

Cleansing



By

William

Cashwell

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... “Cleansing,” by William Cashwell, is an archetypal, apocalyptic tale that brings to mind larger questions of philosophy, human existence, and the nature of creators. To say much of the plot would be to spoil the larger, “a-ha,” moments within, but, suffice to say, Cashwell put an enjoyable spin on a tale of redemption and violence between two brothers within a setting that is almost too easy to see as a possibility within the scope of time for Earth. What I like about “Cleansing” is the way in which our own humanity is brought into the foray by reading. Stories in which the concept of humankind/nature is destroyed, and only the remnants remain, show how our absence create these vacuums of love, connection, human revelries, and, in turn, demonstrate for us how often we still need these ideas upfront and in focus. If there are only tatters and dust left, then the values we have left on the DNA of this Earth are the ones we’ll miss most – the most important ones. Cashwell’s, “Cleansing,” does a fine job reminding us what we live for, fight for, die for, and reminds us that what we often neglect to care for often turns out to be what we want to preserve most when they’re gone. Nice work.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE *(for the love of language...)*

“We were born by curse, spat out by whatever sadistic god left this city’s builders to extinction. Why can’t you see, all we have is each other in this ruinous place! And if we lose each other?” he whispered. “Surely, we shall fall into despair.”

Cleansing

Part I

The Red One would always remember the Day of the Second Birth. A luminous cyan blinded the apartment from kitchen to den. The great orb which produced it, a fire from the center of the cosmos, was exactly as he remembered his own, so many years ago. When the orb buzzed and split, he was covering the sides of his face and trembling.

The Blue One stood on the rug of the sun, fleshly incarnate. The Red raised himself from the floor and laughed, holding his belly as the newborn watched in silence.

“At last!” the Red One exclaimed. “At last, I am no longer alone—brother.”

“Where am I?” said the Blue One, gazing around the apartment. The glint of light from the four glass windows overlooking the city glittered on his naked skin. “Just moments ago, nothing,” he said. “Consciousness, the grasp of being, the rootedness to all that is, was lost on me. I was like a thought unthought, a sight behind the eyes.”

“Birth,” said the Red One, stepping forth to grasp the youngling by the hands. “It is your birthday, brother.”

They were shaking together, each as bewildered by anticipation as the other, hand in hand. And it was on that day that the newborn first tasted the freedom of existence, and the elder the comfort of companionship.

The Blue One was immediately curious.

“What am I doing here? What are—”

“*We*,” the Red One corrected with a nod of scholarly encouragement. “We are here for the cleansing. Come, come! I will show you.”

At the door of the apartment, the portal to the fallen city below, the Red One caught himself.

“Wait,” he said. Raising his hands, he materialized from nothing two levitating black cloaks. One of them drifted toward the astonished Blue, who grasped it gingerly.

“There is much to learn,” said the Red, “when one has dwelled here for so long. Put it on, brother. We must guard against the elements. The plague must not touch us.”

“Plague?”

“You will see,” the Red One insisted, throwing the hooded garment over his bald and featureless head.

The city’s balmy air weighed down their skin. Floral overgrowth dominated every street; great vines and trees and flowering plants climbing skyscrapers and burrowing into subway stations, cluttering empty concrete with tropical life. The duo stepped over a jutting cluster of gigantic, spider-leg roots clamped to the sidewalk.

“The vermin grow stronger, and more numerous, every day,” the Red muttered. “I imagine they forced the previous inhabitants of this city out, long ago—or drove them to extinction. It has been this way since I arrived, a wasteland of an ancient civilization.”

“How lovely,” said the Blue One, extending a single finger to caress a floppy, elephantine leaf hanging from a traffic light.

The Red One reached out and pressed his palm against the Blue’s wrist, separating flesh from flora. He shook his head.

“You will not find it so when you see its power to consume. How it devours all in its path, without dignity or care. And that, brother, is why we are here—we are cleansers.”

“Cleansers?”

The Red nodded, leading the youngling further into the dank underbrush, stepping between powerless cars and over cracked concrete, sliding through tangled masses of invading trees. He told the Blue how, years and years ago, he had been bewildered about his purpose. No signs or guideposts, no message of meaning from the universe.

“And every day,” he said, “I was alone.”

They were standing in an outdoor amphitheater, having descended a flight of mossy stairs into a pit.

“I cleansed here yesterday,” said the Red. “I’ve made the restoration of this city my lifeline, brother. As a cleanser, I sustain this city’s pulse—and it mine.” He placed a firm hand on the Blue’s clothed shoulder. “Now my routine,” he promised, “shall sustain you, too.”

The Blue nodded but betrayed no expression. He said at length, “Well, will you teach me how? How to be a cleanser?”

The Red laughed and, without thinking, embraced him.

“You are the first time,” he swore, “that the universe has not been indifferent to me.”

They stood on the apartment rooftop, staring out at the rows of behemoth skyscrapers, dwarfed at midday.

“This is the time,” said the Red One. He pointed to the skyline miles off, which rose with the mountainous terrain. In all directions, the world beveled like a snow globe, the city surrounded by sierras.

“What’s beyond there?” the Blue One wondered aloud. “So marvelous, so strange a world! Had I been born so early as you, why, I would have charted every footstep under the sun.”

“There is nothing,” the Red One half-grumbled. “Walk for days, weeks, even months and you will never reach the end of it. This city has no limits but extends indefinitely. Come! Raise your hood. It will guard you from the rain.”

Ominous clouds of neon green were brewing in the sky, right on cue, their innards snaking with galvanic power. Lightning split the green smoke here and there, then was swallowed again.

“Every day?” the Blue said. “Acid rain at midday?”

“They gather their evil from the jungle, the wicked clouds,” the Red One said. “Then they spit it at us, along with whatever toxins our extinct forebearers left behind.”

When the storm clouds raged forth and spiraled above them, the Red One held out his magic hands and showed the Blue how to catch the lightning. The burning rain pelted him, his cloak, the concrete rooftop, the steel and leafy lattice of the city, taking sizzling chunks where it

landed. The first bolt struck the Red One's upturned hand and vanished in an explosion of crackling sparkles.

"Use the lightning to charge yourself!" he shouted to his spectator above the torrent.

"Convert the energy into power of your own use!"

At first, the Blue was timid, but after watching the elder catch bolt after bolt, he lifted his hands, trembling, and followed suit. He laughed, though, when he felt the electricity pulse through his monochromatic skin. When the storm passed, the Red One was glaring.

"What you must remember above all," he instructed, "is never to lose focus. Today, the bolts were green—typical. Green storms are short. See how the constancy of the world is renewed?"

"Save for some acid burns," replied the Blue.

The Red dismissed him with a waved hand.

"A black storm," he cautioned. "Now, *that* is one to avoid. Never catch a black bolt, brother, if you love your new life."

That night, back in the apartment, the Red One demonstrated the final stage of his daily ritual. They sat across from each other on the rug, still twitching with pent-up electrical potency. Their legs were crossed in meditation. The Red One raised his magical hands and swirled them about the air, never taking his gaze off the Blue One.

A perfect cuboid of solid matte black, the same color as their robes, materialized midair, hovering over the Red One's palms.

"We end every night in creation," he explained. "It calms the mind. But you must remain focused, brother. See what distraction brings?" The Red One dropped his hands and the three-dimensional shape collapsed on itself and dissolved. "Now you."

The Blue One, eager to please, raised his hands and concentrated, wrinkling his brow.

“Allow,” the Red said. “Do not force.”

And within moments of purpose and directed attention, the Blue One summoned a shape without name, a many-sided shape, one spiraling this way and straightening that way, one as ununiform as an amoeba, sprawling and free.

“That,” said the Red, “is a mistake.” He clapped his hands to break the youngling’s focus, disintegrating the unusual form. The Blue began to speak but was interrupted.

“That most beautiful things are what we strive for,” said the Red One. “And what is beauty if not controlled, careful... symmetrical?”

“I understand,” the Blue whispered. He bowed his head with a student’s obeisance.

“Forgive my carelessness.”

Part II

The next day, the Red One led the Blue outside and down a snaking alleyway behind the apartment.

“We will begin our work presently,” he instructed, sliding past a couple of rusted dumpsters choked by snaking vines. “There is a shrine beyond this wreckage, outside of what was once a government building. A statue stands there—it is just the thing you will marvel at, young brother. But alas, the plants work their wicked magic to consume it.”

Outside of the massive domed building in question, which stood atop an array of white pillars, was the statue. It towered over the two cleansers: a bronze suited figure clenching a book against its chest. It was an alien of the world before, a forefather of the ancient city. A coronet of twined stalks and white flowers trailed from the top of its head to the edges of its hanging beard. Prying roots had forced cracks into its pediment and legs up to the knees.

“Look at its crown,” the Blue whispered. “How kingly it is, an amalgam of the natural and the created.”

The Red scoffed and squeezed his fingers into fists, sending forth an inferno that torched the flora from the statue, leaving black ash behind to blow away in the wind.

“Now how kingly?”

The Blue One said nothing.

“I love you, brother. You have liberated me from the darkness of solitude. Now, let me lift you up! Let the current of our task pull you, too, to freedom from despair. Be the discoverer of order in this world. That is how to avoid being consumed as he was.”

“I do not understand,” admitted the Blue One, “but I very much want to. Only tell me, brother: Why have you shown me this?”

“Because,” said the Red One, “you must remember what happened to the designers of this city.” He gestured to the book of knowledge in the statue’s oxidized green hands. “Ambition drove them to destruction. And the universe disposed of them without a thought, wiped the slate clean and handed it to us. It could happen again, brother. It happens all the time. Therefore, we must be vigilant and remain loyal to each other and to our task. We must never be greedy, lest we find ourselves soil for the jungle.”

For a week, the Blue One imitated the steady ritual set by his elder brother with a child’s wonder. Each day followed the same pattern: cleansing, followed by the inevitable acid storm and lightning bolt catching, followed by an evening meditation and shape generation. The Blue accepted all correction with eagerness, even when the Red scolded his unorthodox shapes and

tendency to empathize with the verminous jungle. They were making progress; in just one week, they had wiped three subway stations and the streets above them clean root, twig, and tree.

“But how will we ever succeed,” the Blue asked once, “if the city extends forever?”

The Red One sighed and said, “Listen. Even if we die before the city is liberated, think of our little lives *now*. By slaying these monstrosities, we sustain ourselves. The routine keeps us alive, brother.”

The Blue absorbed this answer in silence. He did not respond for another week yet, continuing his loyal imitation of the same tasks in the meantime. Then, one night, after meditation, he spoke.

“Brother,” he said, “do you value my existence?”

The Red gaped at the very question, raising himself to his feet.

“How could you ever doubt it?”

“Then you are better off,” continued the Blue One, “now that I am born?”

“A ridiculous question. Of course I am better off. You and I are one unit, brother.

Without us, this world is lost!”

The Blue fell silent. He did not speak again. The Red let him digest the exchange without prying. Come morning, they were out in the city square, erasing floral invaders with their psychic powers. When a line of shops had been restored, along with the rusted cars parked alongside them, the Blue One halted.

He was staring out into the sierras at the skyline again, squinting past the skyscrapers.

“Brother?” It was the Red. “You’ve removed your hood. The storm approaches.”

“I am going traveling.”

“*What?*”

“Traveling,” the Blue repeated. “I read the word in the book on the living room table. You did it, once. Now it is my turn.”

The Red One set his hands on his hips and began to pace about the concrete.

“Wherever will you go?” he managed. “Are your legs infinite in strength? Can you march forever to the horizon?”

“I had a dream,” the Blue whispered. “I was in the orb again. The great blue starlight. And just before I woke, I saw the galaxy from above, one cell among millions of spirals of stardust! And it was then that I realized,” he said, “that anywhere I wanted to go was unlocked for me. Anything I wanted, I could be.”

“That is nonsense!” the Red shouted. “You were born. That means you have limits, young one. If we do not live accordingly, then what will become of us? What will we be good for?”

“Cleansing, so you say,” the Blue replied with calm resolve. “That’s the path you chose when *you* were born.”

A pause followed as the clouds grew more ominous, billowing over the skyline in smokestacks of glowing algae. Lightning coursed through the inclement mass like veins. The Blue turned toward the buildup and said, “Today, I choose to leave.”

“To leave?” the Red gasped. Dirt, discarded ash, and pulverized root kicked up by a gust spat around them.

“Just for a little while,” the Blue promised. “I’ll go to the horizon. In time, when I return, I will join you in your quest now and again. Elsewise, I will go my own way. Indeed, anywhere I want to be, there you shall find me. For I am a being birthed into this world to rejoice in

freedom. I seek out the beautiful, the changing, the *growing*.” He gestured to the still-living ring of mega-flowers around them.

“They are vermin!” the Red snapped. “Lopsided! Ugly! They are the disease of this city, and we? We are the immunity!”

Lightning cracked against an ancient antenna crowning a skyscraper. Within seconds, a steady shower of acid melted the world around them and their protective cloaks. The Blue donned his hood at last.

“Go,” said the Blue. “Do what you must, catch the lightning. And I will do what I must.”

The Blue One was gone before the storm finished. The Red One, watching him disappear into the thick meeting place of jungle and tempest, clasped his hands over the sides of his head. It was the first time since the Day of the Second Birth he did not catch the lightning in his hands. That night, he broke pattern again by not generating any shapes. He lay awake.

Over the next day, however, the Red One returned to work. He followed the same routine he had for years. In fact, alone, he could complete his tasks with more efficiency than before. Forests smoldered before his outstretched palms. Lightning flowed into his veins. Shapes of ordered beauty sprung forth from him with natural ease. His first day alone again went thus.

And the next. And the next. And the next...

For tens of years, he had lived this way, each day renewed to start again, to follow his code. But it was all so hollow now. From the rooftop of the apartment where the Blue One had been born, he stared into the distance, beyond the endless skyline. He squinted, looking between jungle trees for any sign of life. The Blue was out there, somewhere. And here was he, the Red One, in a desolate city.

“Why can’t I go back?” he thought. “Why can’t it be like before?”

At the end of two weeks, the Red One was sitting on the floor of the apartment, locked in meditation. Suddenly, the doorknob jingled. When the door opened, the Blue One stood in the portal.

“Hello, brother,” he said. “My adventure is complete. I have so much to tell you.”

The Red One said nothing. He was trembling. His face gnarled into a venomous glower.

“May I join you?” the Blue tried again. “I would very much like that, my friend. I will tell you of the glory I discovered in the land beyond the skyline.”

“Friend?”

The Blue One simply approached and set one hand upon the elder’s cloaked shoulder.

“Do not mistake my self-love as a lack of love for you,” he said. “I have thought of you always as my highest blessing. Together, we are the architects of a marvelous world, full of love and liberty. But,” he finished, “we are very different, you and I.”

“You are wicked,” said the Red. “You abandoned me. That is our difference. I could never be so cruel.”

The Blue sighed.

“In this life, we may choose different paths,” he said. “But together, they could bring harmony.”

“Will you never leave again?”

“You haven’t heard me,” said the Blue. “Sleep on it, friend. Who knows? Perhaps a dream will change your mind.”

Reluctantly, the Red agreed to allow the Blue to share the apartment for the night. It was, after all, the Great Womb—the place of his birth. In sleep, the Red dreamed of the Blue One out

in the jungle, caressing a canopy of hanging leaves. He awoke with a snort to find the Blue standing already.

“Brother,” said the Blue, “would you go see the world with me, next time?”

“The world?” the Red snarled, jumping to his feet. “You are young and undisciplined and know nothing of the world.”

“And yet I have seen it.”

“Let me tell you of the world,” said the Red. He began to circle the Blue, letting the cape of his robes drag across the floor. “The world is ugly. You haven’t been here long enough, no! Has the acid boiled your skin enough? Has the sun seared your neck enough? Has the endless fight not worn you down enough?”

“We were born by curse, spat out by whatever sadistic god left this city’s builders to extinction. Why can’t you see, all we have is each other in this ruinous place! And if we lose each other?” he whispered. “Surely, we shall fall into despair.”

The Blue One absorbed the ringing silence that followed. Then, he bowed his head. The Red One was still clenching his fists. Outside the windows, the sun was rising, insulating the apartment with a swollen, tropical heat.

“At noon, I will catch the lightning with you,” the Blue said at last. “Perhaps then, you will hear my tale. Until then, do your task—but I will mar the sacred beauty of these forests no further.”

“You find beauty,” seethed the Red, “in that mangled chaos?”

“My friend,” said the Blue, “I find beauty in all things under the sun.”

True to his word, the Blue remained indoors as the Red set about to his usual cleansing in what was once a commercial district, burning giant rosebushes off a collapsed brick pile and between glass shards.

And the storm was coming. And the Red decided it would carry with it an ultimatum of life or death.

Part III

The storm was upon them, stretching over the rooftop in a whipping tornado. Lightning flashed and was followed instantly by thunder.

“See, there,” said the Blue One, pointing into the stratosphere. The wind howled like a fell wolf. “It is a black bolt! There, amid the torrent. I remember a wise one taught me to avoid them.” He turned to the silent Red. “I am thankful, friend,” he said. “Thankful for your tutelage.” He began to catch the green bolts on his open palms, facing the edge of the rooftop. The Red stood behind. Acid rain plinked and sizzled around them, filling the wordless gap.

Zap. Crack! Two more gyrating balls of energy in the Blue’s tingling hands. He jumped, yipped, and laughed as he absorbed their power.

“Fear you not!” he exclaimed over the shoulder. “Soon all will be well between us. You will come to accept me. Change is good! We are here not to own each other, but to share in each other’s unique glow.”

A black bolt cracked behind the Blue.

“Did you dodge it?” he hollered, still busy at work.

“Yes,” the Red whispered. Beneath one palm, turned to the ground, a spinning mass of inky lightning danced and singed. The Red grunted from the sharp pain but stifled a full-on scream.

“Excellent,” the Blue One said. He froze, staring off into the distance again. “The rain bores me,” he said. “Brother, when you travel with me, we will go without our cloaks. Will you? The world out there is safe and lovely, and we—”

Crack!

The Blue collapsed to his knees, mouth curdling with static-emitting foam. A gaping hole, pulsating with blood pumped from a frantic heart, dropped entrails onto the rooftop. They melted atom for atom in the green rain. The Red stood behind, trembling. He did not move around to look in the face of his immobilized brother. He waited until the Blue One fell face-first onto the concrete.

After a moment, hands raised to dissolve the corpse of the youngling like a fell shrub, the Red retreated down the staircase into the apartment, allowing the storm to swallow him instead.

The Red One slept. And in the night, his unconsciousness dissolved, dreamless. That day, he let his schedule dissolve, too, never raising himself from the couch on which he sat. He would not see the rooftop. Not yet. He watched the sun go down again.

In the morning, he'd return to the cleansing.

What else could be done?

Otherwise, he would surely have fallen into despair.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *For “Cleansing,” I wanted to explore what the desperation for control over another—a demented form of love—brings about in a landscape without moral consequences. Also, I wanted to contrast two common archetypes I’ve noted among a variety of real-world couplings, from family to romantic to professional dynamics: the go-with-the-flow, freedom-loving optimist and the boulder-up-the-mountain, schedule-oriented pessimist. I built this strained relationship in a landscape soaked with beauty or decay, depending on which of the two archetypes gains the reader’s sympathy. As for style, I looked to simply written, aphoristic and legendary texts, including the Tao Te Ching and the Bhagavad Gita.*

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