

Love in the Cretaceous, by Howard W. Robertson (Anaphora Literary Press, 2017)

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Tumtum [3d chapter]

It takes your breath away to see a Brontosaur run.

Bud sees the two of them thundering towards us though and has plenty of breath left to holler, “And down the stretch they come!”

We know from fossil thigh-bones that Brontosaurus were capable of a slow run, so we designed our pair to do about a dozen miles per hour. To see an animal 70 feet long and weighing 50,000 pounds move that fast seems nothing less than miraculous.

Lana has used the giant crane to drop a couple tons of mixed ferns, horsetails, and ginkgo and araucarian leaves into the Brontosaur area. The crane is 50 feet high with a long arm so the two sauropods won't bang their heads on it, since they can only reach up to about 25 feet with their long necks.

It's May 2117, and the angiosperms are in bloom all around these two colossal creatures from the end of the Jurassic. We called it close enough and just sort of rolled them into Cretaceous World, our magnificent dinosaur park. Brontosaurus flourished around 150 million years ago, well before the rise of the flowering plants about 30 million years later in the Cretaceous period. When our genetic engineers designed the genome for our pair, they tried to make them as authentic as possible, so the two of them really prefer the kind of food they would have eaten way back when. That's why they come running at feeding time when we give them the ancient gymnosperms that they like best. There's actually a large nursery in the neighboring town of Dewberry that's dedicated to supplying our herbivores with food from the time of the dinosaurs.

Lana gets down out of the crane and walks over to me.

She says, “I'd sure like to see a whole herd of these moving together.”

Lana has a Ph.D. in paleontology from SUNG and knows full well why we couldn't handle that. Our pen of seven miles by four miles is barely big enough for the two Brontosaurus we do have. By the way, I'm so glad the alternate name has died away over the past hundred years: "thunder lizard" is so much more appropriate for these giants than "deceptive lizard."

I say, "Wouldn't that be grand?"

She smiles and tosses her long blonde ponytail. Then she goes over to Bud and gives him an assignment to do.

Lana is actually Bud's supervisor, though her youthfulness and the flecks of grey everywhere in Bud's hair might suggest the opposite. Bud drove a big rig longhaul for over a decade before joining our staff here at Cretaceous World. He's happy as a clam here. We offer generous salary, great job security, comprehensive health benefits, a month's paid vacation, and a rock-solid pension. Not bad for a high school graduate from Roseburg.

Lana returns to my side and says, "Really, I love imagining the whole herds of these guys that roamed around Western Laurasia."

I enjoy it that she knows it's Laurasia still and not yet Laramidia, since the Brontosaurus was in the late Jurassic, 50 million years before Laramidia formed.

She says, "Have you ever heard them crack their tails like bullwhips? It's amazing. You can imagine that they could knock over an Allosaurus with their tails and then just stomp on it with their huge clawed feet. Once they got big like this, they really didn't have much to fear from predators."

I say, "I understand they grew very fast when they were young, and then once they were full-grown, they could live well past a hundred years."

She says, "Yeah, some paleontologists speculate about three hundred years as a reasonable guess for how long a Brontosaurus could live."

I say, "I spent the early part of my career studying the smallest of single-celled life-forms who could basically live forever if conditions were right. Bacteria had no programmed cell-death. It wasn't until the larger nucleated cells came along that death from old age became possible."

She says, "You started out with the tiniest living beings who began around four billion years ago. Bruce and Phyllis here must seem like giant newcomers to you."

I enjoy her use of the nicknames the crew gave the Brontosaurus couple.

I say, "The Cambrian explosion changed everything. Between 600 and 500

million years ago, life got larger fast. In a few blinks of geologic time, the sauropods were leaving their footprints all over the landscape of the Morrison Formation not so far from here.”

She says, “You’ve covered all of life on Earth in your career, from tiny beginning to the recent hugeness. Nice.”

We pause and watch Bruce and Phyllis enjoy their meal.

She asks, "Do you think we mammals would’ve taken over from the dinosaurs if the big asteroid hadn’t hit the Gulf of Mexico?”

I reply, “I doubt it. We were just scurrying around the margins and doing things at night when our fully warm-blooded metabolism gave us an advantage. The dinosaurs were the most successful animals ever to stride the Earth and would’ve continued to dominate us. Their demise was our golden opportunity.”

She smiles and goes off with Bud, who has finished his task and returned.

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After watching the feeding of the Brontosaurus, I return to the residence. It always makes me childishly happy to come home to the palace that Becky and I are privileged to inhabit. I don’t like to think of myself as a superficial person, but in this one regard, I’m really quite shallow.

Chandler greets me at the entrance in his usual cheery way.

I say, “I’m going up to the tea room. Please bring me a bowl of fresh strawberries and a big pot of tea with lemon.”

He says, “Yes, sir, as you wish. Will there be anything else?”

I say, “No, just the tea and strawberries. Thank you, Chandler.”

The tea room is how we refer to the large semi-circular area on the second floor at the rear of the edifice. It faces north away from Cretaceous World and overlooks Tumtum Creek. The entire curved wall of the tea room is made of sheets of shatter-proof glass. They’re fitted together so artfully that you can only find the seams if you get close and inspect the surface of the glass very carefully.

Outside, the temperature is 95 degrees Fahrenheit on this mid-afternoon in late

May, but the air conditioning keeps it cool and refreshing in here. The half-acre of solar panels on the roof of the residence give us plenty of electricity for all the conveniences we fancy.

I ascend the spiral staircase and make my way to the tea room. I park myself on the antique Stickley couch and gaze out at the dense forest. Red alders and vine maples are leafing out along the creek, as are the oaks up the hillside. The endless pines are green as ever.

Chandler soon brings the tea and strawberries and sets them on the small table in front of me. I enjoy his style and politeness. It's very soothing.

I say, "I'd like to hear the creek, please."

Chandler turns on the sound from Tumtum Creek. A microphone has been hidden at a spot where the rushing water passes over a series of three small waterfalls, none of which is more than a foot high. The gorgeous natural music floods the tea room from surrounding speakers. It's complex and simple at the same time.

Chandler discreetly leaves the room.

I say to myself, "Tumtum," remembering its meaning in the Chinook Jargon: heart, mind, will.

I sip the delicious Earl Grey tea with two lemons fresh-squeezed into the pot. I pick up a luscious strawberry and take a big bite out of it.

I think, "Tumtum. Perfect."

At this moment, Becky appears. She's been to the doctor in New Geneva for her annual checkup.

She quietly says, "Hey."

I answer, "Hey."

I immediately sense something's not right.

She says, "The creek sounds nice."

She says it as if she's remembering how it sounds, not actually hearing it right now.

I ask, "Care for a strawberry?"

I lift the bowl and hold it out to her.

She says, “No, thanks. I don’t think I could eat anything right now.”

She sits down beside me on the plush maroon couch.

I say, “Tea, then?”

Chandler thoughtfully brought two cups when he delivered the tea.

She says, “No.”

I ask, “Something the doctor said?”

She says, “Yeah, you could say that. She definitely said something.”

I put my half-eaten strawberry down on a coaster and wait.

She says, “My lab work turned up a problem. They found positive indications for Stander’s disease.”

I say, “Heard the name. Not familiar.”

She explains, “It’s a new virus that’s come along in the last couple decades, now that the climate’s changed so much. It’s a kind of dementia accompanied by a physical wasting away. You lose your mind and your body. You lose it all. You lose yourself. You’ve got two to three years from the time it shows up in the tests to when you’re still alive but you’re not you anymore.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m not prepared in any way to deal with this. It’s the last thing I was expecting to hear her say.

I say, “You look so healthy. You look so well.”

I’m looking at her, and she turns her head and looks at me with her beautiful green eyes. Tears begin to trickle down her cheeks, and I put my arms around her. My own eyes fill with tears and overflow.

I ask, “Is there any doubt about the diagnosis?”

She says, “She’s repeating the tests just to make 110 percent sure, but she doesn’t hold out any false hope. She says the diagnosis is clear. The lab results are unambiguous.”

She utters a single sob, and I hug her harder.

She says, “It’s difficult to accept that it’s true. It doesn’t seem possible.”

I agree, “No, it doesn’t seem real at all.”

She asks, “I’d like to go down by the creek: can we?”

I reply, “Of course.”

There’s a door off the tea room opening onto stairs down to Tumtum Creek. We’re both a bit wobbly as we descend. I hold onto the railing, and Becky holds tightly onto me.

It’s muggy outside. The temperature is at least fifteen degrees cooler in the shade down by the creek.

I say, “There’s supposed to be a thunderstorm tonight.”

She says, “It feels like it.”

We stop beside the rushing flow of the creek.

She asks, “Do you ever wish we’d had a child?”

I lie, “No.”

She comments, “I suppose this whole place, Cretaceous World, is our child. It’s why we’re alive. It’s our purpose in life.”

I agree, “Yes, I suppose it is. I hadn’t thought of it that way exactly, but I suppose it’s so.”

She says, “I’m glad we don’t have a child who has to face this, my dying, his or her mother’s dying.”

I agree, “It would be hard to tell a child.”

We’re silent thinking about breaking the news to a child we don’t have.

She says, “I don’t want you to have to face losing your wife before she’s actually dead. I don’t want to live past the time when I’m still myself.”

I ask, “What do you mean?”

She says, “You know what I mean.”

I say, “You mean assisted suicide.”

She confirms, “Yes, I want to consider it in a year or two when the time comes, when it’s obvious that I don’t have much longer before I don’t know who you are or anything we’ve done together.”

I embrace her.

I say, “Of course. However you want. I’ll be with you whatever comes.”

She says, “I don’t want you to remember me like I’ll become if I let it happen. I want you to remember me like this.”

We kiss tenderly, and all the love and joy of all our life together is in this kiss.

* * * * *

I’m standing in the tower at night. Lightning flashes and crashes outside the panoramic glass windows.

I think, “Like the late Jurassic.”

We have a whole crew of forest workers dedicated to maintaining a 300-yard firebreak around the dinosaur areas. It’s in effect a circumambient meadow. Deer graze there. We also have dinosaur-sized, cave-like fire shelters in every area. We humans have our cars and our roads in case we need to flee. There’s never been a forest fire here at Cretaceous World, but we’re ready for what’s probably the inevitable.

The flashing and crashing continue outside the windows of the circular fourth floor.

I suddenly notice I’m not alone. There’s a plump, slope-shouldered fellow in a nice suit standing beside me.

He says soothingly, “Never fear, my friend, all is well.”

I find I know his name.

I turn toward him and say, “Diablo, my nemesis, what brings you here tonight?”

He winks and says, “You know.”

I find I do.

I say, “Becky.”

He says, “You find you wish Stander’s Disease were an enemy, a villain you could face and kill with a knife-thrust to the navel, do you not?”

He’s not wrong.

I say, “When cellular life on Earth began around four billion years ago,

immortality was possible. It wasn't until the nucleated protists came along much later that death became inevitable."

He says, "You call me Diablo, but you know I'm really just entropy."

I say, "You're the inevitable death of the Universe."

A titanic bolt of lightning flashes across the sky, and at least fifteen seconds later, a soul-shattering thunder-crack shakes me to my core.

Diablo says soothingly, "Never fear, my friend, all is well."

I say, "The Brontosaurus I saw today will probably live a couple hundred years or more."

By the time I reach the end of that sentence, I'm awake in bed with Becky sleeping soundly beside me.

Her peaceful, heavy breathing goes round and round. I think of a mill wheel going around, driven by the powerful flow of a creek.

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