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january 2002

speculative fiction

science fiction

The Nativity Plague

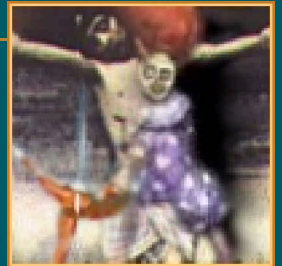
Adam Browne



fantasy

Emmett

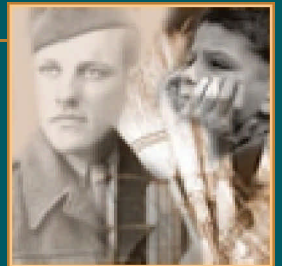
James Stevens-Arce



flash

Mr. Neblin's Boy

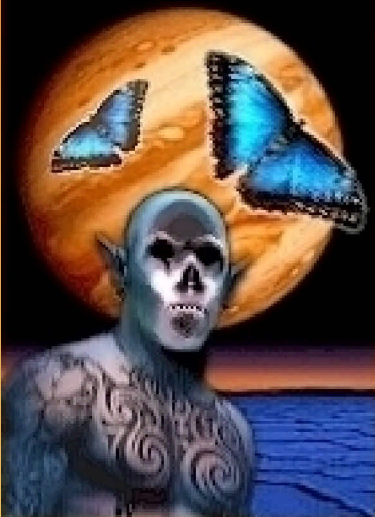
Nancy Proctor



classic

The Man and the Snake

Ambrose Bierce



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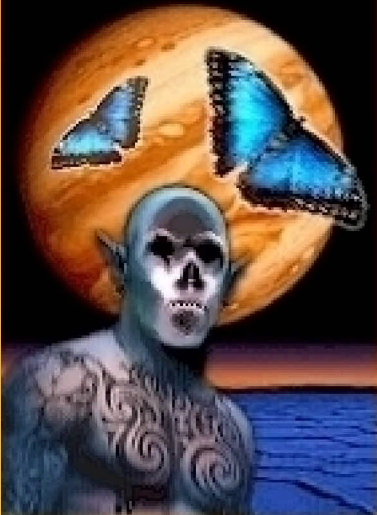
The Man and the Snake - Ambrose Bierce

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*Is religion
horrifying?
Comforting?
Absurd?
In Soulsaver
it's all three.
And so much
more....*

Daniel Goss

Christ's Corpsicles

A Review Of James Stevens-Arce's *Soulsaver*

SOULSAVER

by **James Stevens-Arce**

(Harcourt) \$24.00/264 pages

ISBN: 0151004722

The dirty-bearded philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche accused Christianity of introducing the "morality of slaves" to the world. He didn't simply mean by that rude statement that Christianity — with its fondness for hope, charity, humility, and brotherly love — encouraged weakness (though, being Nietzsche, and infatuated with bullies, he meant that too): on a deeper level, Nietzsche was convinced that throughout history religion — especially Christianity — strove quietly, so quietly, to enslave the will of mankind.

Beneath its virtuous mask of comforting and simplistic explanation — warned our most unkempt of philosophers — religion whispers vices like intellectual laziness, guilt-ridden passivity, and cultural stultification. Nietzsche evoked an image of the warming flame of religious conviction — secretly consuming the very embers of free inquiry and individual liberty that make human progress more than just a trick of the light.

Karl Marx, as unimpressed by infallible dogmas — other than his own — as Friedrich Nietzsche (and almost as dirty-bearded), agreed. He famously denounced religion as "the opium of the masses." (Marx also reminded the world,

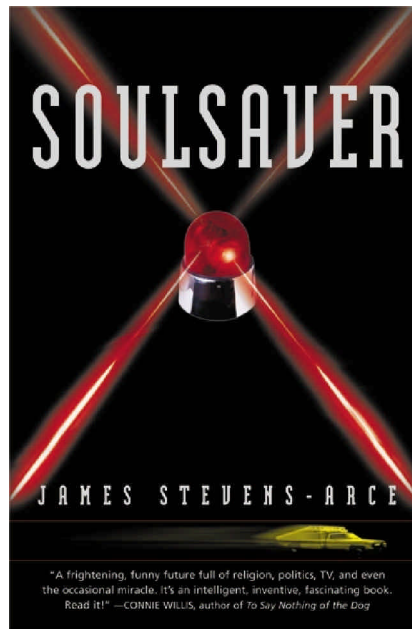
once his socialist doctrines were put into practice, that theology isn't the only psychic shackle available for the enslavement of mankind. But that, as they say, is another story.)

Thought experiments (or "what ifs") are a hallmark of both philosophy and science fiction. Such experiments reconfigure the world, exaggerate or minimize its constituents, and gleefully reshuffle the cards history has dealt human civilization — all for the deceptively simple purpose of imagining how things might have been. Or how they might yet be. "What ifs" are irresistible tools for revealing, through contrast and commonality, how things actually are. The discombobulations and logical absurdities of satire also fit neatly into the "what ifs" toolbox — as Swift, Voltaire, Twain, and Orwell were keenly aware.

James Stevens-Arce's *Soulsaver* is wise enough to grant Nietzsche's point about the dangers of religion, imaginative enough to provide a fascinating "what if" theocratic future — and ridiculous enough to satirize both.

Juan Bautista Lorca, the novel's earnest-to-a-fault narrator, is a "soulsaver": a proud member of the Suicide Prevention Corps of America. He's also genetically blessed with the physique of a Greek sculpture...and cursed with the marble mind of one as well.

After all, it's the Year of Our Lord 2099. America, including the devout State of Puerto Rico, is a fun-fun-fun





Is religion
horrifying?
Comforting?
Absurd?
In *Soulsaver*
it's all three.
And so much
more....

fundamentalist Christian theocracy. Poverty, tyranny, overcrowding, pollution (and cheesy gospel music) infest the country from sea to shining sea — and beyond. *Soulsaver* Lorca — not the most creative sheep in the American flock — can't imagine life any other way. "God's in His Heaven, and all's right with the world." Or at least all would be if so many selfish folks would just quit killing themselves.

Lorca earns his daily bread scouring the streets of San Juan in his FreezVan, rounding up the bodies of the recently self-euthanized, turning them into corpsicles, and transporting them to the Saint Francis of Assisi Resurrection Center. The sinners are then painfully revived — and righteously shamed into getting on with their lives.

What kind of existence are such unfortunates returned to? Best to let the author's pitch-perfect prose speak for itself:

"Skin and bones beggars clamor for a handout. '¡Por favor, por favor, por favor!' Potbellied stickchildren totter about on spindly legs, their faces bony and hollow-eyed. Mommies with pregnant bellies lug babies in back-slings, ignoring the kiddies' shrieks of hunger. Gaunt teeners lounge on each street corner, unemployed and looking for trouble. Wizened geezers play dominoes in the shade of run-down gazebos. Plump street preachers work the pockets of the skeletal faithful."

After reading the above, one might be tempted to think *Soulsaver* is an angry book. And one would be right. (It's one of the angriest novels I've read in years. Which is precisely why it's so profanely funny.) The best satires are born in wrath — and end in tears of mirth. When confronting real horror, the only alternative to laughter is despair.

There's a place for despair, of course,

but that place isn't found between the pages of James Stevens-Arce's *Soulsaver*. Those pages are filled instead with charismatic Judases, misunderstood Antichrists, wolves mistaken for sheep, sheep mistaken for wolves, cartoonish conspiracies, betrothals, betrayals, triple-crosses, double-dares, Divine Revelations, technomiracles, lusty virgins, winking evildoers — and more than enough folks who find "evildoers" a great excuse for doing evil themselves. (Sharing further plot details would be positively sinful.)

Following Juan Bautista Lorca's quirky evolution from slack-jawed innocence to slack-jawed enlightenment makes us ever more attentive to the warnings of messy philosophers — but also ever more convinced that hope, charity, humility, and brotherly love really can triumph over all the evils that men do. And if that's not enough? There's even the hint of a sequel.



"Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien."

The Nativity Plague

Adam Browne lives in Melbourne with his wife Julie Turner, also a writer. His stories have won literary awards, and have appeared in numerous magazines and online sites including the Santa Fe Writers' Project. In 2000 he co-wrote *The Real Thing*, a feature film currently in post-production. Of "The Nativity Plague", which was first published in *Aurealis* 25/26 and received an honourable mention in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* — 14th Annual Collection, Adam writes....

"Writing a story about the evil weirdnesses of the advertising industry was similar to the experience of trying to create sf monsters stranger and more grotesque than those found in nature... I could never HOPE to compete. I'm wondering now if the ad industry has its gimlet eye on biological media: Squid, for instance, with their skins densely spangled with photophores, are like living television screens — will they soon be rewired to flash logos and slogans to passing submariners...?"

Mr. Vale was allergic to advertising. Even the mildest of ads caused him severe discomfort, afflicting his skin with sharply demarcated roseate areas like some unknown species of sunburn, as though he'd been sunbathing in the curdled glimmer of a neutron star...

It was a most inconvenient allergy — not least because he was a senior copywriter at Utility WordSmith 4.5 & Sons, the city's preeminent advertising agency.

It also meant he could never leave his apartment. Ever.

Because advertisements were everywhere.

The industry, Vale believed, had lost control of its creations. Ads were an ecology all their own.

And they were growing cleverer.

Evolving, new varieties arising every day; idvertisements, convert-isements, pervertisements... An eternal nightful of busy monsters — and Vale knew he was at the bottom of the food chain...

The doorbell rang. As it did at six every evening.

Since contracting the allergy, Vale had come to dislike answering the door. After bunkering himself in his apartment and purging it of marketing down to the microscopic level, he was loath to open it to a world steeped in advertising of every kind — seething with ads in every conceivable medium...



"Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien."

He opened the door nevertheless. Although she was humouring him, this visitor could be trusted to comply with Vale's various antiadvertising protocols. She was a punctilious person with a keen understanding of hygiene. She was a doctor after all.

Not that she was here to attend to him.

Dr Uta Krebs was visiting Vale's computer, which had also been ill for some weeks. It was a mammalian mainframe — a two-metre Caucasian flesh-cube hanging from the ceiling of Vale's bathroom by a braid of gummy ducts. Fat conduits led to a pair of orifices labelled with tattoos: IN and OUT. The OUT conduit, from which a mustardy ooze issued, ended at a drain in the floor. The IN conduit was plugged with a dedicated feedline, its collar ruffed with a claggy crust.

Vale favoured the fleshly computer for the organic quality he felt it lent his work (less copywriting, really, than a kind of advertising husbandry) — but he found he was sometimes squeamish about seeing to its needs...

Krebs was dismayed. "Look at the state of this device," she cried. "It's demyelinated, dehydrated... Have you even bathed it today, Mr Vale?"

"I've been otherwise occupied," he said as he audited his various skin predicaments in the bathroom mirror. "And please, call me Noah."

"And here," Krebs continued, "around these data sphincters: inflammation, oedema, scales and cutaneous sloughing... It's as though it's been exposed to the sun."

Vale turned, noticing for the first time a scaly reddening in the peaches-and-cream complexion of the mainframe.

"It does almost look like sunburn doesn't it?" he said.

"Or an allergy," Krebs said, goading him. In her career, Krebs had encountered some outlandish hypersensitivities (including a patient with an allergy to antihistamines), but she believed in Vale's allergy not at all. She maintained that his condition was purely psychosomatic; his crises of conscience — the copywriter's equivalent of tennis elbow or housemaid's knee — getting the better of him, manifesting in his tissues.

Not an allergy, she'd once said, but an allegory.

Vale wouldn't be baited. He was rapt, examining the computer's skin with an unhealthy fascination.

"Isn't it time you returned to work, Mr Vale?" Krebs said gently. She too was an employee of Utility WordSmith, contracted to care for the company's bio-IT. "They all miss you at the agency. Everyone was so excited about your dermatitis advertisement." She was referring to one of his bolder campaigns — a pathogen tailored to infect consumers' skin with a rash spelling out an ad for the only brand of lotion that could cure it.

"Yes, but —"

"And those blitz commercials of yours: coherent marketing beams; white-hot, pitiless — exponential smart-ads acquiring consumer profiles with pinpoint accuracy..."

"Well, they weren't entirely —"

"You're one of WordSmith's most intrepid copywriters. I worry for you — if you stay away much longer, your position there may become untenable."

"We've discussed this before, Doctor," Vale replied tiredly. "Just to think of returning aggravates my symptoms — all those ads clamouring for attention; all declaring the exact opposite of the truth."

Krebs shook her head resignedly and turned away. "Whatever you say, Mr Vale," she said. Preparing to leave, she handed him a tube of ointment. "With my compli-



"Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien."

ments."

"What is it?"

"A dermatological cream," she said, giving the mainframe a final inspection. "To be applied twice a day to the affected areas."

"It's for the computer," he said with some bitterness.

"Of course. You know I'm not qualified to treat humans. You should consult a medical expert system."

"I can't. They're always full of ads. It's subtle, but I can sense them — a commercial ambience, a mist of advertising getting under your skin..."

He trailed off, noticing that Krebs' eyes had glazed over. The little patience with which she bore his maanderings had worn thin.

With an effort of will he composed himself and walked her to the door.

And he wondered, perhaps unfairly, whether the bright little wave she gave as she left was intended for him or the mainframe...

Before bed, Vale tended to his aquaria.

Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien. The apartment, too, was done up in a bathyscaphe style; rusted bulkheads, rivet-studded walls, workstations fitted with analogue gauges glowing baleful green.

Vale knew it was a dubious aesthetic, kitsch, contrived, claustrophobic. But he liked it. It suited him on some deep level, especially since he'd developed his allergy. Housebound — sheltering from the welter of marketing in the external world — he felt safe and cosy inside the apartment's hull, its sturdy walls proof against the press of advertising mashing ceaselessly in from outside.

Feeling safe and cosy, he spent some time just gazing through the glass — the fleshy, vaguely obscene lures of anglerfish; the *zooxanthellae* wafting like extravagant snow; the luciferin sparkles of eelpouts nosing through biogenic ooze — and, not for the first time, the abyssal environment struck him as an elegant metaphor for advertising; the pretty lights giving no clue to the needletoothed grotesques skulking hungrily in the dark.

Advertising, he thought, red in tooth and claw...

Later, he downed some antihistamines, retired to his submariner's bunk-bed and drifted swiftly into sleep.

The computer's sleep, however, was unquiet.

Deep inside itself, down among its nerveworks, it could feel something stirring. Something eldritch and hot to be born.

An advertisement.

Vale's most recent, abandoned piece, festering for a month in the system's imagination. At first glance it seemed an ordinary, even modest ad, its mascot a realtime Christ Jesus — the Redeemer, the beautiful, wounded Lamb of God, all infinite compassion, all goldleaf and antique crimson — drumming up trade for a brand of reusable bubblegum...

On the surface, a standard advertisement for general release. But it was in its



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underbelly, among the ad's intricate guts, where Vale's genius had shone.

For this was something new. A fresh paradigm; advertising's equivalent of the ancient fish that flopped up onto dry land to try out its new lungs. It was a thing tending towards the retroviral, a neoDarwinian entity designed to thrive in brutal extremes, in the dark pressures of the most forbidding demographics. It was profoundly amphibian, adaptive, compatible with all instrumentalities —capable of concocting entirely new media when none other was available...

After contracting his allergy, of course, Vale had been obliged to shelve the project: he'd forgotten about it weeks ago.

So the ad was still a work in progress, little more than a sketch.

But it already had its own agenda. An earnest imperative.

More than anything else, it wanted to be seen.

The next morning, Vale was woken, as he often was, by a terrible itching.

Today's irritation, however, was more dire than usual; his skin twanging and twinging with bone-deep torment, his hands moving of their own accord, scratching at new lesions; mauve papules oozing and crusting; vesicular and pustular sores exuding stickiness.

Stumbling into the bathroom, he yanked open the medicine cabinet and smeared himself in triamcinolone, fluocinolone, methylprednisolone; in gaudy adrenal-corticosteroid ointments and dayglo interferon unguents until he resembled a reject from some sorry race of alien death-clowns.

He waited for the itching to stop.

It didn't.

The irritation was unendurable.

It was as though he had been exposed to an allergen. As though the apartment had been breached by an advertisement.

But there was no time to think about that — the itch was growing worse. Too ambitious to restrict itself just to his skin, it was growing in scope, annexing his hair, his tongue, his teeth...

Moving on to his viscera — lungs, alimentary canal from throat to rectum...

Even his heart was itchy.

He could feel it inside him, tingling intolerably with every beat; the irritation sweeping through the muscle like radar, defining the fine structure of the heart's vaults and chambers...

Suddenly he was in the kitchen with no idea how he'd got there.

There was a knife in his hand.

And he realised he'd been intending to flense himself, dig down under the skin to get to the source of the wicked prickling...

Then he saw Dr Krebs' computer ointment, plainly labelled *Not For Human Use* — but Vale was beyond such considerations; frantic hands already removing the cap, daubing his sores with the colourless stuff in the tube.

The effect was instant and salutary, a healthful warmth radiating outward wherever the ointment touched; an erotic blend of gladness and deep relief sluicing through his tissues. It was a feeling so profound — almost holy, a cellular absolution — that he burst into weak tears.

Soon, he was overwhelmed by a wave of tiredness.

He barely made it to his bed before collapsing back into sleep, tumbling into



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abyssal deeps; dreams black and chill and unchanging...

The thing in the computer was growing like cancer.

Not that the mainframe, with its CPU derived from domesticated carcinomas, was unacquainted with cancer.

Cancer these days had many killer applications.

Sadly, however, this tumour was stylistically of an older school. It was impudent. Profligate. Maverick flesh metastasising without regard for other tissues' needs...

The mainframe soon noticed it was starting to twinge a little.

Vale woke at about five that afternoon.

He climbed muzzily from bed, then collapsed. Not with pain, exactly: something weirder — something wrong with the soles of his feet.

They felt spongy, exquisitely sensitive.

As did his hands. The palms, the tips of his fingers.

They were spangled, he realised, with human nipples.

As were his wrists, his arms and shoulders.

And so was (he found when he raced gingerly to the bathroom mirror) his face.

And pretty much the rest of his body.

There were even nipples on his nipples...

He staggered from the room, the door closing behind.

Vale never noticed that the mainframe, too, was in some distress.

Indeed, had it possessed a mouth, it would have been using it to scream.

But Vale, who disapproved of talkative computers, had never had a mouth fitted.

So it suffered its agonies silently as the thing inside spasmed with insectile vigour, stretching and tenting the computer's clammy skin, a vulval rip opening, drooling lymph...

A limb reaching wetly from the opening...

Vitreous bone, transparent jellyflesh, luminous nodes flashing purple and green...

Vale began hearing the noises from the bathroom soon after.

A series of gobbling sighs, a disagreeable snickering, the mushy crackle of flexed cartilage, a furious tinkling as of a chandelier in a high wind... Sounds that made him doubt his senses, that made him wonder if he was suffering auditory hallucinations — another manifestation, perhaps, of this latest phase of his condition...

Then the doorbell rang. And the noises stopped.

He answered the door to Dr Krebs, who was frankly alarmed by his appearance. "You used the ointment on yourself," she said accusingly.

"Doctor," he said, "I've been hearing... noises. I think there's something in the —"

"*Not For Human Use*, Mr Vale." Krebs picked up the nearby tube of ointment and shook it at him reprovingly. "Don't you realise this is a potent cytoplasmic determinant?" She sighed. "Your sores are of a new variety," she said. "Not merely inflamed flesh, they are undifferentiated tissue; stem cells capable of ripening into anything: eyes, lips, anuses... Until, that is, they're assigned a distinct identity by a topical determinant."



Such as this ointment."

Vale realised he was slimy with sweat. Although it didn't smell like sweat — a wheyish fluid was expressing from the nipples on his forehead, under his arms... He had begun to lactate.

In the bathroom, the advertisement's nativity quietly continued.

The labour was a tortuous process suggestive of a child's coin purse giving birth to a fullscale spy satellite crafted by mad Venetian glassblowers.

The mammalian mainframe did not survive the experience, and in sympathy the apartment also sizzled and died; phones, climate, lighting — all crashing irrevocably, the rooms plunging into bluegreen undersea gloom...

And the slimy thing did walk with legs upon the slimy faux-marble linoleum tiles.

The sudden blackout worried Krebs. It meant, she knew, that the mainframe was seriously ill, if not dead. And nothing would keep her from attending to it.

Vale tried to stop her, telling her again of the fearful sounds he'd heard — he even considered holding her back physically... but then hesitated, wondering if touching a woman with his benippled hands would constitute an importunacy, a breach of some posthuman etiquette...

By then, of course, she'd slipped past him, stepping through into the bathroom.

In the dark, Vale heard her take a sudden breath, about to speak or cry out...

The door slammed shut behind her.

"Dr Krebs?" Vale called.

No answer.

"Uta?"

A moment — then the noises began anew: a wheeping, a whickering; a pulpy ticking as of a gigantic clock made of fat; a wet eager rhythm evocative of feeding or some unsavoury sex act...

Vale feared the worst (although he found himself unable to imagine what the worst was). More than anything now, he wanted to be brave. He wanted to storm into the bathroom and snatch Krebs to safety.

Instead, he ran to the front door, wrenching it open, thinking in his panic that he might escape by facing down the ads outside...

Not a chance.

He was met by an advertising blitzkrieg: all the latest smart variants on the basic ad-form; invertisements, divertisements, oddvertisements; triphammer braindamage-ads and elegiac ads of epic length; ads advertising antiadvertisements and antianti-advertisements and so on — an entire fulminating ecology lying in wait, it seemed, just for him...

He slammed the door and turned.

Face to face with the thing from the bathroom.

Finished with Krebs, it was hungry for its next audience.

In form, it was a giant marine christspider, the Messiah retooled for deepsea navigation. It was the Christ mascot admixed with Vale's old files on abyssal fauna. Jesus' immense transparent head (alien organs palpitating behind glassine skin) composed the body; around it, the flagella of the beard were plaited into innumerable legs, long limber spindle-limbs that scuttled the thing even closer to Vale.

"Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien."



Where it unfurled its lure.
Which was the distillation of all advertising.

With his experience in the industry, his understanding of its ploys and stratagems, Noah Vale resisted longer than most would have — a solid three minutes (trembling, moaning, milk-sweat running into his eyes) — before the lure broke down his defences...

Purest eye-candy it was, a gyre of bioluminescent purples and greens contriving the hypnotic key to unlock all desire. It was cupidity incarnate, the dirty essence of greed; wealth power sex fame rendered down to a cruciform wodge of luminiferous flesh borne at the tip of an articulated stalk...

Vale was happy just to stand and stare.

Until he felt a chill go through him.

Then a surge of weakness.

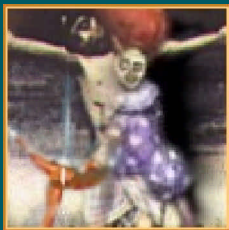
Tearing his eyes from the lure, he looked down to where the advertisement had buried its keen mouthparts in his ribs — anaesthetising the flesh — painlessly relieving him of his fluids.

And it was a moment of strange beauty, nipped Vale in the Rembrandt gloom with the suckling creature at his breast, the two posing briefly like some Martian Madonna and Child — before Vale collapsed with massive blood loss and severe refractory cardiovascular shock, and died...

And the advertisement tossed his husk away.

Ready now to go out into the world and be fruitful and become many and fill the earth and subdue it.

"Vale had a weakness for bathypelagic fauna. His home was cluttered with expensive deep-sea ecosystems; everywhere rococo monsters slinking through abyssal dark — slickheads and bristlemouths, beardworms and gulpers — all dainty and hideous and utterly alien."



"None believed
a crucifixion
could get
laughs. No
member of the
Circus did —
not the
performers or
the
roustabouts,
nor any of the
owners, no
one."

Emmett

In his day job, James Stevens-Arce is an independent writer-producer-director in the advertising industry in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Since his first sale at age 22 to Frederik Pohl at *Worlds of If*, he's published 17 stories in a variety of magazines and original anthologies, some of which have also appeared in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.K. His first novel, *Soulsaver* (Harcourt, 2000), won Europe's UPC Award, was named Best First Novel 2000 by the Denver Rocky Mountain News, and was included in the San Francisco Chronicle's Top Books of 2000 list.

Religion and its effects on us seems to pop up as a theme with some frequency in James' work. "Emmett" presented the opportunity to look at it from a slightly different perspective and is reprinted from *Unexpected*, edited by Jene and Nadra Ballentine, 1976.

It was April, perhaps the cruelest month of the year 2525, and even the common folk had turned cynical. None believed a crucifixion could get laughs. No member of the Circus did — not the performers or the roustabouts, nor any of the owners, no one.

None believed except Emmett and he believed because he knew it could be done, for Emmett was a Clown and born to laughter.

"He is a marvelous mime."

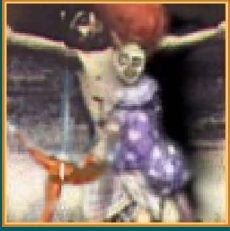
Magda the Acrobat breathed these admiring words into the soft shell of Angel John's ear. His flesh felt so real, not vat-grown at all.

"The incarnation of circus." This was the whispered opinion of Mazeppa the Strongman, who had started out billing himself as Mr. Stone until the day in '36 when he first saw "The Blue Angel." He was centuries older now, but never stronger, much too strong to die yet.

"A Clown." So said Lazro, totally and finally.

Lazro the Head Clown, the World's Greatest Clown, trainer now of a new white-faced, baggy-pantsed generation. Lazro, who, even with his arthritic limp, still loved to waddle into center ring at Emmett's behest to strut his servo-controlled stuff beneath the swaying white daisy which sprouted on a wire from his battered hat.

His rheumy eyes liquified, his voice grew affirmative and private: "He is a Clown!"



*"None believed
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Beneath the whiteface he never removed, Emmett was black. At least so thought Angel John, marshalling his evidence:

(a) Emmett's eyes — slightly protruding, the whites yellowing at the edges like ancient ivory; and

(b) Emmett's lips — thick, rubbery yet sensuous, upturned at each corner in a perpetual smile trapped within the great painted clown frown.

Eyes that knew suffering. Lips that looked warm.

Magda, Queen of the Trampoline, thought him Mexican, a clown in whose veins swirled the golden blood of Aztec priests.

"Emmett Manuel," she murmured beneath Angel John one night, the spin of the great space ring in which the Circus traveled snuggling them gently against the padded bulkhead. Magda never accepted money from Angel John. "Mexican father and Irish mother, perhaps," she said, smiling a smile fraught with innocence, a smile so like a child's. "I am content," she said. "Yes."

Angel John scarcely moved his lips. "Perhaps he's Black Irish, then."

"You said African."

"African, then."

"Now you say Black Irish."

"You say."

"I say Mexican. What do you say?"

"African."

She shrugged as though slipping a naked shoulder out from beneath a soft woolen shawl. "Okay." Beneath them, the earth spun a fraction slower than during any earlier visit of the gods.

Her eyes hid beneath shuttered lids, and air escaped her lungs as from a slow-leaking balloon. After a time, her voice came soft and deep-throated and, like a cat's purr, bespoke voluptuous comfort.

"John?"

"Yes?"

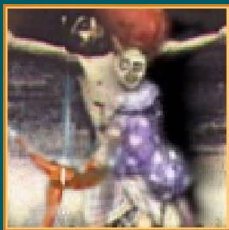
"Mexican."

Like a gold band, the center ring married Emmett to the eyes of the children. In brilliant red-and-gold silks he pranced, and through the windows of their eyes caught glimpses of their mirth-starved souls.

"Hurry! Hurry! Hurry! The Greatest Show Off Earth begins!" hawked Jody the Barker at the mouth of the Big Top, harrying late-landing ringworlders who had missed the opening parade. His puffy head rode slightly askew atop a neck rubbed red and raw. "Count out your money, my friends, only thirty silvery credits to witness what you will not soon forget!"

The synthoband piped and thrummed, and voluptuous virtual ladies posed atop barebacked cyberhorses while Magda floated like a thought above her trampoline, willing her body into slow low-gravity spirals.

His shoes in sawdust, Angel John watched. She spun just like a coin flipped by a thumb.



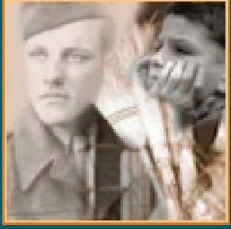
There was no sound as Emmett stretched his arms out to his sides and the spotlight pinned him like a butterfly spreadwinged on cork. Yet in the moon silence, with each jerk of his gloved hands they heard the ring of hammer on nail, saw blood stain red each cotton palm.

The cross bore him aloft and, though none could see it, held him there suspended like a cloud. They could only stare aghast until, in his twisted attitude and agonized face, they learned, to their sweet horror, they must laugh.

It was the bellycrushing howl he had been working for, and when it washed out from the crowd and swept over center ring, it left him clean as desert bones.

"It is done," he murmured aloft, his lips brushing his shoulder like dry leaves

*"None believed
a crucifixion
could get
laughs. No
member of the
Circus did —
not the
performers or
the
roustabouts,
nor any of the
owners, no
one."*



"A hand settles
on my
shoulder, a
hand weighted
by something
that isn't right,
something that
shouldn't be."

Mr. Neblin's Boy

Nancy Proctor is a native of East Tennessee where the long summer evenings of her youth were filled with the sounds of cicadas, whippoorwills, and trains rumbling along the Louisville & Nashville line toward Atlanta. She studied medieval history and information science in graduate school and now earns her living as a government librarian in Knoxville, a small city that hugs the banks of the Tennessee River and nestles between the Cumberland and Smoky Mountains.

"Mr. Neblin's Boy" was a reaction to stories, heard many years later, of what went on in the small East Tennessee town where Nancy visited her grandmother as a child.

I stop sweeping as a shadow looms against the storeroom wall. There's usually a warning. Not this time. Mr. Neblin must have sanded the bottom of the door. Feeling smaller than my ten years, I clench my eyes shut and pray. *Let someone ring the bell, someone needing a prescription or a bottle of aspirin or a soda.*

"Rich-ard." A hand settles on my shoulder, a hand weighted by something that isn't right, something that shouldn't be.

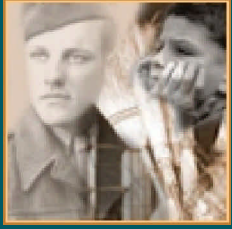
I press the broom's bristled edge flat and grind it in a crackly swirl of broken straws. If only Daddy hadn't died, if Mother didn't need money, if God would just call Mr. Neblin home...

The bell at the front of the drugstore rings, and Mr. Neblin calls out in his public voice, "I'll be there in a moment." The rustling of fabric is followed by the rasp of a zipper, the sliding closure of a belt, and a whisper in my ear. "I'll expect you here early in the morning. Not a minute past eight."

A full hour before Saturday opening.

On Sunday Mr. Neblin greets us after church. "Good day, Richard, Mrs. Mallory." Mother smiles the sad smile that's been hers since the War Department telegram came. The Flying Cross is no consolation.

A hand rests at the back of my neck, and a thumb teases the hairs curling at my nape. "You should be proud of your son," Mr. Neblin says. "He's as fine an employee



as his father was."

"George worked for you?"

"Indeed. I've had many boys over the years, but George was special — just like his son."

Mother's lips move in reply, but I can't hear a word over the roar in my ears.

Monday afternoon I stumble from the storeroom and run between the drugstore aisles. As I shove the lavatory door closed and fasten the latch, my trembling hands fight every move. I spit and rinse my mouth. When I look up, a boy stares at me from the mirror: pale, puffy-eyed, but still me. It's not right. Anyone who's done what I've done should look like someone else, someone awful.

I slide down to the floor and cry. Just like a baby. A pretty little baby boy. Mr. Neblin's boy. Just like Daddy was. Crying doesn't help, praying doesn't either, but I cry and pray just the same.

The sound of voices breaks through my tears. I hear an echoing wail. It's cut off by the clatter of wood falling against wood.

I wipe my eyes and push the lavatory door open to peer between the aisles.

A khaki-clad man steps from the storeroom. He looks familiar, like someone I know, someone I love, someone who's dead. He smiles. "You're no one's boy but your own."

I run, arms wide to hold him tight. One moment, then I hold nothing at all. But in the storeroom, a shadow looms against the wall, a rope hangs from the ceiling, and feet, encased in brown wingtips, dangle above the floor.

*"A hand settles
on my
shoulder, a
hand weighted
by something
that isn't right,
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shouldn't be."*

The Man and the Snake



"A snake in a bedroom of a modern city dwelling of the better sort is, happily, not so common a phenomenon as to make explanation altogether needless."

Ambrose Bierce (1842-?) is still widely considered one of the masters of the short story. His eerie approach to the psychological aspects of horror still affects readers and critics alike. His most famous story, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", has been the subject of both exhaustive scholarly study and more than one film maker's attention. Ambrose himself was as interesting as his work — in 1913, at the age of 71, he rode off to Mexico to offer his services to Pancho Villa's forces; he was never heard from again.

The following piece, "The Man and the Snake", is a brilliant example of the way Bierce weaved the plots of his stories through the ever-mysterious loom of the human psyche..

— I —

*I*t is of veritabyll report, and attested of so many that there be nowe of wyse and learned none to gaynsaye it, that ye serpente hys eye hath a magnetick propertie that whosoe falleth into its svasion is drawn forwards in despyte of his wille, and perisheth miserabyll by ye creature hys byte.

Stretched at ease upon a sofa, in gown and slippers, Harker Brayton smiled as he read the foregoing sentence in old Morryster's "Marvells of Science." "The only marvel in the matter," he said to himself, "is that the wise and learned in Morryster's day should have believed such nonsense as is rejected by most of even the ignorant in ours."

A train of reflections followed — for Brayton was a man of thought — and he unconsciously lowered his book without altering the direction of his eyes. As soon as the volume had gone below the line of sight, something in an obscure corner of the room recalled his attention to his surroundings. What he saw, in the shadow under his bed, were two small points of light, apparently about an inch apart. They might have been reflections of the gas jet above him, in metal nail heads; he gave them but little thought and resumed his reading. A moment later something — some impulse which it did not occur to him to analyze — impelled him to lower the book again and seek for what he saw before. The points of light were still there. They



seemed to have become brighter than before, shining with a greenish luster which he had not at first observed. He thought, too, that they might have moved a trifle — were somewhat nearer. They were still too much in the shadow, however, to reveal their nature and origin to an indolent attention, and he resumed his reading. Suddenly something in the text suggested a thought which made him start and drop the book for the third time to the side of the sofa, whence, escaping from his hand, it fell sprawling to the floor, back upward. Brayton, half-risen, was staring intently into the obscurity beneath the bed, where the points of light shone with, it seemed to him, an added fire. His attention was now fully aroused, his gaze eager and imperative. It disclosed, almost directly beneath the foot rail of the bed, the coils of a large serpent — the points of light were its eyes! Its horrible head, thrust flatly forth from the innermost coil and resting upon the outermost, was directed straight toward him, the definition of the wide, brutal jaw and the idiotlike forehead serving to show the direction of its malevolent gaze. The eyes were no longer merely luminous points; they looked into his own with a meaning, a malign significance.

———— II ————

A snake in a bedroom of a modern city dwelling of the better sort is, happily, not so common a phenomenon as to make explanation altogether needless. Harker Brayton, a bachelor of thirty-five, a scholar, idler, and something of an athlete, rich, popular, and of sound health, had returned to San Francisco from all manner of remote and unfamiliar countries. His tastes, always a trifle luxurious, had taken on an added exuberance from long privation; and the resources of even the Castle Hotel being inadequate for their perfect gratification, he had gladly accepted the hospitality of his friend, Dr. Druring, the distinguished scientist. Dr. Druring's house, a large, old-fashioned one in what was now an obscure quarter of the city, had an outer and visible aspect of reserve. It plainly would not associate with the contiguous elements of its altered environment, and appeared to have developed some of the eccentricities which come of isolation. One of these was a "wing," conspicuously irrelevant in point of architecture, and no less rebellious in the matter of purpose; for it was a combination of laboratory, menagerie, and museum. It was here that the doctor indulged the scientific side of his nature in the study of such forms of animal life as engaged his interest and comforted his taste — which, it must be confessed, ran rather to the lower forms. For one of the higher types nimbly and sweetly to recommend itself unto his gentle senses, it had at least to retain certain rudimentary characteristics allying it to such "dragons of the prime" as toads and snakes. His scientific sympathies were distinctly reptilian; he loved nature's vulgarians and described himself as the Zola of zoology. His wife and daughters, not having the advantage to share his enlightened curiosity regarding the works and ways of our ill-starred fellow-creatures, were, with needless austerity, excluded from what he called the Snakery, and doomed to companionship with their own kind; though, to soften the rigors of their lot, he had permitted them, out of his great wealth, to outdo the reptiles in the gorgeousness of their surroundings and to shine with a superior splendor.

Architecturally, and in point of "furnishing," the Snakery had a severe simplicity befitting the humble circumstances of its occupants, many of whom, indeed, could not safely have been intrusted with the liberty which is necessary to the full enjoyment of luxury, for they had the troublesome peculiarity of being alive. In their own

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apartments, however, they were under as little personal restraint as was compatible with their protection from the baneful habit of swallowing one another; and, as Brayton had thoughtfully been apprised, it was more than a tradition that some of them had at divers times been found in parts of the premises where it would have embarrassed them to explain their presence. Despite the Snakery and its uncanny associations — to which, indeed, he gave little attention — Brayton found life at the Druring mansion very much to his mind.

— III —

Beyond a smart shock of surprise and a shudder of mere loathing, Mr. Brayton was not greatly affected. His first thought was to ring the call bell and bring a servant; but, although the bell cord dangled within easy reach, he made no movement toward it; it had occurred to his mind that the act might subject him to the suspicion of fear, which he certainly did not feel. He was more keenly conscious of the incongruous nature of the situation than affected by its perils; it was revolting, but absurd.

The reptile was of a species with which Brayton was unfamiliar. Its length he could only conjecture; the body at the largest visible part seemed about as thick as his forearm. In what way was it dangerous, if in any way? Was it venomous? Was it a constrictor? His knowledge of nature's danger signals did not enable him to say; he had never deciphered the code.

If not dangerous, the creature was at least offensive. It was de trop — "matter out of place" — an impertinence. The gem was unworthy of the setting. Even the barbarous taste of our time and country, which had loaded the walls of the room with pictures, the floor with furniture, and the furniture with bric-a-brac, had not quite fitted the place for this bit of the savage life of the jungle. Besides — insupportable thought! — the exhalations of its breath mingled with the atmosphere which he himself was breathing!

These thoughts shaped themselves with greater or less definition in Brayton's mind, and begot action. The process is what we call consideration and decision. It is thus that we are wise and unwise. It is thus that the withered leaf in an autumn breeze shows greater or less intelligence than its fellows, falling upon the land or upon the lake. The secret of human action is an open one — something contracts our muscles. Does it matter if we give to the preparatory molecular changes the name of will?

Brayton rose to his feet and prepared to back softly away from the snake, without disturbing it, if possible, and through the door. People retire so from the presence of the great, for greatness is power, and power is a menace. He knew that he could walk backward without obstruction, and find the door without error. Should the monster follow, the taste which had plastered the walls with paintings had consistently supplied a rack of murderous Oriental weapons from which he could snatch one to suit the occasion. In the meantime the snake's eyes burned with a more pitiless malevolence than ever.

Brayton lifted his right foot free of the floor to step backward. That moment he felt a strong aversion to doing so.

"I am accounted brave," he murmured; "is bravery, then, no more than pride? Because there are none to witness the shame shall I retreat?"

He was steadying himself with his right hand upon the back of a chair, his foot suspended.

"A snake in a bedroom of a modern city dwelling of the better sort is, happily, not so common a phenomenon as to make explanation altogether needless."



"Nonsense!" he said aloud; "I am not so great a coward as to fear to seem to myself afraid."

He lifted the foot a little higher by slightly bending the knee, and thrust it sharply to the floor — an inch in front of the other! He could not think how that occurred. A trial with the left foot had the same result; it was again in advance of the right. The hand upon the chair back was grasping it; the arm was straight, reaching somewhat backward. One might have seen that he was reluctant to lose his hold. The snake's malignant head was still thrust forth from the inner coil as before, the neck level. It had not moved, but its eyes were now electric sparks, radiating an infinity of luminous needles.

The man had an ashy pallor. Again he took a step forward, and another, partly dragging the chair, which, when finally released, fell upon the floor with a crash. The man groaned; the snake made neither sound nor motion, but its eyes were two dazzling suns. The reptile itself was wholly concealed by them. They gave off enlarging rings of rich and vivid colors, which at their greatest expansion successively vanished like soap bubbles; they seemed to approach his very face, and anon were an immeasurable distance away. He heard, somewhere, the continual throbbing of a great drum, with desultory bursts of far music, inconceivably sweet, like the tones of an aeolian harp. He knew it for the sunrise melody of Memnon's statue, and thought he stood in the Nileside reeds, hearing, with exalted sense, that immortal anthem through the silence of the centuries.

The music ceased; rather, it became by insensible degrees the distant roll of a retreating thunderstorm. A landscape, glittering with sun and rain, stretched before him, arched with a vivid rainbow, framing in its giant curve a hundred visible cities. In the middle distance a vast serpent, wearing a crown, reared its head out of its voluminous convolutions and looked at him with his dead mother's eyes. Suddenly this enchanting landscape seemed to rise swiftly upward, like the drop scene at a theater, and vanished in a blank. Something struck him a hard blow upon the face and breast. He had fallen to the floor; the blood ran from his broken nose and his bruised lips. For a moment he was dazed and stunned, and lay with closed eyes, his face against the door. In a few moments he had recovered, and then realized that his fall, by withdrawing his eyes, had broken the spell which held him. He felt that now, by keeping his gaze averted, he would be able to retreat. But the thought of the serpent within a few feet of his head, yet unseen — perhaps in the very act of springing upon him and throwing its coils about his throat — was too horrible. He lifted his head, stared again into those baleful eyes, and was again in bondage.

The snake had not moved, and appeared somewhat to have lost its power upon the imagination; the gorgeous illusions of a few moments before were not repeated. Beneath that flat and brainless brow its black, beady eyes simply glittered, as at first, with an expression unspeakably malignant. It was as if the creature, knowing its triumph assured, had determined to practice no more alluring wiles.

Now ensued a fearful scene. The man, prone upon the floor, within a yard of his enemy, raised the upper part of his body upon his elbows, his head thrown back, his legs extended to their full length. His face was white between its gout of blood; his eyes were strained open to their uttermost expansion. There was froth upon his lips; it dropped off in flakes. Strong convulsions ran through his body, making almost serpentine undulations. He bent himself at the waist, shifting his legs from side to side. And every movement left him a little nearer to the snake. He thrust his hands forward to brace himself back, yet constantly advanced upon his elbows.

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— IV —

Dr. Druring and his wife sat in the library. The scientist was in rare good humor. "I have just obtained, by exchange with another collector," he said, "a splendid specimen of the Ophiophagus."

"And what may that be?" the lady inquired with a somewhat languid interest.

"Why, bless my soul, what profound ignorance! My dear, a man who ascertains after marriage that his wife does not know Greek, is entitled to a divorce. The Ophiophagus is a snake which eats other snakes."

"I hope it will eat all yours," she said, absently shifting the lamp. "But how does it get the other snakes? By charming them, I suppose."

"That is just like you, dear," said the doctor, with an affectation of petulance. "You know how irritating to me is any allusion to that vulgar superstition about the snake's power of fascination."

The conversation was interrupted by a mighty cry which rang through the silent house like the voice of a demon shouting in a tomb. Again and yet again it sounded, with terrible distinctness. They sprang to their feet, the man confused, the lady pale and speechless with fright. Almost before the echoes of the last cry had died away the doctor was out of the room, springing up the staircase two steps at a time. In the corridor, in front of Brayton's chamber, he met some servants who had come from the upper floor. Together they rushed at the door without knocking. It was unfastened, and gave way. Brayton lay upon his stomach on the floor, dead. His head and arms were partly concealed under the foot rail of the bed. They pulled the body away, turning it upon the back. The face was daubed with blood and froth, the eyes were wide open, staring — a dreadful sight!

"Died in a fit," said the scientist, bending his knee and placing his hand upon the heart. While in that position he happened to glance under the bed. "Good God!" he added; "how did this thing get in here?"

He reached under the bed, pulled out the snake, and flung it, still coiled, to the center of the room, whence, with a harsh, shuffling sound, it slid across the polished floor till stopped by the wall, where it lay without motion. It was a stuffed snake; its eyes were two shoe buttons.