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Words of the Carrion Eaters

David S. Rubenstein

Charlie Endocheeny, squinting against the brilliance of the sky, watched the circling eagle with idle curiosity. Idle, because three months in the high country without another human meant that any distraction, however small, was welcome; and curious, because eagles did not generally stray so close to people as this one was.

Spread out before him on the green mountain slope were nine hundred sheep, give or take. Give the new lambs born into the late winter snow, that were now kicking up their heels with the combined pleasures of youth and summer. Take the ones carried off by wolves, mountain lions, and coyotes. And the ones that the eagles had taken when they were small.

It was virtually impossible to protect them all from predators. There was just himself and Jake and Ramses, his two dogs, between all that fine mutton and the voracious hunger of the high country. It was an on-going battle between him and nature, which he had ultimately come to accept as part of a natural ebb and flow of life in that wild range in which he had spent his last twenty-three summers.

In his youth, when his uncle had first brought him up from the winter grazing lands near his Hogan, he had fought fiercely and frantically to save each animal, and could not understand his uncle's stoicism at a loss. To see a lamb, that he had carried in his arms across washes swollen with spring thaw, torn and bloody in the talons of an eagle or jaws of a coyote, had been like a stake into his soul. But after he had spent a number of seasons with the flock, and learned the rhythms of birth and death, he came to realize that the shepherd could no more hold all the predators at bay than could a sailor stem the tides.

So the speculating eagle did not anger him. For one thing, the lambs were all too big now to be carried away by even the most powerful bird. And for another, it had been a good spring. All the births were live. And the losses had been very low.

Besides, he had always admired the great bird, even in those strident days when he had felt it his mortal enemy. He imagined a shot with the 30-06 which stood nearby, cradled in the cleft of a boulder. He would line up the proud chest, just below the throat, in the cross-hairs of his scope. Lead it, though. A good two-hundred fifty yards. Take at least a half-second to travel the distance.

He'd miss, anyhow. Waste a good cartridge. He could see the bird eyeing him, calculating. It knows I won't waste one at this distance, he thought. It knows me as I know it, he suddenly realized with surprise.

Jake and Ramses were not so trusting, however, and they ranged below the soaring bird, watching for it to stray from its effortless gliding circle. Jake gave a little yip, just as a warning. The eagle floated away, riding the air currents further up the mountain. Charlie watched it dissolve into the whiteness of the distant sky, then shifted his attention to the clouds. Might get some rain in the valley, he speculated. Bet they could use some. His thoughts went to his home, where his father and sister would be thinking of him. He saw their faces turned toward him, and he smiled at the thought, and to tell them that he was all right.

When he returned to the present he saw with a start a turkey buzzard perched on a rock not ten feet from him, locking him in its hideous gaze. In shock he froze with momentary fear at the nearness of so wild and disturbing a creature. He returned its stare, but calculated the distance to his rifle with his peripheral vision. The bird seemed almost to nod its ugly bald head at the thought. No fear showed in its eyes or body language. Where are the dogs, Charlie wondered, speculating as to the possible damage the huge bird might do with its sharp beak and vicious talons. Could probably scratch him up good, before he broke its ugly neck. Maybe that stick, which lay a good five feet closer than the gun... But after a moment, when the initial shock had subsided, he told himself, "it's only a bird." A sudden shout and waving of hands, and it would flee. But hold—a chance to study the creature up front.

His fear now subsided into curiosity, he held his stillness and began to observe the bird with a critical eye. He could see that, in spite of its unattractive head and neck, it was a powerfully-built creature, not unlike the eagle. Its folded wings spoke of grace duration, wind-riders. The chest was full and proud. The beak, hooked like a hawk's, appeared sharp and dangerous. The clawed feet were beautiful weapons of destruction. Charlie had always held disdain and disgust for the vulture. Its ugly countenance in his mind a reflection of its ugly habits. But now, under close scrutiny, he came to tandem realizations simultaneously: the creature's sinister appearance was so perfect as to be attractive in its way, and it was clearly an important player in the cycle of life in the high country.

Then, as the bird held him in its gaze, the wind, a constant companion in the mountains, dropped suddenly, bringing an unaccustomed stillness. And in the quiet, although Charlie struggled vainly to deny it, the bird spoke to him. It spoke in a hoarse, croaking voice, its raptor's beak mouthing the words. It said; "Beware the Higgs Boson at Waxahachie!"

Charlie, who had so recently feared for his physical safety, sank to his knees in fear for his mental health. He struggled with reality, knowing full well that a vulture cannot talk, but challenging his sense to deny that this one had. And as he knelt in muddled shock the bird said again, as if to reinforce the fact of its speech, "Beware the Higgs Boson at Waxahachie!" Then the wind picked up, and the bird turned into it. It spread its great wings and stepped off the rock. With barely a flap, it rose into the sky in gentle spirals. Charlie watched after it in dumb amazement.

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A month later, William Endocheeny, Charlie's maternal uncle, came to the high pasture to bring him supplies and check on his well-being and that of the flock. Charlie, who had become less and less sure of the reality of the incident with the vulture over the passing time, said nothing to his uncle when he had asked about the past months. He spoke of the new lambs, of the weather and the eagles and the coyotes. He talked fondly of the two dogs and their health. He made no mention of the bird.

But that night, as they sat beside a smoldering fire, supper in their bellies and the night breeze blowing away the heat of the day, William said, “I have known you since your birth, Nephew. I brought you here for your first five summers. Something is troubling you. You will feel better if you share it.” He looked closely into Charlie’s stoic face, but could read trouble there.

“There is nothing that you could tell me that I would not accept,” he encouraged. Charlie stirred the coals with a stick, watching the flames leap to the newly-exposed wood. With the Navajo, long silences were not uncomfortable, but the polite way of allowing one person to finish with his thoughts, and the next to frame his response.

His eyes, although turned to the fire, focused on that day some weeks ago when he finally spoke; “An eagle was circling the flock. Close, for me and the dogs being there. I watched it ‘till it was gone. When I looked down, there was a vulture on a rock not ten feet from me.” Here he paused. William waited politely for him to continue. “I did not hear it land,” he said, shaking his head. “It seemed to appear from nowhere.” He turned to his uncle. “Now I am not even sure that it was there.” His uncle waited. “It spoke to me,” Charlie said, his voice barely audible above the whisper of the wind. His uncle’s face registered surprise, but still he did not speak. “It said, ‘Beware of Higgs Boson at Waxahachie.’” His uncle’s eyes widened even more, but still he waited. When it appeared as though Charlie had spoken his piece, William spoke.

“A warning. From a vulture. That is indeed strong medicine.” Not for a moment did he doubt the story. He paused, searching his memory of the history of the Navajo for similar experiences. Recalling none, he asked, “Higgs Boson”? Do you know of such person?”

Charlie shook his head. “I’ve wracked my brain, thinking of everyone I ever knew. Kids in school. Teachers. People from the trading post. Clan. No Higgs Boson.”

“Waxahachie?” William asked.

“Nope. Never heard of the place. You?”

His uncle shook his head. “What happened then?” his uncle asked

“When?”

“After the bird spoke to you.”

“Oh. It said it again. Then it flew away.”

“Same words?”

“Uh huh.” They were silent for some time, each turning the story over in his mind, for William, the first time of many. For Charlie, the ten thousandth time.

Finally William said: “I will tell the story to Old Man Denetsone up at Tuba city.” He looked to Charlie for approval. Charlie thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement. Old Man Denetsone had been the family yitaalii since before he was born. He, like Uncle William, would not suspect Charlie of being crazy. He would tell them what the vision meant. He nodded again, liking the idea.

In October, when William returned to help Charlie move the flock down to the winter grazing lands near their hogans, he told him what the shaman had said.

“At first he said nothing. I went all the way to Tuba City, and he had nothing to say. Told me he would think about it, get back to me.” William was smoking a pipe, its pungent smoke mixing with the wood smoke from the fire. It was night. It had taken William three days to walk up to the high ground, and they would rest a day before starting back down with the flock. “Two weeks later, there was a letter for me at the trading post. From Denetsone. Said to come right away. I drove over there the next day. He was gone when I got there. No one in his Hogan. I slept there the night. Next morning he returned from the hills. He had talked to other yitaalii, he told me. None knew what the vision meant. But one, a Streams Come Together man, remembered a tale that his father had told him, which had sounded similar. He said he would ask his father.”

“The man had visited his father the next week, and returned with this story. He says that in our spoken history, there have been several occurrences of a vulture speaking to a man of the dinee. One spoke of a coming drought. It was said to one of the Ancient Ones. Soon after, the rains ended, and the Ancient Ones had to return to the other world because they could not grow crops.”

“The Anasazi?” Charlie asked. His uncle shrugged, lifting his shoulders slightly and letting them fall. “The next one the old man retold was a warning about a vast pale tribe coming from across the great waters. Just before Columbus, it turns out.” Charlie nodded to himself.

“The last one was fairly recent. It was said to a Running Water man about fifty years ago. Nineteen forty. It was told by that man to this yitaalii. The bird said to that man, ‘Beware of Fat Man and Little Boy at Los Alamos.’”

Charlie repeated the words to himself, then shook his head. “What does that mean?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Old Man Denetsone didn’t know. The man who heard the words from the vulture didn’t know either.” They played with the words, turning them this way and that for the next hour, but could not find the meaning.

“I’ll ask my cousin Anna,” Charlie finally said. His cousin taught high school at Ship Rock, and had been to college. His uncle, who distrusted *belagana*, preferring instead to consult with the wise men of his own people, neither approved or disapproved. Anna was, of course, of the clan, but her knowledge was pure white man’s.

A month later, after they had moved the flock to the low country near their Hogan, and there were other family members to help watch over them, Charlie took his pickup truck to Ship Rock to see his cousin. He waited until classes were over, then went to her room.

“Hello, Anna,” he said, surprising her as she sat at her desk grading papers.

“Charlie!” she cried, and jumped up to give him a big hug “Just back from the high country?”

“Yes. In 1940.”

“And what happened?”

“Nothing, apparently. Nobody knew a ‘Fat Man’ or ‘Little Boy,’ or what to fear from them.” They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating what they had just discovered.

“So,” Charlie said, trying to make sense of what had happened to him, “The warning was to somehow stop the bombing of Japan? Or the development of nuclear weapons?” Anna shrugged.

“Maybe. But the thing is, some spirit told me the dinee take precautions before some pretty cataclysmic events in our world. And evidently we were too ignorant or apathetic to heed the warnings.”

“But what could we have done? Against drought? Against Columbus? Against nuclear weapons?”

“Plenty,” Anna said jumping to her feet and pacing the front of the classroom, as Charlie guessed she did during her lectures. “Build reservoirs against the drought. Dig canals for irrigation. We knew how. The Aztecs did it not three hundred miles south of here. Unite all the tribes of North America against the Europeans. Shine the light of justice of Los Alamos. Something. If only we had understood the warnings.”

“So why me?” Charlie asked in bewilderment. “I’m just an ignorant sheep herder. Why not appear to a great yitaalii, or someone with learning like yourself, who would understand?”

“You understood enough to come seeking guidance. Perhaps you are chosen to follow up on the warning.”

Charlie thought about this carefully. He was gratified that others had apparently been delivered messages via the same medium. He’d worried about his sanity. But he had carried the message forward. In his more accepting moods, he saw himself at most a messenger. Deliver the words, go back to his flock. But Anna’s suggestion that he was somehow chosen to fight the fight – that thought hadn’t occurred to him.

“We go to the library,” Anna replied, and she immediately led him through the deserted hallways to the school library. Charlie stood watching over her shoulder as she went through various reference manuals. Looking for “Boson, Higgs.”

“Try Waxahachie,” Charlie suggested after thirty minutes of failure. She did. And in the second *Reader’s Guide to the Periodic Literature*, she said quietly, “Bingo.” There were several dozen listing of articles about a place called “Waxahachie.” Anna wrote down the dates of several magazines to which she knew the library subscribed, and when into the archives, Charlie following close behind. In a cabinet labeled “Newsweek”, she found the issue on her slip of paper, pulled out a reading shelf and opened the magazine on it. “Page 47,” she said, flipping the pages. “Here it is. Oh!”

“What?” Charlie demanded, reading over her shoulder, but understanding little.

“The super-conducting super-collider! I thought that sounded familiar. That’s where they’re building the super-collider! Waxahachie!”

“So,” Charlie asked, feeling stupid, “What’s a super-whatever super collider?”

“An atom-smasher. Where they smash atoms together to try to find new pieces of matter. And the super-collider is going to be the largest most powerful atom smasher ever.” Charlie began to feel more dread than ever. Here indeed was another possibly momentous event in human history, and he was somehow to become involved in stopping it. He looked at the pictures in the magazine, at the immense aerial view, and the cavernous under-ground tubes already dug. What could one shepherd do against such powerful forces? But Anna was reading on, skimming for mention of Higgs Boson. The first article did not mention it, so she returned the magazine and located a second. It, too, failed to discuss Higgs Boson, so she moved on to a third. An hour later, having exhausted the list of articles, she came to Charlie, who sat watching her at a reading table.

“No luck,” she said needlessly.

“I’m starved,” Charlie responded. “Let’s go eat.”

They didn’t speak until the meal had been ordered. Charlie buttered the bread the waitress had left and wolfed it down. Then he buttered another. With his mouth full he asked Anna, “Where do we from here?” She frowned.

“I guess we ask Paul D’Orio. He’s the physics teacher. I’m guessing that Higgs Boson has something to do with the research planned for the super-collider. If he does, Paul will know of him.”

“And if not?” Charlie asked.

“If not, we look elsewhere,” she assured him. “We’ll find Mr. Boson.” Her confidence bolstered him, and he ate with gusto.

That night Charlie slept on Anna’s couch. In the morning they went together to school, and found Paul D’Orio in his classroom before the start of classes.

“Higgs Boson?” he asked, interested. “Sure. It’s a theoretical particle, or force, which some think will tie together the universal theory of particle physics.”

“It’s a particle?” Anna asked, surprised. “Like an electron or proton or something?”

“Right. But smaller.” Anna and Charlie exchanged looks of confusion.

“They hope to prove its existence with the new super-collider,” D’Orio added, seeing their concern. The first period bell rang then, and Anna glanced anxiously at the clock.

“Can you recommend a book or article that would explain the issue to a layperson?”

“Sure can,” D’Orio said. “Matter of fact, I’ve got a good one here.” He went to a shelf and quickly found a paperback. “Here. You’re welcome to borrow this.”

Charlie and Anna thanked him and hurried into the hall.

“I’ll read this,” Charlie told her. “Pick you up after school.” And he walked toward the door, his nose already buried in the book.

After school, Anna was expecting to see Charlie in her room. When he didn’t appear, she went outside. His pickup truck was parked in front, and when she approached, she found him oblivious to the world, still reading the book. The windows were open, letting the cool fall breeze ripple the pages. For a man used to living out of doors, any enclosed place was uncomfortable.

“Charlie,” she said gently, not wishing to startle him.

He looked up. When he saw her he lifted his wrist to view his watch.

“Is it that time already? I’m sorry.” He sat up, suddenly realizing the pain in his back. Wincing, he stretched it out. “I lost track of the time,” he apologized.

“No problem,” Anna said with amusement. “So what’s with Mr. Higgs and his Boson?”

“Well,” Charlie said, running his hand through his hair to push it from his face, “it’s like Mr. Whatsisname, the physics teacher?”

“D’Orio”

“Yeah. Like Mr. D’Orio said, it’s a theoretical particle that they think is going to finish up the nice little suite of pieces in the big puzzle.”

Anna frowned. “So what could be wrong with finding the thing?”

Charlie shrugged. “Beats me. Maybe they can make some super duper new bomb from it. The Higgs Bomb. Maybe one Higgs bomb can vaporize the world.”

“Does the book suggest that such a thing is possible?”

“No. Doesn’t mention any practical application. If a bomb can be considered practical.”

Anna got into the truck and took the book. She sat staring at the cover.

“There is something...” Charlie said after a moment.

She looked at him, questioning.

“This Higgs Boson. It’s one of those things they think could be a particle, could be a force field.”

Anna nodded uncertainly.

“Well, the sense I get from reading about it, even though it never came right out and said as much, is that they think all the particles we know, the ones identified already, that make up everything in the universe, that they are all just places on waves of this force field. Like, depending on where on the wave or where the two waves cross.”

Anna looked at him, not comprehending.

“It means to me that nothing is real,” he said. “Even the hardest rock is no more than a jumble of invisible waves.” He shook his head. “It’s like... like, discovering that the Rocky Mountains are made of wind.”

Anna sat silently, trying to imagine a world without substance. She looked instinctively toward the towering shape of Ship Rock, the formation that dominated the landscape to the south west. She had been there several times, as had most Navajo, for it was an important symbol in their culture. Wind? She shook her head.

“No,” she said suddenly. “The earth is here. It is solid and substantial. We can’t let them take that away.”

Charlie looked at her, surprised at her vehemence. “Yes,” he agreed carefully, “but, knowing or not knowing will not change things. Just because we understand, we don’t make it so. We only... understand.” He shrugged.

“But with the Belagana, understanding is the portal to perverting. IF they learn its secrets, they will abuse it.” She turned to him, suddenly panicked. “You’ve got to stop them!”

Charlie took her two hands, and spoke softly. "Stop who? From doing what? I can't stop learning. You, a teacher, couldn't really want that, anyway."

"But the message. The bird! Every time we failed to act on its warning, something catastrophic has happened."

"But do you really think we can stop progress? And if we can, at what cost?"

But Anna persisted stubbornly.

"You were given a directive from the spirits. You've got to do something!" Charlie was staring out the window, his mind in the high country.

"I'm a shepherd. I know sheep. I know nothing atom smashers and particle theory. Sheep."

"We'll go to the yitaali. They will tell you what you must do. She got out of the truck. "I'll finish up inside. Then we'll call Hosteen Denetsone."

She turned to Charlie, leaning through the opened driver's side window. Her expression sought concurrence.

"I don't know," he said

"Think about it," she said. "I'll meet you at my place in an hour." She was gone.

Charlie thought. He thought about droughts, and Columbus, and atom bombs. He thought about buzzards and eagles and sheep. He thought about the mountains and the wind. After many thoughts, he turned the ignition switch. Later, when Anna pulled up to her house, she was concerned to see that Charlie's pickup truck was not there. But a note on her front door was visible from the street. Leaving her books in the car, its door ajar and key-alarm rasping irritatingly, she hurried to the house and pulled the note from the door.

In Charlie's difficult print, it said simply, "To try to keep people from wanting to learn would be like trying to keep the eagle from wanting sheep. It's their nature. I'm going back to the hills."

She read the note again, then crumpled it up and threw it to the parched ground. A gust of wind picked it up there, and carried it away.