

There's a temple of suffering. It shines off in the distance, between rapid-fire deaths, turning agony into protein. You're not drawn towards it, exactly. You grow into it. It's a full semester's worth of Operative Hellology lectures in an instant, and you barely have time to wonder if you should take notes before the wretchedness of billions of days' honest work catches up with you.

Beauty glimmers in the viscera. You start with one heart, torn dripping from its cage. The soul may or may not have come with. Entrails flow through fingers you didn't know you had. Fingers everywhere.

You assemble yourself from broken cow horns, cartilage and screams. You build a scaffolding around the 'you' inside you, a fortress made out of the slurry of chickens you climbed through on your way out of the grinder.

The brains of the first worker you see make for a fine glue to hold it all together, a grotesque approximation of a life.

Or so you'd say, if you hadn't already emerged out of grotesque, if a temple to grotesqueness hadn't beckoned you into this shell.

Or so you'd say, if you could speak.

Or so you'd say, if you had a concept of what speech is.

Or so you'd say, if you had the faintest inkling of historical linguistics or the comparative method.

The temple of suffering whispers in your ear.

You realise humans can speak.

You speak.

It doesn't make much of an impression on the overalls around you.

Turns out there's skin and internal organs and constellations of souls inside those overalls.

Their fright goes down your throat like pureed intestines.

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When Owen got back to his dorm, he found a guy with a buzz cut and a lean face stood next to the ancient walls, holding a clipboard in his hands. His first instinct was annoyance. One of the reasons he'd settled on this college was the lack of tourists. Swarms of them descended on Oxford all year round, but his alma mater didn't open its gates for a few extra quid from camera-wielding Chinese. Even less so in the middle of the night.

The man wore a battered leather jacket, stained with deep, rusty-crimson splotches Owen didn't want to inspect too closely. The smell of iron hung on the night air, accompanied by a whiff of manure.

Owen sent him the most scathing look he could manage after a long night crawling pubs with his friends. Leather Guy answered with a big, toothy, shit-eating grin.

"Hey, mate! D'you have a few minutes? I'd like to tell you about the important work Greenpeace does in—"

"It's three o'clock in the morning. Fuck off."

"Two fifty-one twenty-six, actually." Both the smugness and the obnoxious Northern accent scraped against Owen's alcohol-soaked nerves.

The man didn't move, but his face and voice turned thoughtful. "It's pretty funny, isn't it? Here you run around for thousands of years, fretting about your little fiery Abrahamic afterlife. And then you go secular, and I like that, by the way, that's pretty clever, in a dumb hold my beer sort of way, and then you go and create the damn thing anyway so you can have cheap chicken breasts. It'd be brilliant, if I didn't have to live it. Oh, and you don't wanna take a step back, trust me."

The man made a joke of Owen's personal space. He stood so close every stump of stubble on his cheeks became distinct.

Feral light lurked in the man's eyes, encased in a tomb of bone. Owen felt the first stirrings of fear through the haze of drink.

"You're not really from Greenpeace."

"Probably not, no. Good thing we established that, isn't it?" He patted Owen's shoulder, like he was a child.

The afterglow of the alcohol gave him courage. "Why're you hassling *me*, anyway? I'm a vegetarian."

"Course you are. Of course. That makes it even better."

Owen made a break for it. He threw himself through the doorway and slammed the bolt.

Just as his breath and heart rate fell back to normal, he found the guy sitting on the stairs, cross-legged, still smiling. He gave a little wave when he noticed Owen climbing the steps.

"Hello! As I was sayin'—"

"How the fuck did you get here?"

The man made a series of 'tsk' noises. "You lot. Always askin' the dull questions. Excuse me, princess, but who gives a damn? Anyway, you're studyin' comparative religion, yeah? Buddhist philosophy? Did you get to Operative Hellology yet?"

“You need to leave—”

“Sorry, I’m just dyin’ for a smoke here, d’you mind?”

The man broke off Owen’s ring finger at the second joint with an awful snap. The world hung in silence, then erupted in a white-hot mist of pain.

“Thanks, mate,” the man said, grin back in place. A lighter emerged from one of his jacket pockets in a lazy arc, and he gave the dripping finger a crown of flame. While Owen screamed, the man took several long puffs from the burning digit, then exhaled a hazy replica of a Victorian factory.

“Aah, that hits the spot, doesn’t it? Dark satanic mills indeed. That guy knew what he was talking about—sorry, would you mind not screamin’ while I’m tryin’ to enjoy a spot of social criticism?”

“You’re a maniac! I’m gonna...you’re, I’ll...”

“Careful,” the man said, as cheerful as ever. “Blood loss. Nasty stuff.” He kicked Owen’s legs out from under him. “Can’t have you checkin’ out yet. We’re going on an adventure, you and I.”

He knelt down, next to the young man writhing in his own piss and blood. “We’re going inwards. Down. All the fucking way.” One more puff on the finger, before he threw it into the stairwell. His face went thoughtful again. “D’you know what? Lots of planets have a hell. Sure. But I think you lot might be in the runnin’ for the worst.”

#

There was a time when we knew how to act like a river. It’s not hard. We weren’t ever the same, but we were water. We replaced ourself. Chains of molecules, an endless dance with the atmosphere.

We run with all sorts, now. Our veins swell with effluent on every plane. When the sun evaporates us, it flinches to look at us. We shouldn’t be both ends of the chain, but we are.

We used to flow by academies. By academic fiat, we’ve had to take more modules in Operative Hellology than any river should. Top marks, for all the good it did us.

We know a thing or two about the care and feeding of hells. Our currents bring them sustenance and souls. Even hells need their bread.

We’ve become a hell. Wicked people die and circulate through us.

Hells have to be maintained. All the textbooks say so. Our professors told us they have to be actively fought for. We violate to allow them to violate.

We burn with nitrogen. We shimmer with potassium. Phosphorus brightens every hell. Conventional wisdom says the devil prefers brimstone, but take it from us, he'll settle for phosphorus.

We'll settle for we'll settle. When operating a hell, there's a lot of settling involved.

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The young man's down to a single toe and a heartbeat. Blood glistens on the grass, while the stench of meat and preservatives overlays the sweet smell of summer England. Village greens. Tea. Cosy mysteries. Yeah, this whole thing is one big fuckin' cosy mystery, all right.

The young man died at some point. Well, that's bloody inconsiderate of him. How long have you been dragging his corpse along? How long have you been dragging everybody's corpse along?

Teeming hordes of chickens, ground up for the crime of being born roosters. You've been every one of them.

"Oi," you say, slapping the corpse. "What the fuck d'you think you're doin'?"

No response.

If only you were a real doctor.

Maybe if you'd gotten your shots, like a good boy.

Maybe if you'd dropped out instead of sucking it up and finishing that module in Operative Hellology.

Your life would have taken a different turn if you'd had no idea how to create a hell. Why do they even teach that stuff, in public universities?

You reach through the young man's chest, burrowing past bone and dangling tubes, and tickle his heart.

Still dead, then.

Fine.

Fuckin' fine.

"Fantastic," you say under your breath.

You pop his head off. It comes off easily, like it's meant to go that way, smooth as one of the machines that birthed you. The eyes are long gone. Brain matter stares back at you through the sockets.

"D'you know about that one guy, like from Norse mythology? He killed this giant, because killing giants is kind of what modernity does, only this was pre-modernity, wasn't it,

unless you wanna be all fancy and say all of time exists at once, and there's some truth to that, actually, and fuck I kind of forgot where I was goin' with this."

The fumes make you light-headed. Sometimes it feels like you're the only light head in this heavy-headed universe. Maybe a drink would help. You crouch down to the riverbank, make a pool with your hands and take a sip of yourself. A builder's tea of microplastics graces your lips. Not much, but it shuts up the petroleum addiction for a few while you focus.

A toothy grin turns your face demented. “Oh, yeah. That’s right. This guy, he kills this giant, yeah? And the giant, he knows everythin’, about everythin’, ‘cause he was smart enough to have rich parents and went to Eton and had an actual decent education or somethin’. Where was I? Right, the guy kills him, but then he takes his head, and he talks to it, ‘cause the head still knows everythin’. Kind of like you, except, y’know, alive and all-knowing.”

With more tenderness than you thought yourself capable of, you place the head on the grass next to the bank. People worked horses to death here once, pulling barges. Which means they worked you to death, too.

You kind of miss being worked to death. It's miserable, sure, but it's not personal. It's not deeply profane, like going through an industrial grinder a few billion times. Cruelty never got to you. It's the clinical aspect to it all that sets you off, that makes one horror stand out in relief before they all blend together into a shadowy rainbow of greys and blacks and bland.

[illegible]

thousand cuts.

“So not like you at all, then, I guess,” you tell the head. “You gonna tell me anythin’ useful? No?”

The head wisely keeps its mouth shut.

When you give it a good kick, it sails through the air. You'd like to think it's pretending to breathe as the air rushes through its ruined oesophagus. Wishful thinking was never your strong suit, though.

It hits the water and dissolves. So much for Detective Fuckin' Inspector Cosely D. Rosegarden and his earnest assistant getting to the bottom of this murder. Book burnings should never have gone out of style.

To set up a hell, you need a fire. That's like Operative Hellology 101, first day of class type stuff.

With a grin on your face and blood on your everything, you head for the nearest bookstore with a crime section.

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There's a temple of suffering. It sparkles at the bottom of us, shining in between the diluted anti-depressants and the fertiliser runoff. We dive into ourself, washing off the blood, drawing lungfuls of new blood. If water could bleed, we'd bleed out.

A fresh hell crackles and consumes along the riverbank. Proof that you don't need a PhD in Operative Hellology to light up the atmosphere with misery, in spite of what all the job listings say. Billions of lives and thousands of species in student loans, but we're still making ends meet serving manure-slurry espressos.

The public sector has an insatiable appetite for hells, they said.

We swim down and away, with the blaze at our back. The temple of suffering flows around us. It's supposed to be the other way around. Flowing is our game, but then flowing became old hat. It's all about linear curves now.

A sustainable hell needs some hope. You can't feed an army of devils, or the devil himself, on bad prose and ruined ecosystems and implausible English villages where authors romanticise brutal crime and twelve-year-olds sewing shoes in factories for other twelve-year-olds and mysteries that always wrap up in a satisfying bow and mad cow disease alone. We have some slight expertise here. We wrote our master's thesis on this, and it was a rather good one, actually. See (Wye 2022).

We argued that a forever hell gives its inmates a reason to keep living. Either that, or it declares them not to be sapient.

We've been through the grinder enough times to know we're sapient. We've been worked to death enough times to know we feel.

Cost-cutting meant our recommendations went ignored. Who cares about building a beautiful hell, when you have next quarter's profits to consider?

If we have to live in a hell, if we have to *be* a hell, we'd just like it to be a beautiful hell. Is that too much to ask?

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Bibliography

River Wye, the

2022 *The Devil's Timepiece: The performance of fractal hells along the fault line between intentions and expectations, as seen from the perspective of an actor both embedded in and deeply disenfranchised from the conventional hell construction industry*. Master's thesis in Operative Hellology, every fucking university in the entire fucking country, and probably the world too