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The Art of Memory

by Howard V. Hendrix

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Author’s Note: “The rise of religion-based intolerance and forced conformity in the USA during the last quarter of the twentieth century pops up in my novels *Standing Wave* and *Better Angels*, but its genesis was in this story. Someone once told me that such a theocracy could never happen in America and I was wrong to suppose it could. He lived in Berkeley. I have lived in places much less insulated—places where a candidate can’t even hope to be elected without the imprimatur of the local big box warehouse church. Places where the establishment of a ‘faith-based initiatives’ office in the White House itself is greeted with cheers rather than trepidation.

Maybe the theocracy is already here, after all. Or maybe I’ve just read the Constitution too often to feel at ease in today’s America.”

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IN THE ORCHARD gentle rain falls, wet blackness on tree trunks. Autumn. Some trees persist in their old green confusion, some have turned to fire, some to bare branched ashes. Tense expectancy fills the air. Everyone in the orchard is waiting.

No one knows what to do. So everyone is waiting.

A woman picking apples looks up.

“A sky out of the dark ages,” she says.

Her male companion nods.

In the northern quarter of the sky from another time, dark specks like rags of cloud are moving swiftly, becoming figures, man shapes flying in low over the trees and fields. Shock troops in rocket packs and stealth combat armor. The man and woman run shouting through the aisles of trees. “Take cover! Take cover!”

But it is too late. The faceless stealth-armored soldiers land with gunfire and death. The apple pickers run, are gunned down, spill their baskets of bright red apples everywhere.

“Hey, Captain!” one of the troopers calls over his helmet battlecom as he perforates a family of four seeking refuge in nearby thickets. “What kind of heretics we got here?”

“Brunists,” Captain Will Acton responds, reducing a farm wagon and its passengers to blood and splinters, wood and bone, with a round from a smart mortar. “But that’s not your need to know. They’re cultists. Good enough?”

“Yessir!”

Acton’s men fan out, lobbing cluster and fragmentation grenades into groups of fleeing pickers. Concussion and implosion bombs unbuild in an instant the cabins and cottages on the hillsides above the orchards and fields. The platoon’s heavy munitions man fires a semi-nuke at the commune’s main hall. Laser-guided and smart, the projectile does not miss. The high hall erupts in a ball of fire and is gone.

Acton carefully observes his platoon’s efficient battle dance. His wardogs in action possess a certain terrible beauty, and their choreography is particularly beautiful today. He has trained them well.

“Begin mop-up operations,” he commands over his battlecom. “We’ll regroup this side of the stream, where the plank bridge crosses it.”

His men break up into two-man patrol units, flying low over the trees and brush. Sporadic gunfire is heard—all from his men. No fire returns from the ground below.

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Acton flies above the field where lie corpses clad in bloody jeans and flannels and bullet-holed homespun. He comes at last into the broad meadow, where he will establish his command post beside the stream and its bridge. On the battlecom he hears Lieutenant Dalke, the platoon’s second in command and Reverend Morals

Officer, blessing the carnage.

“Thank you, Lord! Praise be your glorious name! Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!”

Surveying the broken bodies scattered among the trees, Acton sees that a few of the heretics are not dead—only fatally wounded and crying out in pain. But he hears none of their agonies. The sensors in his smart armor automatically filter out all information not relevant to battle.

“Bloody mess, eh Rev?” Acton tightbeams to Dalke when the Reverend Lieutenant lands beside him.

“And glorious, sir!” Dalke says, out of breath. Even in his battle armor, Dalke is clearly overweight. “I estimate the number of apostate dead at two hundred and fifty.”

“Glorious?” Acton shrugs. “I’m not so sure about that. Not much fight to these Brunists. They’re duller than last week’s Quakers.”

“But even greater heretics,” Reverend Lieutenant Dalke reminds him fervently. “Followers of the pernicious doctrines of the heresiarch, Giordano Bruno.”

Acton watches the command tent deploying itself automatically. “Can’t say I know much about the man.”

“The Catholics burned him at the stake over four hundred years ago.” Dalke breaks down his armor’s built-in flamethrower, scratches carbon residue from it. “He denied the divinity of Jesus, declared that the Bible was mythical in nature, said that all its books could be boiled down to ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’—and the rest could be thrown away.”

Acton turns and strides toward the stream. “Still,” he says over his shoulder, “I’d feel better if there’d been more fight to them. Taking them out was easier than shooting doves in the high desert. Used to do a lot of that when I was a boy.”

Lieutenant Dalke looks up from the hot end of the flamethrower he’s cleaning. “Respectfully, Sir, I must remind you that how much or how little ‘fight’ they put up is not important.” The Lieutenant’s voice betrays only the slightest hint of irritation. “What’s important are the crimes of these cultists against our holy state. Bruno’s occult *Art of Memory* is obviously still contaminating minds. What’s worse, it’s gotten thoroughly mixed together with a lot of other heretical claptrap: Earth Mother Goddess worship, witchcraft, magic, pantheism, druidism—all that cultishness.” Dalke, flamethrower cleaning finished, punctuates his comments with quick short blasts of fire. “Heaven knows these people deserve death. I have it on good authority that many of them were drug users or homosexuals or both.”

Acton stares at the chocolate-grey confusion of the turbulent stream. “Well, Lieutenant, you’d know more about that than I would.”

Beneath Acton's reflection in the shallows, a crayfish is wriggling its pale self loose from an exoskeleton it has outgrown. Acton watches, fascinated that the creature should have chosen to molt now, when the stream is so turgid. Finished at last, the crustacean scurries away again into the chaos of the rain-swollen flood.

Rising from his squatting position on the streambank, Acton sees that Dalke has gone. The rain, now ending, is snow in the mountains.

He remembers living in those mountains, remembers the forests being stripped for firewood as more and more people moved in all the time. *Be fruitful and multiply*. He remembers the landslides, the rockslides, the erosion that came with every rain, the silt-choked streams. *And God gave Man dominion over the Earth*.

Heresy, these thoughts. Never to be voiced. He's got to fly low and under radar, or one day he'll wake up and find designer chemicals or gay porn planted in his bunk—all the "good authority" needed to end debate and find for guilt.

Spotty sunlight splashes gold on the peaks above the clouds. The rain has ended. Shafts of late afternoon light slant down out of the clouds. "Angel slides," his mother called them when he was a boy. The only angels sliding down them today are his soldiers.

He remembers briefings by his own "good authorities," who reported ... many things. Of the three spies sent to infiltrate the Brunists, each reported only for the first month or so—and then went mysteriously native. Yet even in their fragmentary reports there abounded tantalizing suggestions of a hidden power in this remote place, a remnant left over from the Old Government's secret projects. What that power might be the spies unfortunately never got around to saying, but speculation at Service Command ranged from a perfect brainwashing chemical to (on the wild fringes) the suggestion that the Brunists might have among them a Starburst—the name persistent rumor gives to the mythical shield-telepaths of the equally apocryphal Project Medusa Blue.

Watching his men returning from mop-up operations, the Captain recognizes the source of his disappointment with the battle now. He expected to confront brainwashed but well-armed hordes, even illusions projected against him in the skies. He expected to fight against an invisible hand reaching inside his mind, trying to flick off the switch labelled "Duty." Instead he has found no noble contest at all—only routine death and mundane destruction. The Brunists never had a chance.

Reverend Lieutenant Dalke takes two men and begins IDing the bodies, flamethrowing the fruit trees of the orchard, torching the dry cornstalks in the fields. Smoke billows up into the westering sun. Acton wonders how much Dalke knows about the spies' fragmentary reports. Morals officers are Intelligence's watchdogs, but the reports are Service Command property—zealously turf-guarded. Curious, he tunes in on Dalke's words to his subordinates.

"...feast of Samhain among the pagans," Dalke says over the intermittent roar

of the flamethrower. “Festival of the Harvest Moon. A night when the worlds of the dead and the living were supposed to be especially close, with a lot of commerce back and forth between them. Even after nominal Christianity came in, the pagan feast still survived into modern times as a Satanic remnant called Halloween—.”

The Captain tunes it out. He is old enough to remember the “Satanic remnant” His mother, a plump devout woman with shining eyes and very pale skin, dressed him in a child’s “Full Armor of God” costume and, as a little Christian soldier, he had paraded the chill October streets, proclaiming “Trick or treat” at every door he came to. People smiled or shrank back in mock fright, then gave him the candy he would stuff himself with over the following days.

When he was eleven his mother told him how glad she was that the New Government had banned Halloween. The New Order could do no wrong as far as his mother was concerned, but news of the banning left him almost despondently sad. His glance falls on the Cross and Stripes patch on his combat armor. He is old enough to remember what came before that, too. Old enough to remember when there were still many white stars on the field of blue.

Perhaps he remembers too much. Dalke and the rest of his men begin to fall into formation before him. His men are young; they have never really known anything other than life under the New Government. They do not have his memories, his questions.

“...only spirits gonna be hoverin’ round here tonight is the souls of dead heretics,” one of the men says. Dalke laughs. The men come to order.

“Mop-up operations completed, sir,” the Lieutenant says, coming forward and saluting. “All the heretics accounted for except seven women. According to Intelligence, one of the missing, a Diana Gartner, was an important witch among them. The other women may well be her attendants. Probably all of them were absent at the time of our arrival, Sir, but I suggest we bivouac here tonight and continue light patrols in the morning, on the off-chance we may still come across them.”

“Very well, then,” Acton nods. He looks over his armor-clad men. “I had planned to bivouac here in any case. Men of the 337th Guardian Air Assault, you may stand down. Take a break, wardogs.”

The helmets come off and the men have faces again, young faces, baby faces, bland faces, squeaky-clean faces. Dalke, his short blond hair slicked back above a visage round as the full moon, bites into an apple he has filched from the spilled basket of a dead woman. Some of the troops deploy shelters, some break down weapons and check armor, some stand talking. Though no one smokes or drinks, conversations grow spirited nonetheless.

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The twisted skein of the stream leads Acton away from the camp, into the

deepening twilight, alone. Helmet under his arm, he walks with no particular objective in mind, only a vague uneasiness with the day's events, a desire to be by himself. Behind him he hears the men being led by Lieutenant Dalke in a prayer of thanksgiving for their great victory.

As he walks on, his armor seems unusually burdensome. He knows he's supposed to admire the technology that makes possible this suit, but somehow he does not. The science that makes the soldier faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, has also made the human being inside the armor almost completely superfluous.

He strikes off up a side branch of the stream, one that plunges down out of rocky, tree-lined slopes. The water is calmer here. In places below rumbling falls the stream broadens into calm pools. He sits down on a log beside one such pool, scrutinizing in the water's surface his reflected face: stubbled, dark, weary. Night begins to fall. He takes off his armor slowly, then, once naked, dives quickly into the pool. The water is so cold it shrivels up his groin, knocks the air from his lungs. It is all he can do to keep from letting out a loud shocked whoop.

Crouched in the muscle-aching cold of the water, a stillness descends around him. The moon rises. From further upstream he hears a sound, unclear at first but growing clearer, until it sounds like female voices, women softly singing.

Leaving the water, he grabs the HK pistol from his gear and scrambles up the rocky gorge, toward the sound. His bare knees bash against boulders, his feet scrape on stones, water beads on his cold flesh under silver moonlight—and it is wonderful.

A mad thrill of the blood drives him on toward the source of the sound, the source of the stream. The singing grows louder, more insistent. The moonlit world blurs past him, fluid, swaying, as if he's running beneath the waves of a crystalline sea.

Suddenly, so suddenly, he comes upon them. He instinctively raises his gun. Unknowingly he has darted into the broad entrance of a cave, an arching roof of rock above him, a mountain spring bursting forth from one side, a broad pool with sedgy grass near the entrance, for sunlight, catching only moonlight and firelight now. By the torches of six young women standing about the pool he sees it all—and the seventh woman too, in the center of the pool, beautiful and nude, torchless yet glowing.

One of the six young women—he thinks of them as maidens—sees him and her song becomes a scream. The others follow suit, rushing inward toward the center, surrounding the torchless woman, attendants protecting their mistress. Perhaps they hope to hide her nakedness with their bodies or catch the bullet intended for her, but either goal is futile. The woman at the center is head and shoulders taller than any of the others.

For her part she seems thoroughly unconcerned. Her pale eyes take him in, his nakedness, his raised gun. Abruptly she laughs a laugh that echoes and shakes the cave's stony vault, a laugh to split the very vault of the universe in two and stop all the clocks ticking in a different world.

Acton feels a spike of blue-white light driven into his forehead, then blackness and falling, falling inside himself—*What is past is present elsewhere*, a soft-spoken female voice says inside his head. *What is future is present elsewhere. You are going elsewhere.*

—toward infinity, where starlight makes ringing music on the gong of the atmosphere. The mind of the world falling into his mind. With golden oars of joyful wisdom rowing a canal of stars. Shooting stars fish flash great gold sword slashes sheathing themselves in an unbounded scabbard of black velvet. Toothed whales of light giant squid of darkness struggling out of view in deep luminous skies. The galaxies themselves mere oases of light in vast deserts of darkness. The further he goes from himself the closer he comes to himself. The entirety of the universe more intimate to him than he is to himself. The eye with which he sees infinity the eye with which infinity sees him.

—toward eternity, where light lets there be, light from excess of dark, drops and puddles and storms of light blowing and booming outward. Planets wandering not far from their primary's gravity attraction loving embrace. Life in contravention of the law of the second. The nightmare hallucination of evolution of human history of the bleeding the broken the buried beneath brick and wood and stone of refugees wretchedly fleeing destruction like salamanders writhing out of the fire then Project Medusa Blue but too late the nightmare again and again of the Iron Man topping his brazen whore Liberty again and again the lovers beneath an infernally red and black sky coupling endlessly atop a bed of skulls in a field of skeletons a vast plain of corpses and decay stretching to every denuded horizon ghost people in ghost buildings diaphanous dissolving disappearing ghosts watching ghost shadows watching shadows in every dying room swarms of ghosts like dust devils of ashes everywhere ghost bees in their high hives their ghostly skyscrapers dependent for hire or fire on the ghostly business of empire fires swallowing fires ashes swallowing ashes moths butterflies to flames in buildings inevitably ruins before building a fire building a stack of ashes forever forever even the sun only a light inevitably blinking out all the stars falling going out like cigarettes tossed from passing starships to the eye of eternity the eye with which he sees eternity the eye with which eternity sees him.

Inward, inward, outward, outward. The golden eye of the amphibian seeing two worlds, the eye of the salamander writhing out of the fires of space and time. The eye at the center of the storm, the eye above the mortal two at the limit of the divine—and still further— He wakes at last to early morning sunlight and the sound of distant flamethrowers. Dalke and the men burning bodies. Dew lingers on his cheek, though his gun is gone. He should be running for his armor, back in uniform,

back beneath the mask, but a luxurious languor still fills his senses. He is in no hurry. The woman—Diana Gartner, Witch, Starburst, whatever—is gone, along with her attendants. It is the first of November, the cave entrance is dark, and in the daylight world no trace remains of the night before.

But now he remembers why Giordano Bruno was burned alive. His religious experience was the reflection of the universe within his own memory, proof that the mind itself is universal and divine. He taught the art of memory, the art of mind, the heresy that the kingdom of God, the literal universe, is within each and all. He taught that to kill a person is to kill a universe—and for this he had to die.

He begins walking downstream again. Somewhere along the leaf-strewn gorge he hears his helmet battlecom squawktalking, breaking the morning quiet, echoing among the rhyolite walls. Over the tree-lined slopes he sees Lieutenant Dalke and Private Reese coming in over the trees.

“Look!” he hears Dalke say over the com. “A heretic! And naked at that!”

“Let’s burn the faggot, Lieutenant!” Splitting up to flank him, they fly down into the gorge and he dives running into the thickets beside the stream. Over the abandoned helmet he hears their search for him as he evades, anticipates their directions, reacts to their crosstalk. They set fire to the brush at the mouth of the gorge. He starts following a line of brush and low trees still in morning shadow to where the brushline goes up and over a ridge, into the next drainage and away. A gamble; out of this gorge he will no longer be able to hear the battlecom from the discarded helmet.

His body surges pulses pounds through the brush and low trees, dodging and running, unencumbered by superhuman armor. He never knew he was capable of this. Branches slash him, thorns tear him, but he does not slacken his pace. It would be so easy to stand up before Dalke and Reese, shout “Hey! It’s me! Your superior officer!” But he knows what would happen then. They cannot hear him—their smart armor screens it out. Even if they could, they’d never expect to see their Captain naked, they’d probably gun him down before he had a chance to speak.

At some level, too, he suspects the truth: he *is* a heretic now. He can never go back. He is almost to the ridge. He needs only cross a small clearing and he’ll be up and over—Dalke spots him at the top of the ridge, lays down a barrage. A round takes him in the shoulder and he falls plunging tumbling bouncing bonebreaking off tree trunks to the floor of the otherside drainage. Dazed, bleeding, unable to stand, much less walk, he sprawls in a leaf-strewn gully.

Dalke lands in a whirlwind of leaves. “Damn it, Lieutenant!” Acton cries out painfully over the scraping of fractured ribs. “Can’t you see it’s me?”

Slowly, Dalke raises the visor on his helmet.

“Thank God! That’s right, Lieutenant—it’s me. Will Acton. Your Captain.”

Dalke stares at him carefully.

“No,” he says. “You’re not the Captain. You’re a heretic.”

Dalke steps back, slapping down his visor. All time and space become one time and space. They are Brutus and Caesar, Judas and Jesus, Cortes and Montezuma, Mocoenigo and Bruno. Infinite worlds in infinite space infinitely one. Barefooted and garbed in a robe embroidered with devils and flames, an exotic robe, an Aztec robe, Bruno steps toward the flames. Dalke presses a stud. A stream of fire surges out. Acton sees only a stream of butterflies and moths, floating toward him forever.

When Reese lands he see Dalke standing beside a corpse-shaped mound of ashes. Small fires still smolder among the surrounding leaves.

“Another starry-eyed heretic bites it, eh Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Private.” Dalke seems subdued. “Let’s find the Captain and report this. He of all people would certainly want to know.”