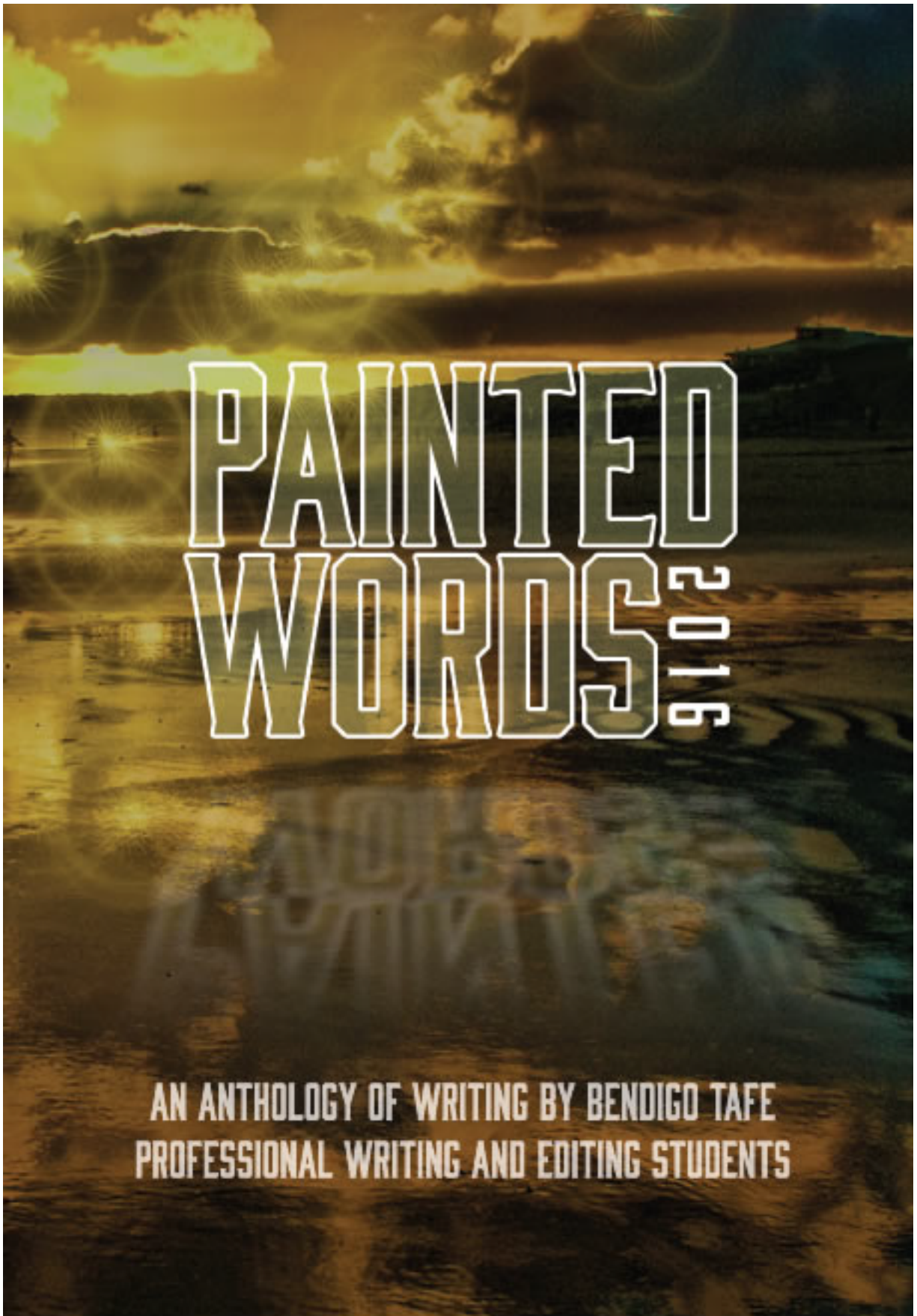




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AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING BY BENDIGO TAFE
PROFESSIONAL WRITING AND EDITING STUDENTS

THE GLACIERS RETREAT

Athabasca Glacier, Columbia Ice Fields, Canada, 28th June, 2015.

IAN IRVINE [HOBSON]

I

The glacier broods in summer heat, above a turquoise lake. We gather like pilgrims at the foot of this mammoth ice beast - one of many in these mountains: gigantic blue-white survivors from a time the earth was cooler. Zoo animals now - dying slowly, 30 feet a year.

In the distance, away from child-swallowing crevasses and arctic wind chill, the tourists of a hundred nations focus cameras, buy shirts and fast food, and chatter about the marvellous view. But here - near the black-ice terminus - the scene is apocalyptic.

A middle-aged English couple discuss the factual displays - 'The glacier has lost 60% of its bulk since 1885' she says. He looks bored. She continues: 'The old photos show it stretching back to the road - just across from where our car is parked'.

He looks irritated, mops his brow, 'Ice does that - it forms in winter, it melts in summer - why speak of climate change?' Breathless atop the viewing hill, she says, quietly: 'The car-park is a long way off'. He shrugs his shoulders, turns to the glacier.

II

Canada, Alaska, New Zealand - everywhere the glaciers retreat to higher altitudes - alchemicize themselves into clouds and air. Their large, river-wet, rock-nugget tails destabilise as the beasts slither upwards; huge moraines - debris walls - form in their wake.

Do the tourist children sense the slow motion tragedy unfolding here? They build stone cairns all over the shale plain left by this retreating monster.

Are they grieving already?

"I don't have a formal gown for the occasion," she replied. "All I have are my normal clothing."

Taking a look at his best friend, Shannon chuckled. "I distinctly remember that you packed a dark green formal dress when we left Earth, a gift from the Fallinian President if I remember right?"

Aylee grimaced. "It's not exactly formal for the sort of gathering we've been asked to attend. Arasians don't show their shoulders except in private."

Shannon smiled at his friend. "We aren't Arasian," he said taking a seat on the couch. Shannon closed his eyes to remember what he did on Arasian culture. "They won't take offence to you showing them."

Aylee let out a small laugh. "I never guessed you'd be into fashion sense."

"I'm not," he replied, a smirk on his face. "But as an ambassador, untrained and technically unqualified as I am, I'm expected to know all things. And the clothing choice of my best friend, who also happens to be my escort for formal occasions, just happens to be one of them."

Aylee smiled. "You're so full of yourself sometimes, Shan. But we're would you be without me?"

"I don't know, Ay," he replied, the smile crossing his lips never fading. "But it would be lonely without you here by my side."

THE ORPHEUS PLAGUE

IAN IRVINE (HOBSON)

Synopsis: This extract is the current draft introductory chapter to *The Orpheus Plague* – the planned 4th novel of the speculative fiction series entitled "Songs of the Interstitium". The overall project is proceeding as a transmedia project featuring an online hub, 5 novels, poetry, non-fiction pieces and original music (go to: <https://songsoftheinterstitium.wordpress.com/the-orpheus-plague-book-4-of-songs-of-the-interstitium/>). This extract sets the scene for the creation of a female character known only to the main protagonist (Rowan Sweeney) as 'the beautiful hybrid'. After briefly meeting with this mercurial young woman in the late 1980s - at the height of 'The Orpheus Plague' – Rowan finds himself writing prolifically across a range of genres. As he tracks the beautiful hybrid over a number of decades he notices that she leaves a 'trail of creativity' in her wake. What is her story and why is she so difficult to meet with?

Chapter 1 – of The Orpheus Plague

Of all the curious phenomena I came upon in my years as a Planetary Observer there is one experience, perhaps above all others, that moved me to contemplate things more rightly reserved for the philosopher than the student of alien cultures. The official records I posted at

the time—almost three hundred years ago now—do not do full justice to the events that unfolded on Jramanna in that distant period of my life. At the time, I was unaware of the full implications of the strange mutation to the well-known ‘Spiritual Plague’ that attacked the dominant life form on Jramanna.

During my observatory stay among the Jramannians I learnt much about their social customs, and also about their general view of life. I was stationed there in the sixteenth decade after what the historians call ‘The Great Acceleration’. The term is as useful and useless as any we could choose to describe the wholesale transformation of Jramanna that took place after the widespread collapse of the metaphysical world view. The Age of Commerce and Science followed ‘The Great Acceleration’ and for two hundred Jramannian years an ideology of progress reigned supreme. I arrived on Jramanna at the height of that period.

I expected a difficult, though largely uneventful, stay on the planet and spent much of my early posting aboard the Observatorium which orbited the planet. Those of my kind already stationed on Jramanna had barely a good word for the place. Many, however, had developed an emotional attachment to the humanoid life at the epicenter of the various revolutions Jramanna was undergoing. Departing Observers explained to me in detail the symptoms of the Spiritual Virus that was fuelling the interspecies transformation of the planet—I noted a certain degree of frustration among them regarding the ‘inflexible’ attitudes of our central body, The Great Council. According to some the classification of the dominant species as an ‘alien’ species was leading to unnecessary suffering. My fellow

Observers argued that the dominant life form on Jramanna was a species ‘not unlike our own’, thus they deserved our assistance in treating the Spiritual Virus afflicting them so sorely. Such arguments initially fell on deaf ears. When I arrived we were not permitted to interfere in the ‘travails’ of the Jramannians—the official line was that they were to evolve beyond the Spiritual Virus through their own efforts alone.

The symptoms associated with the Spiritual Virus are well known to every student of primordial alien cultures, and as such there is no need to go into detailed descriptions here. The malady lodges itself in ‘interpersonal memory fields’ by weakening ‘emotional entanglement’ within organic quantum fields. Suffice to say that I arrived on the planet with the virus in ascendance over its ‘human’ hosts—whenever the humans managed to create inter-relational antibodies the virus seemed to mutate. This conflict between humanity and the virus was, as usual, accompanied by an over-reliance on ‘materialist’ views of the cosmos—especially among the elite of the dominant species. Materialist perspectives led, in turn, to unsustainable increases in the human population of the planet—many other life forms were decimated as a consequence.

I witnessed endless wars and widespread environmental degradation. Members of the higher species created toxic social institutions that enforced passivity and hopelessness. Most humans became increasingly anxious and uneasy in their own skins—many were addicted to alternate bouts of frantic though meaningless activity and bored exhaustion. Many parents lost the capacity to relate to their children

and as a consequence billions grew up unable to empathise with members of their own species—never mind any other species. Of course these are well known symptoms of the Spiritual Virus.

The suffering I witnessed on Jramanna is painful to recall—even now, centuries after I witnessed the events here described. If one of the rules for ‘like species’ classification is the ability of a given species’ suffering to move ‘our kind’ emotionally, then the Jramannians were a ‘like species’. Though immune to the Spiritual Virus, I was not immune to the empathic feelings that arose due to my observing their suffering on a daily basis. A growing feeling of empathy eventually fuelled my own suffering. To use quantum terminology—after only a year or two I was ‘emotionally entangled’ with the plight of the Jramannians.

As I have said previously, outbreaks of the Spiritual Virus are encountered frequently by Planetary Observers. The Jramannians, however, experienced something quite different, something unique and profoundly disturbing. In the beginning I was content simply to log their affliction as a slightly virulent ‘mutation’ of the Spiritual Virus—for the Orpheus Plague did resemble the Spiritual Virus in numerous ways. This diagnosis however, turned out to be erroneous—to say the least!

I lived among the smog, the ceaseless busyness, the daily grind of life in a Jramannian metropolis for about two years (after leaving the Observatorium) before the Orpheus Plague hit.

Our sensors alerted us the night before that something

out of the ordinary was happening in the psycho-spiritual sheath (some humans called it the ‘Noosphere’) enveloping Jramanna. Students of alien cultures will be well acquainted with the peculiar energy patterns emitted by life forms just before they become creatively inspired (or achieve other states of higher awareness capable of altering the ‘Noosphere’). At that time the human population greeted scientific and commercial outbursts of creativity—minor manifestations by intergalactic standards—with an effusiveness bordering on hysteria. The more important ‘paradigm altering’ creativity (what my kind refer to as ‘fundamental creativity’) of the planet’s artistic and literary minorities was increasingly dismissed as ‘unproductive’.

Imagine our surprise when the emissions turned out to be coming from a celebrated poet living in the slums of a large Western democracy. Although we were quickly aware of the man’s condition - he was down on his luck, unable to cope with the hectic pace of modern life - we had to wait until much later to work out the significance of the psychic waves he was emitting. To understand the peculiar turn the Spiritual Virus took on Jramanna you have to understand that the poet had written poetry all his adult life. Even whilst living in the slum (as a consequence of the collapse of his third marriage) he’d maintained notebooks. Into them he’d scribbled his starkly realist epiphanies of pain, boredom, sorrow and occasionally, only very occasionally, joy. An agent called on him at intervals—sometimes to give the poet money (a kind of unit of ‘social permission’ on Jramanna) for his most recent work. The agent also gained permission to sell the rights for biographical studies of the poet’s lifestyle, one of which turned into a lucrative

movie deal. Sadly the story of the poet's mental illness and alcoholism was more interesting to ordinary people than his poetry.

What happened to the poet? Well he simply stopped writing. We didn't pick up the importance of this development to begin with. We observed him closely for an entire month but were none the wiser as to what had actually changed in the planet's Noosphere. From memory scans conducted later we managed to calculate the exact moment the change occurred. The man watched a young girl huddled beside her drug affected mother for several minutes. The family had been cast onto the street by the heartless economic regime of the day. A wave of sadness swept through the poet due to this encounter, but the moment came and went. He observed the woman and her daughter. He felt sad. He walked away. He sat down on a park-bench. The wind whistled around him. He gathered newspapers to his chest. He fell asleep. What had changed?

He stopped writing. He never wrote another poem.

It took only a short period of time for the Orpheus Plague to decimate the creative minorities of Jramanna. It struck randomly, viciously, ruining many lives and eventually robbing human cultures of much colour and beauty. Great musicians suddenly found themselves unable to finish musical pieces. Novelists became apathetic half way through early drafts of their novels. Poets were unable to write poems and film-makers found it impossible to visualize or hear their characters. Everywhere a great weariness and sadness afflicted the creatives of Jramanna.

So obsessed was the culture of the day with celebrity, escapism and commerce that the average Jramannian was not, to begin with, aware of what was happening. As a rule, the first to be hit by the Plague were the true artists - those prophets of the uncomfortable who had, since the beginning of the Great Acceleration, criticised the terminal shallowness of Jramanna's dominant culture. To see these critics silenced was initially welcomed by the stupid and the vulgar.

The epidemic registered only slowly in the mass media of the planet. For years the endless stories of writers who would not write, dancers who would not dance, painters who would not paint, etc. were ignored due to the clamor for stories about celebrities who looked attractive and saw their work as nothing more than escapist 'entertainment'. In the areas of academia responsible for analysing the arts, theories were forwarded that questioned the need for poets, writers and artists. As the plague progressed even these relatively uncreative theorists began to fall silent. Five years into the plague and the great educational institutions of Jramanna were swarming with economists, scientists, managers—practical, colourless people most often lacking 'fundamental' (i.e. paradigm changing) creativity.

Nevertheless, some people were becoming nervous—'surely it is cause for concern that the greatest artists and writers of the age are being struck dumb' wrote a lone critic in his internet blog. On the fringes of the great media machines that ruled collective consciousness on Jramanna at that time, assorted prophets of doom attempted to draw the public's attention to the problem. To begin with their warnings were dismissed and ridiculed. Television

shows, newspapers and popular magazines continued to feature gossip pieces on famous artists and writers indifferent to the fact that most of their subjects were no longer creating anything. For approximately a decade—the human population of Jramanna created virtually no new art, literature or music. A culture of ‘remixing’, of ‘appropriating’ and ‘reconstituting’ developed. Some theorists even argued that this kind of art and literature was the only genuine art and literature possible. Businessmen, politicians and, worryingly, the general public, used these pronouncements to ignore the calamity bearing down on humanity.

Meanwhile, mere entertainers were worshipped as never before. At the same time the unpublished works of inferior writers, painters, song-writers etc. were sought out—despite often being decades old. So began a period of endless re-runs of old movies and television shows—it was also a period of interminable remixing and reconstitution.

Around the ten year mark the Orpheus Plague took another bizarre turn for the worst. As with previous developments our small group of Observers was unable initially to explain what was happening. At this point in the epidemic, even the celebrity entertainers found it impossible to act, sing, write, dance etc. For the greater part of the next five years technology alone kept the illusion that art, music and literature were creative pursuits alive. Live performances became extinct, consequently the planet’s computer networks began simply creating ‘artists’ randomly – they named civilians as singers, poets, writers, etc. then

manufactured whole bodies of work for them by remixing previously created works. In educational institutions art and literature teachers lost their jobs—whole faculties were closed down. Legions of non-creative administrators, spawn of the Age of Commerce and Science, descended on remnant creative thinkers like vultures.

A little later came the next worrying development. The Plague jumped from the creative minorities to sections of the general populace. To begin with, of course, people had no idea that the loss of their own less developed ‘fundamental’ creativity would hurt them in anyway. They went on ignoring, mocking, profiting from, or worshipping the fake art distributed to them via the wizardry of technology.

Plague instigated distortions to the human experience of time revealed some of the worst terrors associated with the destruction of ‘fundamental creativity’. A terrifying lassitude descended on those afflicted with the Orpheus Plague. Victims had the feeling that nothing ever changed. A great weariness infected tens of millions of people. Just as many became pathologically bored—bored to the point of madness, bored to the point of cruelty. The death of ‘fundamental creativity’ heralded an age of absolute sterility—sterility punctuated by ever more destructive outbreaks of mass insanity. The world of the humans became drab and mundane, petty and, above all, joyless.

The silence that began with the creatives now afflicted others. Eventually people were unable to speak for fear of repeating the same old hackneyed phrases. An all-pervasive and malignant sense of déjà vu afflicted millions. Nobody ever said anything original—habit alone came

to define existence. Everything had been said before and the experience of living resembled a dreadful B-grade movie. Some attempted to overcome their numbness by 'pretending drama' - trivial and unimportant things were treated as profoundly significant.

If you want to imagine the Orpheus Plague at its height imagine yourself telling the same dull story for years on end, all the time knowing that you are repeating yourself, all the time feeling disgusted by what you are doing.

It is hard to describe the eerie state of despair that descended over that world when the full implications of the Orpheus Plague were eventually acknowledged. Collective epiphanies of this nature often occur some years after the more sensitive have experienced them. In the case of Jramanna, the realization that something was radically wrong came after the death of one of the planet's greatest writers. Cultural historians now see the end of the 'Cult of Commerce' period as the aftermath of that terrible moment—the moment when the public realized that not only were art and literature dead but perhaps also the very faculty of creativity in humanity and perhaps in nature itself.

We had warning of the moment, but, like so much that happened on Jramanna during that period, we were initially unable to decipher the importance of what we were witnessing. An international TV station was analyzing the death of a well known female writer. After ten minutes of photographs, old video and interviews with 'critics' (composed largely of gossip about her relationship with her

first husband) a short interview with the woman's closest female companion came on screen.

The old woman had nothing at all to say about the dead writer's personal life—instead she chose to talk about the moment the writer had stopped writing. Her comments were not markedly different to comments made about other creatives that had fallen silent without explanation. After the broadcast, however, something changed in the public ... indeed it was immediately after that interview that pundits began talking about 'The Orpheus Plague'.

'I remember the day Margaret stopped writing ... it was a very strange day, about seven years ago, I knew something was up. She was delivering a lecture on one of her novels ... at an Australian University, as I recall, and she was asked a very simple question by a young man in the audience ... a very simple question. I'll do my best to put the question as the man put it:'

Margaret, I wonder ... could you tell me ... I'm a young writer and I wonder ... could you give me some advice as to how to go about assembling my writer's resume—I've only had a few literary short stories published you see ... how should I sell myself to publishers and agents?

'The man of course was asking a perfectly legitimate question. The world of literature was self-evidently all about 'selling oneself' ... The young man was very quietly spoken and very earnest ... and obviously very sensitive ... and I'm sure Margaret was aware of the sadness in his voice. Well she just looked at him for a very long time ... I have no idea what she was thinking but the entire auditorium went very, very quiet ... Nobody dared speak a word ... Margaret seemed to want to reach out to the young

man. For a moment she wore the same pleading expression he wore.'

Well ... I don't know ... she finally mumbled. ... Yes, of course, you must sell yourself ... your wonderful lecturers here in the writing program have your best interests at heart ... Yes ... you must ... we must ...

'She then excused herself and left the auditorium. I attempted to talk to her about the encounter afterwards, but she had little to say. She just looked incredibly sad.' That young man ... she kept saying ... the wrong time to be born a writer ... the worst time ... 'She burnt all of her unpublished manuscripts in the weeks following that lecture. I never knew her to write another word of fiction.'

I hesitate to describe the panic that began to spread among the populace in the days after that television special. After years of indifference, suddenly, collectively, the masses became alarmed at what was happening to the planet's creatives. The writer in question had written nothing at all for seven years. Perhaps there was something mystical about the number seven for the Jramannians. We can only speculate, but the great commercial machine that had been the obsession of the populace—their religion, their moral imperative, indeed their entire worldview—one that had sustained their suicidal exploitation of the planet for over 200 years - all of it, the entire unreal edifice began to collapse. Speculations concerning the 'Orpheus Plague' began to circulate like wildfire. Finally the malady had a name and people could point out its various symptoms.

To some the Plague was a sign from the heavens, from

unseen beings, from the God/Goddess that the Cult of Commerce had apparently vanquished. Art, music, poetry, dance etc. were, quite suddenly, missed.

'What a damned and shallow people we have become!' wrote one Jramannian in stilted, unimaginative prose. 'We are arid souls ... dried out due to egotism, greed and flight from self!'

As so often happens after such moments of profound realization, chaos ensued. When the life force, the *elan vitale*, is muted, dulled, smothered or crushed people seek out every available cure. Others seek someone to blame—a scapegoat, a witch, an evil "other". Many Jramannians set upon each other like savage animals. A period of tragic bloodletting followed—endless wars erupted across the planet as if violence could somehow reinstate creative living.

It was at this point that our Intervention requests were finally considered by the Great Council.

No doubt you will want to know what happened to the Jramannians. Part of our job as Planetary Observers was to monitor what were known in those days as 'quantum fluctuations.' Jramanna's Age of Commerce and Science ensured the denial of any organic link between human creativity and what we call 'multiversal' constants (constants fundamental to both fields of matter *and* fields of consciousness). I came to understand that the denial of the bio-semiotic foundations common to both life and creative practice was itself a symptom of the Orpheus Plague. A symptom, however, that my small troupe of relatively

inexperienced Planetary Observers completely missed.

Only after a visit by one of the Great Council's most experienced Planetary Observers was a correct diagnosis of the Orpheus Plague made. Authorization for a rare 'regional intervention' followed soon after.

After arrival Counselor Ovston took several weeks to examine the planet's Noosphere data. She was very thorough and asked to see calculations stretching back some 1,100 years. At a dinner held in our main Observatory—i.e. the invisible observation satellite orbiting Jramanna—Counselor Ovston announced her findings in a succinct and relaxed way.

'Certain stretches of space-time ... when inhabited by stressed life forms—such as we find on this marvelously complex planet, Jramanna—exhibit a tendency to inhibit one of the primary attributes associated with all normal matter fields ... i.e. the everywhere tendency of all matter to exhibit signs of what we might call *creative uncertainty* ...'

She paused to survey the small audience crammed into the hexagonal room for a moment before continuing.

'The consequences of this inhibitory process can be a space-time region in which a stressed collective consciousness *will*s a matter-reality lacking *creative uncertainty*. This inevitably leads to a state of stagnation that births other imbalances including unique forms of suffering that ensnare all nearby (that is 'entangled'—in the quantum sense) organisms in the process creating a diseased space-time region ...'

She halted again, as if to allow everyone time to digest the full implications of her words.

'Jramanna, my friends, is in a very bad way! ... its Noosphere is so compromised that the planet's life-forms are unable to self-inoculate (fundamental creativity, we recall, facilitates periodic *cultural inoculations*) ...'

Counselor Ovston reached for her glass of Jramannian water. I took the moment to glance nervously at some of my fellow Observers—like me they probably felt a little ashamed that they'd been unable to put two and two together for so long. I began to wonder if perhaps we'd been infected in some way due to long-term immersion in the planet's diseased space-time reality—even though we were not strictly speaking 'human'.

When she continued she sounded more businesslike.

'My friends, the dominant species—that is, the humans—in which the Orpheus Plague has manifested so virulently—must become our patients ... In particular we must concentrate on healing Jramanna's creative minorities ... minorities decimated, we note, by the onslaught of the Orpheus Plague. I recommend the following. Firstly, genetic modifications to 3,500 members of said 'creative minorities'. The modifications will instill greater sensitivity to parallel worlds, specifically worlds in which *creative uncertainty*, embedded in matter and consciousness, functions as an antidote to 'life force stagnation'... The genetic modifications will nullify the worst effects of the Orpheus Plague permitting our 3,500 individuals to collectively birth a new reality paradigm unfavorable to the continuance of the Plague ...'

The counselor paused again before adding, 'More details

of our plan will be released after we've received treatment authorization from The Great Council. In the meantime, I imagine you may have some questions?'

A friend of mine from the department of Noosphere Monitoring put his hand-up, 'You are proposing that we intervene here on Jramanna, yes? We, however, have long been told that an intervention would be against Great Council First Principles?'

'Given experiences with this Plague in other galaxies we have reason to believe that the space-time "dead-spots" created by this rare malady will tend to increase in size very rapidly indeed ... infecting larger and larger regions of space-time. The problem here on Jramanna cannot be left untreated.'

A young woman attached to Ovston's entourage then stood up to speak, 'What the Counselor is proposing is the administration of a genetic antidote to 3,500 members of Jramanna's creative community ... you might imagine that the antidote will turn them into *organic quantum computers*—that is beings *extremely* sensitive to the infinite number of parallel worlds existing all around them ... We envisage, in fact, a bio-semiotic bleeding of positive aspects of some of those alternate worlds into this world ... In short: our chosen creatives will act as a kind of organic creativity bridge ... We've found elsewhere that individual genetic antidotes lead, in turn, to cultural antidotes ...'

Counselor Ovston laughed gently as she interrupted the young woman, 'Quite correct, Margana, but perhaps we can describe the treatment process more simply ... Our *organic quantum computers* will 'bleed information' from other realities into this one by way of what the Jramannians call 'a

new poetic'—that is, a new model for creative practice, and thus, we hope, a new model for creative living.'

The Counselor ended the presentation soon after. Within a week her treatment program had been authorized by the Great Council. I volunteered to assist the small number of professionals assigned to carry out the genetic treatments on Jramannian creatives ranging in age from 5 to 25.

Before her departure the counselor declared the entire system a 'Disease Control Zone' thus precipitating infection control protocols. After receiving their compulsory inoculations most Planetary Observers were withdrawn from Jramanna—only a skeletal team of Planetary Observers, code biologists and q-geneticists were permitted to remain.

Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, the prescribed treatment program was not carried out according to plan.

to see climate change as a threatening and urgent matter which requires a courageous stance. As many individuals and communities are discovering, political will is scarce and therefore, it's time to take action ourselves against the behemoth of climate change.

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CLAYTON ESHLEMAN: THE ESSENTIAL POETRY (1960-2015)

IAN IRVINE (HOBSON)

I'm ancient as never before this afternoon, charged with karstic urge, fully born (from 'Eternity at Domme', June 9, 2007)

Eshleman is in his 80s now but he is still writing significant poetry and prose—as evidenced by a plethora of high quality publications over the past decade or so. *Clayton Eshleman: The Essential Poetry*, contains a comprehensive selection of poems spanning some 55 years of the poet's literary life. Readers should note that I read the collection in conjunction with a *The Whole Art*, perhaps the seminal non-fiction commentary so far on his life and work. Having read his poetry and prose since the 1980s, I suspect that this collection, published by Black Widow books, is close to becoming the defining collection of his work as a poet.

There are some poets for whom reading their poetry is all that is needed—little is gained by reading the poet's prose or even by reading a biography on the poet. There are others,

however, for whom knowing something about their lives and their prose writings, enriches the reading experience. Clayton Eshleman is one such poet. He has practiced simultaneous careers as a poet, journal editor, translator of poetry, prose writer (usually on poetics and the experience of being a poet) and poetry teacher, making him a truly multifaceted literary figure. In particular, it is well worth reading his poetry in parallel with his major prose writings. To approach him from the perspective of his 'Whole Art' is to encounter someone for whom prose writing, journal editing, translation, archaeological speculation and even, perhaps, teaching, are precursors to poetry—poetry by other means or poetry in process. Unfortunately his achievements in these other areas have sometimes obscured his poetic achievements.

This collection features over 220 poems from some two dozen books (plus miscellaneous pieces) published since 1960. The poems are largely presented in chronological order—giving readers some sense of an unfolding narrative. Through Eshleman's sustained 'inner dialogues' (sometimes over a number of decades) with a range of real and imaginary figures, the reader is slowly exposed to the key elements, obsessions even, of his 'inner dreaming'.

The figures tasked with overseeing the poet's inner transformations are numerous. Of the poems conversing with real people, César Vallejo, Wilhelm Reich, Bud Powell, Aimé Césaire, Antonin Artaud, Eshleman's second wife Caryl, and his parents (Ira and Gladys) feature most often. Of those conversing with mythic, legendary, or purely imaginary beings, Yorunomado, Coatlicue, Ariadne and Persephone are of particular interest. When we add the poems dedicated to creative peers and friends e.g. Paul Blackburn, Vladimir Holan, Leon Golub, Jerome Rothenberg, Diane Wakowski, Gary Snyder, Adrienne Rich, Robert Kelly, James Hillman,

etcetera., the sense that Eshleman's poetic narratives unfold as sustained, and intimate relational dialogues, intensifies.

Once admitted to the poet's inner world, such figures are put to work imaginatively—become, in a sense, a means for Eshleman to dialogue with unexplored (or only partly explored) regions of his own unconscious—which, from the early 1970s on, turns out to be the unconscious of the species itself, all the way back, layer upon layer, to the origins of the imagination as depicted in Paleolithic cave art.

Although we note occasional abrupt shifts of thematic focus—notably in the early 1970s, and, I would argue, post 9/11—there is also a continuity of purpose on display that reminds this reviewer of the elemental symbolism of rivers. Rivers feature stretches of long, slow-moving deliberateness which suddenly give way to tumultuous rapids and waterfalls that force direction changes. The major recalibrations of the poet's creative life are all tracked in this collection - sometimes they are dealt with in a single poem, more often in a poetic sequence.

The full visionary breadth of Eshleman's 'inner dreaming' is more evident in this collection, I think, than in any of his individual books. As we progress through the collection we witness the gradual emergence and development of complex, self-created, mythopoetic narratives spanning the length of both human history, and the poet's own life. Blake's epic myth making endeavours later in his life, as well as Robert Graves' re-evaluation of human imaginative/mythic history (as outlined in *The White Goddess* and *The Black Goddess and Mammon*) are comparable projects, but neither of these poets pushed the 'Origins' theme as far back as Eshleman has attempted to do in both his poetry and prose works.

Readers can track for themselves the key narratives embedded in this collection e.g. sustained meditations on the

nature of creativity (particularly as expressed through poetry, art and music); on sexuality and love; on the pathologies of political and economic elites, to name but a few. Like the Paleolithic caves the poet and his wife Caryl explored for decades, readers will encounter many-layers to his poetry.

I'd suggest that whichever entrance to the visionary labyrinth of his life's work one enters first, e.g. this poetry collection; back copies of *Sulfur*; his poetry-prose opus *Juniper Fuse*; his award winning translations of other poets, or key prose works like *Companion Spider*, we should, from the outset, understand that each work will give us at best only a partial picture. At the back of each 'discipline gallery' we will always find a gateway to a central chamber, featuring swirling fragments of insight gathered from the multiple vocations Eshleman has practiced throughout his life. In this kaleidoscopic—and profoundly creative—'apparent' chaos, we nevertheless glimpse an essential wholeness or unity of purpose to his work that is fierce, and serious, and direct.

The Essential Poetry counts as one of the best gateways to Eshleman's oeuvre—largely because pieces from so many of his most important poetry collections feature here. Stuart Kendall's introduction, together with the poet's 'Gratitude and Annotations' section at the end, do a fine job framing the poetry selected in terms of some of the major turning points in the poet's adult life—i.e. the encounter with Vallejo's work, the period in Japan, the encounter with Paleolithic cave art, Caryl, and so on. It becomes clear that particular personal challenges have motivated many of his creative and intellectual pursuits. This grounding of Eshleman's work and poetics in the personal allows us to glimpse the unflinching courage underlying both his poetry and prose.

I suspect that the true species value of Eshleman's poetry and prose has yet to be fully processed by our contemporary

global culture/s. In part, this is because his vision is so vast—demanding as it does genuine and sustained engagement across multiple disciplines. However, I also suspect that there is something in the American (perhaps even the Western) psyche that resists acknowledging the more difficult insights/critiques proffered by its major writers and poets. Eshleman is a truly international literary figure—dare I say one of the few poets useful to all ages and all cultures. Perhaps a full appraisal of his achievements will only come once he is better known internationally. When a true and measured international assessment of his worth begins, I suspect that this collection will be fundamental to the process - it is already one of his major works.