



PONTARLIER IS OVERRUN WITH FISH.

A BSINTHE FISH

BY M. DAVID BLAKE

SCHRÖDINGER HAD ONLY a thought-box, with a hypothetical cat that may or may not have met a diabolic end therein. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, the superpositioned Schrödinger also contemplated butchering dogs, squid, butterflies, and rhinoceroses before settling upon the feline form. The many-worlds interpretation suggests that for every thought experiment Schrödinger carried out, another Schrödinger, separated by quantum decoherence, tested the practical implications of his work. And the relational supposition provides for a cat able to contemplate the small meteorite which might or might not obliterate Schrödinger in his tracks, and knock the top off the box.

The fish know nothing about Schrödinger. They know nothing of cats, although even a hypothetical cat would enjoy the delicacy. They do not know water. They do not know fish.

The fish swim inside a large, copper alembic. The alembic sits in a distillery, and the distillery is in Pontarlier.

Pontarlier is overrun with fish.

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Some have fins, and some do not. Some have scales, and tails, and eyes.

It is dark in the alembic. There is no reason for the fish to have eyes. The fish have no comprehension of darkness, so those with eyes keep them rather than plucking them out.

Some of the fish blink through gelatinous, transparent lids. There is no reason for the fish to have eyelids, either.

The fish swim in the distilled essence of white grapes, stirring

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE GALLAGHER

an infusion of anise, fennel, and wormwood.

In the dark, behind gelatinous eyelids, with fluid motion that may or may not carry through many worlds, the fish dream.

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For many, dreams are seen through a fish-eye lens. For some, the side of a single vessel equates to their window, while for others superimposed facets of cut glass and the curvature of adjacent bottles must combine to distort, twist, and fragment perception.

The fish have never seen a funhouse mirror. But then, why would they need to? It would be dull, and incomplete, compared to their dreams.

Dreams educate, and inspire. Schrödinger dreamt of the ridiculous mechanics involved in measuring atomic decay to trigger the release of a poison.

The fish dream of everything, and sooner or later they will even dream of Schrödinger's cat.

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The man who sits with the alembic has large hands. They are almost flippers. His eyes roll behind fleshy lids.

The man dreams of eating fish. He salts his bread, and dips it in oil, soaking up cracked peppercorns and rosemary.

A glass stands beside his plate, cut facets catching the soft candlelight. The facets sparkle with golden light, and a golden incision rings the glass at a carefully measured level.

Rising to the level of that careful measure, a colorless liquid rests, waiting. The surface belies a watery appearance, because it does not curve in any way the same measure of water might, under the same conditions. A single, narrow tendril of liquid clings to the side, as evidence of the slow, measured pour that filled it.

The fleshy lids narrow upon watery eyes, as the man settles a large silver instrument over the top of the glass. He thinks of the instrument as a spoon, although it more closely resembles the slotted spatula a child might use to serve a miniature slice of imaginary pie.

Pale fingers select a single cube of white sugar, which the man inspects, as if he was a jeweler examining a stone. He finds no imperfections worth noting.

After placing the cube on the flat surface of the spoon, he opens a thermos, the end of which he balances upon a wire stand. The thermos began this evening filled with ice, and what it contains now is still mostly ice. The thermos has a small opening, and a stopper valve.

As small not-frozen droplets saturate the cube, and then gather underneath an almost-spoon to drip into not-water, candlelight sparkles in watery eyes that continue to watch from behind fleshy lids.

The milky swirls that form beneath the surface are not *fee*. They are *poissons passionnés*, and they are beautiful.

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All through Pontarlier, the ritual continues. Some receptacles are cut glass, and others are crystal. Some are ornate, and others plain. One is a graduated cylinder, held by a chemist, and one a repurposed cutting vase, gripped tightly in an old woman's hand.

In many of these receptacles, the not-water is a brilliant *verte*.

In a good number, peridot tends toward olive. In each case, the green comes from the *chlorophylle* in a secondary grouping of herbs, macerated and steeped after the initial distillation.

The fish know nothing of this. Their eyes, as they awaken in each glass, either see *verte* (the elderly gardener-woman) or not-*verte* (the flipper-handed alembic sitter), and any unfiltered hue that breaches the milky swirl.

The fish dream.

The fish also have teeth.

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In a small apartment near the center of the city, a couple make love on a metal frame bed. They are not old, nor are they young.

In the next room, a black-and-white television plays the soft theme from an old sitcom about an American astronaut who finds a smoke-filled bottle. The smoke resembles the same milky swirls that recently filled two glasses, on the small table that lives in their kitchenette. It is slightly ironic to call the sitcom "old," because the couple were children when it first aired, and they do not apply the same concept to themselves.

The couple are experienced. They have been bitten by the fish many times, and frequently seen the parade of pink elephants with melancholy faces, and once even a dog that they both believed could almost talk, until they settled on ventriloquism as an explanation.

They do not see the fish. They do not even see the small cat that pads into their apartment, trailing damp paw-prints upon the linoleum.

The cat sees the fish, because they are *everywhere*.

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Beyond the distillery, thousands of candlelight dinners and assignations progress. In each glass that is filled, *blanche* or *verte*, milky swirls of fish open unplucked eyes, and add new sights to their dreaming. They remember into the alembic.

Within every diner or assignee swim fish. They bite and feed, and numb the lining of each stomach, and worm their way through snaking fibers toward an infinity of synapses. Each synaptic gap may or may not lead into many worlds.

The fish do not notice any gap. They swim across.

Inside a large, copper alembic in the distillery, the oldest dreaming fish ponder implications, while the youngest splash and play.

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Across the gap, fish circle and spin, as whirls beget whirls and many paths diverge. Some swim through and some beyond, and some cease altogether. Some are struck with awe, because the remembrance of dreams never took hold. Others are struck with familiarity, and comforted.

Nebulous potential is amorphous by design. Even filled with fish, a milky swirl is undefined. *Que sera, sido*.

The fish don't analyze whether they are superpositioned or decoherent, and frankly, they don't give a damn about quantum physics.

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Outside the alembic, a man who has finished his dinner sits and

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reads a story about God and irony, in translation. Although the man enjoys both the story and the writer, the punchline eludes him. He does not understand irony any more than he understands what a clothes press has to do with the concept.

He contemplates pouring another careful measure of not-water, and wonders whether it would be ironic to do so.

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Within a milky swirl, ensconced in *blanche*, uncounted nebulous droplets spin and interweave. At the edge of each, and groping toward the next, is a gap filled with synaptic potential. Gaps beget fish, and fish beget gaps.

Within a fish who sits by the alembic, reading a story in translation and pondering irony, swim other fish who whisper dreams. The dreams beget awareness, and awareness begets dreaming.

Flippers turn pages, and pour absinthe, and select cubes of sugar. Scales and tails flash within the milky swirl. Flashes coalesce, flaring and dying with regularity. Flippers contemplate God, and irony contemplates itself.

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Schrödinger's cat fishes within the alembic, much to his delight. The alembic is more pleasant than the box, if not as quiet. He brings just enough light to see. And why not? He is only hypothetical, and so is the light. It follows him in, by the tail, and illuminates the inside of the copper. Not-water reaches almost to

the top, so that the cat must stand upon the surface.

He does not sink, because it is filled with fins and scales and tails and eyes.

Schrödinger's cat frequently brings wet paws, and tiny, cold droplets of water make their way into the absinthe. Absinthe also frequently makes its way into the cat, which undoubtedly contributes to the feline's pixelated state.

As the cat observes, one milky swirl expands within the backdrop, much as any other ... but this one swirl is filled with stars, and for a single, all-encompassing moment, God is a dancing fish. ■

Over the course of three and a half decades, **M. David Blake** has been a Revolutionary War reenactor, a ditch digger, a troubleshooter, a gallery artist, a woodturner and a poet. He has run soundboards for live performances, done lost-wax casting, scooped ice-cream while serving as a barista, crash-tested software used by a significant portion of the entertainment industry and reassembled the shattered skull of a murder victim. He was asked to leave one college, graduated from two others, and in the process utterly flunked a course dedicated to the study of science fiction. Blake currently lives in Hillsborough, NC with his wife, their daughter, one geriatric cat, and several thousand books. His work has appeared in *Stupefying Stories*.

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