

Recursions, Volume I: Original Poetry by John Peterson

(includes short story *Woe to the Vanquished*)

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As We Were

Caught in a fever dream,
Touching unreality.
Caught in an eyeless storm
That stares straight through dead eyes.
We were no one special,
But we tried.
Riders on the razor's edge
Stepped weightless off the ledge.
The brave and bored were dancing there
Bearing teeth and scars.
Expecting really nothing
Except to be left wanting
We torched the house
Our past had kept on haunting.
And for what?

Kiss of Clarity

God is the heat, God is the wind
A howl through time, waking chaos within
The void is the mother, the void is the reaper
Sunlight pierces waves but the trenches are deeper,
And colder, I told her,
To not wish otherwise.
For our wishes are earthbound,
Melt in front of our eyes.
Dissolved, we're absolved of longing.

Even so I embrace with the truest sincerity
How welcome to my heart
Is this kiss of clarity.
My muse falters when the void calls her
Yet still she returns to me
I hold my breath, tighten up my chest
And God comes rushing through me.

Drifting

You told me that I
Would outlast this pressure
Promised me my worth
Could not be measured
By the ones holding me down
Swore to me
My words would resound
And together
We'd make our own way out.

Passing months become nostalgic years
Since we've last spoken
I never meant to disappear,
And leave this bond broken.

I won't accept anymore time wasted
Let's not be unfamiliar faces
We held tight through the darkest nights
Woke up so far apart, somehow
Whether we're in transit or in stasis
Tethered by the thinnest laces,
Or just drifting, I am lifting
My heart up to you now.

Point Nemo

Great expectations give birth to great stress
Don't pity the pariah who would settle for less
A legacy, a debt, a breathless race to success
One must first kneel down if they wish to be blessed

I've been living in a mad world all too familiar
Where every disappointment is deja vu
With nothing but dull nails, I've been digging underground for shelter
Like when I sank beneath the waves to see the darkest, coldest blue

I march with the procession of the flagless mercenaries
In step only with the tachycardia in my chest
A legacy, a debt, a breathless race to the mausoleum
One must first be no one if they wish to be blessed

Nebula

The frayed threads of a patchwork in progress

A guarded conscience that takes pause

Dare it be honest?

Kaleidoscopic view of collision course stars

Death on a pale horse,

The eclipse of red Mars

Diemos and Phobos in retrograde dance

Conceptualize fate, faith, grace and chance

So seamless it is to cling to a word

To fall asleep dreamless is its own reward

Rarely acknowledged as most great truths are

Sometimes merely knowing will cut and will scar

Recursion

I imagined myself standing between two mirrors
In precise alignment and flawless proportion.
And I came to believe that the person I saw
Was nearly myself but not; it wore subtle distortions.
Then I had the thought that in the eyes of the other
Were neither mine nor its own but those of another.
Those thoughts were the catalyst that began the recursion.

So continued the sequence and in each reflection,
Changes quite more apparent as the light travelled on.
Unrecognizable the innumerable others became
Until they were blurs, then a point, and then gone.
And if sharper vision could extend their existence
Still no light has the time to traverse the great distance
Of a universe ever expanding, itself a recursion.

For even replicas are which from replicas come.
With this understanding, I lost my point of reference
To perfection, the infinite, the first and the last.
Those words from my mind, an irreversible severance.
Now I invite others to stand in that same place
And reflect on its nature until their minds erase
Any doubt that we are but a single frame within the recursion.

Unconventional

Creatively unstable, beyond description in my way

What should I do with all these days?

To be high on life

What would that taste like?

I think those hits I take aren't so pure,

Nor are they safe.

Shining cyanide on silver plates.

Someone should make me a bracelet of thorns

I'd be the savior of the lost

Each fresh cut would remind of the cost

As I write.

And I've known love, I've felt accomplished

But when I'm selfish and thoughtless

I always am consumed by my worst.

The most vibrant color, the great outline

A work of art, but a tragic design.

Still I don't mind.

Enamored by the fog that keeps me from my road

I hope the poles shift and the path erodes.

To be unafraid

And my debts repaid

Where to go from here, the question.

I need a cipher

To decode life lessons.

Someone should make me mechanical hands,
I'd have a handle on the conventional.
But I can't separate the concept of normalcy
From wasted potential.
But I'm in love and want no life of,
Settle down, take-or-leave it price of
Complacency. That'll never work out for me.
I want to give more than I take,
Hope for good luck with spare glass to break
And to be remembered, whatever of my life I make.

Clown Junta

Welcome to the sideshow
Swallow the sword and choke
Suffocate with all the lies
Caught tight inside your throat
Clown junta, clown junta
The greatest show on Earth
Clown junta, clown junta
Bled dry of pride and worth
The elephant is a war machine
The elephant never forgets
The elephant is a war machine
The war machine never relents
Clown junta, clown junta
Like you've never seen before
Clown junta, clown junta
The tent torched to the core
Ringleader in the tiger's maw
Firebreather with an ash black jaw
The elephant, the elephant
The war machine, it screams
Clown junta, clown junta
The elephant it screams
Clown junta, clown junta
Impaled on the tusk, but it's only a dream

Poetrash

Well he's some off-white trash
And his skin is stained
He's got a tattoo
He calls the Mark of Cain
And you can dish it out
'Cuz he will never complain,
Never complain, never complain.
Says, he says
That he knows, he knows
There's one, one way
Life goes, goes, goes
And it's the subtleties
Of the clothes, clothes, clothes
That let the keen eye scan the ego.
But they keyed his heart
And dented his pride
His friends all died on a waterslide
He watched them die, watched them die,
They died on the waterslide.

Poetrash II

I built myself a time machine
And took a stroll through Sodom
I smoked myself a sweet pipe dream
Down in Bikini Bottom
My clients ring me off the hook
For rocks while I still got 'em
My kids, they made their teacher faint
With all the words I taught 'em.
But like God and punk rock
I'll be dead
Then you can all
Dissect my head
Pass the scalpel, add some salt
It's really not your fault.
Like God and punk rock
I'll be dead
Gone staler than my daily bread
Like God and punk rock
I'll have died
I'll have died on the waterslide.

Awaiting Impact

Come find out, just let it out
The part of you that wants,
Lock on to the impulse and then
Purge all second thoughts.
Like a bullet through the thickest fog,
We're redlining with seatbelts off
Awaiting impact or the engine running dry
And once you get a taste for it,
You'll never care to brace for it
Someday you won't even wonder why.
Ride with us, collide with us
Never break your stride
It's not enough to chase the storm,
No, let one take form inside.

The Nameless

This is our story, frame by frame

The shifting pieces of a game

Controller: We send our prayers

And sacrificial gifts.

Sleeping on the fault lines,

Echoes of our call signs

We balance on the edge

Of an ever-growing rift.

Abnegation

Shadow cast over pitch black,
Shaped by the mind's eye
Six-sided photographs of
Panoramic blindsides.

There's a ceiling above the stars
An echo from below the floor
There's a feeling that comes and goes
In waves that my nerves absorb
But even touch can lie.

White noise, a voice
Ever so unreal, ever so inviting
White noise, a voice
Drawing me to the event horizon
I will sail there.

Separation, abnegation
Ever so unreal, ever so overwhelming
The subtle whirl and the piercing ring
So unravels everything.
I will sail there.

I will build a ship and carve her razor wings
So unravels everything
I will build a ship and carve her razor wings
And ride along the strings
I will sail there and witness.

I melt into her
At loss for thought or word
The sky turns, sound burns
This depth I cannot discern
But I melt into her.

Woe to the Vanquished

Three lunar cycles had passed since the fall of the Highlands; two since the occupiers' tribunal condemned Cordan to die. By the winter solstice, the designated day of reckoning for the man called deviant, war criminal and heretic, the once proud city of Bryn saw only four hours of daylight. Dust and debris had been stirred up not only by the battle for the capital which marked the Highlands' last stand, but also by the punitive burnings of surrounding plantations, meaning that many people residing in the subjugated city were beginning to forget what a true day looked like.

For most, this was just another source of misery, yet Cordan found it strangely comforting to lose track of time. At least the narrow window of his cell and the darkened landscape limited his view of the indignities inflicted upon his Bryn; the structures shelled into rubble which the occupiers had not even begun to rebuild, the scorched vestiges of collapsed bridges, the crude filling in of Cordan's silos with cement. Worst of all for most Highlanders was the fact that leviathan oil was wasted illuminating the occupiers' crimson flags draped all over the city every hour of the night, while medicine had gone unsynthesized in Bryn ever since the war's end. A constant reminder: "Woe to the vanquished."

Although Cordan was, when he wore a general's uniform, one of the Chieftan's most adored, and although he as a Highlander professed his love of country loudly and publicly as all virtuous citizens should, the patriotic hatred that should boil in his blood on the day of his execution was actually rather trivial at this point. He was only plagued by the sorrow of his personal failure – how close he had come to victory, only to have it torn from his grasp days before his life's work would come to fruition. Perhaps this was why he took his death sentence in such stride; for he had lost a battle with time already, the only one which truly mattered.

To breathe life into the rocket would have been so much more than a milestone in the history of this species; Cordan knew it would have been ascension to a new era that would have made all civilization thus far seem primitive. Indeed, he promised the Chieftan as the tide of war turned against the Highlanders that his creation would reduce Arma, the Meadow Clan's capital, to ashes and bring them a victory unlike any

other. Yet what would winning the war be except a means to an end? Why use the rocket only to kill, when it could one day let men walk among the stars?

The last vestiges of Cordan's sense of duty to his country crumbled with Bryn's walls. Truthfully, he would have gladly served the Meadow Clan, the occupiers, if only he could continue his noble work. He and Alyzia offered them this chance. But the foul fundamentalists refused, and repaid the offer of friendship with charges of heresy. Their priests held that the sky was the Creator's blanket, the most merciful blessing ever given, to shield all from the Void and the demons within. To even dream to leave the confines of the dome above, to rise above the clouds and touch the Void; that was a crime that eclipsed the worst atrocities of the war.

No doubt, every priest, clan-elder, and "scientist" the occupiers summoned to testify concluded that Cordan and Alyzia would have doomed every soul, brought forth an extinction event, had they not been stopped.

The din of the crowd gathered in the city square grew louder, and Cordan smiled in his cell as he listened. This would be over soon. Then, he heard another sound: the unmistakable footsteps of the occupiers. Cordan was perplexed, for he did not expect to be passed another meal through the iron door after last night's, but knew his executioner was not to escort him outside until high noon. So what had they come for?

Even when unlocked, the cell door took a considerable amount of strength to move, and Cordan feared for a moment that his last hour of life would involve watching it open inch by inch. But after a moment, the necessary force slid it all the way down the track. Three figures stood before the filthy, unshaven prisoner. Two were Meadow-clan soldiers. The other, Cordan thought, must be a hallucination. But she spoke, and he believed.

"Our conquerors have granted my last request."

Alyzia looked only slightly less dreadful than he did. She no longer wore the black lipstick that was one of the most memorable sights at the silo. Her hair was greasy and

had too many knots to count. Her eyes were sunken in and open wounds lined the circumference of her wrists where she had so often been chained.

But Cordan forced his half-atrophied legs to allow himself to rise to greet her.

“I’d thought they burned you already” he told her.

“I asked that we die together” Alyzia replied.

“Why?” Cordan asked as he laced his fingers in hers, looking past her at the occupiers who glared with disgust but said nothing.

“We have been intertwined seventeen cycles. It only seems fitting” she answered.

“No, why does the Meadow Clan indulge any desire of yours or mine at all?” Cordan clarified. Alyzia laughed, weakly but distinctly, and speculated “those who will rewrite history might one day find it useful to appear magnanimous. I’ve heard they will even throw bread to the justice-seekers who attend our execution.”

“We defied the Creator, Alyzia. And still they must feed the masses just to get them to watch us die? For a crime so unforgivable, you would think they’d trample one another just to catch a glance of our pyre.”

With a dark grin, Alyzia turned toward the soldiers and raised her voice to say “there is no Creator.” Predictably, they recoiled; the one holding the keys even lost color in his face and looked as if he were about to vomit. Defiance was all Alyzia had left.

This is what Cordan admired so much about her. No presence was so exquisitely corrupting as hers. He was a general, she was a scientist. Cordan could think unconventionally, but she could blaspheme. There is no doubt Cordan was a talented inventor in his own right, but without Alyzia the rocket would scarcely have been more than a dream.

In retrospect, Cordan could not even recall whether their ambitions fueled their lust for one another, or whether their lust fueled their ambitions. She would paralyze his inhibitions with wine, and whisper to him in bed an illicit, occult doctrine; to envision one's destiny while locked in carnal union would make it come to pass. At the start of the next cycle following that night, there was no need for wine; and as Cordan and Alyzia climaxed, they proclaimed they would deny the bonds of gravity and touch the Void. Whatever demons may come, let them, for theirs is Knowledge.

There were no more chances for that; only the privilege to burn together.

Still, Alyzia expressed one more wish.

"When they walk us to the pyre, Cordan, I believe we should clasp hands and take a bow. And if you can will it, smile as they curse us and chant for us to burn. They will see us die, but they need not see us regret."

Cordan nodded and quietly said "I have already accepted my end." He turned his left arm up toward her and revealed fresh scars on the underside. They spelled out words: "Woe to the vanquished."

"You should have carved that into the wall of your cell rather than your arm, for posterity. For your skin will soon be ashes" Alyzia suggested. Cordan had a riddle to offer in return.

"If a book is to burn, are the words on the last page to touch the fire more attuned to posterity's needs?"

Alyzia was glad that Cordan would walk to his death with pride rather than cowardice, but disappointed that he had lost his faith in the destiny they wished together.

“No execution can frighten a populace into submission forever. Another will rise and achieve what we did not, of that, I am sure” she admonished him.

“I would disagree, Alyzia. They will forever be afraid. Not of punishment, no. They will fear their own potential, and they will all die. When the red oceans rise eons from now, they will overtake Arma and Bryn. And this world will be a mausoleum for beings that knew there was one way forward, but refused it.”

The moment of silence lasted as long as the Meadow Clan soldiers would allow it to. But they moved to drag the condemned outside if they had to, so Alyzia left Cordan the last word and took his hand.

Minutes later, the most hated beings to ever draw breath were on full display for all the justice-seekers and bread-seekers gathered. A priest on the stage was handed a scroll while the condemned were bound. Eager executioners held their torches. Their moment would come as soon as the priest’s proclamation had finished.

“All ye assembled hear our judgment! There is no graver crime, no darker sin, than daring to invite the Void’s demons down upon us...”

Vessel X62 of the Reclamation Fleet idled in the thermosphere of the planet called Atikyr. Assembly officials called it an “edge world”, though it was actually closer to the galactic center than the capital, Sumeria Prime. It was deemed such because it was habitable, but undesirable.

Fourteen million colonists were about to enter this solar system. Their terraforming resources were meager, and life on Atikyr would be hard; but the frontier offered them more hope than the hiveworlds from which they emigrated.

Admiral Vallan reflected as he stood on the bridge of X62 that he was grateful this arid world was not to be his home. The three-hundred eighty-six year old war hero had just

one more tour of duty to complete before the gleaming palaces of Titan would be his to walk freely among the Assembly's aristocracy. Overseeing this sector's Reclamation Fleet was little more than a reward career; it required virtually no exertion at all.

After all, ever since the Assembly won the Final War, times of strife were behind the human race. Thousands of years of internal rebellion meant losing contact with lesser colonies like Atikyr. The Reclamation Fleet's task was simple – assess the condition of a planet, see if there is anything worth salvaging, and prepare it for the immigrants.

The report Admiral Vallan sent back to Sumeria Prime read thus:

“Approximately 160,000 ferals occupy the southern continent. Data from explorer drones indicate all tech from the initial habitation has been lost. Primitive warfare occurs incessantly and nothing of value remains. Zythyl canisters will deploy – all ferals will be purged.”

And the Void's demons did so.