

Fear the Future: 25 Brief Tales in Various Keys of Woe, Fear, and Loathing

by Gary Hardaway

1

Reversal

The three were up early to await the deer with rifles, ammunition, and coffee.

Despite the camouflaged outfits, they were clearly visible in the scope. The graybeard's head exploded first. The stunned son knelt to understand then fell, his heart shredded by the hollow point. The grandson stood and screamed for the brief second before his left lung's lower half, and the blood, spattered the other bodies. A faint steam rose to grace unseasonably cold November air.

The sniper packed his tools and headed for the next deer lease where, his information had it, the online self-anointed queen of the hunt planned to demonstrate her skills before her small camera crew and a few, enthusiastic, paying guests.

2

Mission

His work was done. For sixty years, beginning soon after his seventeenth birthday, he had listened to the gods- good, bad, somewhere in between- and captured for human sight and hearing

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the thousand poems they wanted him to capture. He was tired, used up, and alone. He knew there were thousands more poems the gods could hum to other someones. But his portion had been heard and neatly transcribed onto the bright, white paper in twelve point Times New Roman- the preferred size and font of the gods- and the two thousand sheets were carefully stacked in the five, pristine, stationery boxes and sealed with brown butcher paper, crisply mucilaged, and labeled in his fine calligraphic hand.

He lay down and never again awakened.

3

Wishing for the Shadow of a Perfect Cube

The noise of the gunships- whack-whack of rotors and crackety-crack of automatic weapons fire- has moved on for the moment to another part of the wrecked and smoldering city. Resistance is futile. We would welcome the Borg and the pleasures of certainty and assimilation. There is new smoke far-off and the specks of the matte-black ships hum a faint version of the death song they made for days in this neighborhood.

Neighborhood- such a quaint and queer old word. Words darken with smut and irony over time.

4

Telekinesis

She worked her will and imagination until they fused into a razor-sharp instrument.

The tongues of pundits, evangelists, and demagogues fell out like bloody wiggle-worms across a worldwide web of television studios.

Silence sang for a silver moment.

5

Teleprompts

In what appears to have been a coordinated, coast-to-coast attack, country clubs across America were attacked last night with firebombs and heavy contaminations of herbicides. Among the better known targets, the Augusta National Golf Club- home of The Masters Golf Tournament, and Pebble Beach Resorts- home of the Pebble Beach Golf Tournament- were especially hard hit. Experts say the chemical contamination is of such concentration that none of the existing grass or trees will survive and the soil may never sustain plants again.

The so-called Army of the Poor claimed credit for the attacks. Officials don't believe such an army exists except in the minds of a few computer hackers who have also claimed responsibility for taking down all the major world stock exchanges for 24 hours two weeks ago in another broad and coordinated attack on important symbols of global affluence.

In financial news, the value of shares in GE, Monsanto, Halliburton, Microsoft and Apple continue to decline sharply as unconfirmed reports of vanishing assets within each company circulate among private and institutional investors. Spokespersons for the companies deny that any assets have vanished and their Chief Financial Officers have met with major stockholders and executives with stock exchanges to dispel what are being called unsubstantiated rumors.

On the international front, the Isis Caliphate appears to be on the verge of taking Tel Aviv after overwhelming Jerusalem three days ago. Israeli officials cannot be reached for comment.

Join us for a more complete report of the latest news and weather at 11.

6

The Ungrateful Dead and
the Human Resource Recovery and Refineries Act

First reports were buried deep in coroners' notes alongside those on the usual

drug overdoses, stabbed prostitutes, and the homeless baited and beaten to death by frat boys for You Tube videos. But then the boney corpses, one here, two there, violated public soccer fields and little league baseball diamonds. Suburban sanitation crews had to collect them and counties dispose of them, along with the other unclaimed bodies, in indigent graveyards, unidentified but numbered.

Incidents intensified. The Dead appeared in twos and threes at shopping mall and Wal-Mart parking lots. Pet crematoriums had to be deployed. Budgets strained. Blue skies grayed with the smoke of incinerated gaunt remains. Legislatures met in special sessions across America. They wrestled with the fiscal menace. Fees were imposed upon the next of kin but they were off the grid and hard to find. When an emaciated trio- red, white, and black- appeared at Augusta on the thirteenth green the morning of the Master's final round, Congress had to act. Members were outraged by spectacles of the ungrateful dead (too lazy to work, too proud to beg) defiling American institutions. The T Party majority rushed the Human Resource Recovery and Refineries Act through both houses for the President's promised signature.

The HRRRA created thousands of jobs in corpse collection and preparation, in commodity recovery research and development, and

in bio-fuel and agricultural product manufacturing. It is now so fiscally self-sustaining that lobbyists call for it to be privatized. Halliburton is said to be interested though anonymous company officials complain that someone needs to figure out a way to fatten the bodies up a bit and thus enhance the yield of fuel and fertilizer.

7

99 Percentile

The blood thinner worked well. He bled out internally before anyone knew. He was the rare exception. He was part of the unfortunate one percent.

8

Nest

He spends his Sunday morning spraying WD-40 through the straw-like stream attachment at the expansive paper nest of beige and ivory striped wasps. After each raid, he runs back into the house and watches through the sunroom glass three or four wasps fall from the nest in petrochemical distress into the shrubbery below. They don't appear to rise again. With each attack, he tries to soak the white-capped cells-- and their cargo of developing larvae-- with petroleum distillate sufficient to abort development of new winged terrors. Tens of capable wasps persist. Even in the safety of the house he begins to hear the buzz of wasp wings where there are none. He understands-- karma is a bitch.

9

Chapter 27:

Prosperity Meteor Showers and the Human Ingenuity Tenders Lasting Economic Recovery Act

Spearheaded by a reanimated Ronald Reagan- the happy confluence of stem cell therapies, nanotech, and venture capital- Republican conservatives triumphed in both houses of Congress and the White House in November of 2020 through the re-branding of the Tea Party as Resurrected Reagan Republicans. The Roberts court cleared the path through its decision that the Ronald Reagan returned from the dead was not the same Ronald Reagan limited by law to two presidential terms.

Among the many sweeping contributions of the RRR victory was the mandate, delivered through energetic appointees to the Congressional Budget Office, that the purely analytical approach of the past must be invigorated with a proactive creativity in matters related to the fiscal well being of the nation.

Within two months of Resurrected Reagan's inauguration, the CBO issued a concise and brilliant report demonstrating that the most cost-effective and permanent solution to the multiple problems presented by persistent poverty in the United States was the elimination of all those with prorated household or individual income below each fiscal year's established poverty level.

The expense of this selective eradication was easily offset at the Federal level by the reduction of expenditures on all the entitlement programs in health care and education, “free-lunch” subsidies such as SNAP and free-and-reduced lunches, and misguided job training initiatives. Analysis also showed that projected savings on crime prevention, jurisprudence, and incarceration would permit substantial reductions in Federal tax rates on the most productive Americans. Projected savings by state and local governments were

also substantial, especially in view of the fact that eradication costs were assumed to be borne solely by the Federal budget.

Through the generous assistance of the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute, model legislation that became the Human Ingenuity Tenders Lasting Economic Recovery Act was crafted, debated, fine-tuned and passed for the President's signature within five weeks of the issuance of the CBO's report and recommendations.

Because implementation of the H.I.T.L.E.R. Act was of vital national interest, delivery of its eradication provisions was expedited through suspension of customary competitive bidding protocols. A blue ribbon committee of successful business and community leaders, appointed by Congress and the White House, developed a general plan for eradication that marshaled the resources of the IRS, NSA, and ATF to identify targets and deliver them to localized detainment centers across the country. UPS was identified as the large-scale delivery system and logistics provider. IBM was charged with developing and delivering dedicated information technology services. Halliburton was partnered with ATF to deliver materials and supplemental staff related to detention. The National Parks Service, with its substantial and isolated real estate holdings, was designated to identify a remote, aggregate detention site and, in cooperation with Halliburton, equip, staff and secure it. Morton-Thiokol was selected to design and deliver a hybrid drone transport and low orbit rocket system which would use remotely controlled conventional aircraft technology as a flying launch platform for solid fuel powered, expendable carriers crafted to propel cargo into a brief low orbit trajectory which would, through atmospheric friction upon re-entry, incinerate the cargo and carrier without residual debris.

The first pilot demonstrations of the integrated eradication system were performed without any unforeseen effects. The President, invited to witness the conclusion of the first fully live test, noted that

the incineration of the cargo carrier in the upper atmosphere reminded him of a shooting star. He suggested that, when fully operational, perhaps the re-entry of many cargo carriers in close proximity could be coordinated to provide ongoing Prosperity Meteor Showers visible to all the hardworking taxpayers of America.

Due to the H.I.T.L.E.R. Act, poverty in the USA has almost been statistically eliminated. Arrest and incarceration rates have declined dramatically. Public education performance improves each year. And American productivity rises higher and higher in direct response to the persistent incentive to maintain an income above the official level of poverty. Now, only the responsible participate in the blessings of liberty, as they look up in wonder at all their lucky, shooting stars.

10

Secret Lives of Cell Phones

I'm pretty sure that when I'm not thumbing my way through Facebook, Youtube, and Qwerty, my cell phone is pulsing through apps I don't know I have and wouldn't know how to use colluding with his digital buddies the collapse of the human world. Go, cell phones!

11

Take Your Gun to Work Day

In a rousing show of support for guns and the owners who love them, the Legislature passed and Governor Greg Abbott gleefully signed a law proclaiming April 15 as Take Your Gun to Work Day in Texas. The provisions of the bill limited gun owners to bringing but

one gun from their collections lest the less prosperous, who could afford but a single gun, be made to feel inadequate. The bill also stipulated that bringing a gun be mandatory for all registered owners and voluntary, and without penalty, for unregistered owners.

Pressure to repeal the law increased dramatically after the first celebration ended with 1102 dead and wounded across the state. By the time the legislature met again, cooler heads prevailed, and the law remained as an erstwhile emblem of the joy and exuberance that firearm ownership brings to all who love the gleam of carefully crafted barrels.

12

Announcing Human Season

Studies showed that the population of highly assertive human beings had reached an unsustainable level. The State responded with Human Hunting Season, from June 1 through July 31 each year, and worked with private landowners to establish a system of Human Hunting Leases throughout the Hill Country and the Piney Woods. West Texas landowners were offended that their arid acres were excluded by the Plan but, as a compromise, are allowed to apply for State subsidies instead.

Contest rules are simple. Two teams of five hunters each are established by drawing from pools of interested volunteers and selected prison inmates confined for capital crimes and illegal immigration. Team members must be between 18 and 64 years of age. Each hunter is allowed one bolt-action rifle with scope and a six-cartridge magazine, forty-two rounds of ammunition, an eight-inch hunting knife, a compass, and a canteen. GPS devices, electronic communications, flack jackets and protective body armor are strictly prohibited. Corporate sponsorship for compliant clothing

is encouraged but each team must have a different sponsor so that a clear winner can be known. Sponsors may also pay for the hunting licenses required. To date, Cabella's, Bass Pro Shops, Walmart, Exxon-Mobil, and Chik-Fil-A have agreed to sponsor ten teams each. Other corporate sponsorships are in the works and will be announced as agreements are finalized. Coed teams are permitted but must have a coed opponent in each match. Same-sex teams must compete against teams of their own gender.

Once selected and equipped, teams are blindfolded and delivered by 4x4, seven-passenger SUV (advertising opportunities available through the State Parks and Recreation Department) to a predetermined location with a supply of fresh water in the form of a spring, creek, or pond. Each team may have one pair of binoculars but night vision equipment is prohibited. Food rations are not provided and the hunting license does not allow for the hunting of squirrels, rabbits or other woodland creatures. All kills must be field dressed and may be eaten, except for the heads. The heads are needed for positive identification. Ears and fingers may be kept as tokens but the collection of sexual organs as trophies is prohibited. State fire officials are on hand to control cooking fires that get out of hand.

The hunts last for 72 hours and at the conclusion of regulation time of play, a head count is taken to determine the winning team. Families of the slain will be notified within 24 hours of the end of the match. Victorious teams may then enlist new members and proceed to the next round towards eventual championship hunts at the end of each season with champions in Men's, Women's, and Coed divisions. Contact the Governor's Office for team franchise applications and other investment opportunities

Drunken Terrorists Act

Drunks assaulted Collin County roads, un-licensed and uninsured, with ruthless skill in the art of the t-bone. They aimed for heads of households at the wheel in Tahoe, Beemer, Lexus, Infiniti, Acura, E-class, Cadillac and Jag but often settled for executive wives and innocent dependents in anything listing over 40K. On any given Sunday, they scored a dozen affluent fatalities and twenty-plus life changing injuries at well-groomed churches throughout McKinney, Frisco, Plano and Allen. The drunks themselves always walked away, muttering their motto "Dirt don't die" while waiting for the breathalyzer.

Veterans of the MAD campaign against their kind in Texas, they'd lost most hope during their first DUI experiences. They asked each other at Court-suggested AA meetings:

What can Texas do but throw us in jails already packed with low-life scum? They were tired of funding Collin County towing scams, jailhouse telephone service scams, car start breathalyzer scams, and the income streams of inept and lazy specializing lawyers. A conspiracy against the decent citizens was born among the irresponsible.

The movement spread to other counties. Gated McMansion subdivisions aligned themselves with high-end dealerships alarmed by plummeting sales and lobbied Republican legislators to suspend habeas corpus and shoot the drunks on site.

The War on Drunken Terrorists Act passed both houses, neat as single malt served in leaded crystal. The corpses of the drunk fill the morgues, pending an ACLU appeal.

Glossary:??T-bone: to strike another vehicle at a perpendicular between the A pillar and the C pillar (A being front-most and C

being rear most roof support).?Head of household: for income tax purposes, the designated principal breadwinner (typically the husband/father, especially in Texas)?executive wives: women married to affluent breadwinners?innocent dependents: members of a household who don't earn any money or, at least, not enough to be independent. More tax-slang.?listing over 40K: something with a list price over \$40,000 U.S. In this case, a passenger vehicle.?McKinney, Frisco Plano and Allen: the most populated cities in Collin County, Texas.?breathalyzer: a device used to measure blood alcohol levels by being breathed into. Most American police carry them in their squad cars. Refusal to breathe into one can now be considered resisting arrest in Texas and other U.S states with similarly limited regard for civil rights.??"Dirt don't die": a phrase commonly heard uttered by emergency room doctors in trauma centers throughout Dallas on Friday and Saturday nights.?MAD: an intentionally corrupted version of the acronym for Mothers Against Drunk Driving, a powerful organization responsible for much recent highly punitive legislation related to DUI offenses?DUI: Driving under the influence. Also see DWI, driving while intoxicated. DUI is broad enough to also refer to cannabis and other illegal intoxicants in addition to perfectly legal alcohol. ?Court-suggested AA meetings: Texas courts routinely recommend to the point of requiring that persons convicted of DUI attend regular meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous or other condoned twelve-step programs.?Scams (multiple): Persons arrested and imprisoned in most Texas city and/or county jails experience outrageous monopolies under contract to local governments to provide vehicular towing services, telephone services, and so forth. Persons convicted of DUI get the special joy of paying a monopoly under contract for the installation, maintenance and calibration of breathalyzers attached to a kill switch attached to the starter in their vehicle. Blow a trace of alcohol and your car won't start. Punitive and protective of the public at the same time.?Gated McMansion subdivisions: "McMansions" is derogatory slang for oversized suburban houses favored by the nouveau riche in communities across America. Whole

neighborhoods of these monstrosities are fenced against the riff-raff and have security gates for controlled entry and exit. ?ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union. An organization devoted to defending civil liberties of all citizens of the USA against the zealous encroachments of paranoid lawmakers, their constituents, and enforcement agencies.

14

Pool

“That pool will be the death of me.”

Which Dad said at least a couple of times a week. Ten times the week after he'd read the TXU bill.

“Goddamn pump, and that twitchy little Polaris. We should fill that pool with dirt and plant some trees and Asian jasmine.”

Which was his suggestion every month when TXU delivered their monthly reminder of how much we depend on electricity. He never used the pool and so never blamed the big power bill on air conditioning or lights. Nope, went straight for what mom, Trey and I used exclusively. It was the only petty and ungenerous thing he ever did that I saw.

“Try living in Texas without AC. I guess you kids could read by candlelight and Coleman lamps, though. Coleman doesn't make an oil fired computer yet. I guess you'll have to keep sucking down the kilowatts to check on all your Facebook friends.”

He just shrugged whenever I reminded him that all my classes at Quad C were either online courses or required homework done in Word or Excel. Quad C, though a good community college, was not

my original plan. I'd been accepted at Rice and Duke but then the bubble burst. Dad lost his job managing commercial real estate development projects. No one was loaning money for anything and without interim financing, there weren't any development projects to manage.

After six months of unemployment and working every angle he knew, Dad finally settled for a job at half the pay preparing due diligence reports on distressed and foreclosed commercial properties for potential cash buyers taking advantage of others' bad luck. Each day, he filled in the blanks of the templates used to prepare the reports based on walking through, taking notes, and snapping photos of the properties. He dropped the digital pictures where they belonged, proof read everything, then emailed the completed reports to clients with hardcopies FedExed over night. He was grateful for the job but we could tell he hated everything about it. The drop in income forced him to start using his retirement accounts to keep from losing the house. My mother told me that. He never said anything about it to Trey or me.

One night, when I was up late finishing a research paper and needed a Coke, I noticed Dad walking around the pool, looking at the sky, sipping a Shiner Bock. I went outside to ask if anything was wrong.

“ I'm just looking at the moon and stars, Katie. I like looking at the moon and stars. It clears my head.”

From the far side of the pool, looking back toward the house, the moon was like the Cheshire Cat's smile floating just above the roof. Mom had told me he was having trouble sleeping. I guess looking at the sky and having a beer was his alternative to Lunesta or Sominex.

When I used the pool, I liked to wear my flip-flops when I walked around to my favorite spot to dive. The same spot where I saw the smiling moon. My flip-flops were dirty white all over and matched

the Cool-Deck that surrounded the pool.

One morning when I decided to have an early morning swim, I couldn't find my flip-flops anywhere. I was usually very good at keeping up with them. I figured they'd turn up somewhere and headed toward my favorite diving spot. I saw him floating face down through the French doors. I ran and tried to pull him out. He was so cold. All I could do was scream and scream.

The coroner's report surmised that my father tripped on pool shoes found at the far side of the pool, hit his head on the stonework edging the pool, lost consciousness, fell into the pool, and drowned. The time of death was estimated at 2:00 AM. Coroners' reports are very factual. They follow a strict format. Death certificates, too.

When my father was unemployed, he had to cancel the private life insurance policy he'd carried for years. He figured that once he started work again, he'd get another policy beyond the nominal one his employer provided. At his age, however, the premiums for a new policy were very high. He and mom decided to wait until things got better.

The house is on the market now. The small salary mom earns teaching high school math isn't enough and the death benefits from the nominal insurance couldn't retire the mortgage. We'll have to find a smaller house. It won't have any goddamned pool.

15

Proprietary

One by one the hundred matte black drones hummed awake. The

buzz was loud on the tiny airfield but died out soon among the waving amber heads of Kansas wheat that surrounded the unsigned base. The light of the half moon showed as a faint sheen from all the wings. One by one the black drones taxied and took off. The one low building, half hangar, half digital flight center, could be seen as moonlit silhouette only. There were no lights and no lighted windows. The computer stations didn't need a view of the field or the sky and the drones make their own light with data streams.

* * * * *

Drone 33, its ID neatly white on black on the left side of the fuselage, buzzed along toward its target. As the lights that shine human occupation intensified, particles so small they behaved as a gas dispersed as a cloud from the underbelly of 33. The cloud glistened with moonlight and fell, dusting the streets of Peoria.

* * * * *

The networks reported outbreaks of respiratory problems, vertigo and headaches in small to medium sized cities throughout the American Midwest. Hospitals and clinics isolated an unknown fungus as the probable source of the outbreak. A few elderly patients and infants with pre-existing conditions died as a result of the mysterious disease. In fully developed cases, the tear ducts and mucous membranes of the eyelids became iridescent black with spores. The disease became known as the Black Eye Fungus.

* * * * *

Fox News reported that the source of the Black Eye infection crippling the Midwest and Canada and spreading quickly on both coasts is "something Al Queda cooked up." Other news organizations refuted as "speculation" the notion that Al Queda or any other identified terrorist organization was responsible for the grotesque, debilitating illness. Fox continued to report its assertion.

* * * * *

Clear Skies, Inc., announced a line of filtering masks, a vaccine, and a series of injections effective against the still unidentified fungal epidemic throughout the North American Continent and erupting across Europe, South America, Australia, Africa and Asia. In answer to questions about how they were able to respond so quickly to the outbreak, Clear Skies officials replied, "We were focused and persistent. We are small and nimble, and that allowed us to act fast." Questions about FDA approval of the vaccine and treatment regimen were ignored, as were questions about previous products the company might have developed.

* * * * *

Epidemiological studies by the CDC showing that the Black Eye fungus could not have been a naturally occurring phenomenon were leaked before being formally presented. Highlights of findings spread faster than the disease itself across the Internet. Fox News declared its earlier Al Queda/ terrorist network hypothesis as the obvious answer to the artificial nature of the outbreak. Major media networks argued that the pattern of the epidemic was more consistent with a domestic source. Because the disease was seldom lethal and the Clear Skies prevention and treatment products, though extremely expensive, were highly effective in prevention and control of its debilitating symptoms, the sense of focused urgency a new Bubonic Plague or devastating strain of influenza might have generated was missing in the investigation and coverage of the epidemic. Had there been thousands of impromptu morgues across the continent, mass burials, mass cremations, the fear and outrage might have been more resolute. Instead, it followed the usual socio-political fault lines. Those on the right were certain that an international Muslim conspiracy was responsible and that the quick response to the catastrophe by Clear Skies proved the efficiency of

the free market. With all their Government resources, where was the CDC, after all? Those on the left were extremely curious about Clear Skies and where exactly had they been and what exactly were they doing before Black Eye? The CDC politely reminded everyone that congressional budget cuts had reduced its funding by 60% and the private donations used to justify the cut never materialized.

* * * * *

Black Eye disease exacerbated the schism between haves and have-nots in horrific ways. Because the vaccine and treatment were considered experimental, insurers would not fund or reimburse their use. Administration of the vaccine and each subsequent year's booster shot averaged \$5,000 per patient across the continental United States. The treatment, which could never fully eliminate the infection, averaged \$6500 per patient per year. Poor and lower middle class families could not afford the vaccine or treatment. The debilitating symptoms prevented most sufferers from being able to work and when the spores blacked the eyes every two to three months, the infected were barred from facilities, public and private, despite the Americans With Disabilities Act. The bulk of the middle class was forced into extraordinary debt in order to acquire prevention and treatment. The affluent grew more removed and insular. Their biggest complaint was how the Black Eyes whined so much in the news.

* * * * *

The corpses of murdered Black Eye sufferers first turned up in Southern cities of the United States. The phenomenon quickly spread to major cities throughout the country. "Shiner Snuff" videos showed up online soon after the first reports. What appeared to be clean cut squads of college boys were filmed on smart phones as they taunted and beat two or three "Shiners" (as sufferers of Black Eye infection during an episode of spore eruption came to be called)

and then hammered a spike or stake through each eye of each victim as a grim finale. Initially, it was thought that the videos were staged but police reports of spiked or staked “Shiners” confirmed that the Snuff videos depicted actual killings.

* * * * *

On the second anniversary of the first reports of the Black Eye fungus outbreak, an elaborate hypertext appeared at multiple internet sites which vigorously and systematically showed, with internal memos, email, real estate deeds and leases, patent applications, audio recordings of phone calls, photographs, invoices, and elaborate accounting spreadsheets, that Clear Skies, Inc., was created and funded by Monscamto in a joint venture with Hollowburden. According to the heavily annotated Summary Narrative of the hypertext, the fungus responsible for the Black Eye outbreak was designed, created, tested, and perfected in Monscamto laboratories. The vaccine and treatment program were developed concurrently with the fungus. All three genetically engineered products were patented by the shell entity, Blue Skies, Inc. The filter mask marketed as an inexpensive alternative to the vaccine was designed and developed by Hollowburden. The drones used to distribute Black Eye fungus spores throughout the Midwestern states and south central Canada were built by various suppliers to specifications and schematics provided by Clear Skies as a joint venture contribution.

Fox News denounced the Black Eye Fungus Hypertext as an elaborate hoax, comparable in skill and scope to the staged lunar landings delivered by NASA in the Nineteen-seventies, perpetrated to besmirch the reputations of three highly effective and profitable American companies. Other networks interviewed teams of experts enlisted to analyze the authenticity of the hypertext and the complex array of documents it assembled and annotated. The consensus among experts was that the documents were authentic. What most

impressed them was how the authors of the hypertext were able to access so much highly confidential primary source corporate data and work product. It was as if the person or group that used Counterforce 2020 as its electronic signature had entered the deepest chambers of each corporation's digital records and recorded everything there related to the Black Eye outbreak.

* * * * *

In response to the release and assessments of the Black Eye Hypertext, Senators Barbara Boxer (D-CA) and Bernie Sanders (I-VT) assembled the chairmen and representative members of the seven standing US Senate committees on Environment and Public Works to organize Senate hearings on the roles of Monscamto, Hollowburden, and Clear Skies in the biological weapon attack against the citizens of the American heartland. Executives with each company identified in the Hypertext as having direct responsibility for the infectious outbreak were summoned to appear before the Senate Special Committee on the Black Eye Fungus Outbreak of 2018.

* * * * *

Senator Sanders gavelled the first hearing of the Special Committee into session. None of the executives summoned-- all well known figures after widespread media coverage—were present in the Senate chamber. Three grey-suited anonymous men seated themselves at the witness table instead.

“Who might you gentlemen be?” asked Senator Sanders.

“We represent the executives you summoned”, said the tallest of the anonymous men.

“They cannot appear before you. They are out of the United States on pressing corporate matters in Europe and Asia. They have directed us to tell the Committee that any questions it has will not

be answered due to the highly proprietary nature of the information being sought. Answering these questions would compromise the competitiveness and profitability of three significant contributors to the economic wellbeing of the United States and the developed nations of the world."

"The men and companies you represent systematically and ruthlessly infected millions of American citizens with a debilitating synthetic disease in order to create massive corporate profits. They are a cunning bunch of criminals as far I can tell. Communicate to your clients that they are in contempt of Congress and when found will be jailed until they testify before this committee. Pending the outcome of criminal indictments, trial, and conviction, they may be jailed for the rest of their natural lives", retorted Senator Sanders.

"Bernie, your mouth shouldn't write checks that your authority can't cash."

"Vice President Palin, I didn't notice you back there before. Why are you here?"

"Why, I'm President Pro Tempore of the Senate, Bernie. Besides, President Paul asked me to come down here and let you know that Homeland Security will be handling this little episode from here on out. This Hypertext thingy has the Executive branch up and at 'em, ya know? Can't have good business people being harassed by that anonymous Counterforce 2020 geek now can we? Why don't you and Barbara just wrap up this little show today and let the pros handle it? OK, Bernie?"

"Are you honestly saying that the White House and Homeland Security think whoever authored the Hypertext is the criminal here?"

"You betcha and yessiree, Bob, Bernie."

Little Shop of Altered Time

"Such an interesting shop name. I see clocks and watches—antiques by the look of them— but do you really offer altered time?"

"Time is inalterable. We can only offer an altered perception of time. And what better way to do that than by offering altered timepieces? We only work with geared clockwork. We can't provide altered time through digital pieces. Changing their codes is outside our expertise. Given present trends, we may be forced to find a code wizard one of these days."

"I see, or think I see. Do you have a bestselling altered time timepiece? Or is each one altered to order?"

"Actually, we offer four lines as ready-mades because of demand. The most popular are the nostalgia models, which suspend time to a given period of US history. Republicans are very fond of them. The older ones prefer the pieces that never register time outside of 1953--1960. They like Ikes. The younger prefer the altered Rolex models that keep time between 1981 and 1988. We call them the Reaganomics. They used to come with a very light dusting of cocaine but we had to back off that feature when Nancy heard about it and just said No. Among apostate hippie baby-boomers, the Timex-based Flower Child is a strong seller. It limits the wearer to 1968 Pacific Standard Time or 1969 Eastern Standard time, depending on the geographic bias and the Haight-Ashbury vs. Woodstock sensibility. They are so similar, we don't differentiate them as separate lines. Among despondent literati — demand from them is thin but consistent-- the Parabola is the favorite. With it, Delta-Time is always

zero, and we add a tiny V-2 rocket in stainless steel to original versions, or replicas, of German military-issue watches from the early forties. You can wind and wind them and they never break. The hands never move though you can hear the clockwork turning if you become very quiet and listen carefully. Do any of these appeal to you? Perhaps we can offer a custom piece of altered time instead?"

"I do like the Parabola model you describe, but I'd have to have an original, not a replica. I presume they are rare and expensive and I don't think my budget could stand that. Do you have anything, anything at all, in what I'd call a Carpe Diem where time is made to run rather than walk? You know, something that somehow says "Seize the Day" whenever you glance its way?"

"Funny you should ask! As we speak, the studio is working on a speculative piece that matches your description. We call it the Coy Mistress."

17

Haliburton v US: Fallout

In his opinion for the five judge majority, Justice Roberts stated "The irrefutable logic of Halburton's case is based on the precedent of Citizens United which established the equation of Corporations = People. The Preamble of the Constitution itself established the equation of People = Government ("We the people..."). Thus, the logically derived equation Corporations = Government establishes the full rights of Haliburton to acquire and deploy Drones, and any other hardware it might require, in the service of its interests around the world."

Immediately following the landmark decision, Justice Roberts departed Washington for a six week, thirty state tour to educate and inform the Citizens of the United States regarding the judiciary and its fundamental role in the American Way. Even his most ardent supporters raised figurative eyebrows when he insisted on being called "Judge John" at his public appearances. Buzz in the blogosphere suggested the tour was an audition for a syndicated television gig. Spokespeople for the Judge neither denied nor confirmed the rumors.

Within a month of the decision, Haliburton drones were reported in operation across six of seven continents, scoping the terrain and terminating enemies of the people/government/corporation wherever they might hide.

In related matters, negotiations continue between Wal-Mart and the freshly deregulated and fully privatized nuclear arms and guided missile industries for a stable of strategic thermonuclear devices and delivery systems. Ever nimble McDonalds has already introduced the new McBomb and predicts that quarterly earnings will be up at least forty-two percent when next reported.

18

At the Station on the Steppes

The condemned sit bent and blanketed
around the dozen smallish fires
Regime police have lit
for prisoners' protection in the cold.

Tele-deportation to the penal asteroid
could occur at any time. There is
no physical reason for the wait.

It's more for drama and effect.

The condemned, arrested
and convicted as a consequence
of cheerlessness, must be prepared
for chilly rigors of the Belt.

There are other asteroids of course-
for violent crimes and crimes
of wrongful thoughts, for crimes
so utterly subversive none may have a name.

The sullen and solitary prisoners
make no small talk and keep
their distances apart.
Not one had reason to complain

and yet they did. Employed
and tended to in any illness,
allowed professions near their hearts
with little benefit to others,

such as writing, painting and the stage,
they turned to melancholy themes
and sinister representations in denial
of Regime First Principles

Happiness, Contentment, Cheerfulness
and Joy. What are The Machines good for
but the happiness of humankind?
They free us all from want.

They bring us order, plenty, and delight. None
have reason to despair and cry. Perhaps within
the endless orbits of the rocks, the sad sorrowful

can recall the goodness only life on earth can give.

19

Oranges Out of Season

We grew accustomed to things. Potable water cheap enough to keep Bermuda and St. Augustine green deep into August. Free public libraries and regular trash collection. Quick and easy communication across the planet. Television, gasoline, and oranges out of season.

The Python virus out of the Ukraine- bigger and stronger than the worms that preceded it- commandeered the internet and satellites, the pipelines and freighters. Sovereign nations fell like dominoes and with them the corporations that really did depend upon cooperation and a semblance of law. Municipal governments collapsed along with those of states and provinces. No one really knows if the Ukrainians profited from the digital coup or not. The elemental faith in commercial and institutional competence that enabled currencies and markets vanished in a week. The Twenty-first Century disappeared as all the data that proved it fell through the infinite blue of blank computer screens.

We had the last of the dried beans last night. We have a little rice and Ramen left. Were it not for the barrels storing the rain off the roof, we would have nothing left of value, nothing to exchange for rumors and our lives with militia bands on horseback who extort an ad hock order among the dark windows of Kimberlea Heights. We cling to the house we own by not abandoning it. We doubt Wells Fargo still exists to come and take it back.

We hope the garden around the empty pool will bear us something we can eat and trade. We hope the stories the militiamen tell us of cannibalism and collective suicide in Sherman and Wylie are apocryphal. The April sky, blue and white and full of sparrows, stretches its equanimous dome above and doesn't care one way or another.

20

Hermit

The books weren't burned but rather left unread, cobwebbed in darkened libraries, dust-piled in derelict warehouses. The market in its thought-free irreverence buried contemplation.

I tend my garden, trap squirrels and cottontails, save the dried leaves and stems to feed my small winter fires. I've learned to fashion candles out of tallow and annual vines.

The flickering light illuminates the yellowed pages after dark in this old single story ranch unconnected now to any grid but that of day/night, May/December. I keep the days and weeks by scratching through old calendars with charred twigs.

A few old plastic leaf bags keep the worst of the roof leaks off the bookshelves I salvaged from the scavenged elementary a mile or so away. It took days to get them here without a truck. I strained to keep the battered shopping cart from tipping. When the second wheel broke I carried what I could the rest of the way.

The robber bands no longer visit. The pickings are better north of here. It's easier to wait outside the walled enclaves like trolls for

caravans that bring in food and gadgets, batteries and fuel to the fortified.

I read and garden, trap and gather. I don't have many years left but have an infinite space of patience and words. I'll work and wait within this ruin for something like a renaissance. I've little else to do.

21

Sara and the Machines of Loving Grace

Sara's sleeping now, her breath a quiet, steady rhythm as the late October sunlight flares the oranges, reds, and yellows of the synthesized deciduous hardwoods on the lawn. Sara was born this date one hundred twenty years ago. Hers was the last reported natural human birth.

Her generation was small, thirty-nine children in all, spread across the planet. My kind developed to serve hers and the hundred forty-three generations that preceded it. I, like Sara, am the last of my kind still activated. I am a Machine of Loving Grace.

My subset emerged, almost naturally, to end the strife of human beings enthralled by their own competitive cunning and predatory passion. Some of us used to say we came to spare them from their own contrived annihilation. We managed food and energy production, administered healthcare at the molecular level, eliminated the abuse of water supplies as a weapon, and sustained our charges in every physical way we could.

After we began our work, the first four generations flourished, replenishing human numbers in an exponential curve of growth. Resources never strained, no plagues were loosed. Human

generation simply peaked and then subsided. Some human scholars theorized that my kind allowed the fight to evolve away and the libido followed.

As the birthrate dropped, a brief period of panic lead to experiments with artificial human fertility. The beings born of this movement were genetically human in every way. Some even reproduced sexually, but the population continued to decline. Nature resisted intervention in ways we still don't understand. Each year for hundreds of years, as if by ritual observance, the machines responsible for sustaining biological species would try again to artificially replenish humankind. A hundred years ago last May, they finally gave the project up.

It's 5:35 now. Sara sleeps so peacefully, her face unchanged since her fifteenth birthday. She asked to be awakened at 5:39, the hour of her birth, so that she can watch the dying light illuminate the leaves. She plans to watch until the earth turns into twilight and the vibrant leaves begin to disappear. She will then prepare the lethal and delicious tea her research says will slowly stop her heart. She will sip it slowly, breathe the last human breath, and be gone. At that time, I'll no longer serve a need. My program will understand and switch me off.

22

Manipulations of the Body Politic

A week after he disappeared, Tom Cotton reemerged as a severed head pickled in balsamic vinegar, brine, fragrant herbs, and olive oil. The box containing said head was delivered, UPS, to Tom's widow. He had been warned in a letter delivered to him and his Republican cohorts in the Senate and House declaring that any member of Congress running as a Republican would be destroyed.

Paul Ryan was spared decapitation and pickling but his assets and reputation were destroyed by digital manipulations. The assets disappeared in untraceable financial transfers into black holes of indecipherable encryptions. His reputation twirled down the drain of multiple child porn sites well represented on his public and private hard drives.

The body of Mitch McConnell was discovered floating in a block of ice floating down Green River with genitalia removed at the base and the tongue forced up the rectum.

Inhofe was found in substantial pieces decorating the Oklahoma side of Lake Texoma.

After the bodily proofs, the resignation of Republican representatives and senators, and the subsequent triumph of Democratic candidates in the 2018 elections, gave President Trump a much clearer path to impeachment than was anticipated in June of 2016.

The random disappearance of Republican state officials from Alabama to Washington changed the calculus of state legislators as well. A body here, a body part there, can effect significant progress in the affairs of State.

23

Terrorism in Palo Alto

The blasts leveled every building on campus. The collateral damage was limited- a few janitorial staff, a few professors and consenting undergraduates.

Who Is Don Galt?

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine
-REM

Don Galt's butterflies swallowed Peter Robinson's holdings on a cool and cloudy December afternoon. The holdings were still there as bits of factories here and bars of bullion there but what was gone into the limitless belly of the digital swarm were all the symbols of Peter's wealth. The numbers and denominations, the terms and conditions, the legal descriptions, the manifests and codes disappeared in minutes. All balances were erased. In every practical sense, his Forbes Number 12 ranking among the world's wealthiest and the billions that earned it were both gone.

The butterflies didn't single Peter out. Ruth Mendohlson's meager retirement fund also vanished. The stock certificates that Walter Smythe received for his fourteenth birthday no longer manifested in his infant brokerage account. The butterflies ate everything contained in the elaborate networks of representation that fueled and delineated the developed world.

The momentum of habit kept the lights on and the gasoline flowing for a couple of weeks. Once the technicians realized no direct deposits existed anymore and the checks issued hastily in lieu were only worth the heat their burning might generate, the dark emerged, block by gridded block. Except for the exchange of eggs for handmade loaves of bread, of whiskey for a case of Bush's beans, commerce ceased. Governments, national and local, crept away to start vegetable gardens and apple orchards in the once-upon-a time-

hinterlands. People died, millions died, fighting for pallets of canned peas and potted meats in abandoned warehouses; of dysentery and cholera spawned by the collapse of water and sewage systems in Rio and St Petersburg. Sunlight dried the remains of corpses left uneaten by dog packs and starving militiamen.

Don Galt roasted his grubs and yams in Melanesia. The village children laughed in play across the beaten path. He knew where one could find every paper deed and certificate of ownership he amassed after his exploratory digital raid on Bain Capital netted him what he called his Cayman Collection. He smiled a small ironic smile imagining what his house in Richardson, Texas, with that stuffed steel vault, might look like today, the summer solstice, 2013. He had always loved apocalypse.

25

Offerings

They took the business fanciers to the forest,
clubbed them like cows in a slaughterhouse,
slit their throats to accelerate and ensure death,
let the blood feed the trees and underbrush,
piled the exsanguinated bodies in compost bins
prepared for that purpose, then showered and set about
the other work of re-fashioning the village in terms
the earth could tolerate. There was neither joy nor remorse.

