

EGREGORE

by Greg Stolze

(This work was released under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike License 2.0)

At the swearing-in ceremony, immediately after taking the oath of office, the new President muttered something. The Chief Justice heard that a phrase was spoken, but no specifics, and the flash of the cameras, the effort of being in front of people—the Chief Justice tried to shield himself from it but was well aware that people hated him, hated him intensely, hated him for what he did and for what he failed to do, that some people loathed him for overreach and others, contemplating the same decision, despised him for not doing enough—it wearied him and he didn't care, couldn't, he just wanted to get home. He had downloaded a new game on his cell phone, something like a crossword or sudoku, he was hoping to get a few rounds in while his driver took him away. So he did not investigate the first words spoken by the new Commander in Chief.

###

At one time, life on Earth consisted solely of one-celled creatures, barely worthy of the name “animal.” Boiling in the forge of evolution, each blindly and ignorantly acted out its impulses, trying to eat and split, consume and reproduce, each suffused with energy to pursue these drives. (Those without sufficient drives, without such chemical action programs, faded back into the soup and were devoured.)

But one day, a single-celled organism tried to eat another and only succeeded in part. It encompassed its prey, but could not penetrate it, could not plunder its valuable interior acids and

proteins. It had that meal trapped, but undigested. And something peculiar happened.

It turned out that the cell within the cell could use its predator as a new environment. What the outside ate, the prey could eat from within. It had become the first parasite.

Perhaps it happened right away, with that first pairing. Or maybe it happened after a billion similar coincidences—there's no way to know. But at some point, a cell-inside-a-cell became more than just a stealthy thief. Its refuse, the organic strings it excreted... they were, by happenstance, useful to the outer entity. Each—the outer thing and the inner—contributed something unique. Together, they were more versatile, more omnivorous, more able to devour, than either was alone.

This was the first nucleated cell, and it changed everything.

###

“Shaddap,” the President of the United States said. “Shaddap, I'm the most powerful. Most on Earth. Most powerful man. Shaddap.” He was so tired. It used to be he didn't feel so tired. If he got tired, he'd sleep on beautiful sheets of silk or high-thread-count cotton. (He was secretly embarrassed that sometimes he liked to sleep on cotton more than on silk which was, after all, more expensive.) When he was young, if he'd been tired but hadn't wanted it, he'd just get a blowjob from whomever and snort a little cocaine, but the cocaine

today didn't seem to work as well, it just made him snifty and jittery, somehow anxious *and* weary. He hadn't thought you could be both. He hadn't thought that there was any overlap between having too much energy and not enough.

That woman was still talking.

"...so you see, the metrics we're tracking, the parameters just aren't acceptable. We need a decision on this, Mr. President..."

"Ask the other guy."

"No." The staffer was... unimpressed? Was that possible? "This is a presidential decision. You have to take a stance. Now. Sir."

"Shaddap." He could feel how much weaker this demand was. He hated that feeling. "The first. Option one, the A option, awright? You happy? You happy now?"

"I serve at the pleasure of the President, sir."

"Fuggoff, bitch."

###

It is a law of thermodynamics that systems leak. They are inefficient. Energy is inextricably lost. When you lift something with a pulley, there is always some slippage between the rope and the disc, some friction, some part of your effort that is paid, like a tax, to the imperfection of reality. Human bodies, they age as replacement cells are inevitably plagued by accumulating DNA transcription errors. Or, when you send power through a wire, some of the electricity turns into heat. The amount that comes out the other end is always less than what you put into it, and the farther it goes, the more is wasted. This loss is called "entropy" and, projecting it

forward on a grand scale, it leads to a distressing concept called "the heat-death of the universe."

But we're nowhere close to that, yet.

The oft-ignored corollary to entropy's grinding diminishment—the iron law that when nothing is added to a system, the energy within gradually winds down—is this: When energy *is* added to a system, it tends to become more organized and useful. If you want to send electricity through a wire without loss, you need to go to the effort of constructing and maintaining a superconducting line which (currently) costs far more effort and money than simply writing off the heat of resistance. Mechanically, if you pedal your bike while going downhill, you get greater speed than if you just coasted.

On the system called Earth, the source of outside energy is the sun. It bombards us with free solar power all day every day, and under that pressure the inanimate seas evaporate to form clouds, the clouds move, their electrical charges differentiate and spark lightning, brownian motion agitates shallow pools, simple carbon becomes complex organic strings and those in turn become combative one-celled animals.

Bathed in relentless warmth and light, monocellular life becomes nucleated, and those nucleated entities work in concert forming fungi, plants and animals. Vast oniony layers of creatures, increasingly sophisticated, lumber across the land and slither through the deeps. The heart of the cell, once independent, is now a motionless mastermind supported by its surrounding organelles. The cell itself is one of many serving a function within the environment of a body, perhaps a blood cell rushing about

ferrying oxygen to the fixed organs, perhaps a factory buried within bone marrow constructing those blood cells.

Each cell has no understanding. It has only purpose— instructions painstakingly graven into place by aeons of random trial-and-error evolution. Yet arising from those individually ignorant cells, held in place within their individually ignorant organs, supported and designed from within by those individually ignorant nuclei, all ultimately buoyed up and washed into place by the indifferent power of the sun's perpetual explosion... arising from all that is the individual human, with a brain. Patterned by yet somewhat separate from the brain, a mind, an identity: Consciousness.

###

The Vice President liked people, if they were the right people. Even the wrong people, he liked to talk to them, talk with them, listen, inwardly shake his head and try, try to gently and persuasively guide them to the light. Turn them around. Get everyone on the same page, though that seemed laughable right now.

The President was acting like he had a mandate, like he'd been swept into office by a blistering majority. It was going to take a lot of repetition to make reality act like that was true, and when he was alone—or, sometimes, when he couldn't avoid being outnumbered by the wrong people—the VP questioned whether this was possible.

(Sometimes at night, he would wake from dreams in which he was trapped in a huge dirty building, looking for the bathroom, but the bathrooms had no privacy, they were just open and filled with staring, dirty people, the toilets vast and unclean and communal. When he

woke from these dreams he usually had to urinate, and sometimes he'd chuckle as he did, in his very clean bathroom, in his private and comfortable home. No great secret meaning in that dream! He just had to pee!)

(But then when he lay down again the thought would sneak up and hit him, that maybe it was wrong to use a government that was for everyone to do things most people didn't want. And when he thought that thought, it was hard to sleep again. So he tried to never think that.)

During the day, talking with people, he felt good. He felt like he was leading the nation in the proper direction and this time he'd get it right. Of course, he was cautious. He'd felt like he was doing the right thing with that bathroom dealie back in Indiana and it turned out *everyone* had gotten mad at him for it. Both sides! The one thing they could agree on was that he had bungled the bathroom bill, even if they couldn't agree on why or how it was wrong. That was, for the Vice President, what Hell must be like. Everyone agreeing to disagree with you.

Today's business wasn't about bathrooms, though he felt very strongly that there was something *wrong* with a country that couldn't even get its boys in the boys' room, but he put that thought aside for as long as he was able, because the Russians were moving ships in the Persian Gulf. He was not very happy with the Russians. He knew that if he handled things right, advised the President with finesse, had the right guys in the room with him... well, he might just create a new set of deals, with the Russians instead of the squishy lefty EU. Not an alliance, he was smart enough to see the Russians had come to the table to eat. But some more breathing room, a

wider space in which the right people might operate.

He wanted to go back to Indiana, but he knew he'd have to wait. Wait until things were better. Wait until he had something to show, something *real*. He'd never say it aloud, but he was tired of things not being quite true enough. He was weary, repeating the talking points over and over and over to make them function. He just wanted something factual, something that would still *be there* when you stopped talking about it.

Though of course, the Russians would still be there no matter what. So what he wanted was something that was concrete *and also good news*.

He sighed. It must, he thought, be so easy for those degenerates who don't ever have to think about politics, they can just go to some sex orgy and not worry about appearances. How did people get to be that way, so free and unencumbered? He had no idea.

###

Philosophers, neuroscientists, and the occasional college freshman with really good weed—they've all frowned, furrowed their brows, and tried to come to grips with this thing called 'consciousness.' What is it? What does it mean to know oneself, to be set above the animals, to be capable of understanding that other minds exist as you do, to use your knowledge of others to deepen your grasp of yourself?

It's not easy. It seems to be an emergent property. Just as neither carbon nor energy could recopy themselves, but carbon *exposed to energy* can—just as inner nucleus and outer cell could not, side by side, attain the energy efficiencies of one inside the other—just as neither

bone marrow nor circulatory system can fight infection without the other—the conscious mind seems to be a thing that brain cells do through synergy, which individually they could never attain.

It's been suggested that we grew such big brains as radiators to vent excess heat generated by marathon pack hunting strategies. The cognitive increase? To evolution, it was just a side-effect. To biological history, a quirky gift-with-purchase. To humankind, our defining and most crucial mutation.

To be conscious is to imagine, and the most imagined thing for every person is their consistent personality. There is nothing stopping you, you the reader, from marking your place, setting this story aside, and committing a grisly and unprovoked murder against the person you love the most. The person you imagine you love the most. The person you imagine your imaginary self to love the most.

There's nothing stopping you but you don't because you won't because you can't do it and still be you.

And yet, you can imagine it, can't you? Where in your home the hammer lies, or the knife? If you're not healthy enough to heft such a weapon, you pictured how you could poison them, how you could manage to smother them in sleep. Or if you didn't think those thoughts before, as you read them here you are certainly thinking them now. Sorry about that.

We imagine, then. We think of things that aren't true, and play with them as if they were. This is something squirrels and dogs and even great apes probably don't do—daydreaming, writing short stories.

But to imagine a thing is to partly believe it. We know it's untrue, it's not a fact, it's dissonant from reality, but we make it *believable*. We make believe. We suspend our criticism and think "But what if...?" and, miraculously, we are sometimes able to change the facts to fit our imagination.

"People can't fly, have never flown, have only fallen," thought Orville and Wilbur Wright, "*But what if we could?*"

"Britain is in charge, has far greater weaponry and organization, and we are not free," thought Mahatma Gandhi, "*But what if we were? How could we get there?*"

"Not enough food is generated by the plants and processes we use," thought Norman Borlaug, "*But what if we changed them?*"

That which is known to be false becomes plausible, and that which is plausible sometimes—not most of the time, but often enough—becomes real. Through some alchemy of consciousness and act, through an emergent property of thinking and doing, what was only thought is engraved on matter and history.

Does this mean that to imagine a thing is to partly desire it? If we didn't desire to interact with an event, why could we contemplate it at all? We may deny this—push it away into shadow—but why would we think of frights and doomsdays if there was not something within us willing to see them made real?

Something hoping for it?

###

The Russian president left the room like a locomotive, direct and powerful and looking like something it would be dangerous to pause before. His

"translator" kept pace, turning his shoulders to fit through the doorway.

"*Never,*" the Russian president said, stammering—and he was not a stammering man—"Never have I been, never have I had such an insult!"

Everything had been going so well with the American. They agreed about the fairies and the subordinate races. They had similar tastes in action, similar goals, or so it seemed. They'd even shared a woman, back in 2014. (Not, together, of course. The Russian had sent her to him, a few days after their first conversation.) Privately, the Russian had considered the man a warped, diminished and goblin-like reflection of himself. Only not a fighter. Not a spy. Not a politician, not a... not a *realist*. Just a rich boy who became a TV buffoon, stupid and rude enough to sway the rude and stupid Americans to him. A useful idiot.

At some level, he had considered the risks of putting the fearsome foolish arsenal of the world's luckiest country in the hands of a man who was clearly at heart a child (and not a happy child) but he had trusted the chaos. He *needed* the chaos. Russia was diminished, tragically shrunken, and anything that made the world confusing and alarmed made his calm authority more powerful in comparison. The reality star had seemed perfect.

But something at this dinner had set him off. Perhaps he was just senile! But the Russian president had said something, it had been translated, and the American had turned bright red, his under-throat swelling like a bullfrog's, and then he was yelling and pounding the table with his fist. Dishes had jumped. Drinks had spilled. Crumbs had sprayed from the American's mouth, spittle-

slicked, as he bellowed some reply. A second blow to the table had caught the edge of a plate, flipping it end over end, hurtling perfectly-cooked brown rice through the air.

“*Mr. President,*” the translator said, reaching sausage-like fingers to pick rice grains off the Russian leader’s lapel, out of the thinning hair on the side of his head. “*We must...*”

“*Silence!*” the President snapped. He put out a hand and shoved at Sergei’s shoulder, but it was like pushing against the tire of a parked tractor, he lost balance and stumbled, hissing the words “*Don’t preen me!*”

“*What are we to do?*”

“*Do? Leave this nation of assholes and engage the fallback plan.*”

Even as he said it, he felt a chill. The fallback was risky, ill-prepared—he’d hardly expected the Americans to fall for his tampering gambit, the idea of it falling apart after seemed so much less likely than it succeeding in the first place—but there was no way he could forgive what had been done, what had been seen and recorded. Shouted at, *sprayed with food*, like some cringing underling. It had taken all he had to resist picking up his steak knife and sticking that fat gutsack in his floppy throat.

He could not be secondary. He could not afford to be someone yelled at, not even by the commander of a thousand nuclear bombs. He had to strike back, and be seen to strike back, and deny striking back.

It was not going to be easy or profitable. The American had ruined everything.

###

We have seen how things on Earth get greater, bigger and more complex. All that sunlight, what does it nourish? First organic strings, then cells, then multicelled creatures, then consciousness. Does it go further? Yes.

If humans are constellations of cells, what is a constellation of people? A nation, a faith, a community? Perhaps.

Could something bigger arise from the massing of consciousnesses? Mystics have thought so, have believed enough to coin a word: Egregore.

An egregore is more than an aggregation of mere thoughts. (That would just be a text, or a library.) It is more than a unified goal—those lesser words like country and cause, they are fit for the piled-up ambitions of small people.

An egregore would be qualitatively different, vast and inscrutable, as unconcerned with the actions of its components as you might be with the function of your thyroid or pineal glands. Cells individually divide, live and die, but cells *combined* become human, producing consciousness as an emergent effect that no number of cells could if they were merely together but not assembled. A bag of donor blood has powerful healing properties, but it’s little compared to blood in context, moving within its native system. Similarly, people individually believe in freedom or democracy or the will to power, but people *combined* enact agendas too large, too significant for individual humans to grasp or even imagine.

The egregore of humanity flexed and awakened not long after the development of consciousness, after a disaster that so overwhelmed humankind’s previous operating behaviors that they were forced to

conjure a new, more flexible system to cope—a system of imagination to deal with a reality that had become unsurvivable. This happened about 70,000 years ago, when a volcanic super-explosion knocked the population of *homo sapiens* back to around 5,000 individuals. For reference, that's a quarter of the seating in Madison Square Garden.

The egregore awakened because the stuff of it nearly went extinct. It found itself embodied in 5,000 people and it immediately set about expanding. By the year 2016, it had succeeded to the tune of seven billion individuals. This expansion is proportional to an 8-week-fetus weighing 90mg growing to be a 180 pound adult.

What did this superconsciousness think about during its expansion? What has it planned for 70,000 years? What has it been putting us in place to *do*?

###

It was cold. She was cold. There was something behind the cold, too, something in Deeny's bones, an ache deep in a core she hadn't known she'd had, a pain in a place she didn't know she had nerves. She pushed forward, walking, because it was what she knew how to do. There was an urgent care ahead. She knew. She'd driven by it a hundred times, taking Janey to gymnastics.

(No. She couldn't think about Janey. She wouldn't. She wouldn't. She couldn't.)

Deeny had never been in. When Janey got hurt, Deeny took her to St. Matthews', it was near their house. It was where Janey was born. It was-

(No. Couldn't. Wouldn't.)

She was pretty sure that if she quit walking she would just stop, and with every step that sounded more and more sensible. What were they going to do at the urgent care? Could they treat this? Did they even know what it was? Deeny sure as hell didn't. Before the radios went off and all the cars stopped and the fire and the glass flying through Janey and her husband, the glass, the blinding fire-

(No. Won't.)

But she was so thirsty. They'd have water at least. Maybe some Gatorade. Something. She put a foot forward, shifted her weight and she could see it. *See* it. There was a glow from inside... chemlights? Shadows moved in the green dim. People?

Deeny put forward another foot and decided that she'd get a drink and see. Maybe then she'd let herself die. But maybe she'd let herself live.

By the time she got to the doorway, someone was already there. A woman, heavysset. Shocked eyes, staring too long. Face slack, expressionless.

"Please..."

"Who are you?" the doorway woman asked.

"I'm so thirsty..."

"Do you have the hat?" Her voice wasn't raspy, wasn't dry. She'd had water. Inside, there must be something to drink.

"...hat?" Deeny asked.

The woman folded her arms, narrowed her eyes. "The red hat. You know the one."

"I... I don't..."

"Politics. What are your politics?"

Deeny couldn't read this woman. She did not deal with people like this, people who were so hard and resistant. Probably two months ago, this woman hadn't been like this.

Deeny tried. Left or right? What would this woman do, how would she act? They were strangers. She had to demonstrate a tribe.

"Show me the fucking hat."

So, slowly, Deeny fumbled with her purse and pulled out a red baseball cap. The sign. The uniform. "Make America Great Again."

The woman in the doorway smiled, but it was joyless.

"Please," Deeny said. "Can I have some water?"

"No. Water's for decent people. But I'll tell you what, you fucking traitor. I'll give you a quicker death than radiation poisoning."

Deeny saw the axe handle swinging at her and somehow—somehow it gave her an odd little boost of hope? That the woman could swing it so hard and fast after the light and Janey burning and everything? Deeny didn't dodge. She couldn't. It hit her head hard and down she went.

But it didn't kill her. It took Deeny eight more hours to die.

###

What is the goal of the egregore? Is it the survival of the species, of itself? One would assume so, but one would assume that the goal of a neutrophil white blood cell is survival when, in fact, the very act of defense that is its purpose extinguishes it. Your life is built on the regular demise of millions of cells.

Considering humanity's propensity for wide-scale slaughter, the notion that the egregore cares about its components seems unsupportable. Especially if one considers the destruction of the environment in which its constituent population dwells. An individual, a you or me, has an excuse for ignoring the gradual alterations in the climate, changes spanning decades and continents. But something as big as the egregore would surely perceive it all... wouldn't it? If it opposed such a disastrous possibility, wouldn't it act, have its human elements preserve their breathable air, their potable water, the predictable weather upon which food security depends?

(Over the course of the 20th century, there was a massive movement to urbanize. More and more people moved to cities, bigger and bigger ones, where the air quality was *worse*, where illness could be more concentrated, where any disaster or act of war could harm thousands instead of mere dozens or hundreds. If survival was the goal, if the safety of *any* individual was of any importance... why?)

Survival instincts are gouged into the behaviors of tangible animals because it's such a reproductive and evolutionary advantage. But why would an egregore have a drive to survive, any more than you, a fully multicellular human, would need a drive to procreate by cloning like a yeast cell?

An egregore would be—must be—an entity in a state of constant flux, flipped into new configurations by the technological advances it, itself, demands, pummeled by rising population and the constant influx of solar impacts, always exhaustingly expanding.

What if its goal is to stop?

A creature of pure idea might simply wish to become the most effective expression of itself and then—having become perfect—freeze into that position forever. We, small mortals, cannot know what the word or notion or idea is, that the egregore might long to permanently make of itself. But whatever message or pattern that might be, the egregore could need to express it, *become* it, and then cease. It would need to die at its height, in order to remain unflawed. The human race would grasp its collective purpose and, in that moment, perish.

###

“Mr. President...”

“What is this, a fucking Ramada Inn?”

His aide sighed. She'd been impressed, early on. She'd felt something when he spoke, even when her parents scoffed. She'd followed the family path of academics, had a degree in semiotics, understood language deeply and she'd felt something pure and important in those speeches, in the rhythms behind the words. Somehow, this man—to whom she'd devoted her professional career at the cost of seeing her father red-faced, *shrieking* at her over the Thanksgiving turkey, apoplectic with his failure to understand—he had stirred something in her, a patriotism that was deep and preverbal and more passionate than any of the calm rational principles she'd been taught by her PhD mom and dad.

She still, at some level, believed in that, in *him*. She could never fully escape the feeling that he had been the mouthpiece for something greater, some collectivizing human force that mere language could not encompass.

But now he didn't remember where he was so she could never fully embrace that feeling either.

“We're at the shelter, remember? The secret base?”

“Fuckin' Russians. I tell ya. I tell ya —never trust a Russian. They have great shit, the best shit, and their women, Jesus... but they'll fuck ya in the end.” Those eyes, once brilliant and blue, now bleared and unfocussed. “In the end,” he repeated, as if it was the profoundest wisdom, “They'll fuck ya.”

“Mr. President. It's about the launch.”

“Send it. Nuke 'em. Launch the shit outta, outta...”

“We did that.” She kept her voice calm and level. She raised one finger to wipe away a tear. “We did that, Mr. President.” And by God, it seemed to relax him. He seemed relieved, what could that mean?

“This is the other, that... that thing, the culture thing?”

“The cortex launch,” she said. It was a final gesture—an encoding of the collected culture of humanity. Initially, it was meant to be curated, a sort of “Humanity's Greatest Hits” launched to the moon for safekeeping, beckoning with a nuclear radio beacon, but as the project had moved on, the Senators who had argued against including all that African and Chinese stuff had gotten distracted by the decimation of their home district electrical grids by cyber-attacks and then, as things had escalated, by tailored bioweapon releases and finally the nuclear exchange.

The same factors that distracted so many, had focussed the few who

remained. They were the true believers, the ones who cried when the NEA was disendowed in order to fund partisan electoral policing of “unidentified and questionable voters,” the ones who’d really loved NASA. Now there was one rocket that had somehow survived in Florida and was pointed at the moon, if the president would give the order.

“Um...” He frowned.

“Why don’t I just take care of it?”

“It has my name on it, right?”

“Of course, Mr. President,” she said, though she had no idea if this was true or not. (It wasn’t.)

As she went off to forge his signature and send humanity’s collected thoughts away from a world that was rapidly running out of humans, the President of the United States lay back on his bedspread. He was really tired.

“Nylon!” he mumbled, to no one. “A nylon fucking bedspread! Christ.”

Then he said it again, in a low and querulous voice. The same thing he’d muttered during his inauguration, the question with no answer and, soon, no one to answer it. (His aide had been infected with one of the more advanced Russian nanophages and he’d caught it, though neither of them suspected a thing.)

“When do I get to do what I want?”