

Excerpt from “The Revelation Roadshow” by Jennifer Morgan.

It was one of those perfect September days on the barrens when time is measured by blueberries filling cooking containers. First you hear individual berries dropping on metal, then the quiet beat of berries landing on a layer of tiny blue planets.

The three women spread a sleeping bag over a flat rock. The wiry one pulled an olive-green tablecloth from her canvas bag. Wordlessly she turned to the stouter of her friends and the two unfolded the cloth and laid it on the sleeping bag. With a nod the first two women acknowledged the tall, thin man standing with the basket of food.

John Corbett laid the basket on the cloth with care. ‘Sacramental’, was the word that came to the mind of his wife, Grace Corbett, who was watching him. Thoughtful, was the word on Shirley Janes’ mind, as she watched Grace watching John. Thoughtful as if John’s mind was on something profound and distant, but also thoughtful as in kind—John was always kind.

“Absentminded,” said Hilda Tavener – but she said that later to Shirley, when they were driving home, piecing the day together.

Nothing about Pastor John Corbett seemed to be absent at that moment. He was very present, as he surveyed Three Pond Barrens, and beyond the barrens the small evergreens and then the city of St. John’s spread in its many valleys and hills. The harbour was a child’s painting with blue sea between two hills, a small castle on

the eastern hill. All three women would later speak of the moment when John swept his arm across the panorama.

“This is lovely,” he said, or “I love this city.” Each woman would recall a slightly different wording.

None of them expected John to pick berries – although Hilda passed him an empty margarine container before settling her bulk into a large blueberry bush.

Grace sat on a mossy rock a short distance from Shirley, where she could hear her friend’s sinewy hands rustling the leaves, tickling dusted blueberries into her palms.

Grace’s yoghurt container was a sign of her small ambitions for the day. Now that she’d gotten John out the door, and successfully negotiated around the social awkwardness of bringing a husband on an all-girls’ expedition, Grace had no more plans. Instead of picking she admired the blue berries against red leaves, the small black spruce growing down the hill, the city stretching to the sea and the sea defining the boundaries of her horizon.

How often had she returned to this shoreline like a spawning capelin?

“Where do you want to go?” John asked her, when he retired. “We’ve always moved because of my job. I want this move to be for you.”

“I want to go home,” she’d said. Although they stood in their home in Oshawa, he knew what she meant. He’d known her answer before the question was asked.

And now, Grace thought, it's like the poet said, 'Home is the place that when you have go there they have to let you in.'

Lifting a berry to her lips, Grace studied the hand holding it. When did her hands start looking like the hands of an old woman? Her veins cast a blue shadow under the liver-markings. She looked at her friends' grey heads bent over the bushes.

Without breaking her berry-picking rhythm, Shirley watched Grace. Grace Corbett had been a beautiful woman as long as Shirley had known her. Her skin was dry now, but pulled taunt over remarkable cheekbones. Grace's eyes had a wide-opened look, which always made her look naïve, although friends like Shirley and Hilda knew better.

"Are you and John going anywhere this year?" Hilda asked from behind Grace.

"Not really, we were on that trip last year. I thought it might be good for us to stay close to home this winter."

"I thought..." crouched in a bush below the others, Shirley listened to Grace's words. There was something strange there, but she couldn't quite place it. Still, Grace had seemed strange all day, coming out to the car with John and all flustered, and now...It was unusual to see Grace Corbett sitting on a rock, empty-handed and not working.

"Are you all right?" Shirley asked her, in a low voice, so John wouldn't hear.

Grace blinked, "Oh yes!" and reached towards the nearest bush to start picking.

The three women returned to their job, the quiet rhythm slipping them into a meditative trance. Grace had almost filled her yoghurt container when she heard a voice behind her, thundering it seemed. Or was that the blood rushing to her head, the throb of her own heartbeat?

"I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: What thou seest, write in a book and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea."

It seemed to Grace that it took forever to turn her body around. She saw Hilda drop her stewing pot, berries spilling into the bush as she ran up the hill.

There stood her husband, John Corbett, retired pastor, beloved preacher, eschatology scholar – stark staring naked, except for a large plastic diaper. His hand pointed towards the city, his gentle voice thundering.

"Project from your diaphragm," Grace thought, her feet planted in the ground, unable to move. She wanted to laugh hysterically.

Hilda picked up the green tablecloth as she ran. It flew out behind her like a veil in those paintings of women running to the sepulchre, only Hilda was round all over and wearing a pink cardigan and light blue jeans with embroidery down the legs. Rushing to her pastor's side she wrapped the cloth around his waist.

Grace could feel Shirley taking the container from her hands. Three days later Grace would find the yoghurt container full of blueberries sitting in her refrigerator and wonder how they got there.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Shirley whispered now.

“I didn’t know,” Grace answered.

But, “How could she not know?” Shirley will ask Hilda, later that evening, as they drive home from the Corbett’s. “It’s been as plain as the nose on her face.”

“Sometimes maid, a person don’t want to see the nose at the end of her face,” Hilda will answer.

Grace walked slowly over the barrens, towards her husband. She looked at his bare pink feet on the green lichen and blue granite. Gently she took his hand.

“Where are you John?” she asked.

John turned from Hilda who was helping him into his shirt. He looked confused, but he spoke clearly.

“I’m on the Isle of Patmos.”

Grace helped Hilda ease the hand she was holding into his shirt arm, “What’s the weather like in Patmos?”

John smiled, so much like himself she could have cried, “Oh, it’s always lovely in the Mediterranean.”

“Here are his socks,” Shirley was clambering up from the bushes.

“Hold on to Hilda’s shoulder dear,” Grace was bent over, sliding her hand up John’s calf. “Lift this leg, that’s right.”

“She’s done this before,” Shirley thought.

“What happened to my shoes?” John asked.

“You must have taken them off when you went to Patmos,” Grace said.

Although she’d seen it all a few minutes before, Hilda had to look away when Grace handed her the tablecloth and helped John into his trousers. Shirley busied herself untying his shoelaces.

Hilda shifted her weight, “I suppose we could eat our picnic.”

She wondered what to do with the green tablecloth now, it wasn’t like it was soiled or anything. But Shirley was laying the food directly on the sleeping bag.

“Put it in my bag there,” Shirley tilted her head towards an empty bag.

“Well,” John was cheerful, “A picnic on the barrens. How very civilized!”

But he was the only one eating.

It was Grace who broke the silence.

“I’ve never really liked the book of Revelation,” she said.

. . .

On the other side of the continent, on the other side of the Bay from San Francisco, Pam Anderson crouched face and arms over a boxwood end. She could smell her own breath as she blew the curling wood shaving away from her spit stick.

“FUCK! Fuck. Fucketty fuck.”

No one in the pressroom turned to look at the visiting artist in her ink-stained alcove. They knew. Pam had cut a white line where she wanted a black boundary. It's a common problem for a wood engraver. If one were to judge from the profanity that echoed from Pam's corner and into the etching and litho areas, the listener would think that Pam was a bad wood engraver. This would be untrue. In the small world of letterpress chapbooks, this Pamela Anderson was a celebrity. She was in Oakland, enjoying a much-coveted residency at Kala Institute.

Pinned on the bulletin board above Pam's head stood Jesus, wearing a long white beard and a white robe. He walked on bare feet between seven candlesticks. Other artists in the workshop admired the famous Dürer woodcut. On the day she was leaving Toronto to come here, Pam ripped it out of her 1967 Time-Life Library of Art book.

Next to Dürer's image, hanging on one pin from a corner, was a sheath of printed pages. A printout of the Enuma Elish. Under Pam's spinnaker the Babylonian goddess Tiamat had left the Enuma Elish and entered Dürer's Christian clouds. Wood grain transformed into scales as Tiamat morphed from a woman into a dragon.

The Kala Institute is one of those sacred spaces where time stands still and art is important. Every day printmakers arrive like monks in ink-stained aprons. They greet one another, speak of the latest current event: the body of the murdered wife, pregnant with child, found in the Bay; the long-delayed opening of the bridge destroyed by the Loma Prieta earthquake; the Berkley students occupying San Francisco's financial district. Then each one heads to a separate alcove where the artist uses archaic technology to pass comment on contemporary society.

The printmakers, who rented space at Kala, knew better than to disturb Pam when she was working. They knew that she was bringing an ancient dragon to life. And they knew that this was a painful and frustrating process.

At night Pam left the shop. She walked through the industrial streets of Oakland until she reached rows of two-story clapboard houses. A police car, with two white policemen, slowed down when it drove by. Every face she passed was black or brown. The graduate students sharing her boarding house were black and Hispanic. Only the artists at the Kala Institute were white and Asian. Upon leaving the Kala Institute Pam became a cultural minority. A month ago, when Pam moved here from Toronto, it bothered her that she noticed the colour of people's faces.

She had found this room on a Berkley notice board. It was relatively cheap and close to Kala. Now, on her walks home from the print shop, Pam felt white for the first time in her life. But Pam had spent her life breaking written and unwritten rules. She didn't mind being the only white woman in this Oakland neighbourhood.



*In the darkened alcove, Tiamat steps out of her wooden box. She adjusts her large breasts, smooths down her long kinky hair, shakes the cricks out of her tail. Lets loose a string of epithets. Tiamat tries out the word fuck, which she learned today.*

*In her hand she holds a letter from Jesus. She wishes she had learned to read. But the Sumerians hadn't even invented cuneiform in her day. Tiamat is an oral tradition.*

*She runs her hand over the engraved Jesus. Under her fingers his wood-toned flesh dimples. His beard curls into a dazzling white. His eyes burn like fire.*

*What does it say? Tiamat asks him.*

*It's the letter to Ephesus. I'm asking you to return to your First Love.*

*I never left my First Love.*

*Why does the Lamb always piss her off? Tiamat flicks her tail and knocks a printing press over. A slash of blood opens on the tender underside of her tail. Shit!*

*Where am I? She asks Jesus.*

*Jesus climbs out of the boxwood, looks around: Kala Institute.*

*Freed from the wood, her transformation continues. She watches her hand turn into a red dragon claw. I hate the indoors.*

*Jesus moves a package of BFK paper over. Sits up on the counter. Swings his feet. I kind of like it. Reminds me of church.*

*That's because you're an indoor god, Tiamat complains. Her new claw is tangled with a metal stool.*

*Not fair! What about the Sermon on the Mount? What about the Sojourn in the Wilderness? I'm famous for my Nature Parables.*

*She stops shaking her claw and the stool flies out of the alcove. They hear the crash when it hits a light table in the large room. I thought your disciples wrote those parables.*

*Jesus waves his hand in impatience. People always give my disciples credit for my work!*

*How do we get out of here?*

*It's not that I don't like my disciples. But really! Those parables were my idea. Jesus walks towards the red Exit sign. John couldn't write Hebrew before Levi Matthew taught him.*

*Tiamat doesn't follow him. Instead she burps a fire blast, which burns a hole through the roof.*

*Do you want a lift?*

*Oh, thank-you. I mean, John could read the Torah, but, when I met him he couldn't even write his own name. I doubt he could write it in Aramaic. Jesus wraps his arms around her neck. He tucks his bare feet under her wings. But they get cold as soon as she flaps her wings.*

*Outside the building Tiamat is very graceful. She follows a line of yellow, red and white lights moving slowly along the Oakland Bridge. She swoops through steel girders and over the dark Bay, towards the towers of San Francisco.*

*The New World, Tiamat says. Where would you like me to drop you?*

*I'm very fond of Grace Cathedral, Jesus says.*

*The two deities stand on the peak of Grace Cathedral and survey the glittering city streets, people on the sidewalks. A man and his shadow pace the maze on the landing below them.*

*Tiamat is disoriented. She misses the grasslands and swamps, the rolling hills and herds of elk. I need to get back to the First Place. Where this whole modern world began.*

*That would be Newfoundland, Jesus says, the oldest part of the New World. The place where West met East. He points northeast. That's where Laurentia and Gondwana collided. That's where you need to go to find your First Love.*

*Oh shut up!*

*Tiamat could have him killed, like she killed her consorts and their sons. Instead she starts flying through the night. There is something, or more important—someone, that she is trying to remember.*

*Falling asleep in an ancient tree in an uninhabited continent can do things to your memory. But something awakened her with its noise. Somewhere a child needs protection from her consort and his manipulative son.*