

Fifteen Small Apocalypses

The Keening

The ruins extended to the horizon, house after house, street by street, as far as could be seen, walls made of paper, roofs unfinished, floors of dust, the day's morning stillness broken at evening by the keening of ten thousand voices raised in songs of love and heartbreak, the night's darkness broken by a thousand fires, shadows flickering across the ruins as dancers whirled and stepped.

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The Adjutant General's Reckoning

Everyone in the city was rounded up, taken by the soldiers to the sports arena, made to stand on the field of plastic grass underneath a very hot sun. They were crowded together and some collapsed. The Adjutant General's executive staff, gathered on a podium at one end of the field, chose among the people before them, indicating the chosen few to select squads of soldiers. All the men and boys who were taller than the Adjutant General were taken away for re-education. All the women and girls who were shorter than the Adjutant General were given to the soldiers to provide for their needs. All the people who were not selected, including those who had collapsed due to the heat or the crowding or thirst or fear or whatnot, were shot, their bodies then thrown into the river.

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The City of Freedom, Part 1

The wall around the city that was to be its protection from marauders, it was never finished. Parts of the foundations were laid, several of the gates were built, but the funds that were to have gone to its completion were spent on cotton candy, sparkling wine, marching bands, and midnight shows.

The army that was to have scoured the outlands, securing the city from approaching foes, its high command held a week-long meeting to perform an extensive cost-benefits analysis. Deciding at the end of seven days that no part of any operation performed by the army would produce a positive return on investment, the

high command ordered the soldiers to retain their weapons, disperse to all points of the compass, and take whatever they wanted. The soldiers complied, some of them confused and others elated.

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The City of Freedom, Part 2

It was rumored at the time, and further speculated upon by scholars and scientists later, that the wealthy people of the city were, if not as a group mentally ill, then surprisingly disconnected from the full reality of their situation. The evidence offered to support this supposition consisted chiefly of their parks: broad, green, lush with trees and bushes and flowering shrubs of every kind, all sprinkled from countless fountains with water pumped up to the surface from deep below the desert floor upon which the city was built. The water from the fountains served a double duty, its runoff from the parks being then diverted to provide the drinking and bathing water for the less fortunate residents of the city, the purification of the water being left up to these same unfortunate people, the wealthy arguing in the civic committees they controlled and which functioned as the practical government of the city that the demonstration of initiative this system would require from the poor would strengthen their character, supplying them with the fortitude that would enable them in their turn to better themselves and take their places among the ranks of the wealthy. Despite occasional episodes of civic unrest that included the smashing of fountains, uprooting of shrubbery, felling of trees, and burning of mansions, this system of land and water governance continued uninterrupted for two generations, until in the third, the wells ran dry one week and in the following week, the city collapsed in upon itself, leaving a giant, rubble-strewn sinkhole, which in the third and fourth weeks was a charnel house covered with a shimmering, buzzing carpet of sarcophagidae. After that, it was empty and quiet.

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The Servants' Reward

The servants were astounded by what their masters did that evening. No sooner were the late afternoon chores done when the masters sounded the end-of-workday bell, which usually didn't sound until the eleventh hour, when it was struck by the oldest and most trusted servant. But this evening, the masters themselves struck it and called all the servants to meet with them in the main dining room, a vast hall decorated in fine carvings and precious marble.

Tonight is your night, the masters said. We will wait on you and bring you anything you want.

We want our freedom, the oldest and most trusted servant replied. And we want a share of everything you own.

The masters told him and the other servants, You cannot have those things, we misspoke ourselves, we meant anything within reason.

But it was too late. The servants were already prying up the precious marble and breaking off as many of the fine carvings as they could, carrying them out of the vast hall which was shortly reduced to a ruined shell. A few of the younger masters banded together and later that night took torches down to the hovels of the servants and burned them to the ground.

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The Courts of Parsimony

The law courts were packed, people filling the courtrooms and lining the hallways, the lines continuing out the front doors of the courthouse and down the steps to the sidewalks, then even along the sidewalks and around the block. It was like this every day. Starting before sunrise, people would begin to assemble, lining up outside the still-closed courthouse doors. By the time the bailiffs opened the doors, hundreds of people were already waiting. More arrived throughout the day, even though it was, or should have been, common knowledge that only those persons who arrived earliest in the day would have any chance of a hearing before the judges.

The bailiffs struggled to keep order among the mass of people. Often there would be pushing and shouting, and occasionally the bailiffs would need to take up long hardwood batons and thick metal prods and use them against those few who would not wait calmly and quietly. At the end of the day there would still be a crush of people waiting for their cases to be heard. The bailiffs turned them away and closed the courthouse doors upon the people, some of whom remained there crying and wailing and cursing as the evening came down and the streets grew dark.

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The Harvest and the Reapers, Part 1

The small coterie gathered in the living room of the great house. There they raised their glasses in a toast to their good fortune: the fine wine and smooth tea, robust coffee and bracing hard liquor; the small fish and large crustaceans freshly caught and flown in that morning on chartered flights from the coasts; the cakes made of triply-sifted flour, iced with sugar glazes that took a week to prepare; the newest electronic toys and gadgets, passed around the room for all to enjoy as the night wore

on. Well past midnight the lights were dimmed, then extinguished. The soldiers came before daybreak.

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The Supernumeraries

The people were hungry, but they would not be allowed to eat if they had not done any work. They waited all day in front of the shops and factories, by the fields and fisheries, but there was no work for them.

We want to work, they said. We are hungry but we don't want to take what we haven't earned, give us work.

But there was no work. Terribly efficient machines were accomplishing the tasks it used to take many workers to do. The people stood in groups or sat in clumps, waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

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The Children of Cain

Every house was divided against itself, battle lines demarcated through kitchens and bedrooms and backyard vegetable gardens, brother against sister, wife against husband, uncle slaughtering niece, they fought each other until the last one left, a young woman with bloodstained hands and mouth, wandered the ruined city, howling in madness and grief and desperation day and night for the week it took her to die of thirst.

A generation later a new people, who knew nothing of the sad history of the ruined city, came from a far place that had become too crowded, settling now into the rubble and working in the cold and weathered wreckage incessantly, taking the scattered pieces and raising them up again in new buildings, modest dwellings where new lives could be made, new children could be heard to cry.

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The City of the Dead, Part 1

The people of the city no longer gathered together for celebrations: weddings, births, promotions and graduations, even the rituals of death, all those occasions when they used to join together, eat and drink, sing and dance, flirt and even slip off two by two for more intimate exchanges, they were all abandoned now.

The leaders of the city thought to issue proclamations commanding the people to again observe the social rituals that had once so effortlessly bound them together, but the people would no longer do that. Even sending soldiers around to each neighborhood to force the people to celebrate together had no effect. The soldiers threw their weapons away, shed their uniforms for more comfortable and nondescript clothing, and went so far as to leave the gates of the city open and unguarded.

Soon the day came when fewer than a score of horsemen rode out of the desert and into the city, now unprotected and inhabited by a people who could not be bothered even to come to the doors of their houses when they heard the sounds of passing hooves. The horsemen rounded up the leaders of the city and hanged them by nooses tied to streetlamps, then spent the next seven years going from one house to the next, neighborhood by neighborhood, taking whomever and whatever they wanted before moving on.

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The City of the Dead, Part 2

The first spring after the catastrophe, countless seedlings sprung up in the wreckage. Most of them died that summer. Many of the few that made it through summer and autumn died in the winter that followed.

The few that lived slowly grew, and within five years had begun to bear seed. More seedlings survived. Within two generations, a forest covered what once had been a city; what once had been a people and all their handiwork reconstituted now as green leaves, twigs and bark in browns and grays, and flowers of every color ever imagined and concocted in the laboratories and factories of the city of which there was now no other trace.

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The Vagaries

Discipline in the command center was spotty, depending on who was in charge of the watch. One officer of the day might be a martinet, so strict in adhering to the written rules and procedures that his subordinates squirmed under his supervision, finding ways to slip off for cigarette breaks, fast-food runs, and extended visits to the restrooms. Another officer of the day might be so lax, the duty room would be filled with tobacco smoke and greasy food packaging, the perimeter lights and gates unchecked, sometimes not functioning at all for several hours, no one in the command center taking notice. A third officer of the day might be the sort who

carefully monitored her subordinates, directing them in the timely fulfillment of their duties while letting them relax whenever she felt it possible.

The duty rotations for everyone in the command center were assigned by means of the “controlled random” method, so that no one, from the commanding officer down to the lowliest clerk, would be assigned more duty at one time than another. There was no way to predict beforehand who might be on duty and who might be in charge, which gates might be properly latched and which sentries might be napping outside the armory doors at any time of night or day. The security of the city and all who were in it was no more foreseeable than the specific flight path of the butterfly.

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The Concubines’ Keepers

The strain was proving to be too much. All the top-tier concubines were required to be ready for duty within a few minutes’ notice, night and day, for the entirety of their two-year terms of service. While their managers did a commendable job of rotating the assignments as best they could, so that a concubine would rarely be in the position of having just returned from a tryst with, say, the admiral commanding the southern fleet, only to find herself summoned to escort, for example, the president of the national bank at a ribbon-cutting ceremony, with scarce enough time to freshen herself up; still, there were those times when such a harrying might occur.

But lately the situation had turned for the worse. Since the Slaughter of the Night-Watch, when a dozen of the top-tier concubines had been killed during the disturbance at the annual Grand Embassies’ Celebration, the survivors had been so hard-pressed for their services that clients were beginning to complain. The concubines were arriving for assignments with their makeup hastily applied, their hair falling in the back, their dresses wrinkled, sometimes even stained. After one of them passed out from exhaustion at table during the most recent state dinner, the office of the minister of the treasury was rumored to be investigating. No one knew what steps might be taken once the investigation was complete. The managers of the concubines could scarcely eat, they were so anxious.

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The Unliquidated Debt

The people of the city knew it was a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living god. Their elders had handed down this knowledge, handed down to them in turn by their elders, the line of generations going back to a time before memory.

The people of the city knew it was a fearful thing, so they contrived to kill their god. At first, only a few of them were rash and passionate enough to want to do this, and they didn't know how. Overthrowing the altars and razing the temples, slaughtering the priests and burning the holy books, these actions for a time only seemed to make their god stronger. But the strength was an illusion, like a green flash at sunset.

Little by little, more and more of the people came to be bored with fearing their god and attempting to kill him (he was a male god; they had killed his goddess consort long before, leaving him bereft and half-crazed in his grief). They turned their backs on him, and like a neglected and desiccated garden, he slowly withered unto death. As he faded, the people came to know how fearful a thing it was to fall into the hands of a dying god, and how fearful it could be to live after one's god had not simply died but had been killed, with the guilt lying where it did.

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The Harvest and the Reapers, Part 2

The soldiers gathered all the people who remained in the city, gathering them together in the plaza fronting city hall. The commander stood in the cupola of his armored car, ordered the people to be passed in front of him in a single file for his inspection. Those who appeared to him as though they would be a burden—for instance, those who had given way to appetite throughout their lives and were fat, soft, and out of breath, their teeth rotting from sweets and their fingers stained from smoking or from darker vices; or those who had spent countless hours and great portions of their fortunes maintaining an illusion of corporal beauty, their teeth unnaturally white, their manicured hands smooth and unblemished, their faces painted and molded according to their guidebooks of ideal forms, their limbs as thin and useless as saplings—these the commander directed to be taken in one direction for reprocessing. The remainder, who were not great in number, were sent in the other direction to await assignment.

The inspection took most of the day. After some small amount of time, the commander ordered a seat to be set up under an awning on the armored car's rear deck, where he could sit to do his culling and currying. By late afternoon, the two groups had been mustered. The soldiers took the group selected for reprocessing to the outskirts of the city, where the fields had been left to go fallow. There the soldiers killed all the members of this group.

Night had fallen before the soldiers were done with the killing. Those who had been remaindered for assignment were marched to the fields, now illuminated by searchlights, spotlights, and the headlights of armored cars. The remaindered people

were given axes, hoes, and shovels. Under the watchful guard of the soldiers, the remaindered people began disassembling the bodies of the people chosen for reprocessing, burying the components about half a meter deep. A few of the remaindered people attempted to protest or refuse or escape or even attack the soldiers with their shovels, hoes, or axes, but the soldiers quickly killed them and added their remains to the reprocessing.

The commander, exhausted by his long day's work, turned in early and left the direction of the night's work to his competent subordinates. By first light the following day, the fields had been prepared, amply fertilized now with rich nutrients that would support the growth in the coming seasons.