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Robert Coover

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Some Notes About Puff

Robert Coover

(From a Work-in-Process)

Puff that mighty dragon: where is he? He lies, brooding, the sorry beast, in his lousy cave. Sad, true, for Jackie Paper is gone, old companion, old pride. Why did he leave? Puff doesn't know. Puff is utterly without reasons. In fact, he rarely thinks at all. Yet Puff knows many things, things Jackie Paper has forgotten. Or never knew. Cannot learn. He knows this, for example: Jackie will return. To play again perhaps. Or to wreak his vengeance, to court the impossible—never mind why. Because he must, that's all. Because dragons live forever. Puff snorts with brute joy, briefly lighting up the dismal cave, and lashes its damp walls with his excited tail.

HOW JACKIE PAPER SPOILED PUFF. Puff now hates his cave. It is a dark and wretched place, damp and evil-smelling. It used to be home and its dank sour obscurity was like a welcome second skin to him. He played invented games here in the old days, lolling goofily about in his treasures, burning erotic fancies onto the walls, chasing his unpredictable tail. Jackie Paper and his fantastic journeys changed all that. What was a lonely stinky old cave after such extraordinary involvement? Nevertheless, Puff cannot leave his cave. In the old days, it was the middle of the world and thus of Honah-Lee, a fun place to return to after lapping up virgins or bringing the dawn. Now, the world beyond his cave has been reduced to an alien calculation of glare and ashes. He would disappear entirely if he ventured forth. He loves his cave.

At times, Puff's green eyes are aglitter with something akin to memory. He is on a boat with billowed sail, Jackie Paper on his tail, and kings and princes grovel, pirates pale. Hah! there they romp! there they frolic! And it's not the honor, the glory, no, shit on all your kings and pirates! It's the blueness, the greenness, the splashiness! All great adventure is ultimately tactile, Jackie would explain were he here. And Puff that mighty dragon would grin back like a happy idiot, rub his belly on the rocks.

Puff's poor cave is dark and gloomy, but it is not entirely lightless. Honah-Lee's autumnal mist seeps in by day, coiling into penumbral corners, pressing its damp purgatorial murk into the cave's soft walls. Puff vaguely associates this invasion with life. Less reassuring is the terrible nighttime pallor of his treasure-store of pearls, those teardrops from the moon as old sailors would have it, thunder-balls, lotus-jewels. Their lurid glow lights up nothing but themselves, causing the barren walls, dimly defined by day, to recede by pearl-light into a vast cosmic night. In all this desolation, Puff sometimes buries himself in his pearls like an obscure nebula, dreaming of the death denied him, waiting for 'day to roll in again and snuff out his treasure-store's illusory threats.

Puff's pearls lie spilled about, heaped up here and there, some stuffed into fat brown sacks, others imbedded in the cave walls like drops of some luminous ooze. Beautiful pearls, the wan lustre of moons, the nebulous pallor of breath and autumn mist, of semen, milk, and cowry-shells. Of bones. The white of the eye. Parchment. COME HOME JACKIE PAPER! the pearls in the walls would read, if Puff could spell. But he can't, so he imitates his own constellation instead, adding Hercules' foot: he thinks of it as Jackie's and nuzzles his short-horned skull against it affectionately.

Puff wears a pearl tucked in his chin, sucks another beneath his tongue. For pearls are the quintessential "givers of life," more powerful even than gold or sweet basil or beautiful maidens. Yet Puff often wonders. Maybe it's all a myth. He eats them and they just pass through, untransfigured—well, of course, magic stones, ultimately unalterable and all that, but still, it's enough to make one doubt. Just as an experiment, or maybe out of some vague dissatisfaction with his career, Puff tries to reverse the process: suck them up his ass and spew them out his mouth. But it doesn't work, they just clog up in there, give him sphincter-ache and an inflamed prostate. Heartburn. Puff, chin morosely down between his paws, wonders if in fact he hasn't somehow been conned into this goddamn job. He'd quit, but he's been sucking pearls for ages, and it'd be hard now to kick the habit.

THE PEARL: an emblem of beauty, of fidelity and humility, sign of self-sacrifice and sorrow, of innocence, integrity, purity, rarity, tears, and vaginal dew, of virginity and wealth and of wisdom. Powdered pearl in lemonjuice cures lunacy, bellyache, and epilepsy. It is an attribute of moon goddesses, Christ, cows, pudenda, and the Virgin Mary, is used in all Eastern love potions and protects chastity in

the West. Pigafetta, traveling with Magellan, reported that the King of Borneo dropped his pants and showed him two as large as goose eggs. The pearl is a Christian symbol of salvation and a particle of the consecrated eucharist wafer, a Chinese charm against fire, a Moslem condition of the hereafter: the faithful endure forever, encapsulated in pearls, each with his own exquisite virgin, Allah's wages to the orthodox. The Chinese in the sixth century also believed it rained pearls when dragons fought in the sky, but some beliefs are not true. We now know in fact that such storms are more often triggered by sudden eclipses in the erogenous zones of quasars. . . .

The Gift: Bihar, India

Charles Poverman

On the palm mat Catherine was lying just as she had fallen asleep. Her glasses, still on above her closed eyes, were like empty shells abandoned by the sea. On mats and tables and rope beds, the villagers slept about her, their bodies twisted and open, each lying as the day had left him. In sixes and eights their bare feet dangled from the shadows of the porch. The village men lay in groups, touching, their family and village and caste instinct keeping them together as if even in sleep they feared to be alone.

When she sighed, reaching up to touch her eye, David knew she was awake. She was looking up at the constellations where they were brightest and most unweakened by the waning moon. David listened to the dogs growling at each other and pacing through the shadows. Occasionally he sensed one silently pass close to his head.

Her face was pale in the moonlight. Soft. He would whisper over to her in the time it took to draw a breath. Out beyond the huts the foxes were calling, their voices peopling the night. They crouched in the dust, their eyes gleaming. The moon tugged at their throats.

Now she was getting up. Picking up her missal. And flashlight.

She stepped into her sandals and picked her way into the shadows beyond the hut. David saw the flashlight go on. He stared over at the deserted mat. Someone sighed near him. Behind his closed eyelids the foxes were calling.