

# THE APOCALYPSE READER



SPECULATIONS BY

Rick Moody

Edgar Allan Poe

Joyce Carol Oates

Dennis Cooper

Shelley Jackson

Michael Moorcock

Neil Gaiman

Kelly Link



EDITED BY JUSTIN TAYLOR

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Thunder's Mouth Press I New York

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*For my parents, who read to me*

# CONTENTS

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[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[INTRODUCTION | Justin Taylor](#)

[NYARLATHOTEP | H. P. Lovecraft](#)

[THE APOCALYPSE COMMENTARY OF BOB PAISNER | Rick Moody](#)

[SWEETHEARTS | Stacey Levine](#)

[FRAISE. MENTHE. ET POIVRE 1978 | Jared Hohl](#)

[WHAT IS IT WHEN GOD SPEAKS? | Diane Williams](#)

[KRAFTMARK | Matthew Derby](#)

[THE HOOK | Shelley Jackson](#)

[SIXTEEN SMALL APOCALYPSES | Lucy Corin](#)

[THE LAST MAN | Adam Nemett](#)

[EARTH'S HOLOCAUST | Nathaniel Hawthorne](#)

[I ALWAYS GO TO PARTICULAR PLACES | Gary Lutz and Deb Olin Unferth](#)

[AN ACCOUNTING | Brian Evenson](#)

[SQUARE OF THE SUN | Robert Bradley](#)

[THE END | Josip Novakovich](#)

[SOME APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF THE SHORTAGE OF TIME | Ursula K. LeGuin](#)

[THINK WARM THOUGHTS | Allison Whittenberg](#)

[THE ASH GRAY PROCLAMATION | Dennis Cooper](#)

[POLE SHIFT | Justin Taylor](#)

[MISS KANSAS ON JUDGMENT DAY | Kelly Link](#)

[THE STAR | H. G. Wells](#)

WHEN WE WENT TO SEE THE END OF THE WORLD by Dawnie Morningside, age 11 ¼ | Neil Gaiman

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I AM 'I DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM' AND YOU ARE AFRAID OF ME AND SO AM | Tao Lin

THE ESCAPE—A TALE OF 1755 | Grace Aguilar

SO WE ARE VERY CONCERNED | Elliott David

GIGANTIC | Steve Aylett

THE END OF THE FUTURE | Colette Phair

CROSSING INTO CAMBODIA | Michael Moorcock

'80s LILIES | Terese Svoboda

THESE ZOMBIES ARE NOT A METAPHOR | Jeff Goldberg

THE RAPID ADVANCE OF SORROW | Theodora Goss

THE CONVERSATION OF EIROS AND CHARMION | Edgar Allan Poe

APOCACALYPSE: A DIPTYCH | Joyce Carol Oates

AFTER ALL | Carol Emshwiller

SAVE ME FROM THE PIOUS AND THE VENGEFUL | Lynne Tillman

CONTRIBUTORS

PERMISSIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

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**THIS GENERATION SHALL NOT PASS, TILL ALL THESE THINGS BE FULFILLED.**

-MATTHEW, 24:35

You HOLD IN your hand thirty-four short stories about the Apocalypse.

People have been telling me this is an especially timely book, but the fact is that, historically, every single generation has imagined itself uniquely in crisis and fantasized that theirs will be the one that witnesses The End. The twentieth century was unique mostly in that it marked the moment when humanity became capable of bringing Apocalypse upon itself, but even the novelty (if not the menace) of that prospect has long since worn off. If this is a timely book, I think the reason is that the topic is perennially timely. It is also, as Frank Kermode puts it in *The Sense of an Ending*, "infallibly interesting."

It's worth pointing out that the word Apocalypse comes from the Greek, and literally means "revelation" or "an unveiling." It can be used to describe cataclysmic changes of any sort. Revolution, for example, or social upheaval. The American Desegregation movement was Apocalyptic in that its success necessitated the destruction of a certain way of life. (That we're better off without it is not the point.) There are micro-Apocalypses that mark moments in our lives: childhood's end, a relationship's sudden implosion, Death.

There are no excerpts in this book. Even ostensibly "self-contained" excerpts seem unfulfilling to me, and frankly, I don't like them. I have limited this book's scope exclusively to the short story, the ultimate in "self-contained" literature, that eternally embattled form that writers are constantly told "does not sell" or "has outlived its usefulness" or other nonsense. This anthology is a celebration of the short story's inexhaustible vitality, as well as an in-depth (though certainly not exhaustive) survey of its variety.

The forms these stories take, the styles they adopt or invent, the concerns they have, the places and positions and eras their writers come from, and the boundaries they push are as varied as the types of Apocalypse they engage. There are funny stories and deeply touching stories; gory ones and heady ones; stories that focus on an individual or a small group and stories that take on (or take down) the whole world; there are a few very long stories and more than a few very short (or "flash" or "short-short") stories; there are "realistic" and "experimental" stories; overtly and implicitly political stories and utterly apolitical stories; stories that could be classified as belonging to this or that genre (New Wave, Fabulist, Horror, Satire, etc.); and stories that defy any attempt at classification. Some are the work of best-selling authors or cult favorites, and others are by people I can guarantee you've never heard of. At least one story has been published elsewhere as a poem.

Each story addresses both of the book's themes in a unique and exciting way, but more than that, each one contains that fundamental, irreducible, *something* that is indescribable, yet always discernable, in great writing. In short, I picked stories that I love and that I want to share with the world.

There are brand-new stories by Shelley Jackson, Matthew Derby, and several others; some (such as ~~Gary Lutz and Deb Olin Unferth's collaboration~~) were written especially for this book. There are classic stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells and H. P. Lovecraft. There are hand-picked favorites by the likes of Neil Gaiman, Rick Moody, and Michael Moorcock; a rare Joyce Carol Oates story, published years ago in *Ontario Review* but never before collected; Terese Svoboda's 0. Henry Prize-winning "80s Lilies"; and plenty of surprising, exciting, disturbing stories from authors you know, or only thought you knew, or will be thrilled to discover (Steve Aylett).

Dennis Cooper's "The Ash Gray Proclamation" pushes his minimalist aesthetics to a radical new level in order to capture and satirize the claustrophobic, reactionary, Apocalyptic atmosphere of post-9/11 America. More than just extremely provocative, it is extremely important, and I am honored-ecstatic, in fact-to have put this story into a book for the very first time.

Now let me direct your attention to those people whose obscurity I earlier guaranteed. Be the first one on your block to know about them, because today's underground sensation is tomorrow's #1 hit. You heard it here first; now tell your friends.

Robert Bradley sent the only unsolicited submission that made the final cut (it also beat out several I had asked for). His contribution, "Square of the Sun," is feisty and unpredictable, with a real meat-and-potatoes streak-the kind of story that slaps your face and laughs at you for crying, but still offers to finish you off before it goes to sleep.

Adam Nemett's "The Last Man" is funny, but not ha-ha funny, unless it's a hushed, nervous giggle. Jeff Goldberg's "These Zombies Are Not a Metaphor," on the other hand, *is* ha-ha funny, so go ahead and laugh loudly.

If this book were a baseball team, Jared Hohl's "Fraise, Menthe, et Poivre 1978" would be battling cleanup.

Elliott David's "So We Are Very Concerned" is deliciously gruesome, and counterpoints the neo-Beckettian agoraphobia of Tao Lin's "i am `i don't know what i am' and you are afraid of me and so am i." These two hypercontemporary short-shorts sandwich Grace Aguilar's "The Escape—A Tale of 1755," the longest story in the book by a good thousand words. Aguilar was a British Jew whose very decision to take up the pen defied the conventions of her day; her work broke new ground in the history of female Jewish self-representation. Her work has been largely unavailable in a nonacademic context for roughly a century. Steeped in the real history of the Spanish Inquisition, from which her parents fled, and the lives of the crypto-Jews, who openly converted to Christianity but maintained their true faith in secret, "The Escape" is probably the most difficult story in this book to get through. First published in 1844, the same year as Hawthorne's "Earth's Holocaust," it is even more heavily handed than that story when it comes to moralizing and pedantry, but it is absolutely worth putting yourself through, or else it wouldn't be here, so I hope that you will exert the extra effort. If you do, there's a kickass Apocalypse in it for you.

A word on sequencing: I eschewed obvious and convenient organizing principles like alphabetization or chronology, and went for what *felt right*. It's the logic of the mix-tape or the Grateful Dead bootleg, and as far as I'm concerned all tracks segue. You, however, are encouraged to hunt and peck, pick and choose, see what suits you, what repels and what draws you back. Thank you for reading our book. Now that we have reached the end of the beginning, we are ready to begin the

End.

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-JUSTIN TAYLOR

Halloween, 200

Bushwick, Brooklyn, New York

**THE**  

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**APOCALYPSE READER**



# H. P. Lovecraft

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NYARLATHOTEP ... THE CRAWLING CHAOS ... I am the last ... I will tell the audient void... .

I do not recall distinctly when it began, but it was months ago. The general tension was horrible. To a season of political and social upheaval was added a strange and brooding apprehension of hideous physical danger; a danger widespread and all-embracing, such a danger as may be imagined only in the most terrible phantasms of the night. I recall that the people went about with pale and worried faces, and whispered warnings and prophecies which no one dared consciously repeat or acknowledge to himself that he had heard. A sense of monstrous guilt was upon the land, and out of the abysses between the stars swept chill currents that made men shiver in dark and lonely places. There was a daemoniac alteration in the sequence of the seasons-the autumn heat lingered fearsomely, and everyone felt that the world and perhaps the universe had passed from the control of known gods and forces to that of gods or forces which were unknown.

And it was then that Nyarlathotep came out of Egypt. Who he was, none could tell, but he was of the old native blood and looked like a Pharaoh. The fellahin knelt when they saw him, yet could not say why. He said he had risen up out of the blackness of twenty-seven centuries, and that he had heard messages from places not on this planet. Into the lands of civilisation came Nyarlathotep, swarthy, slender, and sinister, always buying strange instruments of glass and metal and combining them into instruments yet stranger. He spoke much of the sciences-of electricity and psychology-and gave exhibitions of power which sent his spectators away speechless, yet which swelled his fame to an exceeding magnitude. Men advised one another to see Nyarlathotep, and shuddered. And when Nyarlathotep went, rest vanished; for the small hours were rent with the screams of nightmare. Never before had the dreams of nightmare been such a public problem; now the wise men almost wished they could forbid sleep in the small hours, that the shrieks of cities might less horribly disturb the pale, pitying moon as it glimmered on green waters gliding under bridges, and old steeples crumbling against a sickly sky.

I remember when Nyarlathotep came to my city-the great, the old, the terrible city of unnumbered crimes. My friend had told me of him, and of the impelling fascination and allurements of his revelations, and I burned with eagerness to explore his uttermost mysteries. My friend said they were horrible and impressive beyond my most fevered imaginings; that what was thrown on a screen in the darkened room prophesied things none but Nyarlathotep dared prophesy, and that in the sputter of his sparks there was taken from men that which had never been taken before yet which shewed only in their eyes. And I heard it hinted abroad that those who knew Nyarlathotep looked on sights which others saw not.

It was in the hot autumn that I went through the night with the restless crowds to see Nyarlathotep through the stifling night and up the endless stairs into the choking room. And shadowed on a screen, I saw hooded forms amidst ruins, and yellow evil faces peering from behind fallen monuments. And I saw the world battling against blackness; against the waves of destruction from ultimate space whirling, churning; struggling around the dimming, cooling sun. Then the sparks played amazingly around the heads of the spectators, and hair stood up on end whilst shadows more grotesque than I can

tell came out and squatted on the heads. And when I, who was colder and more scientific than the rest, mumbled a trembling protest about "imposture" and "static electricity," Nyarlathotep drove us all out down the dizzy stairs into the damp, hot, deserted midnight streets. I screamed aloud that I was not afraid; that I never could be afraid; and others screamed with me for solace. We swore to one another that the city was exactly the same, and still alive; and when the electric lights began to fade we cursed the company over and over again, and laughed at the queer faces we made.

I believe we felt something coming down from the greenish moon, for when we began to depend on its light we drifted into curious involuntary formations and seemed to know our destinations though we dared not think of them. Once we looked at the pavement and found the blocks loose and displaced by grass, with scarce a line of rusted metal to shew where the tramways had run. And again we saw a tram-car, lone, windowless, dilapidated, and almost on its side. When we gazed around the horizon we could not find the third tower by the river, and noticed that the silhouette of the second tower was ragged at the top. Then we split up into narrow columns, each of which seemed drawn in a different direction. One disappeared in a narrow alley to the left, leaving only the echo of a shocking moan. Another filed down a weed-choked subway entrance, howling with a laughter that was mad. My own column was sucked toward the open country, and presently felt a chill which was not of the height of autumn; for as we stalked out on the dark moor, we beheld around us the hellish moon-glitter of everlasting snows. Trackless, inexplicable snows, swept asunder in one direction only, where lay a gulf all the blacker for its glittering walls. The column seemed very thin indeed as it plodded dreamily into the gulf. I lingered behind, for the black rift in the greenlitten snow was frightful, and I thought I had heard the reverberations of a disquieting wail as my companions vanished; but my power to linger was slight. As it beckoned by those who had gone before, I half floated between the titanic snowdrifts quivering and afraid, into the sightless vortex of the unimaginable.

Screamingly sentient, dumbly delirious, only the gods that were can tell. A sickened, sensitive shadow writhing in hands that are not hands, and whirled blindly past ghastly midnights of rotting creation, corpses of dead worlds with sores that were cities, charnel winds that brush the pallid stars and make them flicker low. Beyond the worlds vague ghosts of monstrous things; half-seen columns of unsanctified temples that rest on nameless rocks beneath space and reach up to dizzy vacua above the spheres of light and darkness. And through this revolting graveyard of the universe the muffled, maddening beating of drums, and thin, monstrous whine of blasphemous flutes from inconceivable unlighted chambers beyond Time; the detestable pounding and piping whereunto dance slowly and awkwardly, and absurdly the gigantic, tenebrous ultimate gods the blind, voiceless, mindless gargoyles whose soul is Nyarlathotep.

~~THE APOCALYPSE COMMENTARY OF BOB PAISNER~~



## INTRODUCTION:

*John Composing on Patmos*

I USE THE K.J., or Authorized Version, where the *thees* are *thees* and the *thous* are *thous*. Ever since I was a kid I used it, ever since the sixties, ever since St. Luke's Parish in Manchester, N.H. You don't get the same kind of line in the Revised Standard Version. You don't find "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty" (1:8), with its Elizabethan implications of damnation and immortality. Which is pretty much how Revelation begins.

Okay, so it was the first century after Christ's martyrdom at Calvary. His followers were suffering. They were spurned, they were flogged, they were flayed, crucified upside down, torn apart by horses left out to be fed upon by vultures. You name it. Every conceivable torture was visited upon them. Meanwhile, in the midst of this persecution, St. John the Divine goes off to [Patmos](#), an island off the coast of Greece, and begins—in this intense rage—to write a screed on which his reputation rests among fundamentalists. It's about the future of the church, about the coming house-cleaning among the *chosen*. This is the screed called Revelation. It's his prophecy. A prophecy that contains things "which must shortly come to pass" (1:1). "He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly" (22:20).

Here's what I imagine: John living a life of complete poverty, confined to a monastic cell with only charcoal and parchment to divert him, unfed, unattended, in a building as scorched as the sands of the Middle East. Or maybe he was even one of those cave-dwelling monks. Unwashed, solitary, in retirement from light. In constant fear of the authorities. Panicked at the thought of his own martyrdom. In cycles, John wept, shouted oaths, prayed joyously. He had visions. Because of migraines. I'd say John had a migrainous personality. That's my guess. Anyhow, in the midst of John's rage, in the midst of his abandonment, an angel came to him and said to take up his pen.

## MYSELF,

*Bob Paisner, in Chapin House*

JOHN SAW A future marked by persecutors, false gods, Antichrists, Gog and Magog, plagues, floods, earthquakes. He saw it this way because this was how he felt about the church in the first century. Saw it this way because this was the *moral environment* in which he lived. And of course he's not the only guy that ever had these feelings. Jerome probably felt this way in the wilderness. Nostradamus probably felt this way when he was predicting John F. Kennedy's assassination, the rise of Idi Amin, Ayatollah Khomeini, the invasion of Afghanistan, and the Third World War. Barry Goldwater may also have felt the bruising solitude of moral superiority and maybe he still does. Or take the case of James Earl Carter. And I feel that way too. I feel it now, here in Chapin House at Temple University, Phila., PA. I suffer with rectitude. I have tunnel vision sometimes. I get these compulsions to drop everything and run, to go in search of a girl with whom I worked bagging groceries in Nashua, N.H.

Her hair fell in amber ringlets. She took me into her confidence.

---

Therefore and thus, I am up at 3:00 A.M. on the night before this religious studies term paper due. I have taken two Vivarin caffeine tablets. I'm seated inside a large spherical chair-ear-seventies-type design packed with cushions, which I, along with Anthony Edward Nicholas (hereafter Tony) stole from the Graduate Housing Lounge. We had to roll it down College Street. There's no other furniture in my dorm room, now, except for a mattress and a portable cassette player. I'm wearing only worn boxer shorts. I have stockpiled Quaaludes and generic beer.

I'll just briefly expatiate on how I ended up living alone. The room is a double. Tony moved in a week after school began (Sept. 1980). His shit was everywhere. He had a plug-in pink flamingo. He had congas. Bowling shoes. Hawaiian shirts. He left his records on the floor, out of their sleeves. He didn't bathe. And then, just as suddenly as he moved in, he moved out. Maybe a month later.

I *thought* we got along pretty well. He agreed to dine with me in the refectory each night. We chain-smoked. True: I gave him a number of polite but direct suggestions about that lingering hacking cough of his and about his frequent nosebleeds; I offered to separate the whites from the colored items that lay strewn all over our little room. Maybe I wasn't too politic sometimes-one time when he came back from a frat party with some floozy I barricaded the door. I couldn't stand to *overhear that groping*. One night-it's true-I even threw some of his shit out the window at him when I saw him passing below. These things come over you sometimes. I offered apologies. After Tony left, the housing office moved in a rugby player actually named Scooter. He didn't last long either.

So here I am.

This solitude I've described counts among the similarities between myself and St. John the Divine. There are additional [concordances](#) between my life and the prophecy written down in the book Revelation, to which I would now like to draw your attention. My comments on them will form the major work of this paper. Blessed is he that readeth.

#### *The Angel Appears to John*

"WHAT THOU SEEST, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches," the angel commanded John in the first chapter of the final book of the Bible (1:11), and later, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (1:19). The appearance of the angel hearing the word of Christ is intended to foster in John the act of writing scripture.' But the way I see it, the testamentary approach, this emphasis on *writing things down*, is important not only to Revelation but to the Bible as a whole. The Bible is about writing, about persuasion and the dissemination of belief and practice, and its subject is *praise*, pure and simple, praise for God's stuff. The stuff he made.

Moreover, the Holy Bible, of course, was the first book ever printed with a printing press-the Gutenberg Bible. The revolution of dissemination brought about by the printing press came first on sacred ground, get it? and that's not just coincidence. All books, as a result, refer back to the Bible and to the truth contained in it, just as all writing refers back to divine creation, and, by extension, all critical papers ought to be contained in this concordance too. Between all covers, joined by all bindings, sewn, glued, or Velo-bound, is the word of God, like the movement of radiation out from Ground Zero. And that, you see, is what John's *writing* is about in the Apocalypse. Christ is the "Alpha

and Omega, the beginning and the ending" of all alphabets (and all words) and all books and a society and all of society's [works](#).

---

Now, let's examine me for a minute. Ever since I was a little boy, I have felt the significance of the printed word. I read a lot of science fiction. But as for writing, I avoided this shit like the plague. From the age of twelve, when I went away to boarding school, I was exposed to classes in rhetoric and composition. I didn't enjoy these classes. I think I might have a learning disability. Really. When I have to write something, I get really bored. I never wrote my parents or my uncle, and they never wrote me. (My [father](#) lived in a tent-heated, with electricity, outhouse in back at the furthest corner of our property. Early mornings he would stride across fallow acreage with a shotgun and his dog, Claw. As the sun teased through the remote woods of New Hampshire, my father would fire off round after round at the crows on his property. He took shots he could never make. This was his kind of dissemination. The dissemination of buckshot. His oaths of rage crackled across the White Mountains.)

In the weeks leading to the deadline for my religious studies term paper, I know I am compelled to write in order to proceed to my junior year or at least in order to pass this class, and yet I can't do it. I want to write, but I can't. I'll do anything to avoid it. I'm wandering around dangerous parts of South Philly in a torn overcoat throwing rocks at stray dogs. I'm sleeping in public places. And then—*all at once*—a paper on Revelation comes to me, all at once, in a convulsion of inspiration, in a *revelation you might say*, just as the angel comes to John. It's not that I set out to write down the story of my life this semester, I'm just trying to think up a good paper topic, like, say, *Christ as literary character in the three Synoptic Gospels*. But instead the words just tumble out, as if it's a fit or a seizure. As though I'm taking dictation. My dorm room is a grotto and I totter around in it like an autistic until the moment when suddenly I can't stop myself from writing.

Without too much of a stretch, therefore, we can see that the angel's injunction to compose (in 1:1) can actually refer to *this very religious studies paper*, and to problems in its composition and in my life generally.

#### *The Letters to the Seven Churches*

THE SEVEN CHURCHES to which John is enjoined to write by the angel are in [Asia](#).

Here are their names: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea, and *Philadelphia*. The point here is pretty obvious, right? John's letters to these churches are intended to reward and punish the various successes and failures of these institutions. The language of each letter is dictated by the angel of 1:1.

My paper—this very paper—is being written in *the city of Philadelphia, Pa*. Here's an excerpt from John's letter to the church of this very name (3:12): "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, *which is new Jerusalem*" (italics in original). Therefore, all that I'm telling you is true, *it fulfills prophecy*, and plus, it all happened in the one-time capital of the United States of America.

I came to Temple in the fall of 1979 after being rejected at Brown, Yale, Hampshire, Haverford, Union, and U.N.H. My first year was uneventful, although I did meet a guy, Malcolm, who eventual

became my pharmacist. In the spring of that year, I began the frequent use of Quaaludes. My first bona fide blackout-loss of memory from the combination of drugs and alcohol--followed not long after. I was getting ready to go to a bar at the Tyler School of Art (it's all the way across town). Then, however, a gap in the narrative of these events ensues until the moment when I found myself suddenly, inexplicably, in a men's lavatory wearing a gray suitcoat with both sleeves torn off. I was shirtless underneath this garment, and I was also--I noticed in the smudgy mirror before me--wearing lipstick and eyeliner. I reviewed the facts. I had been drinking on top of downs, I guessed, and was luckily at the very bar to which I had set out. To a guy urinating in the stall behind me I gleefully shouted the following:

-I don't want to seem like I'm giving you a pop quiz or anything, friend, but do you happen to know anything about what time it is or what day it is or what presidential administration is currently tangling things up or whether there's selective service registration yet? Is there anything you might know about these things?

I cackled good-naturedly, but my new acquaintance left me (in haste) to my confusion. I decided because of my condition, to make my way back to my dorm, a journey of forty-five minutes, where along with Shusaku Sunami (see note 6), I got into the systematic destruction of my college-issue furniture. The desk and desk chair, the chest of drawers, [etc.](#)

#### *The Throne of God in Heaven*

WHAT CAN I tell you about the Tap Room, as Tyler's bar was called? When I was there, when I was immersed in its liquid dankness, its crimson lighting, its unlistenable music, I felt like I was *breathing properly*, I felt that people weren't whispering invidiously about my wardrobe and comportment. I loved and revered bars in freshman year and I still do. I seemed, in spite of my faith in the community and fellowship of Christ, in spite of my belief in an eternal life as promised by him, to need to degrade myself with drink (and compulsive masturbation). Again and again I found myself scamming, pretending to be a Tyler student in order to find a way into the Tap Room. It was a tiny, rundown space, with no more than six or seven booths, maybe twenty-four seats in all. (And twenty-four, just by coincidence, is my very age as I write this paper because I took two years off bagging groceries and receiving psychotherapy.) An enfeebled citronella candle dwindled on each table; a mild adhesive varnished all surfaces. You had to yell into the ear of the person next to you. The men sometimes wore skirts; everyone wore black.

I fell on my knees in places like that. I succumbed to a joy in my heart. I heard God whisper the good news. Even if they could tell there that I was a liberal arts guy. We were interlopers, those of us from Temple and Penn, in tweed suits from the fifties and skinny ties and peg-legged pants. They could tell us apart.

Compare this bar and its charms with the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse: "Round about the throne *were* four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment" (4:4), and, later, "*There were* seven lamps burning before the throne, which are the Seven Spirits of God" (4:5).

#### *The Seven Ages of Church History*

SEVEN LAMPS, THE seven letters to the seven churches, the seven seals of the Great Book--there a

even seven visions in the book of Revelation as a whole. With these sevens in mind, I will now briefly discuss the work of Petrus Olivi, the Franciscan biblical commentator.

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Olivi, before being condemned posthumously in the early fourteenth century, was notable for insisting on a sevenfold division in church history to accord with the system of sevens in Revelation. He also insisted on a threefold division-borrowed from a Franciscan predecessor-to go with the Holy Trinity. The three ages went roughly like this: God the father went with the age of the Old Testament, Christ went with the age of the New Testament up to about 1300 A.D. (the time at which Olivi composed his *Lectura Supra Apocalypsim*), and the age of the Holy Ghost was, according to Olivi, to last from the time of his composition (1300) for about 666 years-the number of the beast-until circa 1966 A.D. *Or roughly ten years after my own difficult childbirth at Mass General in 1956.* This third period would accord more or less with the sixth age of church history, in which, according to Olivi, we would find the war between the Holy Ghost and Antichrist.

If we consider that Olivi's first defense of his views before the Franciscans occurred in about 1290, not 1300, we can see that the Apocalypse and with it the end of the reign of Antichrist may well occur on or close to the year of my own birth. All baby boomers, therefore, the countless offspring of the late sixth age-of that great period of darkness, the fifties-will be around to see the Apocalypse. In recognizing this concordance I'm also alluding to another trinitarian construct-the three writers and prophets: St. John the Divine, Petrus Olivi, and Bob Paisner.

And here's one last interesting equation! The first Olivians, the followers who made pilgrimages to his grave, were burned at the stake for heresy somewhere between 1314 and 1318. If we take the dates (instead of 1300) as indicative of the onset of *the sixth age* (the beginning of the reign of Antichrist before final judgment), and add to them the 666 years signifying the beast, then we can see, of course, that the Apocalypse arrives between 1980 and [1984](#).

*The Book, Its Seven Seals, and an Angel*

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT in Revelation is that John, in the throne room of heaven, is given a chance to view the great book of prophecy spread wide on an ample table there. "No man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon" (5:3).

I've told you about my own reading habits-mostly s.f. and light psychology books, although I am also a big fan of the writings of Ayn Rand. And there is this little "book" I'm writing here, this book of my own life, which I hope will top out around the required twenty-five pages and be done about three hours from now. But none of these books seems to resonate with the book described above in Revelation.

In fact, I would submit to you that a real book is not intended here. Sometimes you have to admit that Revelation has both a literal and symbolic level. The truth of Revelation floats between the two registers like a mostly submerged iceberg. In the case of the book referred to here, I think we can confidently speak of the symbolic. The book John intends to anoint as the highest book of prophecy and the book of Judgment is not a regular book, a product of the printing press. It's the ancient and all-powerful book of the affections. The book of life, as described in 20:12, is *the book of love*.

I know a little bit about it, about love. For example, my roommate Tony Nicholas and I had had a few drinks one night. At the Tap Room. End of fall semester 1980. After Tony had moved out. And w

had smoked some pot, which was always bad for me, since in its clutches I imagined not only the people but tables and chairs, all the objects in the cosmos, were secretly passing messages about my mood and complexion, my family, or my sickly childhood. That night I had smoked this marijuana and was suffering with the predictable *referential mania*. A malefic world spun out around me. I was powerless over it. I drank to cut the edge of this bad noise. Tony was telling me in some litanical and repetitive way about a stylish mystery film he wanted to direct. The eternal globe-trotting semiotics of mystery. The hermeneutics of murder and power pop. It all sounded the same. I was drinking faster. I had aphasia. I was nuts.

The music in the bar, some fusion of punk and funk that was going around then, obliterated all the ambient noise. I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't see anything. But I could tell, suddenly, that Tony wasn't talking to me anymore. It dawned on me. Through some sixth-sense heartache. He *hated* me. He was five or ten minutes into a conversation with a woman in the next booth. Five or ten minutes. Or longer? He had actually slid into the next booth and was chatting her up and I hadn't even noticed.

That was Judith. That was the first time I laid eyes on Judith. What did she look like? In the dark. Greater forces than my brute desire directed me at the moment, so her beauty wasn't uppermost in my mind. I can't tell you what she looked like, therefore, and her face was mostly turned away. She was chatting amiably with my former roommate. Still, I knew her immediately for who she was.

*She was the angel of the seventh seal.* She was Mary and Mary Magdalene, she was my mom before my mom got sick, but that's not all, she was like Christ, she was Francis or Gandhi or Thomas Merton, she was the grinch after his heart got bigger, she was Patti Smith after the broken neck, she was the transcendental signified, she was the thing that rid me of Tony Nicholas, she was the thing that was going to thaw my ache, and I *knew*. I'm aware that it sounds pretty sudden. But consider the evidence. "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon upon her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). Judith's address at the time was 1212 Rodman St., Philadelphia.

My head cleared when she turned-from where Tony was yelling something in her ear. They were in the next booth. Backs to me. And she turned. As if according to some higher purpose. She turned around and looked at me. My head cleared. Something tricky was going on in my life. There was contempt in the air, Tony's contempt, but contempt couldn't last in that furnace. I felt the absolute and irrefutable faith in an instantaneous bond. Love at first sight. My feelings would be boundless and exact and I would grow fat and bald cherishing memories of Judith. I would comfort her even when she was really wrinkled. I knew all of this by the time she was leaning over the booth:

-Hey ... Hey, what's your name? You're a friend of Tony's, right?

She screwed up her face. Her smile was dimpled, uneven, overpowering. She evidently thought she was really having some fun. I nodded.

-Tony here says you were raised by wild animals.

She started to laugh. Couldn't stop laughing. And I could see Tony looking away, too, shaking from the effort to control himself.

Look, I know when I am the object of fun. Often I can laugh right along. But the little romantic

skirmishes of the past, the meager recon missions of my heart in which I risked nothing and lost less. ~~they didn't prepare me for this. This was a comment like a blow dart. I had to respond. I got right up~~ her face, leaned toward her and took hold of her bangled wrists. Tightly.

-Listen, you don't go in for this bait-the-misfit stuff, do you? Because you don't look like the kind of person that would, right?

Then I bowed my head in a prayerful way. I was wobbling and bowing.

-I dare you to treat me like a human being, I said. That's my dare for you and Tony ... I dare you. And I'm sorry you're both so hard up for fun. I'm sorry about your *empty lives*, okay?

I knew how it would turn out, you know. I knew she would overcome my barb. She thought she didn't care about me, but when she turned nervously back to her conversation with Tony there was no conversation. Tony and she sat there, backs to me, like they'd never met at all. The space between them had widened. My chatter, meanwhile, was with the stars.

Believe it or not, this is how the book of the affections gets opened. It's right there in the Bible. Deep calls unto deep, across expanses of loss. In the course of my stupid life, I've tried to crack the seals of this great book, the way a kid might, six times I have, with six girls I guess you'd say, each with her different lances and charms and sadnesses, a woman with balances, a woman with her head behind, a woman who carried the souls of the dead with her, and a woman who felt earthquakes when we made [love](#).

The seventh was Judith.

Now I'll tell you the number of those lost to heartbreak in all of history because this number is worth remembering: *a hundred and forty-four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel*.

#### *The Half-Hour of Silence*

ON THE WAY back home from the Tap Room I had another blackout. Or this is my guess. They were getting worse. I was slipping into bad situations the way others in my family had. The next morning I showed up for Semiotics Twelve coming in and out of consciousness. I was still tanked. I napped facedown on my desk. Migrainous auras, flares, and lights burst from the margins of the passage we were reading (in Saussure). And the worst thing was that I regretted what I'd said to Judith. Not only that, I knew I was going to be troubling her again in the future.

St. John: "And when he had opened the seventh seal [of the book of love] there was a silence in heaven about the space of half an hour."

#### *The Seven Trumpets*

WE'RE DOWN TO only a couple of hours remaining, so I'm going to have to summarize the first few months that followed. In December 1980, in a sudden display of collegiality and mirth, Chapin House where I live, anointed me dorm president. I was elected by acclamation. Unopposed. In my new post I would be making a number of important decisions, such as what parties we would be giving, how to deal with communal problems like loud stereos, whether to have special study hours, and so forth. I called meetings on these subjects, which we held in our ample, unfurnished common room, but I could

never get a complete set of officers to show up. No one would come to the dorm meetings either. In the absence of consensus, therefore, I went ahead to make a few decisions myself.

My first act was to propose a house party entitled Inquisition Night. It was to take place in January after Xmas [break](#).

The party would feature period costume. We could burn effigies on the lawn in front of the dorm. Crucifixes everywhere. Drinks dyed red to simulate the running blood of heretics. We'd haul up people on false charges.

Not surprisingly, the other dorm officers wouldn't agree to the party, especially when it became clear I was serious. They would, they said, *have to run it by the deans, health services, security*. And then they told me that my election had been a big joke in the first place; they told me that I had misunderstood a simple prank. My powers as president were thereby completely revoked. But I simply proceeded without my housemates. I printed up fliers. The design, if I do say so myself, was lovely, featuring a photocopied woodcut (from an art history text) of Francis bleeding from his stigmata. I stapled these fliers to locations far and wide, including 1212 Rodman Street, which I had learned was Judith's address-from Tony Nicholas, in one of our last conversations. I plastered her street with handbills. Inquisition night!

Rodman Street, a barren lane of overturned grocery carts, blind cats, and leafless trees, provided ample surfaces for my literature.

And though I had been forbidden to hold the party, the night on which it was scheduled to take place eventually arrived. I purchased, for the occasion, some luminous food colorings and in my empty dorm room I mixed up a shaker full of red vodka and tonic and crushed Valium. While no one joined me for my advertised party, I managed to have a good time-

That is, until I found myself in a bathrobe dyed black and worn backwards-apparently to simulate priestly garments-at a party miles from my dorm at which a venerated local band, The Egyptians, were playing. (They turned out these angular dance tunes, really loud-one of which, "Ancient Times," can still move me powerfully: "Oh, I wanna get a boat and go to ancient times; / Go any farther gonna lose my [miiiiinnnd](#)." Luckily, however, Judith was at the party. Wearing black paint-stained jeans and a white thrift-store dress shirt. She also had on a white leather jacket. Her hair was a long hennaed tangle, madwoman-in-the-attic style. She looked like a go-go girl ten years into a devastating nervous illness. I reminded her that Tony had introduced us a month or so earlier and she was obviously happy to see me again. I gallantly volunteered to walk her home (though, in my bathrobe, I was a little underdressed), but she said she wasn't going home. She was catching a train that night to Trenton or Pittsburgh or something.

-What's with the bathrobe? she asked.

-I'll take you to the station.

-I'm taking a cab.

-I'll join you.



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