

All text in "The Philosopher's Corner" © Rich Norman and any other text in this paper attributed to the same, used by permission of and sole property of the author Rich Norman.

Here is a parable from my book, *The Black Mirror*.

The Black Mirror

Joseph was hollow but for his tears. He never wept, and so not since he was a child had he known such terrible fullness. He could no longer deny himself, and knew not what he was, or whose tears he cried. Like a wounded dog, he limped in a pitiful circle and could come no nearer the cause. He sat upon a bench in the wood, and placed his heavy head into his hands, and his tears fell into the earth. The earth drank them into itself, and knew his pain, for the earth knows itself, and so knows the world.

As Joseph wept he cried aloud but to himself, "Why has my wife left me, my child abandoned me and my friends scorned me? Why am I alone, what have I done and why, why am I alone?" His self-pity covered him as a rotten blanket which falls away in clumps. And so he knew his sorrow, his tears so long absent filled him with their empty song, their question which fell to earth. There is nothing so empty as a question, the answer to which we can not stand to know.

The earth sent forth a messenger, a knower of things without compassion, so full and grateful was the earth to give answer to such empty tears. Joseph heard a strange rustle in the leaves and sought his pity no longer, but pressed his eyes and wiped his tears to behold a fearsome ugly sight which seemed too fascinating to resist, and so held his fear behind a strange still glass, as if an inborn respect had been awakened within him to hold his judgment suspended in the air along with his horror. As the leaves shuffled he saw a form rise up from beneath them, covered in dirt with roots hanging along its back. The shape of a huge insect, a hard-backed multi-scaled beetle grew from the earth, here before his eyes, until it assumed the monstrous proportion of some 150 pounds or more, as far as Joseph could tell. Frozen in the awe of disbelief the summoner stood before the summoned, and was judged and known. The beetle's eyes were perched upon stalks which drooped downward with a sort of respectful reverence, they seemed unable to gaze directly upon him but were drooping, always forward, the strange inexpressive eyes pointed at the earth under his feet, as if the bug were expressing its reverence before a king. The plates which covered its back clicked and shimmered in the light, so black. They fascinated Joseph, but he found he soon felt sick and nauseous, and had to look away from their ugly form if he beheld it at too great a length, or looked too closely. The bug for its part had no discernible affect other than its strange reverence which would not meet his gaze. It crawled over to the tear soaked earth and consumed it with its protruding mouthparts. Joseph seemed to understand the thing was there to help him, and so he waited in like respect for the insect to seat itself, such as a beetle can, upon the bench. He asked the beetle, "Why has my wife left me, my child abandoned me and my friends scorned me? Why am I alone?" The bug heard Joseph's words and tasted his tears and it seemed as if the two had somehow combined in its insect gullet, and the bug seemed to

be upset, even annoyed or perhaps just dyspeptic. He could hear a strange scraping sound emerging from its innards, coming from deep beneath one of its abdominal plates and then a froth began to appear from its mouthparts. First a bubble then two, but soon a froth of white foam amidst a furious clicking as the now obscured mouthparts worked feverishly beneath the growing ball of foam, to some mysterious end. It was all the beetle could do to keep its eye stalks erect and allow its eyes to remain safely above the turgid secretions. When the clicking and scraping sounds stopped the beetle seemed to vibrate head to toes until it suddenly shook with such violence as to fling the foam off and into the air, showering the area with the weird air whipped cocoon, including Joseph who hardly bothered to recoil, so fascinated was he at the result. The insect had produced a single scale like those which comprised its back. It scuttled over to Joseph and offered it to him reverently, eyestalks lowered, the black scale gently presented from its mouth. The bug returned to rest upon the bench and ceased to move, as if a June bug in September, which is now no longer a bug, but just a shell.

The black scale was awash in the colors of the daylight, it seemed to absorb them and suggest a subtle deep hue in its darkness. "Depth never forgets," he thought to himself as the darkness gazed back at him, and pulled his thoughts from him. The black mirror showed him what he kept buried in black, now like a subterranean insect beheld in the sun, he knew what he had seen. The image was his, and then, the beetle's! The bug! The eater and speaker of filth too foul to behold, and even much less, oh please God never to know, and then surely but surely, never to be! To be it all! To know it forever! The filthy loathsome thing! But the mouthparts were his, the thorax his, the tendrils and eyes of abomination, but his alone! He had driven his wife out for she had come to know the weak, fearful, dry, sad, selfish, cringing thing he had become; so wounded, mean and hollow in his reproaches he drove her off with words that were surely meant for himself. She all but saw how he was, all but knew him rightly and so he drove her off before she knew him complete, before she dared say his secret aloud before him. His son and friends abandoned him and scorned him to see him as he was, a cringing black soul too small and empty to love, so then transformed into the inverse, the sharp spine for those who are deserving and in need of his tenderness most! He wants them gone, and so they are gone. So the mirror tells him and so he knows. Now his reflection is again his own, and the insect has dissolved in his new knowing tears, which fell clear and black, absorbed into the mirror as it rested on his knees. The mirror accepted these pure tears not born of self-pity and self-righteous humility, but honest tears clear and black, funeral tears of knowledge, disgust, hope and change. He knew himself and was filled with laughter to know what he was, laughter being the shining note, the signature utterance which weaves our sad cloth into the highest of hope's songs.

Now Joseph was as the earth: he knew himself and so he knew the world. This was the cruel gift the earth's happiness had given him. The earth is not compassionate, and so may be trusted. As he walked around the streets and homes among men, he beheld the truth. Each was a carnival of shame, layered thick with strange lies or beautiful truths which concealed empty places. A cacophony of horror greeted

his awakened eyes! First the grocer is the grocer, then a bug with its snout on a flexible stalk, probing the loins of each customer engaged in conversation, breathing its stolen air into a sack with an unblinking eye attached, its pupil dilating and constricting in pleasure, responding in the rapture of hidden intimacy and the mysteries of forbidden places with each unseen breath. The stock girl becomes a caterpillar so friendly and broad of head, her tube feet pulse with happiness, and she glows in kind acceptance. Something is concealed beneath her lovely fur and he knows it is nothing. She is an invitation who will not exist, a fraud who refuses herself, life and despair alike, until she is filled with another. She is an empty place, a hollow wrapped in a promise. But no! He feels her turning in her doubt, her sad interior consumed in choking doubt, and he is filled with her true hopeless soul until Joseph can not breathe to know it! She is the stock girl again and he must leave at once! To know yourself is to know the world, and so know hell! For the world is that which will not know itself and so will remain hopeless, and ugliest of all. The world banishes what hope needs to celebrate and destroy with her laughter. As with all who can destroy and resurrect, hope's laughter is black before it is bright.

So Joseph ran back to the forest and his bench where he sought the companionship of the bug, or "his beetle friend," as he thought of him now so warmly by the hearth of his new vision, in his mind's eye. The beetle was warmed there by this hearth, its fire led him to feel truly grateful to the beetle for having helped him. Although it sat as if dead, he spoke tenderly to it, "I have to thank you. Truly you have shown me my ugliness and I am changed. I am better than I was, surely more in your image, I am honest and new. I feel like you in this way of knowing and want you to understand I am glad in the knowledge you were kind enough to give me. I find you the most beautiful of all my friends, and perhaps the only one I trust, although you are no doubt dead, and mute even in life." The beetle came alive, but now its eyes no longer drooped in reverence at the end of its stalks, but instead looked squarely at him. Joseph noticed this with some alarm and spoke, "Why do you suddenly find you may look upon me? Do you no longer respect me after what I have said?" The beetle replied to him with a calm voice and caring tone, "We who are subterranean see only what lies beneath the surface, and find the sight of your posturing, lying race too loathsome, too hideous and unbearable even to envision. I can look at you because *you* have looked, so only now, can I stand the sight."