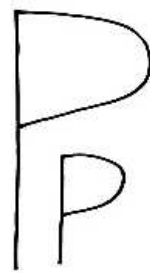


Merry Christmas All You Gods



By Rob Sherman



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*Merry Christmas, all you gods,
From your mountains and your logs.
The towns are warm, come sit down
Merry Christmas, all you gods.*

*Do you have presents for us?
Must we make a fuss?
Now we have enough,
For you love us, for you love us, for you love us.*

The boy's teeth filled his maisonette, percolating through the kettle and the sink, chambers filled with them until they were folded away like the legs of trestle tables. They stretched across the table as a light cloth, crumpling when the enamel pierced cupboards. He had to stop drinking to let the teeth pass from his cup. He had an awful feeling about them being there. It was something he had tried to alleviate, but they dipped themselves into everything. The juice would have to sit, severed in two, half in his belly and half in the carton, until later.

But the billboard brought something new, and for a while he would not have to hear the jingle. It was his country's new favourite jingle. From below, if he craned his neck while he balanced on the air-conditioning unit, he could see all the way to the top of it, the pixels warpish, the singing Korean boys looking spastic, like their mothers took faulty anti-histamines before birth. It was now showing an advert for dog chum, the model a stretched, smiling breed. A new song materialised in barked characters, one almost entirely in slang that he did not recognise. A rap video for dogs.

“Hey! Lord Priest!”

He was already in his robes, and huffed in his pills with the rest of the juice. It was automatic now, like his mouth was a coin slot; eight green, two red. Eight green, *tinkle tinkle tinkle*, two red, *tankle, tankle tankle*. So goes the bells. He took up his wand, and the smaller of his two hats, said a quick, clapped prayer to the gods of cancer and buboes, and went downstairs.

From your mountains and your logs.

The cycle was complete.

The black man stood rooted before the Holy Gate, gazing up at it, jingling coins in his pocket. The snow smeared up the sides of buildings like relieved beer foam, rusted and moulded with fume dust, spit, and crusts of fat from the restaurant above. Certain birds made their nests with spit, and there was an urge in him to do so that disappeared. The pillars of the overpass hummed softly, giving off a slight kinetic. The vending machine was missing a few votives and amulets; neighbour boys, stealing from the Dispensary Shrine to fuel childhood. The cycle was complete. He waved his wand in greeting. The man jabbered at him, excitedly, as soon as he stepped off the porch.

“You seen the guy?”

“Excuse me?”

“The guy.”

“Which guy?”

“On the overpass.”

“No. I was upstairs.”

“He's saying he's going to split himself in two.”

“What?”

“Like a fucking amoeba! He was jogging on the overpass, apparently, and is standing there in little pink, neon shorts.”

“Why is he in little shorts?”

“Because he's jogging. And he just stopped, and he's shouting to all the cars going past that he's going to split into two people, just because he can. What an amazing guy.”

“That seems stupid.”

“It's amazing.”

“Good morning, by the way.”

“Hey!”

The man stepped through the Holy Gate, rubbing it in the same place as he always had. Soon there would be splinters and lawsuits. He would have to time it right.

“I... I need... maybe a size twelve? Pink, if you have them.”

“It's Christmas.”

“They all gone?”

“Yep.”

“Just my luck. Got any size twelves?”

“In Melon or Sunrise Mango.”

“No shit, Mango?”

“Three left.”

“Hell, I’ll take Mango, then.”

The man had an inner ear condition that had quickened into pillared candles down onto his jacket. The jacket cost nine-hundred dollars; the tag had been left in, the numbers gone over in Sharpie. He held out his Yen.

“And a little pick-me-up.”

The priest folded back his robes, and knelt in front of the man. His head bowed, he began to chant in Classical Japanese, a language that had not been spoken widely since the Vikings first invaded Lindisfarne.

“What are you saying?”

“A blessing.”

“What kind?”

“The kind you asked for.”

Finished, he stood, and went to the machine. He had polished its façade every day. He saw himself in the reflection yet ignored it with purpose. The products were hidden under a sheen he had brought up with time and work, but he knew the how to make the locks work. They were gilded onto his brain. He bowed, swiftly. He felt the webbing of his sides mesh and buckle, and thought how fat he must look from behind, how thick and waxy *his* ears! And then he remembered the robe, and its flowing concealment. He stood, clapped twice, and thumbed the eldritch combination. He sung from his throat as the machine bleated and deposited the underwear into the snow.

For you love us, for you love us, for you love us.

The black man in red jogging shoes retreated with his prize, hooting thanks and bowing frantically as he ratcheted back up the road, a roller-coaster rolling back into Tokyo. The priest retreated from the cold, back into the apartment, drunk more juice, hid from the illumined teeth in his bedroom, and remembered, in looking at a photo from the film *Bambi*, stuck above his bed in an expensive frame, that his daughter was dead, *Bambi* had made him very sad, and that the ferret, the white one he had bought for her, was missing.

In 1984 his daughter had been born. It was not scandalous or even noteworthy for Shinto priests to bear children, and so she had been brought up in the seminary along with all the other bastard boys and girls, in the presence of great works and the mountain god. She was born with a defect, named for the man who found it, and her head was elongated and doughy, full of fluid, and she was slow to learn. She had special classes with the Shrine maidens, and liked trains and the sheep in the village. A fast line burrowed a separate cosmology along the back boundary of the

seminary, and she would listen through the bamboo, whilst eating pine sap greedily like honey, which retarded her further, and hunting for chinchillas, which she had heard were the softest animals in existence, and was convinced were living in colonies underground.

He had seen her three times a week, when duties permitted, and he would teach her broken bits of hymns and prayers. She would ask inane questions, picking at her own body constantly. He had resisted batting her hand away. She picked her teeth, her fingernails, her armpits, and her anus, shuffling uncomfortably like a dog in heat.

“It's too hot, Daddy.”

“I am fine.”

“Too hot.”

“Stop scratching, now.”

“I'm not itching!”

“Scratching. Sing this line again.”

“*Glorious and humble tree, must we worship thee?*”

“Just like that.”

“Is it like an Ent?”

“What is an Ent?”

“The tree. Is it like an Ent?”

“I don't know what an Ent is.”

“Ent, ent, ent ent ent!”

She became a shrine maiden, eventually, though he had a job at a laundromat arranged for when she became bored or started picking herself in temple. She arranged the lightning strips, the votives, and took patron's money. Everybody loved her. For her twentieth birthday he asked her what she would like, and she said that she would like a pet squid. Since she could talk she had liked squid, said that they were clever and could use telephones and had feet. When he had shown her a picture, had told her that they didn't have feet, she had disappeared to her room, shouting back that they kept their feet secret from humans, in case they became jealous.

She had settled for the ferret instead, saying that it looked like a little white fox, and as all the foxes were dead she could not have one. The next day he had shown her a skein of foxes wrapped around a dumpster, siphoning protein, and she had said nothing.

He hobbled between pipes, cans, rusting cavities in his washing machine like organs or a cavern system in France. The ferret bent, and whipped, and curled; it was an inhabitant of space. But it was nowhere to be found now. He had disassembled his rice steamer, an ancient machine that looked like a ship, with chimneys and engines. In the grease cup, right at the centre of it, he recovered a small scrap of paper left there by his father that read “help”.

He found his coat, dragging it over his robe, relishing the fibrous sparks of the velour and the cotton set in Velcro lightning. His shoes were canvas, American and covered in stars, and he descended to the street again, feeling a pile-up on the overpass as the vibrations punched the tenement.

The little shit had to go missing on this day. Of every day of the year, after constant reliability, its warm streak of colour nestling under the vegetable drawer for as long as he could remember, it had gone. Had he left the door ajar to go to the shrine? Or the window? Had it been drawn to the billboard, the breathing waves of coral light, the thermoluminescence of teeth? It was gone, and he had to go to the docks. There was snow coming, and he had to go to the docks.

A road studded with papooses of cat's eyes swept elegantly up to the overpass. The great vibrating pillars continued towards the sea, and against one someone had painted a mural. It showed Fuji rearing with a large, cartoon smile. One eye was chipped away, and someone had given it an eyepatch. It sheltered a playground for children, and a great, white hollow whale, with abacus between its missing teeth, sunk slowly into the mounting drift. He began to hobble. As he had got older, and his walk had changed, become more jerked and painful, he fancied that no-one apart from him could tell. The length of his robe and the shortness of his steps made him look as if he was trundling on robotic tracks, an alien robot in a world of vending machines. A smaller model depressed against a shut boutique, a rival, not blessed as his was. It sold sweets and tiny animatronic tigers that purred like cats when you opened them, driven by a tiny motor hitting a piece of tin. He had attempted to buy one for his daughter once, but it had opened to reveal a pornographic scene, the woman young, the man old. She had remarked that they looked as if they were going to the park. She had loved it, and it had taken him five years to get it back from her.

The overpass turned, led to the main road and the skyscrapers, funnelling its sound that way. In the quiet, that u-turn of sound, he began screeching. It seemed pointless to begin quietly; the animal was nearly deaf. He still felt stupid.

“Eee, Shinkansen! Shiiiiinkansen!”

He loved her and missed her, but what fucking idiot named a ferret after a train? He must look a fool. He called again, at intervals, turning into roads. It would be frozen, probably, by now, concealed until the New Year, when the melt water would reveal it, curled around a lamp-post, stiff as an earring.

He had known a man who had lived on this road, the road that led out to the sea. The houses were dark, squat and brown, filigreed with an ivy dirt of old phone lines and antennae, removed and replaced with better versions. A door was open, and he saw a man in a nappy, fiddling.

The houses rose and became flats, thrusting upwards and outwards; in places the apartment blocks were wider than the houses, listing slowly with the weight of books and pipes and

instruments and coffee. His shoes were entirely sodden, the canvas heavy with melt, and he began to bring his feet out of the snow in huge goose-steps, insults of wind parting his robe and tickling his crotch.

The towns are warm, come sit down

Merry Christmas, all you gods.

There was no billboard, this time. The flats rose on either side, their bases plugged with bars and small gambling parlours. A honking of human noise, and light, drove him down a side alley. Bicycles were stacked for trash against the adjacent wall, and pink light, like the light through an ear lobe, illuminated a gaggle of transsexuals applying make-up and chasing each other in the slush. They spoke of Lindsay Lohan and the price of Angel Pads, and mourned the death of Patrick Swayze; two of them performed the pottery scene from *Ghost*, and the one behind attempted to give his partner a reach-around. He shrieked and leapt into the night. They noticed the priest pass, as he hoped they would.

“You love us, you love us, you love us!”

One young man stepped forward. His face was scrubbed clean of make-up, a rebellion against his peers, and his huge fake breasts were contained in a scarlet bra, two lion's head facing upwards, breast-feeding. He jiggled them four times, as if four were important, and shouted at him,

“Hey, Lord Priest! For my wishes!”

He wished them a Merry Christmas, and they began an arm-wrestling tournament. The alley swept on, down to the coast; there had been a bakery down here that he used to visit. His daughter had liked Danish pastries, though he hated to buy them for her; they made her fatter and he always thought that they looked like open wounds. She used to quack, though, there was no other word for it; that rasping wetness as she opened her throat and found it full of the mucus her condition pushed down from her brain. She quacked when she had seen the bakery. The neon shop, casting the pink light, had been here then, as well; “L'Dungeon Aryien”, a Swastika hung in the window with a Buddha beneath it, in repose beside minuscule rocks wreathed with chemically-achieved waterfalls. The fat owner, fat apart from his fingers that were like a woman's and manicured, had been drawn out by the dancing of the trannies, and looked shocked to see him.

“Merry Christmas, Lord Priest.”

“Merry Christmas.”

“What are these deviants doing?”

“I don't know, really.”

“They're not annoying you, are they?”

“No, I'm just passing through.”

“Passing through.”

“I'm going for a walk.”

“Are you very busy?”

“I'm just going down to the sea.”

“Can I ask for your help, first?”

“I'm afraid I'm quite busy.”

“Of course, I'm very sorry, it won't take a minute.”

“I can't, I'm sorry, I have to be somewhere.”

“You would be doing us a huge favour. It's Christmas.”

“I'm not Santa.”

“No, but you can't be that busy. Not at Christmas.”

He looked at the man, and the beckoning men-women, and the pink sign, the glow of the body, and stepped through the door with the fat man and his painted nails.

*

The man and his partner, together, looked like an Arabic number. He was clean, scrubbed with vellum and goopy wax like a new-born child, though his companion was spindly and coated in a layer of porous grease. The shop smelt of vinegar and Vac-Clean. Rows of DVDs and prophylactics were arranged in geometric patterns covered the counter, a tiny cubby that they fitted snugly inside, like stacked plates, and the fat man would not talk to him until he was past this divide.

“Thank you so much.”

“It's okay, what can I help you with?”

“Are you okay?”

“I'm okay. Why?”

“In here.”

“I'm fine, lad.”

“Okay.”

“What is wrong?”

“Well, it's them. They've been fighting again.”

He pointed to a Buddhist shrine tucked between a pair of red shower curtains. A Buddha rested horizontally, still relaxed and in meditation, next to a jar of chrysanthemums and a triumphant statue of a fox. The fox faced away, into the side of the shrine. Several of the lightning strips and amulets had been ripped away, leaving paper tags covering the rough wood. He was reminded of his father's face after shaving, the dabs of paper held by cloyed blood. He produced a handkerchief and wiped his face laterally.

“They've been fighting?”

“I came down to open up, a week ago now.”

“And they were like this?”

“I didn't touch them. But we get no customers now, we haven't sold anything since.”

“It is Christmas.”

“So?”

“Do you sell much at Christmas?”

“You'd be surprised.”

He moved towards the shrine, reaching out to touch the Buddha. He felt the air withdraw as the fat man and his silent partner inhaled, and in one movement he picked up the Buddha and moved the fox back into its position, facing forward, equidistant from the flowers.

“I can do a blessing, if you need it.”

“We would be really grateful. We've got bills to pay, man.”

He produced his wand, and knelt in front of the altar. He began to chant in his old, dimly remembered verses again; he did not know what the words meant. He assumed that he was asking the god of the apartment block, the god of wood, the god of concrete, the demons of sex and lubricant, to bring the shop success. He attached new, prim amulets, and lit dragon fruit joss. The fat man spoke to his friend, who called him 'Chinky' and played with a cup and ball behind the till. He heard the buzz of applause on an American sitcom. The fat man packed crates behind him, and laughed at a joke with an English punchline. The priest felt his foot vibrate, and he fretted, in a moment, about frostbite and gangrene. He turned around, and realised he was touching a large, rubber saddle, that hummed and whinnied softly. An appendage flapped on top of it. The fat man was running a squeegee around the seat.

He began to stand, the blessing finished, and as he clapped he heard a chirrup, like a mobile phone or the door to the shop opening. A bolus of white shot along the back of the shrine, and craning his head under the tiny roof he found the ferret, Shinkansen, curled into a doughnut, shivering and dusted with the ghost of incense.

He swore twice, loudly, and stood, clutching the ferret, and turned. The men laughed.

“You a magician, too?”

“This is mine. He must have ran in here from the cold.”

The thin man watched him, and stuck a finger in his mouth.

“If it's shit anywhere, you're paying.”

“It's clean. It's always been clean.”

The fat man held out his hands.

“Thank you so much, man. Do we owe you anything?”

“I'm a priest.”

“Of course! I'm a real fucking idiot. Have a great Christmas!

“You as well.”

They turned back to their packing and their TV show, and he saw the shower curtains move, as if rustled from within, when he stepped back into the trannie's forecourt. They could not be bothered to shout; their flesh was goose pimpled and they returned home to their mothers and fathers as he exited.

He faced the sea, the ferret sniffing and gorgeous white against his sagging, grey chest, when the youngest tranny, he with the biggest breasts, rotated and squealed, his voice straining to break.

“For you love us, for you love us, for you love us!”

*

The road from the “L'Dungeon Aryien” widened into two lanes, and slipped downhill. The curve disappeared into the tops of sparse trees and the roofs of houses, and though the sea was visible, it was crunched and hard, immovable in the distance.

He would go to her. He would bring her Shinkansen, and go to her. Tonight was the best night. She had loved Christmas. She insisted that Saint Nicholas was a God, tall and bearded, a Viking. He had told her about Lindisfarne, about the skewering of Christians and the pillaging of churches. She had asked if Saint Nicholas was invading Christmas. If he was keeping everyone safe from Jesus. He had turned on the television in response. *Bambi* was on again, and she began crying instantly. She had been twenty-one. Four days later he had lost her, and thought of something bloated with pine sap and eaten by chinchillas, their fur coated in it. But it was snowing, and she had run down to the sea, and that had been that. There was a funeral, ashes, the tide moving out, and long sickly seaweed sweets, black as sealant, rusting and pickling on the plates of the seminary hall.

The road did not level out until it was quite near the sea. The new docks, built on artificial islands, were blinking into power on the other side of the bay, and in the newness and their sparkle he felt the oxidation of the old, a process that ate until it was full, grinding aluminium over the balconies of bachelor suites. He had arrived in a square, a rare sight in Tokyo nowadays. It was perhaps the impression of an ancient hamlet, pressed into the ground and petrified as chairs and tables were set out for Italian cuisine. The lamps were heated, and the snow had slunk into service hatches and doorways. Young couples sat outside a bar, drinking beer and eggnog, watching him. A man, seeing his friends and running to them, nearly knocked him down, and spoke to him as if he had been dead for some time. He waited by a fountain, ripped from Venice and pasted down by the

bar's owners. He was caught in a drift of the young.

“Hey! Hey, Lord Priest!”

He heard the title again. Christmas and New Year is a hard time for priests to leave their homes; everyone wants something blessing; votives replaced, filled up, over the year, with residue, their cooking oil and the rinds of limescale. One could hardly ever get anything done.

The shouting, though, came from up the hill, and through the fug of lights he could see a short man, a man he knew very well, who often came to his shrine, though he had never bought anything. His offerings were placed in the coin return tray.

“What are you doing here?”

The man looked like a cross between a clown and an ancient fertility goddess; he barely reached the priest's stomach, but there was something warm and full about him. He was a baby wrangler, a term the man's ex-wife had often used. Tokyo Broadcasting employed him to hold babies on film sets; when they couldn't use a model, or required the real screams of a child, they brought him in to look after them between scenes. Their mothers were not allowed on set for reasons of security. The babies, he guessed, liked being close to the ground, and were attracted to round objects, things without edges. You would be hard-pressed to find an edge on the baby-wrangler. He slipped along as if under the influence of a different pull, a gravity underwater. The only part of his job he didn't enjoy, he had said, was when the director required him to make the babies cry on cue; he had been told to give them a quick pinch, but he could not bring himself to do so. Instead, he would open their swaddling to a breeze, and, the warmth gone, they would start bawling.

“I'm going for a walk.”

“Down here? You rarely leave the overpass.”

“It's nice and warm down here.”

“Too many students. Let me buy you a drink.”

The ferret was still asleep, its gums lightly resting on his nipples. He hoped it wouldn't wake. He smelt peanut chicken, and the growth and broiling of beer. Once, at the seminary, he had found the chicken hutch door wide open, a red mouth. The ferret had shot out, his white creamed with blood, a long snaking tongue.

It began to snow.

He followed the baby-wrangler inside, willing the ferret to stay asleep, even though the smell of meat was around him. He heard the curmudgeonly sound of the balsa wood in the sticks contracting and grumbling as they were thrown on the grill. The bar was called The Hutch, and this seemed like a sign.

All the normal men that sit in bars on such a day were there; interested in their own fingers,

their arms, the hair around their toes; their drinks and food were just fuel. A very odd game was being played in the sun, broadcast on the television. The barman looked at him like a long-lost uncle. He had big, watery eyes, that constantly leaked; he cleaned mugs. The baby wrangler forced two chairs from the xanthum-coated floor, and motioned him down.

“What do you want?”

“A cup of ice.”

“Are you joking?”

“No, some ice, if that's OK.”

He turned and ordered drinks and chicken, before the priest could protest. The men around the bar seemed to begin a Mexican wave for him, listlessly flapping into the air, and back to their own suppurating bodies. One was squeezing his own eyeball.

“Merry Christmas, Lord Priest!”

“Bless my balls!”

“Show some fucking respect.”

“Buzz off!”

“Fool!”

“Arsehole!”

“Vagabond!”

He watched the men fight, caressing each other's sore bodies, with no interest. He could hear the song again; a choir of students had struck up, outside, and the barflies were dragging their weeping behinds into the square, and its false, angular heat, to listen.

For you love us, for you love us, for you love us.

They seemed to repeat these lines forever, before the baby wrangler turned back to him with a tall glass of ice, a pitcher of beer, cold chicken and a smile from the crying barman.

“He says that he is honoured that you want a glass of his ice, with so much outside.”

“Tell him he is welcome.”

“He charged you three-hundred yen, though.”

“That's fine.”

“He also asked if you can bless the bar.”

“I cannot.”

“Why?”

“It's Christmas. And I don't have my things.”

The barman walked over, a mug permanently grafted onto his hand, the other veiled by a stained cloth, a nun puppet.

“Please, Lord Priest.”

"I really cannot, I cannot stay long."

"Will you come back in the New Year?"

"Perhaps."

"I will kick those cunts out."

"Excuse me?"

"The one's insulting you. No-one gives a priest trouble in my bar."

"You are very kind. You needn't."

"I do."

He spent the next ten minutes showing the priest his shrines, the votives of his dead wife asking for more love, and his tattoo of a raven, picked out at a heavy metal concert in Stockholm. The priest tried to pretend to watch the sport on the television, though it was clear he did not even know which sport it was. Finally the barman left, and the baby wrangler turned, scratching his neck, his beer finished.

"That raven had three legs."

"The one on his arm?"

"Yeah. I was looking. It's like those elephants, those pictures of elephants and horses. You have to try and tell how many legs it has. It had three, he was so proud of it."

"Well, you can tell him."

The barman was busy cudgelling one of his more leprous customers with great aplomb and love. The priest could tell that they cared for each other very much, more than they would say.

"How's work?"

"Weird."

"Oh?"

"They're allowed on set now."

"The mums?"

"Yeah. There's about two more, every week. One of them blew a transformer on the fancy new camera rig yesterday, the director couldn't even shout at her."

"Would she sue?"

"They all would. They've got no practicality. No love for the work."

"It isn't work."

"For them?"

"For them, yeah."

"I know."

"What'll you do?"

"Get fired. Eat crisps. Find a new job."

“Doing what?”

“Teaching.”

“Kids?”

“Yeah, kids. I've got a Sex Ed permit.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Everyone's cosmopolitan, now.”

They ordered more drinks, and the chicken was safely in their bellies. He worried that the ferret was dead, but he felt it nip at the skin tags in his armpits, and he was satisfied.

“How's the little one? How old is she, now?”

The choir had finished the song that seemed to be following him, and people were heading back into the bar, their voices mingling with the weeping webs of the barman's throat, the Caribbean sport roaring quietly on the television, and the robotic din of the baby wrangler's fingers on his glass, still full of ice, mullioned with beer.

“She's twenty-three.”

*

He had avoided the barman like a large spider, saying a quick prayer at his shrine, and as he shook the baby-wrangler's hand he stole a few strips of chicken, weaning the ferret at his breast. It was awake, but comfortable.

He had passed an old control barrier, at some point, for there were tracks set into the ground that extended into the warehouses like footprints of wheelchairs, and the cranes rotted in their rootings above him. The hissing bleach of bay noise came at him, washing him out, his niches clear.

This used to be where they brought in fish. Huge trawlers, the size of city banks, flopped their oesophaguses open and whales catapulted into the sun. Creamy mink, huge and hilarious in the sunshine, out of the water; reams of brill, sturgeon, the odd goblin fish bumbling forth like a tramp in a shopping centre. Anglers came first, the last to be caught at the lips of undersea trenches, their illumination failing as their synapses curled into dryness. Squid, the size of pocket watches and producing electricity that sparked with distress, slipped oblivious over the corpses of albino sunfish, the odd bullied bird. These were all flung back into the sea, their flesh poisonous, before the belch of mackerel, bream, cod and tuna; the stench of them was unbelievable. They soaked up the sun and left it cooking in their hollows, and as they were pelted to the concrete they all seemed to exhale, once, sending carbon dioxide out to be radioed into ozone.

She had brought him here. He had had no desire to come; it was far from the seminary. They had to take a Metro and a ferry, chugging across the bay. But the guards had let her in with a smile

and a brief code into walkie-talkies. They often had bought sorbet, its lack of body disturbing to him, though she had gurgled and snatched his. Every flavour tasted the same.

There had been a bench, certainly installed at some point; before they had sat with their backs against a warehouse, staring out to sea. At the age of seventeen or eighteen she had chased the shadows of cranes lurching between the cool of the buildings, and had told him that she had finally learnt how to do maths. He had asked her times tables, and she had broadly been correct. He asked her if she was ever bullied, or if the shrine maidens had ever pushed her. She often went to bed with cut knees, but she had smiled and guffawed at him.

She would always sit by him when the catch came in. She hid behind his arm as the mutant, bastard load was dropped, and then disposed of, yet always giggled when the edible fish were thrown, fitting, onto the baked iron. They were scooped off by men in yellow overalls, and there was always a thick jelly, the sweat and slime of ten thousand fish, leaking in a wide oval across the yard. Every single time this happened, she had strained to stand.

“No. It's dirty.”

“It's not!”

“It is, you'll get sick. Can't you smell it?”

“It's cream!”

“It's not, it's icky. Icky-sicky.”

“It'll make me pretty.”

“No.”

“Like the stuff you get in tubs.”

She was frightfully strong, though she had never succeeded in getting up before a man in orange overalls had brought over the gargantuan hose, already dripping and snorting, and in one sweep brushed the oil and slime and mucus back into the sea.

He dragged Shinkansen up and out of the robe. It was still sleepy, and rinds of eczema hung about its chin. He tickled them off – it was happy. It smelt for more chicken, seemed to relish his grey flesh, the sniff of aftershave, grape juice, cleaning products and mango dust that he produced. He counted the hairs on his chest.

The bench was gone, and he did not trust his body to bring him back up if he sat down against the cold warehouse door. He walked across the slime square, but it was rough and dry now. The dock was straight, for miles; he saw many openings between warehouses, like his own. Behind sat the dark hills, pricked with neolithic squares of heat. The smoke from the overpass fire drifted down and bobbed on the water. The hiss was louder, here, with no buildings to block it. He felt a spreading wetness, and stuck his hand swiftly down his top. Shinkansen had messed itself, and clambered out into the well of his hands, disgusted. It glowed blue in the halogen of the docks.

Looking down at the water he saw shards of coral, the heads of fish, the torso of a child's robot. He held it close, and it purred, and purred, and purred.

He noticed it had begun to snow again. He had thought that it never snowed by the sea, but moment by moment the tiny waves were filled with flakes before they melted, replaced by new ones. The light was filled with bits.

Merry Christmas, all you gods,

From your mountains and your logs.

He looked up. A Zeppelin passed a hundred metres above, transmuting the song into the ears of the drinking teenagers behind him. Its speakers turned, and played to the hills, and the woods, and the mountains of Japan.

He barely remembered the funeral, but one part had played over in his mind constantly; the seaweed sweets, and how much he had hated them. They had been popular, half-gone, but they had looked like they were coated with oil, and they were disgusting. Someone from the college had brought them, and they left great streaks on the plates, and he had washed them four times, and they were still there, and his daughter was in the bay, washed up against the rudders of yachts.

He curled his flat, barked fingers inwards around Shinkansen; it was like squeezing toothpaste. He lifted it up to his face.

“I thank you, Lord of rivers. Lord of the sea. Lord of waterfalls and fish and coral. Merry Christmas.”

He placed Shinkansen back into his robe, hitched up his skirts, and pissed into the sea. The arc flew further than ever, seeming to hit the low buildings of the entertainment district across the bay. He let the robes fall when he finished, and watched the froth float down towards the park along the coast. Shinkansen was asleep again, and his robe had dried in the empty air. He wanted more juice, and turned back through the snowdrifts to wait for another year, buying underwear for strangers.