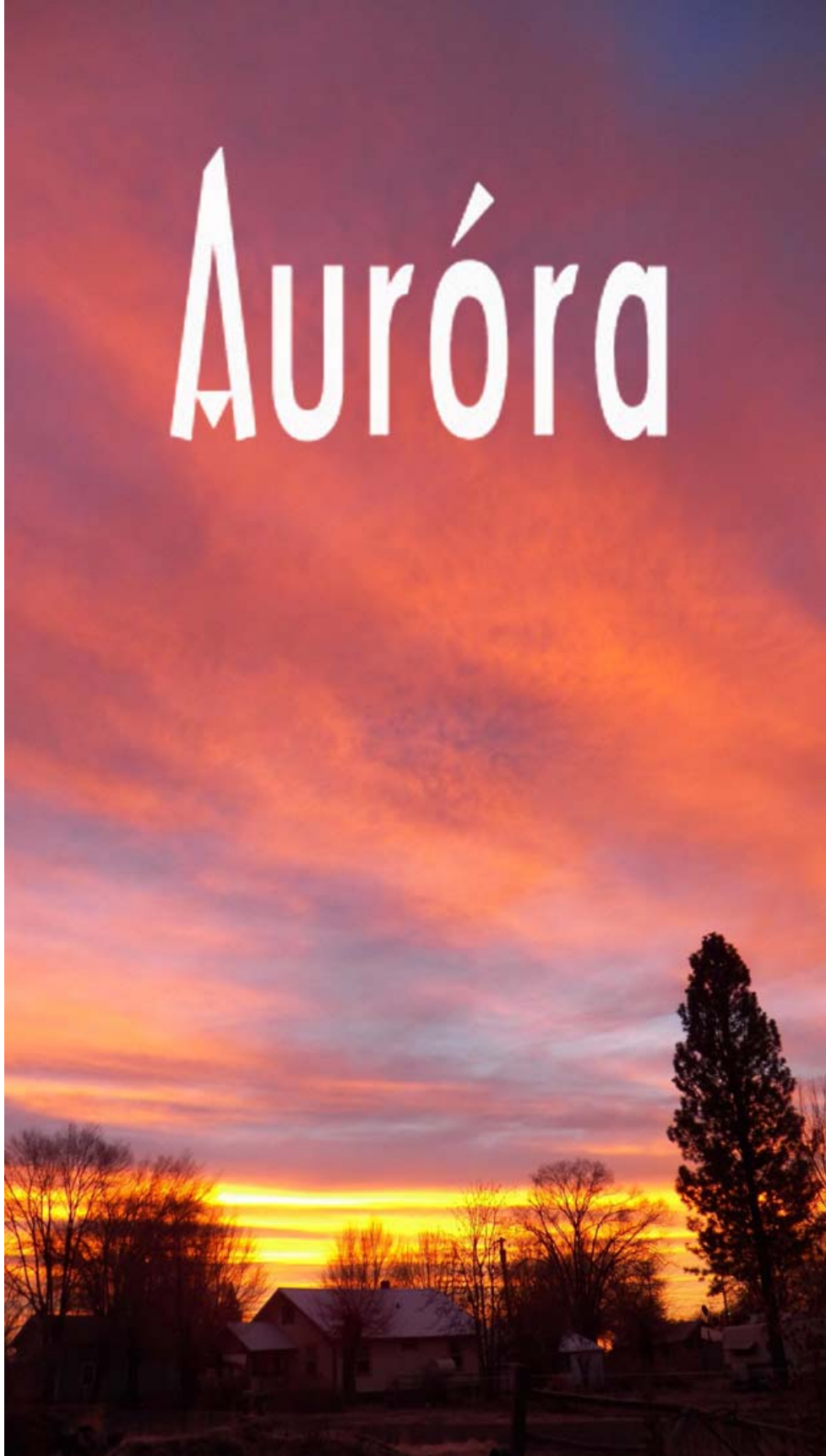


Auróra



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A. A. A. Hartvisen

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“Expo '99”

Auróra

by

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So I sat down in the Garden to watch the sunrise. *Auróra*. I fished round in my jacket pockets till I found my pouch and pipe. The pouch was empty, but there was a bit of chaff I scraped out of the seams, and I lit my pipe. I sat there and listened to the birds and watched the beautiful colours in the air. There was some crazy blue flower like I'd never seen before just growing out by the fence. And a squirrel there come hopping along the ridge. That Garden was a heck of a place, all amazing and beautiful and sticky and full of mystique and ennui and good things to eat. That squirrel.

He scurries up into the branches of the tree there beside me, up from the roots (there's a snake in those roots). He's looking me in the eye. He's got something in his hand, bright and shiny, maybe a little wrinkly.

"Come bite the apple," he says.

I puff on my pipe and look him right in the eye. I'm not shy, but this is weird, and the birds are making weird patterns in the sky, flittering around like pancakes. Off somewhere I hear a siren or an ice cream truck or something, maybe the mail van. That squirrel was talking to me.

"Come bite the apple."

He holds it out nicely, a special fruit, jewel fruit, a prize.

"Come bite the apple," he says.

It's too small to be an apple. Some kind of funny berry. I look away. I look back. He's still there, holding it out to me, sort of grinning like a squirrel might grin if it were to grin at a person in such a way that pretends to inspire confidence but only engenders a lot of disquieting inquietude. I had inquietudes about this squirrel.

"Come bite the apple."

"Okay," I said and almost reached out for it. "No, no, no, I've been through this movie before."

I saw the scratches and fang marks round the base of the tree, where the squirrel must have been accustomed to snuffle round and gnaw. There was roots humped up all over (there was a snake in them roots).

"Come on, Man," he said. "It's an apple, it'll make you wise."

"That's no apple," I said.

"No, maybe not," he said. "But it's like an apple. It's a berry, a morningglory berry. It'll make you wise."

I had no firsthand knowledge of this, certainly, but I'd heard about it. Some folks made some kind of hallucinogenic acid out of those things. That and ether. Maybe it was just the ether.

"Look at me," he said. I was looking at him. "I can talk." He doubled up on his con-grin. "It'll make you wise. All you got to do is swallow this little tiny apple, this tiny little golden apple from the magical cornflower tree of wisdom."

"I ain't gonna eat your fucking apple, Squirrel," I said. "And what's so great about a talking squirrel anyway? It doesn't mean anything."

"You should see the snake," he said.

I turned away. I resisted temptation. I was kind of glad I'd sort of given up on women recently. Everything to a purpose, for a purpose. I ran out of smoke. I blew out the dottle and mashed out the ashes. I didn't want to set the world on fire. So there I was, surrounded by beauty, resting in the Garden, the sun shining bright over the distant horizon. Bats and tiny birds were flittering all over. Something was singing. Then I heard a bang and the squirrel stuffed that apple in his mouth and took off up the tree. There was a hawk up there resting. He ran past it yelling something. It yelled back and took off. All the pretty little birds disappeared. Higher up something looked like tiny deer going round with a belly ache and their backs all humped up snacking on the foliage. Some tree. Good thing I didn't eat the apple.

"You, Bum!"

Some guy was yelling at me from the back porch of the house overlooking the Garden. It must have been slamming the door scared everything off. It

scared off the squirrel. Not that he was ever about to get anywhere with me anyway.

"Howdy, Friend," I said to this guy.

"What the hell are you doing in my garden?" he demanded without mercy.

I raised my hand to take it all in and make some kind of gesture about it to go with answering his query, but then he pulls out a long stick or something. Something long and hard and tubular. It looked painful.

"Get off my land!" he shouted and come down the steps.

I took leave of my seat and circled round to the exit. We were both moving quicklier and quicklier. He was trying to catch me. He started waving that stick around. Since I'd busted the latch on the gate on my way in, it was easy enough to get out, but he was right behind me, and swinging that stick. I took off across the street. He stopped at the gate. He held the stick up over his head like some kind of tribal totem full of threats and shamanism and danger and told me never to return if I wanted to keep on living.

"Stinking bums!" he offered, with no trace of pity in his mean, slaughtering voice.

Last thing I saw of that garden was a big fence, some nasty old guy in the gate, with that rod in the air. It was bright and shining, sharp red and fiery in the piercing dawn sun light. It looked like a piece of copper pipe, I guessed.

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