

# Ballad of a Crystal Man:

## Andrew Darlington

Pleasant Valley. The habit of fractured faith persists on a dry Sunday. At the hot centre of Hellfire Crossroads, where the only hope for cooling is to catch the drought from the grating-grinding of the big rusty fan that draws water from deep earth. And all the while there's whispered talk and condemnation.

In the church-house Old Man Sky stands unsteadily. 'Tell me. Are we accursed, or blessed?'

A flurry of motion ripples through the watching congregation as they sweat, flea-bitten on punishing wooden pews. The preacher coughs. Flips through his antique black-bound gilt-edged book nervously, and grumbles riddles.

'Tell us all, please. We live on, but are we damned?'

He shakes his head in sad bafflement, rubbing creased eyelids with hard knuckles.

'See... the preacher, he doesn't know. He knows nothing. He just spouts this bit and that bit out of his book, and sometimes I think it might just be onto something, and other times I think it's just the superstitions of another time, a pantheon stuck in reverse clinging to metaphorical feathers.' Old Man Sky. More the wild-eyed prophet than the uncertain preacher will ever be. Through tight dry skin his bones are traceable, thin in scrawny limbs, ugly and knobbed at the joints. 'People are never so comical, futile, or tedious as when they assume to know, and guess at the meaning of it all.' He turns and stomps down the aisle and out, forcing the stoop from his reluctant spine, while the snake twining in his brain is more difficult to control.

'Are we the dead?' he continues. A softer rant. 'I sometimes think we are. Then every morning I get up outta bed and my old bones get to creaking and protesting, and they remind me - no, we are not dead. The dead don't feel the pains of the living. The dead don't feel nothing. That's what tells me we're still alive. To die is to find peace, to wake again is to know pain.'

A cross of roads burned into hard earth, the church-house squats at the central four-way intersection. Its guilt and shame the legacy of the same dead god who once conjured water into wine, then made drinking it a sin. The holy blood the preacher pours is sour juice, and pale flesh only a cracker to be crunched. Untruths are stored like embryos in old jars in dark cellars. The only beasts that roam Pleasant Valley are thirst and poverty.

A minor earth tremor, not as severe as before. Two years have passed. And five men have gone missing, a mere fraction of the town's unwholesome

dwellers, melting somewhere out in the surrounding hills, outside the strict reach of rules, into the place of hidden stills where 'moonshine' becomes their liberating medication. The women simmer their anger, as they always do at the ways of menfolk, translating their irritation into the vicious last retorts of crocheting, quilting, and praying or tut-tutting in furtive whispers to each other.

Two weeks pass. Then three of the men return, shamefaced. Tim, the surly elder, and the two Joab boys on their mules. At first, much too preoccupied to accept gracefully any routine venture at explanation. Wait. Then there are guarded assurances of forgiveness for being human, for mouthing myths no-one dares disdain. Yes, they'd gone further than it's wise to go. The other two - Edwin and Travers - do not return.

A sky spectacularly empurpled. Fired on moonshine. When she appeared. 'You boys here to investigate?' She holds a rifle, shifting it casually from one to the other.

'Investigate what? Maybe you're in need of a little investigation yo'self.'

Edwin ignores Travers's attempted banter. 'I know you. You're Kristen Sky. I've seen you in town. In the schoolhouse. You've got a homestead out here?'

Kristen almost looks him in the eye. Not quite. 'The river. It's gone dry. Thought maybe you were here to find out why?'

'We could. Seeing as we're here already, we could.'

Travers shrugs. 'Whatever it is, we'll never find out on empty bellies. Join us. Let's eat afore we all perish.'

She relaxes some. Squats down beside their fire. Accepts their bread and tears chunks of it into her mouth, as though she hasn't eaten in weeks. Beneath her wide-brim hat her black hair is long, but pulled and tied back. Her faded denims are frayed, but neatly stitched too. The rifle is old, but well-maintained and lethally functional.

'Are we accursed, or blessed?' he asks her, shoving loose strands of his blonde fringe aside.

'Why ask me? You think I got answers?'

'Haven't you ever wondered? We live on, but are we damned? Your grandfather said that.'

'My grandfather, he knew lots of old book-stuff. He wittered on about the knowing and the gradual loss of knowing. Tried to get me into reading his books. I liked the pictures. Magical pictures of people in fancy clothes. Women in long fairytale gowns. But I could never really take to reading them squiggly words. He cussed me out for being a lazy dullard and I just ducked off and went playing down by the creek. Maybe he was right and I was wrong. Too late now anyways.'

'Did he take his belt to you because of it?'

'No. He never hit me. Not ever. He was a good man.'

'I remember your grandfather, how he stood up in the church-house that day and called out the preacher's bluff.' He remembers her too, although she's

filled out pleasantly since those schoolhouse days. Always a little scared of her, always a little nervous.

'That was the last time we came into town,' she says softly.

'And now. He's gone?'

Kristen nods. 'Laid him in the ground. Just as we'd laid my folks in the ground. The dust is never satisfied. It just keeps encroaching like red pepper. As crops wither, close themselves tighter, like old men around a dying fire.'

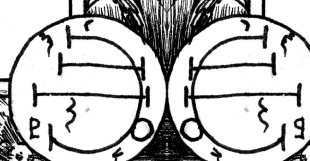
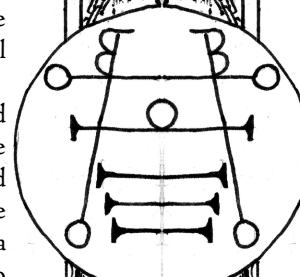
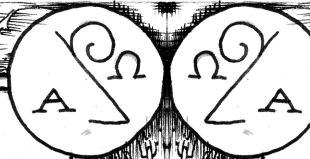
'If answers exist, you can wager we'll not find them here in Pleasant Valley...'

Almost without realizing it, they'd taken the decision, and gone further. She has a horse, they have a mule. At first a strong wind stirs the mat of coarse yellow grass, rippling it like the fur of some monstrous prowling beast, and they moving like fleas through the bristles along its spine, the sway of rough stalks setting up a conversation in high-pitched keening. When they come to it, the river is a black ink trickle. They follow it further upstream.

A dead tree has keeled over, ripping a mesh of diseased roots exposed from where it has toppled in dry shingle. Crashing down across the width of the narrow watercourse. The tremor maybe... or just rot. A dam of sick black mud silting up against it has done the rest. The trapped pool stinks foul, like something that died, with fat green flies and thunder-bugs in a circling hail around it.

They don't go back. By unvoiced consent they go further. Onward through long dark hours before reaching the mountain pass that defines the narrowing edge of the valley. They'd only a scant notion of the terrain beyond the ridge. They send Edwin up, climbing with loping ease. He reaches the crest of the ridge from where he can look back over the valley. Shaped like a boat, although he's never seen a boat. Broad at the centre, tapering at its two extremes. The township dead slap centre. A huddle of lean-to boxes from this distance. A few outlying homesteads battling the aridity. His entire world. Dying month on month. There must be more. There must be other communities, someplace, it stands to sense. We can't be the only people in the world.

He straddles along the ridge for some way until he comes to a high promontory. He scales it. Now he can see the unfriendly plain on the far side, stretching to the horizon, featureless and interminable. But the hint of green where it touches the lowering sky. Green means plants... doesn't it? He scrambles down. They manage to negotiate their way through the pass, and out the other side, descending like rotting pumpkins rolling down a hill. At first there's nothing but toxic burn-pits and thorn-belts, with a lot of rough country to cross. The way is uncomfortably bright beneath the freezing moon. Tortured hours drag by. It begins to drizzle, a freezing rain that turns to tight pellets of green snow, which turns to particles of painfully wind-driven grit. Then they're moving through cold grey hours into the ruins of a great city, with ghost-pale light illuminating dust-washed streets. An opium-dream of a city, eaten by time's slow rot.



'So why is the city inverted? Why is it upside down?'

'There were vast seismic ripples.' Edwin shrugs. His silence becomes sullen.

The long hush extends. Then she speaks with an unsettling softness to her voice. 'I sometimes dream that whatever imagined the world into being, got its mighty attention distracted onto something else, and it went on idly sketching out the pointless pattern of our lives subconsciously. Sure, it must be an awesome intricate web, from the depths of an enormously intricate mind. But conscious intent it had not, we are an afterthought.'

She still has the spooky ability to scare him. Half-fearful, half-numb with an attraction that has him mumble-stumbling his words. Accept this world of impossible absurdities, accept the incredible. Since the bright star fell to Earth many seasons ago, nothing but pestilence had followed. People and work-beasts laid low by storms of all-smothering dust, with cockroaches the only things thriving, them and the scurrying rodents who seem to multiply faster than other carrion. Scorched trees as ugly as a corpse's sores, ash filling the air we breathe. His brain seems choked with it.



'I fear we've fallen into despairful error.' Travers fumbles a moonshine flask from a pocket inside his jacket, and takes a deep swig from it. 'We should go back.'

'We go so far. No further. We go far enough to find out stuff, but not so far we can't find our way home. That sound about right?' The plan is simple enough. Simple, that is, to describe.

She laughs, and the sound seems so strange. Like tinkling bells. 'You've both got nitty-whisker beards already. You know that? We'll have to go back at some point, at least so you can shave.'

The closer they get, the more the green haze looks like a tree. But impossibly huge. He spits into the palms of his hands. Massages his hands together. And rubs his eyes. Leaving traces of gritty dust, tinged green. It's everywhere, suspended in the air so visibility is vague. But there, on the far horizon, yes, is what looks like a tree. A deeper green, a forking column that extends so high it vanishes into the cloud layer and beyond. There's no other possible destination, so they meander towards it.

Now, the only digital means fingers. When there were still TVs, before Grandfather Sky's time, there was talk of a shower of Seetee-matter meteors passing through the solar system from out of a waste of dead suns. Some of them plunge into the solar chromosphere, disrupting the sun's photosphere in scorching waves searing outwards with savage intensity. And one of them falls to Earth itself. It is here now, and its effect is everywhere.

When they wake, Travers has gone. He'd taken the horse and the gun. Edwin is minded to follow him back. This has gone on long enough. There's nothing to find out here. No truth. No revelation. No sanctuary. Just grit and pain. At least at home there are people. Even stupid people are better than

no people at all. When it comes down to it, when you've left the community you've always been part of, you feel lost. Even if it's a place like Hellfire Crossroads. You must take whatever comfort you can from the foreboding that the community must even now be dissolving into mutual recrimination, conflict, and probably bloodshed.

She stares him down. 'I never cared much for Travers anyway. I was always more drawn to you. Even in schoolhouse I wished you'd come across and talk, but you were always bashful.'

'Is that for real? I'm not bashful now.'

'I still see it in you. You've not changed that much. And I still kinda like what I see.'

He cannot deny her. He can deny her nothing. They lead the truculent mule, and head off towards the horizon.

Worry knots his mind. He knows they're in serious danger, yet can't define the threat. Startled by every rustle of the wind. He doesn't believe in ghosts, but can't reject the urgings of his senses.

'Getting edgy?'

'I'm scared stiff.' Edwin spits into the dust. His saliva is green. He's glad she can't see the way his hands are shaking.

'We are the flawed code in organic material, flesh and bone and later dead meat. That's what Grandfather said. Just monkeys with a language, crazy from out-of-control libido, rotten-full of apeshit. Infinity is a hoax, as is time and energy. Just when you think you've got a hold on its meaning, that everything comes from someplace with a purpose to it, it turns around and kicks you in the head.'

Closer now. Within its shadow. It is not a tree, of course. Although its genetic origins may have been derived from it, but warped by alien contaminations. It is emerald green. It is entwined like cord, but each twine thicker than a person's waist. It is deep-rooted in earth, yet the higher it climbs the thicker it becomes, and it climbs forever into the sky, branching out, through and above the silent tatters of the murky cloud layer. How high...? Beyond the very tenuous outer limits of the polluted atmosphere itself, out into cold space, drawing cellular life from solar radiation and the raw pulse of distant suns.

Gazing high he stumbles backwards over a dark snag of rock, protruding like a rotten tooth. He sprawls on the gritty soil. In the dim murk beyond he can vaguely discern the shape of other green columns. A forest of them.

'Look,' breathes Kristen softly, 'look.'

His eyes refocus closer. The multiply entwined trunks are rippling, as if flowing with a continual cascade of water. Except there are streams that undulate in and out downwards, and others interweaving their shimmering paths upwards, winding in and around, out of sight behind the thick trunk, only to re-emerge higher. A continual scintillation of movement.

His heart is thudding at sickening speed, as though hammering its way out through his ribcage. She grips his arm tightly, as though trying to crush it,

as though trying to wring truth from it.

The eternal cascade is not continuous. It is aggregate, granular, made up of individual and distinct particles. Each part moving separately, as a mass.

'Quiet,' she hisses. 'Let's get the hell out of here.'

Too late. As they watch, a shrapnel of pieces begin pinging away from the coursing tides, like agitated molecules... at first it's only a few, then a spew of dozens, until it's a hail, settling across the surface in a squirming green snow. Each particle is an insect the size of a coin, and shimmering with a metallic turquoise sheen. Skittering and massing in a deepening flow that covers and envelops everything. The flood of insect-things has located them, and is moving to attack. Edwin reels back, screaming hysterically, but soundless, as though in a vacuum. Yet the scream rises in intensity inside his head, its skewers piercing his skull again and again. He squirms, grasping and clawing, scrambling for some kind of sanctuary.

The explosion of senses isn't so much sound, as a sudden and agonizing increase of pressure against his eardrums. Then the pressure drops as abruptly. The air is thick with scuttling bugs, incisors snapping off his fingers, tearing away chunks of flesh. Sculpturing meat into new shapes.

With horrid clarity, he sees Kristen, sees her eyes, sees into her eyes and through into her seething mind. Sensing each vibration of her. Touching every nerve-stalk. Sharing her terror and feeding on it, turning it back into a mutual fear that unites them into a singularity of pain. The inside of her skull is a skittering mass of scuttling insect feet and quivering antenna.

She is no longer a cohesive entity. He is no longer cohesive. They're scattered across multitudes. He can see from inside her, out through her empty eye-sockets, out through the holes in her head, her voice speaking inside the echoes of his own skull, stripped to white gleaming bone. He tastes her memories. Her grandfather's touch. Burying her parents. Sinking her bare wriggling toes into the coolness of the creek. And other voices. Fused into their cellular intuitive race memory, igniting visions across the calling darkness, seeded across a freezing void of spiraling suns on the very brink of eternity. Giving it awareness.

Yet he's alive. Understanding that they're not dead, without knowing why.

'Tell me. Are we accursed, or blessed?' he whispers in a voice that ripples out across the mass, through the collective hive-mind which they've now become. 'We live on, but are we damned?'

'No,' she replies. In an inner dialogue. Because she's now part of him as he is part of her. Their every pulse. Their every secretion. Fused in a more perfect unity of souls than has ever existed. 'No... we are the blessed... now.'

Alerted, they shift their attention towards Pleasant Valley. The dirt landscape alive with their crawling immensity...

(Suggested from an image by Belinda Subraman)