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# The FATE of HUMANITY in VERSE

FRANK ROGACZEWSKI

Straight from the near-west suburbs of Sansburgland, Frank Rogaczewski explodes the less than brave new world we've unfortunately arrived at. *The Fate of Humanity in Verse* sears through the vast gaps of capitalism and pop culture in multi-page paragraphs of pure invention. It is quite simply to borrow two of Rogaczewski's titles, an "Else Poetica" for "The Day They Outsourced America."

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Michael Anania

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## Arse Poetica

I've got this thing about space and place, where atoms are doing nothing but falling straight down. Nothing else happens because there is nothing else—no life, of course, so, on the bright side, no death. Just atoms falling straight down, until one of them—some rebel, some smarty-pants communist—swerves. This is just about where, if you could get them together in the same place at the same time, Lucretius and Heraclitus might agree—if they could understand each other, languages disinclinating themselves from one another and all. Anyway, Lucretius thinks this change (a *clinamen*, he calls it—sounds sexier than it is) causes everything and Heraclitus thinks change is everything. We might just jump in at this point and say our world swerves its way into being, atoms of all different kinds of elements compounding and complexifying and then disintegrating back into sub-atomic particles including three flavors of neutrinos—electron, muon, and tau—with the electron neutrinos transforming their flavor as they hurl toward our planet from the sun. Stick out your tongue and you'll see what I mean. Before you can say *clinamen*—actually, it sounds even sexier than I thought—the world is filled with green alligators and long-necked geese, the humpty-backed camels and the chimpanzees, the cats and rats and elephants, and Noah's trying to get them all two by two on the bus before God rides by in his awesome cosmological street sweeper. "Throwing out the riff with the raffwater," God calls it. Fast forward a bit from the days when Heraclitus and Lucretius are hawking their theories

infernal design? And the *c* should be silent not only for the sake of the connection with the word that pertains to gods of the underworld, but also because *ka-TOO-loo* sounds like something you answer with a *gesundheit*. Now that I think about it, the *c* in *Caucasian* should probably be silent too. The remaining *awk* sound of the first syllable would closely relate the supposed racial identity to the word *awkward*, which would disentangle the designation from mythological origins and more firmly tie it to the realistic assessment of these people's dancing. I walk up the alley to my own yard, and, searching for my keys, notice the four dogs next door have all crumbled into gray, stinky powder. I turn myself around, thinking, "Why that low-down, dirty, abysmal, gibbering, gelatinous, cephalopod-headed, cyclopean deity! Even those poets who don't come from Harvard have been trained or influenced by those who do, haven't they?" Past the backyard gardens of overgrown tomatoes, basil and rutabagas that smell like exudate off a real case of gingivitis, down lanes alongside the houses fronted by gray, white and blue American flags, all the while avoiding the occasional noisome meteorite winging by my noggin, all the way to the Starry Wisdom Tavern, where I sit myself down between Julius Caesar and a six-foot raccoon who turns to me and demands, "Aren't you the guy with the dog I saw pissing on my lawn?" On the jukebox the Harvard Alumni Choir chant the return of the Great Cthulhu, but cosmic conspiracy or no cosmic conspiracy, I'm quick to defend Sammy: "Listen, Bud, that's the parkway; it's not your fucking property."

on the streets of Greece and Rome, respectively if only semi-respectfully, and you've got William Carlos Williams asking how he can make himself a mirror for this modernity. See, there's a space and a place for everything. But rather than a mirror, I'd like to be a geodesic sphere eighteen meters in diameter containing over 9,500 photomultiplier tubes surrounding an acrylic sphere housing over 1,000 tons of heavy water (that is, water to which a neutron's been added to each hydrogen atom). That's right, I want to make myself a neutrino detector for this postmodernity. We're talking poetics here. Eros is a rose is a rose. Have I got you fired up yet? Well, hold on to your phlogiston, gentlemen; it's going to be a hot time in the old town tonight. For the very idea of everything beginning with atoms simply falling through space until something just happened went out the window a long time ago. Now we've got the Big Bang, and I don't mean that in the defenestrationist sense of the term, but rather the cosmological. Still, Heraclitus would argue, it's something other than an ignis fatuus to conceive of nature as change. Lucretius would comment that the falling atoms couldn't have gone out the window because space and place were as yet unoccupied by any windows, window frames, or window curtains. Heraclitus would take a deep breath, bring to mind calming images of rusty nails, rotting meat, burning parchments upon which were written *De Rerum Natura*, and launch himself into the old joke (which he never tells the same way twice because he knows everyone's heard this one before) about the elderly woman, who, in need of aspirins, heads out to the shopping mall. A sore is eros is a rose by any other name would smell like feet after having twice stepped in the same old stinky river, heavily

polluted in the process of producing photomultiplier tubes. And did you know particle physicists say that protons are not spherical after all but shaped more like sausages or drumsticks or just about anything you cook over a fire? So anyway, the old woman takes the bus to the mall, visits the book store, the grocery, the pharmacy, the container store, and the pet food place. She notices the movie marquee as she passes by, untempted due to the lack of romantic comedies—and I can't say I blame her for swerving away from her choices between this generation's return to the Alamo, the latest filmic meditation on "the Lost Cause," or *Matrix VI*, in which the audience learns that they are watching something that's not real. The old woman—let's call her Clementine—returns to the bus stop, waits and waits, thinking all the time that, in her estimation, the remaining resonance from the Big Bang always smelled like chicken-flavored vegetarian sausages. Lucretius arrives at the bus stop and asks her whether she doesn't think an entirely better explanation is the *clinamen*. She smacks him right upside the head for his use of dirty language, and Lucretius defends himself: "Did I say anything about a cavern in a canyon? Did I so much as mention excavating for a mine?" She smacks him again, this time with her purse, weighted down with fool's gold. The bus arrives and she boards. She sits near the rear, all the while consoling herself from philosophical anxiety by staring out the window, watching the world flitter by—the horizontal version of the original fall. Of matter I mean. Oh, my darling Clementine, then you remember that you forgot what you set out to purchase in the first place. "My aspirins! My aspirins!" And Noah the bus driver, who's heard it all before, shouts back, "I'm behind schedule, lady. You'll just

have to hang it out the window." Get it? She hankers after an over-the-counter pharmaceutical and he thinks her butt's on fire. The word changes from the time it leaves her mouth to the time it reaches his ear, just as many words in the language we use have swerved from their earlier incarnations, me wyf. There is no Big Bang in human communication. But wait a minute! That's not a woman; that's old Darryl N. Clementine entertaining the riff-raff by standing up on one of the rear seats and properly positioning himself. And the idea of that flaming *derrière* hanging out the bus window, veering in and out of traffic, sweeping ever farther from our view: this is the source of poetic vision and insight.

## Gratia, Poeta!

Well, that settles it. I looked up her website and there's not one mention of Charisma Carpenter, who plays the role of Cordelia on the TV show *Angel*, being the daughter of John Carpenter (director of *Vampires*, *Ghosts of Mars*, *Prince of Darkness*, the original *Halloween*, and the remake of *The Thing*). This means the greatest father/daughter horror team of all time existed only in my *imagination*, a word for a concept that has pretty much always been with us poets, albeit in a somewhat ambiguous relationship with *fancy*, that being an abbreviation of *fantasy*, from the Latin *phantasia*, itself a transliteration from the Greek, making all these terms more or less kissing-cousins, but I don't want to get all ancient aesthetically philosophical or etymologically medieval on you, so I'll skip right to the part where Michael Anania used to mention in workshops that getting into and out of the poem were two of the most difficult tricks for a poet. Also, he made it clear that you have to earn your O's. In the postmodern world of today the time's long past when the poet can get away with exclaiming all over the poem, let alone apostrophizing this, that, and the other Muse. People just can't suspend disbelief in your transnogrification of an abstraction. When I first signed on as an undergrad, I was like, "Yeats, Yeats." I sounded more like a poodle than a poet. Michael Anania and Ralph Mills were kind enough to bring me over to America and plant me a bit more firmly in the 20th century—William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Frank O'Hara, Susan Howe. It's a good thing too. I stopped

conspiracy at work when *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* goes off the air at the same time Michael Anania retires. Well, there probably is. I mean, how do you thank someone for sharing his knowledge of poets and poetry, his way with line breaks and pentameter. Those of us who've learned from Michael Anania consider ourselves spin-offs from a more critically acclaimed, popular, and longer running TV show. Coleridge's secondary imagination related to the primary imagination, so to speak. Whoa! All these imaginations and fancies in my head! They're making me dizzy and I didn't even take my antihistamine today. And did you ever notice how the pharmaceuticals these days sound like something from the old *Flash Gordon* series? With his pals, Dr. Zyrtek and Dale Allegra, Flash faces the Emperor Ming and the evil Princess Viagra. By the way, I thought I saw Michael Anania on TV, standing next to Mayor Daley at a celebration of Chicago's one hundred and sixty-fifth year, and I thought, "Wouldn't that be something if Michael retired into a whole other career: his own TV show—if not on the WB, perhaps on UPN, in the time slot *Buffy's* left unfilled." It's not unheard of—a poet on TV. Somebody told me he'd seen Charles Bernstein reading a phone book with Jon Lovitz on a Yellow Pages commercial. Can you imagine? Longinus sees in the imagination the source of the sublime when "moved by enthusiasm and passion you seem to see things whereof you speak and place them before the eyes of your hearers." Anyway, it's certainly a show I'd watch, whether Michael played a vampire slayer or a poet/professor. And O! Charisma Carpenter! If you would co-star with him, that would be marvelous!

## The Fate of Humanity in Verse

So I'm wending my way through a recent *New Yorker* and what should I read but that the Bush administration's planning another one of their regime changes for nations we just don't like the cut of their jib. This time Iran's the offending countenance. So I'm thinking, "Jeepers! This Seymour Hersh guy is just a bundle of bad news, isn't he?" And then—Holy Oppenheimer!—I come upon this: "One of the military's initial option plans...calls for the use of a bunker buster nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, against underground nuclear sites." Time was, a poet would come across a disconcerting little factoid like that and it'd be an epigraph to a meditation in verse on lack of compassion and the fate of humanity. So I'm like, "My meditation will be there with bells on." But no sooner am I in *modem meditatio*, so to speak, than the slow-moving, stately rhetorical figures tied to those jingling-jangling bells stumble over the alliteration and collapse under the impossibility of predicting from what angle the -ingling will next arrive. First I think, "Oh, this is a tragedy. I can't even light a little candle of hope in the darkness of our times." But then I'm like, "No, this is a farce." (So sue me, Karl Marx). And really, what's to meditate here? Holy bejeepers! This most Christian of American presidents—and there's Hersh again, with a disturbing quote from an unnamed House member: "The most worrisome thing is that this guy has a messianic vision"—every night when *en déshabillé*, so to speak (Thank God this is not an Imagist poem, kee-rect?), donning his Wild West jammees—some yesteryear's Christmas



gift from some shady Saudi Arabian oil tycoon—he kneels and bows his head beside his bed and prays...well, but now you feel kinda like Hamlet, don't you? You look at that *New Yorker* quote again—and, I know, I shoulda set up an epigraph so it'd be easy to find—and you just gotta go with Langston Hughes who wrote of the exploitation of Africans in the Johannesburg mines, “What kind of poem/Would you make out of that?” I know what you're thinking: “Well, he *did* put it in verse.” Not to mention, “Langston Hughes *always* had something hopeful to say about dreaming a world and the fate of humankind.” But then there's the whole question of what good it'd do anyway. The proletarian poets of the 1930s liked to speak of “art as a weapon,” but W.H. Auden, who started out pretty left-wing himself, finally decided that “poetry makes nothing happen,” and W.B. Yeats thought politics made “a stone of the heart.” And who're you going to believe, a bunch of blacklisted people or the kind of poet who hangs out in anthologies with the likes of William Shakespeare, John Milton, and William Wordsworth? Oh, and that reminds me, this poem isn't anthologized yet, so you don't have an editor to kindly remind you that when the poet exclaimed “Holy Oppenheimer!” he was referring to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the father of the atom bomb, who subsequently suffered McCarthyite investigation and was stripped of his security clearance for daring to oppose the development of more devastating weapons of mass destruction. All I can say is that before and during my career as a professional poet I've held a number of other jobs, including paperboy for the *Chicago American*, gardening helper at the Lincoln Park Conservatory, wall washer and floor stripper at Children's Memorial Hospital, laborer

at Tru-test Paints, cashier at Irv's Pharmacy, elevator operator at some unremembered Gold Coast high rise a few doors from The Drake, journalist for a lefty newspaper, laborer at umpteen other sweatshops in Chicago and New York whose names will not be mentioned, hob grinder—and here the anthology editor should probably step in and inform you that hobs are those things from which gears are made—and adjunct college teacher—a job which is sometimes labeled “instructor” and other times “lecturer” but never “professor,” if you get my drift; and in not a one of these other travels of travail have I ever wondered whether my particular contribution made an impact. If you water the geraniums, the geraniums grow. Wash the blood down the operating room drains and the tiles are clean. Elevate the rich folks and they will get where they're going. (Whoa! That last sentence works like, “I am one who is acquainted with the night.”) Grind the hob and you'll eventually get a gear. Students don't work exactly the same way—at least after high school we don't grind them. But the truth about me is that I'm always second-guessing myself. Clearly, if you light that one little candle and you should stumble in the dark anyways, you'll burn down the damn house. Meanwhile, back here in the *Nuttin Anthology* we're all being told to line up and the editorial staff's deciding how many pages we get. “No Eliot are you it seems to me,” the Old Man enunciates at Gwendolyn Brooks. “More's urban than urbane of you. Three pages.” Kenneth Fearing's next on the list, but he hasn't shown yet. “No Eliot, that drunken commie bum,” the Old Man pronounces. “A page at most, and hold the footnotes too.” I go visit the women's caucus, where Edna St. Vincent Millay, Mina Loy, and Angelina Grimké

are leading a demonstration bordering on a riot, demanding more pages for women. And here come Margaret Walker and Genevieve Taggard, fully prepared for a sit-in at the preface until their demands are met. By the way, I don't know where that anthology editor was when I told Karl Marx to sue me. He should have reminded you of Marx's famous notion that history repeats itself, "the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." It's an expression I've used repeatedly, whatever that signifies. But now I'm at the rally in the index. And the important names—let me tell you, I could go on and on. Langston Hughes is speaking for Sterling Brown and himself, demanding that their more radical poetry be admitted to the anthology. Muriel Rukeyser and Kenneth Fearing are waiting in line to speak, which might explain the latter's earlier absence. Wait! Here come Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot dressed in the outfits of the London constabulary. They're shouting insults at the crowd, calling them "rabble" and "riff-raff," knocking Romantic poets aside with their nightsticks. Watch out, Shelley! Oh, he's been sorely used! Now the two poet-bobbies have got hold of Langston Hughes. They're arresting him for saying, "A poem should be simple." But if they think that this crowd of Romantics, Communist Party fellow travelers, and feminists will just part for them like the Red Sea and allow them to haul Hughes away, they are a couple of ding-dongs. *Ding-Dong*, the very words ring like a bell, to jingle-jangle me back to my task, which, as we recall, was to take an immediate political concern and to make of it something universal and timeless, more or less in the manner of Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," or Adrienne Rich's "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," or Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed."

Not too difficult an endeavor, really, since no matter what we might make of the B61-11, the ruling oligarchy of the US uses the same old divide and conquer/bread and circuses strategies of empire that the Romans used two thousand years ago. Pretty timeless, right? Nope, they're carting off Hughes for "Let America Be America Again."

## All in All, a Pretty Good Day

Publishers Clearing House is at the front door with one of those humungous checks. The tune that's going around and around your head from your teenybopper days is a good one, like "The Times Are A-Changing" or "Let's Spend the Night Together." After how many years together, we wake up more in love than ever. That cheese submarine tastes orgasmic! The newspaper headline reads: "Poll shows 100% of News Reporters Correctly Distinguish *Prone* From *Supine*." We find that we can trust just about anyone over thirty. Hold the phone! That was the boss calling to say, "Take the rest of the week off." Prime-time TV runs commercial free. That toothache goes away all by itself, as did those unsightly nose hairs. And running through so many happy heads, songs like "Get Together" or "I Think We're Alone Now." The dogs take themselves for a walk. Meanwhile, winter is canceled. It was I don't know how many years ago today, the Beatles were cloned; now the band has reformed. Ditto for Traffic, the Temptations, the Grateful Dead, the Supremes, the Mothers of Invention, the Left Banke, Buffalo Springfield, the Byrds, the Four Tops, the Lovin' Spoonful, Steppenwolf, the Cryan' Shames, Herman's Hermits, the Doors, the Mamas and the Papas, the Youngbloods, the Turtles, Laura Nyro, Townes Van Zandt, and Marvin Gaye. You've lost weight haven't you? The boss calls back to say, "You'd better take the rest of the month." Magazine ads are discontinued. The border patrol stops patrolling, and world leaders decide that national borders were pretty damn silly after all. Maybe the song in our heads is

can really bring you down. It's so unfair. Bruce Banner in a bad mood becomes the incredible Hulk; Clark Kent in a bad mood is the same old reporter. Ah! But Clark Kent in a phone booth! That's another story. But where do you find a phone booth these days? The Batcave? What I *do* remember is when my sister and I would become grouchy and pugilistic, my mother would tell us, "You're just tired," making, by means of her evasions of our just grievances against one another, our bad moods all the worse until exasperation finally lulled us to sleep. In Old English, *mod* could also mean "pride" and "state of mind." Speaking of pugilistic, certain Southerners are still in a snit over what they regard "the War of Northern aggression." Bunch of raggedy-old-motheaten-flag-hanging whining babies, if you ask me. *Bad egg* as a pejorative term came, of course, from the smell, which says nothing about whether it predates the expression "madder than a wet hen." Moreover, to be *in* a bad mood sounds like one is contained or surrounded—"in a bad neighborhood"—reminding us how much the term *Chicagoland area* puts me in a bad mood, being, as it is, lingo from the world of advertising, but not as bad a mood as language derived from the godforsaken corporate world: *the bottom line* or *multi-tasking*. I can feel my butt burning already. And even when our mood improves, there's still some aura about us of the courageous hermaphrodite working oneself into a lather.



“People Got to Be Free” or “Could Be We’re in Love.” Suddenly, the public domain expands to include all corporate logos. The dogs feed themselves, then swoosh over, bringing us the remotes so we can watch some commercial-free TV. The in-depth newscast informs us (and quite thoroughly, I might add) that much to the bedevilment of numerous ministers, rabbis, and priests (not to mention the editors of *The Weekly World News*), Satan has never escaped from Hell. In fact, he’s never even tried. He has no interest in vying for possession of human souls with whatever cosmic forces of righteousness and justice prevail in our universe—ours being one of many, by the way, each better than the one before, and we’ve got many universes to go. Satan just wants to play Parcheesi, eat his unbelievably orgasmic cheese sandwich, and pay attention to that Sixties tune going around in his head, “Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood.” Peace on Earth. My poetry is becoming wildly popular—soon to be a major motion picture. Christopher Walken will play Satan. By the way, the doctor called and said, “You know that old saying, ‘You’re not getting any younger’? Well, the funny thing is, it doesn’t apply anymore.” While “Imagine” runs through my head, I set down the remote, needing some time to sit and take in the latest poll, which establishes that not only are Americans losing weight and discriminating between *lay* and *lie*, but also they’re calling a halt to the exploitation of one human being by another. During capitalism’s going-out-of-business sale, you can put in an hour or two of labor at your local multinational and receive the remuneration of a yacht. Unless you’d rather have a hot tub. Motorcycle? Mobile home? Convertible? Rocket ship? “Do You Believe in Magic?” Some seventy years ago Langston

Hughes wrote, “Let America Be America Again,” and now racism, sexism and homophobia have been abolished. God really does bless us, everyone. Every time it rains, it rains manna from Heaven. Here comes the proletarian revolution! Peaceful like. Let’s have another cheese sub, honey!