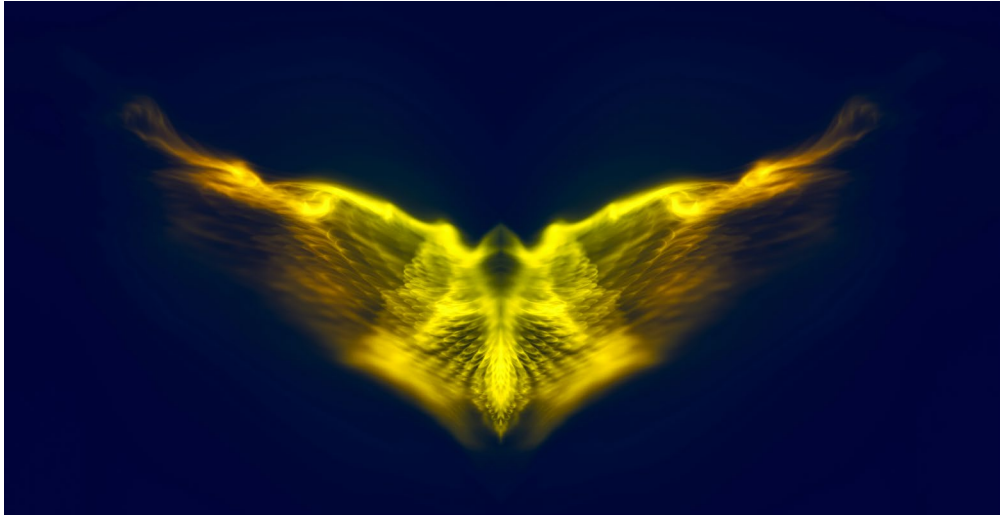


Credit



I am Jesus of the credit cards. This is what I do: I give away money – or at least I try to.

I give away credit cards to those I deem worthy. I find these people on my daily strolls through the city, this sad city, the first in our previously overconfident world to begin being abandoned. A city that will become deserted soon. Dire predictions.

So I figure a wee spending spree is in order. A final fling of irresponsibility.

The cards are Visa Gold cards with a \$150,000 limit. They are fresh and new and viable. True story!

All my recipients need to do is sign one (not always an easy thing), and get to work. Spending, that is. If the mood takes them.

Surprisingly, not everyone takes me up on this offer. Is it too good to be true? Do I appear suspicious? Is my natural generosity impossibly naïve? Or has the climate of giving changed so completely?

Some are taken, but the offer of unbridled spending never taken up. If it is natural politeness to accept the gift, what is the imperative that then sees these cards unused? But this is not my concern.

My concern is simply the giving. And some people do take. And some do spend.

I have a seemingly endless supply of these cards. I'll tell you later from whence they come. You can then decide the morality of it all. Such is the duty of the reader.

All I can say for now, is the money is real; and is there to be spent. And there are still things in this city for it to be spent on. If not the means to use them, or move them.

The cards are lovely, resplendent in their jewel-like livery.

Each card is in a snug UV-resistant plastic folder. None have seen the sun yet. Their colours are still intense, enthusiastic, un-faded. Gold (almost real), and saturated spending colours: rich orange, rich beyond imagination, white, a regal, retail white of expectation, and a heavenly singing blue.

The holograph watermarks on the cards reveal a miniature eagle in silvered rainbow colours. Turn them over, and you'll find an inviting, flat white stripe. All it takes is your signature, with a willing ball point pen, and a firm

hand. Though there's not really enough space for a signature with real flourish. Do that with the spending rather.

There are those who say this remote city never had any business being here. An uninhabitable interior. A scalded coastline. A merciless sky. And always, time running out.

At first everyone said the weather was perfect. Then it became more so. So much more so that it became less so. And still we hung on. We weren't going to change, while bigger things did. Everything started costing more, of course, but we hung on.

Because there was all that stuff, underground, in the hinterland, that could only become wealth if it was dug up. And so it was. At great profit, initially; at great expense now.

But in the nature of these things, the stuff runs out, eventually. Except, it seems, this unnatural warmth.

And we are left with money – credit – that needs to be spent. And we are left with people, drifting, deciding where to go. What to denude next. The must be more mines elsewhere in the world. More holes to be dug. (No, that's unfair: people are just concerned with feeding themselves, clothing themselves, housing their family. We don't look beyond that, do we?)

And we are left with shops, having sales, the *One Last Bumper Clearance Sales*, that beg to have merchandise lifted. And shifted. To keep the pretence going a little while longer.

They – the shops – beg for the cards, of which I have many. And for people to have and to hold the cards, of which there are a diminishing number.

And so I provide. I am Jesus of the credit cards.



Today I am walking through a fresh parkland. It is by the river. The lawns are radiant, an incongruent greenness. Somehow, the drip irrigation is still working here. The river is still fresh – ish. (just look at the haze of heat and smoke on the horizon, the sere colour of both earth and sky). The sea breeze in the shade of these well-watered trees speaks in a languid language of love. It's approaching midday; the notion of lunch begins to jig a thousand trip-switches in the bellies of all these people I love.

A family lolls about near a tent. This is the time when there are still enough people in the city to safeguard property; but also the time when evictions are on the increase. This is the tipping of a balance.

So we have the uneasy balance of homes, empty, and still un-broken into, and families living in tents. Nice tents, just like bought ones. There's a giddy air of holidays. This is before the real shock of being real refugees sets in.

Kids, young, five-ish, play a tumbling game. Adults seem as background shadows. A bent woman in the tent. A man walking away – towards? – the site. It's hard to tell in the glare.

Are they worthy, I wonder? They look well fed. They appear happy – almost on holiday. I see fishing rods, bicycles, a camping stove. Much of their equipment has more permanence than camping would suggest. Maybe they are in motion – already in transit from home to a new place. If they had petrol. There is a bookshelf visible in the fly of the tent. A solid wardrobe. Stuff has run out; but not everything.

I leave them be. No card as yet. Jesus has made her decision.

*

City fathers are perplexed. What to do with this new phenomenon? A city sliding.

It takes so long. A slow city-sliding. Inertia. But an inertia that's once overcome, becomes a gathering, unstoppable momentum.

I have been giving away credit cards for three years now, and nearly seventeen million dollars have been spent. I know it doesn't sound like much in the giant crucible of a city. But it was me. Just me. One me. And it was individual buyers, just buying things they thought they'd need. Not counting those who never used them.

*

Today I am walking in a contrary direction. Against the wind that always blows here. This wind is unnaturally strong so early in the day. They used to call it The Doctor.

I'm going down to the docks. There are always potential recipients there.

He is just waking when I come to him, stretching luxuriously beside a lean-to under the great river bridge. Above the new high tide mark. His bed, I see, is a Sealy double mattress, still in showroom plastic. Last night's looting.

He has no door. Tonight's loot, perhaps?

Is he worthy? Yes, I judge, for I see no food, no means of preparing it. Mostly, I see he has no company.

His only luxuries are his early morning yawns and stretching.

*

The life of a lonely jesus is not all beer and skittles.

I have no company in those long and lonely hours executing my card programme. The nights I'm counting, ordering, filing, planning, monitoring. The complicated ritual of moving money. The communion with this screen. So much online. So little love, or living. That is perhaps why I crave the human transaction of giving. I live for the fleeting touch of fingers, as cards slip from my hands to theirs.

But there's all this after-hours work. I barely have time to flash my own card. I live on an excuse for food, from a deli that does not deserve to bear that name.

But nothing is as it was. Even for jesuses.

*

Shoes. Good shoes are important. It always gives me a frisson of pride, to see my recipients investing in quality footwear. It's the proper order of priorities, I reckon, to start with your point of connection with the pliant earth. (Or the tired, sated earth, whatever your viewpoint)

Yes, good, I think, when I see them buy strong, serviceable shoes. These shoes are important. They will get you places when all else fails. The shoes, and our capacity for moving on, for always moving on.

*

He stops his yawn mid-yawn, he stops his stretch mid-stretch. He looks at me, elbows akimbo, fists near his cheeks, kindly, quizzically. It's the look of a practised saviour.

This flusters me. I am – even now – still unused to this.

The opening lines are still so awkward. Knowing when to stop talking, and reach for the pocket. All appears suspect in these suspicious times.

He stops, holds pose, and waits for me to speak.

*

Turns out he has food – or rather catches it. Fresh fish. Pilfered loaves. An outdoor oven behind a factory wall, under the shade of a great lemon tree. He likes his food separated from his house – the walk does you good, he says. I note he has old, broken shoes.

What is he? He's a juggler. He gives a free riverbank show to those passing, those leaving; one last sight, a man, alone, juggling lemons by the side of their river.

The stately ships, these new mutant clippers of this reduced age, glide powerlessly outwards on the tide, their masts threading through the broken bridge. Their railings are lined with the leaving people, strangely muted as they watch the banks flow past. There is a new kind of timeframe to all of this – so different to the frenetic roar of our over-fuelled past.

He juggles seven lemons, occasionally attempts the world record of eight. But he doesn't want to disappoint his unknown audience with dropsy. So he only does eight on days of super confidence, and only juggles eight for brief moments.

Not that his audience will even know. Are they aware of the world record for juggling? No.

But I must back up to that first meeting. In the mind of this story, he can't hold that arrested yawn forever.

Who spoke first? I can't remember – me, him, or his eyes? 'Course I remember: his eyes said, "Your business on the riverbank this early intrigues me. And I have all the time in the world to listen."

*

A conversation ensues. This is unusual. Most of my recipients receive dumbly, as if in absolution. A wordless communion. Once a suspicious recipient even tasted the card, licked at it tentatively as if it were holy bread. Perhaps she thought the paint was a drug. That one handed back the card, still glistening wet with spit.

This one is different: the card must be chewed over with words. And what words they are! This person floors me with questions, a deluge of questions about the card, I hadn't even considered. He also reveals a philosophy of calm pantheism. This, in itself, is unnerving to me. And will this be of more help to us now, I wonder, anyway? Or have we dug too much, burned too much already?

More questions form, as unfamiliar to me now as clouds.

Is this person a poet? Is this person deranged? For once Jesus of the credit cards is flummoxed.

*

Our conversation falters; too much, too soon. We stare out at the channel.
Another boat drifts past. He, for once, forgets to juggle.

Where will this hopeful traffic of the sea take them, these people sailing out?
To other overcrowded places? To other slow slidings to the same end?

We, we trust to our feet. And good shoes. And the left-over cards. But that is
for tomorrow. Or tomorrows after tomorrows.

*

We are walking. Towards an ascending sun. We will find a tree later. Thirst
will not haunt us. I have supplies of powdered water.

I note with pride we both have fine shoes now. Our last joint purchase with a
card. We could walk forever.

I wear a vest he made by cleverly piercing the corners of leftover cards, and
weaving them together with – get this – strands of his own long hair. It took
more than expected, and he now wears a raggedy look.

I glitter like an Ozymandian queen in the brittle morning light; and sunburn
through the cracks in shifting patterns. My skin will take on the look of a
dried-out claypan.

But no matter. I'm handy in the desert. I have survived well the deserts of my
youth. And anyway, he claims ancient knowledge of where to find
sustenance. I am filled with belief.

I remember, vaguely, I was supposed to tell you something more; to disclose
some secret. Well, too late, it's not going to happen now.

He has no shirt, but a bag full of lemons. Their crisp scent caresses us. We walk.

And we have the horizon.

Some people say Perth, Australia, will be the first city in the western world to be abandoned due to resource crash

