

A Broken Mirror

by Charles McLean Redding

Part 1: Perspective

The warm breeze of an autumn night blew dried leaves over the pavement. The houses here were set back from the road in small enclosed neighborhoods, each with a fancy name and an elegant sign: Valley Crest, Mariposa, and Oaken Heights.

The yards had swingsets creaking, caught by the wind just on the other side of a thin bank of deciduous maples that lined the road. The streetlights were orange, and lit the road in broad circles every fifty feet or so, leaving abyssal patches of darkness, concealing all that existed within from any observer.

There was a sound that no one on Earth had ever heard before. It was like the deep resounding crack of thick ice on a pond about to give way, but deeper... a non-physical layer of reality cracking, or rather, being cracked open.

A sudden desolate wind, like an arctic breath from nowhere, split the balmy autumn night and brought a freezing to the surrounding hills. Grass died and windows frosted over. The human beings, snug in their beds shivered who had their windows open. Some woke to close them, and thought they had imagined the sound that went deeper than hearing as it continued to spread.

Then, for an instant, two realities joined as one. The space between them, the space of stasis and absolute zero, was momentarily exposed to atmosphere. The nearest trees creaked, as the sudden cold-snap split their drinks deep in the core... they would not be waking come Spring. The pavement nearby likewise cracked as moisture trapped within was forced to reshape itself suddenly. Violently. Nearby, those creaking swing-sets froze midswing, sticking out as if a photograph had captured only a single moment. If the exposure to this space had gone on for longer than that fraction of an instant, it might have frozen the

planet to its core.

With a final jarring split, the bridge was formed, and the broken-glass mosaic of space which now inhabited the darkness just beyond one of the pools of streetlight, settled into an intricate array of incomprehensible geometries. They moved slightly now; drifting shards caught in a web, blowing in a breeze that couldn't be felt. A dog barked nearby. The array warped and shifted as something--someone--forced their way through the tunnel between realities. A heavy boot, laced with leather and clad in metal, hit blacktop for the first time.

A not-quite-human shape emerged, brushing aside the loose scraps of reality. He inhaled the now chilly air, stomped a few times to get a feel for the new ground, the new weight, the new feel of this place. His metal armor rustled and rasped against the leather padding as he tried to adjust it. He stretched his arms and flexed his clawed fingers. He yawned, revealing long canines from his flat and shaggy face, and tried to pop his ears. Even as another bulge in the array pressed in behind him, he walked into the streetlight and could have been clearly seen, had anyone been watching. The dog stopped barking.

He was hulking at the back and shoulders, compared to a human. His arms were longer, and he hunched so they could have dragged on the ground if he let them. In his large partially furred hands he grasped the handle of a large axe-like weapon, its blade like a series of graduated crescents sticking out of the haft. He gripped it for comfort as he squinted and blinked. His brain tried to make sense of all the entirely unfamiliar input. He could hear the second traveler get clear of the portal.

"What a pit." He commented to his far more local looking companion. If she was not human, she could easily have passed for one. "Not see a blighted thing."

"Likely is nightfall, as we may know. Is most certainly to our benefit, and will see us have more time to take our bearings." Unlike her companion, the woman wore no armor, instead opting for a warm black cloak lined with course brown fur, over simple tawny, and slightly roadworn traveling clothes. She also carried a

pack with her.

"Night? Have it that, then? These blighted lights are blinding. Phlogistun?"

"Think likely not. Some local alchemy."

"As we may know." He chuckled, a deep throaty chuff that blended in with something new... a strange and unfamiliar sound.

"Quiet! Hear?" She shushed him and drew her own weapon, a shortsword with a basket hilt that bore some kind of intricate locking mechanism, though there was nothing apparent for it to lock to at this time. A distant rumble, a grinding sound from some beast sounded like it was approaching fast. Very fast.



"What the fuck?" Dale complained loudly as his windshield and glasses abruptly and simultaneously fogged up. His radio started in on one of those really obnoxious commercials as he struggled to wipe his glasses, and fumble with the defrost as well. He cleared the glasses, hit the AC button a few times, but before he could see if it was set right, his glasses had fogged up again. "Son of a bitch..." His foot brushed the brakes with token effort and little meaningful effect.

Luckily it was the middle of the night, and in this town that meant the roads were totally abandoned. He cleared his glasses a second time, hit the AC one more time, setting it to defrost. He turned it up to max, cleared his glasses... what was going on anyway? Was it not 70 degrees out tonight?

"Shit shit shit GODDAMNIT!" Dale smacked the radio controls, turning the volume up on the commercial rather than turning it off. He was, as it happens, already a little stressed. He cleared his glasses again, and turned the radio deliberately off. and looked up as the windshield finally started to clear. He thought he could make out some... were there *people* in the road?

He switched on his brights and was instantly blinded.



The beast came roaring at them with incredible speed over the flat roadway, far faster than any steed could charge. Its eyes glowed with a bright white lights. The one traveler hefted his crescent axe, and the other let her sword drop. The lights were much like the ones in the lamps above. Suddenly, the lighted eyes changed, and in an instant were intensely bright, catching a mirror array of glare from the shards of reality, sending a dazzlingly magnified and multiplied light reflected and refracted in all directions.

"Alchemy! An engine! Bail!" She dove to the side as the machine bore down on them in the midst of the chandelier of blinding brightness all about. The larger one was slower to react, following suit a fraction of a moment too late, as the massive device brushed his hip, that alone enough force to strike him with a sickening snap and send him toppling and rolling to the side in spite of his armor.

The beast-device itself rammed like a smith's hammer into the breach, suddenly quenching the blinding flashes, obliterating the array and collapsing the tunnel behind it. Soon the incredible machina, as well as the bridge were gone, leaving only the woman and her companion. Warm air crept back into the area as the dog began barking again, more madly now than ever.

He moaned on the road where he had fallen. She tried to pick herself up quickly to go to his side and almost stumbled again herself in her haste.

"Blighter broke me." He gasped. "Think it got me blinded."

"There's bleeding. We need to set, and get out of this. Think a roadway, could be more machina. Have to move yourself, your fat furry slab is too great for me!" She urged him to get up, helping to provide guidance more than any actual contribution to the necessary lifting. He tried once, in intense pain, and fell back

as his good leg gave way. He hit the pavement howling. Other dogs began to bark, and lights started to come on in the neighborhoods. It wasn't unheard of for there to be a crash on this roadway, as certain idiots liked to drive too fast on it at night. This would not be the first time someone had needed rescue. She half dragged as he half crawled, and they made it to the side of the road, and both were panting. It was a start.



There was a droning buzz that dragged Dale back into a semi-conscious state. His head... it was killing him. He rubbed it with his hand and a sharp jolt of stabbing pain caused him to cry out and swear. He could hear a muffled thumping. His glasses were nowhere around, but he managed to bring his hand up close enough to see... the shard of glass sticking out of the meat between his thumb and fingers. His other hand seemed okay, so he grabbed and slipped the glass from his hand. it came out easily, but suddenly the wound gushed with a tremendous amount of blood. Dale was trying to swear through the pain and shock but it was coming out more as a sobbing sound. The thumping behind him grew more insistent.

"Shut the FUCK! UP!" he yelled, exasperated, unable to think clearly to process what had just happened. The thumping subsided for a moment and then resumed even more insistently. What did he hit... was it a bear? What happened to the lights? Dale started to imagine the scenario which must have happened... that a bear had been screwing with the streetlight, chewing the cords or whatever a bear would do, and as Dale drove up it fled...and the lightpole must have exploded. Maybe it had a transformer? Either way, he was fucked up and this whole situation was now officially fucked. He managed to get the car door open and nearly fall out of it onto the ground, which was unexpectedly soft and yielding. Not pavement. Not grass.

He ended up sitting on this sandy ground, and reached back into the car, digging through broken glass for his smartphone. He found one, but it wasn't his. He found his and...

searching for service. No signal. Suddenly Dale's guts churned, his vision began to tunnel and he felt a coldness seeping into his face. He fell back into the warm sand and closed his eyes to deal with the pounding in his head, the throbbing pain in his hand, the tightly tensed up muscles making his limbs feel like they were wrapped in electrical wire. He wasn't sure how long he laid there, as he drifted in and out of consciousness, but he was aware that he had shat himself at some point. He was certain that at any moment he would hear sirens, and in his unconscious dreaming he heard it several times, but they never materialized. No one came.

There was a buzzing noise that seemed to come from everywhere, and his limbs were strangely heavy. Dale finally managed to crack open his eyes. It was still night. His mind was clearer and the question which had been bugging him, though he hadn't quite been able to formulate it until now suddenly crystallized...

"Why the fuck am I on sand!?" Dale shouted to a strange sky. The only response was the return of the thumping from the trunk of his car. Well, he thought, at least she hadn't died or run off.



People with strange handheld lights, not like torches, but ones that shot bright beams in single directions, were now scanning all over the area where the bridge had formed. They had been especially excited about the blood on the ground. Luckily, none seemed to be skilled trackers, as she had been able to easily hide their path... a skill in which she could be considered novice at best. They didn't even think to use their hounds.

The two travelers had managed to make it to a roadside gulch, and inside a ridged steel tunnel that went under the road, where one imagined water would flow during a rainy season. It was out of sight for now, and they could take cover there while searchers passed them by. Assuming she could keep her companion quiet.

He was whining at the pain, with every breath, and it was getting louder as he lost more and more of his willpower. It seemed a broken hip. The pain of that must be incredible.

"Sorry for this..." She put her hand on his head, and another on his chest, and uttered a few powerful words under her breath, to help her focus. The whining stopped, the breathing became still. As she lifted her hands, there was a dull flicker of light from each palm. She placed her hands together, bringing them up to her mouth and whispering some words of calming and peace, before bringing the light down to a small cluster of clay figurine charms hanging around her neck. When she was done, one of the charms had taken on the light, the eyes now glowed dully with that faint flicker. "Need not worry." She said to the tiny clay figure and the now lifeless body, "time will be soon I put you back, and be grateful anyway. Have to fix the damage, lots of pain in that."

She kept quiet as the local people meandered and chattered with words she could almost make out. When it was quiet she took out a kit of sharp metal and bone handled implements from her bag. She was soon covered in the blood of her companion, from carving into the cooling flesh. Her hands and sleeves were drenched in the dark dull red blood. The bone, when she reached it, was cracked and split. It was going to take a lot of precise work to repair. She took her time and she took breaks often, as she whsipered the pieces back together. There was not a terrible rush, and she needed her companion as strong as he could be. Their mission was vitally important, and she had no idea what threats awaited them in this world.

It was then that she noticed that the light outside was changing. So it had been night after all.



Dale had trudged through the grey sand that surrounded the ruins where his vehicle had...well... landed. The area around the ruins was flat, but the grey sand stacked up in dunes in almost every direction. There was no being sure what had happened.

Everything was too strange to be real. Part of him kept screaming that it was a prank, a dream, anything but what it seemed to be... and even that was still a big fat mystery.

The buzzing in the sky was incessant. The color was dark blackish blue with no stars at all.

Dale's muscles were sore beyond anything he had ever experienced. It was like the result of a hard workout after a year-long netflix binge, though he wasn't sure if that was from this place or was a result of the crash. His hand was swollen and numb, but at least the bleeding had stopped under his makeshift bandage. He'd even managed to get lucky with a spare jacket and a pair of sweatpants in his car to change into that weren't covered in blood and shit.

He went back to the wreck where he'd laid out his meager supplies. Half a coffee from the morning, a granola bar. Two energy drinks. Three bottles of water. A bag of pretzels from a flight he took last June. All told, pretty pathetic. The car was smashed against one of the stone walls of the strange place. It seemed to have been made from cement or marble or something... at least there were no cracks or joints, or brickwork; it was all one solid piece and, as far as he could tell, his car hadn't even scratched it. Something suddenly occurred to Dale. He hadn't wanted to pop the trunk until he had some idea what was going on, but he had just remembered that he'd put snacks and water in there. Maybe she hadn't eaten them all yet. He went around back and reluctantly opened the trunk.

Immediately, Katie tried to kick him. He managed to avoid it, and knock her feet aside. She kept trying. Her hands were still bound behind her back, her mouth was still gagged, and her eyes were red with crying, which was not especially surprising. She was screaming into her gag-cloth as she lashed out in a mad rabbit attack. Luckily for Dale, all he had to do was stand back.

"Calm down! Christ! Would you stop!?! Listen, Listen to me!" he had his hands up placatingly and was staying back. She eventually stopped and glared raw hate at him.

"Okay, look, I'm not a psycho, okay? I'm not a bad-guy, I don't have any sicko plans for you or anything, I'm just doing a

favor for a friend. I swear to god, we weren't gonna touch you and we were gonna let you go, all right? But something's... Christ, I don't know. We got into an accident and we're lost. I don't know where we are." Katie's look diudn't change in the slightest.

"Okay, look, I'm gonna come over there and take off the gag, okay? So we can talk, and make sure we're both on the same page, okay? Whatever was going on before, thing have changed, and we're in, like, a survival situation okay? So don't freak out at me."

She started trying to say something through the gag. She gestured with her head and shoulders. Looking at Dale with more impatience now.

"Okay, I'm gonna take that off you now." he walked up and very cautiously removed the gag. She Squeezed her eyes shut and worked her mouth around, caughing, and choking out a few sounds to make sure her voice still worked. ""Okay listen, before you start yelling or say anything, this is really important I have to ask... do you still have the snacks and water I gave you?"

Katie closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"The snacks? I didn't eat the snacks, because I was GAGGED you stupid piece of shit!"

"Oh... yeah. I guess... shit, I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You're sorry for that? I swear you're gonna be a lot more sorry!"

"You're pretty quick with the insults and threats for someone who's still tied up, jeez! I guess we're both stupid pieces of shit. Go ahead, get it off your chest, but I'm serious we need to... wait... hold on." Dale was squinting outside. Was the light changing? He was so ready for the night to be over. Maybe in daylight he could figure out where in the Hell they had ended up.

"Hold that thought, don't move, I'm gonna to check something."

Dale went out to the sandy hills and saw that sure enough, the sky was lightening up on the horizon. The sun began to rise an angry red through the haze of dust and sand. It was hard to look at, but it was distinctly and vividly red. For several minutes he waited for it to clear the haze, but it just got more and more clear in its blood red light that hurt his eyes while still failing to

properly illuminate the landscape. Dale's brain felt like it was backfiring trying to understand what he was looking at. It was hot. Really hot. Like... pizza oven hot.

"Oh my God..." Dale turned and ran back for the shelter, his back already feeling like it was being cooked in a toaster, only to find what he should probably have expected: an empty trunk.



The traveler watched the sky grow lighter. Her stomach grew colder and knotted until finally the sun peaked above the horizon, sending an impossibly bright spear of light blasted forth to utterly wash out the land, confirming her fears. She quickly averted her eyes, but even that momentary exposure to this cold light seemed to blind her for almost a minute. This... this would be a problem. She was clearly sensitive to this light, but her companion... this light would burn his eyes from his skull, and even her words of power and chirurgy tools couldn't fix them. She needed another solution. This world truly was some kind of hell.

Part 2: Acclimation

"Katie... where the fuck did you go? We seriously *need* to stick together..." Dale floundered about the strange ruins, one hand scraping on the wall to his left as he squinted into the dark spaces within and between the walls of the structure. Katie could see him from the place where she waited. He was sweating like a marathon runner. It was definitely getting hotter, but Katie had found that the walls of this place remained cool. After a few minutes of wandering around aimlessly, he swore and went back towards the car, presumably to look for his glasses again. Katie turned away from the empty doorway and back to look at the chamber in which she found herself.

The smooth grey walls were carved from some kind of natural formation, it seemed, with wide doors and ceilings over ten feet high. The room itself was round, and had to be thirty feet across. She felt like it was made for someone with unusually large proportions. Especially with her hands still tied behind her back, it made her feel awkward; like a kid wandering around in a neighbor's house after they'd moved out. There was almost nothing that looked like it had come from whoever built the place, but there was something that looked pretty recent.

At the center was a camp. There were the remains of a fire, packs and supplies for long a trip. It wasn't scattered or messy, in fact it looked like whoever set it up had intended to return but not for a while, so had wrapped up what needed wrapping up and set everything aside, neat and tidy. Two beds were so packed, and one rather large one was still laid out for use. It would have been a very nice looking place to stay if not for the bodies.

Katie was a girl, but she had never been a "girly" girl. She'd nearly considered joining ROTC, as she had two uncles, and an older brother currently serving. She had opted for track sports instead, but she was fully ready to do what was necessary when it came to survival and self defense. She wasn't exactly eager to roll around on the ground with dead bodies, but given her

situation, she didn't hesitate. Katie threw herself to the ground near one of the corpses, her back to it, trying to carefully grab for the fallen knife with her bound hands.



The warrior felt warm hands on his head, and on his heart.

"Can speak? Ganeth? You waking?" A shaggy face opened one eye, and tried to utter a few words, but none came, only a strange wheezing growl. "I feared it would be. You may have no speech like... this. Can stand?" The warrior felt strange. Very very strange. He shifted his arms and legs, but couldn't twist his hands up to feel his face or remove whatever mask was strapped to it. Was he bound? Gagged? He started struggling to stand, but his body felt deformed, and rebelled, refusing to twist or bend in the proper way. What's more, his arms were like twigs... weak, fragile like nothing he had ever experienced.

Also changed was his vision. He could see his companion who had wrapped a layer of cloth around her eyes, presumably to protect her sight from the bright light beyond the metal tunnel where they were hiding. Yet there was more to it. The light that shone through should have glared intensely, but instead it felt like any other day back home, though strangely blue-aspected. Some colors were washed out, but he could clearly see her there looking at him with great concern and a note of... apology? And next to her was a large lump of armored... him. The warrior could clearly see his own body, laying dead behind her.

Oh.

"Was only one path, my friend. Days come, gone and come again, and time was short for the game. This sky would have blinded, maybe killed your hairy self. Found... another. For travel in this awful place. Can go secret and seen, and aid me still." The warrior was still struggling to stand and failing.

"Step like a hound." she advised.

The warrior glared at her for a moment, swiveing his head around to see his temporary body. No arms, four *legs*. Skinny little legs. Fur all over, nothing new there, and claws, though

small. By far the oddest sensation was the realizing that this block strapped to his face was, in fact, his face. She had taken his astral self, and placed him into some local animal. The warrior tried to speak, but only a whining growling moan came out.

"Best start at the bottom, my friend. Learn to step on fours, before, and talk birds down after."



Dale, after failing once again to locate his glasses, had finally spotted the camp in the large room, and was making his way in. He had to get close to see if what he thought he saw was real.

"Holy shit..." his voiced expression was not dissimilar to Katie's silent one. She watched from the shadows as he slowly leaned down to examine one of the bodies. The clothes were strange, a lot of dark folded fabric, and all rough, nothing smooth or without texture. Even the leather belt and harness was all scaled like alligator skin or pocked like ostrich hide.

The hood concealed a face that was nearly covered in tattoos and the bumps of ritual scar patterns. This had been the fellow with the knife, but no knife was there presently. He was also chopped nearly in two.

Dale didn't seem to notice the significance of the empty sheath on the corpse's belt. This was not the strangest of the bodies.

There were two more, and Dale seemed more reluctant to approach them, but he did. One was the size of a child, but the skin was like leather; thick-looking, cracked and lined, patches worn away as if with acid, hairless, and with similar tattoos across arms wired with muscle. The skin was a faded blue color which got darker towards the ends of the limbs and lighter toward the body. The clothes matched the body of the first, and there was a jagged shard of metal stick into the neck between the shoulder and the jaw. It looked like its head had been nearly pried off. Its blood seemed to be colorless, like water. This one had carried a pair of

hooked swords, but they too were missing at the moment.

The last one seemed, more than the others, to have Dale spooked. It was huge, for one thing, hulking shoulders with shaggy fur over a flat face, and tusks coming from the lower jaw. This one was not marked with tattoos that could be seen, and unlike the other two, this one had not robes, but armor, metal plated and written on with strange characters and symbols. A series of lines with triangular wedges at the ends. Katie had been trying to remember the word for the language it reminded her of, something ancient and middle eastern... dawn of civilization kind of stuff. Whats more, it seemed like this one had killed the other two, and vice versa, though all his wounds were small. Katie wondered if there was poison involved, and was very grateful she hadn't cut herself getting out of her own bonds.

Dale was practically hyperventilating seeing this thing. He was sweating and backing away slowly now.

"Katie!!" he screamed as he whipped around and ran smack into the end of the big-thing's weapon. Once an axe, now the haft of an axe with a jagged metal end. She was careful to strike with the blunt end, and Dale went down like a sack of laundry.



It was not easy to be a warrior when one is suddenly a third the size of the person one is trying to protect, and a tenth the size one recently was. Much less when none of the armor will fit and one is quite incapable of wielding any weapons at all.

However, he was quick to discover one unexpected benefit; the smells this beast was capable of reading were beyond anything he might have imagined. His kind had more sensitive noses than hers, but this was another order altogether. Combined with all the smells of a new world, and the warrior was so overwhelmed that he often lost control of his body, the tail sweeping back and forth with a life and enthusiasm of its own.

The two travelers took several walks that day, in the forest around the neighborhoods. Some scouting showed that she could pass for a local with the right garb, and with his very complete

disguise, as he had come to think of it, so could he. He just had to learn to use it. Walking was difficult at first, but as with fighting, he had to rely on the body's muscle memory. As long as he but decided to go somewhere and didn't think too much about which leg to move in what order, he could keep from stumbling.

Once that was figured out, he often found his legs carrying him further and faster than he'd realized, chasing down the sources of various scents. He also found himself often making the same raucous noises that true members of the species seemed wont to do, without even realizing he was doing it.

It was almost certain that four legged hound-beasts could tell he was not one of them, as their odd shouts became angry and frantic, even panicked when he came close. Luckily, they were incapable of specific communication to their masters.

It was a lot to get used to, and it was hard on the warrior. However, they still had a lot to do, and could not spend as much time as he would have liked practicing.

First, was acquiring some local clothing and supplies, second was finding a way to move around, and third was finding a way to find those they were looking for. Thankfully, the first step was the easiest

The warrior used his smaller form to sneak around the village. He quickly learned that the great machina which had nearly killed him was little more than the common means of transportation for these people. Once he found a house abandoned and unguarded with its back to the woods, he cleared the way for his companion, and watched as she went in to get the supplies she needed.

They didn't worry about the theft or the wronging of any of the people who lived here. Their mission was far more important, as long as they were able to avoid unnecessary trouble.

After what felt like much longer than it needed to be, she came back out with new clothes on, bright and garish to his eyes, but the locals did like their vivid and light colors.

"Feel it, Gan! Smooth as glass and softer than petal!" She held out one of the pieces of clothing much as she rubbed her hand down her arm feeling the strange fabric against it. Not

having hands, he ignored it, but she didn't seem to notice that he hadn't felt it. She had also located some of the dark visors he'd seen on some local faces. Perhaps they were sensitive to the blinding sunlight after all. The odd lenses looked out of place on her face he knew so well, not to mention the rest of the disguise.

The shirt she wore was a light color, and looked pale greenish to his alien eyes. It was tight against her skin, layered over a white undershirt as she had seen on their scoutings. The pants had numerous pockets, but were also nearly white, and very tight against her form, though the pant-legs were very short, ending at the calf. Luckily, the long laced up leather boots, the weapons belt, leather pack (now stuffed with stolen clothes), and various charms and totems around her person lent her some air of normalcy.

They were able to sneak away from the house with no interference or questions, and back to their small camp in the tunnel. On their way, she seemed distracted, dwelling on something.

"Gan..." she said carefully, as if she wanted to be taken very seriously, "this be the most comfortable clothing worn in my life. Ever."

The warrior couldn't laugh, so he just wagged his tail.