Peter Rauch

Non-Linear Narrative

The world in which the story takes place is called Gilon, and is comprised of a group of cities and villages of varying sizes, scattered across a wide but finite landscape. The borders of this landscape are roughly circular, and surrounded by a thick darkness called the world's end, periodically and dimly illuminated by bolts of what appears to be lightning. It has been this way for as long as anyone can remember; theories exist as to whether the darkness at world's end is emptiness, a barrier, or a gateway to another world, and these theories are the primary differentiating factor in the Gilon's various religions. All that is known about the darkness, from a practical standpoint, is that no one who has walked into it has even been proven to have walked out.

Technology is still somewhat primitive in Gilon, but science exists in the minds and workings of those interested in collecting and codifying the informal, empirical observations of generations. This body of knowledge demonstrates, through observation of sunlight and shadow (both of which function as they do in our world), that although the world appears to be roughly flat and circular, it might actually be spherical. As such, it is assumed among the learned that the visible Gilon makes up only a small part of the world, but this view is generally too academic for most to consider. In fact, most of the populace has stopped wondering about world's end at all, having ended the investigation with a verdict of natural coincidence or divine providence. This complacency is threatened, however, when a village idiot from a small border city walks into the darkness. Ten days later, his corpse is found in a wooded area near the border, next to another body.

The second corpse, beaten and bloody, bears some resemblance to the inhabitants of Gilon. It is smaller, and largely hairless, aside from a tuft of fine yellow hair atop its head. It eyes are comparatively large, showing a pale brown iris and a circular pupil. It is dressed in thin robes of unknown fabric. Its thin hands, when it is found, are open and empty.

This discovery is not accepted by all, of course. The strange corpse is believed to be an unknown animal by some, an outright myth by others. The religious groups have split into three camps: the first believes it is a god, executed and cast out of the ether and into Gilon for an unknown transgression, signalling the imminent destruction and final judgment of Gilon. The second believes it to be a demon, one of many that has passed into Gilon over the centuries, and the idiot one compelled by the gods to kill it. Some members of this group fear a full-scale invasion, with an uncertain outcome. The third believes the stranger to be a messenger, momentarily brought into death as a means of entering Gilon, soon to rise again and impart wisdom to the inhabitants.

The learned, for their part, are no less divided. The existence of the corpse is confirmed well-enough for those with the correct knowledge. Some have posited that the stranger is a creature from the hypothetical world outside Gilon, wandering into the darkness by accident, curiosity or suicide. Others are beginning to wonder about the veracity of myths long-forgotten by most, myths that told of a race of wizards unaccountable even to the gods that encircled Gilon with impenetrable darkness by design. Some have taken this theory further, presupposing explanations as to why.

Each story will comprise one year in the history of Gilon, beginning with the discovery of the stranger.

Neal Grigsby

Possible Worlds #1

Federal law prohibited colonization of planets with native intelligent species, but

had to prioritize military enforcement of this law according to seemingly complicated

schema that were known only to the Senate Committee on Interspecies Relations. Some

of the more aggressive ideological clans tested the limits early on, building settlements on

planets where a strong minority opinion disagreed with the final ruling of state

anthropologists on the question of sentience, hoping that the political controversy would

preclude decisive action by authorities. But most of these had been dealt with quickly

and efficiently.

It was the entrepreneurs who figured it out. Actually, many guessed at the truth
from the beginning—it was all rather obvious—but they let the pioneer outlaws be the
guinea pigs to test their theory. The great schema, in fact, used but a single measure: cost
effectiveness. It's true, there was a higher political, and therefore financial, cost to attack
human settlers who had colonized a planet with species of questionable intelligence. But
the single greatest cost multiplier for military deployment was distance. These early
outlaws had struck hard, fast, and close to home. As those unfortunate settlers fought an
unwinnable battle, hoping that the political tide would turn in their favor before they ran
out of resources, myriad entrepreneurs were already drawing up plans for far outlying
systems.
Here's how it worked. These companies would stage numerous, relatively
inexpensive skirmishes to keep the military busy while the real colonists would slowly
make their way to fringe planets. The planets were so remote that military action was
deemed unfeasible. Economic sanctions were still possible, but only if they knew who to
sanction. In this way, the entrepreneurs had it over the ideologues yet again. Colonists
with strong group affiliation, like the Mormon and Catholic missionaries, were easy to
trace back to their central authority. Decentralized banking made purely economic
transactions almost impossible to trace. So the only way to "follow the money" was to
interrogate colonists, which again required military action. By the time the state had
figured out what was going on, the offending colonies were well established and several
generations old. By that point, how could they punish people for the sins of their mothers
and fathers? Such planets were begrudgingly accepted into the Union. What about the
destroyed or displaced species? Well, they would build them a memorial. Maybe even a
museum.
This all assumes, of course, that the native species could be defeated.
Entrepreneurs choose planets, in part, based on their technological sophistication. They

wouldn't touch a species with nuclear capability. Even so, some colonists had been fought off by natives of superior number with as primitive a technology as steam power.

One of the most hard-fought battles, on both sides, resulted in detente. The native intelligence of Planet Ganesh had been little understood and highly underestimated. Many did not believe the Riders to be truly sentient at all, though they had developed considerable technology. The technology itself was inscrutable and, in human hands, worthless. In design, the technology mirrored the odd species itself. Actually, technically, the Riders were two species. One was a parasite. Or was it a symbiotic relationship? It was hard to tell. The young of the two species developed separately.   At a given time, an adult of the dominant species, creatures small, frail, and rather ugly by human standards, would attack one of the submissive species, which was larger, stronger, and better armored. The parasite would deliver a paralyzing sting to its host, then carefully consume parts of its admittedly underdeveloped brain. By a process none had yet interrogated (was it mechanical, chemical, or telepathy?), the parasite would control the motor functions of the host thenceforth. They developed a technology equally stratified, with semi-autonomous control systems that could interface with numerous dumb machines at once.

The war between the Humans and the Riders reached a near catastrophic conclusion with huge loss of life and infrastructure, and the remaining survivors agreed to a cease-fire. A few generations later, the planet was nearly equally segregated between the two races, with a narrow band of territories separating the populations. These demilitarized border towns attracted often unsavory but enterprising individuals who ignored regulations against communication and trade between the populations. Some even broke the taboo of forming alliances with the enemy.