



After John Castlemaine's bizarre "insect-assisted suicide," he lands in "RotaryPug," a surreal Purgatory-like realm filled with countless souls awaiting their final judgment—a promotion to heaven or descent into hell. He is forced to reevaluate life, nihilism, and confront the moral value or bankruptcy of his life's actions.

RotaryPug

by Michael J. Honig

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ROTARY PUG

MICHAEL HONIG

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***“Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”***

- William Shakespeare

Prologue

“How long must one wait for eternity to begin?” This is the nagging question monopolizing the thoughts of the weary souls who are forced to move at glacial speed down the course of a poorly lit passageway. They are unable to retire the question and turn their thoughts elsewhere to more pleasant musings. How unfortunate it is that so many are prone to playing the role of mental masochist, a self-destructive vice carried over from life into death.

The tunnel walls are lined with black granite, whose fine texture is interrupted at fixed intervals by magenta-colored gargoyles on either side of the walkway. The crafted sculptures emit a curious, soft glow from their jack-o'-lantern cores, splashing a dull reddish-orange shade over the effulgent stonework canvas. Their cuddly little faces and sheepish grins make them appear like adorable domesticated pets rather than fearsome fiends poised to attack—notwithstanding the chiseled ram horns and the formidable bat-like wings extending proudly from their muscular, broad shoulders.

The tunnel is so inundated with bends that its total length is masked, stomping upon the hopes of its weary travelers, who yearn to see the end. They wonder if they walk in circles, since each stretch of tunnel between the bends looks identical to the one before and after it—with even the gargoyle facades not varying in the slightest detail. The unchanging appearance of the tube is complemented by an unrelenting smell, as a pungent stench of sulfur uniformly permeates the dank, musty air with a near suffocating effect on the travelers.

The sound of a distant metronome governs the steps of each soul, communicating “right foot forward” or “left foot forward” with each metrical tick. Occasionally, the metronome stops and causes the line to come to an abrupt halt, and then resumes shortly afterwards at the same pace. A few impatient travelers erupt out of indignation, heaping curses and insults upon the one responsible for orchestrating such an instrument of control and humiliation. Conversations are common but difficult to carry on, since it is forbidden to leave one’s place in line or to turn around and face the person to the rear.

A stealthy, hooded sentry occasionally leaps out from the shadows between two gargoyles to strike an unsuspecting soul with his truncheon. The phrase “Keep in line, you swine!” is issued frequently by these zealous guards stationed along the course. Of the multitude of dialogues occurring along the march, the reader’s attention shall be directed to one in particular.

“Now, nothing matters—even our warmest hopes cannot anesthetize us from this cruel predicament. For the first time, we’ll assume an existence devoid of everything we cherished in our former lives. What will it be like to receive no more guidance or love from family or friends?” asks a short, pudgy man with a high-pitched voice.

“Guidance? Is that what you crave?” replies a taller man walking in front of the former. “When I was a boy, I looked to my parents for guidance; when I grew into adulthood, I looked to myself for counsel; in old age, I sought wisdom from Providence ... and in death, I stopped looking altogether.”

“Perhaps I’ve not acquired your comfort with such independence, but when does one ever stop craving correction from a loved one? While it may hurt at times, it

confirms the fact that we are loved, that our existence matters to someone. Does it not, sir?"

"It once did. Now, you should acknowledge and accept the fact that you are alone and that you must look to yourself to find the things that you once depended on from others. If you see your parents, and you should hope you do not, don't run up to them and expect an affectionate hug with warm, sloppy kisses. They will not be the loving and nurturing ones whom you once knew and trusted, and they may not even remember you altogether. Hell is sustained or fueled by forgetfulness and indifference, not hatred."

"Surely a mother will always know her own child? Who or what can deprive her of such an inherent and natural recognition? Your portrayal of this place lacks credibility and is unnecessarily morbid. I'll not accept it!" the short man exclaims.

"Don't accept it, for what do I care? I'm not your priest nor your lawgiver, but your way of thinking will make it much harder to adapt to your new confinement. I tell you this for your own good, not for the pleasure of tormenting you," replies the taller man.

"Oh, if I just had a second chance to make it right!"

"What? To be virtuous? All of us probably had numerous chances to reform ourselves, but we found moral turpitude to be far more rewarding."

"I mean I could change if I knew then what I know now."

"Ah, so you would be virtuous only because of fear of eternal punishment? What a great reason to be *good!* No doubt heaven would readily embrace you as a model citizen!"

"What does it matter what my intentions are?! As long as I—"

A sentry clubs the short man in the stomach. "You march to the beat of the metronome, not to your own! Don't let me tell you again! Move on!"

"Ouch! That stings. It would have knocked the wind out of me if I had any to begin with. It's enough that we have to be subjected to this march, but to receive that abuse on top of it! I'd like to see that bastard boiling in his own pudding!"

"We're on our way to hell and you have to mention 'boiling'?!" admonishes the taller man.

"Ah, it can't be that bad. Rumors always distort the truth."

"Do they?! That is exactly what people said about The Great Mortality before it reached England. It then wiped out half of my village in 1349, including the very people who doubted its lethal nature. I thought that experience was all the hell a man should ever have to encounter." The taller man nearly turns around to face the other, but then notices a sentry staring at him.

"My, I didn't realize you were so old!" stammers the short man.

"It hardly matters now, as we will all be 'born again' soon. The major difference is that our spiritual umbilical cords will never be severed from the Devil's tyranny."

"So we should believe the worst rumors now and capitulate to our fears? Our fears are no longer irrational, but objective realities?"

"To some degree, I imagine. Be prepared for anything and don't get caught with your britches down ... or a well-endowed demon might try to bugger you! Hahaha ..."

"Stop with that nonsense! This is no laughing matter!" the short man yells.

“Yes, I suppose you’re correct. Sorry. You just mentioned before that you wish you had a second chance to live a more virtuous life ...”

“Yes, who wouldn’t want another chance? Don’t you?”

“It’s not easy to change one’s stripes. You can’t throw on virtue as you would a new cloak. If you manage to wear it for a little while, you might find that you prefer to put the old one back on. I recall a verse from Scripture that states something like, ‘A dog returns to its vomit.’ I never cared much for religion, and the monks never cared much for me. Oh, but the Bible does have its practical and poetical wisdom!”

“Listen, I feel like vomiting right *now*! Abominable sulfur stench!”

“Tell me, would you seek a virtuous life without the threat of hell or without the promise of heaven looming over you? In fact, can one ever exercise true virtue when tempted by ulterior motives?”

“I don’t know. That seems a lot to ask of anyone. We’re just human, after all. Why do *they* expect the world of us? I know I could have been better if I were given a second chance. Damn this line! I’ve never endured one so great, and I doubt I’ll ever meet its equal. Why does the overseer not rush us through as quickly as possible, and turn his attention to the next batch of lucky bastards ripe for affliction?!”

“Why would he want to do that? For he enjoys manipulating our fears and anxieties. He drains us of our passions, seasons us with despair, marinates us in grief, and fattens us with pain in order to tenderize us for his master’s feast. Oh, he is a skilled chef in this art!”

“Certainly we are more than ingredients in a recipe, to be consumed and left as a hollow carcass of a soul on a silver platter?”

“Almost. We’re left with a hollow carcass to wander the underworld indefinitely, but he puts more valuable things on his silver platters and in his golden goblets. We’re not fit to be consumed at his banquet, for we are now of the stuff that even a famished worm will not touch.”

“Well, I see talking to you has done wonders for my mental health. How does that slave driver get so much satisfaction from his job ushering us into hell?”

“It follows logically from his work on Earth, I imagine.”

“How did he keep himself busy there?”

“He was an officer, a lieutenant in some paramilitary organization in Saxony ... or was it Bavaria? I think it was called the ‘SS’ or something like that.”

“What does ‘SS’ mean?”

“Don’t ask me. My life expired centuries before that notion was conceived. But one might say that his zeal for the cause exceeded even that of its most loyal and ardent followers. He ushered thousands or millions to their death—men, women, and children. Not a tear or a smile ever chipped his stone expression. It is said that, were it not for the cracking of his whip, he could pass for dead.”

“And now he leads us to our eternal death. I can’t bare it any longer!”

“That’s why it’s called ‘hell’, sir,” the taller man chuckles.

“You find this amusing?! We’re not even there yet and we’re suffering!” exclaims the short man.

“Well, then you have a pleasant preview of what awaits us, don’t you? We are being exposed gradually to it. I believe the constancy of this stroll is an indication of what

is to come—stagnation, changelessness. Therein lies the true torment of hell.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. Though it may be hot, we shall be frozen in our infirmities without the possibility for growth and development. It is this static state that will be so unbearable to endure.”

“What makes that particularly painful?” the short man asks.

“Have you ever known existence apart from that which is transitory? For whatever purpose, be it good or bad, we depended on transition ... no, we lived on it. But with no possibility for variation or novelty, there is nothing to hope for, or to look forward to. Without hope, there is no fertile soil for imagination to take root in. If imagination is extinguished, then our passions are subsequently extinguished and our lives have effectively ended. The Devil has done his work well, for his victory is achieved in our deplorable immutability.”

“Your argument loses its efficacy if you consider heaven, where souls achieve a state of perfection. Perfection doesn’t require change, so the highest good is to be free of that blessed transition you speak of.”

“Yes, that occurred to me, but it is not quite a state of static perfection which you describe. With no more fear from God, I argue that heaven does not merit perfection, only the false promise of its attainment. In other words, celestial souls find the greatest fulfillment in inching towards that divine state without ever realizing it. Through a dynamic existence, they avoid boredom, nourish hope, and stimulate the imagination for all eternity. Salvation is found through this unrelenting, forward momentum towards an unreachable target.”

“You have an uncanny way of trivializing everything, you know that?”

“You remind me of someone, a gentleman named Castlemaine,” says the taller man.

“Was he descended from royalty? That surname sounds like he might lay claim to a title, and to a few mistresses as well. Ha-ha.”

“No, he was just a commoner, I think. He was from some place called Cat-kill or Cats-till in the New World, near an island called Manhattan.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of that island. It was owned by the French, or the Dutch perhaps. What did he do?”

“Not exactly sure, but several theories were floating around.”

“Is he still here, or was he *taken*?”

“Nobody knows. He was chatting with a busty harlot the last time he was seen, and then disappeared shortly afterwards.”

“Maybe he got lost somewhere in that crevice between her bosom,” the short man chuckles.

“Perhaps. It is speculated that they could swallow up three men whole. But back to my story. Castlemaine ...”

Comic “Relief”

Count Olshonsky points towards the entranceway where a crowd is gathering, and a steady crescendo of clapping hands snuffs out the background chatter. I look over in that direction but cannot ascertain the source of the disturbance.

“Whom are you talking about? What are they clapping over?” I ask the count.

“Not what—*who*. Ha-ha-ha. You’ll see him shortly. Ah, and ‘shortly’ is the operative word. Ha-ha-ha. I think you’ll like him, as it’s difficult not to.”

“I repeat. Whom are you speaking of?”

“The funniest man I’ve ever seen—a buffoon, a fool. Mr. Castlemaine, you are about to be graced by Goffard Bliss, the Great! Never was there a man so comfortable in his own skin, or so free from worry or care. You could learn from him.”

Then a familiar high-pitched voice distinguishes itself from the spectators’ enthusiastic accompaniment. The voice is vaguely familiar to me. While there is a strong urgency to uncover the source, a gnawing sense of danger makes my blood run cold. I stand up on my tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the spectacle, but several tall Shaolin monks are blocking my view. The words I hear are:

“Harken you knaves to my words,
Let not them fly over like birds;
The Day of Judgment cometh nigh,
Hold your heads up and don’t be shy!
To whatever end we are doomed to meet,
Thou hath the power to face it and beat!
In this great struggle of the soul,

On you will exact a great toll;
Suspended from Purgatory's rope,
With fear of Hades and loss of hope;
I humbly offer to be your guide,
As you swim against the tide;
Who am I you might ask,
No need me to unmask;
Ye shall never miss,
The great Goffard Bliss;
I've baffled queens and riddled kings,
I've worn their rings and other such things;
The maidens I defiled,
With wine they were beguiled;
Led to my lair of lust,
Guided by my word of trust;
Innocent up to the time,
Now caught in a shameful crime;
No return to their virgin state,
For they left through a one-way gate;
But one night with Goffard Bliss,
Is something they'll never miss;
Ladies of Purgatory beware,
Come be my bed-mates if you dare!

I shagged the sheep,
I made them weep;
Heaven or Hell,
I shall rebel;
So keep me near,
To be a dear;
To make thee smile,
Without beguile;
My heart's desire,

To play the lyre;
To make thee laugh,
On my behalf;
A drink for you, a drink for me,
Getting piss-drunk I guarantee;
Whiskey and wine from one source,
They are set on the same course;
To give us respite from our ills,
To entertain us with some thrills;
If I imbibe with great haste,
It will never go to waste;
It be certain that before I sink,
I shall be filled with laughter and drink!

Away with worry, away with fear,
Or you may see my red wrinkled rear;
The laughter of joy or the laughter of pain,
Shall never rival the kind which is insane!
Clear your mind and enjoy the show,
One inch more I shall never grow;
In the staleness of rigor mortis land,
Do come and join my solitary band,
Get up from your seats and boldly stand,
For the great rhyming rogue be at hand!"

The performance continues and the Shaolin monks are thoroughly amused with the show, although the performer is still not visible to me. They clap furiously, as if this is the greatest spectacle of all time. They turn to each other and move their shaved heads up and down in sync. The high-pitched voice thanks them for their endorsement and compliments them on their long orange robes. A nonsensical line is inserted in their honor:

“A shaven head lies well in bed,
Makes the man look like he be dead ...”

The monks are further encouraged with the special verse dedicated to them, and kick their legs up high like dancers. Who is this person who brings such energy, such “life” to the otherwise mundane existence of the patrons of Beelzebub’s Bedrock? Even Jormundgand comes out from behind the bar and gently goes through the motion of clapping his hands, although they stop just short of contact. Oh, what a thunderous applause he would have contributed, but the simple gesture is more than anyone could have expected from the stoic giant. This colossal “statue” melts into flesh and blood in the presence of this “comedian.”

I am not left in suspense much longer. The crowd parts like the Red Sea to reveal the source of all the amusement, and the rhyming sensation proceeds down his personal avenue.

My God, he found me! I don’t know how, but he found me! It is the same inexplicable entity that had poisoned my welcome into this underworld. The five-foot fiend with the mischievous smile moves in my direction while kicking up his legs and throwing up his arms in a spastic little dance.

He twirls around like a nimble ballerina on one foot, while the three bells protruding from his hat spin furiously around his head. They chime in unison as the ceiling light reflects off their polished surfaces. He stretches out his bauble at arm's length and raises it up and down in jerky movements, which are out of sync with his dance steps.

Notwithstanding the absence of the pet serpent, everything else is the same—the clothes, the hat, the shoes, the height, the piercing eyes, the crafty smile, and the incessant rhyming. Here is unspeakable, unlimited evil, which paradoxically inhabits the limited boundaries of a silly little man. If infinite God had once dwelled in the body of mortal man to redeem the world from its sins, then this jester is Satan's counterpart, designed for the sole purpose of enveloping his "redeemed" in the quagmire of iniquity. Satan's progeny is not the result of an immaculate conception within the womb of an unsuspecting virgin, but rather the impure remains of a botched abortion in Bedlam's bordello—the vaginal refuse of the Whore of Babylon!

Go ahead and keep clapping, you fools! I think. Fuel his fire; there is more than enough to consume all of you many times over! Does no one else know of this clown's true identity, or am I the privileged, chosen one who received this revelation? At least I am not alone this time. This is what I get for killing myself!

The pint-sized fool approaches the bar and leaps up on it with feline finesse, continuing his dance down the "catwalk." With each swing of his legs, glasses are sent flying in either direction onto the floor. The shattering sound serves as a bizarre musical accompaniment to the jester's jig. Spectators move back to avoid the projectiles,

although their shoes and pants get sprayed with the spilled drinks.

Jormundgand, none too amused with the mess, stands motionless with arms folded tightly and veins protruding from his forehead. The jester sticks his tongue out at him and crosses his eyes, but the Nordic statue is unmoved. Nonetheless, he makes no effort to obstruct the little man in his chaotic and destructive course, as if hypnotized into submission. The broken glass collects on the floor as the puddles of beer, wine, and whiskey seep around the shards. The little pool of libations creates an archipelago out of the larger pieces, which sparkle like jewels from the reflected light off the chandeliers on the ceiling.

On concluding his dance, the little performer leaps off the bar counter, performs a somersault in midair and then lands perfectly on both feet, like a dexterous acrobat. His flawless finale brings forth abundant cheers from all corners of the room. The bar is wiped clean, fresh glasses set out, and drink once again dispensed in prodigious quantities.

I feel the Lilliputian threads of indecision tying me down, as I contemplate the options of either staying put or fleeing to another place. I will be hunted either way, by him or by Jedediah. I can't take my eyes off of the jester, but am relieved to see that the demon's attentions are directed elsewhere for once.

He approaches a petite Aztec beauty sitting unattended at the end of the bar. She is even shorter than he is, but stunning with a light golden-brown complexion and an athletic physique. With almond-shaped eyes sheltering two hypnotic silver-black pupils, she looks hostile and alien to even the warmest smile. She has a broad, but strikingly aesthetic hooked nose. Her black, glossy hair is plaited and

entwined with strips of multi-colored cloth wound around the head with great precision. Her cotton dress, interwoven with red-and-green, blue-dyed fabrics, consists of a sleeveless blouse and a long wrap-around skirt.

The girl is nursing a martini and, in between delicate little sips from her puffy lips, gently pushes the green olive around the perimeter of the cone-shaped glass with a plastic straw. Is she bored or just sending nonverbal signals to an eligible suitor to join and romance her off her rocker? Well, this must be her lucky day because the Devil is in "town" and eager to paint it red ... with two coats of Aztec blood. Watch out for his *snake*!

The master of disguise waltzes right up and leaps up into the chair beside her, setting his bells in motion to herald his arrival. Turning his slight little body towards her, he says:

"This seat be not taken,
Or I be mistaken?"

Without turning her head, she shoots a quick peripheral glance at him but says nothing. He appears intrigued by her indifference.

"I am the great Goffard Bliss,
I beseech the fair lady to give me a kiss,
Or I shall piss down Perdition's abyss;
I should like to make you my bride,
Not to be rushed, take things in stride;
Now lend me your savory mouth,
You dark-haired beauty from the south."

What a Casanova. How long has he been on the dating scene? This is the same diabolical runt who had me on the run? Gee, and I thought that I was awkward around pretty girls. Ha! Hmm ... how soon before he is wearing that martini?

The girl turns her head cautiously to see her rhyming suitor. His smile is so exaggerated that the ends of his mouth reach upward to the height of his nose in a “U” shape. He licks his lips slowly around the circumference of his mouth, then puckers them like a blowfish. She covers her mouth in an effort to suppress a fit of laughter, but the jester interprets this as a positive reaction to his clumsy romantic overture. Jormundgand and a few of the patrons take an interest in this interaction, erupting in laughter at her cue.

A man with a very thin, long nose and a chapeau bra on his head is particularly amused and buries his head in his hands, as contractions from intense laughter shake up his entire body. The demon jester suspects that he is the object of ridicule and turns on his charm for damage control.

“So easy on the eyes,
How can I thee despise;
The truth alone—spare me the lies,
Will you consent to be my prize?
It be fact that everything dies,
From the ashes a few shall rise;
Lend me your hand, so small in size,
To be the mate of Goffard the Wise!”

While giggling hysterically, she manages to let out an emphatic “Go away!” His motor mouth stops abruptly in a catatonic freeze, after which he politely bows his head in

defeat. He stares inquisitively at the counter to digest the resounding rejection, and to review his pitch for any egregious mistakes. While the laughter dies down among most, the man with the chapeau bra continues in his fit of laughter.

“C’mon, it’s not that funny,” says someone in the crowd.

“It is to *me*! Why did you spoil it for me? Is it so bad that a man might have a little enjoyment down here? You’re nothing but a damn kill-joy! I hope you go to hell for this, Roland! Get out of my presence, now!” The man with the chapeau bra appears on the verge of losing control, and his face turns from alabaster white to red within seconds.

The other man backs down and apologizes, then swiftly leaves the room to escape embarrassment and a potential violent reprisal. The man with the chapeau bra, now exhausted from the exchange, grows a long face and slumps over the bar. The room is quiet and still, as all heads are turned in his direction, waiting for a resumption of the outburst. With the wind taken out of his sails, a new placid state invites reflection.

He mutters, “If heaven be close, then hell be much closer.” Picking up his glass of Malbec, he pauses just before sipping. The hand holding the glass begins to tremble.

“What’s going on here? What is this?” His fingers and then his entire hand become translucent. “No, not now, by God! A little more time, I beg of you! Stop, sto—”

The hand is no longer visible and the glass falls to the counter, spilling the red wine. A *nothingness* quickly works its way up his body and down his legs. He vaporizes within seconds in front of everyone, but to nobody’s surprise, except for me, of course. The chapeau bra falls onto the empty chair, right side up.

“Look at that! They left the hat! Why just the hat?” yells someone in the crowd.

“I’ll take it,” says another.

“How can you do that? Show some respect for the recently vaporized.”

“What does respect have to do with anything? He has no use for the hat anymore. It’s better than having someone sit or step on it. Besides, I think he has more important things to worry about now.” The man walks over to the empty chair, picks up the hat, and turns it around for a little inspection. He then comfortably fits it on his head.

“I’d say it is almost tailor-made for me. Now I know why they left it behind! I do think I’ll be taking this with me wherever I go from now on.” He breaks out into an over-exaggerated chuckle. The onlookers stare at him but remain quiet.

Count Olshonsky quietly moves next to me. “Well, what do you think of Goffard? Is he not funny?”

My attention had been completely diverted from the clown to the man wearing the chapeau bra. Dismissing the count’s question, I ask about the man’s disappearance.

“Oh, so you’ve never seen that before? Well, you won’t give it a second thought after a while. We all go that way, but not necessarily to the same place. Ha-ha.” He gives me an affectionate pat on the back.

“Where do they go? Why do dead people disintegrate like that?”

“Good question. Ignorant, but fair. Remember that this is a midpoint station between heaven and hell. Just as you have not shed all of your mortal coil, you have not been entirely consumed by that sleep of death, either. The man you saw disappear was taken for his judgment and thus was deprived of the last vestiges of life within him.

Wherever he be now, he is ethereal. Everyone complains about how long they've been here and how bored they are, but all are afraid once they see their limbs vanishing into thin air. They become so penitent, all of a sudden. How disingenuous!"

"Are you afraid, Count Olshonsky?"

"Of course, I am. We are all afraid. We don't know where we are going and how much time is left. We see people disappear and know that we will meet a similar fate. You will go mad if you don't learn to control your worries and fears. We are not designed to suffer from perpetual dread, as a healthy dose of denial must eventually anesthetize you to this. So drink more and talk more, and the rest will take care of itself. Oh, and of course, avoid Jedediah! He is sure to put a damper on your spirits!" the count affirms as he politely excuses himself and exits the room.



After John Castlemaine's bizarre "insect-assisted suicide," he lands in "RotaryPug," a surreal Purgatory-like realm filled with countless souls awaiting their final judgment—a promotion to heaven or descent into hell. He is forced to reevaluate life, nihilism, and confront the moral value or bankruptcy of his life's actions.

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