

TO WALK WITH GIANTS:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION AND POETRY

A Thesis
by
REYNALDO A. VALDEZ III

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

December 2008

Major Subject: English

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Approved by:

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
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ABSTRACT

To Walk With Giants:

A Collection of Short Fiction and Poetry. (December 2008)

Reynaldo A. Valdez III, B.A., William Marsh Rice University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Janet McCann

My thesis is a collection of my own original poetry and short fiction written as a kind of response to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." Instead of having Whitman continue to represent me through his poem, I wish to represent myself through my own poetry. I attempted to create a new kind of fiction and poetry from the perspective of a Hispanic who has less of a tie to Mexico or the homeland and more of the cultural influences of the United States. Instead of focusing on differences between myself and the dominant culture, I attempted to discuss in chapter II my philosophy concerning subjects such as; war, religion, time and space, and society. In chapter III, I tried to reconcile various cultural mythologies as the United States does not have a single shared mythology. And in chapter IV I gave my own predictions of the future based on personal observation. My twofold goal of this collection was to one, demonstrate that Hispanic writers are capable of more than lamenting their shared past. And two, to challenge the notion that anything besides a disenfranchisement narrative is "inauthentic" and renders me a poor writer of Hispanic literature. I believe it is up to the reader to decide whether I have accomplished these goals.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my mother and father for teaching me the importance of education and hard work that got me where I am today, to my sister and brother-in-law who always supported me even in my darkest hours, and their children who I hope will one day consider my thesis entertaining reading.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Janet McCann, and my committee members, Juan Alonzo, and Jose Villalobos, for their guidance and support throughout the course of composing my thesis.

Thanks also go to my friends and colleagues and the department faculty and staff at Texas A&M University for their influence and support as I went through the thesis process. Also thanks to the friends, family, and teachers who influenced me throughout my life from elementary school through college. Without my experiences with them, none of these stories or poems would even be possible.

Finally, thanks to my mother, father, sister, and brother for their encouragement, patience, and love.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Why am I doing this, and why am I so angry at Whitman? It was his audacity, his presumption, but mostly, perhaps it was jealousy. Not jealousy that Whitman was the great talent he purported to be (that is debatable), but because he claimed the title of "The American Shakespeare" before anyone else could. Emerson described what he believed to be the characteristics of the American Shakespeare.

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe... Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await... We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer... Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rouges, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. (Emerson 235)

This thesis follows the style of the *MLA Handbook*.

Emerson wrote these lines in his essay on "The Poet." In this essay, Emerson outlines what he believes a poet is and should be. He also laments the fact that there was no "American Bard" to compare to the likes of Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, or Homer. While delivering a lecture on "The Poet" in 1842, a young Walt Whitman, then a reporter, heard Emerson's lament and took it to heart. History doesn't record if it was a lightning bolt type of moment, if he took a solemn vow that day, or if he just came to a quiet resolution in his mind, but Whitman decided to become that poet of which Emerson spoke. Where Shakespeare said some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have it thrust upon them (Shakespeare 344), Whitman *decided* he would be great. What presumption, what hubris I say, no man knows his own destiny and anyone who thinks differently is a dangerous fool! The audacity to "speak" for America, to be the voice for America, to crown yourself the new American Bard is staggering. And Whitman does just that in his seminal work "Song of Myself." In his poem, Whitman claims to speak for America, all of America.

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
 Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
 One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the largest
 the same,
 A Southerner soon as a Northerner...
 I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul...
 I am the poet of the woman same as the man,
 And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man...

Through me many long dumb voices,
 Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
 Voices of the diseased and despairing and of thieves and dwarves,
 (Whitman 46)

Who gave Whitman authority? Who said that Whitman would be the one to speak for all of us? Was it Emerson? Whitman describes the slave and the Indian, the woman, the thief, the soldier, the President, the prostitute, and the dwarf. Was he ever any of these things? This is Orientalism applied to America. Orientalism is the study of Eastern societies, cultures, languages, and peoples at the hands of Westerners and shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism. Edward Said said that the Orientalists thought they knew Islam better than Muslims and took it upon themselves to tell the world what it was to worship Allah (Said 97). The dominant and imperial culture, the privileged culture, decides what it is like to be the weaker culture and tells the world because the weaker culture is incapable.

Whitman tells women that it is as great to be a woman as to be a man while struggles for women's suffrage have been going on as early as 1836. Perhaps it is not as great to be a woman, at least not where voting is concerned. Uncle Walt, oh sweaty toothed mad-man, you wrote about the Texas rangers as heroes when they would shoot unarmed Mexicans in the back and drop a rusty old revolver on them to claim they died in a gun battle (Paredes 24). But what do you believe, "Song of Myself" or "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez" Who do you believe, the American Shakespeare or the old Mestizo who sings for his supper?

Whitman claimed he was divine and that "I make holy whatever I touch." Does that mean he may profane whatever he touches as well? If so then I am of the worthless mongrel races that inhabited the land (Mercury 149) before Whitman's brood arrived to tell us about ourselves. White male hegemony is what I am attempting to address. Hegemony over ethnic minorities, over Jews, Muslims, over women, homosexuals, all wrapped up in a poem called "Song of Myself." For too long has Whitman, by virtue of his ethnicity, his background, and his own ego laid claim to a crown that should not be bestowed by birthright but by proof of time and history, and possibly never bestowed at all.

Well, I am taking the power back. I do not give Whitman authority over me any longer. I will make myself a god. Like the ancient gods of Mexico and the United States, of America. I will sing the songs that create worlds, tell the story of Death and her many children; I will rail against tyranny and prophesy the future. And therein lies the rub, the risk of falling into the same sort of Imperial trap that Whitman is in. I may not be the new Bard of America. Perhaps I cannot speak with the tongues of all the disenfranchised. But, I have no privilege to my birth, not the son of King nor President, not rich nor influential. Only my words give me strength, so I will not speak for the others who are my brothers and sisters, I will speak with them and empathize with them. I will never presume to know them but try and understand them, the disenfranchised that Whitman silenced with a poem. I will speak my words, my dreams, my hopes; I will share my fears and predictions, I will give my future as well as my past. I am taking the power away from Whitman, and giving it back to me, to them, to our America, to us.

And the reader must decide if I am another Whitman, attempting to speak for those I do not truly understand.

How I will do this is trickier. Like I said, I am walking a fine line between my own voice and becoming an Imperial Orientalist (Americanist?) like Whitman¹. I stand opposed to certain conventions of creative writing. My works are not about race, but race has a lot to do with them. White Anglo Saxon Protestant men can write about death, about love, about nature, philosophy, religion, politics, the environment; they can write about the future, they can write about the past, the spirit of mankind, white men can write about hypotheticals; in essence they can write about the ethereal possibilities of the universe.

But, this freedom has largely been denied the Hispanic writer, the Black writer, the Asian, woman, homosexual, Muslim, etc. We are allowed to write things about us, about our lives, our struggle, but mostly about our difference. To write about anything not directly related to our ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion (all the things that make us different) is to be classified as inauthentic. I don't know if this is a result of the public's interests regarding minority writers or a marketing decision made by publishing houses. Either way, I maintain that minority (especially Hispanic) writers have been pigeon-holed into this sort of retro-pastiche mode of disenfranchisement writing, which while important, renders us impotent to tackle subjects beyond our shared heritage. For example, when studying Hispanic writers, one may read *The House on*

¹ To any Whitman fans out there, I do sincerely apologize. I do enjoy his later works such as his *Drum Taps* poems. It was just the presumption and audacity of his "Song of Myself" that really got to me. Let me tell you, back when we used to do Poetry Slam, if a poet spent three minutes telling you how awesome they were, they got canned quick. Whitman would not have made it past the first round.

Mango Street, which is about growing up in a Hispanic neighborhood. Or, you can read the *Squatter and the Don*, about displaced Hispanic cattle ranchers. You can also read *Caballero*, *The New World Border*, *So Far From God*, and *George Washington Gomez*, all about what it's like growing up Hispanic, how hard it is being Hispanic, and the difference between Hispanics and the Anglo race.

And, these are important works. Don't believe that they are not an important step in representation, in letting people know that there is another life out there within these United States and that the concerns are sometimes different. We went from a culture with no voice to at least having a few Hispanic writers name's on the lips of the everyday consumer. But that is just the first step.

Minority writers are capable of much more than lamenting their shared past and I hope to demonstrate that as the first goal set forth in this collection. Here you will find some stories about the past, or of hardship, as in any collection of poetry and prose from Shakespeare to Keats to Whitman. But, the focus is not on the lament, rather the narrative serves as backdrop for the commentary. I have encompassed here my views on Life, the Universe, and Everything (Adams 311)²! Not only my struggle growing up on the "wrong side" of the tracks.

The second goal of this collection challenges this very notion of growing up on the wrong side of the tracks. I grew up in the suburbs. I had a mother and father who were both educated and both worked. I had a sister who went to college before me. I had a car (albeit a used car) when I was sixteen. My best friends were black and white (or

² A nod to Douglas Adams, who, in his novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, sets out to discover the ultimate answer to the questions of Life, The Universe and Everything.

Anglo and African American if you prefer). I ate macaroni and cheese, watched Japanese Anime, and listened to German Industrial rock music. Conventional wisdom would tell you that I had nothing to say, that I could not be a great Hispanic writer. The idea that I had no authentic experience limits me in my writing credibility.

But, why? I spent my life reading and learning. I absorbed the culture around me, listening, wondering, and questioning. From each unique perspective around me I drew inspiration and curiosity and it spawned a new way of looking at things which is itself uniquely American. Only here could I have the diversity, resources, and backgrounds to create my style and vision, much in the same way that Jazz could only have been created in America. If I am writing for anyone, it is for those confused mutts and half breeds (maybe we could call them hybrids in this new environmentally friendly world), second and third generation-ers, and children who only know this place, this country, and are denounced for their lack of "authentic" experience. We are the new generation beyond X and we are fighting for our place in this era. I am writing in the spirit of this new America. I am not a child of Mexico, but I am a son of San Antonio. They called me the San Antonio Samurai because I ate Spanish rice with chopsticks. Don't call me a Pocho³ because I am authentic me. Never underestimate me, never doubt me, don't tell me I can't do something, and don't ever try to put me in a box.

Benjamin Franklin once said on the founding of the United States, "We are a new nationality, we require a new nation." Yeats and Eliot questioned the search for ancestral

³ Pocho, though its origin and meaning is debated, has at times meant someone inauthentic. Usually a white man attempting to seem Hispanic by learning and speaking Spanish but also an American born Hispanic person who is unfamiliar with their culture yet tries to claim it anyway.

knowledge, "Why may not old men be mad?" and "Tell me not of the wisdom of old men, tell me only of their folly." We require a new poetry, even different from the "Modernists" Yeats and Eliot. My people require a new poetry, my new nationality, Americans, born in America who know only America. Not England or China, Mexico, India, Africa, The Soviet Union, Istanbul, Constantinople, Euraisa, Europa, or the Greater City States of Rome. We, who are considered strangers in our own land though we sprouted from its fields, but more often like weeds, tenacious and indefatigable, from cracks in its pavement. And, instead of ignoring the wisdom of my elders, I will absorb it, and use it to make me strong. If I see farther than Whitman, Franklin, Yeats, and Eliot, it is because I have stood upon the shoulders of giants. All the nations of the world and time immemorial shall be my inkpot and my words will weave you a tapestry so large that I will hang it upon the stars and it will blot out the night.

Neo, the protagonist and John Everyman of the futuristic dystopia that was the first Matrix movie said, "I don't know the future. I didn't come here to tell you how this is going to end. I came here to tell you how it's going to begin... Where we go from there is a choice I leave to you" (Reeves). I am showing you the beginning, here is the universe according to Rey. What you do and where you go from there, is up to you.

CHAPTER II

CREATING PHILOSOPHY

The Day We Were No Longer Afraid

I was wearing JNCO's. You may remember them. They were the popular brand of pants when I was in middle and high school. Skaters liked them because they were supposedly able to fit two skateboards in the legs and still look natural enough to walk out of a store without paying. I wore them because they came in sizes big enough for my fat ass. They were black like my t-shirt. But there I was, six foot huge, clad all in black with a spiked bracelet on one wrist and steel toed boots on my feet. I would fit right in. It was my first rock concert after all.

Okay, it wasn't technically my first rock concert. I had gone to see REM with my sister two years previously. This was different though. This tour was sponsored by alcohol. It was the Jagermeister JagerMusic tour which was a very big deal when you are like 17 years old and drinking is still a mysterious taboo reserved for adults and teenagers who were cooler than you. Sunset Station in San Antonio and I wasn't going with my sister this time. I was going because it was my friend Adam's birthday and he invited me and two friends in lieu of having a party. They had a few no name bands like 40 Below Summer and Ill Nino but the big headliner that evening was going to be Drowning Pool. This was hard rock and we were going down all by ourselves. We were

bad-asses and the world was going to know it. Of course we had our parent's permission, four cell phones between us, and we had to be home by 1 am.

It was Adam, me, his friend Chris, and our friend Ceci. We all tried our best to look the part. Ceci was wearing a black tank top and the black wristbands she wore during drum-line practice. They reminded me of furry little gauntlets. Adam was wearing the shirt from the Pledge of Allegiance tour which ironically featured Rammstein, a German industrial band. I was supposed to go to that concert with him but was unable due to an unforeseen accident where I twisted my ankle at math camp. Don't ask. Chris had a cowboy hat because he always wore a cowboy hat. For the occasion he did choose a black cowboy hat at least. We all piled into Adam's red Ford pickup truck with the two jump seats behind the front bench seat and headed out for Sunset Station.

Now when we got there, there was a palpable excitement in the air, a hum, a buzz, an electricity if you will (or even if you won't). For once my intimidating air would simply brand me as a fellow music appreciator. Some of the guys here were huge with more metal in their face than some of today's more flamboyant hip hop stars. Eyebrow rings, tongue studs, gauges in the ears were the order of the day. Black t-shirts, spiked collars, Doc Martins, these guys were serious and it showed. The show crew was just gearing up. The geeky AV guys were doing a sound check and the reverb made us all cringe. We secured a spot near the front, close to the stage. Little did we know that soon the rest of the crowd would be joining us.

With the first chord I was slammed forward. 40 Below Summer was playing some song I neither cared about nor liked that much. What I did care about was trying to

avoid being toppled over the rail into the pit area in front of the stage. Sometimes they set up a railing that separates the stage from the crowd by a few feet. They don't do it at every concert but they did that night. This is mostly to protect the band from whackos and crazies who try to bum rush the stage. Also, if it looks like things are going sour, some of the more burly security guards position themselves inside that little pit area to remind the crowd who was in charge. Well, with the combined weight of the rest of the crowd who absolutely needed to be as close to the band as possible, I was dangerously close to falling into the pit. The security guard moved forward to warn me "One time and one time only" that I was to move back or he would force me back. I attempted to explain to him that I would love to move back if the 200 pound gorilla who was behind me would kindly remove his girlfriend's boots from my back (she was on his shoulders and was going to lose her balance if she didn't use me for leverage). But, due to the volume of the amplifier being turned up to eleven, the security guard mistook my explanation as me saying something hurtful about his mother. As I had exceeded my "One" warning the security guard took that opportunity to shove me bodily backwards into the crowd.

Separated from my friends as I was, I was trying to locate them when I caught a Doc Martin in the back of my head, somebody was crowd surfing. For anyone unfamiliar with the practice, crowd surfing evolved from stage diving. Someone jumps off the stage and lands on top of the crowd being supported by the outstretched arms of the concert goers. Crowd surfing involves what happens after one has dived off the stage. As in life, nobody is going to support you forever so what do they do? That's

right; they make you someone else's problem. People on top of the crowd are passed from hand to hand like a millipede on its back shifting you from the front to the back of the crowd. Well, on his journey towards the rear of the amphitheater this guy's boot hit me in the back of the head.

I was hot, sweaty, had lost my friends, was being pushed by security, kicked in the head, and to top it all off the music was bad. I decided I hated 40 Below Summer. I went to where they were selling water and found my friends. They were hot too. But there was a problem. Not expecting such a rush on water the event staff had not stocked enough bottles. Not being able to purchase alcohol posed a problem for us. We couldn't get anything to drink. For awhile the servers were giving out cups of melted ice water from the big tubs where the beer bottles were floating. But, the officials put a stop to that because of health issues. The dirty beer bottles were in there, servers put their hands in there to get the beer bottles, anything could fall in there because they were uncovered, mean spirited people could spit in there, they gave us any number of examples as to why they couldn't give us water. We were pissed. We decided to stay a little bit longer to hear Drowning Pool and then leave. Unfortunately for us they were the last act.

We waded back into the crowd. Ill Nino was going on next and they launched into a raucous performance of their hit single. I actually kind of liked that song and was getting into it when suddenly I was pushed. And where did I end up? I landed smack in the middle of the mosh pit. Again, for anyone who is not familiar with the vernacular of my generation, a mosh pit is the equivalent of the dance floor. At a rock concert there really isn't enough room to dance. It is usually wall to wall flesh and maybe you move

your head up and down to the beat. A mosh pit encompasses a need to move and react to the music similar to dancing albeit in a more violent manner. From the outside it looks pretty scary. A hole opens up on the floor and a bunch of guys shove each other around the circle. It looks like a riot gone out of control; like football practice from Hell. Or at least that's what I thought until that day.

I was in the middle of the pit, surrounded, then a shoulder check, I stumbled to the left into a wall of people who shoved me back into the pit. I was rocked from side to side, it was too fast for me to think or react. As I careened like a car out of control my ricochets caused other guys to go spinning off in different directions, a nightmare game of pinball. And then I fell. I hit the ground hard landing on my shoulder and I shut my eyes awaiting the inevitable raining down of boots and heels. But, it never came. I opened my eyes and looked up to see this guy, he looked like some kind of skin head; huge muscles, tattoos, bald of course, I would hate to meet him in a dark alley. He held back the tide, the rippling mass of bodies and boots and fists and legs. Then he offered me his hand to help me up. I was covered in sweat and beer and whatever else was on the floor. I had bruises running up and down the side of my body. And, in that moment, I felt a brotherhood I had never felt before. When I was on my feet the guy shoved me again and I was back in the pit. There was no malice in his shove. I realized he was just having fun. This was a release. All of us were covered in sweat and brine and gross. All of us had jobs and school and pricks that we had to work with or work for. But here, we were animals. We were recalling something primal in our natures, a scream, a roar, when we were another species entirely and ran the forests wild. At least that's how I felt and

the look on the other people's faces told me they felt the same. We moved in rhythm, an ebb and flow. We were no longer in control of our bodies, we collided, we felt pain and joy in each collision, and the music played on.

I grabbed Adam, "You have to try this," I yelled over the roar of the music and the combined guttural exhalation of this mass of humanity and I threw him into the pit. He tried to retort but was carried away in this human sea before he could. Time passed and Ill Nino finished up their set. By the end each of us had ridden in the pit. Even Ceci had tried and found the calming peace that comes with letting go and hitting bottom. We were disgusting. Someone had dumped beer and water and melted ice on Chris, and we all hugged so we would be gross too. We didn't know what we were covered with and for awhile it didn't matter. I was bleeding a little from my elbow, I had landed on something when I fell, but it was slowly drying. It was an amazing experience and I was not alone in my sentiment. The faces of my friends reflected our rapture. Then the moment we had all been waiting for; it was time for Drowning Pool.

Drowning Pool was a popular band during my high school years. They had ridden the wave when hard rock music was making a comeback, strong guitars and scary lyrics. Their big hit was *Bodies* with the chorus being, "Let the bodies hit the floor... Let the bodies hit the floor... Let the bodies hit the floooooooooor!" This was our rallying cry, our sounding call, the voice of our generation. Or at least the voice of the people at the concert. I think by that point anyone who didn't want to be part of this had left between sets.

As the music started, the crowd pushed inwards again swallowing the mosh pit and ourselves up in its nearly smothering embrace. This time though, my friends and I weren't trying to remain autonomous entities. As the crowd enveloped us we allowed our identities to be absorbed into the hive. Connected by sweat and body heat and physical proximity we became one organism. And then the music began in earnest. The bass rippled through our ranks and shook loose something within us. A primal rage, desperation, hopelessness was awakened. The fear of the first apes who dared to walk on two legs, who challenged the big cats with stone weapons, who huddled in caves or around fires trying to keep the ancient darkness and what it contained at bay. So close were we that you could feel the hot breathless screams of the person behind you more than you could hear them over the rumble of guitars. We breathed as one. So tightly packed together you forgot where one body ended and the next began. We moved as one. If I had felt a brotherhood in the mosh pit, here that feeling was gone. We weren't brothers here; we were one organism, a writhing mass of humanity. If our genetic memory serves us at all I would compare the experience to being in the womb, smothered on all sides, you moved where this organism moved, but instead of panicking you were at peace. We were something old, the first soul, the one soul, the over-soul. We found something sacred amidst the chaos. I had no voice anymore as it joined in with the chorus of other voices, howling, screaming, and crying. Our barbaric yalp reached out to the heavens as we called for other souls to join us in our union, other souls to nourish and refresh us, other souls to feed upon. We were god and the devil and humanity all in one and not at all. We were something older than gods. We were the idea of humanity all

blood and bones and wants and desires. Like a child we were all Id, selfish and self centered. And the music played on.

My friends and I heard the lead singer's voice through the muffle of bodies. Harsh and grating, his pain was ours and ours was his. As he sang the pain leeches out of us through sweat and saliva and blood and ran down the drains into the sewers. The pyrotechnics went off. Fire on either side of the stage and the singer's features were lit with flame and we danced and moved by Inferno's light. Like a spell like a dream. And just as quickly it was over. When the music stopped the thrall we were all held in evaporated. Suddenly we were all too close together and the crowd dispersed. But we had touched the infinite that night. We touched something very old, a part of the soul from which we had all sprung, the over-soul, something older than gods that would exist after all the gods had passed away. It could not die because it was the shared experience of all humanity, something we all felt and knew deep within us that brought us together for thirty minutes while we listened to the music. In that moment, we knew we could never die because we knew we were all one and for those few moments we were unafraid. Unafraid of loneliness, unafraid of alienation, unafraid of all those things that make us fear dying alone so we imagine God in his Heaven in order to sleep at night.

Only now am I able to put into words what I felt that night. I would come to call it Pantheism years later. I didn't know it then but Marcus Aurelius said it best in his *Meditations*:

Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul; and observe how all things have reference to one perception,

the perception of this one living being; and how all things act with one movement; and how all things are the cooperating causes of all things which exist; observe too the continuous spinning of the thread and the contexture of the web. (Aurelius 46)

But that night I had no name for it. I just felt a sadness because that closeness was gone, once again we were alone. My friends and I got back in the truck and rode home and laughed and played the CD on the stereo and rocked out but that feeling was gone. They had touched it too, our shared feeling in that crowd. I bought the album by Drowning Pool but could not get back the feeling in my clean room listening to it over stereo speakers. The lyrics really meant nothing and Drowning Pool never had another hit album. But, for one night we touched the soul that Marcus Aurelius was talking about. We acted with one movement, held one perception. We were god the devil and all of humanity at once. For one night we were no longer alone in the universe and for that collection of moments we were no longer afraid.

Winter Formal (Get Ya Freak On)

Shoes melt,

The rubber turning soft -- sticking to the gymnasium floor,

An entire battalion of boys,

Immobile.

The mouth of the floor opens,

Gaping yawning massive black hole.

Sucked toward the center,

Nobody escapes the gravity well.

Palms sweaty, 1-2-3, ouch, 1-2-3.

We follow the moving lights.

1-2-3, ouch, 1-2-3, the serpents in our bellies writhe.

Like distant stars and disco balls.

High Fives all around for a job well done,

Touching girls is no easy feat.

Prayers for a fast song,

The walls reverberate relief and Boys II Men.

So long ago.

Nowadays we just bump cocks against asses and call it dancing.

All for the Ring

I could go to jail for driving too fast,

And in holding they try to take my shoes away.

I get in a fight defending myself,

And suddenly I'm in for five to ten.

Or, while touching myself I find a lump.

Upon going to the doctor we find

That the lump is a malignant cancer.

So, I must lose my testicles or die.

I'm a day late turning in my thesis,
And I end up failing the semester.
I lose all of my scholarship money,
And go bankrupt paying off my loans.

I meet a woman and we fall in love.
We get married and have a baby girl.
I find out she is fucking someone else,
She leaves me and takes my little girl too.

In a world where it can all be taken,
My life, liberty, and my happiness.
It would seem that a bachelors degree
In English is the most permanent thing.

Underneath the Skin (Manipulated Living - Donnie Darko⁴)

We control the vertical

We control the horizontal

We are in your TV

We are in your Radio

IPOD

IMAC

Big Mac

Mac Daddy

Puff Daddy

Master P

MTV

In and under and around

Slippery, sliding, sneaking,

Underneath the skin.

⁴ From the *Donnie Darko* soundtrack.

*Postmodern Dramatic Monologue*⁵

Thus have I politicly begun my reign,
 And 'tis my hope to end successfully.
 Would through the airy region stream so bright
 That birds would sing and think it were not night.
 O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound,
 That breathes upon a bank of violets,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 And my ending is despair,
 Unless I be relieved by prayer,
 As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.
 They kill us for their sport.
 Gentles, do not reprehend:
 if you pardon, we will mend:
 Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
 Will not debate the question of this straw:
 Till then I'll sweat and seek about for eases,
 And at that time bequeathe you my diseases.

⁵ Sampled from the pages from Shakespeare, and they said you couldn't make a postmodern dramatic monologue.

Only the Doves Are Real

Upon the Statue of an angel,

A shiny brass plaque:

"Yea, we commit your body down to rest,

We know the spirit dwells not here anon.

Cold hands and a heart within a cold breast,

Beneath a headstone to be gazed upon.

This place was not conceiv'd for dead kind,

It's hallowed grass the living walk around

They come with grief, to mourn, and solace find,

Their cries of anguish are the only sound.

And though they say this place be haunted by

The spirits of our long forgotten kin,

The only thing we should be troubled by

Is the weight of guilt caused by our own sin.

Come one come all, sing songs and shed a tear

For soon you too shall share this ground so dear."

Doves make a nest in *La Pieta*

They got the message.

Sonnet to Diplomacy

After victory, tighten your helmet
For the true storm is about to begin.
Violence keeps an enemy well met,
But it's only peace that makes him a friend.
The way of the gun, the way of the sword,
To expire with your weapon in your hand.
These must be replaced by pen and by word,
A time for diplomats to make their stand.
When tyrants arise and threaten our peace
Then we shall take up our swords once again.
But preemptive strikes when silence has lease
Only lessen the righteousness of man.
To fight hand to hand is a simple chore,
The challenge is to fight without the war.

Karma Police

Time, our constant companion. Perhaps we did not notice him when our journey began but he was there. He was there before us and shall be there after us. Of course he is, he is the master of the great wheel of eternity and we are the poor slaves of karma stuck on the rim. Because it all comes around again. He is the fire in which we burn. Desperately trying to outshine the stars to remind the universe that we burned here. But eventually our light is snuffed out, by Time. Of course, that only matters to those of us on the rim, because it all comes around again. What was now is then and what was then is gone. When does one journey end and the next one begin? Will we be around for the next go round? So we make now always the most precious time, because now will never come again. Time, like a predator stalks us all our days. When we show fear he leaps at us faster than light. We had our little spin on the wheel, maybe next time will be better. Because it all comes around again, to those of us on the rim. The straight arrow of our lives' path is only a small part of the curve; like an infinitely small section of an infinitely large circle is a straight line. We can only see the line, but Old Father Time will see us again, as long as we remain on the rim. Next time he is an old friend who walks with us on the journey. We cannot escape him, but we can let his smiling eye rest on us gently. To leave this cycle one must leave the rim. The trick is to be the one in the center of the wheel. How to get there is the mystery, perhaps we'll figure it out... next time. Because it all comes around again.

Two Oceans, No Water



Last stop on the tracks

It looks like nothing from here

Two white X's and an octagon of red

Dirt roads and grass that stretches to infinity

Infinity, an imaginary line that diminishes as you approach

Nowhere left to go...

But what does it look like from the other side

Many spend our entire lives in fear of that answer

What will you meet from the other side of the tracks

As you approach the line

Where two oceans meet

But may never touch

*Ascending and Descending*⁶

Is it madness?

The red queen said to remain exactly where you are

You must run as fast as you can...

Do you really think you will get to the heights of Heaven?

Do you really think you will reach the depths of Hell?

Turn your eyes skyward, you will not find your creator.

Look down and see the Devil that has created this world,

While God took his nap upon the stairs.

⁶ Inspired by the painting by MC Escher.

Graduate Study in the 21st Century:

A Comprehensive Look at the Use of Words as Food for the Soul. Written in Four (4)

Parts for Easy Digestion.

Dr. Reynaldo A. Valdez III Ph.D. (In Training)

Part the First – The Verbivore

I chew words

Tear them with my canines

And grind them with teeth of wisdom

Till nothing is left but pure product

A crucible burns away impurities

I digest them

With stomach acid criticism

I get metaphoric indigestion

And simile like heart burn

For fancy occasions

A tuxedo is necessary

When dining on Shakespeare remember

Prose on the left hand side

Verse goes on the right

Try the Romantic Buffet

It's only \$2.99 with drink

Since it joined the Public Domain

Don't fill up on Wordsworth

There is some mighty tasty Byron and Keats

Near the end of the table

Don't get me started on the Pynchon on a shingle...

People just have different Tastes, I guess

Pulp Fiction with my morning juice

The punctuation gets stuck in my teeth

And I use floss

To get the taste of dystopia out of my mouth

before...

I have a rhetoric sandwich

With malaise mayonnaise

Lunch is always a snore

For a Verbivore

Murakami and Yoshimoto

Wrapped in seaweed and eaten sushi style

Fforde and chips

Steak and Gaiman pie

All make fine international fare

Maybe a dash of Cisneros for spice

Part the Second – The Metaphor

How does one live like this?

Words have no nutritional value

They are not on the Adkins

How many Weight Watchers points

For that novella?

Words of a different sort

In soil, a garden

Ideas inch along, Bookworms

Grinding through truth and myth and fact and fiction

To nourish sentence fragments

Rains of heaven wash away identity
And the absolute terror fields we use
To keep mankind apart
To leave the truth and grow the fruits
Of knowledge

In this Eden
Knowledge grows on trees
Or in pomegranates
Their thousand seeds
Nuggets of wisdom
Fruit

Instead of the flesh of animals
The Earth provides us sustenance
We can pick paragraphs off bushes
Uproot poems
Dice up dissertations
Sauté sonnets
And mince words

The children of the mind rather

Would peel the skins of apples
Go through the layers of onions
To find within the seeds of beauty
Of discontent to spark revolution
Of fantasy and hope and brotherhood
To nourish our bodies

And these are words
Written in the very food we eat
Sweet
Bitter
All the flavors
We have different tastes

We stalk the wild beasts of the ancient forests
The Grendals and the Dragons of St. George
Hunters of truth and beauty and righteousness
Sometimes it hurts
For weapons of opinion can shatter
Sticks and stones can break your bones
But words have
Serrated incisors

Heads and horns like a mountain stag
And claws that can tear a plank to kindling
Words can hurt

Part the Third - The Debate

We can talk
And if we are proven wrong
If we are destroyed during the hunt
Perhaps we reconsider our words...
Dogma is a fine weapon
But ideas are more pliable
They can be re-molded into something else

Lyrical Ballads

Lyrical Battles
To nourish our beings
We feast on carrion like vultures
Black ink like blood from the page
Thick and viscous, coagulating
The delicious blood candies
Food for thought, brain food

Let's chew the fat

But man cannot live on words alone

What is the point?

Part the Fourth – The Point

That rare and delicate apple

We search for in our culinary endeavours

Like the golden apple of Aphrodite

Which sparked the Trojan War

Like Adam's apple

It got stuck in his throat

Because he couldn't handle the knowledge

So he denied it to all his offspring

And now the garden is off limits

So we keep eating

Hoping to stumble upon the flavor

Getting fat, getting slow

Intellectual diabetes

Reading is the insulin shot

To keep writing

To keep thinking

Shall we starve or shall we gorge?

What's on your menu?

CHAPTER III

CREATING MYTHOLOGY

La Migra

Oni, Fairies, Leprechauns...

They arrive in droves,

Pouring off ships, swimming out of rivers, heralded by storms and lightning,

Dragons, Dogmen, Kitsune...

Some with three heads, some with four arms, some animal, some not of this world,

Witchdoctors, Animal Totems, Demons, Nosferatu...

In Radiance and Glory do they arrive,

Haloed by Light and Darkness,

Loki, Sekmet, Czernobog, Kali...

Bast, Thor, Anansi, Anubis...

The Heavens part, the Earth moves, the Seas boil, and a hush falls over the Underworld,

The Stars fall from the sky and then a terrible noise is heard throughout,

Like the howling of a creature that was old when the world itself was newborn,

Bielebog, Wisakedjak, Vishnu, and a host of others...

Prostrate yourselves before them, fear and love them, and behold!

Silence! The speaker's nametag said J.C.

Name?

Odin

Occupation?

The All Father – God of Battlefields – Gallows God

You shall be known as Marcellus – Angel of the first choir, Next!

Quetzalcoatl – Plumed Serpent God of Mexico

You shall be known as St. Pious the IV, Next!

What is the meaning of this? Who are you? How dare you?

I am La Migra, hombre, "Immigration."

He spoke to them slowly and loud,

As if they were ignorant children who could not understand,

And not the God's they used to be.

Here you work for my Dad, we all work for my Dad.

Welcome to the New World. Next!

Hell Hath No Fury

"Please step off the path of good intentions and enter the bullet train. As you board, abandon all hope as ye enter here. Keep your hands and arms inside at all times and mind the closing doors. Welcome to Hell." The tour guide or the automated recording switched off and the loudspeaker was silent. I sat upon a seat which smelled vaguely of urine, old sweat, and fried chicken. The floor was sticky, not movie theatre sticky, but sticky with that impending doom feeling like your feet will never move again as you hurtle towards a horrible fate at 300 mph and nothing you can do will stop it. But, when I lifted my foot I found that I had only stepped in some gum.

"If you look to your left you will see the sulfurous planes of Gehenna. And, far above the train if you crane your necks you might catch a glimpse of the unending ethereal realm of Elysium, though that is as close to it as you will ever get. Look now while you can." The loudspeaker cracked off again.

"Boring old Blighter. Pay Er' no mind, it's all for the tourists, that is." The man in the seat across the aisle from me spoke.

"Come again?"

"The Ethereal Planes, Abandon all Ope', it's all for the tourists. 'Ell, Elysium is only about 10,000 cubic miles."

"Cubic miles?"

"Goes up as well, Love."

"I guess so."

"The name's Iggin's. So, you're new, eh." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, yes I am. I'll be working the acid mines."

"Rough gig."

"Well, it was that or Bride of a Demon."

"I start to see the appeal, full time or part?"

"Part time, I'm a grad student here, how 'bout you?"

"Me, I'm just an old working stiff, originally from Sussex."

"From England then?"

"Seems to be. Well I would love to stay and chat but this appears to be my stop."

He stood up and moved towards the doors. The sign read, "Wood of Suicides: No Axes or Antidepressants." I didn't know if they were trying to be funny or not.

"Have a good day." I said half in sarcasm and half out of habit.

"Oh 'Ell."

"What?" I asked him.

"My damn Twix melted in my pocket."

I paused a moment, but for only a moment and responded, "I would think that that would be pretty standard around here."

He considered a small spot somewhere between my eyes for half a trice before a wry smile turned up the corner of his mouth and creased his cheek, "That it is, Love.

That it is."

City of Dis

The great city of Dis. Hell's largest city as well as its most populous. Grethor may have been Hell's capitol but Dis is the city mortals picture when they breathe the words "Eternal Damnation." Oh, the ethereal planes of Gehena stretch on forever. But, they are no match for the majesty of Dis. Its towers tear the already burning sky, black metal gleaming against a dark sun, nightmarish castles, holy temples, arcane sanctuaries, the great Hellforge and its mighty bellows breathing life into the heart of the city. Fire lights the walls of this ancient city, older than the foundations of earth and living stone it is carved into. Its walls stand taller than two and twenty men and are marked with battlements from the Great War. Scars mar the beautiful visage of the city's main gate, the legacy of the Sin War and the uneasy peace between angel and demon. Acrid smoke spews forth from the factories covering the peoples and things of Dis with black dust. The children with the wings of bats play in the filth and make soot angels. The taverns boast ale that could slay an Oni.

Dis is host to the nightmares of man, yet here those nightmares are brothers and kindred, friends, lovers, family. Vampires, by virtue of birth rather than infection, the progenitors of their kind make their home here. Ogres, trolls, and creatures so vile that their names cannot be spoken in the mortal tongue provide a constant energy that powers the city, a heartbeat that resounds through all of Hell like the throb of ten thousand drums beaten in unison. Families; living, working, laughing, and dancing give praise to Kurai, the last of the great Dragon Masters and ruler of their unholy home. But, to them,

and to me, it is holy, a sanctuary for demons. It is more than a city; it is history and legacy, the legacy of the evils that came before us. We are the fallen, Angels of the underworld. We were cast away from Heaven, but we strove on. Morningstar told us, our grandfather's grandfathers, that as long as we were alive there was hope. The elders held that hope within them even long after the rebellious angel was no more. The Great War truly never ends.

Trifles (Inspired by: The Destruction of Leviathan - Gustave Doré)

When he plays, the seas roil and boil like a boundless cauldron. His eyes flash and nostrils belch chimney smoke while his iridescent scales illuminate dark Marianas. Seven times do his coils bind the earth and he swallows 1000 foot dragons in his crimson maw.

Yea, the lord slew his mate, for a race of such would enslave the earth. The final twenty-fourth part of a rotation does the lord play with his pet and has since before the apes killed with bone, since before the terrible lizards walked from The Americas to Eurasia, since before names. Indeed, Adam never named him.

Poor, wretched creature, the lord gave you your ghastly appendages, fearsome claws and teeth, curved beak and single serpentine tongue. Eternity is a long time to be alone, was

the gift from the lord more a punishment? Forced to live until you are slain as food for god's more deserving children.

Leviathan is confused, "Have I not served our lord as I was intended to, why now do you come to kill me?" Gabriel makes no answer and moves to carry out the lord's command without word or explanation. Leviathan tries to escape, but cannot get away. The churning waters, once his comfort and companion, betray him to the surface and death. Gabriel points his rapier at Leviathan's swollen belly, grim determination in his eye.

What was Leviathan but a plaything to the lord? What are we but playthings? And, how long until he grows bored of us?

Coffee House Pretty Boy

I'm a man who knows what I like. Grande, because Tall is too small and Venti is overkill. Soy milk, because it's less calories. Half-Caff because I need to wake up in the morning but I don't want to be all dried out by the afternoon. Mocha Chai Latte, because... I have no idea. But, apparently I screwed up somewhere along the line because the bleach blond cashier was staring at me like a dog stares at an answering machine when its master's voice is coming out of it. I'm sorry, not cashier, Barrista.

"Grande, Half-Caff, Soy Mocha Chai Latte, please." I repeat myself.

"Sir," he said in the vernacular that only someone who grew up baking in the California sun on some beach all day and smoking pot by the bonfire at night while dreaming about Tsunami style waves off the coast of Japan (or maybe I was just giving in to stereotypes) could muster, "It's a Soy, Half-Caff, Grande Mocha Chai Latte. We have a very specific way of ordering here so our Barrista's can get your order correct the very first time."

"Son," I don't know why I called him son, his nametag said "Rain" and he was maybe two years younger than I was, "Do you even know why they call it a Chai Latte?"

He was about to answer and stopped mid-mumble, "I'll have to check with my manager, Chuck!" He called his manager over before I could stop him. "This guy wants to know why they call it a Chai Latte."

"No, I..."

"I don't know, did you check in the manual?" addressed the manager to the Barrista, oblivious to me.

"No, I don't care, that wasn't the point." I tried to explain.

"Well, you asked me." The Barrista retorted.

"No I didn't, I was asking if you knew personally, not to ask your manager."

"Are you saying I'm not smart enough to know, like a guy like me couldn't possibly know the history of Chai and you are the font of all coffee knowledge. They don't let just anyone wear this green apron!"

"I don't suppose they would." I said sarcastically.

"Do YOU know why they call it a Chai Latte?"

A challenge, I could have conceded that I did not know gracefully, accepted my Latte and walked away. But, I didn't. I was feeling punky, masculine, rambunctious, and I was not going to surrender to this coffee house pretty boy in his green apron. I made sure his eyes were locked on mine so that he couldn't turn away, his boss and all the other customers faded out of my peripherals, I took a deep breath and I began my tale.

Long ago, in Ancient China there lived a man, a farmer, and unlike the many farmers who grew rice, this farmer grew coffee. He grew the most robust, flavorful, and delicious blend of coffee. And he called it Chai, named for the regional Overlord. The legend of his coffee spread across the land and finally reached the ears of the Overlord himself who journeyed long to taste the coffee named after him.

"His Excellency the Lord Chai greets the honorable master Yang, grower of the Chai coffee. Bow in preparation to receive his Excellency." came the proclamation from the Lord's official herald.

"Most gracious Lord Chai, I welcome you to my most humble farm."

"Arise Jang Yang, and bring me some of this coffee that I have heard so much about."

Now, Master Jang Yang, grower of the coffee, had two lovely daughters who helped run the farm. They were called Song and Jade. They tended the field in spring, harvested in fall, and roasted the beans in winter.

Song and Jade brought out a golden tureen full of coffee before the great Lord Chai. Both of their skins were tanned from working in the sun, but were smooth, their muscles taut and strong like bars of iron beneath folds of silk. They had put on their finest garments in order to receive his Excellency. Song wore a gown of crimson, her hair was a shocking white, and her nails were painted the color of ruby. Jade's gown was golden, her eyes sparkled like emerald fireflies in the night, and her nails were painted black. They both wore dragon clips in their hair, made of onyx and inlaid with gold and silver filigree. They were the loveliest things the Overlord had ever seen.

"Do you like your coffee my Lord?" asked Song, her voice like bird's call.

"Yes indeed, but not as much as you, child. Where is your father, call him forth to me!"

"Father."

"Father."

"Yes my dear ones, has the Lord enjoyed his coffee?"

"I have indeed master Yang. Tell me, your daughters, they know how to run this farm?"

"Yes Lord."

"And, are they married?"

"No Lord."

"Splendid."

"Do you wish to marry one of my daughters, my Lord?"

"No my friend, I plan to take them both for myself and hoped there were no husbands to get in the way. They shall service this farm and myself when I come visiting. I shall become rich beyond measure selling your coffee and have two lovely virgins to satisfy me as well. That just leaves you, which I can handle readily enough, Guards!" The lord's personal soldiers entered the room and stood ready to carry out his command. "Take him outside and execute him in the fields he tended so well and then bury his body among his beans." The guards took him away. There was only a short cry as the first guard's sword went wide and merely grazed Jang Yang's shoulder. The second guard silenced that cry forever. The Overlord Chai then turned to his new possessions.

"Now my dears, you will prepare yourselves for me. Wash yourselves in clean water and rub yourselves with lavender oil so you will smell like lovely flowers. Please me and you shall live, disappoint me and you shall watch this place burn to the ground before I kill you in front of each other."

Now Song and Jade were clever. Instead of lavender oil, they mixed the bath water with ground coffee beans. They bathed in the coffee. Their skins turned black as the night. They slipped into the coming twilight and escaped to the fields where they waited. Their presence could only be detected by Song's white hair and Jade's green eyes.

The house began to smell of coffee. The aroma flowed out of the bath and permeated everything, the walls, the floor, the furniture, the tapestries. The Lord finally

grew suspicious after he called to them and they did not answer and he could find no trace of them within the house.

"Go, seek them in the fields. Bring them before me and I shall have my way with them before I give you each your turns. Then we will burn this place, leaving them homeless and ruined women."

The guards ran out into the night and searched the fields, but it was dark and everything smelled like coffee. Suddenly, a shock of what appeared to be white fire burst from behind a coffee bush. It screamed and cried and circled the two guards.

"White fire, an angry spirit!" said the first.

"A demon!" said the second.

In the commotion, neither guard noticed the second figure, smelling like coffee, moving through the darkness, until it was upon them. It leapt at them like some great and agile cat and screamed in a voice like the screech of bats, "Leave this place and never return!" The only thing they could see were two spots of green that burned like coals. They dropped their swords and fled for their lives and did not stop till the morning light crept over the foothills. They were never heard from again.

"Guards, guards! Such lazy worthless fools I have never known." fumed the Overlord as he left the house in search of his lost guards and the rebellious girls. "And the smell of coffee is beginning to stick in my throat. This whole place reeks of it, the fields, the farm, the house, even I. I shall never drink coffee again. And when I find those girls I shall have them scrubbed till their skin is pink and they no longer carry the

stench of this place. Then they will serve as my slave girls as punishment for their insolence."

He never sensed the two figures in the dark until he felt the guard's blades pierce his heart from behind. The last thing he saw were two spots of green and a shock of white.

"One Soy, Half-Caff, Grande Mocha Chai Latte, order up!" My drink was ready and the Barrista's manager handed it to me. I took my Latte, one of those cardboard cuff things they use to protect your hand from the heat, three sugars, and a stir stick, tipped my hat and moved towards the door.

"Wait! What happened to them, the daughters and the Overlord?" The Barrista had jumped the counter and headed me off before I could exit.

"You ever wonder why the beans look red before they roast them. They weren't always like that. They ground up the Overlord and buried him in the same field as their father. The beans are red because of the blood."

He looked at me like a tourist looks at the Pope, with a respectful disbelief yet a sense that maybe I was right. "Is... is that true?"

"Not a damn word, but is there no truth in beauty?"

"Huh?"

"You see, I have always believed that truth was in the eye of the beholder." I had taken that line from an episode of *Star Trek* ("Ensign Ro").

"But isn't the phrase '*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*'?"

"No no no, beauty is in the eye of the *destroyer*." I had stolen that line from an episode of *Tenchi Muyo* ("The Eye").

He paused, "Where will you go, Master?"

"Wherever the Great Bird of the Galaxy takes me." I forget where that line comes from.

"Take me with you, make me your disciple."

I looked at him, dipped my finger into my Latte, then made the sign of the cross on his forehead. Before he could say anything else, I turned and walked away.

Brown Bear in Coat Tails

Big brown bear

Why do you stare?

In your coat tails and pants

Will you give us all a dance?

Silly little bear

How do we compare?

Lion on the front row

Sittin' in his chair.

Bow tie round his neck

Ostrich to the right

Duckies on the front row

Make for quite a sight.

If the bear is the USA

Fat and rich for all to see

Then the animals are third world nations

Wishing they could be

The great silly bear

With claws all trim and tidy

Hug his belly and kiss his nose

And he'll rip off your face like he rips the bark from the trees

*Immortal Ones*⁷

I will crush you
my fingers cannot be broken
my maw is great and all consuming

Thunder's lightning can split Heaven
but Heaven lives on

you who are eternal
my Brother Fuji
bisects me like the lightning splits Heaven
but I gaze over you Mountain
and from here you are small
you will slide down beneath me
once a Mountain
turned Earth and rubble
as I shall make you

Fire bows down to me
for while Wind may feed him

⁷ Inspired by the *Great Wave of Kanagawa* by Hokusai.

only I can calm his fury

and Thunder is my kin

both Earth and Mountain defy me

but time will master them all

even as I evaporate

to rain and nourish the Forrest

the sea rules both water and Forrest

Fire and Thunder

Earth and Wind

and then only I and Heaven will remain

and Moon will shine down upon us

Fiddle Man (ianiss xacis)

an old grey shadow

dancing to his fiddle

he knows when the fiddle music is done

that he will cease to be

but

what he doesn't know is he comes back

every time the fiddle starts again

the old man bound him

with his gut bucket and whiskey jug

bound his feet

his dancing souls to the fiddle and the darkness and the dust

but the fiddle is out of tune

and his mind gone to seed

so pluck pluck pluck the strings

dance, dance for them shiny coins

coins to cover your eyes

run, Fiddle Man

for something in the dark is calling you back

in the hours after pitch dark in the quietude of the substrata

one does not question Fiddle Man

just dance with him

...or he'll rip out your eyes and cut off your feet.

CHAPTER IV

CREATING THE FUTURE

*The Battle for Terok Nor*⁸

If space had any substance it would have shook. The very molecules would vibrate discontent with the slaughter. If space had any sound it would have screamed with the whine of phasers and the twisting of metal. Beams of brilliant death lanced across the void and photon torpedoes bloomed like cherry blossoms as the gates of Sto-Vo-Kor are opened to vanquished warriors. But space has no substance, has no sound, no one to mourn. So the Prophets weep for all. Frozen shards of metal and blood sparkled like tear drops hanging in an endless sky and floating in that eternal night until the universe collapses in upon itself and all is one, once again. Those tears, a silent reminder of rage and pain and death and hope.

⁸ Based on the historical battle in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

Notes: Final Exam in History 101 – The Foundation of the Alliance

(A Post-Modern Narrative of What Might Have Been)

- In the year 1963 it was deemed that the separate races would never co-exist peacefully and that race riots and civil war were inevitable if something was not done. On August 27th, President John F. Kennedy of the United States approved the "Divided We Stand" Initiative, drawn up and proposed by George Wallace, then governor of Alabama. Essentially the country would be divided up into provinces and each race would reside separately. Each province would pay tribute to the central government who would have final authority in all matters of law.
- 1964 – January, John Fitzgerald Kennedy stepped down as President of the United States. In the political turmoil that followed in the newly divided nation, there was no vote for a new president. A select few congressmen, chosen at random, would be left as the standing central government; their identities were concealed for their protection as were their ethnicities. Now began the arduous task of dividing up the nation. Their first attempt would be a failure.
- 1967 – Land grants had to be re-drawn (this would be the second attempt) as the Latino population, once thought to be unified, could not get along with each other and threatened the fragile balance of this newly divided nation. New decisions had to be made:

- The Mexicans were given California, Nevada, and Oregon (This area would now be known as San Salinas). It became a vast farmland with fields stretching to the vanishing point of the horizon. The need for human workers grew and families were encouraged to have many children which was okay with the Catholics.
- The Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Columbians, Bolivians, Peruvians, and the Spanish were to share Florida, Georgia, and Alabama (called Los Estados Unidos). The province became a ragged group of city states loosely controlled by a council of elders representing the different ethnic Latinos. A Feudal system developed and a Shogun was established. All hail Gregorio Pancho Carlos Emiliano George Cheech Marin Picasso Zapata Mencia Lopez Villa the Third.
- Caucasians were granted Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Arkansas. The land was turned into a giant gated community and renamed Wellborn after General Ishmael Ames Wellborn, founder of the capitol city affectionately dubbed Washingtown. Contact after 1967 was severely limited and records of Caucasian activities are spotty at best.
- Those of African or Caribbean descent were given the Great Lakes region, New England, New York, Pennsylvania, down through Virginia and West Virginia (now called New Freedom). Immediately a new Renaissance in art, film, literature, poetry, and music began. Also, large

areas of land were converted to what appeared to be military training facilities in the lower regions.

- By far the largest chunk of land was given to Hindus, Muslims, People of Middle Eastern Descent, Indians, Asians, and other. It was composed of all remaining continental lands and dubbed The Fire Nation. The Muslims firmly established themselves in the former Washington and Hindus moved to the extreme other side of the land grant. Cities such as Shanghai 2, Neo-Shinjuku, and Little Calcutta sprang up in the center. Portions of this land remained uninhabited and were classified no-man's lands.
- Travel between the provinces was limited with central government approval. People of mixed race were allowed to live where they pleased at first, though they were encouraged to stay in places where they most resembled the local inhabitants. They were called mud-people and used mostly as diplomatic envoys between provinces. The central government had headquarters in the former Oklahoma, Hawaii, and Alaska. The central government maintained a small military force chosen from the disbanded armed forces of the former United States.
- 1973 – With no minorities around the Caucasians officially set up a caste system. Those of Italian and Irish descent were classified as second class citizens and were force migrated to the edges of the Wellborn Nation to an area called the Ghetto. The Shogun of Los Estados Unidos was assassinated by one of his advisors and the nation is thrown into turmoil. Gang violence was on the rise as

politicians vied for power. The five nations became dependant on the grain, fruit, meat, and textile products of San Salinas. Literature and music from New Freedom are imported to all nations except Wellborn. The large spiritual communities of The Fire Nation remain at relative peace as long as they remain separate with enough room for their peoples to have their own space.

- 1979 – Under the leadership of a Spanish-American dictator named Franco, Los Estados Unidos is re-named New Spain. It became an industrial and technological powerhouse. There is a growing rift between the more warlike members of New Freedom and the more peaceable philosophers. New Freedom separated into Athens in the north and Sparta in the south. An increase in the number of mud people prompts the central government to outlaw procreation amongst them. According to the "Illegal Sex Acts" a large colony of about 10,000 mud people living in a no man's land on the outskirts of The Fire Nation is annihilated by government troops. The central government is now referred to as The Dreadnaught Government due to its tactics, or more simply, The Dreadnaught.
- 1983 – The internet is invented in New Spain. A technological revolution has begun in medicine, computer technology, robotics, and military technology including: advanced armor plated tactical suits, nuclear payloads on smaller caliber weapons and explosive devices, and viral weaponry. An illegal arms trade begins between New Spain and Sparta of New Freedom. The Dreadnaught is

strangely silent. Some new strain of influenza wipes out cattle and blights crops in San Salinas, prices for foodstuffs skyrocket.

- 1985 – The Wellborn Nation refuses to pay for goods from San Salinas. In protest, farmers burn entire fields of crops, leaving only enough for themselves and neighbors, and trade is closed with the other nations. Irish and Italian dissidents from the Wellborn Nation expatriate themselves and flee north to The Fire Nation. The Fire Nation welcomes them. With their numbers swelling due to prosperity and the inclusion of the Irish and Italian expatriates, The Dreadnaught fears an uprising from The Fire Nation. The Dreadnaught launches a preemptive strike of nuclear missiles from their silos in the former Hawaii, turning The Fire Nation into a graveyard the likes of which the world has never seen. It is classified as a police action. The new land is now called Shadows Fall and is uninhabited. The Dreadnaught then gives San Salinas an ultimatum to re-open trade with the other nations at lower prices. San Salinas complies.
- 1989 – San Salinas is almost bankrupt but is still forced to export most of its crops to the other nations with little to no pay in return. It is revealed that the military installations of New Freedom had been sending their best and brightest to be soldiers in The Dreadnaught's army since 1967. The weapons of New Spain had also been inadvertently sent for use by The Dreadnaught through their arms trade with New Freedom. Sparta conquers Athens in a conflict called the 90 Minutes War (It actually took two hours) and New Freedom is once again whole. Dogs of the Dreadnaught they are called.

- 1992 – Kurt Kobain turns 21 in The Wellborn Nation. His protest songs against the establishment prompt the Wellborn Nation to take up arms against The Dreadnaught. His musical group called Shangri-La advocates peace through violence. His hit song "Smells like Teen Spirit" is a rallying cry for the youth of The Wellborn Nation. For the first time in 25 years, The Wellborn Nation opens its borders and marches to war.
- 1993 – Operation Desert Storm. The Dreadnaught moves its forces from Alaska to join with new soldiers from Sparta of New Freedom. They establish themselves in the wastes and deserts of Shadows Fall. Their march shakes the earth they are so massive and clouds of dust blot out the sun. The Dreadnaught's armies march through San Salinas and bully them into submission. Food lines from San Salinas to The Wellborn Nation are cut off. New Freedom takes weapons by force from New Spain. Surrounded on all sides, Kurt Kobain goes to the headquarters of The Dreadnaught in the former Oklahoma to negotiate peace. He is found in his hotel room dead, a shotgun in his mouth, The Dreadnaught claims it was suicide.
- 1997 – After four years of hard fighting, The Wellborn Nation finally surrenders at the Battle of Houston. The Caucasian Race is kept by The Dreadnaught as indentured servants as stipulated in the terms of surrender henceforth known as the Genova Accords.
- 2001 – For the next four years The Dreadnaught government wiped out the remaining mud peoples in the no man's lands. The Mexicans of San Salinas

remained in their capacity as growers of food for the lands of The Dreadnaught.

The Africans of New Freedom were the soldiers. The Residents of New Spain were kept in a research and development capacity. And Caucasians were kept as a labor force. New Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants were admitted as residents of New Spain but most tended to avoid the lands of The Dreadnaught.

The members of The Dreadnaught Government form an elite class known only as The Regency who has little interaction with those who serve them.

- 2007 – Today, the lands of The Dreadnaught, now called The Alliance, is one of the richest, most technologically advanced, and culturally diverse nations in the world. Our industry is second to none and our military is the envy of all of Europa. We have wiped out hunger and joblessness as well as most major diseases. Everyone has a purpose; everyone has a place in our society. We are The Alliance; we work because we know our place!

Nightmare

"The memory isn't mine, I shouldn't have to carry it" (Glau).

The Serene Central Hub and the Savage Outer Rim

Red core and Black Sky

The Black, always the Black

They say men went mad staring into the Black

To sit in solemn silence

In a dull dark dock

It will be War

Not Pestilence or Famine

But there will be Death

Gravity's Brilliant Rainbow

Creating Death Showers

In a pestilential prison

With a life long lock

Like Helios, Chariots against the Sky

Iron-Clad Locomotives

No Steam but Radiation

Refugees and Castaways

The Route of Civilization

The Massacre of Mankind

Awaiting the sensation

Of a short sharp shock

We move in

We consume

We move on

We're not Explorers

We're Parasites

We're are a Virus

From a cheap and chippy chopper

On a big black block

We may not have the power to save the Earth

But we may have the power to save ourselves

Demon City Shinjuku

Where in the world could you purchase a Saturday Night Special on a Tuesday morning at 4:37? A Saturday Night Special is a small caliber gun purchased for under thirteen dollars. Its bullet complement is small, the force behind the bullet is weak, and its accuracy is usually nil past a few yards. It really only has one purpose, one use. To sneak up behind someone or to approach them through some manner of subterfuge, to lean in very close, close enough to whisper in their ear, to caress their cheek, to slide a brotherly arm around their shoulder, and place the muzzle directly over their heart. It's a close range weapon, without much reusability. Usable only by people who didn't care what happened to themselves after that one shot as long as the other person was dead. The Saturday Night Special, weapon of choice for harlots, the destitute, and those with nothing to lose.

So, where can you purchase a Saturday Night Special on a Tuesday morning at 4:37? The same place you can get Pad Thai with a side of Haggis, a hormone massage with a happy ending, and a bootleg copy of *The Satanic Verses*, La Bodega, where all your dreams come true. La Bodega is part flea market, casino, brothel, international food court, UN safe-house, and holy sanctuary. You can find anything there, sometimes even redemption, and it's always open. Some people say you can only find it when you need it. But, it's actually located at the corner of Lonely Street and The Boulevard of Broken Dreams... seriously.

From the outside, it looks like a Gothic Cathedral, think Notre Dame except smaller and its towers have been replaced by minarets painted the color of the dying sun and lit by an arcane fire. The outer walls are black but if you touch them soot comes off in your hand, as if the entire structure had once burned and only a charcoaled husk remains. But, the great iron doors, ever open; seem as if they have stood for centuries. They welcome you to the most bizarre of bazaars. Like the marketplace that Jesus never got the chance to smash. Larger inside than it looks from without, it has many twists and turns, many exits and ways unto ways, electric elevators, spiral staircases and rope ladders can take you to the upper levels. And yes, they have a Starbucks.

Unfortunately, La Bodega is located in the bad part of town; you don't end up on The Boulevard of Broken dreams without a few traumas in your past. Across the street are a bail bonds place and a rundown hotel that really just serves as place for high school runaways to reconsider, bums to crash, and drunks to sleep it off. The Hotel is called the Shangri La and has free continental breakfast, really good eggs but stay away from the coffee unless you like high octane diesel. The end of Lonely Street is a pier, no water, just a drop onto some rocks, you figure it out.

But, I wasn't here to commit suicide. I was actually from the nice part of Neo-Shinjuku. That's where we are by the way, the city of Neo-Shinjuku. A crater left after the Third World War. If Japan was becoming Americanized before the war then afterwards you could almost call it a new colony. Being the hero of the war, Japan also took the most damage. America was more than happy to rebuild Japan as well as its economy. Soon McDonalds, Starbucks, Exxon, and Barnes & Noble weren't just on

every street corner, they had moved their corporate headquarters, and their staff. It was true; the population of Japan was now only 45% Japanese. In Neo-Shinjuku itself that number drops to only 27%. Myself, I was a Hispanic, Rivera, of the Okinawa Rivera's.

Neo-Shinjuku was very different than Okinawa. Okinawa's buildings gleamed in the light and stretched upwards forever. Neo-Shinjuku seemed to be in forever twilight. Whether it was the darkening clouds or just the lost souls of soldiers who died in the war; this place always felt like the sun was about to set. It had a spectral aspect, something that made it feel not quite right. I moved here because of its reputation and because of places like La Bodega.

I lived on the upper west side in one of the better neighborhood town-homes. My family was well to do in Okinawa and I had used that money to purchase a few properties here in Neo-Shinjuku. Really nice properties that you would think would sell for a lot of money, but like the rest of the city there was something not quite right about them. Whoever lived in these places always came to a bad end. One tenant was a veteran who was haunted by memories of the war. When a military vehicle pulled up in front of the house he was sure they were there to call him back to duty though he had been discharged a year before. He killed himself with his own Saber in the way of the Samurai so he would die like a warrior. The vehicle actually turned out to be a man who had served with the tenant of the house during the war and who had just become an officer. He wanted to share the good news with his old comrade and share a bottle of Sake as well.

Another tenant was a reclusive female poet. She was running from something. Apparently, it caught up with her. Her assailant left a note, a haiku written in their commingled blood on the bedroom wall. The poem loses meaning in the translation. Something about spirit walks and time, there was time enough at last. Their bodies were found locked in an embrace in the bathtub, surrounded by cherry blossoms, and wrapped in silk.

The latest tenant had had Shinto priests come and do a cleansing, Catholic priests do an exorcism, and even had a Rabbi come give his blessing. After six months, he went mad and was never seen again. The house passed to his son who sold most of his father's possessions in order to satisfy his drug habit. He died of an overdose within a year leaving his girlfriend with a dead body, a wicked case of withdrawal, and no means of income. She squatted in the house for awhile; not telling anyone her boyfriend was dead and prostituting herself for money. One of her johns smelled something funny and discovered the body hidden in the pantry. She killed him, but his buddies reported him missing and it was only a matter of time before the police tracked her down and arrested her. She is currently serving time in an asylum.

Needless to say, the property was going for cheap, as were the others I bought, each had similar stories. I bought them, fixed them up, and rented them, mostly to rich yuppies and young professionals. I never told them the stories; I figured if they lived in Neo-Shinjuku they should be prepared for anything. This place ate the un-wary and I didn't like yuppies anyway. This was how I afforded my town-home. This was also how I afforded my hobby.

It started innocently enough, meeting women at the Hive. The Hive was one of the trendy discothèques downtown along with the Sin Bin and Red Star. They were all flash and sin and sex. Red Star had a communist theme. Supposedly there was no VIP room because everyone was supposed to be equal. A huge statue of Lenin stood behind the bar. The Sin Bin had a lot of alcoves, dark corners, and low tables shrouded by thick curtains to conduct dark business. The Hive was always "buzzing" with activity at all times of the day or night. In these places money, drugs, and women were traded on the dance floor. And, I was in the mood for some of the third. But, for some reason none of the fish were biting. I was young, rich, and available, and my clothing reflected that. So why weren't the ladies interested? I observed them and almost caught a beating for looking at another man's girl. But, I realized what the women wanted, Bikers.

Neo-Shinjuku was a hotbed of illegal street racing. Whether it was cars or bikes, the greatest racers in the world along with some kids with too much time and hard-on for thrills risked their necks every Tuesday night, and they did it on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams, mostly because the cops left them alone and because the name had a kind of poetic irony to it. They wore the latest in Italian racing wear, form fitting leather jackets emblazoned with names and slogans and bright colors, motorcycle leathers, racing boots with reinforced steel toes. And this was what the women gravitated towards. I decided then and there that I would become a street racer, or at least dress like one to get the ladies.

The actual thought of racing turned my stomach in a way most unpleasant. I figured I could ride normally, but one of my mates had his face peeled of with a concrete

razor blade introduced to him after a bad turn on his bike. Pain and unpleasantness aside, it also ended any romantic entanglements he had going as he now resembled the phantom of the opera minus the hypnotic charm. But I figured I could fake it to avoid serious injury to myself or my libido.

I bought black leathers, the jacket, boots with silver studs, and to top the whole thing off, a full face helmet with a mirrored visor. I adopted a swaggering bowlegged walk like someone who had ridden all day and didn't talk to anybody when I walked into a club. I was the jaded, brooding, dark rider and it worked like gangbusters. I had women all over me wanting to lick my proverbial wounds and a few other things.

I made one slight mistake, I hadn't bought a bike and when I tried to take my first girl home she split the scene when she realized we would be taking the Underground to get to my place. I haven't been to Red Star since. But, after that I sold one of my properties to its current occupant and picked up a Kawasaki Dragon. The Dragon was like a Kawasaki Ninja only a couple generations later. I was actually a little intimidated by it. Its size rivaled small cars. I figured I might as well have an impressive bike to impress the girls, not like I actually needed to race it. But I flinched a little every time I turned the key. I could feel the raw power burning inside this monster crotch rocket and I knew the damage it could inflict on my soft flesh. Don't get me wrong, I was a big boy, and strong, stronger than most, but I knew in a competition between my body and the g-forces this thing could inflict at maximum power, I would lose. But, I could drive it around the bars like the Hive, far away from the actual track on The Boulevard of Broken Dreams.

So I rode my bike, picked up some girls and had a good time. This city is a good place for the anonymous. People came and went, disappeared, fell through the cracks, so none of the girls really stuck around and there was always a fresh crop at the Hive. But, even in a city such as this, one finally caught me. She was some kind of half breed, Japanese body with Hispanic features except for her eyes, so slanted and sharp they looked like they could cut glass. She was wearing low rise black denim jeans with old school Harley Davidson riding boots. A lacy thong crept over the waist of her pants, white like ivory with a tiny tube top to match. But for all her naked flesh she seemed the most clothed girl in the entire club. She was tattooed all over her body like a Yakuza gangster, tattooed with dragons, one of which curled up her neck and over her left eye. She wore a metal claw featuring a dragon head with ruby studded eyes on her left index finger. A leather Great Coat the color of midnight enveloped her slight frame and completed the ensemble. She called me out, said she never saw me at the track, and did it loud enough that most of the patrons of the bar could hear. Not, to be outdone, I threw her onto the back of my bike and made for the bad part of town.

It was my first street race and she took off my helmet to kiss me good luck, then she kept it. Put it behind her back and walked backwards with an impish grin on her face, said real men had no use for helmets. This was it, I was going to meet my maker and just to prove I was something I really wasn't. I was so nervous my hands were sweating and I couldn't grasp the handlebars. I could barely turn the ignition. I was thrown from the bike, luckily it was while I was pulling up to the starting line and accidentally yanked the emergency brake because I was so damned nervous. Being

minus a helmet I got a wicked cut across my left cheek and was pissed and was all set to tell her about it. But, when she licked the blood from my face and told me to follow her, I forgot what I was going to say. We had sex that night at the Shangri La. She kept using her claw to re-open the cut on my face. After that I couldn't get enough, I was hooked. But, to keep her satisfied, I had to keep racing. Whenever I got injured, she always made sure to press on my bruised ribs and lap up the blood from my cuts like some kind of vampire. I figured she got off on pain and who was I to disagree.

This brings us back to why I was looking for a Saturday Night Special at 4:37 on a Tuesday morning. I was going to kill my girlfriend. Our relationship had been going on for about a month when she told me she wanted to try something different, something special. She told me to meet her at our place, the Shangri La. She had never actually been to my place nor I to hers. In fact I didn't even know her name, she told me to call her Little Dragon and she called me Rivera because it was on the back of my Helmet the night we first met. We always had sex at the Shangri La. I went to our room, room 613. I walked in and the light was off. Not a big surprise, half the rooms at the Shangri La had lights that didn't work or were burnt out. But, as I stepped across the threshold I realized something was wrong half a second too late. The bat came down hard where my shoulder met my neck and I was down for the count. I spent the next two hours with a gag in my mouth tied to the headboard while she alternatively hit me with a piece of rebar, burned me with cigarettes, and gave me quick jabs with a switch blade, all the while moaning because she had one of those electronic buzzing eggs buried inside of her while another one stimulated her clitoris. I guess I should have seen this coming. I

wouldn't have been so mad, she wasn't trying to kill me. She was just getting off to my pain, a masochist. But, before she left she poured whiskey, really good whiskey mind you, all over me and lit it on fire with a cigarette so that my death would look like an accident. Luckily, me and the manager had become chums over the past month and I had told him about my explorations with this girl. Apparently, she had kind of a reputation that he knew about and when he noticed her leaving alone he decided to check up on me. I could still move and walk because she wasn't trying to kill me, she expected the fire to do that for her. I could also thank a month of racing to give me a thicker skin. And, I had always been a rather strong boy with a mighty constitution. Even given all that, I was a little crispy, a little bloody, really bruised, and seven different kinds of pissed.

I had left my jacket, helmet, and riding gloves on my bike and I pulled them on to hide my burned flesh. I was completely covered in black and smelled like burning. People must have thought I was the Grim Reaper and maybe they were right. I found La Bodega and the sea of consumers parted before me. I grabbed the nearest vendor, a smallish man selling what appeared to be bootleg hentai VHS tapes, and said one word to him, "Guns!" He raised a quivering hand and pointed to what appeared to be an army officer's field headquarters, a tent erected in the middle of the trading floor. A sign over the entrance flap had only a picture of an anvil and a hammer on it, the local blacksmith.

I entered and found myself surrounded by samurai swords, tower shields, crossbows, staves, armor; it was like walking around a Renaissance Faire. Seated at a low table covered in a black cloth with what appeared to be tarot cards spread over it was an old man with a Fu-Manchu style of beard, wrapped in a weathered traveling

cloak with a hood covering his eyes. I approached his table, he absentmindedly picked up a card and examined it, he seemed unconcerned.

“Old man, I need a gun, preferably for cheap, I don’t have a lot of cash on me.”

“Fancy a gun do you? The real question is do you want the bullets that go with it?”

“Well of course I want the bullets.”

“You know, there is a special sensation when they make it.”

“They? What are you talking about old man?”

“The “they” that everyone talks about, the nameless “they” that are responsible for everything and responsible for nothing so they can be blamed for everything but no one is held responsible. But, there is a special feeling when they make it.”

“Make what? I just want a gun and some bullets.”

“Exactly, the bullet that will end you.”

“End me?”

“Not everyone is ended by a bullet. And, even if you are riddled with bullets only one actually kills you. There is an enormous amount of bullets that never actually reach you, that never serve the purpose for which they were crafted. Hundreds of thousands of bullets that go to waste, that are never fired or never find you. The actual ratio of killing-deadly bullets to misshapen lumps of useless lead is quite high. So, when the bullet that kills you is created, it sends a special sensation through the ether.”

“This bullet isn’t for me, it’s for my Little Dragon.”

“First of all, it’s cold. Not like the grave, more like the scalpel they use in an autopsy. It’s all cold steel not even warmed by a living human body but chilled by a cadaver, that kind of cold. Not a freezing of the marrow kind of cold, but a cold disdain for life, a practiced uncaring, unfeeling, lack of empathy.”

“Lack of empathy, do you want to see my face?” I ripped off my helmet, threw it on the floor, and leveled my charred face with his. “Here is my lack of empathy. Now do you have the gun or not?”

“It is a quick sensation,” he continued as if I had not spoken, “but not like the bullet itself. It starts somewhere near the tailbone, a short sharp shock, a hornet sting, the pinch when you get your ears pierced, striking the funny bone. The sensation flows from there like quicksilver throughout the gates and alleys of the human body. It’s almost like carbonation running to the tips of your fingers, an uncomfortable bloating that builds up right beneath the skin, snakes, spiders, creepy crawlies in on above and around your entire body stinging spitting and biting as they go. All of this occurs in a heartbeat, a thunderclap, a single flap of a hummingbird’s wings.”

I picked him up bodily, knocking over his little table and scattering his cards, “Listen old man, I don’t have time for this.” His face was inches from mine but I still couldn’t see it. All I could see were his eyes which could have been fires burning in the forests of the night, which could have been distant stars.

“The phrase, “Someone stepped over my grave” comes to mind. The feeling when your bullet is made comes over you like that, as inevitable and unexpected as a sneeze. Your eyes shut, you shudder, your stomach constricts, and you double over. For

a moment you are alone, the sky darkens and you hear nothing except a whisper, a voice, an old voice, a voice like aged leather, like a murder of crows picking over carrion and calling out to the All-Father in thanks for their bounty. “I’m coming for you and no power in the universe can stop me” is all it says. Then it is over and the only thing you are left with is that sickening sense that something is coming to devour you, body and soul, that someone is carrying something for you and you don’t know when they will deliver it.”

This caused me to pause.

“That feeling in your heart lasts as long as they carry the bullet for you. The bullet is stored in the clip of a Saturday Night Special. You don’t know when or where, but you know that someone is bringing your bullet to you and that no power in the universe can stop them. Now son, do you really want that responsibility?”

“I...” I didn’t know what to say, maybe I didn’t. My resolve was shaken.

“Violence begets only more violence. Revenge begets murder begets death begets retribution and more death.”

I put him down. Maybe he was right. I picked up my Helmet and turned to go out. I heard the click of the hammer. Funny, they say you never hear the sound of the bullet that gets you but to me it sounded like the ringing of bells. It was 4:44 and I knew that I wouldn’t see the sun rise, not that it ever really did in Neo-Shinjuku.

“Nice shot, Padre.” came the feminine voice from behind a tall screen with daggers displayed on it. Her teeth looked like ivory bullets as she smiled. She handed him my stolen wallet. Protection money or maybe they worked together and when she

had her fun she then gave him half, I didn't know and at this point I didn't care much anymore.

“You owe me one, Little Dragon. We'll see if his wallet covers it.” He said as he holstered the pistol.

Neo-Shinjuku, sometimes called Demon City Shinjuku, sometimes just Demon City. We are all monsters here, in one way or another. The city attracts us and we follow the Siren's call. Like lambs to the slaughter, like moths to the flame, we're hooked and we can't get enough. The decadence is intoxicating, but there ain't no such thing as a free lunch, and you never get anything without paying for it eventually. My last thought as I lay in a rapidly collecting pool of my own blood was "I should have seen this coming." Then the darkness took me and I thought no more.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

When I began this collection of poems and short stories I did not know fully where it would take me or my readers. In my writings I tried to bring a new perspective to life in America from a new type of American. I tried not to speak for other people but to empathize with them. Whether or not I did the same thing that Walt Whitman did in "Song of Myself" is for others to decide. The success of my writings will be determined not by me but by my readers and what they decide to do with my stories. I said in my introduction that I wasn't going to show them the end, but the beginning, a new beginning for myself and those who come after me. Here's to that brave new world, with such people like us in it.

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