

NICK * CAVE



**AND THE ASS
SAW THE ANGEL.**

HIS FIRST NOVEL REVISITED



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And the Ass Saw the Angel
by
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Prologue

Three greasy brother crows wheel, beak to heel, cutting a circle into the bruised and troubled sky, making fast, dark rings through the thicksome bloats of smoke.

For so long the lid of the valley was clear and blue but now, by God, it *roars*. From where ah lie the clouds look prehistorical, belching forth great faceless beasts that curl 'n' die, like that, above.

These sly corbies are birds of death. They've shadowed me all mah life. It's only now that ah can reel them in. With mah eyes.

Sucked by the gums of this toothless grave, ah go – into this fen, this pit, though ah fear to get mah kill-hand wet. In truth and as ah speak, the two crows have staked out mah eyes – like a couple of bad pennies they wheel and wait, while the rolling smoke curls and dies above, and ah see that it turns darker now and ah am but one full quarter unner, or nearly and gaining.

O little valley!

Two shattered knees of land rise and open to make a crease between. Down the bitten inner flank we go, where trees laden with thick vines grow upon the trembling slopes.

Travelling the length of the valley, south to north, as the crow flies, we follow its main road as it weaves its way along the flat of the valley's belly. From up here it could be a ribbon, as we pass over the first of many hundreds of acres of smouldering cane.

Tonight is the first night of the seasonal 'burn-off', an occasion of great importance and high festivity for Ukulore Valley, when the townsfolk all take to the tall fields to watch the wall of fire sweep the cane of its useless foliage, its 'trash'. Yet this night sees all strangely quiet here on the out-fields: wet sacks and snake-beaters carelessly abandoned, sparks and grey ash borne silently through the air on a low wind.

The sugar refinery sprawls out by the east flank, a mile from the town. We can hear the steady chugging of its engines. Trolleys – some empty, some part loaded – sit forgotten on the tracks.

Wing on and past, over the town itself, where the rusty corrugated roofs grow denser and we can see the playground and the Courthouse and Memorial Square.

In the centre of the Square, erected at the very heart of the valley, the marble sepulchre containing the relics of the prophet crumbles and splits beneath the slogging of three down-borne mallets.

A group of black-clad mourners, mostly women, watch on as the monument is destroyed. And see the great marble angel, its face carved in saintly composure, one arm held high, a glided sickle in its fist; will they bring that down as well?

And on, through the commotion, through the town's stormy heart, where women mourn as at a wake, bullying their grief with breasts bruised black and knuckles bleeding. Watch how they fan the streets with their wild, black gestures, twisting the sackcloth of their robes with pleading seizures and dark spasms.

From up here they look like ground-birds.

Circle once these creatures of grief, and then onward across the stricken town, over the clusters of trailers where the cane-cutters live, at the heel of the rhythm of the crops. Here, at this dark hour, only their women and frightened children remain. Standing at their windows, the ghosts of their breath coming and going on the glass, they listen to the motors of their men roar northward then fade amongst the hiss and crackle of the fields.

Pursue Maine Road till the cane ends abruptly against bare wire fences, four miles from town, two miles from the northern valley entrance.

A lone shack on a junk-heap burns and burns, belching purple smoke into the restless air. Beyond the shack the land grows sodden, and from the marsh rises a wheel of vegetation – tall trees borne into bondage, rising from the cooch and crabbing dog-weed, carrying a canopy of knitted vine upon their wooden shoulders.

Here we dip and dive, for this is the swampland.

As we pass above, we see a line of torches winking beneath the dark canopy, moving inward and toward the centre of the circle.

Torn from the very centre of the swampland is a clearing, round like a plate, and within this clearing, like a wheel within a wheel, is a circle of quickmud, black and steaming, large enough to digest a cow. It glistens darkly at our passing. But stop. Look who lies on the surface of the mud, all curled up like a new-born! See how his bones cleave to his skin. How his ribs fan softly each time he draws breath. See how he is nearly naked. And look how very still he is.

But for that eye.

It rolls in its orbit, and, fish-like, fixes us.

I

It was his brother who tore the caul on that, the morning of their birth, and as if that sole act of assertion was to set an inverted precedent for inertia in his life to come, Euchrid, then unnamed, clutched ahold of his brother's heels and slogged into the world with all the glory of an uninvited guest.

The noon-day sun spun in the sky like a molten bolt and hammered down on the tin roof and tarred plank sides of the shack. Inside sat Pa, at his table, surrounded by his ingenious contraptions of springs and steel, greasing his traps and trying, in vain, to closet his ears from the drunken ravings of his wife, who lay sprawled and caterwauling in the back seat of the old burnt-out Chevy. Pride of the junk-pile, that car, sitting on bricks out back of the shack, like a great shell shed in disgust by some outsized crawler.

There, in the squirms of labour, his bibulous spouse shrieked against the miracle that swelled and kicked inside her as she sucked on a bottle of her own White Jesus, rocking the Chevy on its stilts and moaning and screaming, screaming and a-moaning, 'Pa! Pa-a! Pa-a-a!', until she heard the shack door open and then the shack door shut, whereupon she took leave of the morning and passed into unconsciousness.

'Too pissed to push,' Pa would tell Euchrid later.

Prising the liquor bottle free of her grubby clutch, Pa broke the bottle carefully on the car's rusted tail-fin.

Taking intuition as his midwife and a large shard of glass as his cutter, he spread his prostrate wife-with-child and doused her private parts in peel liquor. And with a chain of oaths spilling from his mouth, and with all the summer insects humming, with the sun in the sky and not a cloud in sight, with a hellish shriek and a gush of gleet, two slobbering bundles came tumbling out.

‘Jesus! Two!’ cried Pa, but one died soon.

Inside the shack, two fruit-crates lined with newspaper sat side by side on the table. The animal traps had been moved and hung around the walls.

Two boxes and in each a babe.

Neither made a sound and both lay quite still upon their backs, naked as the day and with eyes wide and wandering. Pa drew the nibbled stub of a pencil from his trouser pocket and, squinting, leaned toward the little ones, writing on the foot-end of the first-born’s crib ‘#1’, then, licking the tip, ‘#2’ upon the crib in which Euchrid lay.

The babes had strange almond eyes, with slightly swollen upper lids and next to no lashes, blue but so pale as almost to verge on pink; intent, eager, never still, not for a moment – rather they seemed to hover, these weird chattering eyes, hover and tremble in their browless sockets.

Little Euchrid coughed, short and sharp, his tiny pink tongue lapping at his lower lip then curling back inside. And, as if waiting for a signal and recognizing it in Euchrid’s timid hack, the brave little first-born closed his eyes and fell into a slumber from which he would never wake.

‘Goodbye, brother,’ ah said to mahself as he slipped away, and for a full minute ah thought that ah too was going unner, so fucken cold was his dying.

Then sailing through the still night came the raucous fray of her bitchship, mah mother, Ma, screeching in hoarse malediction through the very anus of obscenity whilst banging on the side of the Chevy and going, ‘Wha-ars mah boddle!’

‘Wha-a-ars ma-ah boddle!!’

Pa had fitted two improvised restrainers across mah ankles and chest, forcing me to maintain a horizontal attitude there in mah crate, but, consumed by an overwhelming need to observe what mah brother was up to now that he had launched so impulsively

into Eternity, ah endeavoured to raise mah head in the hope of catching a brief craning glimpse of him.

Having been hauled into Life without warning, jettisoned from the boozy curds of gestation – oh that snuggery where we would float and float! – and left now still reeling from the trauma of birth, mah conception of that final Enigma was, as you may well imagine, shamefully uninformed. Ah mean, how could ah have known just how bloody deathlike Death was?

In any case, much as ah thrashed and craned, there was just no give in the restrainers – nope, no give at all, and eventually ah abandoned all hope. Toil-worn and winded, ah just lay there thinking, thinking about mah sainted brother in the fruit-crate beside me, thinking how the hell was he gunna get to Heaven if he was having half the trouble that ah was in slipping his bonds?

But ah had managed to wrench one tiny arm free during that first, great, futile and ultimately portentous struggle – and with one grub-sized knuckle ah knocked out a message, using a system of coded raps, taps and gaps that mah brother and ah had devised while adrift in the purling fremitus of the womb.

Do – Not – Forget – Your – Brother – Reply

But mah brother did not. Ah tapped out a second time, adding a *Please* to the end, but again he did not. *Please*. Undaunted, ah told him what Life was like, and inquired about any special powers he may have developed in Death. Mah signals became urgent and disjointed. The futile raps sounded hollow and lonely as they hung unanswered above mah crate.

Life–Is–Bad–Is–Hell–Can–You–Fly–Hel–Hell–Help

Finally ah took control, and with mah knuckle barked and weeping ah tapped out one last message upon the inside of mah crate.

Night descended – but as ah lay in harness, supine in mah lonesomeness, and watched with increasing dread as the aching light of day grew subfusc and fraught with the freakish music of the darktime – hoots, incessant shrills, scuttles, blood-curdling howls – ah thought that the end of the world had come.

The Day of Judgement had arrived and all ah could do was lie there – yes, and ah guess that’s precisely what ah did – lie there and let the dead of dark swaller me up, while ah waited for the Ark of His Testament and the lightning and voices, thunderings, earthquakes and great hails.

Slowly mah world was smothered in shrouds of fear and black shadow, and when ah could no longer see anything but the very pitchest murk ah heard ominous footsteps, leaden and uneven, cross the porch and come to a halt outside the door.

Ah cowered in mah crate.

There was a hideous skreek as the screen door swung back, a fumbling with the door catch, a resounding ‘Fuck door’, an explosion of white light, a door crash-bang-slamming, a terrible belch – and mah mother bowled headlong into the room, lolloped blindly past, and disappeared out the other side.

A single naked bulb hung from the ceiling directly over mah crib. The bulb throbbled hotly, brazen and hypnotic, as ah lay upon mah back and observed, with increasing annoyance, a growing number of night-insects serried around the humming cynosure. Ah watched helplessly as every minute or so an overzealous moth or gnat or fly would collide with the deathly bulb, frying to ash its little wings and hair-like appendages. Thus its futile business would end in a screaming descent, invariably coming to ground within the fruit-crate in which ah lay. Spinning insectile amputees littered mah crib – died ghastly deaths, their last agonies performed in all their screaming luridness right before mah eyes, to bring them at last to the end of their days, bereft of life.

Ah knew then why mah late lamented brother seemed so subdued. There was no Life left in him.

Then the day returned. An erumpent sun bellowed shouts of buttery light over the eastern flank, waking the entire valley with its aureate noise.

Two crows chortled and cackled in the sky. A wild dog howled somewhere in the hills. Ah could hear the chirruping of hungry

chicks. Close by, a mule brayed in despair. Ah heard the idiot twitterings of a lark. Bees hummed earnestly.

All about me the world seemed in need of attention.

Bells rang from the valley's belly. A cane-toad croaked. A fly buzzed. A car horn blared as it plunged down Maine.

All about me the world demanded that it be attended to. It was time all the fledglings and chicklings, weaners and catlings, lambs, piglets and babies were attended to.

Ah was in woeful need of attention. Ah was. Ah was in terrible need of nourishment. Mah body longed for sustenance. How long would ah have to wait? Do you know? Did ah tell you that ah was *very fucking hungry*?

Ah had contemplated eating one or two of the fried insects that sprawled across mah stomach.

Rather ah decided to make a bit of a ruckus – stir the attention of mah custodians in the manner of all hungry neglected children. So ah filled mah lungs with air and howled and howled and screamed and raged and gnashed and yelled out things like '*Feed me!*' and '*Food!*' and '*Tit!*' and all the while ah thrashed and kicked beneath mah ungiving restrainers, so ingeniously devised by Pa – a veritable master of the trap – that each kick and thrash of mah infantile body served only to draw the bonds that little bit tighter, frustrating mah movements all the more, so that within the space of a minute mah little fracas was restricted to a bit of buttock clenching, some pretty ferocious rolling of the eyes, lolling of the tongue, and, of course, mah embranglement of words – O how they rolled off mah tongue – O how they gushed from mah mouth – great bloody words torn from the very pit of mah belly – '*Feed me!*' '*O Death! Must ah starve?*' and '*Fucking feed me now!*' – and, you know – ah mean, *do you know what?* – in spite of all mah whoop and holler – all mah howling and yowling – all mah bull-like bawling and shit-storming and caterwauling, all – in spite of it *all* – do you know *what?*

Not a peep of sound did ah make – not from mah crate, not from mah cot.

No, not a peep of sound did ah make.

Ah felt bewildered by mah discovery. Cheated. Duped.

Ah felt lonely.

With mah one free hand ah tore at the newspaper that lined the walls of mah crate. Rolling it into small balls, ah sucked the paper to a soft pap and swallowed it.

In time ah managed to sate mah hunger with that frugal supper and, belly full, ah yawned deeply and turned mah thoughts again to mah brother, who lay in the buzzing crate beside me. And yawning again, more deeply this time, ah closed mah eyes, wondering as ah fell away – was mah brother a mute too?

‘Guess ah’ll never really know for sure,’ ah remember thinking, as sleep wound itself about me, ‘ah guess ah’ll never really know.’

Ah dreamed mah brother and ah were united in Heaven, incumbent on warm cotton clouds. He stroked his golden harp and a shower of silvery tones broke over mah body. We smiled.

Mah brother stopped playing and rose into the air. His wings were black and veinous and oozed a viscid phlegm. He rubbed two hairy legs and put the harp which was now a crown upon his head. Ah tried to fly but ah had no wings yet, just a white hairless wiggling maggot’s body – helpless on mah back – on mah back. Mah brother pointed at me and shouted ‘*Pirate!! Leave me!! Leave me!! Leave me-e-e!!!*’ Then ah saw that Heaven had turned red and soupy and ah was floating slow and turning and all the time a double beat sounded ‘*Boom-boom . . . Boom-boom . . . Boom-boom . . . Boom-boom . . .*’ like a heart.

Ah awoke.

Mah father loomed over me like a crooked stick. From out of his grizzled face two small, pale eyes hovered in their sockets.

So Pa sat, a bowl and a loaf in his hands.

Ah sucked a piece of milk-sopped bread that was offered to me and it was warm and sweet.

Pa’s fingers smelt of pitch or grease.

Mah hunger quelled, ah closed mah mouth and turned mah head. No longer could ah tolerate the acrid chemical smell.

Pa stood.

His stool was a fruit-crate turned on its end!

Ah sought mah brother. Mah brother was gone! So was the crate! Beside me in its place was a metal animal trap, coated in black grease. Jaws yawning! Spring coiled! Teeth howling for blood!

Ah looked away, mah brains bloody.

Pa was walking to the door. Over his left shoulder was a long-handled spade. It was then that ah noticed the grizzled nob, the tufted cleft. His missing ear.

In his hands he held a shoebox bound in string. On its lid was written '#1'.

II

THE PROPHET

The voice of the Valley No. 38 Aug. 1932

!!Harken ye CHILDREN OF THE LORD!!

*The SECOND FRIDAY of AUGUST in the year of our Lord 1932
marks the 70th YEAR of the*

*‘MARTYRDOM OF THE PROPHET AND SAINT,
JONAS UKULORE.’*

*On the afternoon of the anniversary of this most blessed and
bloody day*

*our valley will mourn her Prophet and Patriarch,
JONAS UKULORE.*

His earthly remains and his relics will be taken from their current
resting place in UKULORE VALLEY TABERNACLE
and enshrined within the town square which
from this day forth will be known as MEMORIAL SQUARE.

**To mark this most holy day,
a monument befitting THE PROPHET
will be unveiled.**

Faithful Ukulites

at 3.00 pm on this day, Friday, 12th August 1932,

the Children of Israel, ye Faithful Ukulites!

shall march from the Tabernacle on to Memorial Square,
where the body of the Prophet and Martyr will be laid
to rest for all time.

Prayers conducted by **Sardus Swift**.

Simon Bolsom, historian and biographer,

will read from his forthcoming biography

Jonas Ukulore: Prophet and Revelator, Man and Martyr
in the **Big Hall**.

Eliza Snow shall sing, accompanied by **Alice Pritchard**.

Supper will be held after the service in the **Little Hall**.

No plates necessary, ladies. Catering handled by **Valley Functions**.

– ALL SHALL ATTEND –

The monument was shrouded in a massive canvas tarp, with a rope threaded through brass eye-holes girding it at its foot. The tarp cover made it look like a great, grey Sphinx, eroded by the sands of time into faceless obscurity.

A huge truck had rolled into town the previous morning, with the monument standing draped and grey there in the back, looking just as it did now. Sardus Swift, who had left the valley at five o'clock that morning and taken a cane-trolley to Davenport and a train up to Orkney, insisted he ride with the contractors the 380-odd miles back to the valley 'in case of complications'.

Both of the memorial contractors, a fat Mr Godbelly and a fatter Mr Pry, looked exhausted but jolly. It had taken a dozen men to swing the monument, lowered by chain from the truck, into its allotted position in the Square.

Even some of the cane-men had lent a hand, though those not strictly of the faith were forbidden to participate in the celebration of what was, for the Ukulites, a Holy Day: the day commemorating 'The Martyrdom of the Prophet'. The valley's residents tolerated and had tolerated for many years the unorthodox practices of the Ukulites, who, though they comprised no more than one fifth of the valley's two thousand or so denizens, owned the refinery, most of the cane acreage, and the vast majority of the business and residential space. This, of course, was the chief reason why the small sectarian colony was suffered to operate in (and in fact control) the valley; but it was a precarious ascendancy, and the Ukulites had borne their share of adversity in the ongoing battle to retain their enviable, but not unassailable, position.

Since the time when, in the last days of winter 1862, Jonas Ukulore had led his small band of adherents into what was then an unfarmed, virtually uninhabited valley, the Ukulites had fought for, defended, and embraced their beliefs with uncompromising rigour. It was this steadfast adherence to a strict dogma, set down in a testament written by their prophet in 1861, coupled with the keen and aggressive business methods employed by Joseph Ukulore, brother of Jonas, which had assured the

Ukulite colony its longevity. Indeed, if Jonas was the prophet, Joseph was the profiteer.

It was in 1859 that Jonas Ukulore, a Welsh convert to the Baptist faith, began to have revelations, and in due course he had announced to the Baptist authorities his revelation that he was the 'Seventh Angel' predicted in the Book of Daniel, and that destiny would see him as 'a mighty man, yea a prophet in Israel'.

The following year Jonas and a few of his followers were excommunicated by the Church authorities, his revelations having begun to conflict with orthodox dogma.

On two occasions he had narrowly escaped death at the hands of orthodox vigilante committees, and observing the growing hostility toward all Baptists and other sectarian bodies Jonas and his band of adherents fled the trouble in search of a suitable spot to establish 'the new Fold'. Finding the secluded valley in 'a state of divine pendency', the group pooled all possessions and set up residence.

The Prophet spent much of his time in secluded prayer, as he prepared himself for 'the second coming', which had been revealed to him in one of his three hundred or so revelations, all of which he documented meticulously. Meanwhile his brother Joseph, former agriculturist and business man, took control of the valley's monetary interests and planted sugar-cane.

The cane flourished in the humid valley; soon the excess bulk of each crop was being sold, at a healthy profit, to the Davenport Mills.

The valley flourished. The crops burgeoned. The profits rose. It seemed that God had indeed been a generous overseer to the valley's growth, and the colony's future prosperity seemed secure.

Early in August 1872 the Prophet, wearing a white robe and golden crown and holding a gilded sceptre, announced to his disciples that 'the hour was nigh' – the second coming was at hand and all must prepare for the imminent crusade out of the valley.

One week later, as fifty or so men and women marched behind their white-garbed leader, shouting hosannas and singing his praises, Jonas Ukulore was shot through the head by an unknown sniper, the single bullet killing him instantly. The assassin was never discovered, but was naturally assumed to have come from the outside. Taking this as yet

further evidence of the treachery of the Gentiles beyond, the Ukulites abandoned their projected crusade and remained inside the valley; and as this course brought rich rewards, they came in time to read into the tragedy a dramatic justification of their faith.

Under the guidance of the ever resourceful Joseph Ukulore the valley continued to prosper, the townsfolk eventually building trolley-rails to Davenport and little by little recruiting 'outsiders' to work the cane-fields.

In the year 1904 Joseph undertook the gargantuan task of organizing the building of the sugar refinery, fully aware that at the age of eighty-three he would not live to see its completion, let alone to share in the overwhelming rewards that his industry would certainly bring. The following year, the foundations of the refinery having only just been laid, Joseph Ukulore died, leaving the valley a legacy of ensured future prosperity.

From *Vargus, A Regional History* (Vargustone Municipal Offices, 1922)

And so it was that on this day the Ukulites mourned their prophet.

'Hail the Prophet, ascended to Heaven
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain
With God he's on high, watching over his brethren
Death cannot conquer the hero again'

sang Eliza Snow.

And Sardus Swift pulled back the tarp.