

FLARE AND FALTER

Michael Conley

"Conley walks the difficult tightrope between darkness and humour; he is an exciting up-and-coming talent whose work deserves serious praise."

Claire Askew
author of *This Changes Things*



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The God Quetzalcoatl Has Retired and Now Runs a Pub in South Manchester

HE LIKES THIS NEW WORK: granting, recurrently, the single recurring prayer of the drunk; the way the sallow light drags ruby through the bottom of a pint of stout. He loves the early afternoon lull, the heavy silence punctuated only by the occasional cough or the bright jangle of the fruit machine. Even the stench of the gents' toilets, which he has never been able to fully eliminate, is at least honest. The days are so still he's forgetting what it was like to be a god. Lots of heat, a little light. Smug superiority. Unmanageable mood swings.

In his last clear memory of Tenochtitlan, he is weak and sick: as his people succumb to Spanish thunder, they inevitably lose the faith that sustains him. The conquistadors toast their victory in the sizzling night. His last loyal High Priest hurriedly sews together a working human body from the butchered remains on the streets and then leaps, jacketed in flames, from the sacked city's tallest tower. He inhabits the body: not quite like putting on clothes, more like a puppeteer insinuating himself between the cells of a puppet and learning to master woodenness. Then one final choice before his omnipotence disappears forever—a time and a place, far from here.

He wakes up, naked, on the pool table of the Three Arrows, a crowd of people laughing at him. They think he's the new owner and estimate that he's in his late fifties, and he doesn't contradict them. That was three months ago. He's decided on an English name he can give in case anybody asks, but nobody has yet.

If the first adjustment to being mortal is to fear death, the second is learning to ignore that fear, reducing it to a perpetual but faraway alarm. He can't believe how often his body reminds him of its own meatiness, its slow decay, but he quickly picks up the ways to mask or delay it: toothpaste, hair dye, deodorant, wet wipes. Everything else is easy. He acquired the essentials of the language within days, though even now there are those who narrow their eyes and ask if that's a hint of foreign they detect in his accent. He smiles enigmatically.

Sometimes they make him put the football on. His favourite camera angle is the one from above, where the men are twenty-two blobs of colour and you can watch them swirl like phosphenes. Then he discovers PlayerCam: pressing the red button to follow just one footballer for the whole match. He always selects Rooney; he admires that straightforward ugliness, the loosely-tethered simmering violence. He likes it when Rooney is watching and chasing something off-screen, when Rooney receives the ball, looks up, releases it again, receives the ball, looks up, releases it again. He doesn't care where the ball is when it's not in Rooney's orbit. He dismisses any complaints, doesn't understand: if you don't want to watch Rooney, why do you keep singing his name?

Neither do they understand him. They suggest that he's lonely, that getting a dog might help. He's directed to www.failed-guide-dogs.org.uk, where he scrolls through pictures of the weak of heart, the distractible, the slow learners. Losers in a game they didn't realise they were playing. Some of them aren't even looking into the camera for their photographs. They probably all think their noses are just as wet, their coats just as glossy as the other,

more successful dogs'. He clicks on a picture of Axel, who *has no eyes but does not let this affect any aspect of his life*. He finds Axel's attitude unquestionably admirable, but he imagines waking up to discover the dog sitting at the top of the stairs, stinking tongue hanging out, black sockets fixated inaccurately upon him, tail thumping on the landing, every day until one of them is dead. The thought repulses him.

After he made it clear that the dog was a no-go, they started trying to find him a partner. He has no desire to share his bed with the dead weight of another body, and he doesn't need help sharing out domestic tasks. Eventually, he buys a picture frame and leaves the stock photograph in it: a black-and-white headshot of a dark-haired woman in her early forties, lip curled up over her top teeth in a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. He names her Shirley after a Billy Bragg song on the jukebox. Now whenever anyone tries to hint about their lonely friend or family member, he shrugs, nods to Shirley, and leaves a pause. He doesn't know what conclusions they reach but it tends to work. He wants them to think it's complicated: over, but not his fault, and not because he harmed her or anything. He doesn't think he would ever have harmed Shirley.

When the general election arrives, he regards the concept of democracy with interest, and, with all the experience of a former god, he concludes it's a stupid idea. There's a man in his pub who comes in every day and stands beneath the dartboard with his dog and a pint of mild. The man breathes loudly through a partially blocked nose but he never speaks, except when someone asks him to move because they want to play darts, in which case he tells them to fuck off. That man's vote counts exactly the same as everybody else's.

He doesn't think much of either main party, but he does notice that the most objectionable people in the pub all seem to belong to the same side, so he registers in order to vote for their

opponents. He marks his x with a pencil tied to a piece of string; in the privacy of a booth, as though it's dirty behaviour. He looks at the pencil, the string. How can we be trusted to elect leaders if we can't be trusted not to walk off with the fucking pencil? He rips the ballot paper into several pieces and tosses it in the air. He kicks at an adorably tiny plastic chair as he stalks out of the primary school. It skitters across the hall and collides with a display of many carefully cut out and coloured-in disembodied hands. He doesn't even watch the results on TV.

Someone is hacked to death outside his pub during the night, but the murder has nothing to do with the election. The police don't tell him much, and he has to leave the dark stains on the wall and pavement for a few days before they allow him to hire a steam cleaner. It makes the local papers, and now his pub is that pub someone was hacked to death outside. The regulars still come but he doesn't see any new faces for a while.

He starts having nightmares, all on the same theme: sometimes he's the murderer, feeling the buttery yield of flesh to machete, sometimes the victim, trying and failing to keep from spilling himself all over the concrete. One time, he's the High Priest back home, sinking the obsidian knife into the chest of the virgin and squinting at the clouds as he lifts out the dripping heart. Whenever the dreams jolt him awake, he invents a happy childhood for himself, a mother with a lavender scent, and pretends to recall the sound of her lullabies.

At these moments, he does regret that there is nobody he feels he can talk to about his situation. He reads in a supermarket magazine that there is a woman in Leeds who claims to be the mortal incarnation of Pallas Athene, the Ancient Greek goddess of wisdom. There is a photograph of her standing on a crate in Leeds city centre and, just from the look of her, he finds it hard to believe her claims to divinity, but then again, he isn't much to look at himself these days either.

He catches the train to Leeds and finds her crate. She is wearing an off-white bedsheet fastened at the shoulder with a golden brooch. People walk by without even looking as she shakes her shrivelled pomegranate fists at them. He smiles at her and holds out his hand. Imperiously, she takes it and steps off the crate. He looks into her eyes. It's immediately very clear to him that she is not Pallas Athene or any other deity of any stature.

He buys her a coffee anyway. He tells her he is the mortal incarnation of Quetzalcoatl, the Mesoamerican god of wind and learning. She nods. He asks if she'd like something to eat. She orders a teacake. He asks if there is anything she'd like to know. She pauses, shakes her head. Then she asks him how many times he thinks the world has been destroyed by wind, flood, fire, then re-created again from nothing. He says that as far as he knows this is the fifth time, but he can't be sure. She nods again and seems content. He wonders if claiming to be the "mortal incarnation" of the god Quetzalcoatl is even accurate any more. It seems a very long time ago and he feels tired. Pallas Athene offers him a bite of her teacake. They part as friends and he helps her back up onto her crate.

On a whim, he decides to abandon the pub, and instead gets a taxi to the airport. He arrives in Acapulco in the early hours of the morning and finds himself on the beach. Miles of bleached sand, no reference points. He thinks of staging a photograph: he'll dangle his thumb close to the camera lens while someone far away looks up in terror, as if a giant sky-thumb is crushing them. But he's alone. Instead, as the sun rises, he takes a photo of a bird flying towards him, which is either very large and in the distance or very small and almost upon him.

As the sun climbs higher into the sky, the beach fills up with bathers. He buys a towel and a cheap paperback from the hawkers along the esplanade. He wriggles on the towel all morning, trying to read his novel, arms like pink swan throats. On his back, the

craning gives him neckache and he's conscious of passersby glancing at the squat beanbag of his genitals inside his underpants. On his front, the sand chafes his elbows and the glare on the white pages makes him squint. On his side, he has to balance the novel and it keeps falling over. Teenage divers shout from a tall sea stack. He wishes them a rocky landing. In the distance, motorboats skitter across the bay like mayflies. He gives in and takes the six-hour bus ride to Mexico City.

He uses a consumer review website to find somewhere good for an evening meal. He scrolls through all the one-star reviews he can find for hotels and restaurants in Mexico City. On the page of a well-known hotel chain, the management seems to have been employing a customer service liaison to address the complaints.

Complaint: *While we were trying to relax in the jacuzzi, we overheard some contractors shouting insults to one another.*

Complaint: *We waited ten minutes for a valet and in the end just unloaded the car ourselves. When we complained to a manager, he looked at us rudely, saying nothing, which left us feeling angry and humiliated.*

Complaint: *When we paid our bill in cash, the lady ostentatiously checked that our money was not counterfeit.*

After a while, this becomes exhausting.

Complaint: *The smoke detector in our room was covered with what appeared to be a shower cap.*

On the page for a cheap place just off the Zocalo he comes across this three-star post from Don H: *Try the scallop ceviche. Nana had tacos which she shared with me. It was so nice to be out together.*

He feels a sudden rush of love for Don H. He clicks on the profile but apart from one thumbnail of a white, middle-aged man with glasses, he finds only this review. There is nothing on social media either. He rushes to the restaurant. The waitress says she doesn't know any Don H and she doesn't recognise the man in the

picture. He orders the scallop ceviche. It's the best thing he's ever tasted.

Later, in the hotel, he picks up a leaflet for a guided tour of the ruins of Tenochtitlan. He studies the black and white picture of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. He barely recognises it. Tomorrow he will climb it and lie on its flat top, feeling the warmed stone prick his skin. For now, he insists upon a city view room, where he can see a pharmacy, a German pancake house, and, as night settles, the anonymous yellow city lights which, for the most part, wink out in the early hours, it not being a weekend or public holiday.