless hummocks and pits, over which grow rank, sandy-colored little plants with woody stems.

He goes forward into the valley.

Now he sees his first sign of animal life. Out of a stubby tree he startles a sort of bird that catapults straight into the air, hovers, circles back more calmly to take stock of him. They survey one another. The bird is hawk-sized, dark-bodied, with a pinched ungenerous face, cool green eyes, thin lips closely clamped. Its fire-hued wings are ribbed and gauzy and from its hindquarters there trails a wedge-shaped filmy tail, edged with pink ribbony filaments streaming in the wind. Passing over him, the bird dungs him with a dozen shining green pellets that land artfully to enclose him in a geomet-

rical figure. Hesitantly he stoops to touch the nearest pellet. It sizzles; he hears it hissing; but when he puts his finger to it, he feels neither texture nor warmth. He flicks it aside. The bird caws at him.

“I am Hanmer’s,” says the bird.

“Why are you hostile? How have I harmed you?”

“I am not hostile. I take no responsibilities. I place no blames.”

“You bombed me.”

“It established a relationship,” says the bird, and flies off. “I am Hanmer’s,” it calls again, from a distance. He studies the creature until it is gone. The sun slowly moves toward the hills. The sky seems slick and lacquered now. His tongue is papery. He continues toward the valley. He becomes aware that a creek flows through the valley, green water, burnished sun-shimmered surface, trembling shrubs sprouting on the bank. He goes to it, thinking that the sharp sensation of water against his skin will awaken him, for now he is weary of this dream; it has somehow taken on an ugly and implausible tone.

He kneels beside the creek. It is unexpectedly deep. Within its rushing crystal depths he sees fishes, swept tempestuously along, driven by an irresistible current. They are slender creatures with large, wistful gray eyes, deep-cut toothy mouths, sleek flattened fins. Victims. He smiles at them. Cautiously he puts his left arm into the flow up to the elbow. The moment of contact is electric and stunning. He pulls his arm back and claps his hands over his face, and weeps as an uncontrollable surge of fiery sadness cuts through him. He mourns man and all his works. In his mind there churns an image of the world of man in gaudy complexity: buildings and vehicles and roads and shops and lawns and oily puddles and crumpled papers and blinking signs. He sees men and women in close-fitting clothing, with tight shoes and fabric binding their breasts and loins. That world is lost and he mourns it. He hears the roar of rockets and the screech of brakes. He hears the throb of music. He admires sunlight’s glint on lofty windows. He mourns. Cold tears sting his cheeks and trickle across his lips. Are the old blossoms gone? Are the old weeds gone? Are the old cities gone? Friends and family? Stress and strain? Cathedral bells, the redness of wine on the tongue, candles, turnips, cats, cactus? With a little defeated sigh he tumbles forward and lets himself fall into the creek. He is carried swiftly downstream.

For some minutes he refuses to offer resistance. Then, quickly, he extends his body and seizes a submerged boulder. Clinging to it, he crawls downward until his face rests just above the pebbled bottom of the stream, and he hangs there a long moment, acclimating himself to his altered surroundings. When his breath is finally exhausted, he erupts surfaceward and scrambles onto the bank. He lies face-down a short while. He stands. He touches himself.

The tingling waters have changed him slightly. His body hair is gone and his skin is smooth and pale and new, like the hide of an infant whale. His left thigh no longer is bruised. His knuckles are whole. He cannot find the scar of his appendectomy. His penis looks strange to him, and after a moment's contemplation he realizes in awe that he has been decircumcised. Hastily he pushes a thumb into his navel; it is still there. He laughs. Now he realizes that night has come while he was in the water. The sun's last limb slips from view, and instantly darkness spreads out over the sky. There is no moon. The stars pop into view, announcing themselves with high pinging tones, singing, I am blue, I am red, I am golden, I am white. Where is Orion? Where is the Dipper? Where is the Goat?

The shrubs of the valley emit a coarse leathery glow. The soil stirs and quivers and splits at the surface, and from a thousand tiny craters glide night-crawling creatures, long and liquid and silvery, emerging from hidden burrows and slithering amiably toward the meadow. They part as they approach him, leaving him as an island in the midst of their gleaming myriads. He hears furry whispering sounds from them but detects no meaning.

There is a feathery flap and two flying creatures descend, unlike the other one; these have heavy, drooping, baggy black bodies ringed by tufts of coarse fur, and angular wings mounted on a jutting knobby breastbone. They are as big as geese. Methodically they pursue the nightcrawlers, sucking them up in flexible puckering bills and shortly excreting them, apparently unharmed. Their appetites are insatiable. He draws back, offended, when they give him a sour glare.

Something bulky and dark clatters across the stream and disappears before he can see it properly. From the sky comes raucous laughter. The scent of elegant creamy flowers drifts from the creek, decays into saltiness, and departs. The air grows chill. He huddles. A light rain comes. He studies the

troublesome constellations and finds them altogether strange. In the distance music unfolds from the night. The tones swell and diminish and crease again in an easy trembling throb, and he finds he can seize them and shape melodies to suit himself: he carves a lively tootling horn-call, a dirge, a minuet. Small animals scramble by. Have toads perished? Are mice extinct? Where are lemurs? Where are moles? Yet he knows he can come to love these new beasts. The boundless fertility of evolution, revealing itself to him in bright bursts of abundance, makes him joyful, and he turns the music into a hymn of praise. Whatever is, is good. Out of the plasticity of the raw tones he manufactures the drums and trumpets of a *Te Deum*. Against this in sudden bleak counterpoint come thumping footsteps, and he is no longer alone, for three large creatures emerge and approach. The dream is somber now. What things are these, so bestial, so foul, so malevolent? Upright, bipedal, great splayed toes, huge shaggy hams, sagging bellies, massive chests. Taller than he is. The stink of decay precedes them. Cruel faces, nevertheless almost human, glistening eyes; hooked noses, wide gummy mouths, thin gray beards sticky with muck. They shuffle awkwardly along, knees flexed, bodies canted forward at the waist, colossal upright goats modeled loosely after men. Wherever they tread, bristly weeds spring up instantly, giving off fishy odors. Their skins are paper-white and wrinkled, hanging loosely from the powerful muscles and the thick underflesh; little tufted blisters pockmark them everywhere. As they clump forward they nod, snort, snuffle, and exchange blurred murmured comments. They pay no attention to him. He watches them pass by. What are these dismal things? He fears that they are the supreme race of the era, the dominant species, the successors to man, perhaps even the descendants of man, and the thought so squeezes and grinds him that he drops to the ground, rolling over and over in agony, crushing the gliding nightcrawlers that still stream past. He hammers his palms against the earth. He clutches the malign weeds that have newly sprouted, and rips them from the soil. He presses his forehead against a flat rock. He vomits, yielding nothing. He clasps hands in terror to his loins. Have these beings inherited the world? He imagines a congregation of them kneeling on their own turds. He visualizes them grunting outside the Taj Mahal in the full moon. He sees them clambering over the Pyramids,

dropping spittle on Raphaels and Veroneses, fracturing Mozart with their snorts and belches. He sobs. He bites the earth. He prays for morning. In his anguish his sex stiffens, and he seizes it, and, gasping, spills his seed. He lies on his back and searches for the moon, but there is still no moon, and the stars are unfamiliar. The music returns. He has lost the power to shape it. He hears the clang and clatter of metal rods and the shriek of strained membranes. Desperately, grimly, he sings against it, shouting into the darkness, covering the raucous noise with a lamination of ordered sound, and in this way he passes the night, sleepless, uncomforted.