

Self-actualized A-hole

By Douglas J. Ogurek

WHY WE LIKE IT: ‘...As the ground-slapper jogged toward them, the trophy top—a baseball player in mid-swing—hanging from his neck jounced. “Pardon me, gentlemen.” He had a high voice. “A slight curiosity. Have either of you fine scholars perchance seen a small ball? It’s a green ball. Kind of a charltoose green ball, with a quote-unquote boomerang pattern on it?”

A superbly realized fiction that plots the actions of three neighbours (Cdn. sp.) in a pointillist gravure that is as beautiful as it is malvoglio. Sotto splatterpunk has burrowed beneath a clusterangst intellectual construct with the noble mission of ‘Art and its Antithesis.’ In places, it is as frightening as Greek wine. Synaptic Dada-isms cantanker loaded hyper-Hyperion prose and Nature Boy’s star only glows brighter because in a world of silence anyone with a voice is a threat. A keen arrow from a master fletcher that left us dizzy and high somewhere beyond the Kuiper Belt.

Five stars.

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by

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Death metal blared over a lake surrounded by homes. The source of the music—it plodded, and the vocalist roared—was a tree in one yard. Next to a speaker, a cloaked figure

stood on a platform built into the tree. He wore pink-rimmed sunglasses and held a pink stuffed unicorn.

An older man stormed out of the house next door. He had a box, and a white towel hung around his neck. His jowls shook as he strode toward the noise. The recorded vocalist shrieked and the older man grimaced at an empty cage next to his house.

The music overpowered the man's shouts.

The figure in the tree turned off the music, then growled.

The older man set the box next to a tree in his yard. He waved the towel. "Jesus Christ, Nature Boy. The hell you doing?"

Nature Boy spread his cloak. "I accept your surrender."

"Huh? That guy sounds possessed or something."

"They'll never take me alive."

"What is that shit? Guy sounds possessed. I mean, that's really bad."

"Nothing stands between me and the treasure. You hear me? Nothing."

"Boy, if my father saw me pulling a stunt like this, with that drivel, he'd be absolutely—"

Nature Boy cut off the older man with a quick blast of death metal.

The man took a rifle scope from his pocket. "Let me ask you something. I'm in there trying to talk to my son—he's a cardiac surgeon—and you turn that shit on?" He looked at a cardboard cutout near the water. It showed a black man wearing a suit. "What the fuck?"

Nature Boy hoisted the pink unicorn and released a phlegm-infused laugh.

"When Tom was your age, he was halfway done with med school. Grades were absolutely—" The older man's voice wavered. "My wife—God rest her soul—we went to his graduation, and boy—"

Again death metal blasted. The man, red-faced, waved his towel.

Nature Boy turned off the music. “Mr. Prosecutor, I’d like to address the artists that you just had the pleasure of hearing.”

“Jesus Christ. You call that tomfoolery art?”

“They’re far more innovative and technically adept than your Devon Sweetman.”

Mr. Prosecutor sniffed the towel, then removed the tape that sealed his box. “You’re comparing those lunatics to Devon Sweetman? It cost me four hundred-fifty bucks for two tickets to his concert.”

Nature Boy held the unicorn before his face and squeaked, “My my, Mr. Prosecutor. Are you insinuating, eehuh eehuh eehuh, that the price of a concert ticket is a predictor, eehuh eehuh, of the quality of music?”

“Boy, you do belong in a straightjacket.”

Nature Boy lowered the unicorn. “Despite your accusation of possession, the group that you just heard offers a positive message.”

Mr. Prosecutor rubbed his scope lens. “If my father heard me playing that drivel, he’d be absolutely irate.”

“Question: is it too masculine?” Nature Boy held up a noose.

“What the hell?”

“Perhaps you prefer more effeminate music? Ballads, the kind of stuff that melts your balls? Like Devon Sweetman.”

“Fuck’s sake. I can’t even understand what the shit those guys are saying.”

“That music—the stuff you just heard? It’s about God’s redeeming love, and about loving your neighbor. Is that what Devon Sweetman sings about?”

Mr. Prosecutor lifted a flap on his box.

“Question: do you love your neighbor, Mr. Prosecutor?”

“Not your neighbor there.” Mr. Prosecutor pointed his scope at the property on the other side of Nature Boy’s lot. A man—he carried a baseball player bobblehead doll—stumbled out of a shed, then slapped the ground.

Mr. Prosecutor chuckled as his cell phone rang. He swiped it. “Shit. Fuck. How the fuck?” He held it up to his ear. “Tom? Tommy?” He looked at the phone, then kicked his box. “Ah goddammit. How the fuck . . .”

While Mr. Prosecutor’s tirade continued, Nature Boy put the noose around the pink unicorn. The ground-slapper talked to the bobblehead and swept his shoes, baseball spikes, over the vegetation in his yard.

Manly Man liked baseball—he wore a Cubs shirt on the day that Nature Boy’s dog Filter approached him. Go Flubs!

Mr. Prosecutor gave up with the phone. He flapped his towel toward the empty cage. “See that cage? I had a raccoon in that cage this morning. Now it’s gone. You know anything about that cage, Nature Boy?”

“Nothing stands between that treasure and me.” Nature Boy spread his cloak and released his phlegmy laugh.

The ground-slapper—thick glasses magnified his eyes—set down the doll, then pretended to tap a bat. “Now up, Cliff Seeeeeger.” He wiggled into a batting stance.

Mr. Prosecutor shook his head, then looked through his scope toward the lake. “There was a raccoon in that cage this morning. I heard the fuckin’ thing.”

Nature Boy, holding one end of the rope, tossed the unicorn into the vegetation below him. “Question: were you aware that a raccoon can eat an entire wasp’s nest?”

“They mess up my flowers.”

“Flowers are ephemeral. Do you know Maslow’s hierarchy?”

Mr. Prosecutor took from the box pieces of wood, painted white. “Fuckers keep knocking over my garbage cans.”

“You left them open. It’s called Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.”

“The ones I catch? I take them on a little boat ride, teach ’em how to swim.”

Nature Boy pulled the stuffed animal through the groundcover.

The ground-slapper pretended to swing. “Kay-ow. Way up there, way up there. Look Grandma, look Pops, look Junior. There it goes everybody. And bring it downwwn . . . now.” He pumped his fist and jumped up, then slapped the ground as his nonexistent hit sailed over a nonexistent fence.

Mr. Prosecutor set the wood pieces on a bench, then wiped his scope. “I’m sure he likes bats. A lot.”

“Look. There’s a beautiful creature.” Nature Boy pretended to fire a shotgun at the pink unicorn beneath him.

As the ground-slapper jogged toward them, the trophy top—a baseball player in mid-swing—hanging from his neck jounced. “Pardon me, gentlemen.” He had a high voice. “A slight curiosity. Have either of you fine scholars perchance seen a small ball? It’s a green ball. Kind of a charltoose green ball, with a quote-unquote boomerang pattern on it?”

Filter had a green ball. He loved it. So much so that the pit bull leapt the fence at the old house when Nature Boy accidentally threw the ball over it.

Nature Boy lit a green smoke bomb. “Look . . . charltoose.” He shook a branch and cackled.

The ground-slapper leaned back and convulsed with laughter. He pointed up at the cloaked figure encased in greenish-yellow smoke and addressed Mr. Prosecutor. “Now this guy’s one of a kind. I would surmise that it’s his density to be a mascot. Bring it down.”

Mr. Prosecutor toweled his forehead, then pointed at the cardboard cutout. “What’s your hero doing in this charlatan’s yard? You having fried chicken tonight, Downing?”

Downing laughed again and grabbed the trophy top. “Do ya know what? ‘Let’s step forward, and stay grounded.’ That’s what Mayor Range said. Quote-unquote ‘Let’s step forward and stay grounded.’”

“Maybe our honorable top dog mayor took your ball, Downing. You said it’s green? Maybe he thought it was a watermelon.”

Nature Boy suspended the unicorn, still hanging from the noose, in the smoke. “To be a comedian, Mr. Prosecutor, is your density.”

Downing smacked his lips. “Now gentlemen, that ball, I find it to be very distinctable: it’s got a boomerang pattern. If you perchance happen to see it, please let me know.” He resumed his search.

Mr. Prosecutor took from his pocket a small bottle of clear liquid. “Boomerang pattern. Boy, I remember that. My mother had these curtains. They had a boomerang pattern.”

Nature Boy started unraveling a skein of green yarn.

“My father would say, ‘You sure you don’t want to get ballerinas and puppy dogs instead?’”

“I’m self-actualized.”

“Huh?”

Nature Boy spun the skein. “Perhaps you haven’t kept up with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs? I could let you borrow the book.”

Mr. Prosecutor shook the liquid. “Jesus Christ, I don’t have time for that; I got a company to run. I got so much to do I don’t have time to do anything.”

“So what you’re saying is that you don’t get anything done?”

“Kay-ow.” Downing swung an invisible bat and nearly fell. He mumbled to himself and looked up, then raised his fists and jumped.

After Filter leapt the fence, Nature Boy told him to stay. Normally, he would, but that day, Filter saw a rabbit.

Mr. Prosecutor squirted the liquid onto his scope lens, then rubbed it. “My father used to use this towel. It’s a special towel for cleaning. This towel’s absolutely fabulous.”

Nature Boy picked up a microphone. “An anecdote of profound implications.” His voice echoed through the speakers.

“You got watermelon-flavored candy up there? Maybe you can give some watermelon candy to your top dog mayor over there.”

Nature Boy slipped a capsule into his mouth. “So witty, so distinctable.” He went into paroxysms of laughter, and red liquid dribbled down his chin.

“Boy, that’s really bad.” Mr. Prosecutor rubbed his scope and nodded toward Downing’s yard. “You ever been in that shed?”

Nature Boy attached the yarn to his sunglasses. “Question: did you ever notice that our mayor does this with his hands?” He held his hands before his eyes, then brought them down.

“You do know your neighbor’s a homosexual, right? In my opinion?”

“Perhaps we should burn him at the stake.”

“He goes into that shed. With other guys. I don’t know what kind of tomfoolery’s going on in there.”

The yarn fell.

Downing set a cat on a stand in his yard.

Filter pursued the rabbit that day. He charged into the field across the street. Nature Boy hopped the fence, then ran after his dog.

From his box Mr. Prosecutor took a hammer and a wooden contraption. This one was not painted white.

Nature Boy mimicked the mayor’s hands over eyes gesture. “Question: Mr. Prosecutor, do you know what self-actualized means?”

“Huh? Sounds like psychobabble.”

“If you’re self-actualized, then you’re happy with your life. Content with what you have.”

“Then I’m self-actualized too.”

Downing yelled, “Steerike one.” He stood a few feet from the elevated cat.

Nature Boy picked up a wooden stick. “So you don’t care too much about material possessions?”

“Nah.” Mr. Prosecutor pounded the contraption into the tree.

“Oh.” The stick had a paper raccoon face on one end. Nature Boy spoke through a hole in the mouth. “By the way, your Mercedes is looking rather luxurious this morning.”

A small platform extended from the tree trunk. Mr. Prosecutor talked on his phone. “I need you to come over. I want to show you something. Something I got in the arctic.”

Downing, like a pitcher, shook his head and held his hand behind his back. “Meowman now at the plate.” The cat on the stand crouched. “Here’s the pitch.” Downing tossed a cotton ball, then the cat swatted at it, but missed. “Big cut. Meowman’s on the ropes with an O-two count.”

Nature Boy chased Filter across the field, through a wooded area, and then into the neighborhood beyond.

Mr. Prosecutor ended his call, then took a transparent container from his box. “My daughter’s got a degree in psychology. She’s got a dual degree. Psychology and journalism.” His eyes watered and his voice shook. “You know, she’s the first female sideline reporter for a non-BCS college bowl? My wife and I—she passed away eight years ago this March—went to that, and I’ll tell ya . . .”

A deep, extended note came from a keyboard on the tree platform. Nature Boy covered his face with the cloak and spoke into a microphone. “A self-actualized person plays music because he likes it, not because he thinks it makes him look good.”

“. . . really bad—”

Nature Boy added another note, and the two notes stretched as Mr. Prosecutor attached the container beneath the platform on the tree and Downing, still on his knees, tossed a cotton ball. The cat smacked it. Downing jumped up, then slapped the ground. He lifted the cat, spun around, and nearly toppled.

The keyboard stopped.

“How do you like this, Nature Boy?” Mr. Prosecutor patted the platform. “You put the seeds on here. And when your best friend squirrel comes along . . .” He pressed a button on his

key ring and the platform dropped. He tapped the container. “Splash. Swim time for your squirrel friend.”

Nature Boy squeezed the pink unicorn. “Mr. Prosecutor, eehuh, you’ve reached the height of manliness, eehuh eehuh. You’re a brave heroic man.”

Mr. Prosecutor shrugged and smiled, then walked back to his house.

Downing, holding his bobblehead beneath his arm, looked over his shoulder at the bottom of his right baseball spike.

Nature Boy shook his pink unicorn and squeaked, “Hi Mr. Ballplayer, eehuh eehuh. Ballplayers make the world, eehuh eehuh, a better place.”

“Now this guy . . .” Downing, laughing, lost his balance, then tumbled into the vegetation. He tried to mimic Nature Boy’s falsetto. “It’s the home run that counts. Bring it down.”

“Yes, yes. Eehuh, it all hinges on the home run. There’s the theory of relativity, eehuh eehuh, and then there’s the home run.”

“Kay-ow.” Downing took off his shoe. “Do ya know what? That ball—the one with the boomerang pattern?—it’s got to be around here. It’s chartoose, like . . .”

The day that Filter escaped, Nature Boy held up his dog’s beloved green ball and called for him, but Filter didn’t listen: the new neighborhood’s smells and sights were too enticing.

Nature Boy’s normal voice returned. “Question: what purpose does this ball serve? Are you using it to reset the world’s course?”

“I was practicing with Timmy and he smacked that thing and it was like kay-ow. This thing’s really . . .” Downing picked at his spikes. “I can’t find that ball. It’s chartloose.”

The keyboard made the sound of wind blowing, and Nature Boy's whisper echoed in the speakers. "Chartreuse as the mists that hover on the lonely shores of Home Run Island."

Downing slapped the ground, then used the bobblehead's bat to pick at his spikes. "This guy's one of a kind."

Across the lake, a motor rumbled. Nature Boy swirled his cloak and bellowed in the microphone. "Baseball. The game of geniuses."

"Do ya know what?" Downing held up the doll. "There's a similation between this guy and Cliff Seeger."

Nature Boy came within a foot of Filter, but the dog saw a squirrel, then charged down the street in pursuit.

Nature Boy held down a note. "Question: what is one practical benefit that comes out of baseball?"

"Kay-ow. Good, that's good." Downing took off his spike and sang the first lines of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." He smacked his lips. "They sing that at every game. You ever been to an Outlaws game? Cliff Seeger's on the Outlaws."

"I don't like to participate in activities over which I have no control of the outcome."

"You ever seen Cliff Seeger?" Downing dislodged a pebble from the spikes. "That guy can just, kay-ow."

The motor grew louder. A speedboat halfway across the lake approached them. Nature Boy set the pink unicorn on the keyboard. "Perhaps I'll nominate this Cliff Seeger for the Nobel Peace Prize. There's undoubtedly a similation between his work and the theory of relativity."

“One time he was like kay-ow.” Downing tossed up the stone, then tried to hit it with the doll’s bat. He missed and stumbled. “And that thing, everyone was like, ‘Whoa.’ I measured it. It was the farthest ever. Oh way up there. Look Grandma. Look—”

Nature Boy cranked the death metal, but Downing, his eyes amplified by his glasses, studied the shoe and his lips kept moving.

Filter jumped into bushes, and from the distance came the chorus of the rock ballad “You Evermore.”

The death metal stopped. “. . . Seeger wears these, and he hit that ball to the street once. Here.” Downing tossed up the shoe, which sailed by the motionless Nature Boy and his platform, then fell into the vegetation.

The speedboat docked at Mr. Prosecutor’s pier.

Downing removed the other shoe. “When I wear these? In my mind I feel like I’m still fourteen. Here.”

The other shoe flew past Nature Boy. “When I see those, in my small intestine, I feel like I’m still yellow.”

Downing slapped the ground, then rose. “If you perchance see that chartoose ball. It’s got a boomerang pattern, and it’s chartoose.”

The boater wore a Cubs jersey and held a bag of chips. Nature Boy snuggled the unicorn against his cheek. “Chartoose. I will alert the world. Because baseball is the be all and end all of this great universe.”

Downing jumped and the trophy top clunked against his glasses. “Ka-yow. It’s the home run. Do ya know what? I got something to show you.” He retrieved his shoes, then walked to his shed.

Filter chased Nature Boy to a yard's edge. Manly Man, wearing a Flubs hat, washed his Manly Man motorcycle and listened to "You Evermore." A real ball-melter.

The boater munched on chips and talked to the much taller Mr. Prosecutor.

The death metal blared.

The boater thrust out his chest and shouted, "Fuckin' turn that shit off."

The music stopped, then Nature Boy grabbed a branch and growled into the microphone.

"Treasure. I shall have that treasure."

"Sounds like a fuckin' garbage disposal up there."

Nature Boy balanced the unicorn on his head. "It's distinctable."

"It sounds like a garbage disposal."

"I think it sounds like a Harley, Balladeer."

"Balladeer. What's this Balladeer?"

"You like ballads, right? Those macho rock ballads?"

"Look it that shed." Balladeer stepped onto a stump and picked at his teeth. "Shouldn't you be in that shed over there?"

"Or maybe it sounds like a speedboat."

Manly Man watched Filter sniff his bushes. He threw down his sponge, then strode into his garage.

Mr. Prosecutor held up a stuffed and mounted white fox. "Nature Boy, isn't this absolutely beautiful? I nailed this beauty on my arctic hunt. It's very rare."

Nature Boy lit another green smoke bomb. "That makes you a candidate for the Courageous Super Tough Guy of the Year award."

“Tough guy. Yeah tough guy.” Mr. Prosecutor dropped a white triangle, then picked it up. “I’ll tell you about a tough guy. Tommy. He climbed a dozen mountains in one month.” Again his voice wavered. “Boy, my wife and I met him at the end. He climbed a dozen mountains.”

Nature Boy used thumb and forefinger to hold his tongue as he spoke into the microphone. “He didn’t climb it because he wanted to die. He climbed it because he wanted to live.”

“Let me ask you something. I got guests coming over.”

“Below self-actualized is esteem.” Nature Boy removed his glasses, then placed one of the pink tips in his mouth. “Then love, and belonging.”

“What should I tell them about this nut in the tree next door?”

“Tell them your neighbor is self-actualized.”

Mr. Prosecutor toweled his forehead. “It doesn’t look good.”

Nature Boy guided the unicorn through the green smoke.

Balladeer stopped chewing when he saw the cutout of Mayor Range. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I’m self-actualized. Are you self-actualized?”

“You should be in that shed. My wife said you pissed off a lot of people. Jogging by like that.”

“The woman whose husband I am says that ‘a married couple . . .’” Nature Boy tossed up the unicorn, then caught it. “. . . is a schmarried couple.”

“She said you were wearing one of them straightjackets.”

“A *straightjacket*? So why all this talk about that shed?”

“What were you thinking?” Balladeer hurled a rock at the cutout. It missed, then splashed in the lake.

Manly Man returned with a baseball bat. He watched Filter saunter across his yard. “Get that thing off my property.” Nature Boy bounced Filter’s green ball. “Oh don’t worry. He’s super friendly. Come here, Filter. Here, boy.”

“I was thinking a lot.” Nature Boy flourished his cloak. “I graduated third in my college class.”

“Nice girls’ glasses.”

“Question: did you graduate third, Balladeer? In your *college* class?”

Balladeer sprayed chip fragments. “With them glasses, maybe you should have a fashion show in that shed over there.”

“Some people wear girls’ glasses.” Nature Boy hoisted the unicorn and raised his voice. “Others, eehuh eehuh, listen to girls’ music.”

Mr. Prosecutor used a white rectangle to flick the cutout. “Boy, this is really bad. If my father—”

Death metal cut him off.

Balladeer kicked over the cutout, then stomped on it.

Nature Boy turned off the music. “The strength, the overwhelming strength.”

“That shit sucks. Singing about killing dogs and raping your neighbor.”

“So what you’re saying is you can make out what they’re singing. Admirable.”

Balladeer picked at his teeth.

“The lyric there, Balladeer, was ‘Overwhelming urge, irrepressible scourge.’ Do you know what ‘scourge’ means?”

“You should be in that shed over there.” Downing had still not emerged.

“How about ‘irrepressible?’”

Mr. Prosecutor hung the towel around his neck. “What kind of tomfoolery you trying to pull up there?”

Balladeer crumpled his bag. “You need to turn that shit down. I can hear that shit across the lake.”

Filter wagged his tail and sniffed at a butterfly. Manly Man gripped his bat. “It comes over here, I’m gonna put it down.”

“And I heard *your* music last weekend. From that party you had?” Nature Boy threw down the unicorn. “That’s a gift for you.”

“You get this from your friend’s shed over there?”

“No Balladeer. I heard you playing ‘You Evermore,’ that classic ballad, at your party.”

Balladeer threw the chips bag. It hit Nature Boy’s platform.

Filter crouched before Manly Man and wagged his tail. “Get it away. You better get it away.” “Please, listen. Please, he’s friendly.” “I know this breed. This breed ain’t friendly.”

“And then I saw a carful of girls singing along to that same song. They had a pink unicorn just like this one. It hung from their mirror. So I figured that you, Balladeer, might like one too.”

“You should be in that shed, ya homo.”

“Homo. I’ve been married for fifteen years. How many years have you been married?”

Balladeer tried to rip apart the unicorn with his hands. He gave up, then threw it in the lake.

“You Evermore” played, and Filter sniffed at the soap bubbles beneath Manly Man’s Harley. Nature Boy pleaded with Manly Man, but pleading wasn’t enough. The ballad played, and Manly Man brought down the bat. Repeatedly.

The death metal resumed.

A baseball landed on the platform. Nature Boy—he wore the cloak’s hood over a bulldog rubber mask—crawled to the ball.

Downing used an aluminum foil roll to shade his eyes. “Now it just so happens, my fine scholar, that Cliff Seeger signed that.”

Nature Boy sniffed the ball. “Here lies the key to the great beyond.”

Downing used the roll to smack the ground. “Bring it down.”

“The unraveler of the universe’s mysteries.”

“It’s just unravel—” Downing stumbled—a shrub had caught in his ankle-length pants—then regained his balance. “Have you perchance spied a green ball yet? Yellow-green, like chartoonce and it has a quote-unquote boomerang pattern.”

Next door, Mr. Prosecutor sat on his bench and ate a hot dog. His white wood pieces and his box sat next to him.

Nature Boy spoke into the microphone. “Ruff, ruff, Mr. Prrrrosecutor.”

“What kinda tomfoolery?”

“You’re a DSU grrrrad?”

Mr. Prosecutor toweled his forehead. “One of the nation’s top business schools.”

“Mr. Prrrrosecutor, level two of the hierarchy of needs includes, ruff ruff, physical health. I wonder, ruff ruff, what brand of hot dog that is.”

“I was thinking about fried chicken.” Mr. Prosecutor clacked two pieces of wood. “But I didn’t want your top dog mayor to steal it.”

Nature Boy put down the mic, then growled at Downing. “It turns out that our humanitarian neighbor’s triumphant DSU Bulldogs killed their mascot at a game. Heat exposure.”

Downing unrolled foil. “Now perchance you’ve heard of Sinker Sands?”

“Is he a . . .” Nature Boy stood and placed a fist beneath his dog mask. “. . . rrrrocket scientist?”

Downing clutched his trophy top medallion and laughed so hard that mucous sprayed from his nose. “No, he’s a pitcher. A Warriors pitcher? He’s got a quote-unquote ‘Strikes for Strays’ thing. A real gentleman and scholar. He can just shh-shram it in there and he helps stray dogs and cats.”

“Hmmm. A warrior gentleman who can shram it in there?” Nature Boy dropped to his hands and knees, then sniffed the baseball. He only smelled the rubber of his mask. Filter would have liked to gnaw on the ball.

“That’s the one. Cliff Seeger just smonched that one. He was like kay-ow powp.” Downing swung the foil roll, then wiped spittle. “Oh look Grandma. Look Pops. Look Junior. The farthest I’ve seen. To the street. Yow.”

Mr. Prosecutor took from his box a bottle of wood glue.

“Do ya know what? If you want to come see a game. See Cliff Seeger play? There’s still a few games. What do ya say you come see a game?”

Nature Boy, still on all fours, nosed the ball. The signature showed. “If I were to witness someone smonch a home run, my life would be complete.”

“It’s the Outlaws. The field’s right down the street. It’s the home run that counts. Kay-ow.”

Nature Boy removed the hood, then grabbed the platform’s edge. Cliff Seeger, the sports god that Downing worshipped, the valorous home run hitter, was a Little League player?

“When Seeger hits a homer?” Downing ripped off a long sheet of foil. “Everybody’s watching it. Everybody’s a part of it. Then it’s up there and it’s just you and the ball, but it’s like hey it’s everyone too. All these different people . . .”

Nature Boy reached beneath his cloak, then squeezed Downing’s missing ball. When people came over, Filter was always thrilled to see them.

Mr. Prosecutor applied glue to a wood piece.

Downing clapped. “Timmy. Hey, here he is!” Next to the shed sat a boy in a wheelchair. He held a big red plastic bat.

Race. Income. Sexuality. Political preference. None of it mattered to Filter. Nature Boy removed the rubber mask.

“I can’t find it Timmy, but do ya know what?” Downing tossed up a tin foil ball, then fumbled it when it came down. “This should be a sufficitory replacement.”

Timmy, grunting, wheeled unwieldily through the vegetation toward them.

Downing cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey my fine scholar, how’s that birdhouse coming?”

Mr. Prosecutor waved his towel.

Downing held his foil ball up toward Nature Boy. “He’s building a birdhouse. He said his wife always wanted him to build a birdhouse. That guy’s one of a kind.”

“Perhaps this will be a suffic—” The flesh that covered Filter’s belly felt like human skin. Nature Boy jumped off the platform. “Look what I found.” He tossed the chartreuse ball with the boomerang pattern to Downing.

Filter had a pleasant scent. Nature Boy approached Mr. Prosecutor. “You said your mother had a boomerang pattern?”

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: *“Self-actualized A-hole,” though not an unsplatterpunk story per se, comments on the mission of the horror subgenre, which challenges writers to integrate a positive message into otherwise controversial subject matter (e.g., gore, debauchery). Like many of my stories, this one introduces an artist-protagonist (Nature Boy) whose “art” appeals to few (in this case, himself and the reader), yet offends others (i.e., his neighbor and likeminded individuals).*

The story puts under the microscope the complexities of the Christian ideal of “love your neighbor as yourself” by confining the setting to three lakefront properties. To move toward change, the overconfident Nature Boy (the story’s namesake), must come down from his tree platform (i.e., subdue his feelings of moral and intellectual superiority) and extend an olive branch to his distasteful neighbor Mr. Prosecutor.

With a few exceptions, the story sticks to the objective point of view (i.e., never entering a character’s head) to reflect the protagonist’s reluctance to look within and explore the filters that might be preventing him from being more empathic.

All my stories are inspired by Christian death metal and its quest to conceal a benevolent message within music that is, to many, offensive and even ugly. My literary influences range from Raymond Carver, Ernest Hemingway, and Tom Wolfe to Edward Lee, Carlton Mellick III, and Jeff Strand.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *Douglas J. Ogurek is the pseudonym for a writer living somewhere on Earth. Though banned on Mars, his fiction appears in more than fifty Earth publications. Ogurek founded the controversial literary subgenre known as unsplatterpunk, which uses splatterpunk conventions (e.g., extreme violence, gore, taboo subject matter) to deliver a positive message. He guest-edited the UNSPLATTERPUNK! trilogy, published by Theaker's Quarterly Fiction. Ogurek reviews films at that same magazine. Recent longer works include young adult novel Branch Turner vs the Currants (World Castle Publishing) and horror/suspense novella Encounter at an Abandoned Church (Scarlet Leaf Publishing). More at www.douglasjojurek.weebly.com. Twitter: @unsplatter*