

# **The Serpent's Utopia**

C. A. Grady, July 2025

When the trains whistle, they whistle for me.

They arrive daily, precisely when the sun hangs at the highest point of the sky, when its rays have finished drying its morning dew, sweating the dew out of me instead. The first drop beads down my forehead, the taste of salt and wonder fresh on my lips when I smile wide, hearing the whistle.

When I was little, I would run through the plains, giddy and fresh-eyed, curious about the little wonders this great world has to offer. So many treasures, so much to discover! The earth listened to me, its leaves following the wind of my run, the breeze as delighted as the briskness of my steps.

“What is that noise?” I asked the Serpent, small hand pointing to the unknown shadows of the machine beyond the hills.

The Serpent, with love gleaming in its golden eyes, slithered down the tree and said, “I will tell you when you are older, child.”

I am older now. My limbs are as long and spindly as the healthiest fruit-bearing branch. My chest aches with knots of hardy muscles and the unquenchable desire to expand outwards. Every day, I prowl these hills, enjoying the fruit of my labor: figs, and apricots, and sweet nectarines. I would collect chestnuts and dig up tubers, then pluck grapes and olives and dates. Sweet juices run down my fingers, then down my arm, until I am hot and sticky and require a cleansing. I would float down the river, the cold water a welcoming embrace under the cloudless sky. Rinse and repeat, always interrupted by the same whistling, at the same time.

I ignored it, at first. I ignored it much like how I ignored the birds' song when I young and undeveloped. Wisdom has taught me that the world is alive: the bird sings, but only at certain trees; the trees spread for life, but only at certain spots; the earth leaves room for its forest, but only when the soil allows. Water falls from the sky, but where does it come from? The river runs through my toes, rinsing the soil from my feet while being the same water that I drink. I am only one part of this earth, one part of this wonderfully complex web of life.

So what, then, is the machine without life, and where does it fall within this web? The spider does not know what to do when a mysterious unknown object lands on its web. It would use its senses to deem it non-prey, then move on with its spider life. I, as man, use my senses to know this machine is non-prey, but I am inclined to understand more.

“What is that noise?” I ask the Serpent again, for I can no longer ignore the daily whistle that calls to me.

“You are old enough now, child,” the Serpent says, golden eyes deep with timeless wisdom and age. “The noise you hear is a train, a reminder of a more complex world. This land of yours is protected. Here, you may live comfortably, free of evils and suffering the complex world brings. Should you wish to leave, you may do so by boarding the train. But you may never return.”

I watch the Serpent slither down my feet, grounding me. “What is in the complex world?” I ask.

The Serpent replies, “Death, pain, and uncertainty. There is constant work with no resolution, only chaos. With great depths of sorrow, there is also light: there is love, joy, and wonder. You will find others like you, and others who are not like you. There are friendships and enemies, hands that hold you, and hands that strike you. Meaning is not given to you like it is here. You must find it—and many do not, living with a limited understanding about themselves and the world.”

I frown. “Why would anyone want to live in a world like that?”

The Serpent looks up at me and does not answer.

Days turn to nights turn to days turn to nights. I follow the breeze of the birds’ songs from the pomegranate trees that bear fruit without labor. I pluck each seed and let its juices run down my skin so I may wash it away in the forgiving river, so I may drink the forgiving waters and remember my place: here, where the land is free, where the sky kisses the grass that lulls me to sleep, where I am one with the earth and the earth welcomes me with comfort and delight.

Every day, I float down the river and hear the train’s whistle. Every day, I remember the Serpent’s words. I remember it as I bite into fruit that loses more sweetness with each passing day. If meaning is given without choice, then can it be lost, for there was no struggle? I do not know, for I do not understand what the Serpent means by death, pain, or uncertainty—but I do understand wonder, and how overwhelming joy would come from my beginning struggles of mapping the fruit trees, the vast grasslands, and the singing birds. Indeed, I have grown comfortable, overcoming struggle and now coming to expect each creature, each fruit, each seed. As I bite into a nectarine, I wonder if it is sweetness I truly taste, or if it is the expectation of sweetness that I perceive to taste. I do not know, for I have never eaten a rotten nectarine.

Nights turn to days turn to nights turn to days. I have stalked every bird, every mouse, every frog. I have found every ant hill, every butterfly on every flower. I have talked to every tree, witnessed every leaf blowing in the wind. Fruit tastes no different from nuts, and the river no longer feels cold.

And still, every day, the train calls to me, never late.

“I understand,” I say to the Serpent, as I rest against the shady tree. “I understand the temptation to seek newness, far from comfort.”

Dangling from a branch, the Serpent looks at me with a curious glint, head tilt, and tongue flick. “I assure you, child,” the Serpent says, “you cannot understand.”

I consider the possibility. “What is death, pain, and uncertainty?” I ask.

The Serpent replies, “Death is the loss of a being, item, or event of our affections. Pain is the feeling of discomfort from a death. Uncertainty is not knowing when a death will happen.”

The Serpent is right. I cannot understand, for nothing dies here.

The sun disappears, but it does not die, because it always returns. The trees lose its leaves, but it does not die, because they always return. The birds fly away, but they do not die, because they always return. I only understand life as a cycle, and therefore, I cannot understand death.

This does not stop me from contemplating and imagining. What if the sun loses its radiance? What if the leaves remain wilted? What if the birds do not return? Would this loss bring about discomfort and pain? Is this feeling universal, or only for me? Would the tree, perhaps, feel pained in the silence left behind by avian death? Would the tree, perhaps, harbor uncertainty when less birds choose its branch to sing? Perhaps if I were a tree, I can better understand.

“Serpent,” I call, “what is it like to live amongst men?”

“I do not know. I only have you, child.” The Serpent droops lower, golden beady eyes holding mine. “Would you like to live amongst men?”

“I do not know,” I say. “I only have you, Serpent.”

Suns turn to moons turn to suns turn to moons. My body moves on its own, but I am elsewhere, creating a myth. Imagine: men, like me, eating fruits, like these, together. Perhaps I am only one bird out of a song of many, creating a beautiful melody in harmony—or perhaps our songs are discordant.

Perhaps I am a dove in a family of ravens, or a raven in a family of doves. Doves and ravens do not sing together, and they do not quarrel. Doves quarrel with other doves, and ravens with other ravens—and yet, they are both birds. I spend days and nights pondering this, imagining man as a bird like ravens and doves. Perhaps if I were a bird, I can better understand. Perhaps if I were not the only man, I can better understand.

The whistling begins to take the shape of words, now: “You are not alone,” it screeches. “Find us.”

Moons turn to suns turn to moons turn to suns. I no longer listen to birds, no longer chase mice, no longer capture frogs. I hardly see the ant hills and the butterflies and the flowers. Trees are a shady recourse from the relentless sun, and bathing in the river has become a nuisance.

I only listen to the train. I only talk to the Serpent.

“Yes, child?” the Serpent prods when I say nothing, only frowning. “What is your affliction?”

“I am no longer a child, Serpent. I am a man.”

The Serpent says nothing back.

“Serpent,” I continue, “I would like to board the train.”

The Serpent coils in front of me, thin body lifting into the air to meet my gaze. The eyes are stony, stoic. “Do you understand you may never return?”

“Yes,” I say gravely. “I understand.”

“Very well.”

The Serpent slithers away and never returns.

I only listen to the train, now. I only talk to the train.

“Find us,” it howls when the sun harshly looks down upon me. “Meet me.”

I venture toward the unknown shadows of the machine beyond the hills. There is a skip in my step, at first; then it grows heavy, slow, like a weight pulling me back into the earth. I grow heavier and heavier, a dull ache sitting limp against my chest. My breath turns sharp and shallow. I stop.

The sky is gray, the sun resting behind a blanket of clouds. The grass is yellow, covered in patches of dirt. There is only the solemn call of the breeze, weakly pushing me backwards.

The next day, the sky remains gray, the grass remains yellow, and the breeze has died. I feel the pain of its loss, the heat exhaustion heavy in my body. The weight grows larger, the

ache spreading to every limb and every pore as I trek these hills alone. I wish to call for the Serpent, but the desire dies on my lips.

I must find this train.

“Meet me,” it shrieks. “You are close.”

I now know how rotten nectarine tastes. The trees here are decayed, black and wet and hollowed out. Disgust rolls off my tongue and assaults my nose. These blackened hills are disgusting and unpleasant, with no clean waters to wash away the filth. Hunger gnaws against the wake of aches, bubbling into uncertainty.

“You are close,” the train screams. “You are here.”

I have not seen the sun in days. Black plumes of smoke hack and huff from the train until I no longer see sky at all. I run, and I run, and I run—weak, coughing, and, perhaps, close to death. But I would rather risk dying than risk one more death of this train.

Behold, man’s machine: black, bold, and breathing, bounding forward, only forward. And yet, it calls to me, stops for me. It moans mechanically, sighing in pain, uncertain that I would board.

My eyes sting in the pollution, barely seeing the open compartment welcoming me inside. It is made of a material I do not recognize: polished, matte, and, upon touch, smooth and gentle. Thirsty tears well in my eyes as I muster the rest of my strength to hoist myself up. The machine groans, then rolls forward, slowly at first, then gaining speed and noise.

Black spots float in my vision. Sleep weighs heavily upon my eyelids. I no longer feel my aching pains or the pit of hunger. I only wish for a long, black sleep.

My hand aimlessly reaches for something to hold. It falls upon a sack of soft objects. I squeeze my fingers and feel squishy flesh. I open my eyes and see that I am holding a ripe, fresh, sweet nectarine.

Tears fall down my cheeks, and I laugh. I laugh, and laugh, and laugh, crying, and crying, and crying as I devour each sweet fruit, savoring the sweetness and joy packed oh-so-densely in such a small thing! Oh, happy day, to be blessed by such generosity, the nectarous flavor, the end of aches! How wonderful! How wonderful, how lovely, how joyous!

Tears mix with sweet juices until I am sticky with sleep. Pits scattered about, I close my eyes smiling, accepting the death of my past life, and the uncertainty of this new one.