

From CosmoZ



Claro

—translated from French by Brian Evenson

Is it the ether? ether which is defined as a gas that's soluble, for the unconscious and for the flesh at once, capable of infiltrating the nostrils and the beyond. Or is it the tongue, too long and too literally enbaumed, which leaves to its fluids the care of accomplishing the task which disgusts us? Whatever it is, the fact is that after the operation, thanks to a impeccably rapid convalescence and attended by Glinda, the young L. Frank Baum realizes that his irrational fear of scarecrows—what Dr. Bergfield, smoky scholar, has baptized scarecrowphobia—begins to diminish.

Until then, each of his nights had as its lynchpin the distressing visitor. Each of his nights was a field where, among the rattling corn, the Sentinel watched. Yes, since his early youth armies of scarecrows sprang up in Frank's head, one per night, always the same. Some dream of magic sap, others of crippled braggarts, yet others of the translucent dead. One struggles with a rat that speaks all languages, some other with a serpent with a human face. The mind is a stuck drawer, according to the chest of wisdom. In Baum's brain grew a scarecrow, which perhaps nourished his tumor, who knows?

Before the operation, Frank's scarecrow was a constant in the equation of his childish fear. It was nearly as much conspired after as dreaded.

Cloth sack closed around a ball of straw, arms paralyzed in a cross, trousers with dangling legs, eyes drawn with charcoal: this crucified of the fields, although motionless, chased the child in jerky nightmares, uttering incomprehensible entreaties, bouncing off the sides of fences while savagely gesticulating, doing splits then scissoring, elastic, liberated, featherbrained, as much victim as executioner. He didn't have a name. Didn't want one. The crows kept an eye on him, from afar, from above, from very high above, furtive shadows caressing the ground with their dark menace, regardless of the radars of reason.

Frank often came round when joylessly stuck in some sad sap. If he fell back asleep, he would drown.

In L. Frank Baum's dream—at least before the operation performed by the masterful hand of Dr. Bergfield—the scarecrow bustled about, sensing that his reign was nearing its end. Impaled on his gnarled post, he was playing Jesus for so long that his disciples the crows no longer hesitated to take his last truths off with their beaks. They brushed past him—obsequiously—slapped him—harshly—pecked at him—stealing his straw to better remind him of his emptiness, which would end up one grand tempestuous day prevailing upon his function of fright.

But the scarecrow knew what these winged plunderers didn't, he knew that the straw fetus that their beaks carried away wouldn't enrich any charnel house nor help them to understand this NOTHING of which he was made and proud. They could try to lay him bare, remove his stuffing of characteristics; he would retain his absence of substance. Vertical, although endowed with a tendency for falling, arms spread in an airplanesque version of the straw-stuffed divine infant, he scorned in equal portions what formed him and what drained him, conscious that his destiny lay in his eventual human emancipation.

He was in the beginning only a bit player in the small Baum's nightmares—a shape cut out of the cardboard of his fright. In those places, he had all the time in the world to perfect his body language on the monochromatic stage of Baumian dreams; a siesta scattered with

mosquitoes or an inopportune rush of blood, a sweat-soaked night, or even a passing swoon, were enough for him to give free rein to his straw-man act. Although consummately ridiculous, he was hardly laughable, because the script whose stage directions he closely followed was that which a being less than five years old could only associate with the worst of disasters, and adorn with the most dreadful rags.



The nightmare unfolds almost always in the same way, the scarecrow bringing to it only little variation, having, from real things, a vaudevillesque design, which it can't be reproached for because the world, isn't it true, came to terms a long time ago with repetition and nuance, and this so as to better recycle its horrors.

It starts thus like this, contractually, so to speak: the shadows lengthen like entirely consumed matches on the tablecloth of a landscape where, here and there, a few scraps of rabbits and mice still crackle; the coppered disc of the sun interferes with the slit of the horizon, sparking off nearly immediately a subtle music, composed of rustling and breathing, as if the young buds jerked off in the chilly wind.

Frank is alone on the immense road of his nightmare, with his swollen tongue, his underwear full of taboos, his palms still warm, he is afraid, and he knows that his fear is a dress's train too long for him, that it is going to disturb the dust and leave tracks in it that he doesn't want to see.

The setting is the same. Always.

Behind him, fields as far as the eye can see, ash-blond, then purple then no more fields at all, then nothing. He moves forward, not attracted by a gleam that could be that of a thatched cottage in which some full-sized adults are slapping their thighs before plates empty of dinner and imagination, no, he moves forward because his legs don't want to leave time for the ground to hold the print of his little timorous feet, his child's feet terrorized by the clickety-clack of his top teeth against his bottom teeth. If he stops, other feet will push into the marks that he is leaving and at the end of his feet other knees topped by other thighs, and so on to the abject head. Brrrr. He moves

forward.

He doesn't understand why fear sticks to childhood like hypocrisy to the adult. Frank Baum doesn't want this fear which, one day, he feels it, will invade each road, each space, each life.

Frrt.

Something moved in the field. A branch in motion, the silhouette of a hanged bird, a fuzziness turning distinct then fuzzy again. Frank doesn't know—and prefers, from far away as well as up close, not to know—the extent and limits of the field, the nature and scope of the noises, the secrets of the light.

Frrt-chhht.

Planted at the crossing of four roads which are logically only two but nonetheless four since the choice makes itself four-fold as soon as it unfolds, he must choose. On his left, a fence of pickets tilted, with hairy wires throws a grill of shadows at his feet. A crow, in any case something very black and very determined, crosses his field of vision with the nervousness of a paternal finger pointing to the room plunged in darkness where he must now go without a word. Frank pivots in an arc of feverish footsteps and sees him.

The Scarecrow.

That's when small Baum's dream truly unfurls into a nightmare. The Scarecrow moves about stupidly, but it is the ineptness of his gesticulations which is the cause of fright, not his reality. It is as if dreaming was suddenly utterly plain, as if the tumor which surrounded his tongue spoke for him.

Once the tumor has been removed, his tongue again becomes a little tip of flesh, a fish lying on the plate of expectancy. Frank knows, finally, from what he comes back and returns, he has acquired the knowledge and feels in it, how to say it? at ease. He can henceforth direct his fears with an iron hand and the courage of a lion-tamer. He still sweats, of course, but his sweat crystallizes quickly into a dazzling suit of armor. He orchestrates. He allocates. The roles listen to him.

Above all, he gives a name to the Scarecrow: You will be called Oscar Crow. Oscar Crow: thus I baptize you, possess you, protect you.

Suddenly, the Scarecrow feels his power wane, his straw dampens, he folds, bows, makes the effort to speak, at first in snippets, then in

gurglings.

He who is henceforth called Oscar Crow looks at Frank, who no longer sees in him anything more than a slave, for which it would be enough to pull the strings from one book to another—yes, because he's going to write, one day soon.

Not only does the Scarecrow no longer scare him, Frank even goes so far as to consult him, convinced that the feather-brained status of the great gangler can only guarantee the innocuousness of his advice. The straw oracle fills his office wonderfully, advocating in the same sentence an opinion and its opposite, the same amount of yeses and nos, a perfect balance between the immensely urgent and the possibly dispensable. Frank takes advantage of it to grow, which is alas far from being the case for his heart, whose valves, following rheumatic fever, are waiting for the suitable moment to break down.

Enrolled by his parents at the Peekskill Military Academy, Frank endures discipline and mess hall fare for two years before the thwacks of the cane set off a heart attack in him. Papa Baum orders the immediate repatriation of the filial larva to the baumian cocoon. Shakespeare and Dickens then become his two nightstand luminaries and his father, to compensate for these reveries, buys him a printing press. Frank tries his hand for a time in the journalistic field, he even goes as far as writing doggerel, not without success, for grocers, those proverbial slogan-lovers. Then it is the turn of the stage to swallow him. He spends thousands of dollars on velvet and silk, on lace and gold braid, after the director of a troupe of strolling players promised to engage him if he furnished all the costumes for his future roles himself. Alas, his wardrobe dresses only the other members of the troupe—swindled, it's stripped bare or nearly that he returns to Syracuse to work in his brother-in-law's dry goods company. Seduced by queen Clutter and king Bauble, he opens a bazaar—Baum's Bazaar!—and puts in the display window a metallic mannequin, at once the antithesis and the complement of the stuffed man of his nightmares: a stiff golem of an ironmonger's nature, a boiler by way of a torso, stovepipes for limbs, the ring of a frying pan in place of a face—he goes as far as to crown him with a funnel by way of a hat,

baptizes him Nick Chopper, fits him up with an axe, dresses him up with a miracle lubricant invented by his brother, an amber liquid marketed under the name “Castorine.”

Henceforth tired of the shilly-shallying of the Scarecrow, Frank takes refuge more and more in the articulated entrails of Nick Chopper, as if in the womb of a medieval Iron Maiden. Despite the resounding huffiness of the tin monster, there reigns in this place a reassuring tranquility, as if a refuge is possible in this world were everything is no more than nascent tornados. But, at the end of these cataleptic séances, the stiffness he feels is as steadfast as his hopes, and Frank quickly longs for other company.