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Circling the Void by Andrea DeAngelis

Fancy always wore glad rags despite traveling the rails since his release from the Dismal Harmony ward, where he had been locked away until declared rehabilitated. The time before grew dimmer with every iteration of his perpetual atonement. But the memory of violence refused to recede completely. Tendrils lingered. He'd been hopping the boxcars until his past couldn't corral him any longer. He hadn't intended on hurting his family, but Hera told him to burn it all so he did. His six sons died from fire or dagger.

The aura around his soul collapsed, growing smaller and slower until only a speck pecked at the horizon. His mind flattened like a penny left on a track, squashed by the force of his memories. There were so many echoes at first, then only a pinprick of remembrance welling, the umbra of his shadow fighting its way back. He had lost eleven years as a sun walker. Now he was a vagrant whose tether was knotted around railroad spikes.

The first time he charged through the quasar it spaghettified his limbs. The second time it unraveled his mind, but never his eyes, his eyes were still his. He knew what he saw was real. He was a hero before he was a devil, his former name embedded in the amputated limbs of the Hydra, always threatening to grow back.

Fancy found work wherever he could, riding the empty freights past bone orchards, mad cows and sprawling ghost estates. He'd paint a house or build a fence while scouring the landscape for the itinerant symbols only the wanderers could understand; hastily scrawled hieroglyphs scarcer with every mile he journeyed to outrun the void. Consumed stars streamed around him, sparkling psychosis, but the rattle of the train cars couldn't erase the black hole's gaze.

Decades ago, he imagined his life orbiting constellations but Orion, Andromeda and the other eighty-five slipped from his whirling mind. He was left wrung out in the grimy air. Dirt was all he tasted.

As the train jerked to a stop, Fancy slipped into the night, avoiding the wanderers' encampment. He would only increase their misery. There was a Labor he must do. A job no one else could because their minds had not circled the nebula and gone too far, drawn into the monstrous abyss at the center, and because they weren't Fancy.

Every place had its unique sorrows, but this waystation was emptier than most. A sole statuesque figure named Thena awaited him in the deserted train yards. Her frame was covered with dust and soot as if she had been standing there for eons. They walked silently side by side until they stood in front of a concrete block house, the top floor precariously overhanging the bottom.

"Do you still listen to the gods in your head?" The old woman asked.

"Yes. Always."

Thena nodded, her matching headscarf and mask burned into Fancy's eyes. She searched for the spark within them, but the void had made sure he was incomplete.

"Do you know what you are here for?" she asked.

"What I am always here for," he answered.

"Good. Follow the fowls' trail of decimation, through the foul fields, the stripped lemon trees and the dead who tried to stop them. After that, you will come upon their nest." Her grey eyes examined him again. "You will sink in the marsh, the ground will not hold your weight. That is what happened to the others."

He was heavier than the sun after being ripped to shreds.

"They are not me. I am Fancy."

“How will you hunt in the marsh if you cannot enter?”

“They will come to me. I have the means.” Fancy dug into his tuxedo jacket and pulled out a pair of clacking sticks, two concave pieces of wood connected with leather straps. He slipped his thumb and middle fingers through the loops and made the krotala sing its intoxicating rhythm.

The old woman stayed his hands. “That will do. Do not bring them here. How will you dispatch them?”

He patted the two spiking mauls strapped to each side of his belt, their long handles made of bone.

“We will see.” She pulled her head scarf over her forehead and limped back inside her cement shelter.

Fancy understood terrestrial anomalies as well as sun-spotted. The Stymphalian birds were voracious and vicious, rumored once to have been women, daughters.

The fields were obliterated, any remaining plant life beaten into the cracking ground. Winding through the fruit trees, Fancy followed the rinds of devoured lemons, their sharp tang perfuming the air. Pulp sizzled in the sun. He reached the marsh. The air was thick with sickness. Bodies of the ones who failed bobbed below the water’s surface, clogged with serpentine vegetation.

Fancy pulled out his clacking krotala and summoned the birds, who screeched like the rusty wheels of a subway train as they circled overhead. Their metallic wings rubbed against one another, their bulky bodies at odds with their long breakable necks and legs, as they dove from misshapen cottonwood trees. He gripped his mauls in each hand, knocking the cursed aberrations out of the air, impaling them with the tapered ends and smashing them with blunt hammers. Those skewered tried to bite his exposed flesh with their bronze beaks but he flung them off the spikes. He was made for violence and violence had made him.

Eventually, their unnatural caterwauling ceased. Their carcasses littered the fallow outskirts of the wetlands. A slow crackling arose from the sole survivor far afield. In between the indecipherable static, she said, “You’re the one who killed Lerna.” Of course, monsters called to other fiends. Fire and harvesting sickle, multiple mutilations and amputations and finally the golden sword now lost brought her tortuous end. Her poisonous blood on his arrows continue to kill.

“All women are serpents especially those who cannot be controlled,” he said, parroting the words he’d been given by Zeus.

“Don’t you remember me, Hercules?” she asked.

He stood over her assault of a face, mottled but undoubtedly human, a brutal beak taking the place of lips and a nose.

“Yes.” He remembered she had also been human but never behaved in the feminine manner that was expected. When she was told to smile for Hercules by her father, she clenched her perfect white teeth wide and threatening instead. Her gaggle of younger sisters smirked at her disrespect. Her father, Stymphalus, attempted to appease Hercules’ rage but nothing would quench it and they sprouted their angry wings.

“You were inhospitable,” he said slamming the blunt end of a maul down on her head.

Each time he travelled backwards to the frenzy of his madness, he devolved. This was what always happened despite assurances it wouldn’t, but with infinite repetitions, what was incorruptible broke down into agitated components to be reformed again.

Fancy didn’t know how long he had before he was atomized anew by the black hole. This cycle of Labors was only halfway complete. He’d never not finished all twelve before the regeneration. But the accelerating time loop always returned him to the beginning because he refused to face his carnage.

Thena was waiting, graying into the dust-filled landscape. One day she too would no longer be there, finally dissolving. Perhaps his forgetting would finally burst and bloom and he’d be consumed by the dismal harmony. She heard his thoughts before he did.

“Is it done?”

“Yes.”

“Was it hard?”

“Harder than before.”

“You asked the oracle for this, remember?”

“Can I unask it?”

Thena didn’t answer. “The next Labor is in Crete.”

“The bull?”

“You do remember.”

“Only sometimes.”

“It is best not to have any memory of such slippery things. Otherwise, once you grab hold, they will choke you whole.”

Fancy started to cough. He didn’t look at his hand to see what viscera had shaken loose, letting it drop to the dust and skitter away.

He dreaded what the minute monstrosity would evolve into and the raw havoc he'd be responsible for.

Yes, it's best not to look." Thena stepped closer to him, examining his morphing features. "You are already succumbing to the time sickness?"

"You did not know me in the time before."

"That was my choosing."

"When will I be able to choose?" He asked, her lined face a terrain he was so close to knowing before it eroded.

"When you are ready." The remnants of her worn-in voice wheezed. Her decaying arm pointed towards the station before disintegrating. Was that what all the grime swirling in the air was? The forgotten goddess, his wife, his sons and every living thing trapped with him in the narcosis of his doomed memories?

He would hop the rundown train and ride to what was once Crete, the seas having withered to salt and despair. But this time he wouldn't let the bull go free and rampage. He must make different choices until there was nothing left to choose. Only then could the beginning be altered and they live.

Bio

Andrea DeAngelis is at times a poet, writer, shutterbug and musician living in New York City. Her writing has recently appeared in *Haunted MTL*, *The Hallowzine* and *Bowery Gothic*. Andrea also sings and plays guitar in the indie rock band [MAKAR](#) who recently released their third album, *Fancy Hercules*. She tries not to disturb her neighbors by putting her guitar amp in the closet.

Author's note

The nexus of this story sprang from a song I co-wrote with my husband called "Fancy Hercules" for our band, [MAKAR](#). I was never satisfied with the origin of Hercules' penance aka his twelve labors. It felt removed from his devastating sorrow and derangement. I wanted his mind to break and keep on breaking in an endless time loop where he was doomed to seek a deliverance from what he had done for eternity. I chose to focus on the slaying of the misshapen and monstrous Stymphalian birds because of one haunting detail; the birds weren't birds at first (or at all—that's where the myth comes in) but daughters of Stymphalos and Ornis. They were brutally

transformed because they didn't receive Hercules hospitality. Maybe it wasn't a pure madness that Hera created in Hercules, maybe the violence and rage was there all along waiting to erupt on those who displeased him.

Carmina Magazine's intersection of the modern and mythological provided me the impetus and drive to revise and rework this story, one where a disgraced hero travels the rails repenting his violence but is condemned to repeat it, caught in a black hole. I believe myths and folklore can inform and inspire us for eons to come as we speed toward the impossible infinity of our lives.

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