

*Jeffrey S. Chapman*

## The Scapegoat

A Mid-American city is dying of drought. Dry summers for five years, and a few more years of below-average precipitation will lead people to be unpleasantly hot. Lawns will turn brown. It can't be allowed.

The Scientists have their theories.

Among their explanations: we live in a desert, droughts are inevitable; global warming patterns have short-term effects that reflect long-term change; we use too much water.

It's all true, but when is the truth helpful? Deserts and global warming are things that people in a Mid-American city can't change. People with water in their basement don't want to be told that they built their houses in a floodplain. People with cracks in their walls don't want to be told about fault lines. People without roofs don't want to be told about hurricanes. That tells you what you did, but not what to do.

Conserve water, the Scientists say.

Isn't that what we're complaining about? the people ask. Not enough water to use? We don't want to stop using water in order to avoid having too little water to use. Our lawns will turn brown.

The scientists say: You only want solutions that involve no pain.

The people say: Yes.

The scientists: Science is obviously not the proper paradigm for the people of a Mid-American city.

The people: True.

The people need an organizing principle, but no one is willing to step up and provide one for fear that it will fail. For fear that the people will grow frustrated, will grow irate, will throw stones and bricks and burning fences. Already the poloi are agitating.

The politicians are powerless to mandate rain. The poets demand but don't receive. The philosophers ideate, but who listens? Who even knows where the philosophers live anymore?

It's the foxy sooth-sayers—who have been reasonable and resigned for ages, waiting for their day—who recognize the opportunity. They have solutions that offer the most people minimal pain, with big pain for a small set of the people.

This city, the chief Soothsayer says. This city is a tooth with a canker. A heart with arrhythmia. A dogwood with moths. A road with sinkholes. A room with a corpse. A melon gone to rot. A bread like a rock. A man with a hole in his noodle. A paper with brown edges. A phallus with a crook.

It is time to purge, he says. If we send away the detritus, we will create an environment conducive to rain. Moisture is fashioned to seek out the good like flame is fashioned to fly upwards to the firmaments. Rain will come.

He *wants* to say: And are you all without fault? Perhaps you should look to yourselves to discover why the rain won't come.

But he understands desire, faith, need. He understands that the people won't want to clean their own houses.

This is his prescription:

He orders the people to bring forth a scapegoat. Of course a virgin. Someone pure of action.

Weeping parents clamor to be the first whose child is selected for honor. They are full of hope and tragic humours.

Eventually the people lead a young scapegoat forward. He is quiet and resigned; a homely boy with brown hair and an awkward mouth. He is rubbing the fabric of his shirt between his thumbs and middle fingers; otherwise he betrays no emotions. The crowd crushes forward to see the cause of their problems. He doesn't look like a problem, they think. It goes to show how looks can be deceiving. What a bastard, the people say.

They yell: Kill him!

Cut his neck with a razor!

He has to die! We can't live if he's still living!

People who were never blood-thirsty find themselves rubbing their fingernails, as if they might be allowed to rip the skin of the young hero over and over and over and over and over. The Soothsayer holds up his hand and says there will be no killing today.

But just kill him, they say.

Idiots! the Soothsayer says, but turns away quickly before he says the wrong thing. How easy it would be to lose control. He puts his hands on the Scapegoat's shoulder in a reassuring manner. He smiles over the crowd.

No killing, he says. No need to kill. What you do with a scapegoat, in order to get rain, is to blind it with a pointed stick from an ash tree. Then you send it, in exile, to the Big Coastal City. On a chartered bus.

Yes! the people yell. Yes yes yes yes yes yes!

The Soothsayer whispers to the Scapegoat: Pigs. Bloodthirsty pirates. They need to be fed something.

The Scapegoat shrugs. He is looking around, looking at shapes in order to

remember them when he is eighty years old. He is looking at colors. He is looking at mouths. At hair. He is looking at his feet. He is looking at mountains, at bricks, at books, at the tar on the street. He is trying to do the looking for the rest of his life. He couldn't have guessed that he would stop looking so early on. If he had known, he would have looked around more. He would have spent his life looking carefully at things. Storing up memories.

The Soothsayer sighs when he pokes out the Scapegoat's eyes. The Scapegoat remains brave. He cries, true, but nobody knows because the blood on his cheeks trumps the tears. He falls to his knees. The people go wild.

Kill him! Kill him now! Kill him already!

Then they hear the first thunderclap. Still faint for being far away, it rolls through the valley, up the side of the mountains and then back into the city, like a wave in a bathtub. The city shivers with the auspicious thump. Another boom. Another.

Goddamnit, the scientists say, who hate to be wrong.

The sky darkens with the advance-guard of the storm and soon the rain curtain hits them. It's not rain that falls, however, but blood. Blood is raining from the sky. Blood has trumped rain. The people chose their paradigm; the world has handed them like.

The Scapegoat, on his knees on the platform, cannot see the browned grass of a Mid-American City washed with blood.