

BLOODLETTING

By Marcos Donnelly

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WE'VE ALL BUT IGNORED the most arresting development of our century: the shift away from scientists crafting theories based on nature, to scientists pillaging nature for evidence of their favorite theories. Massive vector bosons, MACHO and WIMP dark matter . . . good Lord, gentlemen, could we please return to the essence of things?"

Dr. Henri Elobert

1992 Paper to La Societe

"Blueshift," Kantell said as he looked up from the astroplot they'd prepared from last Christ day's readings. He said it casually, as if saying "meteor shower" or "solar flare."

Tern looked angry. "Impossible! A supercluster that large and that far out — in blueshift!"

The dozen other heads in the room nodded. Of course it was impossible. They'd only just discovered this new supercluster, but no clusters so near the cosmic horizon blueshifted. Every major piece of the Universe was moving away from every other major piece. The cosmic rule of thumb was redshift.

But Ledeirsen came running into the room with astroplots from Bloodday observations, just last night.

"Another one," he said, out of breath. "There's another one."

She first comes to kill me out from a shadowed corner of my monastery cell. I know what she is — my own reaction tells me. I have been taught, again and again, that if one of the satans comes to steal off the soul of a sacerdote to a place in the Hells, that satan will attack the priest's weakness, his Most Grievous Inner Sin.

My Most Grievous Inner Sin is flesh lust, and she is beautiful.

She — no, it, for I must keep my wits — is guised as one of the women beyond the Holy Walls: long strings of black hair hanging from the open front of her hood, and the thick chest flesh tight against her umber robe. But I have readied myself for this, and I know to hate the tempter. I know enough to want to grab its throat and rip out its life in the Name of the Christ Son, first Believer in the Bloodletting for the Fatherhead.

The satan appears to me in year twenty-seven of Benedictus the Fifty-first,

nine hundred and eighty-third Pope since Remus and the Christ Son together laid the cornerstone of Roma.

It draws its hood back, and I am struck by the satan's incarnation. Not exactly the form imagined in my Most Grievous Inner Sin, but enough to cause me to sway. Dark gray eyes, full hair and no signs of balding, unlike the men and women outside the Wall. Not a single blemish from the Curse.

And I hesitate. The woman-face the creature wears is sad. The Writs have spoken of voracity in satan eyes, and of licentiousness and Hell-light, but never of sadness. I hesitate because I believe I am seeing a new guise of the satans, as did St. Carlisle of Old, and I decide it might be important to discern the creature's full nature before ripping its throat. I have always performed special worship to St. Carlisle, and this unholy incarnation may be the Saint's way of repaying my devotion. The Saint is revealing to me a new class of satan, that I might win honor for my name and his.

Or perhaps the satan is striking at my pride, the second of my Most Grievous Inner Sins.

"Oh, Shirrah," the satan speaks, calling me by a name not mine. This is a good sign. If a satan speaks your name, you lose a portion of your spirit. "Your head," it says. "Your hands."

It looks at me piteously, seducing me into believing it sympathizes with the pains of the sacred Bloodletting. I have bored holes through my palms, completely through. Few sacerdots have gone as far. The cuts in my head are not as deep as they could be, and I feel shame for a moment. But my hands are holy; I will kill it with my hands.

It walks past me to the window of my cell. I have still said nothing to it, because I cannot remember what Saint Carlisle had said to his new demon. But I should know! This satan confuses my mind, and I must fight to remember.

It is looking out the window, completely trusting that I will not attack it from behind. This, too, confuses me. The satans are not so careless. "The stars," it says, its voice low and bewildered. "The stars have never been this close. No time that I remember." It turns and faces me. There is a tear coming from one of its eyes, and I know now, for certain, that I am indeed blessed to cast down a guise of the satans so unique. Never have the Writs mentioned tears.

"You were right," it says. "No patterns, never a set amount of time. You knew, and now I do."

It pulls a dagger from beneath its robe. I have prepared myself against surprises, but I gasp nonetheless. She has turned so that starlight reflects from her

right eye, the one without the tear. It is Hell-light, I realize. I begin a silent word ritual to St. Carlisle of Old.

She screams now. “You remember nothing after this? Notying?” The hand with the dagger is shaking violently. This satan acts like a human, but speaks arcanelly. A noble test from the Fatherhead. I am terrified.

The creature in woman-guise calms as suddenly as it exploded. “Oh Shirrah. It ends with your ignorance, just as it began with mine. Then go ahead! His start, my finish, and we remain dim-minded toward one another!”

She has yelled this last part, not at me, but out the window of my cell, as if to the very stars. But I do not take the time to ponder, for the words of Saint Carlisle come to me all at once. I recite them: “How could I have loved you when the Universe demands our blood?”

Ancient words, always a mystery to the Brotherhood of Sacerdotes. They strike the creature, confound it, and it lowers the dagger. I do not waste the moment. I lunge at it and grab its throat. My hands only appear to be weakened by the sacred Bloodletting; they are actually quite strong. The satan in my grip hardly struggles.

Before the creature’s final gasp, I feel the sting in my side. Then the satan goes limp. There is blood, and I am confused. Satans, even in human-guise, have never bled, never shown sadness, never shed tears. But I see the blood is mine, then, and that her dagger’s grip protrudes from my side. I laugh; it is an honor, a slashed side like the Christ Son. The laugh hurts, though, and I cannot breathe. I stumble over the creature’s dead form, catch myself on the stone edge of the window.

Before I die, I see the stars. They are too large, many almost half the size of the moon.

The world is dissolving — not just my world, my life, but the entire world. And I cannot think why.

Kantell set down a stack of astroplots. On top was the latest: Blueshift No. 198 A.

“It can’t be happening,” Tern said. He’d been saying it for three days straight.

“It shouldn’t be,” Ledeirsen agreed, insistent. “There isn’t enough matter in the Universe for a collapse. We’ve proved that. We’ve dispelled the dark-matter myth. Even with the MACHOs, the Universe is only at 23% capacity for a collapse. This can’t happen! It’s that siraple!”

Kantell nodded toward the stack of astroplots. “I’m not the one you need to

convince.”

I AM RESTRAINED by a metal sheet, seated and feeling cramped. My head is clear, and I forget for a moment that I am dead. There is a grandiose room not made from stones, like nothing to which I am accustomed from thirty-seven years in cells behind the Holy Walls of Roma. This place is an abode for giants; “Nephilim” is the word I was taught.

My prison seat is elevated from the floor, the height of at least three good men. There is a giant across the great abode, standing the height of seven. A terror creeps through me, because I remember I have died, and with me all the world. This, then, must be the life after, and I have failed at the hands of a satan. I have been sent to one of the Hells.

One is not expected to retain dignity in the Hells; I scream without shame. The giant approaches; she has a huge, contorted face, a ballooned parody of the human facade. The face is as large as half my body, and I continue to scream, knowing the she-giant will consume me whole.

I silence myself — it is something about my scream, an unnatural shrieking like a bat or a maimed rodent. My body feels squat, like a dwarf. When I hold my hands before my eyes, I scream again, for the sacred holes are gone. No, not only the holes; the hands are gone, too. They are replaced by tiny things that only approximate hands, scrunched and wrinkled and no larger than a cat’s paw. I have been betrayed! A sacerdote, the Writs have promised, may keep his wounds, even unto the deepest pit of the Hells, even to mock the satans with the victories of the Christ Son! Death has robbed me.

The demon-bitch has robbed me.

“Baby,” the she-giant says. “Oh, poor baby. Come here.” She lifts me without the least effort and sets me staring over her shoulder. “Poor baby,” she says, patting me gently with a massive hand that could easily crush my spine. “My poor little Carlisle.”

By the Sweet Wounds of the Christ Sort, I curse to myself. This is no giant. I am an infant!

I am lulled to sleep by the gentle patting, and, as far as I can tell, I sleep for three dozen years.

When I awake, I am standing before a beautiful portrait of St. Carlisle of Old. The craftsmanship is unmatched, with the shades of the oils so delicately blended that the portrait has depth and dimension that are almost alive. It is St. Carlisle in his latter years; the artist has broken from convention by eliminating all the gray from Carlisle’s beard. He has made the eyebrows much thicker than the standard

portrayals. I do not care for the sagging, darkened skin under each eye, but I still find the Saint's humanity more compelling than any other portrayal I've seen.

I lurch backwards and lose a beat of my heart. I have knocked something over, and it falls with a tinny clatter; I do not bother to look to see what it is. For when I reached to touch the canvas and feel its quality, the canvas reached back for me. And when I lurched, the Saint also fell away deeper into the portrait.

Sweet Wounds. It is my reflection in a glass.

There is a banging and I feel firm hands on my shoulders. A voice with the strangest accent says, "Father Carlisle? Father Carlisle, are you all right?"

I turn and face him: a short man, fat from abundance that few ever see behind the Holy Walls of Roma. The room we are in is small, smaller even than my cell, but it is white and brightly lit. It feels very close in the room, and smells like cold, false incense. His hands are quite moist, and I realize I am naked but for the briefest of cloths covering my modesty. "Bernard," my voice says, in an accent quite like his own. And again, "Father Bernard."

He leads me from the room, into a darker passageway. Another man has taken my arm, and the two of them speak.

"What happened?"

"Another spell."

"A vision?"

The one named Bernard is slow to respond. "We'll ask him when he recovers."

I turn my head to see the second man. "Father Schramm," I say, and he nods.

"You'll be okay, Carlisle. You'll be fine."

"A vision, Father Schramm," I say, "A vision. Yes." For I begin to realize what is happening. This is all part of my translation to the life after. Devout to St. Carlisle, loyal to him only after the Fatherhead and the Christ Son, this has become my reward: to see St. Carlisle's world through the eyes of St. Carlisle. I have not been damned to the Hells after all. I have been blessed.

They take me to a room that is far too luxurious for a Saint. The bed is large enough for two and has three blankets and two sheaves of fine white linen. The walls are a bright blue, and portraits and landscapes hang on each of the four walls. There

are other devices that I am sure represent wealth and power to some degree; I know that similar devices exist in my own time, outside the walls of Roma, the tools of scientists and governments. I do not claim to be a scholar of the age of Carlisle, and would not venture to guess the functions of these particular devices. Nor do I protest the luxury. It is not my place, for I am to watch the Saint from within.

They seat me on the edge of the bed. "This is just great, Schramm," the one named Bernard says. "The conference is in less than an hour. We can't take him in front of the College of Cardinals in this condition."

Father Schramm looks intimidated by the short, fat priest, and he keeps a hand on my back to steady me. "I'll never understand, Bernard," he says, his voice unsteady, "why a mystic would entrust himself to a pragmatist like you. You act as if you were his agent."

"I act like I'm his mother, and it's a good thing."

"My mother," I say, "was of the Nephilim." They both stare at me silently for a moment.

"Good God," Bernard mutters, and turns his back.

In an hour, I am before the College of Cardinals. The speech I am to give is written on thin, smooth parchment with the most painstakingly precise handwriting. The writing reminds me of the oldest copies of the Writs which are kept secure behind vaults in Roma. I once saw the oldest Writs, on the day I was ordained a sacerdote. They are shown once to all novices at ordination. A single holy glance provides the greatest indulgence of sin recognized by the Brotherhood.

But the words on the parchment before me are bland. They speak of vague universals like unity and peace. They say nothing of the personal call placed on each aspirant to the Presence of the Fatherhood. They say nothing of the temptation by the satans, or the Bloodletting.

I know what speech I am about to give. It is not this false one before me. As a novice I memorized Carlisle's Homily to the World, and I have at times recited it aloud in the emptiness of my cell, pretending myself to be the Saint. I had thought it pride, a manifestation of my second Most Grievous Inner Sin. Now I see it was practice for this day.

"The whole world watches?" I whisper the question to Father Bernard, who stands beside me for this homily. He smiles without heart and gestures to my left. When I look, I see only rows of metal boxes on iron legs, like malformed tabernacles touched by the Curse outside Roma's Walls. Behind the boxes, the forms of men are crouching, hiding their faces. Piety in the presence of the Saint, although a bizarre and primitive piety in my opinion.

The hall is vast, a sea of red garments. Beyond the red I see the darker costumes of other men. I surmise they represent the Separated Brethren, and that this is the day of the One-Church Unification. I know the legends.

“Today,” I begin, and hesitate when my voice fills the entire hall and rolls back at me. “Today,” I say again, adjusting to the noise my small lungs produce, “I have seen the guises of Satan in our world. This is to be a day of reunification of the divided Body of Christ. But I will not speak of brotherhood today. Pretending to be brothers cannot save us from the deceptions of the satans.”

There is a murmur in the great hall, and the sound of flapping paper. Many of the Cardinals are looking down and reading parchment. Perhaps they have been given copies of Carlisle’s intended speech, and are confused that the words do not match what I say. It is not inconceivable that so many copies could be made. The resources of this age appear limitless to me, and even a thousand scribes would not seem an absurd number.

But I will not give that false homily.

“Today,” I continue to recite from memory, “Satan, many satans, circle above us in the guise of metal, threatening from the skies a rain of fire and death. Today, satans surround us on the Earth in the guise of flesh that craves flesh, in the guise of armies keeping peace, in the guise of unseeable monsters of man’s own creation, invading our bodies in silent acts of war.

“Today, satans hide below our feet in the guise of two million demons of fire that can be launched in a single moment from Washington, Buenos Aires, Beijing” — I speak the names of the ancient Cities of Hate, but with a peculiar stress and pronunciation I have never used before — “Berlin, Jerusalem, Mexico City, and hundreds others, without the faintest cry of protest heard.

“I will not be your brother today. I will not claim to come from your stock. Your call for brotherhood is a farce, and many in this Hall of God are themselves no more than guises of satans. I see that in your finery, your bloated purses, and in your eyes.”

There is a cry of protest from the hall, and again my head is swimming. There should be no protest. The Writs record in annotation to Carlisle’s Homily to the World: “The crowds were humbled by the Saint’s words, and submitted to the Bloodletting of the Fatherhead.”

“Know today,” I shout, “that the true believer is brother only to the Christ Son. Know that you do not bear His Name without bearing His Wounds.” Then I dig my right index finger into my left palm, and the thrill gives me strength. My index finger snaps, but not before ripping flesh from the palm. I use the edge of bone to

finish the hole, and bore through completely.

The pain is incredible. Burning and holy. I hold up my bloodied hand.

“This,” I scream, for the crowd is now shouting, “is the only brotherhood with the Christ Son!”

The speech is ended, as far as the Writs record. The crowd is abusive, not conforming to the written history, but I do not care. I am enraptured in the holiness of the Wound. I turn to face Father Bernard, but he has left my side.

Suddenly the crowd before me is silent. I look over them, but they are not looking back to me, the Saint. They all seem to look toward the ceiling. I hear, then, the single note screeching above us, around us. They listen in fear, as if the sound were a trump of doom.

Then panic as I have never seen. Waves of red garments, dignity turned animal as the hundreds claw over one another toward exits from the hall. In the madness of the mob, one Cardinal grabs me. His eyes are so wide that his pupils seem lost in the surrounding whiteness. “How could you know?” he screams at me. “The bombs! The bombs! How could you see it coming?” Then he rushes into the mob again.

And she pushes through the mob, too, coming in the other direction. Toward me. She looks completely different, her hair short and her garments cut and fitted in various patterned pieces. Nevertheless, I recognize my satan. She is blocked for a moment by a Cardinal tardy in his flight from the hall, and she kicks him quite viciously to remove him from her path.

She is before me, but it is impossible. This is my vision, my blessing before death, and no satan can enter a blessed vision. She is a satan beyond my understanding.

“Bastard!” she yells, and she hits me across the face with something blunt and metal. I cry out and fall to the floor.

She swears at me again, and kicks my ribs. Vaguely, my eyes blurring and my cheek against the floor, I see the throng of red garments still clawing over itself to escape the hall. Several Cardinals lie motionless, crushed by the mob and tossed aside.

I reach for her foot, and when I catch it I twist until I hear cartilage cracking. She screams, and I pull her down.

“Bastard, bastard, bastard!” she yells, still beating on my head. I am forced to push her away.

“This is my vision,” I cry. “You have no right to invade my death! This dream is holy!”

She is sobbing, and now beating the floor instead of me. “Holy,” she manages to say between gasps of sorrow and pain. “There is nothing holy about us, Shirrah. We were both fools. How could I have loved you when the Universe demands our blood?”

I am shocked, then outraged. “Those words are mine, you demon-bitch. How dare you rob them from me? From the lips of Saint Carlisle himself?” I grab her hair, lift, and slam her face into the floor.

She looks up, her nose flat and bloodied. “What do you care?” she asks. “For you, love still approaches. For me, everything is past. How many more times? Just one, isn’t it?” Then she swings the blunt metal she has used on me, and strikes the side of my head. I manage to strike her well one more time. Then the world explodes in white, and I die a second death. I believe I have killed her, too.

Near midnight of Woundsday, Ledeirsen crept into the central meeting room. “I have bad news,” he whispered.

“That,” muttered Tern, “would not be so very different.”

“PN-259 E went into blueshift this morning.” The room became very quiet. This wasn’t a previously undiscovered supercluster, like the others. It was a known one, one already charted.

“You’re certain?” Kantell asked, knowing, even as he said it, that the question was a stupid one.

I AM AN infant once again. I am shocked by the coldness of this infancy. There are bitter winds, frost falls from the very sky. The giant who is my mother here treats me roughly. She bundles me in a sack that covers to my neck, and tosses me over her shoulder. I am suspended there.

So, I am twice betrayed: once of my Wounds, once of my Vision. The demon-bitch follows me and robs me; this is a charade.

All my life, I have asked little of the Fatherhead. My first desire was to be in His presence, my second was to bleed righteously and often like the Christ Son. My outer sins have been negligible, and my Most Grievous Inner Sins have been carefully monitored. It has been sufficient. I have never begged for the honor of battle with one of the satans.

I sleep again, like the last time, and awake a young warrior. My body is

covered with animal skins. I need them. The weather around me is colder than any winter in Roma. The frost even falls in frozen droplets from the sky. I refuse to pray to the Fatherhead for warmth.

Another warrior approaches me, even younger than I. I know that he is one of two hundred and twelve who follow my command. I counted the number just yesterday, although I am not consciously aware of any yesterday but infancy. Yesterday, I set pebbles on the ice for each man I counted. For weeks I had shown them how to approach for battle. I demonstrated how a strong center attack could divide an enemy into two forces, and how this division would weaken them. I taught them to circle behind enemies from both sides, enclosing them.

When I concentrate, I can remember all these things and much more. I am not just seeing this life from inside; I have lived it.

The young warrior who approaches me kneels and touches his head to the ice-ground. He carries a long wooden spear with an ivory head crafted to a point. The sword at his side is metal. His eyes are shaped like the ivory point of his spear, and the skin on his face is a brown darker than anyone inside of Roma.

Roma. I do not care to compare this place, this man, with Roma. This man is loyal to me. He is not like Father Bernard, who never trusted me as the Saint. No, this man would give his life at my word.

“They come, Larakhan. And they are led by a woman warrior, as you said.”

“Yes,” I agree. I remember having said it, although it feels for a moment I have not. But he is right. “Have the warriors span the ridge. You know what to do.”

He runs off. I am amazed at his fleetness. Even his boots of black fur leave little impression on the snow. I am proud of this one. Very proud.

Oh, Fatherhead. Oh, Christ Son. What is this test? This game!

The two hundred and twelve are crouched silently below the edge of the ice ridge. I watch them, and I feel my body spasm with fear. Yes! I can feel her. I have developed a sense for the satan’s presence; I know she is near.

My young warrior raises an arm to me, the signal that the enemy is within reach. I raise both my arms in response, and all two hundred and twelve watch me.

When I drop my arms, they raise a unison war cry that could frighten the very hosts of the Hells. They charge over the ridge.

I move forward slowly with measured strides, listening to the screams beyond

the ice ridge. The battle is finished when I reach the top of the ridge. The enemy is partially surrendered, mostly slaughtered. The redness of their blood does not sully the snow much. Wounds freeze quickly in this temperature. My warrior reports two hundred and fifty enemies killed, twenty-two captured. Our force has lost seven.

“The woman?” I ask him, although I know he has followed orders. He points to the eastern side of the battlefield. Three of my men have stripped her naked, and are dragging her through the snow by her hair. Each time she struggles they strike her, but they are careful not to injure her beyond my command.

After three hundred paces of being dragged across ice, I allow her to stand before me. She can barely manage it.

I am not affected by her naked form, although it is no less pleasing to the flesh than her first appearance to me. And I feel no pride at having overcome her forces so easily. No, she has touched upon my third Most Grievous Inner Sin. She has brought forth my anger.

“Shirrah,” she says weakly. She is shaking and the cold will take her soon. “What has happened? Our pact, my love. Our agreement. We said only others from now on. Not ourselves. What about our love?”

Curious. She always speaks this way, as if I should have some knowledge I cannot reach, but which she expects of me.

“I no longer fear you, guise of satan,” I say. “The Fatherhead will not accept my soul, and the Hells cannot seem to hold it. I have nothing left to fear.”

“Shirrah?” Always that confused look, always that name. “Don’t you remember? Has the journey stolen your memory?”

I roar at her. “Remember? God’s Wounds, I remember! Twice you’ve slain me, you demon bitch, and I have no care of God, Christ, or Carlisle left to show you any patience! You suck me back through the history of this earth, and you slay me violently in two lifetimes! I’ll have my share of violence as well.”

“Slew you? But . . .” Her hands go to her mouth. “Back? Back, Shirrah? You’ve never told me —”

“When we’ve done battle, I’ve never had time to speak a word, you murdering whore! The time I give you now is far too lenient by your own standards.” I raise my sword, and want nothing more than her blood.

“But you never told me you are pulled back! I assumed . . . I only thought it was like me —”

I swing the sword, but she manages to say “I love you” before I have taken her life.

My men cheer, fanatics for the easy victory of their leader. But I am troubled by the corpse in the snow. The satans cannot love. They cannot speak the word aloud, even to lie to mortals. Such I have been taught. And such, despite my trials, I still believe. Yet she has said love to me today. And she said love when quoting the words of St. Carlisle.

What I have killed is no satan.

There is a commotion among my men. I turn to them, and their faces are toward the sky. Always the sky, I think, and I look myself. A sphere of flame is falling, some burning rock from heaven. I am not concerned, because death has already lost its novelty to me. Instead, I take the moments to ponder.

Each time she is both puzzled and puzzling. Each time her reactions follow no pattern I can discern. She reacts to situations in ways contrary to mine, almost directly opposed emotionally.

Backward.

And each time there is incredible death around us. This time, when the fiery meteor from the sky hits the earth, is no exception. The ground seems to buckle for a thousand miles.

Every star, star cluster, galaxy, and galactic cluster in the observable Universe was now in blueshift.

“Except one,” Kantell announced.

Tern stood up from his own astroplots, daring a look of hope. “Which one?”

“Blueshift Number 1. The very first one we discovered.”

Confusion. Then elation from Tern. “It’s stopped! Sweet Blood of the Son, it’s stopped!”

“No,” said Kantell. “It’s no longer visible. I believe it’s approaching faster than its own light.”

Tern was shaking his head. “But we would still see . . .” “He said nothing else. There was no sense in arguing. Nothing was rational anymore.

“Blackshift Number 1,” said Kantell.

This time the infancy does not take me by surprise. Except for the desert warmth. More than pleasant after a life on the ice ridges.

Again I slumber after the initial awareness, and I awake an adolescent, much younger than my other incarnations. I laugh at myself, because I realize I have now taken on as many forms and guises as any of the satans could. In my first life I would have wasted time pondering the symbolism of that, but now I do not care. I have no faith in the Fatherhead any longer. That does not mean I do not believe there is a God. It simply means that I feel God has left Himself irrelevant to me.

Perhaps that is one of His Inner Sins, Most Grievous.

In this life I am named Shirrah. I believe I am Hittite, and that I first lived six thousand years from now. But I am going backwards through history, and my satan — who has called herself my love — is going forward. She does not yet know the tomorrows we will share, and I cannot yet grasp the yesterdays ahead of me. I search for her, because I know we must meet again and again in ignorance.

She is by a pool, preparing to bathe. The pool is man-made, surrounded by a score of layered-bark trees with sharp, drooping leaves. A channel of water runs to the pool from an oasis a hundred paces upland. Her family must be rich to afford such luxuries. But she is unattended by servants. Either they are only moderately rich, or she is a willful child to bathe alone.

I watch her disrobe; I am only faintly aware of vows I have made against indulging the flesh. Rather, vows I will make, six millennia from now, vows that died in the body of a loyal sacerdotess way back then. Her form fascinates me, naked, dark, thin like the women outside Roma, but with small breasts. I do not know what it is that fixes my eyes on her breasts.

I do not want to embarrass her. I wait until she is done bathing and fully dressed before I approach.

“I am Shirrah, son of Terin the sheep grazer.”

She is startled by my voice. When she jumps up, she grabs a rock twice the size of her hand.

“I deserve no less,” I say quickly. “I have trespassed on your family land, and I have invaded your solitude. My life is yours.”

She throws the stone at me and just misses my head.

“Perhaps if I move closer,” I say, “killing me will be easier.” I venture several paces across the sand, closer to her. She looks at me queerly.

“I know you, Shirrah,” she says, sounding as if she is not sure she believes it herself. She picks up another stone, and hurls it at my side. It hits.

“How do you know me?” I say while standing. My side is bruised, but I do not care. Even pain has begun to bore me. “Have you heard me calling you across the millennia?” I mean the future when I say it, but I believe she is pondering her past. She does not reach for any more stones.

“You killed me,” she says, looking amazed that she has remembered. But I know she is not talking about her future. She is talking about what I will still do in mine. “But then I killed you back. Twice.” I cannot tell if the pride I hear in her voice is due to her being able to remember, or due to her out-killing me two to one. I do not even care. That she recognizes me is enough. I bow to her — it is anachronistic, a gesture I acquired in my previous incarnation — and leave her.

Her name is Selah, for what that is worth.

Over the next few months we fall in love. We set no times to meet, but always do. We sense when we need one another. I assist my father in the tending of sheep, but during the long days in the sun I find myself longing for my woman-guised satan. I have never been physically intimate with a woman in any of my incarnations; never married, never in love. The sacerdotesses of Roma were wrong: lust is not as far removed from love as they supposed.

But neither is it far removed from violence. It is a pall over me that in her next incarnation, Selah will die under my sword. I try not to think of it, but it is impossible. I cannot bring myself to tell her.

At times, during our lovemaking, I tell her to dig her fingernails deep into my flesh. When she draws blood, we experience an ecstasy that matches the white blazes of destruction in each of my previous guises. She asks me to explain the effect, but I pretend ignorance. It would reveal too much to her about the violence — about the history of the world ahead, and our history besides.

“Being human has changed us,” she says to me one day. We lie naked by the pond; I have been running my hand over the smooth skin of her back.

“What do you mean?” I ask. I never inquire about our past, for she has always assumed I know what she knows.

“I mean, before we took this form we fought mindlessly. I never understood why we attacked. What the battle was for. But being human has given us reason beyond what we’ve known before. Being able to touch . . . I think that changes everything.” She leans toward me and kisses me.

I am ashamed of the future. “Maybe being human isn’t all that different.”

“But it is!” she insists, sitting upright. “Being able to touch you has changed how I feel. I don’t understand you, but I feel who you are. We should swear never to harm one another again, Shirrah.”

I lower my eyes to the pool beside us. “It is never that simple,” I whisper. “Things do not follow such neat paths. There are no reliable patterns, no set times.”

She grabs my shoulders and forces me to look at her. “Swear to me! Swear to me by our love that we will never harm each other again!”

I shake with fury. With helplessness. How can I promise to never do what I have already done in the coming centuries? “All right!” I yell. “I swear! I swear by our love!” And then I grab her in a furious kiss. Our bodies come together like those of animals, and she digs at my flesh. I dig at hers as well. We are both bloodied.

She looks up in the middle of our passion. “If we must kill, Shirrah, then let it be others! Never ourselves again. Now that we are human, never ourselves!”

I swear it to her. The sky becomes dark as our lovemaking turns more primitive. Our bleeding brings the rains, but we do not stop the joining.

I realize that for the first time since I left the life in Roma, I do not want to die. Not because I fear death or the Hells. Because I am with her, for the first time, without hatred. Leaving me now, she will move forward to a life in which I strip her, drag her over ice, and slice her throat for revenge.

But Christ Son! How could I have known? How could any man have guessed it? I cannot be held responsible for the sins I commit in her future, because I jump through lives in reverse of history, like a stone skipped across the surface of an incoming tide.

Tides. The water falls from above us like no other rain I have experienced. We are floating now, and growing more vicious in our passion.

This is the Great Flood of Old, as related in the Sacred Writs.

I push her from me and scream to her against the howling of the wind.

“Gather an army!” I yell. A wild, erratic current is pulling us away from one another. I swim back toward her.

“What did you say?” she yells back.

“An army! When you come to the land of ice in our next lives, you must surround yourself with an army! Never trust me! Never!”

“Yes!” she shouts, and then follows it with something I cannot hear. I force myself closer, and she says, “We will fight with the lives of other men! We will never harm one another again —”

“Never trust!” I insist, but I cannot get back to her. With the current separating us, I cannot even see her now.

I am sinking beneath the water, beating madly against the waves in violent despair. My warnings to her are useless, for I have already sealed her future. Only death after death are ahead for her.

The flood takes me. I am not certain how much of the Earth our passion has destroyed this time.

Tern had come to the lab drunk. The rest of the team was too courteous, too understanding to comment on it.

“You know what I was thinking last night?” he said to no one in particular. “I was thinking, ‘Alpha and Beta Centauri.’ That’s what I was thinking. I used to complain about how far away they were.” He laughed, and the last laugh was a sob. “How very far away they were.”

Ledeirsen cataloged Blackshift No. 498.

WHAT I am now is no infant. There is life, but there is darkness; not any darkness to which I am accustomed, for it is warm, it is mobile and diverse. I can feel myself growing, dividing into two, both of me growing more, dividing, then again and again, endlessly. I feel the sun, but I can see nothing. I try to judge the passing of years by the warming of day and the cooling of night, but I soon lose interest. The years do not concern me. I must absorb everywhere, internalize and process to survive. I must grow and divide, and spread myself over spaces I cannot see.

I cannot find her. She is not in this age of the Earth.

I do not want to miss her when she comes. I continue to force my growth, and after several millennia I encircle half the face of the planet.

After a million years, I have sent parts of me over the great rocks that rise up from where I grow. Thousands of bits of me are over all the globe, and I wish I had one voice with which to laugh. Because I realize I am the very life of the planet. In my search for her, I have carried life everywhere. What to say, then, Fatherhead! I am what You will bleed for, just me! I was a fool to bleed myself for You, because I am, I have always been, the source of my own life. You are the alien! An impostor! When You claimed my life as a sacerdote, I was a foolish peasant deceived by a tyrant.

I feel her suddenly, at my head and at my feet. She has appeared without warning, and I can sense she has noticed me and is terrified.

She tears my feet and dissolves my head. Millions of bits of me die in a coldness she controls, and she is moving on me from below and above.

I have no way to stop her. She is not really a life, she is freeze and motion. I cannot scream to her, I cannot say I love her. I can only retreat.

If I find no way to stop her, the entire world will be swallowed in her ice.

So I let her take parts of me. Many parts. But I concentrate most of my life in one spot, a tight ball of survival. I rest the ball in the midst of mountains, but I hesitate. That area repulses me; I know where it is, and I have tried to settle there by instinct, a wounded animal crawling its way home. The area is Roma, or at least parts of what will be Roma in millions of years. I abandon the spot; let Christ Son and Remus lay its foundations. I will have no part of the place.

I move away, downward. She still follows, destroying with her ice any residue I leave behind. Finally I center again, far south of Roma. She knows that I still live, and she will take this place too unless I leave. So I experiment. I separate gently from one of the smallest parts of me. I pull back without destroying it. It is dazed for a moment, if that is what such a small bit of matter feels when it is left alone to live. And it does live. It has a life of its own, manufactured from the bits of matter this planet has provided. It functions.

I continue the process, piece by piece, pulling myself into a tighter ball and leaving behind the growths that were me before I abandoned them. Many cease to function, but some continue to live. She, as ice, watches the process, and halts her advance. I have puzzled her.

Most of me is contained now in a cluster that is smaller than I have been in eons. I send a tendril north, a thin, connected line of matter that almost touches the farthest advance of her ice. Then I begin to erase myself from behind me, moving up piece by piece until I am contained, as when I started this incarnation, in a single bit of matter.

She senses that I am fully there. I am tired from the exertion, but mostly I am lonely. I have left an enclave of life behind me in the south, but it is little comfort. It is not me, not really.

She still has hate. The barest finger of cold touches my side, and I begin to rupture. Then the ice envelopes me, and the blackness of this incarnation returns again to white.

Tern did not show up for observations the next evening. Ledeirsen offered to call him.

Kantell told him not to.

The next seems so short. The last one, in which a millennium was a day, has spoiled me for longer existences. I become aware and sense her already here. We are, in fact, melded together.

We are a molten ball, the Earth before it was yet Earth. Above us the sun is pure whiteness, a mass still young itself.

Her fear is tremendous, and she pushes me away. But since we are one, the effort is a strange one.

Why? Why did you do that to me?

Her essence is mine, although we are still two in awareness.

I do not know what I did, I tell her.

Liar! The deception and the violence of it! She is still pushing me.

I have done you violence, I agree. But you have been violent with me as well.

I've done nothing to you. But I will, I swear! I'll hurt you now, and again and forever if you continue to hurt me. I trusted you, but I'll never again make that mistake.

She pushes, and I do all I can to cling to her. I could never explain. How could I ever make her see that in just a few billion years we will be lovers?

At last her pushing succeeds, and I am trapped in a small ball of molten rock that hurls away from her. The separation is more than I can tolerate. I love her! I would die for her and bear her pain, just as once I bore the Bloodletting for love of the Christ Son. I can no longer live without what she is, and my awareness drains from the free floating rock in which she has imprisoned me.

I manage to throw my corpse into orbit around her before awareness is lost completely.

* * * *

They were saved from the Centauri. The disruption of the stars' own gravitational balance sucked them into one another. Half the evening sky was ablaze with the resulting novae.

“A brief abeyance,” Kantell said. He and Ledeirsen were outside, eyes fixed on the heavens.

“My God, it’s quiet,” Ledeirsen said. “It looks violent, but it’s so quiet.”

“Isn’t it beautiful?” said Kantell.

And completely still.

And more so.

Until the very nothingness is itself an awareness. I am All That Is Not.

A peculiar state. I will not describe it in words, except to say that there is no Time yet; not blackness, but the Black. That is what I . . . AM. The Black.

“What is this thing, the ‘Making’ you dream of?”

It is she. I can barely sense her, for she is beyond whatever line keeps her apart from the Black. Somehow she has crossed that line, something I do not know how to do.

“What is ‘Making’?” she repeats.

I have nothing with which to let her know, so I find where she is crossing. The light is tremendous, and I feel what blackness is for the first time in infinite no-Time.

She is All That Is. I steal the smallest portion of her essence and draw it into myself. I fashion and mold and make me a Man. I begin by forming the likeness of Shirrah, but I do not have the will to create the one facsimile of me she has loved. Instead I build the first of me, the naive sacerdote.

I stand him before where she calls, and use him to speak.

“This is a Making.”

She is silent. With the eyes of the sacerdote I see her as a ball of white fire, endless in herself and defining all that is by her Being. She is ignorant of the Time and Forms of what will be.

She speaks at last. “You hurt me when you did that.”

“Yes,” my sacerdote nods. “The hurt is part of Making. It is the cost.”

She does not understand “cost.”

“It is . . . as it should be. It is right.”

Again she falls silent. I take another part of her. I fashion the visage I had first called a satan. I stand the female beside my sacerdote.

“You have hurt me again.”

“Speak through the woman,” I direct.

“Through what?”

“The other Making.”

Through the sacerdote, I watch life come into the eyes of the bit of All I have fashioned. The memories hurt me for a moment, my first death and the betrayal I imagined. But she, through the woman, feels nothing like these things, for she has never Been. She simply Is.

Through the woman’s eyes, she examines the hands I have made for her. “Why does this intrigue you? It hurts me a great deal, and I find no particular pleasure in it.”

“I’m sorry I’ve hurt you. There can only be Making through violence. It is that way, because that is as it should be.”

“I am All That Is. I know nothing of your Making or your violence. How can the Void presume to teach me about what should be?”

“These,” I say, indicating the two Mattings, “are not only part of All That Is, but part of all that will come. I do not mean to rob you of any part of Being but I fashion them for your knowledge. Take them and preserve their forms. Lock them safely in the All. They are your rightful essence, but the Making is my gift to you.”

The forms disappear, and I am again alone as the Black, for a measure that is not in Time, for I have no Time and Time is not yet.

Again she calls me. “I have studied your gifts, and I have preserved them in the All as you requested. But I do not understand your curiosity for them.”

I feel the touch of the All from which she speaks to me. I crave it, long for it. I love her.

“You must keep the Makings safe, no matter what happens.”

“They are in the All. What do you mean by ‘happens?’”

Yes, what is 'happens'? 'Happens' is something I do not experience as the Black. Nor does she experience it as the All. There is no Universe because alone, the All separated from the Black, there is no 'happens.'

"Surround me," I say, "and you will know 'happens.'"

"What do I do?"

"Surround me. Envelop the Black on all sides and draw it into you."

"This is how I understand 'happens?'"

I hesitate. "Yes."

Then she is around me everywhere. I have definition, for my nothingness touches forever walls of the All. It is painful to my awareness. I really am quite Nothing.

"Now explain 'happens,'" she says.

And I empty, fully, throughout the All. She screams from the agony, and the violence mixes us, pieces of the Black and shattered fragments of the All, spewing . . . out. I remember 'out,' a spatial function of the All. She is screaming still, and I know that the anguish I feel in my scattered nothingness could only be a fraction of what she feels as the scattered All. But I am justified! If I had not entered the All, then there would never have been a 'happens' or a 'Makings'! There would never have been an 'Ever'! Even here, at the beginnings of the Universe, the violence is primary to Being. So despite the deception, despite pain as vast as the Universe we form, it was necessary!

No wonder she has hated me since before time began.

Kantell appeared at the laboratory dressed in his evening cloak and carrying the contents of his emptied desk in a small cardboard carton.

"Gentlemen, I am leaving you. I wish each of you the best."

"Now!" gasped Ledeirsen. "You're just going to leave?"

"Of course. I have a very loving wife at home, and an adoring daughter. I should like to spend some time with them. I should like to know them a little better."

He turned to leave. No one said anything else to stop him. "And I believe," he said without turning back, "I shall call on Dr. Tern and share a drink with him."

My hands clutch the cold of gray stone on the window ledge. By instinct I reach down and pull the dagger from my side. There is pain. But it is nothing like real pain, the pain of becoming a Universe.

I examine my side. There is no wound where the knife had been. Neither are there holes bored through my palms, though I am the sacerdotess. Bloodletting is over for me, along with all its maiming evidences.

I hear her coughing, and the shuffle of her standing up. "The trouble with human forms," she says before I even turn to face her, "is that yours is always considerably stronger than mine."

I say nothing. The sheer wonder of being in a form, a solid form that is all me inside and not at all me outside, keeps me silent. I have not felt a form so itself, so fully contained, since I was Shirrah.

"At first, during this life," she says, "I was unclear of the beginning. But as I grew into this form, I remembered more. This is the form of your Making. It helped me remember." She smiles—a human smile! It has been ages—and she asks, "Do you remember now?"

I nod, but very slowly. "Still," I say, "these forms had . . . died."

She laughs, as if I am now the ignorant one. "These forms cannot die, not until the All of Making itself dies." She crosses the room and sets a hand on my shoulder. Her gaze goes past me, out the window. "Of course, that will be very soon."

I look where she is looking and I remember what she had said several minutes, the age of the Universe, ago. That the stars were bigger than she had ever seen them. It is true.

"I love you," I say, and she smiles. She sets her hand gently on top of mine. I sense it: the need for violence is gone, now that the Making is coming to an end. We stand, side by side, leaning against one another. We are silent at the window, the stone ledge cold on our forearms but our shoulders warm from each other's touch. Together we watch the stars come home to us.

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Marcos Donnelly's short fiction publications in F&SF and in the Full Spectrum anthology series from Bantam Books have received a great deal of critical attention. In fact, we have chosen the first story Marcos published with us ("The Resurrection of Alonso Quijana" March 1992) to appear in our new Best from the Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction anthology (St. Martin's Press, October, 1994)

He has just finished a wonderful novel titled Prophets of the End Time, and has turned his attention back to short stories. “Bloodletting” is the first of several we have in our inventory.