

Monstrous Creatures

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Electroshock, Michael says, as if
Chanting a mantra: Electroshock, electroshock ...
It does sound like some strange prayer,

A magic spell, an incantation to make
His grief disappear. It's come round
To midnight, and Michael says he's tired

Of feeling like he lives in a great hole—
The walls above him crumble and crumble in.
Electroshock, he says. I wish I knew

What to say to him. Since Sharon died,
He's like a tree in a gale, or maybe
He is the gale, or maybe he's just one

Drop of rain driven into the night.
He takes the last of his coffee and grabs
His coat. I give him a hug and say,

Stay, sleep on the sofa. I'll make a fire
And you can chant some more. Yeah,
He says, if only I were drunk. Leaving now

Or in the morning, it's all the same.
Whatever comfort we leave, he says, whatever
Light, we all go when it's time. And then

He sits back down. Okay, he says,
I'll stay, but only because leaving
Takes more nerve than I have right now—

I mean, why turn my back on even
A little light, the fire in the hearth,
The fire in the cave. Who wants to disappear

Into the dark, into our fear of the dark,
The unknown, that gloom we call
The future, all of our delusions and ill-

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Formed plans gift-wrapped,
Ribbioned, and bowed like one more
Awful necktie-and-handkerchief set

Under some garish fake Christmas tree?
But for most of us, I say, that
Is a blessing: a cup of spiced eggnog,

The colored lights blinking on the tree,
And Bing Crosby on the stereo crooning
“White Christmas.” I nudge him. It is

Possible, even in the Christmas shock,
Even in the clutch of all the odd-
Ball uncles and third cousins, even if

You’re appalled and must endure that kind
Of claustrophobic, jammed-
Shoulder-to-shoulder comfort. Like Japan,

Michael says, the nation-family, one
Hundred and some million crowding
Their string of sea-spewn rocks. He smiles,

Almost, and I see that we're in for
A night of it. Japan? I say. Yeah,
He says, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

They made all those B-movies, as if
Little Boy and Fat Man weren't
Enough, as if sci-fi fiction, somehow,

Could illuminate the real thing. And they
Thrilled to it, the horror, annihilation made
Fake and real all at once—nature

Gone completely berserk, giving
Life to hordes of monstrous creatures
Impervious to their tanks and rockets:

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Godzilla stomping ashore like MacArthur,
Rodan swooping across the sky
Like the Enola Gay with its fiery breath,

Mothra, Kumonga, Anguirus,
Varan, and dozens more, tramping all
Across Japan because we had to drop

The bomb, not once, but twice.
Hurray for us, he says. We'll be up
Till dawn, so I put on a pot of coffee

And grab two glasses and a bottle of vodka.
You know, Michael says, more than two-
Hundred-thousand people died,

But Godzilla came to life, and that's us,
Monstrous creatures, all too ready
For the red-hot and rip-roaring. So long,

Toy tanks, toy bridges, toy towns. So long,
Japan. Small wonder
That in the spring the Japanese visit

En masse the cherry blossoms, delicate
And fleeting, nostalgic even before
The petals fall. But even before the bomb,

I say, they went. For a thousand years,
They've seen that we're momentary,
Transient, and made their pilgrimage

To honor the beauty of our brief lives.
But the bomb, Michael insists, has proven
The more appropriate metaphor: a blast,

Then nothing at all. Armageddon,
Judgment Day, golden harps and hosannas,
Et cetera. So there you go, he says,

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The bomb is our modern Christ,
A gift to us—as one public idiot said—
Given by our benevolent God,

In whose benevolence we are at last
All made equal, right down
To our very atoms. And he raises

His glass and shoots back a shot
Of vodka. Every couple of weeks,
Michael needs a night to let out

All that's pent-up. This last April,
His girlfriend died, a car accident,
Sharon and her younger sister, boom,

Both dead, and I think dawn
Always seems farther off for him.
Who can live one long night

After another? I worry for him
And I listen because there's something pure
About his grief. I listen because

There has always seemed something
Constant, something invariable, about it.
Does his life make his grief or does

His grief make his life? One night
A couple years back, he came home to
A busted latch, an open window, a living room

With a breeze and emptied of stereo, TV,
DVD, lava lamp, and more.
The material world blossoms, he says,

And the crime rate rises accordingly,
But how can anyone really argue
Against the unruly abundance of even

The most temporary physical pleasures,
 The trinkets and geegaws, the baubles
 And trifles and jumbles, the everything

And even the far-too-little? Why argue
 Against the objects of the easy life? That they
 Decimate the spirit, perhaps? What

Doesn't? Michael says and holds out
 His cup for coffee, black and strong,
 And goes on to extol the spunk and sheer

Recklessness of the small-time thief,
 The cutpurse and mugger and housebreaker,
 The thief for whom theft may be

Pleasure but not a game, the thief
 Who must recognize not the price
 But the worth of a stereo, a vase, a camera,

Whatever modest jewelry adorns
 The victim's vanity. It is, Michael says,
 A distinction worth noting: The goods

Have got to sell, and so the priceless is
 Just as well worthless. Say you steal some
 Newly unearthed papyrus, and on it, say,

Is that carpenter the Christ's signature
 —Maybe on the road to Gethsemane he signed
 An autograph for some good Little Samaritan—

It isn't worth the tab in any back-road
Barbeque joint. You simply cannot buy
Ribs and white bread with the priceless.

That is what the spirit's worth, he says
And pours a shot. Spirits, he says, *boom!*
The whole damn thing, *boom!* Everything

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Gone but you and me, and what remains,
The spirit? Some abstraction? No—
Our hunger remains. And there's always

The chance. In the last four hundred
Million years, Earth has seen five
Major mass extinctions, and even more

Minor mass extinctions. Think of that,
He says, a *minor* mass extinction.
Suppose one fine day you're a trilobite,

A fairly sophisticated roundhead,
The top of the heap, grubbing
In the muck of a limestone platform

Far out at sea, above what we've come
To call Utah, and a just-large-enough
Chunk of rock, some debris, some

Piece of celestial garbage, it plunges
Into your atmosphere and sizzles across
Your sky and splashes straight into

Your ocean. Up from the sea floor come
Waves and waves of deep water,
Which is oxygen-poor and, it turns out,

Deadly to you. Who knew? *Whoosh boom!*
You and all the immediate kin
Are history. The third-rate cousins,

The squareheads, move in and grub
In your muck. They're more primitive
And adaptable and have it made for the next

Hundred million years, then *boom!* again—
There goes the whole family. So long,
Trilobites all. Hello, goodbye, hello,

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Goodbye. And well, hello, mammals.
Hello, bipeds. Hello, opposable thumbs
And sentience. Hello, shame, hope,

Honor, and despair. And hello, Provo,
City of trilobites and true believers.
The ocean has withdrawn, the trilobites

Are fossilized, and the clock on the stove says
It's far too late. I yawn and rise
And pour coffee for both of us. I know

There's no allotment on grief, but I hear,
Still in my father's voice, the old saw
So who said life was fair? and I can't help

Wondering just how much sorrow
Any man gets: as much as he deserves
Or as much as he desires? Or is it purely

Chance? The day after Sharon's funeral,
The dogwoods blossomed and up
Michael's walk to his door came one of

The earnestly concerned, a young man
In coat and tie, a boy really, fresh faced,
Blond, his blue eyes, as Michael tells it,

Unsullied by thought, and confident,
Having beheld some blinding,
Comforting light. And in the crook of an arm,

He held a stack of complementary pamphlets
That showed in a crude drawing the lyres
Of heaven and the rising flames of hell

And between them the face of a man
Puzzled by the need to make a decision.
No thanks, Michael said, I'm tidy

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With the God of Abraham. The young man
Nodded and handed Michael a pamphlet
And said, Good. The end time, as you

Surely know, is near at hand. And Michael
Agreed, perfectly sincere that day,
I'm sure, in his own grief and belief.

How could he not, standing at the door
Next to the boxes of Sharon's things
That he'd been packing away? So long,

T-shirts and hiking boots and toothbrush.
So long, pink nightgown. So long,
Stuffed lion and diary with its pages

Of clean, clear script. Those days,
Michael has said, were easy with certainty:
Clean out everything—clean out

And drink and wish for numbness, or sleep,
Or death, or the freaking end of the world.
Whatever would come. Whatever.

It's almost four in the morning. I'm tired,
But the vodka tastes good and, really,
The end of the world isn't all

That far-fetched. It seems always
Welcome somewhere, or expected,
Though we clothe it in humor and scorn:

The eternal cartoon character in his beard
And gloom and grimy Biblical garb,
Shuffling along a busy city sidewalk,

The crudely painted letters of his placard
Proclaiming *The End Is Nigh*,
And some young scamp has just taped

To his back a paper that says *Kick Me*,
And at the corner we wait for the light
To flash *Walk* so we walk away

From our common ruin and eventually
We arrive home, safe and warm,
Although later in the evening, in the bedroom,

After a few frenzied minutes of love,
One of us will say, That old man,
It's sad, but what if it's true? What

Would we miss most—our small talk,
The stock portfolio, the tulips, the sweat
Glistening right now on our flesh,

The public library system...? Then
We fall asleep. It strikes me, though,
That no matter how we portray the doomsayer,

No one actually kicks him. Isn't that
A strange sign of faith, too? What if he is
A prophet, some god's right-hand man?

Who'd dare it? Michael would, maybe,
A few months back, fresh and raw
In this long downward spiral, kick him

Or shake his hand. I pour another
Shot of vodka for each of us. It's going on five,
Still dark, but not for long, and I should be

—Should long ago have been—in bed
With Margot, but I am warm with the coffee
And vodka and I have Michael here,

A friend who needs, as I have needed,
A safe place simply to be. He pours coffee
And says, Some days, all I want is to feel

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Nothing at all. That would be a relief,
One day not to live in a hole
That's constantly caving in, to stand

In the open and have a sun that's more
Than a pinprick in the clouds. I miss
Sharon, he says, and I can only guess

At what it is to live in her absence,
To feel that hole opening beneath me
Wherever I stand and pulling me down.

Strange how sometimes we cultivate
Our grief, feed it, water it, train it
To grasp and wend its way up the trellis.

Given a lifetime, it covers the house.
But what the hell do I know,
Standing on the outside looking in?

It may be some neurotransmitters
Have shut down, the dopamine
Doesn't flow, the serotonin ebbs,

The neural connections fail, the signal
Is lost, and the mind turns back on its own
Frail pathways. The line is cut,

The lights go out. And then joy
Is only a notion, hope only
An abstraction. Oblivion, Michael says,

Isn't such a mean conceit. People say
The end of the world, but all that means
Is the end of us. Strangely, he seems

In a better mood, as if he's achieved
Some of the nothingness he says he wants.
But I think of reading bedtime stories

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Every night to Paula and Leah,
My daughters, all of us jammed snug
In the overstuffed chair in Leah's room,

The classics: *Goodnight Moon*, *Frog and Toad*,
Little Bear. When we close the last book,
I say *the* and my girls say *end*, and then

I tuck them in bed. Tonight we'll have
More stories. Michael, I say, I don't want
The end of us. I want all of this

To go on forever. So what that yesterday
Was an awful day, and the day before,
And last week. So what that we spin

Through space faster than we can believe
And still have nowhere important to go.
So what that some days don't do,

That the mail brings bills and junk,
And the revolving doors at the hospital
Spin people in and out and in again,

And the futures exchange falls and rises
And falls. So what. Michael, I say,
Get up. Help me set the table. The girls

And Margot will be up soon. Next up
For us is breakfast. He says, You are such
A cliché—another simp who lives for

The happy ending, the great fake-out,
The cheery pregnant couple at the end
Of every sappy romantic comedy.

Tell that to my girls, I say, and see
Just how far it gets you. So, Michael,
If you're staying for breakfast with us,

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Break some eggs. Get yourself busy.
I switch on the radio and put on another pot
Of coffee, and set the table this morning

For five. The weatherman, in all his sincere
Fallibility, promises a clear, cold
Beautiful day today. All I'm sure of,

Michael says, is that this *beautiful* day,
Like every other, will end.
Darkness is more than a metaphor,

He says while whisking the eggs,
And it's all so ridiculous. It's a double-
Edged faith Michael has, and suddenly

I want him to feel the other edge,
To run it down his wrists and slide it
Across his throat. And I say so—.

And maybe we can make a new holiday,
National Suicide Day. Why not?
Think of the mess, he says. After you, I say,

Why not me, a whole line of us, one
After another? That is us, isn't it,
Monstrous creatures? He feigns shock,

Which I appreciate. Feel better? I ask.
Yeah, he says, let's do this again next week.
I pour two fresh cups and raise mine:

Here's to Death in a robe of cherry blossoms.
Yeah, yeah, he says, to nukes
And meteors, like I need even less hope.

Whether Michael he feels better or not,
The coffee smells good and today
Is just as good a day to live as any other.