

Soliliquy

- Christopher R. Moore, Editor

Greetings and salutations.

Creation. What a process it is. An infinite variety of mediums in which it may proceed. Exempla gratis: *In principio creavit Deus caelum et terram*. Vishnu Purana.. The emergence from a cosmic ovum. An “earth-diver”. Choices, choices, choices.

Questions teem: How are we here? What’s the deal with our existence? Why? Do we, perhaps, owe the existence and being of our Universe and World and Self to God our Father, a Grand Architect, Paley’s Watchmaker. With His omniscient and omnipotent hand he brushed the Oils of matter and meaning over some great Canvas set lovingly over an equally great Easel, with all the skill of an infinite Michaelangelo. Or instead of pigments, we could all be figments of an infinite Imagination, metaphoric neurons with allegoric synapses firing this way and that. Try this on for size: our world, alas, may not be able to thank a Father for his sperm, a Progenitor for his impetus. Creation, in that case, could have a Mother, the maternal laws of nature. The caring, kneading fingers of logic and gravity and chance and thermodynamics may be the at root of our history. Combinations and permutations of the cosmic ragoût of elements and kinetic energies working in unison with time, eras and epochs, endless eternal progression, ever-complex changes and mutations, as the means lead to, always temporary, yet momentarily permanent, ends.

Perhaps miraculous and divinely inspired, or perhaps in absolute concordance with the laws of nature, mystery regarding our origin abounds. One more question: Is it, to inquire into the fundamental basis of previous curiosities, important to know of the Primus Mobila, the Original Force?—or is it sufficient and adequate only and even solely to recognize and know and appreciate the Result, the Effect? The magnificence of our Earth and Universe and Life is so very apparent. For all it matters, a

particularly witty goat could have created everything, but so what – we have what we have, as they say, and there’s no denying that.

Simply, Creation is good.

Now, I shall cease speaking of the creation of worlds and mention the Creation of Art. Yes. A very fascinating subject indeed. It is full, as well as the previous topic, of philosophical issues, qualities, importance and significance. Art is a very mysterious thing, of course, filled with debate over platonic Forms or waxing-profound of Pirsig’s (roughly paraphrased) Zen and Fixin’ Motorbikes. The artist is one who attempts to manifest his ideals, one who tries to extract from his head his imagination or perception of reality, and endeavors to realize those beliefs upon paper or clay or stage or ear. The mind, built of its boundless past and future experiences provides an infinite well of potentiality. It is the drawing out from the well, the distillation from the flotsam and jetsam of the head, that takes skill; but it is a skill, surely more or less developed, within everyone.

This creation, in ways, is the essence of our being, the final cause, the purpose. In life, it is not the individual human being who perseveres, of course, but his or her contributions (material or organic) to a continuous, ever-advancing society. It is art that will survive, that will become the extant testimony to one’s existence. Just as science and philosophy do, art accumulates from one generation to the next, always adding and amending and augmenting to the aggregate of all past representations of a personal reality. For one to continue in this spirit, to contribute to the totality of yesterday and be the foundation of tomorrow, though cliché, is essential.

Setting aside eternity, during this eon (although we are rapidly reaching some frontier – as always, for we are always immediately at the unexplored periphery), in the production of art we may share our ideas and truths with one another. Through that, we may understand each other to a greater degree, and comprehend varying perspectives on the so-called “human condition”. With so much variegation and, paradoxically, ubiquitous similarity, it is nice to become aware of the binding factors and on the other hand the differentiae of individuals in our world.

For this purpose, of elaborating and articulating one's perceptions, of all the multifarious mediums of art, the burden may most easily fall on the shoulders of pen and paper, for its pervasiveness, accessibility, and ease of use. Ah, literature, writing. Reading, flipping crisp ivory pages. Eyes caressing black-typed words and sentences and paragraphs and chapters. What a tradition we have: Homer, Thucydides, Ovid, Milton, Dante, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Brönte, Joyce. The meaning and feeling and experience their works lend to curious readers – quite spectacular.

For all these above reasons, I felt the obligation to commence the publication of this insouciant literary publication of sorts. When one peruses some magazines, or takes an academically-oriented class, a number of names and theories are put forth. But relative to the number of possible names and theories possible in our grand hoi polloi, the publicized ones are of miniscule quantity. Sure, on average perhaps their quality is high; but on the individual basis, who knows? Much repression goes on – not necessarily societal, or economic, or by peers, but primarily by the self – of one's ideas and writings. Perhaps they are put onto paper, but never disseminated, deigned to live out its shelf life in the bottom drawer of the desk, beneath a moldy apple core. More likely, the words never find themselves metamorphosed into ink, for the effort/gratification ratio seems much too high. To provide a backbone onto which one may hang their struggles, literary or otherwise, seemed the right thing to do, for the social community in which I reside appeared to lack a proper outlet or fare for such things.

Thus, in summary, I created *16 Renford Road* in order to enable the circulation of the most poignant thoughts, ideas, theories and philosophies of our day with fellow readers and critics. I wanted to encourage the writing process (conception and completion of written works) and the publication of such works (ego-gratification!) for others, and myself. I thought it beneficial to promote correspondence between present acquaintances, and to promote the convergence of new paths,

thereby extending social circles. And not lastly, because, heck, why not, to provide some interesting reads.

I ask for contributions up to ying yang. Please, kind reader, or someone you know (if you aren't so kind), give birth to (if you haven't done so yet), then send in, beautiful literature. Anything – words words words. Throw in some poetry. A bit o' prose fiction. Maybe a healthy dose of exposition. Essays galore. Why not some drama, a dialogue or monologue? A Socratic dialectic? Be my guest. Maybe, if fuel is running low, a review of something nice. Or a letter, open or directional. Cast off the shackles of limits and taboos! Write whatever! Create! Do!

Fantastic. Worry yourself not of brief time, “what with schoolwork or my job or this or that I just ain't got no time”...excuses are futile; they will fall upon deaf ears. There is plenty of time. One must just find that time, allocate it, use it, be it. Haiku – what?—three lines and 17 syllables? Minimalism, too, is in fashion. Not a problem; for the fruits that one may reap through the creation of a work of art far exceed any temporal restrictions one may place upon oneself. Go on now, go do it!

Right-o. Read, write, and be merry. Please. Live it up, pal.

Pastry Perplexities

- Christopher R. Moore

I have here next to me a danish that strikes a thoroughly uncanny resemblance to that late 12th century monarch King Fred the Uninspired. It's an apple-filled pastry, with a bit of white sugar frosting squeezed onto the top of it, reminiscent of loose spaghetti, but sweet and sugary of course. It's quite a tasty danish. I've already taken a bite out of it, in the lower-left hand corner. Right now it's set upon a white napkin, on some yellow scratched-up paper, on my desk. I've really just begun to eat it. I think I ought to go back to the grocery store and purchase a few more; it only cost me 79¢. Maybe I'll finish assembling the royal lineage.

(Pack my lunch) *65

- Corey Sorrento

(Pack my lunch) *65

This is an excerpt from
an excerpt from my
system. If you dive in too
Fast you may never touch
The bottom. Ease in, and just
Maybe the bottom will jump
Up and slap you in the face.

cavities – 36

argyle – 12

needles – 79

Tuesday – 31

half – 62

syrup (maple or vermont style) – 10

holes – 88

cute – 41

foghorn without lighthouse – 7

extremely – 94

stop – 46

stopp – 15

Gene “Lapdog” McElroy - 51

My Love

- Gary C. Campbell

My love, weakness has touched you.
Why, I must ask, why does fate hurt and torture ?
There was none less deserving than you.
Pain will be gone, but so will you.
What will I do then, how will I live ?
I will dream of you every night and
I will weep all day long,
Mourning for you, my love.

Llama!

- Sir Scottard Pickett

Llama! Llama! Burning Bright
In the Pastures of the Night
What Immortal Hand or Eye
Could Frame Thy Fleeceful Symmetry?

A Poem...

- found on the floor

I think, therefore I Am
Therefore, I Must be! Of course you Are, our shining little star
You're Miles and Miles of your forefather's fruit
And now to suit, our great computer,
Your Magnetic ink!
I'm More than that, I know I Am.
There you go lad, keep as cool as You can.
Face piles of trials with smiles.
It Riles them to believe
That you perceive the web that they Weave!

* * *

a poem
written in blue ink
found on a crumpled piece of paper
on the floor
of a sterile bus
one cloudy afternoon

[ed. note: poem found and annotated by Laurie E. Sablotny]

My Angel

- Charles E. Gilmore

I saw only grey clouds
Swirling
Surrounding
They shut out the light
Blocked off the world
I was alone
Tired, depressed, suffering within

It was with a quiet grace
that they separated
Light shone through and I could see
my Angel

She came to me, not from God
although some will claim that
She came to me, not from my imagination
although I had believed that
She came to me of her own heart
Dispelled the clouds with her words
And opened the world there before me

I saw only blue sky
Peaceful
Harmonious
It gave light to my world
Inspired the birds to sing
I was no longer alone

A Smile

- Charles E. Gilmore

I saw your smile for the first time
It spoke to me
I felt music
I saw poetry
A vision took hold of me

A world was there, created only for us

You spoke to me for the first time today
Words shallow in conceit
Thudded against my ears
Disillusion robbed me
And my smile was torn from me

Chrysalis *(or The Life of A Bug)*

- Evan Barbaric

The Stage

the first thought is love
to see her and wonder
where is my mother?

then with reluctant eyes I felt
translucent skin,
colorful organs
sheltered, throbbing

so born from slime into dirt
it is a brilliant light, another world:
white sky my home
under fancy clusters
of clover, and looking up
I saw firmly packed blossoms
of flowers

Colored Shells

opalescent fires on the edge of the
world, blue flames, orange mires
smoke like glistening pearl,
and green pyres burning the purple-bodied
Ouranos -- I thought they were all
just colored shells to cover the
ends of these words

The Pink Sea

anticipation was the most fearful
hell I knew
for from the pink sea they came forth:
creatures grotesque and unfamiliar to
me, moving on the night wind
steady, breathing
to claim the lights of death
or the shadows of my brethren

The Withering of Minds

I had seen them before:
bugs assailing a
bright and humming bulb
apprehension, expectation
-- they search for the light
and embrace it
only to be burned and die
in a brown field of dying
springing for the shadows
fled, flying

New Morning

the sun was a fire by which
I could be seen
a thousand eyes like stars
I remembered them
on waking up beside myself
with grief, from my rotting bed of
leaves and crying for the lonely music
I heard when I awoke only to
search for horrible food

The Eaters of Honey

why are these ants
 ascending the green stems
of miniature palms?

a pale fear was instilled in me:
 the black/white spider
and faces of cruel
 spiders

 cry, cry, you moth
 fly from the pity
 of every life
 you see
 crawling, dying

Purple Meat

forced to eat purple flesh
among the rotting swarms
I consumed an inane death,
together with mindful worms
and maggots of the cunning birth
tasting pleasure in the dead meat
though I cried for the stench
yet grew stronger than I had been
and saw still stranger things
in the vapors of my mind

Crustaceans

Once I dreamed I was a man
a giant -- larger than leaves

to see you, oh people, running, crying . . .
I cried, "Oh where are you going
and what do you flee from? Where is
the terror over your shoulder and
what calamity could have struck
our unfair city?"

You answered in uneven tears,
"We have seen crustaceans whose
fate it is to adorn the plates of
celebrity feasts! And we have seen
babies flailing as lobsters would have
done, on wet countertops lifted
by a mysterious hand from
other worlds beyond the water.
Oh, that way is the withering of minds."

Yes, I see it now! A June bug still
silver-green with armor fit for battle-
kings of your kind
but strewn among wet leaves, on his
back, facing the sky: Oh, my June bug,
are you dead or only dying? And crying
I slew that which had given birth to the
rancors of my mind

Indeed that was the time in my life
when nothing could comfort me but the
waxing of the moon -- white as a cloud,
blue sky, Autumn afternoon -- when
frozen blues were not yet painted on
my man's lips, cheeks, nor fingertips,
but only the golden sun, making paper
colors of fast and fallen leaves, the

home of decomposing things,
as it fell beneath a pink and metal sea

June Bug Morphology

oh I lived the life of woe
to have lost my
lady June bug
when we had just discovered love
but no! it was only another season
after all,
the one in which
I laid down to die
and was poked by a creature
and his stick, two legs
who watched me cry
my final seconds
 away into oblivion

The Crustacean Says

better to have died in a desert
 than this porcelain place
and so I begged you to throw us on dry
 land, for that agony I could have bared

but you were killing me kindly
 with whimsical words
accepting my claim, to be the source of
your feast:
larval tongues licking letters on pages
 of print, the bound verse of a
 madman or genius

how expertly you cracked my shell
and split from me the moment when
I knew regret, to see my kindred once
again, all crawl across a landscape of
symbols and die an arid death
not alone, but
fornicating with the sun

Chroma

the honey-eater states:
"the year is almost through
and what holes have you filled
to protect yourself against
the coming cold?"

the colorful one responds:
"only those whose food
will sustain me"
then I watched him leap away

Waking

And so I was the God of your people,
the promise of love
in unearthly places where walked my
feet unbidden, to peer on the world
with unblemished eyes
(two of which would comprise
the longing for a blade of grass)
when I saw the burning flower,
possessed of eternal flame
and playing about faces
fair and familiar to me

The Burning Flower

a burning flower, I saw it
in my dreams, dancing in the air,
folding and unfolding like a
butterfly's careless wings, dissolving
and reforming, or changing shapes in
a wistful fashion
but oh, the blue and ghostly flame!
licking the whitish funnel smooth as of
colored creme
-- desperate, like the falling of a fountain
 of youth when then I was ready
 to reach for it
 but the flower flew away

Worm's Eye View

Love laid eggs in my ears
and those soft words
 became fitful worms
to consume my brain
and its pink fold
 with pupal swift-grown malice
so debility became art
 after all

Calyx

And after I have eaten you
my thoughts shall
consume you too

but by all means, retain the right to bleed
I simply shall not bore you
with my dreams

The Figeater's Tale

I recalled the figeater's tale
so the leaves would fall and bury me
too had I spent one more moment in
hesitant protection, or maddening
dreams when really I should have been
flying freely to seek the death that we
know, and the promise that was love
which lingered patiently in the sky,
if only I could have waited for it and
shunned away willingly the world I had
known -- when one day I might
fly to that other place, embrace
a yellow sky, or even see my cares
drift away like the smoke
of a burning flower
or distant fireflies
after the passing of the night hours

Chrysalis

and so I drowned in days of sleep,
but bliss came after that:
I in your arms, you in mine --
I said to the sun do not speak and betray
the shortcomings of your mind,
for you are too beautiful to touch,
here, as if born from some Vienna Genesis,
to see you and burning babies
in our hollow prison cell
we asked, we asked, dancing
madly in the sky, drops of rainbow
glittering by our sides
what is our purpose?
oh, to shed the chrysalis

Philharmonia

- Christopher R. Moore

We proceed *en masse* via a great rocketship. Fellow passengers, window seats, ailerons, boiler rooms. Seat cushions, oxygen masks, fire-extinguishers, control manuals. Wagnerian leitmotifs weave in and out between the aisles, phrases here, clauses there. Brief whiffs of times to come... samples of the fragrances to be, that will diffuse throughout the air, pressurized cabin, recycled. Just a seed now, a mere germ, a sperm to meet the egg Gaia the World. Where is the Word?

Notice out the observational windows: the sun orbits, revolves about us (yah, Copernicus, take that!), light and dark alternations, flashes on/off, electronic acidic transitions and transformations. Sol, source of nutriment for photosynthesis, light for finding rings in park grass, ultraviolet light to sere foreheads of mammals. Day night night day. Carpe diem. Knight and Dei. Contemplative abilities of warm sun-lit afternoons, notions of

Newton's gravity, inverse square roots... Trees of alloyed steel spring rebelliously out cracks in urban tarmacs, blocking congesting public transportation, requirements of balloon angioplasty. These polyunsaturated partially hydrogenated mostly homogenized lipids clog and stuff and thicken and make faces, slowing life to slo-mo rates of speed... Aspirin, if you can bare, will street-sweep the mess, and thus:

We speed along once again multilingually at .37 times the speed of light (110,923,209 km./sec., or is it 3 steps forward, two steps back? Come home, Charlie Brown), straight POW! through comet tails, stardust nebulae, billions and billions of stars. Cosmic ethereal ephemeral imperial haphazardous concoctions slow not us down any longer... stop? Pardon? 7-11 quickie run, ok? Sure, sure, stick your arm out the window – don't get caught in the bush, though, eh?

Words words words piped through the PA pipes, oozing ubiquitously throughout the fuselage. Par-lay voo fran-say? Ich bin ein Berliner (hard, rough, grating sounds, sprachwissenschaftlich, or is that

with an umlaut), no chè? Sayonara, quid pro quo. Translations and transliterations, UN diplomatic round-tables, orthographic cognates... speak and you shall be spoken to. Speak for yourself.

The one-hundred-and-three piece philharmonic symphonic orchestra blasts away. Trombones blaring, tympani thumping, melodies twist about, inverse, obverse, reverse, fueling feuding fugues.

On the left-hand side, if you squint your eyes just right (left?) 20/20, you shall see a large concrete wall, constructed of brick and sponge, bugs and vehicles splattered chromospectrally along the grout. Fortunately, Yours Truly has earned much diploma, exercised many a day within simulators, stimulators. That road shall not be taken, though there's a heck of a view at that altitude. Blinking, now peer to the right, and witness a great open expansive plains, meadow, lush in bud, virgin blossoms, luxurious verdant emerald green, a giant stuck fast in the mud. Babbling brook meandering beneath his knees colossusly... it flows spritefully between seats 19C and 19D. In case of a water landing on the horizon...

Over the intercom, it is el capitan who spakes unto thou: There is one emergency exit on this craft, please look to see its proximity to you. Eyes peek geometrically down the rows, following the phosphorescence, though it is difficult to find the destination. Curtains impede view. Never worry, says helm. Ah! One moment to tangentalize, yells a boisterous voice from behind! Curtains! To do what! To separate 1st class from cattle-car class, gently responds an attractive flight attendant. Ack! You capitalist bastard! Eyes look askew. Yes, you heard me, you, you big-business stock-market wealthy person! We see Thesis, the humbled masses here, served complementary peanuts for the poor. And observe Antithesis, greedy hyenas up yonder plane. Let us behold Hegelian Synthesis, say I! Merge, fuse! The proletariat shall yet reign! Let us all unite!

In case of an emergency (clearing throat), pull down, twist counter-clockwise, and push-out, all clockwise; that is, in advancing temporal fashion. Then, in single-file fashion, hypothetically, disembark calmly, without fret. There will extend a presently hidden-from-view inflatable

ramp to catch you, to escort you safely to safety. In case of a water landing, the ramp will metamorphosize, kafka-esque, into a self-contained water-resistant raft, plush and deluxe. Happily ever after thou shalt be. Remember, ladies and gentlemen, please do not, I repeat do not, bring your carry-on luggage or your cigarettes in case of an emergency.

Emergency schmemergency. (*God is dead, remember? adds Nietzsche*). The carpeting is worn thin, an astroturf variety. Many scuffed heels, muddy tracks persevere. What does persevere? Press the lit button above you. Electrons ever swirling concentrically, what a bore, about the nucleus the core, complements of Primus Mobilis. Quarks up down left right charm strange? 3-in-One? But never sep-ar-ate, say the phy-si-cists. Trinity. And then. Second. Law. of. Thermodynamics. Vortices of energy accumulation twisting purposefully inherently through streams of the substratic matric essence. Layers upon layers, hierarchical archangels of the earth. Existence. Form + Matter/Function. Universal + Particular. Kings Play Cards Only For Girl Scouts. Individual. I.

We continue to zoom along at break-neck velocities.

The Disregard

- Christopher R. Moore

Late Sunday evening Theodore received a phone call informing him that he in fact had not returned a movie that he had rented upwards of eighteen months ago. The lady on the other side of the telephone line requested that he please return the video at his nearest convenience, and that his late fine was equal, as of today, to one thousand six hundred fourteen dollars and thirty cents, with tax. And thank you sir for your cooperation.

Theodore, who had been standing by the telephone in the kitchen of his tiny apartment, sat down in a chair and furrowed his brow in confusion. Eighteen months ago? He had a difficult time remembering vividly what he had had for dinner last weekend. Was this a prank call? Fifteen, sixteen hundred dollars? That'd buy any movie he could think of at least thirty times over. No, he had heard movie-store noise in the background. It seemed pretty absurd. It didn't make any sense at all – what ridiculousness. And anyhow, he certainly didn't have \$1614.30 lying around – he felt fortunate with a couple hundred dollars in the bank after rent and groceries and insurance and all. Oh well, I'll deal with it tomorrow. It must be some mistake. Obviously some mistake. I'll call them after work tomorrow, he thought.

Upon going to bed, though, sleepy as he was, he struggled for hours, tossing and turning, unable to erase the thoughts of overdue movies from his mind, interspersed with occasional pangs of guilt from his childhood library-book borrowing days. He didn't want to worry about it, worry over such an inconsequential computer error or misreading. Worry though he did. He finally threw off his blankets and switched on a lamp.

Let's see, he thought. They said it was eighteen months ago. I probably did rent videos from that store back then. I'm pretty sure. But I certainly didn't rent movies very often, maybe once, twice every two months. I couldn't have forgotten to return one; the store's right on my way to work. And where would the movie be? In my car? In my house?

Nah. Wouldn't they have called soon after they noticed the movie was missing? Theodore began scrounging around his apartment for any movie that might be the missing one. He took the elevator down to the garage and looked in his car, under the seats, in the trunk. No rental movie was to be found. I am sure of it, he thought, I did not forget to turn in a rented movie.

A thought sprung into Theodore's head. A peculiar thought. Why hadn't the lady on the other side of the line told him which video he had rented? And why had they just noticed that their tape was gone? Eighteen months is quite a while. He couldn't imagine that a simple video-rental store operated under some huge, intricate bureaucracy, capable of losing papers for years at a time. And the fine! What was the point of that? What was it, punitive damages? Theodore quipped. He vowed to telephone the store the minute he got off work – they'd be open by then, he assumed. Then he would be able to straighten up this mess. Perhaps they had mistaken him for someone else. Or perhaps the computer was malfunctioning. He surely didn't forget to turn in a silly one-night rental video.

That evening, after he left the office, a colleague invited him to play racquetball at the local health-club. Theodore decided to accompany his friend, as he did enjoy the lively sport, and had unfortunately to decline a time in the past. Afterwards, they went to a small bistro for a light dinner. They chatted over coffee afterwards, consequently delaying Theodore's arrival home till after eleven o'clock. Theodore determined that 11 p.m. was too late to call the movie-rental store; he would wait until the following day. Going to bed, his mind was still fogged with thoughts of thousands of dollars and secret-agent video-tapes. Fortunately, he was quite fatigued from the evening of sports and dining and slept relatively soundly.

The following day, after work, he resolved that he would clear up the issue, though of course minor, once and for all. He called the store, but, unbeknownst to him, renovation of the store had begun the evening before; the telephone recording announced that normal operation would not begin again until Thursday. Theodore decided to spend these several

days thinking. What kind of policy was this? One that charged people thousands of dollars for tapes that they had in fact returned promptly? Wasn't there governmental overseeing agencies to deal with stuff like this? Theodore thought that he might call the Better Business Bureau – he had heard of them in some of the magazines he read. Upon calling them, he was referred to the NSBA, the National Small Business Agency, for evidently the BBB did not deal with issues like this – they only dealt with fraudulent businesses or false claims and the like. They told Theodore that according to the information he had provided, the movie place was not misrepresenting any information. The NSBA turned out to be a large voice-mail device with tips on common problems: how to speak to your credit-card company, what to do if a business goes bankrupt, why large corporations often put small businesses out of business. They also recommended contacting a larger federal department for other, extraordinary problems. When Theodore contacted the number referred to him by the NSBA, he found that that federal department had been dissolved six months ago, and that perhaps he might try calling the BBB or NSBA, please.

Theodore knew that he could not give up. There must be something he could do. He knew it. These things just couldn't happen. There must be some reason, some problem with something. "How about calling a different video store – maybe they could give some insight," recommended a friend with whom Theodore was discussing his problem. "Sure, that's a good idea. Maybe they'll tell me if this policy is really out on a limb, or if it is typical," he responded.

Theodore located a telephone book and called the first store he could find. "Yes, hello," he began, "I'm curious to learn about your late-return policy."

"Why? Do you have a tape that you would like to turn in late?"

"Oh no, I'm not even a customer at your store. I'm just curious."

"Well, sir, then, we can't really tell you that. I'm sorry."

"Why? I'm just asking what would happen if someone turned in their tape late."

“Oh, yes, I understand, sir. The thing is, though, this: What if, for example, you had borrowed a rare tape, one that couldn’t easily be found on the public market. And let’s say that you would really like to keep this tape. And say you called to find out about the punishment that would be exacted upon you had you returned this tape late, or not at all. If we told you the punishment, you might weigh the consequences against the utility you might get out of holding onto the tape, and, if you found that you would rather keep the tape and receive the punishment, we would lose some of our inventory, which we cannot allow. Therefore, we cannot tell you this information.”

“But I’m not even a customer of yours. I’ve never rented a tape from your store.”

“That may be true, sir, but we can’t make exceptions. We just can’t do that. It would be nonsensical, in fact, to do so, for what’s the point of a rule if it’s just going to be disregarded?”

Theodore slammed the telephone receiver against the wall.

“Good-bye!” he said, infuriated.

“What is this insanity?” pleaded Theodore to himself. “I thought I lived in a normal world, one with logic, one with common sense, one with logical consequences to one’s actions. This just is so... so... weird, so illogical, so nonsensical!”

That evening, upon falling asleep, he had a dream. He was returning to some nondescript movie-rental outlet a movie that he had watched by himself the previous night. He walked into the store and handed the video-case to the young man behind the counter. The young man opened the box, looked at the tape, looked at Theodore, and said, “Sir, thank you for returning the tape by the deadline, but you didn’t rewind it. It clearly says that you’re supposed to rewind the tape. I’m sorry, sir, but we are going to have to expropriate all of your possessions. If you would prefer, you can step into the manager’s office to hand over your wallet and give the pertinent identification, residential, and banking information.”

“What?” replied Theodore, astonished. “What are you talking about? Is this some type of joke? True, I admit it’s not rewind, but it’s only a video-tape!”

“I’m sorry sir. It’s our store policy. Even you admitted that you didn’t rewind the tape. We can’t bend the rules to every customer’s whim. What’d be the point then?”

“Well, I’ve never heard of such a rule. It’s absolutely preposterous!”

“We’ve had this policy for quite some time now, sir. It’s common knowledge around here. You could have asked anyone here – we all know the rule.” Theodore was in absolute awe. He tried to speak some sense to the young man behind the counter: “OK. Why don’t I just take my, or rather, this movie back home, rewind it, and bring it back in about thirty minutes. How’s that sound. Easy?” Theodore was having a difficult time controlling his temper.

“Sir, do you not understand? That surely wouldn’t work. You’ve already handed me the tape. If you want the movie again, to watch it or whatever (that doesn’t really matter to me), we have to check it out, just as we do for every movie. Simple procedure. But to check the movie out, we must first check it in. That makes sense, I hope. And when we check the movie in, the computer will find that it was not rewind, thereby officially sentencing the fine. It’s really quite simple and logical, sir.” The young man, by the end of his explanation, was speaking in a very calm voice, almost as one helps a seven-year old learn his times table, reiterating facts that, to the teacher, are as blatantly obvious as the color of the sky. “What am I then to do? It’s just a video-tape. Am I stuck? I just wanted to watch a damn movie, for goodness sakes. When I finished watching it, it was late, I was tired, then I brought it back after work!”

“Sir.” Theodore saw the manager holding his head out of his office, probably signaled by the young man behind the counter. The head, enormous, was the most horrible face Theodore had ever seen. It pained him to look in that direction – like a sun, only without the glory and the beauty – just pure repulsiveness. “Would you mind stepping back here...”

At that point, Theodore woke up, sweating, short of breath, fists tightly clamped. He looked at his clock: 2:05. “Oh crap...” he whispered under his breath, though there was nobody around to hear him. He had to do something. He just had to.

Friday afternoon, Theodore scheduled an hour for a telephone call to his movie rental store so that he would not be interrupted. So, at three o’clock in the afternoon, he dialed the store’s number and put the transmitter up to his ear.

“Hello, this is the movie-rental store, how may we help you?” he heard.

“Yes, hello, the other day, I was informed that I am in possession of an overdue movie.”

“Oh, OK.” Pause.

“And, yes, I would like to... I mean, I was not given any information about it, except that I checked it out eighteen months ago, and did not return it.”

“That may be so, sir, but I cannot help you. I’m sorry.”

“Well then, who can?”

“The manager, sir.”

“Well then,” yelled Theodore – he was really growing quite tired of these charades, but with a hint of cautiousness and anxiety, complements of his previous night’s apparitions, “please let me speak with him.”

“Oh, sir, it’s quite unfortunate, but he was fired several days ago.”

“May I speak with the new one then?”

“We do not yet have a new one, and anyhow, he would not be able to help you, I don’t believe.”

“Why not?”

“How would our new manager know the policies of our past manager?”

“Wouldn’t you instruct him?”

“It is not our place, sir, as telephone-answerers and counter attendants to tell our boss what to do, what policies to implement, which ones to scrap, etc.”

“Then what about my predicament? Am I free then?” asked Theodore, very anxious in anticipation. Perhaps his slate would be wiped clean!

“Of course not, sir. As you yourself said, you were told that you have an overdue video that you need to return to us, and a large late fine to pay. You do admit you said that, sir?”

“Well, I certainly did say that that’s what someone told me.”

“You don’t expect that they were lying, do you?”

“Well... they may h— no, I suppose not. What, then... you see, I’m very confused – I was always under the impression, perhaps, that I had a firm grasp of the normal day to day order of things – now, obviously I was partially ignorant, though I still don’t like to assume that...but, what I want to ask is: what do you recommend I do?”

“I don’t see why you’re asking for a recommendation from me. I could recommend a good drama or a horror flick, but I don’t expect you to think that I’m good for giving advice on such a level as this. But, I do suppose you should heed the advice of the telephone call you received, whatever it may have said. That’s probably a thing you could do. But really, I wouldn’t know.”

“OK. Well shoot. Anyway, thanks.” Theodore resigned. What a bizarre, fantastic system, this was. He knew, he was just so sure of it, that he had in fact turned in the movie, but it made no difference! He was growing quite desperate, searching his head for any possible ideas. He thought about going to a video-retailer and purchasing a few films, ones that might possibly be the one that he had lost, or rather, the one that the movie store said that he had lost. But why should he have to? It was the video-rental store’s job to purchase new movies, not the customers. That was the antithesis of his purpose. “I may as well, though. What else can I do?” He called that very evening.

“Hello. A while ago I received a telephone call stating that I forgot to return a rented video that I rented nearly a year-and-a-half ago, and that I needed to pay an exorbitant fine. I was not told which movie I did not return, but regardless, I don’t believe that I actually forgot to return whatever video it may have been. I am willing to put that argument aside.

I have purchased several movies with my own money, movies that may be the ones that the computer says I did not return. Would you like me to bring them into the store? You may keep them all if you want, for I don't care to watch movies more than once, anyhow."

"First of all, sir, I don't know to which telephone call you are referring. But yes, as you said, regardless of that point, perhaps a large, significant one, I will address your inquiry: I, personally, though I do not expect you to take my opinion as that of the entire store, its management, or its other employees, believe that your 'plan of action' is poorly designed and ridiculous. First of all, you admitted yourself that you do not know which video you allegedly did not turn it in. How are you to know which movies to give to us to make up for that loss? Secondly, you could not have forgotten that you would still need to return the video that you borrowed, for it was and still is property of this store, legally and otherwise, and not of you. Thirdly, you would certainly still need to pay the fine, whatever the amount may be. And finally, this 'method' that you want to use to atone for your mistake is most definitely not a 'method' that this store has ever encouraged or suggested or accepted. Though we value the customer, it is not the job or purpose of the customer to enact his own procedures of rental and return. If I understand this telephone call you received correctly, you must return the video that you had not returned and pay the fine. I think, though this is just my own personal assessment, for whatever that's worth, that that telephone call was proper procedure. Thank you sir. I have another customer on the line. Thank you again."

That did not work. Why not? What was the huge difficulty? Of all the problems in the world, one misplaced video, probably a lousy one at that, should be the least of the worries. What if he went into the store and demanded, demanded until he got a satisfactory answer? Hm. Maybe not such a great idea. Theodore remembered his eerie dream – what if, knowing he couldn't pay, they took all of his worldly belongings? Put him into bankruptcy? He couldn't live with that, not with bankruptcy. No, that certainly wouldn't do. He *had to find the tape!* He just had to! He obviously hadn't looked long and hard enough. He *would* find it! What else was there to do?

Theodore, as carefully as he could, checked over every square inch of his car, his office, his gym locker, everywhere. He rummaged through a couple of old filing-cabinets, tossing out documents and binders by the handful. Under the sofa he saw only thirty-three cents – no tape. Not on the bookshelf. What about *in* the VCR? He probably had used it in the past eighteen months, but perhaps the tape was put back in there somehow, maybe by the housekeeper. He got down on his knees so that he could see the VCR, which was under the television. He tried to peek in through the door on the front of the machine but could not see. He shoved his hand into the slot to feel around, and was promptly shocked by a line surge at just that moment.

Upon waking up in the morning, he found that he had been metamorphosized into a man-sized video-cassette tape, *the one he had been looking for!*