

BAD TO WORSE

Robert Edeson



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O Lord

I am lost in my enemy's forest.
His quarrel darkens to the Counting Owl
winding the curse of his father's ruin.
Now a shadow lengthens upon me.

My Son

Listen to the thriced.
Then is deliverance yours, the Owl become
gracious, the tyrant stopped in his shadow
and the infidel turned, if from bad to worse.

Leonardo di Boccardo
Conversaciones e Silenzio

FOREWORD

Before you lies a book of truths, and I start with a very peculiar one: I do not know the author of this work. Not even his or her name.

From internal evidence of an emotional intelligence and refinement of sensibilities that could hardly be masculine, I thought at first the author to be a woman. However, based on textual and stylistic similarities to another work entitled *The Weaver Fish*, and the crass transparency of attempted subterfuge, I now incline to believe this is the writing of A B C Darian in masquerade as an anonymous recluse.

Whatever the case, by some entwinement of circumstances beyond my understanding and a natural ineptitude for tactical avoidance, I find myself in multiple roles as that person's literary agent, power of attorney, editorial correspondent, and briefly his *nom de plume*. Even more onerously, the responsibility has fallen on me to excite in total strangers, by means of my following remarks, a compulsion to continue reading until the last veracious full stop.

How should I do that? At least I have prepared conscientiously, by reading the manuscript five times. Forward quickly, forward slowly, once aloud, once backwards, and once upside down (a convent skill, never explained). Five times I entered his dissenting universe, where every fact seems fallibly familiar and every falsehood impossibly erased. Only once before has this reviewer's frocked composure been so tested by the reasoned sensual. (When Monsignor Papaduomo visited our

Order to speak on ‘Constructs of Celibacy’, and remained at the abbey as tutor-in-residence.)

If, like me, you prefer to know what a book is about before committing to read it, I shall tell immediately. This is the account of a century-long vendetta; true, tragic, and so transcendent in its special evil that the Inferno itself was visited on a small frontier town in America. It is a record of generational human misfortune and ambiguous redemption, unequalled for malice and tenacity in the whole miserable world history of feuding families.

But it is so much more. Informative asides are unexpectedly grammatical, or arithmetical, sometime crustacean, sometime chemical, aeronautical, oceanic, theological, or ambivalently poetic.

I give examples: Here, in a discreet footnote to an unexceptional endnote in a commonplace appendix, you are confided the identity of the Supreme Being ... Learn the true number of the Trinity ... Expose Luciferans secreted in your family ... Why is the Circular Sea so shaped? ... Know what crabs think upside down in z-bends ... Who first thought of zero? ... What are Satroit’s tenses? ... Break out of the Couplet Prison using only the power of thought ... Why is the Inferno hot? ... Where will you find a Secret Chord? ... What is Theta Collapse? ... How do waitpersons vanish? ... Return from the dead ...

Yet all the time we are never distant from the sickening criminality of the beautiful Regan Mortiss, her executive killer known as Glimpse the prospector, and a witless half brother codenamed Haberdash. Nor, we can be thankful, are we far from the moral certitude and discerning ruthlessness of Richard Worse, opposing them.

Every modern chronicler of Ferende history, Dr Darian included, has observed that nothing should surprise us about that country. Even so, I was intrigued by the geological marvel of volcanic josephites. Nor could I anticipate the terrifying events that unfold deep inside the Medallion Caves. Or the

astounding scientific and anthropological findings concerning Rep'huselans, the presumed Neolithic ancestors of today's Ferendese, who left their people's likeness memorialized in sacred caverns unknown to posterity until now.

I am aware that anglophone readers, and Westerners generally, lack a familiarity with the Ferendes that historically they enjoy with Singapore, say, or Hong Kong. There are many reasons for this, not the least being revolutionary tumult that has regularly punctuated the sham tranquillity of civic repression. Nor, geopolitically, does that nation sit restfully on earth, being centred as it is in the South China Sea over inestimable hydrocarbon prospects openly coveted by a rapacious, expansionist and militarist near neighbour.

Nevertheless, I feel I have done my homework here as well. Earlier this year I visited the parish of St Alonzo's in Madregalo where, in my capacity as a former abbess, I was invited to address their deconsecration working party. This was an opportunity to learn more about Ferende culture, meet with theologians, and venture far into the suburbs to hear about ordinary life under their new and mysterious monarch, Prince Arnaba.

Of course, for the academically curious, the main excitement out of the Ferendes is not to do with the Shuffler, or liquid-core geodes, or Stone Age roadworks. It is about language. And the world's foremost authority on birdsong linguistics, Nicholas Misgivingston, happens to base his swint field studies at the Cambridge-administered Language Diversity Initiative research station in that country's remote Joseph Plateau. In this volume, you will find the latest science expertly summarized, along with informal reflections by Dr Misgivingston and unpublished conjectures about the swint's thricing behaviour, multilingualism and capacity to count.

All this, I know, would be enough to draw you in; but wait! For those with the courage to embark, there is offered a chaperoned journey through the underworld in the company

of American poet Monica Moreish. Hailed the Dante of our era, her acutely observed travelogue rendered in elegant cantos has enabled our own author to provide in the present work a modernized, practical and English cartography of Hell, highlighting previously unknown dangers and recommending realistic strategies for escape.

You have opened your personal book of change; now it dares you into destiny. But be warned: *This work contains implicit language.* (And some explicit.) It is safely read and internalized only by the sound in mind and pure of soul. If you are one amongst those, perhaps with ambitions to outwit Satan and even aspirations to immortality, take seriously our nameless author's prescription, which is to study probability and the geometry of circles. Also, do as I have: read his book five times.

Magdalena Letterby

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1 TWICING BREAD

DANTE, ARIZONA. 1877

Keff leaned forward, squinting to read, one hand combing his horse's mane.

'Tom Worse, Baker. All ya k-neads met. What's k-neads mean, Rigo?'

'Jesus, Keff, ya dope, it says needs, spelled wrong. Smells good. Get's a loaf.'

Keff stayed mounted, slightly standing in the stirrups as he called loudly, 'Baker!'

A man stepped from the shadowed interior; he was wearing a blue-white striped long apron and a black bandanna scarf. He picked flour from his hands as he spoke. 'The name's Worse.'

'Hey Rigo. He dressed like a butcher. You wanna meat loaf? Could be worse.'

Keff folded over in mirth, recovering just enough to demand, 'Get the man a loaf, and I mean bread, mister.'

Worse looked at Keff unresponsively, then at Rigo, who returned a cold stare.

'I was a butcher once,' said Worse. 'Miss it, somehow. Miss the blood.'

Rigo's expression didn't change. 'What side was you, baker? Where was you butcherin'?'

'What's that to you? War's long gone.'

'Shut your mouth, baker. No one answers back to Mr Rigo.'

Keff's flare of temper made him tense in the saddle. His

horse felt it, moving sideways nervously. Worse read the animal, and the rider, and ignored them.

‘Side of principle, where I could find it. Butchering mongrels, where I could find them. Service of humanity generally.’

Worse glanced at Keff, then back to Rigo. ‘Reckon I missed some.’

Their gaze was locked for a few seconds, interrupted by Keff.

‘Mister, folks die from passing insults. You wanna die in a fleck of a town called Dant?’

‘Dant-tay, Keff,’ Rigo shot at him irritably.

‘Like the Inferno, Keff. That’s where the Host gets baked.’

Worse turned back into the shadows, re-emerging with a wrapped loaf. He approached Rigo on the side away from Keff, and passed him the bread.

‘I call this loaf a twicing. Enough for you both. That’ll be a dollar.’

Rigo took the bread and looked at Keff, as if to an interpreter.

‘Baker, nobody pays a dollar a loaf. And Mr Rigo, he don’t pay nothing. You know who Mr Rigo is? Hey, baker?’

‘I know. He’s a Mortiss brother. I’ve seen a reward poster. Only, up close he’s even uglier than an artist can draw without dying. That’s a half-dollar for the bread, half for delivery. No credit.’

Keff stared at Worse, shocked. Then, deciding they were dealing with a simpleton, he began to laugh again. Worse was looking steadily at Rigo, who pulled sharply on a strap, causing his horse to round on Worse, snorting loudly. Worse didn’t recoil, instead reaching up and stroking the mare’s face, speaking softly. In return, the horse nuzzled, but Rigo pulled her away with the left rein.

‘So that’s a dollar, or the bread returned, or I’ll take the horse in lieu, if that’s your preference.’

‘Go to hell, baker.’ Rigo tore at the bread with rotten teeth,

and spat a mouthful towards Worse.

‘That doesn’t qualify as returned. Now it’s a dollar or the horse,’ said Worse.

Rigo placed the loaf against the horn of his saddle, freeing his hand to hover above a right gun holster.

‘Now, mister. I’ve killed better men for lesser talk. You get back to the kitchen, you hear me? I’ll take the bread by way of apology.’

‘I’ll take the dollar by way of payment.’

Rigo straightened in his saddle.

‘There’s another payment I like to make, baker. I call it a bullet.’

Worse reached up to stroke the mare.

‘No way that would cover expenses. I’d need to take the belt-full, in fairness.’

Keff required time to take in Worse’s response, then burst into laughter. He was silenced by a glare from Rigo, and quickly recovered his role.

‘Baker, no one talks back smart to Mr Rigo. You upset Mr Rigo, you upset the brothers. And the Mortiss brothers, baker, they don’t forgive and they don’t forget. You got family, baker?’

Worse ignored him, whispering horse words to the mare but looking at Rigo, who was the first to break the silence.

‘Know what I think, baker? We’re gonna turn our beasts and ride away, with the bread, with the dollar, with the horse, and less one bullet if you raise objection.’

‘And here’s what I think,’ said Worse. ‘You turn away, get yourselves shot as thieving mongrels. I take the dollar, the horse and the cartridge belt for my trouble. You get the bread and a pauper’s burial, and the town benevolent fund has the leftovers.’

‘You telling me you shoot customers? That ain’t good business.’

Rigo’s eyes were darting around the shopfront, assessing his risk, checking for witnesses.

‘I’m selective, obviously. Just uncivil folk like yourselves, to keep up the bakehouse tone. And discouraging non-payers makes sense because it cuts losses and simplifies bookkeeping, which is definitely good business. Plus it’s effective deterrence. Plus it eliminates reoffenders. Whole of Dante knows. You should have come inside and read the conditions of purchase. Pay or die, in summary.’

‘Fuck you, baker,’ said Keff. ‘Kill him, Rigo.’

‘Think I might just do that,’ said Rigo slowly, eyes now fixed on Worse. He backed his horse up a few paces, testing the situation. It offered Worse a clearer view of Keff, but he spoke to Rigo.

‘Your mare’s uneven shod on the right foreleg. Be tender before long.’

‘You saying you’re a farrier now, baker?’ Keff’s tone was mocking.

Worse answered without looking at him. ‘I keep a forge alight, out back. All part of Dante’s inferno services. Just don’t try raising a gallop, or she’ll fall lame.’

‘You mind your bad mouth over my mount, mister,’ said Rigo.

Worse wrung his hands again, wiping flour onto the apron, at the same time loosening the tie at his waist.

‘That’ll now be two dollars, accounting for the delay and inconvenience, the expert veterinarian opinion, and the cost of conversation with the dimwitted across there.’

Keff looked stunned. Rigo continued staring, weighing up Worse. Eventually Keff found his place.

‘You got a big mouth for a baker, mister. Kill him, Rigo.’

‘I’m saying to you, baker, you make your peace real quick with the Lord, as there ain’t no preacher hereabouts gonna help you along with a prayer of the departed,’ said Rigo.

As if feeling the heat, Worse reached up to loosen his neck scarf, flicking it to the ground. Underneath was an ecclesiastical collar.

‘Preacher says the baker’s pure and deserving of Heaven. The

Lord tells the preacher two sinners on horseback will appear, each impossibly more stupid than the other, riding to the Inferno. The Lord wants only the horses spared. He's very particular: only the horses.'

Rigo and Keff stared at Worse.

'That'll be four dollars, being just two extra for the words of the Almighty.'

Rigo and Keff were silent.

Worse rubbed his hands together, then clapped, creating a small cloud of flour dust. 'There's something you may not know about flour.'

Rigo's right hand now rested within a fist length of his revolver. 'And what might that be, preacher?'

'Well, with all the understandable God-fearing nervousness and such, the shakes, the sweating and the like, it gives a better pistol grip on that lady-type pearl inlay you've got there.'

As he spoke, he casually pulled the apron sling forward over his head. 'I'd dust up my right hand, if I were you.'

Rigo's gun hand flinched slightly, and he moved it forward to rest on his thigh. Worse knew that he was drying his palm.

'You got a big mouth for a baker, mister. Kill him, Rigo.'

'You hear that, preacher? My friend here, who's a believin' man, finds the evil in your words deservin' of being shot, and I have to agree with him. Now you commune your last time with the Maker because from where I'm sitting I see two guns against the meek pickings of flour dough.'

Worse raised both hands in a sign of benediction.

'Behold the power of two. Now hear what the Lord says of sinners: In number is damnation, for the multiplicity expandeth wrong in the same measure it divideth good.'

'Kill him, Rigo.'

'Then for each among the many, his days to Judgement will become hours, even as the hours of his perdition will be made days.'

'You got a big mouth for a baker, mister. Kill him, Rigo.'

‘Well, preacher, the way I see it we still have the power of two guns against the God-speaking, hand-wringing impotence of one pastry-baking mortal,’ said Rigo.

‘Hear again the lot of sinners: The weakness of one will ever surpasseth the strength of another, wherefore the power of two bringeth the downfall of both.’

‘Kill him, Rigo.’

But Rigo had been thinking. His face turned even uglier as he smiled. ‘We don’t need to do that, Keff. We’re too smart to be wasted on the labours of killin’. Better we just get the law to help out with an official town hanging, courtesy of the local justice.’ Rigo lifted up the bread, displaying the missing bite. ‘What have we got? We was sold a defective product; extortion, threatening behaviour, impersonating a man of the cloth, talk of horse stealing. What’s the sheriff gonna say to all that?’

Rigo looked pleased with himself. He put the loaf back on the saddle, stealing a glance at Keff, who was grinning victoriously.

Worse’s left hand pulled his apron right down, exposing a right-sided gun holster, and a tin star on his lapel.

‘Sheriff’s going to say: Pay or die, mongrel.’

Keff jumped with surprise, his horse responding with a complaining snort. Rigo’s self-satisfied smile vanished.

‘That’ll now be eight dollars, to cover the humiliation of public disrobing, and time taken when the baker could be stoking the Lord’s inferno. Plus another eight for the sheriff’s impartial mediation. Plus sixteen in fees for the deeply considered jurisprudence determination in tort and mercantile law, as well as ongoing pastoral care from the preacher. Total thirty-two. For that you get complimentary flour dusting if the pearl feels damp. Judge Thomas M Worse will oversee collection of the dues and issue a receipt of the court.’

Worse held out his left hand for the money.

‘Fuck you, baker.’ This time it was Rigo; Keff had decided to stay out of the argument. ‘Now, we gonna turn our mounts and ride away from here. You’re not gonna shoot a man in the back,

being a sheriff and a preacher and a judge, are you?"

"Well now, you seem to have forgotten. First off, I'm a certificated mongrel killer. In that event, where the lead goes in depends on which way the mongrel happens to be running, and I say that's all his choosing."

"Kill him, Rigo. You can take him. Just kill him."

Rigo wasn't so sure. He dried his gun hand on the denim again. "You're saying we can't ride off, without getting shot front or back, unless we pay you thirty-two dollars?"

"Correct, but you're not keeping up with the invoicing. Sixty-four dollars, the advice of a mongrel butcher being highly priced around these parts."

"Kill him, Rigo. You gotta kill the fucker."

"Shut up, Keff. I'm thinking."

Again Rigo's hand wiped along his thigh.

"While you're thinking, I'm asking once only that Keff here slowly take his weapon and drop it to the ground, then dismount on the side I can see him, hands in the air."

"Now why would I do that, baker?"

"Because I'm arresting you for incitement of a felony, being soliciting a third party killing, as well as bad hygiene, general antisocial attitude and an unworldly ugliness sufficient to cause public alarm, all of which are in violation of town statutes. First the weapon, then get down."

Keff suddenly found himself a leading actor, and he wasn't used to it. He looked at Rigo, who continued staring at Worse. Keff reasoned that he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by repeating the crime.

"Kill him, Rigo."

But Rigo wasn't offering any comfort. He kept looking at Worse, and his right hand was now constantly wiping back and forward. Keff was left to find his own way out.

"Now what you gonna do if I just refuse, baker?" The voice lacked depth.

"Well, Keff, you're asking for your fortune told from a mongrel

killer right now, and you know his talk is very expensive. Can you figure out what that question might cost you, Keff?

‘Christ. Fuck you, baker.’

Keff’s right hand reached for his gun, but not slowly enough. Nor was it quickly enough. Before his weapon was completely drawn, he slumped forward in the saddle, his jaw anchored over the pommel and a point-45 bloodless roundel centred on his forehead.

The event took Rigo completely off guard. He turned to look at Keff and started, audibly catching his breath. Worse reholstered his gun.

‘Resisting arrest. Cursing a lawman. Attempted murder. There’s a sweet, uncomplicated judicial killing, I’d say, with a Churchman’s blessing and the aroma of fresh-baked bread. What could be kinder?’

Rigo was unable to see Keff’s head wound and couldn’t know where he was hit.

‘My friend needs a doctor, mister, plain as day. Call the town quack, for Christ’s sake. Get him some help.’

‘We’re humane and caring folk in Dante. Doc always attends a shooting.’

Worse reached to a rear pocket with his left hand, producing a stethoscope that he slung lazily around his neck. He tilted his head sideways and studied Keff quizzically.

‘Nothing I can do, sadly. I pronounce his life extinct. Cause of death: execrable depravity. An evocative final pose, you’ll agree; doubled up like that in homage to the twicing, I expect. Reverend, should you say some words?’

Worse muttered in Latin, hands clasped before him and eyes downcast. Then he looked up brightly.

‘Now, in the matter of payment. There’s sixty-four dollars arrears, plus another sixty-four in sheriff costs, attending physician’s comprehensive consultation, and the preacher’s solemn Bible talk customized to the unredeemed. Within that, there’s a one-off penalty for the final blaspheme which I

determine offensive to the Divinity as well as all bakers. There are also burial expenses for one, plus retainer for a second anticipated. I should say those interment fees have been generously discounted by the town mortician, on account of the corpse not being too messy, supplying its own transportation, and the economy of a two-for-one excavation. So that's one hundred twenty-eight dollars owing, cash only, or the horse in kind.'

Worse clapped his hands sharply in the manner of using a gavel. '*Res judicata*, Judge Worse presiding. Be assured the offer of flour *gratis* still holds.'

Rigo, though looking at Worse, seemed to be staring trance-like into the distance. He hadn't even seen the gun draw, it was so fast. When he spoke, it was emptily, without emotional presence.

'You're telling me you're the undertaker as well in this stinking town?'

'As the sign says, all your needs met. Temporarily. Funny thing is I'm a stand-in, but it's lie-down easy compared with baking.'

Rigo continued looking absently at Worse, only half listening, his mouth fallen open. He was trying to understand how one small misjudgement about a dollar could come to this. But his thinking was blunted, circling ineffectually around intimation, incomprehension, and irrelevancy.

'What happened to the undertaker?' he asked flatly.

'Appetite for bread beyond his means.'

Keff's horse suddenly sensed her deadweight. She snorted and bucked a little, shifting her rump away. The effect was to point Keff in Rigo's direction. What Rigo saw froze his spine: only a supremely confident gunfighter would make a single head shot under pressure.

'As I was saying, one hundred twenty-eight dollars. It's an exceptional loaf, being the staff of the Lord's own inferno. And, of course, you get to eat both ends of it now, blessed be Keff.'

Rigo spent the following seconds in a chill turmoil of indecision and resolve. All his life, the weapon at his side had served to settle conflict. Now for the first time, when he had no choice, it looked too hard.

His hand stopped rubbing, and Worse noticed.

'You might want to close your mouth for the afterlife,' Worse advised, 'it being sulphurous where you're headed.'

'You're one son-of-a-bitch, baker.'

Rigo was fast. His hand, so near to his gun at the start, had a grip of the pearl inlay, the barrel fully drawn from the holster and almost aligned. But his cold-sweated trigger finger wasn't yet closed on the steel when his head jerked back with the impact of Worse's shot. At the same time, his horse reared up in fright, flinging rider and loose kit backwards from the saddle.

Worse stepped forward to calm the mare, speaking in the same reassuring voice as before, holding the leather down firmly, stroking her face. He would care for her, reshoe her, and rename her. 'Twicing', perhaps, in recognition of the day's exchange: this beautiful, spirited animal for the loaf now settled in the Main Street dust before its buyer's sightless stare and gaping mouth.

An account of the gunfight is given in the *Dante Judgment Daily* of June 11, 1877, under the heading '**Incident at Bakehouse**'. It had been witnessed from an open second-floor window in a lodging house by one Miss Baker, seamstress, whose attention was drawn when she thought she heard her surname called. Two weeks later, an unnamed wit penned the epitaph:

Here lies one called Rigo Mortiss.
Drank like a hare but drew like a tortoise.
Couldn't shoot and couldn't spell
Funny how he's shot to Hell
Signing in with *Rigor Mortis*.

(Such crude and heartless parodies were common in the era.) In fact, the Mortiss grave would have been unmarked. The historic Boot Hill cemetery has itself long been buried, currently under a shopping emporium.

The hapless Keff is remembered only for a single utterance, because it proved prophetic, to the effect that the Mortiss brothers would never forgive and never forget. He was probably Kevin Dupain Fister, who was wanted in Hericho for horse stealing and multiple killings.

[Editor's note Readers are referred at this point to Appendix A. The author has advised that supplementary materials provided there ideally should be read concurrently with corresponding chapters in the text. Alison Pilcrow, UITA Press]