

1. Prologue

Excerpt from *The Worst of Things: America in the 21st Century* © 2019 by Brett Alan Williams

The year is 2057. The place is America. The Great Upheaval has begun, and Morgan Whitaker is dead.

Morgan was a brawler. His life, one of combat. Most of it fought on the rolling neural hills and valleys within his skull.

Morgan's rivals were ideas, and he relished their engagement to the end as though there weren't one. But in that last moment alive, he was confronted with a sense not topographically steep, but Himalayan. An idea the likes of which he'd never dreamed could reach so high.

It came about as an emergent property of the singular condition he was in. A collision between mind and body in that remarkable instant, which revealed a distinct reality: his merger with nothingness. His first and last chance to see what wasn't there.

It was then his brain registered a signal sent by his body never before expressed: time to die. It happens only once. At least for most people, it happens only once.

Few reported their encounter with death, articulated in supernatural language that strived to capture the occasion. Maybe all would have, had they not been consumed by impermanence. That delicate evanescence called life that depends on energy-intensive maintenance of cellular order. Order otherwise directed to dismantle in accordance with the law. The so-called Second Law of Thermodynamics with its demand for disorder in entropy.

But it's not the sole law of thermodynamics. The first demands a conservation of energy. Energy cannot be destroyed; only change its form. So this energy of life, laughter, love, and tears, where does it go when we die? The form that is us, into the form that is what?

Resuscitated Christians confessed to know after their meeting with Jesus. Revitalized Buddhists claimed to receive counsel from Buddha. Restored Hindus declared witness to their holy trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, or whatever image people were raised with that gave them comfort and assurance.

Such revivals were proclaimed to be miracles. To modern minds, these accounts seemed contrived. Or like those visions of flowers that rose from their pots to sing, dance, and converse with LSD trippers, able to recall their conversation verbatim forty years later.

But return would not be Morgan's fortune. How in that moment could he reconcile his being here for all these many years with this now concrete recognition of his absence? Could he be grateful? It's hard to assess just how monumental it is for contemporary man to crack that riddle.

What finally killed the man some feared might never die was not simply that he was biodegradable. Morgan was born furious, and it was durable. His mind and body pushed beyond what most would have been drained of decades before. It also cost him. Infected with awareness, Morgan learned too much for the era he was in. And the tribal nature of America could not allow minds like his to saddle it with doubt. Like Socrates, his questions and brute honesty endangered an entire way of life. Like Socrates, what killed Morgan was murder. Butchered to save America, desperate to endure.

As a young man with no living examples to look up to—save one he ignored—all Morgan had were the Great Books from the Great Minds lost to fads and fashion. Charted by their stars,

life for Morgan had to be larger than it could be, even in a heroic age. But heroes were not allowed; despite he secretly wanted to be one. The noun *hero* bristled with superiority and conceit for modern-day Americans. An infringement on another's right to self-esteem.

Over the years, the more Morgan learned, the more hostile he grew, and he never stopped learning. His mission: to exhume a remedy for civilization's failure would become a quest from the day he knew he was on one. It was *The Truth* about humans he sought, concealed by millennia of debris. Somewhere in that deepest fissure of the human nucleus was his answer. And his salvation. Saved by forgiveness for himself, and the species he held liable—his own.

He never found it. Quite the opposite. What he unearthed was damnation of a cerebral sort. A tireless fistfight to square the circle. To make sense of a creature that never could.

Throughout his search, Morgan incarcerated those ideas he judged as delusions, be they held by individuals or societies. Ideas caged with tireless enthusiasm, like a psychological round-up, targeted in the crosshairs of his temper. As every society is rife with absurdities, self-contradictions, willful ignorance, the deeper he dug, the more his prison population swelled.

With a precinct all its own was religion. After the death of his father—that living example he ignored—Morgan examined every faith still alive and some gone for ages. He didn't just read them. For decades he tore apart their printed verses in his ambition for a cure. Each elaborated history's long labor to reconcile the two great essentials: that we exist, and that we won't.

There were intervals when promise flickered through the pages. Promise that strong figures in religious history might provide warmth of a permanent tradition. Something to hold on to, rather than fickle adulation of *the new*, that grist and fiber of the ego, not the soul.

But it was the lethal tantrums of temperamental gods who set those pages ablaze. They became Morgan's impossible obstacle. Notably, the God of Exodus. Not because Exodus was more immoral than parallel stories from other peoples before and after it in the evolution of morality. But because this was the God he was raised with. And as for all believers, *his* was real. Or so it had been when he was young. Before he ate from the tree of knowledge, converted to leaves of a book.

If God made man, Morgan decided, God-given reason insisted satisfaction. No equivocations, no excuses, no mysterious ways. Among his deductions was that cold-blooded murder of innocent firstborn children in Exodus was simply cold-blooded murder of innocent firstborn children, infants, boys, and girls. The problem was not a difference in comprehension, like that of quantum mechanics between humans and chimps. As though God alone understood slaughter of the guiltless, while meager humans dare not probe. To Morgan, this was mythologized politics, made by people for people. That's why every god was so human in their frailties.

It also set an upper bound on Morgan's list of repellant things: those who could protect their invented deities from decency, ultimately to excuse themselves when convenient. The way slave state Christians excused slavery by reference to the Old Testament, ignoring the New.

Once, Morgan felt by chance discovery an affiliation with those inimical to belief-as-superstition. But in mining piety, he found its contradictions universal. Doubters welcomed moral corruption with no less enthusiasm than devout believers. Both sides in America's century-long Culture War were the same. Incongruence in human affairs, from politically correct McCarthyism to Right-wing denials of fact, from the segregation of multiculturalism to the contempt of white supremacists, all held common ground. Worse, his studies revealed this was an infliction unconfined to America. Humans were a species of liars, he decided. And it started early, enshrined in their very scripture, be it ancient or modern.

Lies gave humans comfort. Lies gave people power. Lies made them feel in charge when deep down, they knew they weren't. Every doctrine was for Morgan the same, even atheism, composed of liars of another sort. American sects were dichotomies slapped together by erratic and capricious creeds. Morgan was against them all.

No longer would he detain combatants to the bay between his ears. He would release them to every port in a tireless effort to unmask those countless deceivers who trafficked in the notion that immorality was moral. Others would know what he knew, feel what he felt, blessed by, and hostage to reason, just like him.

Thereafter, to keep his covenant with rationalist thought, anything with a fragrance of canon was fired on with gleeful savagery. Morgan could dismantle dogma, Right or Left, with reasoned deconstruction like few others.

A portion of superiority accompanied his role. Participant and spectator to the evisceration of beliefs, lost along with his adversary's meaning. Yet each time he won in the battle of reason over belief of whatever sort, he felt worse. As though each victory showed no one and nothing could stand up to the critical method. He was right, and deep down, he didn't want to be.

In the subterranean shadows of his consciousness, this was a search of another sort. For someone who could beat him.

At last, he found one. Just one.

More accurately, he and wife, Ne Shoul, created one: his son.

Morgan tried to inoculate his son, John, against "The concoctions of man," he said. As a physicist, Morgan knew, "The light, power, and glory of science, Amen." As a biologist, so did John. But John revered an irresolvable power and glory that Morgan did not. Hence the friction, father and son.

For John, dissection of every human aspect with the tool of dispassionate analysis was a mistake. As to employ the calculated action of a saw meant to cut the solid nature of wood, instead to divide the fluid nature of water. No matter how that saw is passed through liquid, it divides nothing. And raises the danger that a living substance unseen beneath the surface is damaged or destroyed.

Unlike his father, John saw human fallibility as the endearing imperfections of a child. Children succeed through failure. Humans deserved not so much forgiveness or its companion, blame, but understanding. A message he advocated.

John's most vital questions were how best to live one's own life, and with others, all to find a way to save these Ununited States in a free fall. Morgan's solution had been political philosophy. John's solution was more complex: political philosophy and faith.

John's venture carried him across America, witness to social evaporation no acquisitive economy however successful could mask. But after The Quake obliterated the planet's sixth-largest economy of California, the economy was no longer successful. With domestic incompetence and stratospheric debt, largely "off book," international players allied to trigger chain reaction failures that tumbled the nation already reeling from a half-century of China Shock. Something crucial changed. Something beyond efficient markets or maximized utility. Something no economist could reconcile because it was qualitative, not quantitative.

Far from what Americans viewed as their final calamity, John framed it as an historic opportunity for transformation. He shared his thoughts, learned from others, and attracted followers.

What became John's supporters debated whether John owed his generosity to an exalted view of humanity, or sense of a universal sacred. For John, reverence was for the living state and its sponsor still a mystery, notwithstanding daily hustle that obscured it.

Not infrequently, John expressed this mystery with the word *God* in the conventional manner, but just as often as a shorthand for some kind of law in the universe. Was John a restoration of the customary believer, or something else, his supporters weren't sure.

The source of John's insight was in the answer his father searched for. Convinced he found it, John's conviction was not protective dissent, as bluff hides suspicion. The kind of suspicion that can sense rationalism trumps faith, all the while pretending to deny it. There was an element of faith, yes, but for John, faith was not irrational. It was the most rational thing he knew because it was fundamental to human nature. "Not all beliefs are in the same fanciful category as my father claims," he said.

But for all their differences, John inherited Morgan's habit for excavation and honesty. Some things nagged at his beliefs, and he faced them squarely. None more than the ludicrous notion he was born physically, in actuality, a second time. No revival. No miraculous meeting. Instead, John had died as a man, consumed by modernity, that same man born again as a child full of wonder. But for one brief expression, he never let it be known, lest he be deemed mad, and he conjectured he might be.

As a biologist trained at one of China's finest graduate universities, John was a product of the present. Contemporary views did not confuse fables with fact, much less those come to life in the here and now. With Asia's premier medical technology, John explored if he might suffer some form of mental illness or disease. None found, could it be a relic of youth? A vision of nobility, reared when it should have been strangled by adulthood.

It was John's six-year retreat to the Alaskan wilderness that answered his father's quest that had become his own. As Buddha had discovered in the forest and Jesus in the desert, John too, found *The Truth* about the nature of humanity in nature itself. Offset by the coordinates of civilization was man's center, origin, and home, estranged by the convolutions of history and too many humans.

But these spiritual patterns bleached with John's emersion in *The Upheaval*. Things went missing. Things the intellect could scarcely sense because it couldn't see what wasn't there.

None suspected John's doubts, save one. Least of all, Morgan, who in his last moment alive received the gift of his son's perfect confidence as comfort for his final journey. The kind of journey that needs precisely that. The illogical solution to our illogical condition: that we exist, and that we won't.

Through discovery of the human condition as it is, not artificial abstractions would pretend it to be, John determined to recover this lost wisdom. Intellectual trajectories that dissolved belief over these last three hundred years would come full circle to reveal it.

If people understood as he once had, they would recover what was lost: the Truth that would set them free. Truth that would salvage America from extinction. But only if people could decipher truth, able to extract it from what swallowed America now.

That persistent question that asks if humans are capable of government, justice, and morality based on reflection and choice, appeared to be no. But John knew it was yes. Yet, like the terminal moraine of a receded glacier, social rubble lay in piles across the continent with no trust. Absolutism was the rule. It nurtured ignorance and arrogance about it. It vilified objectivity because objectivity lowered the fever and diminished tribal linkage.

In this Clan Age, absolutism offered an emotional lure: swear to the creed, and your emptiness is filled. An emptiness arrived at by the disconnected nature of American life where things mattered more than people, and rights expunged responsibilities.

Alone with their rights in this individualist quagmire, Americans ached for belonging. To belong was binding. It was also blinding. But they wanted blindness as shelter from what they saw.

Like Rome's explosion of mystery cults with the fall of Republic, identity groups multiplied. So elevated were their separate identities in celebration of difference that unity with the majority harbored the hazard of exile. Dethronement from victim status was a threat to both Left and Right. Since reasoned deliberation menaced their convictions, convictions were protected, examination banned, evaluation silenced.

Everyone had a right to their own reality while everyone else held mere opinions. Even science, responsible for all that technology which worked just as science said it would, was declared just another opinion. An opinion counting for nothing in a nation where opinions could take it to war.

But when science was ditched, so too was the reason it was built on. And with reason went morality because morality requires we know what really happened for just decisions to be made. Loss of this essential for republican democracy forced America to vault from postmodernist relativism to defiant decrees of certainty defined by "what we are against," not "what we are for."

Marooned with primal urges, impetuous and insubstantial, Americans cowered from their pivotal problem.

Which was what? Of the manifold causes offered, no one knew.

It was in this atmosphere Morgan gambled with his final provocation. Had his wrath not been liberated when it was, broadcast from Washington, DC's Library of Congress in the debate against his son John, Morgan might have lived a few more years. But from the massive crowd, Morgan picked the wrong man to receive his crescendo. Soaked in Morgan's venom, this surrogate for the people's rage crashed through barriers to maul Morgan with a carnivore's lust for devastation of the helpless.

Cut to pieces, Morgan's wail enunciated what the world already knew—an end to what was. Violence discharged through library doors as though they were parchment. Crammed streets sprang from marches to sprints of utter madness. From sea to shining sea, the people's reluctance to act on their bottomless contempt gave way to satisfaction.

America's Founders sought to save Americans from this with governance of, by, and for unstable humans. Almost every facet of the Founding was right, but for the wrong kind of creature. The Founders had handed America a time bomb.

Battered by human temperament, barricades to passion buckled under the assault. On that day, at that moment in 2057, the geopolitical planet lurched. But would its outcome be akin to those 300 Spartans whose defeat by Persian armies gave birth to democracy in 480 BC? Or four centuries later, when Octavius tackled Mark Antony and Cleopatra to seal the Republic's doom?

Which was America's fate? A new beginning or the calamity forewarned, debunked, and forewarned again for generations?

Could it actually be the long experiment in self-governance was over? Was this commencement of the end?

It was.

Learn more about the author and *The Worst of Things* at:

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