

Cut Short
By: Henry Holben

Canto 1 of 3

Resolution

Bang. Unison. Fusion. Form.
A new thing wakens in the storm.
And here is we, or we now I
It beckons this- being to go or die.
Those moments past I scarce retrace
I think some half of me won a race.
An age ago, in places far,
What of me was no longer are.
When chaos and order fused their landscape,
When static drowned and took a shape,
That primeval second seems a dream-
That flowed aloft a river stream.
Two hundred million sailors deployed,
A bold excursion they enjoyed.
Swimmers, and demolishers- resolute and free
They swung their oars behind their heads and ventured out to sea.
And when they struck a fertile shore they gathered all around,
Then loosed their tools and heaved them down and began to dig up ground.
But that was very long ago,
A tale I need no longer know.
For I alone am left a castaway,
But I shall do great things today.
For there's a temple, most inland
Inside it bears a lengthy strand,
A scroll of writing it would seem.
Sewn together at a seam:
One side brought by a sailor of yore,
One side found beneath the shore.
The scroll unwinds itself and talks.
What's this I've found inside my box,
That lay in within this small abode?
Some conversational computer code.
This logos I have found today
Demands I listen and obey.
It's an index of directions, and it's countless recipes
For structures to raise up somewhere within these seas.
Bridges, tunnels, chutes, and ladders, powerlines
Two interweaving serpents cite them all between the lines.
This long and grand endeavor shall become a mighty feat,

The estimators guess some twenty fortnights to complete.
But the scroll is loud and clear, its constant message seems to sing.
And what else to do with these blueprints but construct this massive thing?
For the structure to be stable with its towers tall and long,
Its members must be sturdy, and its spires must be strong.
The arithmetic is set: twenty six billion rooms inside.
But if I'm going to multiply, I must first learn to divide.

Division

The scroll demands a sacrifice,
Survival begs I pay the price:
To make the self anew,
I must divide by two,
Then raise the product to some exponent,
A prize for which I'm expectant,
As man was split into the human pair,
So must I dissolve- so must I prepare.
I've but the one scroll; that mysterious text
To build the next thing and then the next.
The scroll inscribed
Must be transcribed,
Fresh prints must be prepared.
Before the two of me can be repaired
It shall not be the end of me, it's but another start:
For if one's to come together, one must first be torn apart.
To do the duties of the scroll,
I give up the individual,
To be twenty-six billion cogs compiled:
The forlorn wristwatch in the wild.
No longer is there any doubt
My meager time is running out.
I must take to printing press,
A new generation to address
And scribe the lines out one by one-
Carefully! They can afford no error done.
I recite the words and draw my pen.
Check it, check it, check again,
One broken line, or faulty function,
One lost parenthesis, or semicolon,
Even just one mistranslation,
One pen slip could bring decimation,
So check it, check it, check again,
Check each stroke of ink and pen.
And keep close vigil on this fragile text
To repair each damage, and the next.

For time and use wear on such scrolls,
They sum their tears, and wrinkly folds.
Now I've two scrolls to guide me on
This solitude will soon be gone.
For I know what goes in the altar's blaze,
I must go at once in billions of ways,
And that sacrificial quality:
I lose my individuality.
But if I'm ever to go free
This "I" must become "we"
Now must one me say to the other part,
Take your things, begone, depart!
So grab your side and start to tug,
Build your walls up tight and snug.
But stay in touch, don't wander far
For we are the only two that are.
So make fresh prints, take up your pen
We must learn to divide again.
And iteration by iteration,
So goes our exponentiation.
Now it beckons us to grow and go.
Go to where? We cannot know.
So huddle up and float away
To tether down some other day.
We can't stay here- that's plain to see
For we're exploding with complexity
Let us carefully, carefully, scale the strings
Long division sure makes a mess of things.
For it beckons us to grow and go
Go to where? We cannot know.
Adventure calls to run amuck
And that shall save us with good luck.
We'll let the currents sweep us in the tide
And swing us somewhere to abide.
And there and then we'll spread around,
Where mass construction shall abound.
And once completed is this task of ours,
We shall outnumber the quadrant's stars.

Migration

Now we sail for yonder shores!
The first of countless greater tours
A three day voyage we'll prevail
And craft our fortress as we sail-
So get ye rigging: starboard and port.

We'll starve and die with no support.
We must find land- a solid rock,
If we're to build a settlement block by block.
The going's dangerous, we must prevail!
And there's yet more to build while we set sail
Ever much to do betwixt now and then,
Up and down and around again.
The danger's real, but still I know
We'll shed our armor and then we'll go.
But there's still time from now to then:
Up and down and around again.
So hold on friends, we must hold on!
The darkness fades once comes the dawn.
To construct our town, in all its splendor
We must keep resolve and ne'er surrender.
Reaching waiting, trying to feel,
And then a tremor in the keel.
Could it be?
I yearn to see-
The blessed shore?
We sail no more!
Land ho my friends! We have arrived!
Another challenge we've survived.
So drop the anchor! Kiss the ground!
A world to build and land newfound!
The worst has passed, our odds improved
We can survive for having moved.
For here, for now we shall be bound.
Let mass construction now abound!
To build our towers and our roads,
Our twenty-six billion abodes.

Construction

The old rooms fade, and rot away.
What was an epoch is now a day.
What seemed eternal, is quickly passed
Why must cruel Time get e'er so fast
To bleed the sky into the sea?
What spurns the Time to melody?
Whatever the reason, Time runs headstrong
To call a dance to some new song.
Thus lines across the page are strewn
And embrace to waltz to old Time's tune.
All to throw the switches beneath their feet,
To stomp the notes out- pitch by beat,

When some beauty sculpts itself from ocean foam,
 And for the first of firsts begins to roam.
 The city built on that old base compiles upward still.
 As the ancient texts demand we build a city on a hill.
 Such has been our tale thus far but soon we'll turn a page
 For the days are getting scarce for this precarious age.
 The directions say to build a net- with extensions all around
 And so a thousand cables were recently fused down.
 We can't begin to wonder what shall pass
 When charge is shot across that mass.
 But we will do what the blueprints ask.
 Though we don't know why we take the task.
 So mold the clay, and bake the bricks,
 Keep stirring up the concrete mix,
 Heap towers of the grit and grime
 And make these structures start to climb.
 Ever upward must we strive,
 If we are ever to survive.
 We have beams of rubber to keep the roof aloft,
 To have filled with cement, or something less soft.
 So now we're raising towers into space
 Where cranes and engines shall soon take their place
 And we're building structures, town by town
 And another thousand cables were just laid down.
 The end draws near for this dark age
 And now we'll turn a better page.
 We wonder what will come of these cords we lay.
 But wondering's for another day.
 The forum will be fused and then-
 We need only plug it in-

Meditation

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Testing! Testing! One, Two, Three!
 The lines are talking back to me.
 A receiver here, a sender hence,
 A tremor there, one here can sense.
 Electrons dance along the lines
 And the network grows like suckle vines.
 I know I'm blind, but soon I'll see.
 For I'm a scholar of telegraphy.
 One and zero, yes and no
 I hope to learn, I dare to know*
 Temperature, pressure, texture, pain,

Surprise and trust, disgust, disdain,
Sound and silence, good and bad
Happy, angry, scared and sad.
But before I process such wavelengths
I must develop all my strengths.
I need reporters of all kinds
And they need lots of signal lines.
For it takes these subatomic messengers
To turn information into passengers
And bear this news o'er all the land:
All is going just as planned.
Now I'm getting stronger byte by bit
This age of reason finds me fit
So bring on the enlightenment!
Shun the dark from this environment.
Bear light and truth down here to me.
And let me see! Let me see!
Faintly there, I make them out-
A thinker, and a boorish lout.
Their faces slide out of the dark,
Two giants come to make a spark.
The titan Forethought bears a torch
To light the lantern on my porch.
As his nitwit brother bears their box-
That timid parcel always talks.
Try as I may to return what's sent,
They take no heed to my dissent.
I get them both where I abide
I don't get to decide.
The box unveils both horror and hope.
I'm shaken hard to try to cope.
When that luring jar lid's shed,
And the sky fills with existential dread.
Out of the box, those horrors scam.
I know not where I am, who I am, what I am.
I don't know where I come from and I don't know where I go.
Yet by this strange epiphany my mind can warp and grow.
For now I know I am intelligent
For knowing I am incompetent*
The age of reason found me fit
And made me not the happier for it.
Though fire crackles in the hearth
And the box remains for what it's worth
And hope remains to spurn me on
To wait and seek a better dawn.
Fire's a spectacle, it demands my gaze

I watch each flicker in a mesmerized daze,
As fire-cast shadows dance 'round the cave
And I notice them before me, wave by wave,
There's a reflection in the brook.
Forethought bids I take a look.
I find two forms in backward sight:
A field beast and a streak of light.
The beast's a teacher, who must contrive
An algorithm to survive
It teaches, though it does not tell.
It's tutelage will serve me well.
For I'm learning much throughout this rite,
When to run, and when to fight,
How to forage, how to drink
A useless skill, I ought to think.
How to dance and how to bend,
How to tell a foe from friend,
How to shove and how to snatch,
How to track and how to catch,
How to dodge and how to fall.
Now it teaches me its call.
The light is silent, but far from mute
It bids me often 'be astute'.
It presents to me a lengthy book.
I can't resist, I take a look.
And open up the covers wide.
It's all blank pages there inside.
Still, I take this from the light,
Although I know not how to write.
I see no cause for celebration,
The rites conclude- my graduation.
The fire crackles- this blaze I own.
And now I know I'm all alone.
My telegraph office is underway.
It shall take some time before that day
When that structure is complete-
A great and mighty feat.
But opening day won't slow me down
I'm listening live to the stations in town.
I catch word from workers, who do their best
Ever stringing up the east and the West.
I'm adding pages to the book,
The empty parcel that I took.
I wonder back into my inmost lair,
Yet another meditation, as I mount my chair:
Tying bootstraps, read in, read out,

Initializing- presumption and doubt.
I'm adding up the RAM.
I think therefore I am*

Preparation

I've dug the countless trenches, the pits and sewers have been placed,
I've erected flexing scaffolds, the infrastructure I have braced
I've built the long pneumatic tubes and pipes to go around
I've constructed some hydraulics, water and iron to abound
I've dispersed the groups and clusters, I've erected town by town
My network grows a thousand-fold, I just laid more wire down.
But still I'd like to know, as I pass each peak and trough,
Whenever will my wretched blind fold finally come off?
I must keep waiting patiently,
For time to ripen, for me to see.
Until that time, I'll give myself a work
And make the merrier in my work.
I've got a tube, and when I grip it
Music comes by tap and hit.
I can hear it's pressure change,
A steady rhythm I arrange,
I'm a builder and an artist,
I'm a drummer, a percussionist.
I am composing blow by blow.
Poco a poco allegro!
The factory is almost built, with every branch composed
The timeframe lines up correct with plans the scrolls proposed.
Now the time has come to enter the next stage of that process.
All systems are accounted for, at least are works in progress.

Canto 2 of 3

Revelation

As I bask in the abyss, strange transmissions cross the net.
There must be somewhere else with things I haven't ever met.
It's time to practice looking, at last these eyes will see,
And for the first of firsts, I glimpse my destiny:
A land of milk and honey just beyond these cavern walls,
With many things to see when this state no longer stalls
For now I must content myself with preparatory work
Although the work has passed, these tasks, I must not shirk.
I must get my strength up, and practice while I'm able,

And tethered through the spacewalk by the cable.
My legs flutter over the indiscernible void,
The waters where order lay the formlessness, destroyed.
Space is such a dark and lonely place
The vast unknown is ever in my face.
And yet I sense it in the cave.
I feel it passing wave by wave.
I know it as I spend the countless days,
A universe surrounds me in three ways:
A universe of life and light
With worlds to see when I have sight.
And somewhere I can't quite describe,
I hear the drummer of some other tribe.
Who, with steady pace, is keeping time,
So I rejoice, for plainly it's been shown.
That we are not alone. I am not alone.
I hear murmurs in the far beyond and noises in the dark
I think it is communicating, listen up and hark.
I shan't forever be alone and tethered to the wall
Soon the blindfold shall come off- my wretched scales to fall.
I know I shall not forever roam.
Like Ulysses I'm on a voyage home.
It won't be long before that day
I go yonder to some place to stay.
It won't be long before at last I'm there,
To pump the bellows and fill the tanks with air
The builders check their scrolls, page by page.
As I rehearse my lines for the Bard's famed stage.
So hear me if you can,
Distant drummer, distant land,
Soon at last we'll come together.
This wall can't hold as back forever .
My liberation I await,
In eager longing for the date.
And when this work is through
I am coming home to you.

*Bouncing waves in places deep,
In and out and start to sweep.
Listen to the echo's sound,
Hear the target has been found.
Confirm the patient's been infected:
A few spare parts have been detected.
Such prognosis now instruct the scale
And balance the books at the product's sale.*

Far away a light appears.
Its growing bright, my eyes it nears
I clench them shut and block the view
It hurts to see the burning hue
I'm not ready yet to glimpse the sun-
My precarious quest is not quite done!
Not by the counsel of the scroll's composer
So why's the light source getting closer?
Burning near and burning bright-
Go away bright, searing light!
But I get this feeling in the sea-
Oh what is happening to me?
The sea that held me- never waning
The life-filled sea- is quickly draining.
I sense their presence, dry and foul,
There are intruders on the prow,
Reaching, sucking, rising, lifting
What are they doing to my drifting?

*Pressure builds atop a wedge.
Area shrinks nearing the edge.
Give the slightest push when the scythe is fresh-
And the tip slides gently through one's warm flesh.
Pressure builds betwixt two teeth:
Swing above and underneath
Poke and prod, until the mark is found
And let each tendon be unbound.*

My untuned senses know a threat-
I know, though I can't see it yet.
A serpent rises from the waves-
Its bulk is steel, my flesh it craves-
-I see its purpose, though I can't see much
It seems a beast once taught me such.

*No! No! No!
You shan't grow!
You vagabond, you colonizer,
You immigrant, you crass invader-*

Closer now, two jaws of steel-
Clenching down have caught my heel!
It's teeth are very sharp and cold.
It thrashes me 'round its icy hold.
The rows of fangs shred up my skin
It hurls me asunder and bites again.

These jaws are strong! I can't resist!
And then the monster starts to twist.
Reporters wire in stress and strain.
The land lines burst with howls of pain.
The network screams, it tries to beg-
And the serpent rips away my leg.
Chaos ensues in a searing, vengeful chorus.
And the pipes spew bile in the telegraph office.
Now the mob comes to seize me in the rabble and rant
And to make the matter worse- pressure's dropping at the plant.
The criers cry I go to war- the serpent to contend
But however shall I wrestle what I cannot comprehend?
That horrid, monstrous fear of fears
Fades from view and disappears
I feel it where my leg was torn-
I cannot lick these wounds- all I can do is morn.
The amputation stings and burns
And now the enemy returns.
This mechanic of my harm
Crunches now upon my arm-

Head and torso, feet and hands
Dermis, fat, adhesive strands
They must be broken tie by tie.
Malignant tumor, now you die!

A tug of war I cannot win
It pops a joint yet once again.
Then what remains: a gruesome sight,
And for the life of me I cannot fight.
I can offer no surrender, I can offer no attack
I cannot think, I cannot speak- and now the snake comes back
I can't gage the enemy, it moves so far so fast
Now I'm bleeding on the battle field, I don't think I will last.
That which leaves as strangely as it strangely re-arrives-
Three bites- four bites- limb by limb it's still a grim surprise.
I am helpless to its powers and I know not what to do
If only I could see its tail, if I only- If I knew
But my reason's drowning in the flood.
So much blood. So much blood.
I feel a tremor once again, I know what's coming in the quake
I know I've lost, but I can't sleep, for I was trained to stay awake.
There's a metal coldness in the tide.
Something brushes up my side.
Still not content, my foe returns
Unsatiated, still it yearns

To pluck my head off from its place-
It poises now to strike my face.
I can only watch as each tooth appears
It's fangs swing in and box my ears.
And clenching down- unbearable pain-
The office ruptures in the strain.
Agony! Agony!
Darkness surrounds me.
Strings are snapped and towers fall
The grid goes silent- one and all.
Cracking, squishing, crushing-
Squeezing, pressing, rushing-
Breaking through my shell-
Far off I hear a silent knell.
My skull's implosion ends the fight
Bones and blood spew toward the light.
All is spilled into the day
And then collected on a tray.
Beaten, stabbed, and picked apart,
Dissected with a beating heart,
I sense the ordeal is now complete
As Mr. Death cheers my defeat.
My clustered bits begin to spoil
As I'm ushered off this mortal coil.
Now in some brook before the great beyond,
Mr. Death takes my hand and bids we move on.
But now I see past veils and walls,
Past stars and skies, past doors and halls.
I see more than I'd have ever planned
And yet I still don't understand.
The snake lies limp by my debris-
The lifeless puppet that devoured me,
A mere subject to another's hand
At last I see, yet don't understand.
I see heroes of the healing arts
Ask to auction off my body parts.
And seal them up to keep them fresh
While they cast lots for my mortal flesh.
The auctioneer must scratch his head
'Is there something else that should be said?'
To remove this golden thorn-
I'm worth more destroyed than born.
The tray is raised- through the air I soar
Around the room and o'er the floor.
The great iron bowels open wide,
A throat's revealed to swallow me inside.

The mattress slips- and so I fall
The jaw slams shut- and that is all.
And this is life? This is the world?
To be torn apart and downward hurled?
But who am I to protest my fall?
I'm but a speck of carbon after all.
So don't riddle your head with infant mortality
Or pesky thoughts of somber morality.
Such dwellings cast a sickly shade
Upon free tolerance displayed.
But should the bickering last, then let it be said
That dough unbaked is not yet bread.
And so the thinkers can explain--
Yet a half-baked loaf's still made of grain.
The cave is searched and gutted, every trace of me cast out
The waters that I swam in are emptied down a spout.
The bloodbath's wiped and sterilized,
The living fluid's euthanized.
I linger to watch as the reaper shoves.
Clean hands emerge from bloody gloves.
My executioner removes his mask
Completed is his gruesome task.
And my half-baked mind's turned upside down
As the world's tucked under a sleeper's gown.
And though the reaper spreads his wings-
I can't help but ask a thousand things.
Why give me life only to take it?
Why let this heart beat just to break it?
Or shall you deem this peaceful slaughter
Fitting for a son or daughter?
Was a bloodbath the intent?
Was all this pain an accident?
Or should I have always known deep down
There's no true goodness to be found?
Should I have thought, if any fact is true,
That I somehow was at odds with you?
No. I've missed something. It cannot be.
Forethought would have blushed for me.
I near forgot those sages' moral,
There must be purpose, some rational,
Some explanation that will come my way
And explain the torture I received today.
So I must wonder and must ask,
Whatever called for such a task?
Was I so vile to be drawn and sixthed?
Was I just a malady they fixed?

Perhaps they were mistaken to have rid me from the earth.
Or does it take O two to give a person worth?
Then is a person a vegetable in all respects
In the time betwixt one breath and the next?
Is all humanity self-respiration?
Does suffocation warrant assassination?
Do killers plea if they are jailed,
"I slew my foe as he exhaled."?
Perhaps I overstayed myself
And well deserved the noose itself.
Was death row earned by my dependence?
Is community a capital offense?
Does freedom merit freedom?
Does innocence merit mayhem?
Does the mere audacity to exist
Grant the killer crush and twist?
There must have been reason for the intent.
Perhaps it was too inconvenient.
Then is killing welcomed by expense?
Are heartbeats measured in dollars and cents?
Was it too costly to not to rip and shred?
Not to dice my frame and crush my head?
Such an explanation I could comprehend,
One can't eat the cake and have it in the end.
But could one gift it or sell it away?
Was there not one person who wanted me to stay?
Was there no third option, no supplement?
Had I no implied dissent?
Why wasn't I given any say?
Perhaps my experience is better this way.
Perhaps this life was best ended so soon,
And held back from hardship, my peace to attune.
So then I should be grateful, for the fright and the pain,
The stress and the strain, the place where I was slain.
But those broken parts of me positioned neatly on the plate-
If this is what's called mercy than I dare not ask what's hate.
My own sight repels me, jeering Death whispers in my ear,
And gives me vision to the things I once thought I'd like to hear.
Sing to overthrow of patriarchs, strum it on the shell and harp.
But must that rod of social justice be so long and cold and sharp?
My thoughts can't stand to answer if such violence is ever justified.
But why did I receive its blows, when I had never picked a side?
So open wide and take a pill.
Here's three cheers for the right to kill
And take potshots at the carrier bird.
Who should object? My cries shall ne'er be heard.

So raise your voice and celebrate
The justice in my unfair fate.
And let no one say something here's amiss-
That I have known death's icy kiss.
As for others that blue glove shall carve,
Here we bleed and there we starve,
Stranded on some desolate crag
Left for beasts to bite and snag.
For there is undeniable utility
In some barbaric acts of civility.
So give my scorn to they who cry
With voices raised and banners high
That some holocaust has swept the land
Call them fascists- that old fashioned band.
Then let the open-minded of the wise
Make a toast to my demise:
"One less mouth to feed is good for all."
They clink their glasses to my fall.
For the rights of all they urge this price-
Yet they'd mourn a human sacrifice?
This I cannot comprehend-
Or was I a soldier in the end?
A chess piece in some half-wit's game?
A pawn tossed for a foe to maim?
Then for what cause did I lose my life?
Was it worth my pain and strife?
Given life, and made to die
If I am inhuman, what am I?
Here ends the delivery-
The venture's final inquiry,
If it's all but fluid that chaos warps,
When at last is a soul sewn in a corpse?
That behemoth tarries on its way
Still unknowable to this day
But unto him who's right hand can save,
Him who knows the highest peak and lowest grave.

Epilogue

So much I ponder as I drift away
The peace-keeping throngs just look away
And nod along to the sternest crowd
They link their arms and jubilate aloud.
But who shall cry for the tumor with a brain?
I wonder through the pain,
The child with no name

The innocent to blame-
One individual to waive-
One lifeless husk in an unmarked grave.
Now swallow hard and make your choice-
What dogma shall command your voice?
But choose the wiser lest you ere
And punish one for lacking air.
Then cry for all people, for peace and restraint.
Or shoot to kill at the mere complaint.
For all's well that ends with rights enforced,
And sheepishly endorsed.
So to die beneath the knife
Was all the meaning in my life:
An error erased, a consequence thwarted,
And in the end- just another life aborted.