

## *Eschatology*

She awoke on the warm sweet ground and breathed deeply in. Her eyelids, sticky with disuse, clung to the flesh below them and resisted her opening. She persisted -- the dirt below her was dark with rain. Slowly the outline of grass worked into her sight. She breathed in and remembered it.

Imogen sat up and regarded the area around her. Everything at first smelled of water and the air was wet. Grass and dirt for a short distance, then nothing and Imogen's ears roared. She moved toward the darkness, following an idea of shameful curiosity. Soon she grasped the last tufts of earth.

For a second and then gone, a faint grid of lines moved toward the horizon. Everything was dark. Then water, lit by a faint moon and shimmering far below her. In the distance, bright lines of light began to emerge from the water. She shook her head and the image dissolved.

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light; she looked at her arms. Her flesh was blue and the veins underneath gleamed through, still and immobile. She turned over her arm and gasped in horror. Her bone was visible. She reached into the canyon of rotted flesh, touched it and felt nothing. She inspected the rest of her body, shocked and numb. Around her neck was a small golden cross, and a diamond engagement ring was on her left hand. Her body was slightly rotting and senseless. Neither her fingertips nor her legs imparted any sensation at their meeting.

An overwhelming desire to rest gripped her. She could smell, but not feel, the earth below her. Mindlessly, she began to dig at the edge of the cliff. After a few minutes

the small hole that she'd made gave way and collapsed into the ocean. "Goddammit," she breathed out softly.

Suddenly she remembered the cross around her neck. Then she sat still; mute pain spreading over her body. Years of sweet belief were torn from her. Then she felt sensation on her dead skin: the small pulling fingers of all her holy moments pinched her flesh, icy and burning like the touch of God should be. Then they were gone.

She got up and walked away from the cliff, needing movement, activity. As the din of the sea falling violently against the cliffs behind her fell away, another wall of sounds came towards her. A man's voice raised in conviction and hope, and occasionally smaller voices below his. Imogen saw a light through the wall of trees and headed toward it. The voices grew louder and the trees began to thin.

Six cars were parked in front of a low, stucco building. One door and two windows, all three flung open and full of glaring fluorescent light were bordered neatly by four wooden posts and the concrete slab of a porch. Imogen ducked lower and moved slowly in the direction of the parking lot. She wanted to see people, to be near the voices of human beings. A faint gleam reflected off a rearview mirror and momentarily blinded her. She sat down and held her eyes.

From the building, the strong tones of sermon came out to her: "And he said unto John, our Lord and Savior lifted up his servant and he said!"

A thick silence moved between Imogen and the church, she crawled forward, straining to the preacher's voice.

"I am the Living One! I was dead, and behold! I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

Imogen moved between the first and second car. The preacher's voice was cavernous and close now. "And so what do we say brethren? What do we say, sisters of our Lord? What can we make of the disappearance of so many of our kin, and of our folk? What can we say of the missing numbers in the Middle East? What can we say of our missing politicians and mothers and artists and all the countless children that are gone? Where are the missing of America? Where are the missing of the world?"

A woman's voice broke in, softly at first: "Well, that's what, that's what we're all hear to ask you about Robert."

"What's that Anna?"

Imogen almost ran to the window; she pressed against the wall.

"Well it seems like, Reverend," Anna said, stronger now. "That we're all good Christian folk. So uh, not to be prideful on no count, but uh... I don't see how this could be the Rapture. Isn't there some other explanation?"

"You know I've thought the same thing myself Anna. I am a minister, after all, a servant of God. And so in the light of all these disappearances of the holy and the innocent I have asked myself time and again: Why have I been left behind? Why are some of our children left here? What are the sins that tether us to the material? What is to become of us?" The minister stopped and Imogen turned from her position, staring at the parking lot with her back against the stucco wall, to look at the congregation for the first time.

The minister stood at the front behind a plain podium, a bronze cross behind his head. Six adults and three very young children sat on high-backed pews. Reverend Robert's head was in his hands; his thick fingers rubbed his nearly baldhead, elbows on

the podium. He almost collapsed and the podium rocked forward, nearly tipping. He grabbed it, sweaty and red.

“Well Anna, kind of embarrassing for all of us, isn’t it? But maybe that’s the problem. Maybe we’ve been too caught up in ourselves. Maybe we’ve secretly sinned, and kept these sins even from ourselves.” He stopped and shuffled his feet, and started again, deliberately: “But the Lord Jesus and his Father God see all and know all. The Lord knows us better than we know ourselves. We are here because we are sinners.”

Imogen saw the congregants shift in their seats. A small child started crying and his father tried to pick him up. The child pushed away his father’s arms and wiped his nose and eyes along his sweater. He ambled over to an empty pew and lay along its hard surface, sucking his thumb. Imogen felt compelled to hold his tiny head and stroke his back while he drifted to sleep. Likewise, the preacher watched the child and only began speaking again after the little boy had settled himself.

Imogen stared as he administered his truth to the congregation, rubbing his temples, unsure of himself.

“Now we’ve been told,” he said. “That we are sinners. And... Now we know. But this should not be a time of despair. This should be a time of joy! Here is our final chance, brothers and sisters, to redeem ourselves before our Lord and eschew the ways of Satan!”

A man and a woman were seated near the back of the room. She leaned into and whispered: “What about kids then?”

Imogen searched the congregation for the little boy. He was missing. The congregants all sat in a stupor, unable to move, confronted with damnation. She heard a small gasp and looked sharply to the door.

He couldn't have been more than four years old. Fatty arms and legs protruded from a tank top and shorts. He was shoeless and staring at her face.

She stood unwilling to move, not wanting to frighten him. He peered forward as if seeing something unclear. His face was streaky and shining. Imogen waved slowly at him, but his eyes didn't shift from their position. It occurred to her, just as she felt a warm wind blow across her neck, that he might not be looking at her. Smoothly, and full of fear, she looked where the little boy was staring.

A shifting light gleamed at the end of the porch. Briefly a face flashed at her, direct and deeply. Then the edge of a wing appeared, the tallest feather almost impossibly higher than the head. The corpse and the boy stood in awe, unable to move, neither aware of each other anymore. The angel moved closer and hovered between the first and second wooden posts. Its light illuminated the coarseness of the concrete.

Its full form became apparent. First its head gleamed into recognizable human features, eyes bigger than normal, with a third on its forehead. The light hit Imogen's eyes like the light from the church refracted off the rearview mirror. Instead of the harsh pain of reality, the ice of holy separateness drove into her brain, cooling the fire of abandonment that had lingered there during the Reverend's sermon. Its face was androgynous and not kind and not cruel but the face of judgment.

Then its shoulders, chest, and body shifted from light into lines, solid and vertical, like a line drawing, lacking shadow or true definition, but imparting both solidity and

emptiness. Its wings lowered to clear the top of the porch, they occasionally moved through the wall. Imogen briefly thought how that last foot of wing would appear from the inside of the church.

The angel came very near to her face. It smelled of sweet water. She breathed in its scent and remembered. Holy water, in a deep stone cup affixed to the wall near the door of a church. She saw the rose petals swirling on the surface of the water from the intrusion of fingertips, a memory from childhood.

She looked into its eyes and wanted to surrender herself to its majesty. But she felt shy and just as she did, the angel moved through and past her. She turned and watched it kneel before the child and regard it in the same way. The boy giggled and reached to touch the angel's face. Imogen could just see the tip of his fingers feel the surface of its face. His fingers stayed there, having met resistance. The boy giggled. "Warm!" he exclaimed.

The angel lifted the boy in its arms and paused to look once more at Imogen before entering the church. The child had fallen immediately asleep in the angel's arms and had even begun to fade. Though the child had become nearly invisible to Imogen, the angel's arms remained in the shape of its holding. The angel cleared its throat and spoke to Imogen. Its voice did not come at Imogen from the place in which the angel stood, but surrounded her and moved her bodily. She swayed and it spoke, repeating itself for her.

"No one can see you," it said.

"What?"

"Your body isn't real."

"Then how come I can feel it?"

“Because it’s real to you.” With that, it walked into the church.

Imogen stayed outside and stared through the window at the congregation. The angel carried the child to the front of the room and stepped behind the preacher. Robert was reciting from memory, caught up in the prayer. The angel spread its wings behind him, and the massive appendages rose higher with each phrase. The congregation repeated the words after him.

Robert prayed: “I am the door which no man can shut. I am the light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

“I am the Way.

“ I am the Truth.

“And I am the world without end.”

In the stillness that followed, an ovoid of light surrounded each of the congregants. Slowly, like the child, their forms faded from Imogen’s sight. Her heart leapt after them. Even the angel was gone.

The minister was the only one left in the room. He opened his eyes and sighed, then looked towards the ceiling. Imogen shook with sympathy for him and self-hate for herself. She sat on the porch and wept until she was parched. She passed out from exhaustion and dreamt about angels and regrets.

She saw her fiancée in that dream: at a dark and smoky bar, doing lines of cocaine and drinking heavily. She sat next to him on a barstool, fully fleshed as she had been when she was alive, and in love with him. He didn’t seem to know where he was, or who he was. He faded in and out of her sight, like the people in the church. Except, when he faded she could see the lines of cocaine in his nasal passages, the smoke in his lungs, and

the whiskey in his belly. She reached lethargically for him and he seemed to briefly see her. Their eyes met then he shook his head and took another drag of his cigarette. Needing him, she stood up and gripped his shoulders, trying to regain his eyes. She shook him and screamed quietly in his face, barely able to hear her own voice, desperate now.

“James!” She shook him and he glanced up at her then looked down at the surface of the bar. “Imogen is here! I am Imogen!”

He shook her off, somehow, and whispered hoarsely. “Imo,” he said. He ran his fingers over an old carving on the bar next to his glass, full of ice and alcohol.

Imogen looked at the bar: “Imo” was scrawled there, deep and old and full of filth from countless dirtied hands and spilt drinks. She became righteous, as she often had during their relationship, and grabbed his neck. She concentrated and swiped James’ cup off the bar.

“Imogen,” he read. Then he looked and moved to kiss her, and disappeared.

She wept until she woke up.

It was the middle of the day. She was in the minister’s car, moving quickly through browned hills, the shadow of oak trees dappling her dead flesh. She wasn’t wearing a seat belt, and neither was the minister. She turned to him; he looked at her and smiled.

“You did some good work there, Imogen,” he said. “You did good.”

She looked out the window and didn't speak, confused and saddened. Finally she looked ahead at the road. The minister was driving too close to the car in front of them. He got closer and closer. "Hey," she said.

Their car merged into the car ahead of them. The minister drove through the car until the two were on top of each other. His body was merged with the body of the man driving the other car – a spectral monstrosity.

He drove faster and left the other car, gaining solidity as they sped up. Imogen sat with her arms wrapped around her legs until the closeness of her flesh disturbed her too much to hold the position. She didn't want to know anything more, she was exhausted and –

"You feel betrayed," said the minister.

Imogen looked at him and snorted. "I don't even know."

The minister nodded.

Five minutes later Imogen began to cry again and blurted out: "He just looked at me and walked into the church. Then everyone was gone. Except for me."

"Except for us," said the minister.

"The angel said no one could see me," she said, suspicion taking over her grief. Then she said spitefully: "You must be special." She glared at him, certain that he was holding something over her.

Quickly and coldly: "Don't pull that shit on me."

Imogen was reminded of the angel's voice as Robert's admonition hung around her. But she persisted, still certain that he knew something she didn't.

"Ask me a question Imogen," he said.

“Fine I will,” she said.

“Well?”

“Well...” she couldn’t think of anything specific, a need to cling to generalizations halting her.

“C’mon.”

“Okay, okay,” now this was a game, like 20 Questions on a long drive with her parents. “What about James?”

“Which James? Your James or my James?”

“What do you mean, your James or my James. James! My fiancée,” she said.

“Please don’t be so upset, I was only having a joke with myself.”

She felt petulant and alienated.

“I’m sorry Imogen,” he said. “James moved on, that’s what you did when you didn’t know what you were doing.”

“In the bar?” she asked.

“Yes.”

She thought about that, and let its logic fall into her mind. “Okay,” she said.

“Well then, well then, why am I dead?”

“You’ve been dead for awhile.”

“Why is my dead body still on me Robert? What the fuck is going on? Why did I wake up? What is this Rapture shit?”

“Unresolved,” he said. “I don’t even know if it’s the Rapture, per se, but that was how Anna and the little boy and all the others in the congregation could understand it.”

“So you don’t know what’s going on?” She spat out bitterly. She’d stopped looking at him, wanting distance, not wanting to see him smirk at her.

“I can barely see you, it was quite the act of concentration to keep you in the car until you’d woken up. Then your mind accepted the physicality of the now and you became more solid,” he indicated the road behind them. “Otherwise you’d be sitting in the passenger seat of that car right now,” He chuckled. “But you’re a believer Imogen,” he laughed again, heartier. “ You’re a believer.”