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Destiny

David Morse
Trumpeter

DAVID MORSE is a freelance writer who lives in Storrs, Connecticut. He is the author of the forthcoming novel *The Iron Bridge*, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998, from which this selection is taken. (Reprinted here with permission. Copyright (c) 1997 David Morse.) An earlier piece called "The Iron Bridge" was also published in this journal.

At the Quaker meeting for worship at the Old Furnace, Maggie focused on positive images. Tried thinking of herself as the foremost molecule at the crest of a great curling wave. She thought of the forces gathered behind her, the human tide that had brought her to this point, that had made this detour backwards in time. She tried to think of those forces as irresistible, imagined herself as gathering strength from the consensus that had sent her back, saw herself as the expression of that purpose and power.

She had asked Erzulie once if she believed in destiny.

"Destiny!" Erzulie snorted. "Destiny is one of the most abused words in the English language. My ancestors were slaves because somebody insisted it was their destiny. Your great grandfather died in Auschwitz because somebody said it was his destiny. Our planet was brought to ruin in the belief that it was Man's destiny to conquer Nature."

Maggie was startled by her vehemence. They were walking through the rain forest, carrying umbrellas, looking up at the forest canopy; beyond, the dazzle of sun on glass. Maggie had just been admiring Erzulie's face, her dark skin refracting light from the yellow umbrella. She hadn't meant to strike a nerve. "So." She proceeded cautiously. "Destiny is just a human construct. You don't believe in some larger inevitability?"

"Dunno. Can't say. As a scientist I see an order to the universe that lies outside our comprehension. What Mr. Ho calls li. But I'm not comfortable giving it a name. And what human beings call 'destiny' or 'God's Will' or 'Natural Law' is a spit in the ocean compared to that orderly flow. Invariably those names become political."

"Okay," said Maggie. "Politics aside, what's going to happen if we succeed in getting Industrialism onto a less destructive track? Will humankind show any more wisdom the second time around?"

"You mean, is humanity destined to screw up?" Erzulie made the palm-up gesture they all used to indicate the ruined world outside.

Maggie shrugged. "Or gain wisdom."

The little downpour was ending, thanks to whoever was doing rain that day. Now there was only tree-drip. Erzulie tipped her umbrella aside. "Dunno. We

sure do be out of control now, girl. The human species. Been out of control for a long time. It may be a law of evolution that intelligence will extinguish itself. Intelligence in the wrong species." She sighed. "I suppose if I truly believed it was our destiny to mess up, I'd say forget trying to go back and change it. Go with this." She made the other gesture, palm curved in to embrace Ecosophia. "This little miracle." She knocked on a thick bamboo trunk: after a couple of seconds, a miniature shower came from above. She grinned.

"But not a day goes by I don't thank my mama and daddy for refusing the destiny that was offered them. If you ask me do I believe in free will, in our ability to change things, I don't have an answer - but I live as if we did. My Daddy was barely literate - I mean it was a struggle for the man to read a newspaper - but he used to quote Gandhi. What you're doing may seem insignificant, but it is terribly important that you do it."

Those words were a comfort to Maggie now, standing in the circle, trying to focus her own power. Not only to have Gandhi's words, but to have them from Erzulie's father.

Next to her, someone's stomach growled audibly over the thump of the furnace. Abiah, head tipped up. Abraham, head bowed.

Look at us, standing here on our hind legs, looking for comfort against the abyss of meaninglessness. Looking for external salvation. That's the pitfall of Christianity - the idea of Christ coming and saving us from the mess we've made. Judaism with a credit card.

Do I really believe in Gaia? In the planet as a living whole, a composite of dynamics rhythmically adjusting its chemistry and temperatures within the range necessary to sustain life? And if I accept as an article of faith the sacredness of the life not only on the planet, but of the planet, then by what arrogance do I suppose the planet wants to be habitable for humankind?

A furnace-keeper sneezed.

Mr. Ho used to say that compassion is for all creatures, not just our fellow humans; that the universe is not human-hearted. A person who wishes to be in harmony with the universe will not be human-hearted.

Her own stomach growled.

She thought of all their bodies respiring; semifluids and gases moving through their gastrointestinal tracts; atoms of minerals and heavy metals tumbling slowly through the plasma of hair follicles; oxidation of sugars powering muscles; hearts pumping blood, the iron in their hemoglobin carrying oxygen to cells.

Iron moving within them and without them. Iron shaping the planet for life: iron in the Earth's core generating electromagnetic fields, the moon swinging

tides of iron; magma forced up through seabed rifts causing continental plates to shift; diatoms billions of years ago digesting iron compounds thereby freeing oxygen to accumulate in the atmosphere, permitting complex life to evolve: the planet a rusty spaceship hurtling through the void.

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