

The Valhalla Draft

I stepped down off the bus on the lakefront. *Brunnhilde Buses* it announced along its side in bold lettering. The bus, rather the driver of the bus, a beautiful red haired women, had delivered me to the job site. The job? I wasn't sure what it was. What ever it was, it was over at the Valhalla Center, the vast glass front of the which reflected the sun rising over Lake Michigan. It was a big building, reminded me of the Milwaukee Art Center, but even more a modern airport terminal with tons of glass along the front. Even reflected in the window the sun rising was too bright to look at.

Job. Valhalla Center...I had been drafted? Maybe. It wasn't that I had been drafted to serve my country; more like drafted by a pro football team and, or, and this was more intriguing, some portion of my writing had been drafted to be published! Published in reality? I didn't dare think it. I didn't remember the bus ride, not a bit of it, except for the beautiful red haired driver. It, the bus ride, was the dream before the dream you remember.

As the bus pulled away I turned and made my way along the lakefront. About halfway I came upon an uncanny sight. At first I thought it was a bum leaning against a parking meter but as I got closer I saw it was something much more disturbing. A young man was leaning up against a parking meter along the lakefront side of the big parking lot. He was absolutely still and yet so startlingly real a part of me figured he was as a Dwayne Hanson polyester resin sculpture; an uncanny copy of a real person, a fat woman pushing a grocery cart, a janitor with a broom, put outside like this to startle people. In the big white space of an art gallery you mistake the sculpture for real, do a double-take, walk up close and see it's not real but a sculpture and that

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you have been fooled by a perfect simulacrum. For more than a couple of seconds I could not decide which I was seeing.

The young man leaning against the parking meter was absolutely still but...steaming in the morning sunlight as if his flesh had been hard frozen. As I got closer I felt a chill combined with repulsion -- *I don't want to be that person!* Yet I was perversely fascinated at the same time. Unable to overcome my curiosity I edged close enough to see that he looked, well, like me and there was what appeared to be a trickle of black, coagulated blood down his cheek coming, apparently, from a wound somewhere above his ear beneath his hair which was matted with it.

He was the antithesis of everything around him. His presence made this bright summer lakefront the coldest place in the universe. Suddenly it was the middle of February and the Valhalla Center behind me a vampiric black hole sucking all the warmth from the earth. Shrouds of ice cloaked the lampposts along the breakwater like Tibetan Buddhist monk candidates who failed to generate enough heat to warm the sheets and died. They formed a weird sculpture of nearly identical, frozen forms lining the lakefront putting the lie to the bright summer day. I expected screams were frozen inside. I didn't want to hear them! I hoped to never hear them in horror stories about acute depression, drug addiction or how many suicide attempts it took to die.

Deciding I did not want to know more about the guy, why he was there or why he had what appeared to be a fatal bullet wound in his head, I turned and made my way toward the Valhalla Center where a busload of fresh draftees was just climbing down off a bus.

I trailed in after them, sat near but not among them on the pew-like benches in the big reception room where we waited to be processed. There were huge, dark paintings on the wall.

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One featured a skeleton wielding a scythe with a real clock imbedded in its crotch. Over on the side walls were images less distinct. One seemed a Broadway Boogie-woogie angel...annunciating someone dog style.

“Do you mind if I sit here?”

I glanced up into the face of a rather pleasant looking woman who smelled...of gas, gas from an oven maybe. It was hard to see her features because of the nimbus of light around her face from the front of the building but she had pale, almost blue skin, soft eyes, bedraggled blonde hair, full purple lips and what looked like tear stains on her cheeks.

“Go ahead, help yourself,” I responded, gesturing to the seat beside me. The bench was probably fifty feet long so it’s not like there was a shortage of space. Despite this the woman sat a few feet from me. We remained silent for a while. In profile the nimbus around her face was a bit like the atmosphere around the earth seen from space. She looked up from her hands folded in her lap.

“Do you remember it?” She asked shyly, like it might be hurt if she spoke. She seemed very needy.

“Do I remember what?”

“How you...got here?” She looked in my direction, her eyes full of bewilderment. I hallucinated I could see words swirling in the light around her head and then a riderless horse galloping across a field.

“Not much,” I answered. “The last thing I remember was walking down a residential side street in Boston, I think, might have been Madison, Wisconsin or it might have been Chicago, the

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street where I grew up. I'm not sure, but then the something rushed me from the side. That's all. How about you?"

"The last thing I remember is the black cloud shoving me from behind, shoving me so hard there was no way I could stop it or resist. I think it was depression, I think; I was really feeling depressed, you know?"

"Maybe," I said, not at all sure I knew what she was talking about but trying to see if what she was saying related to my job. "What happened then, after being...shoved from behind?"

"I tried to hide!" She exclaimed. "Tried to hide by crawling into the snow cave in the kitchen. I had stuffed rags under the door. I don't remember why. That's it. Not much, is it?" she looked my way with a pained smile.

Just then Anubis in fatigues marched into the room, ordered us to our feet, "Follow me," he ordered, turned on his heels and strode from the room for the elevators, "for uptake." The puzzled woman who smelled like gas accompanied me but we said no more to each other.

As we gathered in front of the elevator I noticed the painting on the doors, a flensing of the Satyr, Marsyus, by the god Apollo, except it wasn't the famous faun of the legend being skinned alive by god of music; it was the woman who had just been sitting beside me in the entry way of the draft center.

According to what I knew about the story, Marsyus had challenged Apollo to a music contest to be judged by the Muses, his nine female channels. Marsyas would play his pipe and Apollo his lyre. The god won, of course, seeing as he owned the judges. According to the rules set before the contest the winner could do anything to the loser. Hence, Apollo "flensed," skinned the satyr alive. A little lesson in hubris.

In other versions it was Apollo who challenged the satyr because jealous of his abilities with the pipes; but this was not, of course, the correct protocol -- only mortals could display hubris. Deities were above such things.

Most telling was the Roman version in which Marsyas was the inventor of augury and a proponent of free speech -- the philosophical notion of "speaking truth to power," associated with demonstrations of the plebs, or common people. This could certainly explain why the god would not tolerate such plebeian "music." Just then the elevator doors whooshed open, parting the painting and we trooped on board.

We rocketed up for some time, finally the elevator slowed, stopped and we stumbled out into a huge green room, cold and clammy as the sanctuary of a medieval cathedral. It was filled with desks and examining stations where doctors and therapists waited to do our uptake work. First, however, we had to pass through the security device, seven doors or gates shaped like pointed arches. From the whispered comments of draftees in line I understood the gates comprised a "dream catcher." Between the curving sides of bleached bone was complete blackness. Again, from what I gathered this blackness was supposed to represent the holiest, highest things, the view, as it were, up the Virgin Mary's birth canal which no mere mortal could possibly penetrate. One by one the candidates stepped into that impenetrable blackness and disappeared.

My heart pounded as I approached the uncanny portal. Finally, it was my turn. I hesitated, then stepped into the blackness like the Holy Fool stepping off the cliff. As I stepped through a terrible beep went off.

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Next thing I knew I was being dragged down what appeared to be a hospital hall as long as the great hall hung with French paintings in the Louvre by a Degas ballerina with a buzzard's head and beak.

“You have an appointment with Dr. Hymn,” the ballerina said by way of explanation. Job? Was this part of my job?

I had no idea where the other draftees had gone, only that it was elsewhere -- that something about me had set off the alarm and singled me out.

On our way down the hall we passed a tableaux that caught, riveted my attention though my escort tried to drag me rapidly past. A black, abstract expressionist angel, wings slashed in with violent brush strokes was...taking, raping a naked woman...or was it a man? from behind on top of a table about the size of a boxing ring or wrestling mat. The square of the ring was surrounded by a crowd of snarling, gaping, cawing creatures fresh from some Goya Black Sabbath painting. I tried to understand the tableaux as we passed but was dragged so violently I only caught a glimpse.

Further down the hall we turned left. In front of me stood the front door of my childhood house in Chicago. Two huge sides of beef dripping red and green putrescence framed the door. The buzzard ballerina led me straight though opening the door as we went. I ducked expecting the rotting flesh to slather me, but emerged unsullied into a cubicle where my guide shoved me roughly down into a wooden chair suitable for a second grade student, then turned and left.

The room was small, bare, a set of metal shelves on the back wall. Immediately in front of me was a large metal desk strewn with papers. Incongruously, a small balance scale sat on the

left side of it. Dr. Hymn, apparently, sat with his back turned to me in a swivel chair behind the desk.

I flinched when he turned expecting Pope Innocent X, cadaver teeth grinning. Instead, it was an extravagantly beautiful man in a Greek toga in the chair before me, one of the most beautiful men I had ever seen.

Although he did not introduce himself the sign on his desks proclaimed him as “Dr. Hymn.” Facing me, he leaned back, steepled his fingers above his lap and asked in a weirdly musical voice: “Can you still feel your Hercules?”

“Can I what?” I asked, perplexed.

“A simple question. Can you still feel your Hercules?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered not having the slightest idea what he was asking, “as far as I know, no.”

“Okay,” Dr. Hymn replied, “how about the Jacob’s Ladder, can you still see it? You claim in one of your writings,” he jabbed at the fan of manuscripts spread across his desk, “that you can see it. Not only can you see it, you claim you can stop the Muses if you feel like it!”

“Well, yes, you’re right, I have claimed that. I guess I can see the Jacob’s Ladder then, and you’re right, I have wrestled negative inspirations, the kind that possessed Hercules to kill his wife, or those for war or social unrest, to keep them from reaching their destinations -- Bosnia, Kosovo, the ghetto, the heart of some potential school shooter. If that is what you mean I guess I do still feel my Hercules.”

“Did you write this?” Hymn, his beautiful face marred slightly by distaste, picked up a small red book, more a sheaf of stapled pages and began to read:

“I feel like doom incarnate in the morning. The angel or agency of death is in me, forcing me from behind. This starts when I go down to the goat barn to feed the goats. The gloom, the complete dark in the middle of the day is so awful I feel I will die or am dead. The cloud, the awful black cloud of His Will, of... Zeus or Jehovah in the goat barn is like a rapist thunderstorm. It is a chilling, absolutely real, metaphysical force I can feel like cold metal. It is a literal, phenomenal force—the concentration of it here so great, so focused, it has reached the physical manifestation level.

When I am in the goat barn, Mab and Daisy munching their grain, it is in the room, a palpable darkness near the ceiling. I can hear it as well as feel it, meaning the force of its Will is up my brain. It wants me to “kill for it” to prove that I believe in immortality. The reality of this voice in my head, like a voice hearing schizophrenic’s hallucination, is so chilling, so absolutely real, so not me, I vomit acid coffee into the straw and frozen goat berries.

These are not “talons in the brain” as Kazantzakis described them, this is a Mississippi of doom, of horrible dark inspiration channeled directly into me. The sheer, oppressive power of it lying on top of me, like a thunderhead of Muses on Io, can force me to escape it, get out of its way, or more frightening do what it orders. The reality of what Abraham felt when ordered to sacrifice Isaac sits in my mind like a ten thousand ton block of fright. Is that me? Are these awful, mind bending feelings mine? Suicide or obey.

I cower before the sheer hideous reality of it and ask it what it wants?

“Sacrifice yourself for me!” its earthquake reply.

I can feel myself forced against my will to do this like some kind of robot. Face pale as death, I see myself grab the ax from the chunk of oak in front of the house, my wife’s horrified face as I lift the ax to bring it down on my daughter’s skull. This is so awful, so unspeakable it is unbearable.

Back twisted into paroxysms of hate I force, physically force this awful doom cloud away. It is trying to make me to do things against my will. I scream at it in my mind that *I will never do these things for it!* I walk down the snowy driveway raging that *I will never submit! That it can pursue me through ten thousand lifetimes and I will never submit to its will, ever, that I am . . . stronger.* With that I get it in a full nelson and put it on its back. I don’t even have to count three seconds; it was over, I had pinned it.”

Face dripping with pity, contempt, Dr. Hymn looked up. “Did you write . . . that contemptible, psychotic drivel!”

“Yes,” I admitted. This description of the black mood of the god storm that descended upon me many years ago always got me in trouble. For me it was a great victory, maybe the

greatest of my life. I had, I felt, wrestled the same “angel” Jacob wrestled for control of the night, wrestled the same force that possessed Abraham and, unlike them, had won, not been forced to take orders from “god.” I had defeated the awful Dark Muse that had possessed Hercules turning him into a family annihilator, the guilt slave of Hera, the “goddess” who sent the murderous spell.

Most people did not see it that way. Most people, “Muggles,” thought, “mental illness,” stopped there.

I tried to put Dr. Hymn’s mind at ease.

“I know this is an uncomfortable thing to read, but, don’t you see, nothing happened! I did not do it. That’s the point. Whether you think I’m crazy or you see what I’m talking about, the point is, I won!”

“That’s the problem, imbecile!” he snarled, “You won! You weren’t supposed to win! You were supposed to lose! Plath lost, Sexton lost, everybody loses—no one is stronger than the Dark Side of...me, no one, including you! You were supposed to lose. You were supposed commit the crime! Don’t you understand obedience, absolute obedience is the point?”

“But, I didn’t do it! I’ll never do it. No one, no force, no god cloud should be able to force us to do its bidding! Don’t you see? I discovered it wasn’t me! It was a separate force, a metaphysical force that can afflict people and force them...”

“You know what that means!” Hymn interrupted leaning forward, bringing his beautiful, lyre stroking hands down on his desk, face flushed purple. “You know what that means you interfering little son-of-a-bitch! It means you’re fucking around with history! With my Muses! It means you’re meddling in divine business. It means you’re throwing a monkey wrench into

The Plan. Are you going to stop?” Mussolini’s face, Stalin’s face, Hitler’s face passed through the beautiful features, eyes narrowed with rage, lips flecked with spittle.

Now I was beginning to understand why I was in this place! Why I was a ‘bad’ dream, what the job was. I suddenly remembered the poor frozen guy leaning up against the parking meter. Maybe I had been wrong about him?

“I think the job I was doing was important,” I offered. “Important so Prometheans can govern the planet, end the possession of people, the creation of monsters.”

Had I just said that? That was like...the dead guy down there admitting things that would ruin his chances to get into...well, goddammit! Heaven!

“Enough! Enough of your pop mythology, enough of your Orpheus and Eurydice shit, enough of your fucking dreams!” Hymn raged. “There are ways of dealing with these infractions.” The voice was cold, chilling. Hymn stopped, considered for a moment, then went on, “I’ll give you one more chance. Here, look at this.”

He pushed the small scale off to the side of his desk over toward the middle. It was an old-style balance scale with two silver pans on either side. Hymn extracted a copy of a poem, a hymn to Him, apparently, from a drawer in his desk and put it into the pan on my right.

“This is a feather of Maat,” he explained placing the poem across the pan. “It represents Divine Law. In your case it represents the Rainbow Covenant and relates to what can be seen or not seen, what can be seen in dreams or not, what can be understood about what you see and what is forbidden, and this,” Hymn continued picking up one of my manuscripts on the desk, placing it in the pan to my left, “is your heart. It represents the thoughts and acts of your heart

and soul. It must not weigh more than the feather of Maat. Otherwise your heart will be fed to the Devourer of Hearts.”

“This heart,” he continued, keeping the pans in balance with his fingers, “is a writing of yours called, *Sophia’s Choice*, about how the University, for Christ’s sake, chooses which knowledge, which child to raise into the light and which knowledge, which child should be to be sent to the dark, expelled, eliminated because it is, he is,” Hymn searched in his mind for the right word, “forbidden!”

“Do you deny writing this? Do you deny these are the thoughts of your heart, your soul? Do you deny seeing these things below the Rainbow Covenant, the barrier put there specifically to keep people like you from interfering with things you do not understand?” The tone was accusatory and badgering. Hymn’s chin jutted out and a strand of dry saliva hinged in the corner of his mouth. I could not take my eyes off of it because it was so...ugly.

“No, I do not deny saying those things. They are the thoughts of my heart.” I was remembering things I thought I had forgotten. I was remembering things I thought had been ignored as...unimportant, unpublishable, too far out to be worthy of attention.

“Then look!”

Hymn removed his hand from the pans and the one holding my manuscript clunked down as if it held the cylinder block of a V-8 engine. Hymn stared at it triumphantly like Mr. Wizard after performing a successful scientific experiment on TV.

“You do not deny it?” He asked.

“No, I do not deny it,” I replied, “how could I?”

“Then, you leave me no choice.”

Hymn turned to the shelves behind him that now writhed with maggots of red words, the ones that had invaded my room as a child, and reached up to the top shelf for a rectangular object shrouded completely by a black cloth. There was a wire handle jutting up from the top. Hymn lifted this object, turned and placed it on the desk before him. When it was sitting on the desk in front of me I could hear sounds like some small animal scrabbling inside it.

“What is that?” I asked feeling a huge swoop of fear.

“You’ll see,” Hymn answered placing his hands on either side of the cage. The scrabbling grew silent.

“On the desk in front of you, you will find a confession.” He gave me a chance to look. Sure enough there was an official looking form labeled **Confession** which I dutifully picked up.

“This is a standard form,” Hymn continued, a thread of bureaucratize in his melodious voice. “All you have to do is sign it and you will have...this!”

He pressed a recessed button in his desk. The entire wall to my right transluded. Through the wall I could see the campus of my old high school, the “fields of glory” where I had been a star athlete in three sports. I did not quite understand my point of view, where I was seeing this from. From behind the football stadium I concluded. Sure enough I heard the roar from the home side. Someone must have caught a pass, made a first down or sacked the opposing quarterback. A soft bullet of nostalgia tore through me.

“Is that what it looks like?” I asked.

“What? What what looks like?”

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“Heaven,” I replied.

“Yes,” he said, “what did you expect? Clouds, mighty pillars, Norse deities wielding hammers?”

“And...Valhalla has drafted me?”

“That’s correct. There’s just the matter before you. You must sign the confession and then you have this,” he pointed into the scene, “Hell, you can be there, fight for our side, God’s side.”

“And, what am I confessing to?” I inquired, picking up the document, trying to scan it. I was half prepared to sign. My wrestling match with the doom cloud, my heroic wife, my gorgeous children all seemed like unbearable weight. Maybe if I signed I could...forget? Feel joyous and light for once!

“Oh, the usual things. That these things you have seen in your dreams are delusions, hallucinations; that you have been mentally ill or unstable all your adult life, thus rendering all your writings, all these...ravings those of a mentally ill person like Ms Plath!” He pointed to the manuscripts on the desk. “That the fantastic claims contained in them of possessing special powers to govern the weather, influence history or politics deriving from Orpheus or Prometheus are the inflationary delusions of a sick and troubled mind. That all your creations are bogus, all your dreams the stuff of a lonely, degenerate man—a failure. That’s the gist of it.” Hymn smirked, his smile completely and absolutely inappropriate.

I felt my willingness to sign this...peace treaty sink.

“You renounce your precious soul, revealed in all its sick glory in your writings, worthless and we’ll declare peace with you, give you your life back sans all this Brunnhilde bilge, with a chance to fight for the right side, Valhalla’s side, Heaven’s side, our side, against your old self. Do

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this, lead us through the Magic Fire of Time and you'll never have to see what's in here," he tapped his fingers on the cloaked box on the desk, the scrabbling began as he did.

"What kind of life would that be?" I exclaimed, "I might as well be that poor dead guy leaning up against the parking meter."

Suddenly I remember something. I remembered the dark form rushing me from an alley to the left as I was making my way along that Boston Street on Christmas Eve.

"What kind of life would that be?" Hymn answered. "Like you had when you were a mental patient. Like you had when you were putting your sick shoulder to the wheel raising us to the top! Like you had when you went from therapist to therapist, group to group, pill to pill. Like you had before you...got well and began to see clearly. That is the life you will have."

It was a dark angel that rushed me from the left with revolver raised. Bang! Then I was getting off the bus. The frozen dead guy down there was my...vehicle, my dead body, how I'd come here.

"No. No, I will not sign this!" I began to rise from the tiny chair. Traitorous tears threatened to trickle down my cheeks. "I would never sign this . . . sell my soul in a million years!" I tore the confession in half and let the pieces flutter to the floor.

"Is that your final decision?"

"Yes," I answered. The scene through the wall winked out.

"In that case," Hymn said coldly, "I'm afraid I have to do this!"

All in one motion he pulled the cloth away and opened the cage beneath it. As if stricken by a nightmare where you are paralyzed, cannot scream, cannot breathe, I froze half way out of the chair.

I barely had time to register the bat wings and velociraptor jaws of the dream eater as it hopped up to the edge of the cage and prepared to fly at my face.

“Meet the Devourer of Hearts!” Hymn gloated gleefully waiting for the thing to fly at me and start in on my face...but it didn’t, it just sat there in the cage door looking first at me and then back at Hymn as if deciding something. Suddenly, I had an idea what was happening.

“I told you, Hymn, I won. I beat you that day in the goat barn!”

The dream eater made its way to the top of the cage where it turned and concentrated on Hymn.

“Sick him, get him, eat him alive!” Hymn raged trying to shoo the little monster my direction.

“Beat you, beat the Williwaw, beat God’s Dark Side, the Dark Muses, the Muse of Mental Illness.”

The dream eater leapt from the top of the cage toward Hymn’s face. He screamed, tried to fend it off but went down to the floor in a cloud of blood with his beautiful cheek half gone and the velociraptor teeth tearing at his left eye. I did nothing to stop it.

Instead I got casually up and left Hymn’s office. There was lots of work to be done up here. Part of my job, I guess.