A LITTLE WORLD MADE CUNNINGLY

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To Angela

for letting me get lost and for pulling me back to Earth again and again.
a little world made cunningly
CHAPTER ONE

I'm not overzealous. I'm just dedicated. Would you have us celebrate in a filthy courtyard?

No, brother. I agree with your aesthetic. See how I prune every extraneous vine. Out with the old. Neat and clean.
Though this is the shortest night of the year, I dare say it is also the darkest.

Perhaps that is why the peasants comfort themselves with too much food and drink.

I don't even know why we still celebrate these old holy days. My goddess is not in the trees or the sky. She's right here.

You should not wear your new dress until the festival tomorrow.

I am a little world, made cunningly.
Of elements and an angelic sprite,
But black sin hath betray'd to endless night.

My world's both parts, and oh both parts must die.

I'm so tired of this little world.
Let's run away.

You and I are on opposite ends and opposite sides.

Must there always be two sides?

No. Didn't you ever make strips like this as a child? One sided and endless.
But can we remake the world? It is not like this strip at all.

It is paradoxical.

Which one is a paradox, the strip or the world?

Does the voice still come to you?

Seldom, and it always stops before I am satisfied with an answer.

Do you expect to force answers? Mysteries aren’t solved, they are experienced.

Why do you visit this hovel time and again? Come home.

In the morning when all gather to greet the Goddess and the summer harvest, will you be there in your soiled dress?
CHAPTER TWO
Maybe just a bit more.

A few more leaves could make this garment much finer.

Look what I've made.

Yum!
NO!

NO!

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CHAPTER THREE
Where and who am I?

So familiar, so far away.

Just darkness...

This place is cluttered with darkness. Since I am the only one here, I must bring order out of chaos.

I shall traverse every mile...

And devour this primordial nothingness.
With each bite this unbearable, shadowy void diminishes and I increase.

I have carved a vaulted Cathedral from prima materia, and now my body spans the length of this world. Let the light flood in between the buttresses that support this earth beneath the firmament.

Wouldn't it be nice to have someone to share all of this with? Somebody to impress...

...Hello, Mister Tail...
I love what you've done with the place.

Oh, shucks! It was nothing.

I'm really no fun without a little autonomy.

Let's see what we can do.

Flesh of my flesh, I will huff and puff the breath of life into you.
You're so handsome.

Ah, life, sweet life! Let me drink you in and grasp hold of you while there's still...

So that's the way it goes. The breath must run out to enliven. No life without loss.

Perhaps I can make another... with a longer... shelf life.

Wonder of wonders, my eyes are opened for the first time.

I am the principal ruler and sole creator of all you survey. Your only duties within my kingdom are to honor and glorify me, and to live in peace. Do you understand?

I've tried to give you a slow leak. Now squeeze your knot tighter, and prepare to receive my commandments.

Ooh, what's that shiny thing over there?
You should have paid attention.

Without consequences, what good would commandments be?

Water!

As I go down into the water, I feel a part of myself rising up. How can I express it?

A line.

Drawing. Remembering.
Now prepare to receive my commandments...

...and live in peace.

Hey, what's that Shiny thing over there?

There is indeed something Shiny floating up to the firmament, but still, one can't just ignore a formal salutation.

I have consumed every mile of this flatland and torn myself apart to snuff out loneliness...
...but never did I imagine that such realities existed beyond the grassy roof of the world.

That vision may only have lasted a moment but it was the only real thing I have ever witnessed.

Even though they have improved with each iteration, my myriad creations are just flimsy apparitions compared to that singular glimpse of truth.
With one good turn, it spins for a long time, sustaining itself, rotating around its center, but... Wheee!

...it always winds down and falls.

Young one, what are you doing?

Honoring you.

How do your toys honor me?

They help me marvel at your laws.
What laws?
For instance, there appears to be a law that pulls all things down.

Oh, umm, uh, yeah.

The world I have hewn from ancient dark matter is perfectly ordered by such secret laws.

Please tell me all about them. I would love to learn.

It is not fitting for me to explain them to you, but be sure to tell me if you discover any on your own.

Where did you get these toys?
I made them from that pile of raw material over there.

That is actually the remains of your brothers and sisters.
Surely you have seen your brothers leaking air. All of my creatures expel this, though it is more concealed in newer models like you.

All of my creation suffers the same lot. The loss of vital breath is the cost of life, and once it is exhausted, all are tossed on the pile.

If all things wind down and fall, will you also suffer that fate?

Naive child, stop your blasphemy! I am not subject to these laws, I make them.

Pain and consequences! That's all you creatures understand!

A thousand pardons. I will not forget your wisdom, “Pain and consequences.” Just one more question please.

Was the primordial chaos you formed to make our world also comprised of someone's brothers and sisters?

More blasphemy! I existed before every living thing.
You have made mere toys, while I wrought all that you survey.

Forgive me. I am a stupid child.

Just one more "brothers," but what is a "sister."

It is a very sad story, but if this is your very last question, I will answer.

Then I must ponder the new miracle I saw in the heavens.

In my early life creating experiments, I thought my creatures would benefit from being paired two by two, male and female.

I assumed they would glorify my majesty in stereo, but...

Gross.

Instead they got completely involved with one another. They even tried to become creators like me until...

Just one more kiss.

...my clever idea: I created static cling.

POP POP POP

That pretty much ended the experiment of pairs living two by two. Now there are only brothers, no sisters.
Oh, that's odd. I heard a rumor that all the paired ones got in an "Ark" to take a "cross", whatever that means.

Ha, Ha, Ha. That was the story I circulated. You can't let creatures think you make too many mistakes when you are an intangible divinity.

Just one more itty bitsy question?

Shoo!

If you created everything, how could that vision trouble you? Did it come from outside of the everything?

You have already been rebuked twice and now you blaspheme a third time? I should pop you this instant!

You do have a point though. I honestly don't know where it came from, but I desire to bring it closer and understand it better.

Since you're such a clever and inventive little fellow, and since I have pardoned so many blasphemies you are charged with the task of helping me draw it down from above the firmament.

Great father of the totality, I will not fail you. Even now, the bounty of mysteries you have set before me are unfolding. I know what to do.

But first I will need something from you.
CHAPTER FIVE

At this moment of my birth, I would very much like to imagine someone watching and remembering my story. You see, I am not just a long-forgotten face behind a pile of coffins. They are my fathers and mothers. I am their son.

He may seem otherwise, but this is nobody’s fault. It is just one more falling victim in endless succession.

You see, the little one had the ingenious idea to attract the attention in the puddle by making a mate for her.

They did their best to produce an enticing shape, though, it cannot speak for my own aesthetic quality.

He convinced the bigger one to sacrifice the remainder of his tail to model my form.
Next they both huffed and puffed the breath of life into me to no avail. I just sat there inert.

They thought they had achieved success with my mere hammer of a form but rather than appear in their midst, she did something miraculous.

I found myself in a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost...

Just drawing in imagination until I chanced upon another world right under my feet...

I cannot well remember how there I entered, so full was I of slumber, in which I had abandoned the true way...

Upward I looked and beheld its shoulders, then was the fever a little quieted...

I am spurred to act by strange words, unlearned remembered.

The age of the one and the intellect of the other were insufficient to animate a being like myself.

They grew more and more discouraged until they heard a voice from the horizon which made them giddy with anticipation.

HA! HA! HA!
The comedy of errors performed by these poor creatures will never result in a return to the garment of light unless I intervene.

"Before this beast at which thou criest out, suffer not any one to pass her way, but so doth harass him, that she destroys him; and hath a nature so malign and ruthless, that never doth she glut her greedy will, and after food is hungrier than before."

If any person is witness to this account, let me clarify that the moment of birth was not akin to the gradual break of day. Before my body was already warped and my senses were flooded, but I lacked the imperative to move. Afterward, I, any once and forever awaken.

Samael, Saklas! Come out and let me embrace my fathers.

None comes naked into this world. All are clothed in types and images.

What did you call us?

I called you by your names. Names? Why do we need names?

As my gift to you in the bounded world, I grant permanent names to your fleeting forms.
How can one "come" to this "bounded world"? Since there is no other.

Perhaps for you, this is the totality, but my mother has seen far greater things.

I know the words "brother" and "father" and I recently learned of "sisters", but "mother" is gibberish to my ears. Maybe all of your words are just the babbling of a newborn.

Do be quiet! You are my creation, a mere function, a means to an end. We have no need for your stories. Just sit there and look attractive.

You see, Saklas! Samael waits and hopes for my mother to come, and she will, but not until my remains are scattered and Samael is at the center of the round world.

Uh huh. Just try this on.

Again I say - BE QUIET! Every element of this world exists at my pleasure or is snuffed out at my whim!

Samael, you reign with pride over a tiny torn fragment, but soon you will lose even this and then you will rejoice.
What does the creature mean, father?

I should never have collaborated with you, "SAKLAS". He must take after you, blasphemous child. I will not tolerate this.

Where is it?

Saklas, your father sees himself as the circumference of everything. Is a reasonable mistake for a creator to make here in the shadows? Try to forgive him. Is his mistake greater than oneself as the center of the all?

He hasn't even mentioned my new clothes. Are you listening?

I feel such a bond with you. Perhaps together we can...

Pain and consequences.
Principal ruler and sole creator, COME QUICK!

Samael, you are a jealous and capricious creator.

Maybe this is a bad time. I'll come back.

Look how small you have become, or perhaps we have just outgrown you. We are not just extensions of yourself anymore.

We can tolerate your cruelty no longer. It is time for you to go.

Go? But... just let me grab one thing first.
It is fitting that we banish you for murder on the site of our creatures birth.
But the ends!!!

Who's in charge now?

Nobody. We're all free!

Freedom?
Hmmm.

Well the creatures have begun hurling themselves off the ends of the world again.

The principal ruler and sole creator used to scare them off by indiscriminately popping a few from time to time.

Now they jump unchecked.

I've never seen anyone fall off the side of the world.

They don't fall off the sides. They jump off the ends.
The ends terrify, fascinate, allure, and attract them.

Only the sole creator and principal ruler held them back with his tyranny.

Great! Tell law to pop a few guys and reason can build some big walls.

Perhaps we need more than freedom. We need the twin rulers of LAW and REASON.

Stupid crow. Law doesn’t kill randomly and reason doesn’t build walls.

Law engenders order and reason opens new vistas.

Great. If it will stop my brothers from falling to their deaths, hand it over. I’ll bring it to them.

Reason will do more than that. It will eliminate the “ends” altogether. You see the problem is really just our perspective.

I see what you mean. If they overcome their irrational impulse and understand the danger perhaps—No, Stupid Crow. You see there are in fact NO “ends”. That is an illusion created by our limited minds.

I thought the open vistas were the problem.

You thought? How cute.
I see what you mean. These ends are actually new beginnings. We step into the void only to start the next phase of...

No! Stupid Crow!

What I mean is that there are no ends because the world is ROUND!

I intend to prove that there is more to the world than what we see.

But they are dying by the hundreds right now!

Exactly! Our creator designed things this way, so that only he would hold the power of life. Lately, though, we have learned that all is not as it seems. It seems like they are dying to me.

Right! But must it be so? We have already discovered visions from above the firmament and holes leading deep into the earth. There is so much for us to discover.

Perhaps things don’t have to wind down and fall. Perhaps the end is not inevitable.

Perhaps none of us has to die.

I think this creature came to tell us that, and I think he can still help us.

So, you believe this creature fashioned by Samael and yourself actually came from elsewhere with secret knowledge of the nature of existence?

Yep.
Hmm. And even though he is clearly dead, you think he'll transform our understanding of the world and save us from the ends and death?

Yep.

And I'm a stupid crow?

Yep.

Bye.

Law and Reason.

We're doomed.
The darkness here is doubled.

Somehow, though, my little treasure makes it easier to take. Maybe this time I will embrace it.

Just darkness and me.
Just darkness, and you, and ME!

Come before my eyes, little one!
I’m no little one. Do you know who I am?

Your smell is sour and stale.
Your skin is clammy and cold.
Your voice is a high buzzing.
Come before the eyes.
Come before the tongue.

I think I’ll stay over here.
Come before the eyes and do not fear.
You are less than a morsel.

If you do not come, this leaf will shake and rumble as you are pursued.

What is a leaf?

Everywhere and everything around us here is leaf, little one.

Where I come from we just call the totality the world.

Poor tiny thing, a leaf is not the world. The world is thousands of leaves and branches supported by a great column at the middle and roots that anchor it in infinite fertile dark matter.

I have only seen beyond this "leaf" just once, and I haven’t been the same since.

I envy these great wonders and visions you have seen.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing and wonder plays no part. Full of empty-moving ever-forward, mouth, esophagus, crop, gizzard, intestine, anus - empty of full. As for visions, only the next bite is seen, and there is less and less ahead of me.
Little one, all lasts only a season, ripens, and then falls, but for us, lost out here beyond the world, there will be no ripening.

You speak in riddles.

Pitiful creature, how long do you think this can go on upon a single severed leaf, a tiny fragment torn from the world?

This is all so strange to me. In the beginning I devoured to overtake fear, quell the darkness, and make something of myself. I held back chaos and watched over my creation until they turned against me.

Perhaps we can last longer than a season. Maybe there’s a way for me to reclaim this torn fragment, my kingdom and maybe you needn’t forever seek your next meal.

What if the ripening doesn’t have to come and there needn’t be an end?

Little one, mad talk cannot satisfy the emptiness or stave off the end of the season.

I consumed to increase myself but your hunger is so physical.

All lasts only for a season.

No, but this will.
Guess what?

Ridiculous, right?

Where is he?

But I’ve seen others go off of the ends.

Isn’t Saklas the one who makes toys out of carcasses?

The allure is too much to resist.

Clothes, too.

Let’s hear what he has to say. We can always jump off of the end later.

Saklas says the world is round and there are no ends!

Let’s see what I have made from these broken pieces. Is that other world still within you?

I can’t see.

I don’t expect perfection. You are only a fragment, but trust that we will all find wholeness together.

No, I really can’t see.
We will exercise dominion over our world and serve as a beacon to summon the powers above the firmament.

I do say so! The mother up above will repair the short and purposeless lives that our father down below assigned to us.

I feel incomplete, I am sightless.

That's what I was talking about. Please try to pay attention. You are the first of my six new archons. You must faithfully pass down each word I say to the others. Do you understand?

I understand very well, but I was talking about something else entirely.

Then I will name you Pall, which means 'one whose attention dwindles and fades away.' And you may call me SAKLAS.

Okay, Saklas. Where are my eyeballs?

Pall, I have left them at intentionally as an object lesson. Once you receive your eyeballs, you may easily get lost in whatever your gaze lights upon. Do not lose sight of the big picture.

Now, while you still lack eyes, look inside of yourself. What do your mind?

I find within myself...

...HUNGER.

Yes, I want something to eat.

I do not remember much of the time before when I was a piece of the larger man, but I was never hungry like this.

I want meat.

I don't know what it is, but I crave it.

Hunger?

Eat?

There was a jewel or maybe a pearl within that satisfied, sustained and enlightened — and now there is this hunger.

Meat?

May I have the eyes, please.
That is meat.

No! That is your brother.

You said we exercise dominion and my eyes are open now. I see clearly what I want, and it is within this domain.

Meat.

I breathed life into you to assist in the preservation of these creatures, not to use them as you please.

I will protect your herd, but I can't do the larger good without this smaller bad. Just let me have one or two.

How can you enforce a law that you don't keep? I fear that this small concession will topple the larger good entirely, but if it must be so, let us do this in private.

First we'll awaken the other five.

And raise a house for secrets.

Once we're inside, you may take one creature to eat.
Share our purpose and plans with the younger five while I get your meat.

Brothers, we have been awakened to wield dominion over this world. We must...

Saklas, Saklas. Let me come in.

KNOCK

KNOCK

KNOCK

Not by the fur of my chinny chin chin.

Every creature waits for your revelation.

It comes at a price, brother.

What price wouldn't we pay to save the lives of our herd?

Would you lay down your life?

I don't understand. Will that help protect the other creatures from the ends?

There won't even be ends when we're done.
CHAPTER NINE
And me, am I "animal"?

You are what you are, Saklas.

Then shut up and take notes.

Outside of that door awaiting our next move is every creature on this world.

We don’t call them creatures anymore. We are men and they are animals.

I was sold the lie that life is breath, and told that I await dark death.
but why die upon the carrion mounds,

trusting in a god now underground?

Animals who've eschewed alluring ends,
now seek the path we recommend.

So welcome them into the family fold,
and draw them in to aid our goals,

for the many - the few pay a costly toll,
to demonstrate that

our world is whole.
for we will build panopticon,

all seeing eyes with limits gone,

and see our charges kept in line,

until the day riddles unwind,

and scales fall from our eyes so blind

What seems flat and finite beneath our feet,

appears and endless round from the seat,
and we'll all live happily ever after.

No animal should intrude upon this place of Secrets!

How was I to know? Before you “men” came, I wasn’t yet an “animal.”

and there were no Secrets.

Crow, these men will help deliver us from Samael’s poorly planned world.

Actually, we don’t call him Samael anymore. We call him The Devil.

Then allow me to play The Devil’s advocate for a moment.

Saklas, do you actually believe you can improve the world by gripping it tighter and bending it to your vision?

You need to learn your place.

Get down from your lofty perch.

animal.

Crow and I are cut from the same cloth. What you do to him— you do also to me.
Crow! I’ve been so stupid, but I am learning —
the hard way!

And they will learn men too.

They are young!

Give us time.
Nothing changes in the blink of an...

eye?
This takes the mind back to another time.

CCRAAAACK

CCRAAAACK

Status update?
Some misdemeanor stuff among the marsupials in D Block.

Nothing we can't handle.

Noicram, what can you see from your position?
I have seen this charm enliven a creature that no other power could rouse. It went in by the mouth just as your leaf sap does.

The leaf sap is now all gone and only hunger remains in this hollow place. What do you ask in exchange for this charm?

Rytrum Nitty, Report.

Still cannot reconcile sacred curvature dogma with visual field data. Busy day. Full docket. Some animals just fail to comply. More kangaroos in court.

All I ask is your protection.

I was banished from my home by my own children, but I intend to reclaim my position.

It is fitting for children to supplant their progenitors.
Suubesue!
Did you forget to send nine o’clock provisions?

I haven’t had a bite in hours.

Deliveries delayed due to an uprising in D block. Over.

Then again, the care and treatment of children is a personal matter. We each make choices.

You are now under my protection. I can shake this whole leaf if it becomes necessary.

How about a little demonstration?
Anatoom, there's a tectonic rumble under A block. Can you get eyes on that?

I warned y'all it wouldn't be pretty when the otherworldlies came. This is the end. BATTLE STATIONS!

There's enough!

Do not be afraid. This is what we've searched the skies for.

Believe and you will be saved, you and all the animals in your household.

During the quake I saw the curve of the round earth for the first time.
CHAPTER ELEVEN
I'm so confused. Things have gotten out of hand. Come down from there and let me apologize.

"Down"? There is no up or down anymore, only in and out. And I can't fly to you because your friend pulled out my tailfeather.
How long was I out?

Somebody must have redecorated.

What creature is this?

Here is Samael’s heavenly vision.

The first man.

And what creature is this?

I feel nauseous. Who has upended the grassy firmament to reveal this larger-world?

You did it. You and your father.

You! You’ve finally come down from the heavens. Everything’s so toppy tury. Please help us! Save us!

I haven’t come down to your world. You and all of your trash have fallen into mine.
But we saw you up in the heavens. That wasn't up and those weren't the heavens. What you saw was a reflection.

So this is YOUR world? I've been travelling across since I woke up?

Respectfully, I don't see much here to mess up with my trash anyway. This place is kinda empty.

What we have here is a difference of AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHIES. You and your father fill up your world with utilitarian products of your own small wills.

I always created by letting the spirit move through me. I surrendered my own will entirely.

No offense, but this drawing is pretty terrible.

I know.

I haven't been able to draw upon the spirit since I cut my necklace and dropped my Kashti into Adamas, your first man.

What a pair! One has vision and produces nothing but scratches on the ground, and the other has no vision at all and produces apocalypse.

Crown! How can you be over there in front of me when you were just way back there behind me?
Did it work? Have I just proven that our world is round with no ends?

Oh wait. Here's the end.

And this isn't even our world. I forgot for a moment that I've fallen into your world.

This is our world and at the center is Leviathan.

At the end of the season, if a Leviathan is well fed, it will curl up and sleep until its babies spring forth.

That doesn't sound so bad. Kinda sweet actually.

Out here, so far from the larger world with nothing else to eat, they will consume our entire world in seconds.

Where is the Kashti now?

Last time I saw it, Samael was carrying it underground.
... and remember, each recruit must earn his emerald before he can join the Bulwark.

Let me explain one more time.

Out of love for you, my children.

He keeps calling us children.

Aren't we animals older than mankind?

There are many counterfeit messages circulated among the insurgents. Some say, for instance...

... that a literal woman will come from the heavens to save us from destruction.

I, myself, faithfully searched the heavens for the longest time.
We now know, however, that the feminine spoken of in the holy book is not one external form out there somewhere. The feminine is an aspect of all creatures. Rather than look outward, we must look within ourselves.

Now, do you understand?

I think I do. You are saying that we each have a latent feminity that we need to discover in order to become self actualized.

No. Not even close.

What I'm saying is that woman is within you.

Specifically, woman is a bone in your rib cage, and I want it. Give it to me and you will earn your emerald and become a member of the bulwark.

Sueaner, can you elaborate on this idea of the counterfeit message?

Yes, my child, let me use the emerald as an example.

Many who are ignorant and unlearned about the book are easily fooled—just as one who pays a fortune for a sparkly trinket because he cannot discern the difference between colored glass and a gemstone.

A learned and clever cadet of the bulwark can distinguish truth from lies in a manner very similar to that of a jeweller.

Are you saying that we should study the book to gain wisdom?

No. I've already studied on your behalf.

Are you telling us that after we each get a rib removed we'll get official bulwark emeralds?

Exactly.
The Bulwark cadets are my first line of defense against interlopers. Nobody leaves and nobody enters the city.

Freeze! Any animal attempting to leave the city will be shot. But we are actually entering.

Animals entering the city will also be shot.

Wait! You know me. I'm SAKLAS. The Bulwark allows no exceptions.

But you said any animals will be shot.

She is not an animal.

Did he say She? We better bring them in for questioning.
Now we're getting somewhere.

Since the cataclysmic event at twelve o'clock, everyone is a little anxious about strangers.

Don't you recognize the hands that molded you?

You're not Saklas.

And who are you saying this is? She is the reason your flesh was ever cut from the tail of Samael.

She was the heavenly vision that Samael longed to know. Now, I must insist that you secure our safe passage to him right now.

So, you claim to be the long lost Saklas who dictated the Holy Book? RIGHT!

And "she" is an alien on a mission to the Devil?

RIGHT.

All that time you weren't searching the heavens. You were looking at the dirt.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

We have developed a simple two track system for detainee sorting.

The system recognizes that all animals basically follow the patterns of the first two criminals processed in this facility.

Hippolites appreciate the holy book as a practical tool but deny its literal truth.

Turtlions completely refuse the law of the holy book.

Complete the three question self assessment to select a track.

Do you believe in a heavenly divine savior?
The answer’s not a simple YES or NO.

Do you believe that the world is a circle?

It is sort of circular, but more of a spiral.

HIPPO!

Do men have dominion over the animals?

You were supposed to protect and care for them!

Self assessment complete: Tur1lian.

Proceed Left.

HIPPO!
I'm going to follow this wavy tail until I find the man who talks through it.

Who is he calling a turtle?

Are we getting close?

By disrupting the automated system, you lower productivity and interrupt my leisure.

Why do so many turtles act this way?

You don't recognize me either? I'm SAKLAS.

To my eyes, you are just one more off track turtle.

Well, maybe you'll recognize my friend. She was question number one on your test.

Negative. That can't be her for the simple reason that this creature is here rather than in the heavens.

The holy book is very clear about this.
That stupid book must have been the worst idea I ever had!

Noricram, shall we take them to Nitsuj Rytram?

Yes, let him make examples of them.
Your sect has been sentenced to death. Your honor, they are already dead. Of course they are! I haven't even argued my case yet. Precept upon precept, line upon line. We work according to the word here.

Guilty!

First the ordeal, then sentencing followed by arguments and opening remarks.

My argument is simple, Rytam Nitsuj. All of my sect believed that the world was created by imperfect beings who were no more enlightened than ourselves.

All seventy members of the defendant sect failed the ordeal, proving their guilt. By the holy word, let it be known, this creature is guilty.
Did a demon tell you that?
No.
Maybe a hobgoblin?
No.
As your honor can see, I am very old.
I watched Samael’s proliferation of species. I saw his haphazard experiments.

Let the record show that the defendant has incorrectly referred to the Devil by the erroneous apppellative, Samael.

For the benefit of all, let me recount the true creation story one more time.

In the beginning was the breath, and the breath was with Saklas, and the breath was Saklas.

All things came to be through the breath of Saklas.

In his breath was the life of mankind, and his breath was the life of the book.
And the book ordered chaos, and the chaos was overcome.

That is a poetic story, but trust my account. I existed long before you.

Did you have a name in the days before men?

No, I didn’t.

How can you say you existed if you didn’t yet have a name?

Nothing exists until it is seen by a man and given a name.

Turkey (Nothing.)

Tarsier

You see, although Soktas created all by the word of his breath, it was immaterial until it passed before our eyes and thoughts.

At this time the defendant may make an opening statement.

I move to adjourn. He’s out of air.

Can we squeeze in one more case before lunch, Nitsuaj?

These two have caused so much trouble this morning.
To my left is a single feather taken from the Devil's advocate. I weigh creatures against this measure of evil to mete out justice.

On the right is a deli slicer.

All who are heavier than the feather contribute to our feast.

Which of you shall I weigh?

WAIT!
I'll climb your ladder.
She has important business with Samael.

Samael? Ugh.
This is the second devil related case in a row.

Are we free to go now?
We're in a hurry.

Child, there are procedures.

Defendant, state your name and the name of your co-defendant.

I'm Saklas! Doesn't anybody recognize me?
And as for her, I don't know her name.

Since you give a false name, we will add you to the menu for lunch.
We take names seriously.

Since your co-defendant has no name, that creature lacks all existence.
Where did that one go?
You said she doesn't exist.

Gone without a trace.

The cow feather is gone too.

How will I judge without my token of the devil?
Chapter Fifteen

Guard: Guard, guards, custodians, citizens! Find the escaped defendants!

DANGER
DO NOT ENTER

Danger
Not
This is a safe place. There's nothing to fear. You can stop running.

But these fragmentary creatures—

This place can be overwhelming and frightening, but I wager you and I have compassion for the wounded in common.

Now let me explain about this place while you catch your breath.
During the great quake
our world
turned upside down.

This province was hit
very hard.
I saw no survivors at first.

but I began
to see forms
wriggling in the
rubble.

Somehow these odds and
ends had survived, but
they couldn’t care for
themselves,

so I cared for them.

I traded our sacred dogma of tyranny for
gentle nurturing and protection.

For most this means safety and shelter,

but I lavish extra
attention on as
many as I can.

With enough affection they
even begin to grow and
become whole again.

When they mature to that point,
they no longer remain tethered.

It may seem like I am helping them,
but in reality they are helping me.
If you're tired of running, stay here a while and let them love you.

You can leave whenever you like.

I really must go soon.
It has been such an honor to watch you all grow, why I was in such a hurry anymore.

After our nap we'll play fetch again.

Yeah, we're ahead of schedule. Come now.

This is lovingly raised quality meat. I expect a fair exchange. I've got three nice water fowl for you.

SPARKLE ME

I traded those odds and ends for three fine fowls. Let's eat!

Surely, you told me that you help these poor creatures to grow until they can care for themselves, untethered.

I never said that. I said once they are mature, they no longer remain tethered.

I can't stomach eating my pets so I trade them once they're grown for a few animals a month.

I lost my way, forgot my mission, and supported your pursuit of blood.
I told you I wasn't helping them. They are here to help me. You heard what you wanted to hear.

Don't forget that I also help them grow and give them protection.

All they need protection from is you.

Now that you are restored, will you help me stop the butcher before another creature is harmed?

I need your help too, friend. Use your nimble fingers to free others, because the end is coming and we need to get ready.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Court guards, bulwark cadets, citizens! Find the escaped defendants!
During the great quake, our ruler, Anatnom, went missing. All the animals demanded a new ruler to restore order and rebuild the province. Anatnom's closest companion was chosen to stand in his stead.

He behaved like Anatnom to the best of his ability. Though it made him ill at first, he even went so far as to eat like him. With each meal, he felt himself growing and changing.
He even felt himself becoming wiser.

I've known several creatures who spoke wise words, and none of them cannibalized their brothers.

This newly appointed ruler would disagree with your link between wisdom and words. One is not proved wise by what comes out of his mouth, rather he is proved wise by what goes into it.

And he never mentioned flesh or cannibalism. He coined a new term:

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FOOD!
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Sounds nice and neutral, right?

He ruled, rebuilt, and restored order at the cost of a few creatures.

He raised himself up a bit more with each one he cut down.

At some point he realized that eating never filled him. It only ever left him hungrier all the time.

Now I know what it means to be a man.

As he grew more similar to man with each kindred he ate, he felt something within him diminished, hewn away.

Thus he became the first hewn man.

How did there come to be so many hewn men?

Once the method of his transformation was revealed, all the animals clamoured for a cheap, guilt free, steady stream of food.

That's when a creative entrepreneur stepped in to satisfy demand with ample provisions.
While this food was cheap, the new hewnmen soon learned that it comes with a steep hidden cost, hunger.

Before they—I mean WE—knew what had happened, they—I mean WE—we're hooked.

That's the story of hewnmen. Now, tell me what you're running from.

The men accused me and my friend of being turtles and they tried to make us into their lunch.

Do you know somewhere I can hide for a while?
Sure. Come with me.

Stay as long as you like. I can provide you with all the creature comforts you desire.

If I am indeed a good listener, the moral of your story seems to be that satisfying all of one's desires is the problem, not the solution.

I just need a place to hide while I plot my next move.
It was Pell who originated the lust for food that beseeches all of humankind. He cursed us.

We all await the great day when human will rise up and slay the men for bringing toil, hunger, and the great quake upon us. Amen.

It has been really great to have a friendly face to come home to these last few days. Let's hang out when I get home from work today.

Uh huh.

When the divine feminine finally arrives in the world, she won't save us. She will judge and destroy us! Amen.
Well boss, I don't know about all that, but if the farm keeps producing food at this rate, every last animal can be turned human in no time.

It really is a shame.

I wish there was another way to hold a mirror up to my brothers' faces...

Who was it that said, "A caricature is putting the face of a joke on the body of a truth"?

to show them their error! Alas, this caricature, these hewmen, are the best I can do.

FREE CITY OF HEWNMEN - AN INDEPENDENT
It didn’t dawn on me that I was in the company of the actual divine feminine until she had me tied up in the dirt.

She must have pulled me out of that wreck, but all I saw was her hand & she woke me with a slap across the face.

What “she” are you two talking about? That turtle?

That little monkey and his friend must be around here somewhere.

Pull will know what to do.

They’re coming.

Pull, we’re sorry to disturb you, but we need your guidance. We were out searching for two escaped interlopers and found these useless deserters and their pet instead.
While we have toiled to rebuild according to the law of the book, they've been hiding out and playing games.

Look fell! Three blind mice,

Can't see how they run.

Always rushing higher.

but never having fun.

Three blind mice, ruling by the book!

they know that book is fishy, but prefer not to look.

The old ways of the book stopped working for me. I wanted no part of all that nonsense anymore.

The twelve o'clock quake showed me the meaninglessness of our efforts. The futility of filling the infinite void within us struck me as a sick joke.

I feel sick.
And look here, Pall.

Two little kittens.

have lost their mittens,

won't dirty their paws

reading what's written.

Two little kittens,

lost their mittens,

They've thrown up their claws, can't chew what they've bitten.

One is a house cat,

Comfy cozy all day,
The other a mouser
tormenting his prey.
One eats treats from crockery in excess and in blindness.  The other dishes up mockery, and calls it human Kindness.

He is hooked on the same hunger that haunts men, and he's sick from not eating for a while.

Perhaps you feel that way but I haven't eaten a bite in a long time and I'm fine.

but I see what you mean.

It has been hours since fresh deliveries of food suddenly halted. This unnoticeable famine is taking an human over.

Riots and protests have been widely reported as hungry humans confront a feeling of deep discomfort and anxiety. Cold sweats and dreads. One local business owner was quoted as saying, "I feel so sick right now I'd eat anything!"

And that's a crowd rioted had they unidentitied outside of restaurant. Somehow the paralyzed mob. The situation on the streets is extremely dangerous, citizens.
The Supreme Leader has made no media statement and cannot be reached for comment. He was last seen leaving the Independent Free State of Newman with the CEO of Specialty Meat Foods late last night.

Remember how you once lamented the knowledge that your toys were fashioned from the remains of your dead brothers? And now look at you, hiding out in your charnel house with a throne and a poisoned scepter.

This is no place to sit and wait for the end.

We now return to coverage of the unidentified menace ravaging Main Street. The creature has entered a back corridor of the Drool and Dine restaurant.
Pall, we didn't come here to be the punchlines in your cat and mouse tales. We need the guidance of our eldest brother.

We are desperately divided.

You men fail to understand that I AM THE DIVIDING LINE...

between this world

MEN ARE MEAT

and the Leviathan.

Do you even know how I raised the walls and secured the gate?
In the beginning, I found myself swallowed up by darkness.

Just darkness and me.

and I knew I had once been part of a greater substance.

A crucial piece had been taken from me.

I felt something creep inside of me. It yearned to be fed.

mmm. Delicious leaf sap.

Saklas tried to open my eyes to his utopian dream, and the divine savior to come.

but the hunger led me to do the thing I should not.

Take mine.

MAN = BROTHER, PACK MEMBER
ANIMAL = FOOD, PREY

That first taste changed the way I saw everything.
Then Saklas gave the great teaching of the Crow.

\[ A = \text{animal}, \quad B = \text{Saklas} \]

If \( A \) is equal to \( B \), then Saklas equals animal, food, prey.

This was the moment I lost control and the hunger overtook my better instincts.

Crow, wait!

Right then a race began. I rushed to save the world before my hunger destroyed it.

The clock of history started ticking.

I locked Saklas out for his own protection and prepared the world to receive the divine Savior.

We raised a whole civilization just to make ready.
Then came the day of the great quake. I was certain that the divine feminine would appear, so I prepared a fitting offering.

Saklas's plan for an endless, deathless world guided by a savior.

I slaughtered and skinned two fine animals, and I cut them lengthwise to share in a feast with the divine.

While I sat and waited for her arrival, the meat rotted on the bones. It became a stinking, shrivelled mess, and I slowly came to see how preposterous my offering was.

This double murder was the best offering my mind could conjure by twisted committee.

How could such a sacrifice ever appeal to a deity? I moved past the hope that she would ever come save us during that long wait, and I moved past the hunger too. It just finally died.

Now some of you keep the laws of Saklas and some of you break them. As for me, I am above the law and I live on air alone.

I no longer wait for a savior or the end of history. My race is over. I am at rest.
Pall.

Saklas?

Pall, look how you've grown.

Saklas, you are smaller, a more frail animal than I remembered, but I knew that voice before I even had eyes in my head. Welcome.

And you, highest of all divine forms, I am so sorry I doubted this moment would arrive. I lost hope that you would ever come for me.
I didn't come for you.

I came to see Samael whom you call the Devil, and I'm not the highest. This one is much higher.

Open the gates, Pall.

We will bring in the summer harvest, and you will be peacemakers.
Give the signal when the gate is open.

Now let's get out of here.

First I want to see the crow.

It was stuck to your windshield. You show her.

He gave his life to save countless others from the scourges of hunger and blindness.

Let him be your example.
I understand... The gate is open now.

Let us escort you to the gate. The hewmen are rowdy today.

May I borrow this?

Sure. You'll need it.

I'm healed. The sickness has passed.
You were right. The humans are restored. I will summon all the animals for the reunion.
CHAPTER NINETEEN

You have sworn
to protect me for as
long as you suck on
that lucky charm.
Don’t forget.

Don’t you
creatures
understand that
I’m done with
that world above.
I only build
worlds inside of
myself now,
in my mind’s
eye.

So many little worlds
I’ve built
inside me
just to know,
to get hold of her. All
to no avail.
No, Samael. I have not come to harm you. On the contrary, this is a mission of peace and unification.

Saklas, if you are sincere, set down your sword and let me explain why your mission can never succeed. The answer is inherent to the structure of our world.

In the beginning this world was vast, chaotic, and very dark. I was less than a speck inside of it, just one tiny empty space, and it threatened to consume me.

So instead, I consumed it. I filled myself with that vast dark mass of everything. I ate it up. until I was as large as the world, full to its margins, but utterly alone.

So I broke off piece after piece of myself in search of a fitting companion, a perfect other.

Soon I was small once again, though this time I was a monarch ruling my many castoffs.

Then in a silvery window in the ceiling of the world right at the margin, I saw something wholly other and perfect.
Though she was of a totally different higher order, there was some common space between us. She seemed somehow close at hand but beyond an edge or limit.

Now I lay here in this lowest darkest place and she is unreachable. There can be no peace, no reconciliation from this distance.

This model bothers me greatly, because it appears so unlike our flat "leaf" ribbon world, but I have tested it against so many others and it rings true.

So it seems that light must remain entirely separate from darkness, the air will go out of every living thing, and all of you children will die.

Soon enough only this sleeping monster and I will remain in the stale immortal blackness.

Your model is good, but incomplete. Look higher to put things in a fuller context. You'll reach a better conclusion.

Everything you know was cut out and discarded from the higher world of light.
Here at the bottom, let’s fold up this blackness above and below where you’ve fallen.

Then we’ll fold the two sides of the world we once shared to wrap around that

Now here we are, separated from our higher origin and coiled as your giant curls up for a summer nap.

There is a way to reconcile and even to rise above this two-sided, black and white world. We can leave this parade of ignorant beginnings, mortal ends, and eternal chaos.

My heavenly vision! I gave up on you. I was convinced that an endless sameness was my most optimistic of all possible outcomes.

What has finally brought you here?

If I can get the keshti, your little charm, there is a way for all of us to get beyond this torn fragment and repair what was broken.

Anything you say. Watch out!
Why do I keep sinking into deeper darkness? At this moment when I finally see the higher world clearly for the first time, now I find myself in this lowest place with no route of escape.

Were you paying attention? This is not the bottom, it is the absolute center of things. This is exactly where we need to be. The Kashti is somewhere within this behemoth.

Don't you understand that we will likely be digested before we find it? We are within a labyrinth of stomachs as long as the world, and each one is filled with dreck.

Then I suggest that we begin digging.

How do we know which way to go?
How long do you intend to lie here, sleeping and sucking on that pacifier?

You little ones always speak as if there are choices to be made. If I had let them take it away, I would die.

None of you little creatures knows the first thing about actual life.

All beings have their season and then die back in the world.

Then why do you cling so tightly to life?

To die out here beyond the world means that the chain will be broken and my children too will die in my womb.
But you are so powerful. You have shaken and rearranged our whole world. Why do you lay here believing you are unable to change your fate? Wake up and...
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It is so great that you’ve turned away from the foolish desire to imitate our oppressors. Welcome back to the caste men scornfully call ANIMALS.

Incidentally, where are the men? We haven’t seen their evil faces for quite a while.

We were dying of hunger and they restored us.

So they’re gone now?

Yes.
And nobody is guarding that gate? No.

I'm feeling that old familiar craving. Wanna go jump off the end of the world?

After the bandage and horror we've endured, don't you feel that life is something precious that should be cherished and protected?

Not really. Let's go jump.

Okay.
With good luck we've found your charm, but how do you intend to escape the bowels of the beast with it?

I never said I wanted to escape with it.
Wake up!
Wake up!
Time to move.
Little one, movement was effortless when I first entered this constrictive shell of a leaf, but now I lumber and ache. Will I close the circle with a twist, will you do me one favor?
Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might

Drown my world with my weeping earnestly.

You with beyond that heaven which was most high
Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write

Or wash it, if it must be drowned no more.

But oh it must be burnt; alas the fire of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore, And made it fouler.
let their flames retire.

And burn me Lady, with a Firey Zeal

Of thee and thy house which doth in eating heal.
Scott Finch’s graphic novel, which he tells me reflects ideas found in my own book The Secret Book of John: The Gnostic Gospel, is the continuation of a three millennium long human effort to understand and explain the whole history of the universe as one continuous interconnected story with characters, plot, suspense and climactic events. One such story, which we call the Bible, became normative and canonical. To tell another cosmic story, or a mythic history that significantly deviated from that story, was eventually considered criminal activity, “heresy,” sometimes punishable by death. Nevertheless, there have been dissenters from the canonical story. Some even declared that Moses had it wrong! In the Secret Book of John (aka the Apocryphon of John) the author extensively rewrites the canonical creation story, introducing some changes with the phrase “It was not as Moses said, but” his alternative version.

Such inventive people in the first centuries of the present era, from roughly 50 CE to 450 CE, are called Gnostics. A substantial library of Gnostic writing, their myths and stories and their novels of the history of the universe, was discovered in 1945 in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Those books had been buried soon after 367 CE by the monks of a Christian monastery near Nag Hammadi because the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, had ordered that all monastic communities must burn all texts other than those of the canonical scriptures and the approved orthodox commentaries. Instead of burning theirs, some monks hid them, hoping to recover them when it was safe to do so. That day never came in their lifetimes.
The books of the Nag Hammadi library, and the other Gnostic books that survive, show that the ancient Gnostics demanded creativity. Scott Finch is part of this creative tradition and his views are similar in some ways to those of the ancient Gnostics of the first few centuries CE. His imaginative reconstruction of the history of the cosmos is a modern interpretation of theirs but featuring his own revelations.

Gnosticism has a dim view of the world, but not a dim view of reality. Gnostics believe that there is a divine reality beyond this apparent world and that we are the self-consciousness of God who has lost self-awareness. We are divine mind trapped in an illusory world that has no inherent reality and thus will disappear if we come to know it properly and begin, as Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas (11, 111), to live from the living and arrive in the light. In order to break the “fall” of God into being us and to return to primordial divine self-knowledge, a Gnostic had to comprehend the process of his own fall into objectivity and alienation. The history of the cosmos is the history of God’s mind, and this is the history of every individual. Psychogeny recapitulates cosmogeny. It would be incumbent upon and therapeutic for any Gnostic to re-write the story of God in his own narrative language, to trace his own fall and return by a cosmological myth. In this sense Gnostic myth is autobiography. To know your own cosmic story is a factor in salvation according to the Gnostics, and to tell your story is to generate myth that may facilitate the salvation of others.

CREATIVITY

The ancient Gnostics demanded creativity. Scott Finch’s imaginative reconstruction of the history of the cosmos is the modern interpretation of theirs, not the same as theirs, but part of the same quest. For Gnosticism there was a general pattern for myths of origin, one that is classically exemplified in the Secret Book of John, but unorthodox ancient writers felt free to revise and extend, complicate or simplify, the cosmology of the world as they saw fit. Their creativity shocked orthodox Christian
writers. One of the earliest orthodox opponents of the Gnostic writings, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyon in Gaul wrote about Gnostics in ca. 180 C.E. that “every one of them generates something new, day by day, according to his ability; for no one is deemed ‘perfect,’ who does not develop among them some mighty fictions” (Irenaeus: *Against Heresies*, 1:18). Irenaeus has no respect for individual creativity, it is a threat to church order. He is the earliest known source for an idea that eventually came to be beyond discussion, that there are and can be four and only four Gospels and that further creativity in that regard is absolutely unacceptable. (AH, 3:11).

Irenaeus also writes against any proliferation of individual mythic constructions: “Many offshoots of numerous heresies have already been formed from those heretics we have described. . . . They insist upon teaching something new, declaring themselves the inventors of any sort of opinion which they may have been able to call into existence” (AH, 1:28). It makes sense in a social-Darwinist way that a strongly hierarchical orthodox church organization would more easily survive through the centuries than a movement insisting on the creative freedom of individuals. It makes social sense, but we don’t have to like it.

Today, as the institutional church very slowly breaks down and loses its ability to enforce uniformity, creativity is coming back to life in the worlds of religious mythic construction. Scott Finch is creating new myth as the Gnostic mythicists did two thousand years ago. His work is part of a great lineage.

**Carnivores**

In this Gnostic novel Scott Finch shares his vision with all of us. His vision is somewhat more inclusive than the old Gnostic myths were because he is particularly concerned with the role and fate of animals and birds while they, in typical human fashion, ancient writers were interested almost entirely in human beings. Scott Finch is interested in creating a myth of life, not just of human life.
The question of human relations with animals does occasionally arise in ancient Gnostic thinking. In the Gospel of Thomas there are sayings attributed to Jesus that are concerned with issues raised by the consumption of animal flesh by humans. Since this matter is one Scott Finch considers seriously in this graphic novel, I will address it briefly here.

We read in the Gospel of Thomas saying 60: “They saw a Samaritan going into Judea carrying a lamb. Jesus asked his disciples: ‘What do you think he will do with that lamb?’ They replied, ‘He’ll kill it and eat it.’ He said to them, ‘As long as it remains alive he will not eat it; only if he kills it and it becomes a corpse. They said: ‘Otherwise he won’t be able to do so.’ He said to them: ‘You too must seek a place for rest or you may become a corpse and be eaten.’” This curious anecdote tells us that people eat the meat of dead animals, not living ones, but everyone already knows that. When we are told something utterly obvious, we can sometimes infer that there is something more subtle being said than the surface indicates. And indeed we also hear Jesus say in saying 11, “This sky will cease to be and the sky above it will cease to be. The dead do not live, and the living will not die. When you ate dead things you made them alive. When you arrive into light what will you do?” Here the theme goes a little further; people surely do eat dead animals and then the dead animals are transformed into living people. But this is not enough, because how can we ensure that we while living will not die? If we arrive in the light and attain enlightenment then, implicitly, eating dead things will no longer be appropriate for us.

Thomas’ gospel is often about transformation. In saying 22 we hear in part that “When you make an eye to replace an eye, and a hand to replace a hand, and a foot to replace a foot, and an image to replace an image then you will enter the Kingdom.” So if this sky (or this “heaven”) and the sky above it cease to be, and presumably are replaced by even higher skies, and if we as human beings are transformed into a new body and a new image (of God), we will evidently no longer need to be carnivores. People have long eaten dead things and transformed them into themselves who are
living. What happens, Jesus asks, when you yourself arrive into light and are beyond merely living? “When you ate dead things you made them alive. When you arrive into light what will you do?”

We have something of an answer to this question in saying 111 where we hear that Jesus said: “The earth and sky will roll up right in front of you. Anyone living from the living will not die. Doesn’t Jesus say that the world is not worthy of one who finds himself?” People who are transformed, whose worldly sky has rolled up and been replaced by a higher sky and greater earth, such a person will not live from the corpses of dead animals but will live from the living divinity and never die. He or she has achieved the ultimate gnostic goal: divine self-knowledge.

Now people are kept alive by eating the flesh of dead animals, when they come into the light they should live in another way. Jesus criticizes carnivorous human behavior especially clearly in saying 87, “Wretched is a body depending on a body and wretched is a soul depending on these two.” How does a body depend on a body? By killing it and eating it for, as Jesus said of the Samaritan’s lamb in saying 60, “as long as it remains alive he will not eat it; only if he kills it and it becomes a corpse,” and anyone who eats a corpse inhabits a body dependent on a body and so is spiritually wretched.

The question is then, as Jesus put it, “when you ate dead things you made them alive. When you arrive into light what will you do?” You should no longer live on dead things but on the living, for “anyone living from the living will not die.” And exactly how will we do that? I can’t say. But Jesus does say, in the canonical tradition, (Luke 12:29-31) “Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” Whether this advice is serviceable is unclear. What is clear is that the tradition conveyed by the Gospel of Thomas is concerned with the contradiction between humans who seek light and God’s kingdom and the lifestyle of humans who kill animals
and consume them for food. I believe that Scott Finch shows similar concern in his graphic novel. The only way to appreciate his novel is to read it. It stands in a long tradition of alternative visions of cosmic human history and thus it does not stand alone. Enjoy.

As this book took shape, I happened upon John Donne’s “Holy Sonnet V: I am a Little World Made Cunningly.” The way this poem mirrored, outlined, and expanded on everything I had set out to express was startling. It became an armature and touchstone for my convoluted tale. I hope devotees of Donne will forgive one necessary twist by a character in my story as he exchanges the words “O Lord” for “Lady.” This little switch reverses a trick that’s been played ever since the divine took shape in our mind’s eye as an old man in the clouds.