

Before the fact

Before the fact, two cretins in greasy blue overalls are working back of the gas station somewhere on a service road in the searing desert sun. Perhaps it is Nevada, or rural Greece. They are strapping a camera to a nightmare of their own design, a flying creature cooked up in stainless steel vats back of the outhouse. It is something like a winged sea lamprey or hagfish, purple-black lips drawn back over rows upon rows of rotating serrated teeth. The creature is on standby, they will stand well clear when switching it on. If they can remember in their haste, they will don the radiation suits draped over the hood of the 57 Chevy which they have converted into something like a pickup truck. They rasp at each other in conscious imitation of the ancient anime duo "Beavis and Butthead". We shall not dwell upon their discourse.

Both men have erections. One of them, called either Zeke or Stavros, depending upon where you think they should be, begins to cackle so drastically that an epileptic seizure ensues, and the other, Bill or Giorgos, must attend to him where he writhes, stirring up plumes of white dust, which are caught by the blast furnace wind which has never ceased, and which does not move along linear time lines. The wind moves simultaneously in the past, the present and the future. It is a "ding an sich" kind of wind , dude. Bill or Giorgos, call him Bilorgos, is cursing and sputtering in ancient Sumerian as he ties his belt around Stavzeke's head, looping it through his teeth to keep him from swallowing his tongue, knowing that Bilorgos actually likes to swallow his tongue and does it at parties to amuse the chicks.

Zekeros, Stavzeke, whatever his name is, ceases slowly to convulse, opens his eyes, drawls

"Like, cam online, dude?"

Bilorgos cuffs him with the back of his fetchingly gnarled and calloused hand, steel-hard after years in the wind.

"Fuck yes, shithaid. Quit fuckin' around. Gotta git this fucker up and flyin' before The Master gits home from the dungeon."

Who is The Master? Doesn't concern you, asshole. Scene's gonna end before the stupid fuck is even needed to flesh it out. He is a literary device, how's that for metafiction y'all?

Anyway, they starts in a-chantin' a litany of names which they done transcribed badly from a song by "Napalm Death" or some other stupid band, does it matter? A bunch of satanist poseurs, all right?

"We invoke thee, Quazingy, Freelulu, Mozuba, Scrachreely, Hookoodzaka, oh masters of the black blackness blacker than the blackest thing you can imagine and then even a little blacker and creepier. Woooooo..." A sudden gust of wind blew my picture of Jesus off the wall as I wrote that. Honestly. Author's word of honor. Woooooooo. Such metafiction we got going here. Oy.

Point of all of this, they gotta get the thing to fly, right? Remember these two points. A.: it is a flying thing. B: it has a camera attached.

Zekeros, forgetting the radiation suit, why not? Screams over the mounting banshee wail of the creature's engine, become the dominant theme in this movement of the scherzo. a wooooooooEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!

"Turbos , like, uh...turbaning, dude, Whatever."

"Check." Say Bilorgos Checking a checkmark on a checklist on a clipboard. Perhaps not. Does it matter? He has been wearing his radiation suit for some time. I just forgot to mention it.

"Flight mode...like...engaged!!!"

"Yo."

"I'm ,like, turnin' the bitch on, dude!"

"Shit!!! I'm like outta here dude!"

They starts in a-runnin', raising even more dust clouds like cartoon characters from the Warner Brothers canon, legs becoming blurs of circular penstrokes. They are unable to run. I won't let them. I want them to die, get it?

The creature, lying on an arc-welded ramp begins to hum, commences to gibe and gambol in the wabe, flools a beansnerd, artimioseses quingly while shakataking. Oh squeoooo most dire, oh boodly peeviatinglyocious.

With a dull whine like a flock of rockets bound for Bosnia Herzogovina, it ascends skywards. Thang's a flyin' at long last, trailing a khaki vapor trail in its most heinous wake.

The crispy, toasted, dry-roasted shells of Zekeros and Bilorgos lie smouldering on the desert floor like CNN footage of Iraqi soldiers in a tank. Tough break, guys. The camera-equipped flying hagfish powers up, goes supersonic with a dull thud which disintegrates the husks of the boys where they lie. I said they would "Stand well back." Did they listen?

Down the world line, an aerial POV shot of a man lying propped up in bed. Chainsmoking and drinking cofee from a red Melmac mug. There is a small black telephone at the end of a long black cord which trails out into the hall next to the bed, as next as it can possibly be without being glued to his very head. Somehow, the speed with which the man grows within the frame is exaggerated, almost as if..as if..THE CAMERA WERE FIXED TO A SUPERSONIC FLYING HAGFISH. Oh no! He's a gonna die! The flying hagfish is a comin' in through the window to bore holes in his soul. They's gonna be blood an' hair all over them walls! It's a gonna be a bloodbath, boss! It's getting' nail-bitingly nauseatingly faster and faster, Tom Cruise is sittin' at the controls of this study in perspective as shaped by Renaissance notions of rendering three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, the Top Gun himself is pushing the envelope, proving once again that he has the right stuff to defy those pencil pushers at HQ who tried to ground him twice already, adrenalin is flowing like a messenger hormone or another liquid simile and popcorn consumption is increasing. Men's arms are gripped by their dates. The men think sly thoughts about what will happen after the movie and dinner. It's a gonna crash, ma! It's a twister auntie Em!

Then, ba da bing! It all goes up in a hail of virtual particles and cigarette ashes, pistachio shells swept up from the foul upstairs neighbor who spits them down onto my front porch. It is nothing, there is no film, there is no shot, there is nothing dramatic in the least. There is the 3rd person omniscient, though, and it is the eye of that mind which sees that this man is only lying in bed wishing the phone would ring. His, my, our vision has become so narrow that the desire to talk to someone on the phone, have another cigarette, sip some more tepid coffee constitutes the whole of his ambition, the only plan he has made for the future (or at least the remainder of the day.) The problem is, oh

gentle reader, oh tender reader, oh reader most beloved, oh reader, what are you wearing, I'm in a phone booth wearing a red leather bikini who is this? I'm hanging up in a minute.... the future recedes eternally, fleeing the moment, and the moment is ever and anon the same scene. Oh, woe is him, me, us, you.

And what joy the previous night to resume his haunting of the dark streets of this city, this Athens, this fevered trek from kiosk to kiosk , "periptera", in the local parlance. He consumes a chain of Diet Cokes and cigarettes punctuated by souvlaki from hairy hands. He is hounded and harried by a possibly infinite cycle of cars cars cars piloted by creatures who have surrendered their humanity to their rides. Gasoline powered centaurs checking their humanity at the door of this or that vehicle, merged with rolling semi-autonomous steel and plastic boxes. Become the enemy, become Mammon incarnate, farting a worldsize cloud of poison gas, cutting off their stupid fucking noses to spite the place where their faces would go, should go, have gone. They would run him down in a fucking millisecond, hunted rabbit creature that he has become, pedestrian in a car town, inconsequential by definition, invisible, be-sneakered, sucking an ill-fitting plastic dental prosthesis. He is pathetic, dear friends, he don't want to be, not by a long shot, but he is. There you go.

And ooh, how he ogles the parade of feminine pulchritude come jiggling bobbling, big chestedly tan smooth leggily, past his jaundiced weltanschaung.

A chainsaw of longing, desire, he dare not call it lust, comes and cuts him straight down the middle. "Stop it!" his inner voice cries, "put those legs away! Go home and put on some clothes!" He finds himself wishing he lived in Iran or somewhere the women were decently covered so that the sight of their hooded eyes, their classical statue proportions wouldn't hurt him so. It hurts, dear friends, it is a tangible sensation of pain for him, like an ice cream headache, like the first bite of a piece of fruit after eating nothing all day. Too much sensory information. It is the dentist blowing compressed air on a nerve he has labored over with a drill, a little polyp, raw and quivering, exposed to a light it was never designed to encounter, out in a world from which it had been decently shielded by friendly gum tissue. "Cover me back up! I would rather decay!" it cries. Or it should, if it could. Metaphors only speak when they are spoken to.

The omniscient third person, not having been allowed to speak should by all rights be allowed to judge or comment upon our hero. Who is this 3rd person, anyway. How the fuck did he get so smart? What kind of equipment does he use to see all and know even more? Who's his tailor? Does he have a website? "Can I speak to him, please?"

"Third person omniscient, please pick up the white courtesy telephone. A Mr. Pronoun would like to speak to you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Pronoun, sir, the 3rd person is in a meeting right now. Can I have him call you back?"

(Of course, we all know that he never returns my calls. The few times that he has, I have been out and my answering machine has been on the blink just lately. Can't afford to get it fixed. No time, or something.)

"No, I bloody well want to speak to him right fucking now, bitch!"

"I'm certain there's no cause for language like that, Mr. Pronoun sir. Have a nice day." Click.

Never was a real person on the line anyway. It's all robots these days. At least that's what the voices tell me. They usually lie, though.

"Tahm fo' de flashback, assho'. Ah said flashback tahm, muthafuckah!!!" cries The Monkey. The Monkey can't help being a stereotype, at least not in his dress sense. If you saw him from a distance, you would take him for a standard issue organ grinder monkey. He would adorn the barrel organ of a moustachioed comic Italian stock character named Giuseppe. He would have made you say "Awwww..." if you were lobotomized and sitting in the balcony at a cinema in Texas or in a federal pen in about 1935. This monkey is not of that ilk stamp or kidney. He is redolent of the dead goats he keeps out back of his cardboard box, to let 'em cure for later ingestion. His lice have an oral history, telling of lice civilizations rising and crumbling to dust. Their mythology, first told in heroic Homeric couplets by lice bards or troubadors accompanying themselves on noble kithara have recently degenerated to the point where they sit in cappuccino bars barking into microphones accompanied by DJ's, multi media online presentations and street gang members. The lice have gone hip hop. They wear enormous trousers with boxer shorts pulled up to their nipples and torn hooded sweatshirts.

There are no flies on The Monkey. Flies die at 50 meters when they get a whiff of his aroma. It is not unlike the battlefield at the Somme on a hot day, with just a soupcon of the sewers of ancient Rome the day after the annual offal eating contest.

The Monkey masturbates endlessly, of course. He wears vibrating rubber underwear and it keeps him in a constant state of arousal. He makes me pay enormous phone bills. His cell phone has been on a sex chat line for three years, non stop. There is a relay shift of women who keep talking to him through the headset he has incorporated into his red bellboy cap. He occasionally remembers to mutter something back into the microphone. He chainsmokes Gitane laced with PCP, crack, and Dioxin, which he says "takes the edge off and keeps me frosty". He is my lord and master. I have surrendered my will to him.

If my emotional life could be likened to a 1968 Impala, fashioned into a pick-up truck with a chisel, and it certainly could, then The Monkey pilots that sputtering backfiring chariot. He sits at the wheel takin' er down the Pacific Coast Highway at 150 mph, screeching on two wheels with threadbare tires around them hairpin turns, swigging from a bottle of Everclear, with his arm around a female sheep in a leather wetsuit oiled up with Vitalis. His yellow cirrhotic eyes peer at me from the rear view mirror where I sit on a pile of dirty socks and underwear in the back, and he hawks great asteroid sized wads of phlegm out the window at me. I have long since ceased to try and wipe them off, so I sit up to my neck in an exoskeleton of semi-fluid snot which is slowly contracting and making it harder to move or breathe.

"Shut yo' muthafuckin' hole and tell de peoples 'bout dat muthafuckin' flashback, fuckface!"

The flashback. I hesitate. I must re-fill my vat of diet coke and light a cigarette, folks. There still no word from the 3rd person omniscient. Hope springs infernal.

Mr. P. Pronoun leaves his soi disant bed of pain and exits to the kitchen where he has chopped up all of the vegetables untouched by mold in his refrigerator to cook a meal before he runs completely out of money. Nothing left to eat after that but the breadcrumbs and the instant decaf in the cupboard. Wait! There is some ancient bread, just scrape off that green stuff. I suppose this is more than some, less than others. He has learned that it

doesn't pay to compare living situations, lives. There is always someone better off, always someone worse off. There are the perishingly, agonizingly lonely and those who would trade a kidney for a moment's solitude. There are those who see the necessity of having all of their CD's facing true north, and those with no CD's at all.

There are those born under a bad sign and those born under a stop sign. There are those and there are those other ones. Finish this yourself.

"As long as yez gotcha helt, kid. Dat's awl dat counts in dis life."

Pronoun tastes the soup, tosses in a few more spices. A good palette of spices can make anything taste like food, he thinks. The sound of voices lifted in song rises from out in the street, recorded voice dancing around a melody in the ornate oriental Greek style accompanied by a bovine clarinet. Just when did he decide that this sort of thing was annoying rather than exotic and charming? The soup seems to be all right, not burning on the hotplate or anything, so he returns to his mattress on the floor, lights another cigarette, takes another suck from his sport bottle filled with diet coke (actually Pepsi Max in this instance.) Pronoun slurps this stuff down by the vat.

Fucking clarinet and whining nasal singers are really getting up his nose just now. He thinks about going out on the veranda and staring fiercely at them. He is far too much of a coward to shout any abuse. He doesn't have the vocabulary to do so even if he wanted to. Not that the Greek language is beyond his learning capability, he just doesn't particularly want to learn it, even though he speaks more than people seem to think.

He just decides to close the window and get used to it. It is too hot to close the window, but there is no choice.

Pronoun discovers that the tooth that has been bothering him is actually loose and will probably fall out on its own unless he sees a dentist soon. There is no money for a dentist. There is no money for anything.

Boringly enough, predictably enough, a loose tooth is sufficiently depressing to make him think of (tympani roll please, Gus) SUICIDE. Ooooooo, now there's a thought for an afternoon. "To cease upon the midnight with no pain" woo hoo hoooooo. "Half in love with easeful death."

"Aowww, Mr. Keats, you do have a wye wiff words, innit?"

Pronoun has a prescription for Prozac in his organizer, (he is still lost enough in the 1980's to think that a Filofax is somehow a symbol of affluence.) He is depressed that he has no money to buy Prozac to try and get over his depression.

He is just a mess on toast, ain't he folks? Don't we just hate him? Doesn't he just make us cringe?

Does anybody wonder how he came to this pass? Pronoun is attractive in a sleazy sort of way. He is quite intelligent, articulate, even witty. He is gifted in many ways, plays several musical instruments, speaks seven languages. Urbane, well-read, sensitive, everything in short which no one has any use for any more. "If I were greedy, amoral, stupid and obnoxious I would fit in just fine." he whines.

The Monkey wants to tell us why Pronoun is so depressed. I don't want to let him spill the beans.

"Why?" you ask. Because it hurts, friends, it is because of an event that has come to bore even the staunchest of his few supporters. He has told the tale again and again.

"Ah tells 'em if y'all too skairt, assho" say The Monkey.

Pronoun's wife is dead. His wife is dead his wife is dead his wife is dead she is dead dead dead dead....there...happy?

She died over a year ago. She died delirious and swollen and broke in a broken-down shitpit of a public hospital in Athens, Greece. Pronoun watched her fade before his eyes, sat with her through her last night on earth, nursed her in her final days, bore it all alone. He held her hand, he propped her up, they supported each other but there were just the two of them and in the end, there was Pronoun, sitting on the ground outside the morgue, wailing and pouring dirt over his head. He really did that, everybody.

That last night, they had argued. She wouldn't go to sleep and it was starting to piss him off.

"Just try and get some sleep would you PLEASE!?"
(oh dear lord, oh dear sweet tender succulent Jesus, I can't go over this again.
"Gots ta" says The Monkey, "gots ta tell da fokes.")

They had been to a hospital that day so that Mrs. Pronoun could have a blood test. They thought that anti-coagulants in massive doses would give her a few more months of life. Jesus. Only thing was, they had to draw blood every other day. Mrs. Pronoun's arms were a mass of bruises. She had always had tiny veins. He had watched her in earlier days, searching forever to find a hittable vein, long after he had shot up, savored the rush and was rinsing out the syringe. Whoopsy! That piece of information was for later. Oh well.

There had been a heat wave in that city, that nameless concrete hell. It was 42 degrees celsius and that is well over 107 degrees Fahrenheit if that system is still extant somewhere.

She had wanted to stay in the hospital but they were worried about money. He had told her (to his everlasting shame and guilt)
"No one helps me with this" (her illness, her health care, her) "not even you."
"What do you mean not even me?"
"You won't do what the doctors tell you. You won't wear your oxygen at home. I can't take this. Please lie down and put the oxygen mask back on."
"Are there dogs in the hall?" She had been seeing dogs. She had seen a fleet of impossible taxis drive up the street the day before. She had told him that dogs had come in the window, or it was possibly a dream. She had seen angels in the house.
The heat was accelerating her condition. When she slept he could see the vein in her neck throbbing. Her ankles and her thighs had swollen until they were one meaty cylinder from the waist down. It hurt him to see it. It hurt her of course, and she let him know it, though she was stoic and stubborn. She was not so much in agony as more than usually grumpy. That morning she got her period. When it pains it roars.

The doctors, the indifferent moron Greek motherfucking doctors, the pustule sucking public employees who needed to exert no exertion whatsoever in order to receive their paycheck, who doubtless envied their colleagues in the public sector hospitals where the monied classes went sent them on their way with grumpy assurances that they would know more after the results of the blood test.

"She keep taking calcium. She get some sleep. Call tomorrow."

He found a wheelchair for her, put her in it and left her sitting in the hall near the entrance where the ambulance drivers gathered to chainsmoke and be as stupid and ugly as humanly possible. They were astoundingly good at it, real champions.

Since no one would call a taxi for them, and his only source of the Greek language was a Berlitz phrase book, he went out onto the street in front of the hospital gate to hail one. A century later, a taxi stopped and he managed by means of mime and Berlitz phrases to instruct the driver that

"Wife of me not good. Help go hospital need."

The driver and Pronoun loaded her into the taxi, moving one swollen leg at a time, maneuvering her like a strangely shaped piece of furniture into the back seat.

Pathetically, he tried to point out some of the sights on the way home, naming the streets for her. He stupidly thought that the information might come in handy should she ever want to know where McDonald's was from their apartment or where the shopping center near the hospital was. Or where the health food store was.

The driver and Pronoun got her out of the back seat and on her feet. To her credit, she managed the walk from the taxi into the hall, though she was well into the process of dying even then.

Once inside, they took the elevator, which Pronoun rarely did. It was only about ten steps up to their apartment, maybe more, but nothing compared to the narrow little stairs they had lived with back in Belgium.

He helped her in, helped her get hooked up to the oxygen machine, helped her onto the mattress on the floor. Yes, the same mattress we read about earlier. We dignified it by calling it "bed", the bed where Pronoun lay with the laptop and the melmac mug of coffee.

(I can't go on with this ,monkey. I can't bear this anymore.

"Quit yo' fuckin' moanin' little titty baby asshole. Almos' done now.")

No more, we'll cut to something else. You know how they do in books. They cut up narratives into installments. They go back to another subplot."

"You gots another plot, shitbrain? Shee-it. This be the only story you gots to tell.")

This would perhaps be a good opportunity to imitate Joseph Heller in "Catch 22", you know, the way he keeps repeating "Help him. Help the bombardier. I am the bombardier. And then (in the movie, at least) we finally see that the bombardier is dying, is a bloody ruin on the floor of the plane. We get it in installments. It has more punch that way.

A series of vignettes. We see Pronoun buzzing around their apartment, the selfsame suburban stone-floored palazzo where The Pronoun of the Future sits, awaiting activation. Future Pronoun watches his former self in action. Pronoun of the Past is muttering the "serenity prayer" from Alcoholics Anonymous as he compulsively, obsessively goes about sweeping the floor, dusting, cleaning and then re-cleaning the place.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

The courage to change the things I can

And the wisdom to know the difference.

It embodies a homely, bumper sticker kind of wisdom, but he has decided that if it ever applied in his life that time is now. He is aware of the workings of his psyche, yet powerless to behave any differently.

"I cannot change the fact that she is dying. I can however give this floor a damn good cleaning." He also thinks by this act to work a piece of symbolic magic. If the apartment can be made livable, arranged, set up, ready to go, then she will commence to live in it. She will stop all of this dying bullshit and start living. With this in mind, he has been frantically running around the neighborhood, purchasing little household items with their dwindling supply of cash.

"Look, honey, an ice cube tray!! A mop and bucket! A hose!" He bought a ladder, so that she could reach the cupboards which are too high for her, a pair of blue plastic stools so that she can put her feet up as the "doctor" recommended. Anything, jesus, oh god almighty, anything at all!!

"Will you stop cleaning!!"

"Will you please, please, just try and get some sleep?" lord have mercy on his evil soul, he is angry that she won't sleep.

"I would if I could, believe me."

He goes out on the back porch to have a cigarette. She has stopped smoking on doctor's orders (though we all know she is sneaking them when Pronoun is not around). He is smoking more than ever. Trailing ten meters of clear plastic tubing, she appears in the kitchen door, making to remove the oxygen mask and join him.

"Don't take off your oxygen!"

"I just wanted to come out there for a while. Feels cooler."

The Pronoun of the future is now activated. He comes to with a start, tears welling up in his eyes. "My God, I wouldn't let her come out on the veranda with me." If he had a barbed wire whip, he would give himself a good seeing-to, bloody stripes all down his back. "Yes!" he cries to The Pronoun of the Past, "FUCKING TELL HER TO JOIN YOU OUTSIDE. KISS HER. HOLD HER YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE!!! YOU WILL NEVER SEE HER AGAIN IN THIS LIFE AFTER TOMORROW!!!!"

Now he has gone and done it. The weepy weepies start. Oh boo hoo hoo.

Sounding like Alex in Clockwork Orange now, innit? Hold on. Wailing jag nipped in the bud. Good thing the narrator is on Prozac and Valium, takes the edge off this nasty nasty business of living, don't you think, Monkey?

The monkey has lost interest. He has booted up Pronoun's desktop computer and gone online. He is having cybersex with a 16 year old girl in Kentucky. He is banging his penis on the space bar. He comes mightily all over the keys, says

"ahhhh", sits back in the desk chair, lighting a cigarette and grins over his shoulder at me.
"Say somethin' lame-o?"

I have left the monkey hanging for some time with this question. It is a couple of months later in time as measured in the phenomenological universe since I sat down to this narrative. For you no time at all has elapsed, oh darling reader, reader sweetheart, do you like it when I rub here, reader? Funny thing, that. I have spent many a moment in

mused limbo, sitting on busses, waiting for busses, staring into space, wondering about time, dude.

When we decide it is better to "live in the moment" how do we define that moment, for example? There is a lag between the perceived universe and our brain's processing of the information contained therein. It takes just a wee tiny morsel of time, not enough to feed a hungry neutrino, for a photon bouncing off a tree to strike our optic nerve and to stimulate a reaction in our brain chemistry that informs our memory that we are seeing an object, filed under "plants. tree. won't eat me." In that sense, we can never apprehend the moment since we are perpetually lagging behind. Thus, in spite of our best efforts to be buddha-like and fully occupy this moment and none other, we actually live in the past. Granted, of course, that the objects we perceive have an objective existence of their own, outside of our perceptions, in which case.....

"I be warnin' you, assho'. Kick yo ass you don't git on wit it." say Mr. M.

this fragment ends here. further research may reveal more information.

Many years later. all of the character sketches in the above fragment have reached their expiration date. c'est la vie.