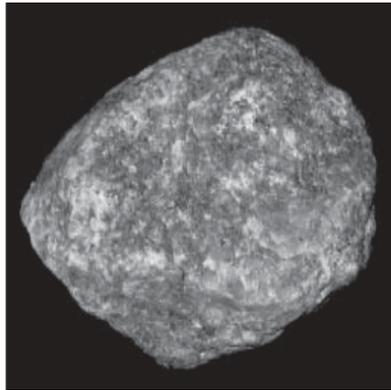


All's End



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BookSurge

Stefan Stenudd is a Swedish author, artist, historian of ideas, and instructor in the peaceful martial art aikido. He has published a number of books in Sweden, both fiction and fact. Among the latter is an interpretation of the Chinese classic *Tao Te Ching*, and of the Japanese samurai classic *Go Rin no Sho* by Miyamoto Musashi. His novels explore existential subjects from stoneage drama to science fiction, but lately stays more and more focused on the present. He has also written some plays for the stage and the screen. As an historian of ideas he studies the thought patterns of creation myths, as well as Aristotle's *Poetics*. He has his own extensive website:

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Also by Stefan Stenudd:

Murder, 2006.

Cosmos of the Ancients: The Greek Philosophers on Myth and Cosmology, 2007.

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1. Preamble

It was evident to everyone who dared raise his eyes toward the sky: the sun was running amok. It sparkled and threw out enormous tongues of fire in slow motion. What had happened to the holy circle?

The man-animals marveled at the malady that had struck the source of all life. Never before had the sun behaved in such a manner. It was a miracle, but a horrible one.

Heaven had gone just as mad as the sun. A strange multicolored light appeared at irregular intervals, and odd sounds came from above. The warmth that had kept the world gratefully alive since time began, rose and spoke louder and louder of death. Plants changed color from green to brown. Streams evaporated. So did rivers and whole lakes. Soil turned into sand, sand into dust. The sun, mother of existence, turned against its own creation.

The man-animals were desperate. If only they knew the reason for her wrath, then maybe they could find some way to appease her? Many herds of man-animals gathered prey in a multitude never before seen, sacrificing them in huge fires — and then, hearts pounding in desperate prayer, they gazed at the sky.

But no, the sun persisted with her madness. She swelled in size, storms tearing that once perfect circle, her rage not even momentarily softened.

Around the world, man-animals fell asleep with anguish gnawing inside their temples, and there were many who hesitated before opening their eyes at dawn. Thousands of them followed the sun into madness. They screamed incomprehensible words and danced until they fell to the ground. Others dug themselves holes, deep down in the sand, refusing to see the day.

Time was cruel to their world. It seemed to have stood still through history — only now, in this turmoil, to rush hastily on, as if eager to reach an end. No one could say what would be the outcome, but they were increasingly convinced that it was indeed to be the end, the very end.

As the sun grew on its heavenly bed, and its ravaged circle expanded, so grew also the horror among the man-animals. Countless were those who dared not wait, but ended their lives in the short time of grace between day and terrible day, countless also those who fell from no action of their own.

And the sun persisted in its madness. Its rays became so intense that the water was sucked out of bodies exposed to them for more than a moment. Every breath released a cloud of steam, the skin dried out and cracked open. Thirst was insatiable. Steam rose from the soil and the sea. All the beasts of the animal kingdom gasped. Birds dropped from the sky. Mighty predators caught no prey. They stumbled and fell, never again to stand up, their blood boiling.

Leaving the shade meant death. The man-animals fled up into the once snow-covered mountains and hid in caves, wherever such were found, otherwise behind rocks and under cliffs.

Breathing burned the throat, and daylight pierced the eyes to blindness. The seas boiled, forests burst into fire and were soon consumed, flaming winds slashed at those without shelter. Escape from destruction was nowhere to be found.

The torment escalated. The sun doubled its size, then tripled and quadrupled. Flames spat far into space. Soon the sun had become so big that it swallowed its closest planet. The sun's rage increased from one instant to the next. In an explosion of force and flame, it swelled to cover all its planets.

When this body of nuclear fire touched the world of the man-animals, its heat had already consumed all life and burned the surface of the planet into ashes. Reached by the swelling sun, it burst open. All things, stone and wood and

metal alike, melted and turned into gas, which caught fire and became one with its bane.

When the sun had become so impossibly big that its body had lost the density needed to nourish the fire, it stopped swelling. For the first time since its birth from clouds gathering in an infant space, its flame died.

Each of all those trillions upon trillions of atoms halted, and nothing happened. Everything was still.

But this peace did not last. The movement recommenced, turning inward. The sphere started to shrink. Beginning in its center, particles crashed into each other and were packed tight. More and more particles were drawn there, from further out in the swollen star. The new direction was a plague, spreading from the core to the very outskirts of the star, until every single particle was afflicted.

Soon, all the atoms accelerated toward the center. They hit with such force and speed that the core broke and was packed more densely, only to break again at the very next instant, and be packed even harder.

The distance as well as the difference between atoms disappeared. There was no longer any distinction between electrons and nuclei in the condensing core. Still, the star kept shrinking. All its matter rammed the center with such force that no power could resist, and no structure could remain intact. The sphere shrunk and shrunk, until finally nothing was left.

Nothing.

A hole in the universe, so dense that it made light itself bend and get sucked into the darkness. Something pulled from within, and swallowed whatever approached. Its appetite increased. But at the very point of this center, there was nothing.

*

The plentitude of atoms that had once been a giant sun, with fifty planets spinning around its waist, had shrunk into a little ball, which was absolutely compact and colder than empty space. The surface was pitch black and smooth. It

traveled through space with a speed surpassed only by light itself.

This little ball had appeared out of nowhere, thousands of light-years away from the position in the galaxy where it once was a sun. Now it proceeded in an absolutely straight line, through vast areas of emptiness, passing stars and cosmic clouds without deviating the least from its course.

Occasionally, an asteroid or comet got in its way, only to be smashed off as easily as if it was no more than dust. During the long journey, it passed right through a fiery star. Yet, its black surface remained unharmed, its straight course was unaffected.

Time passed, and the ball traveled on, light-year after light-year.

*

Somewhere in the empty space between solar systems, an odd-looking kind of cloud bubbled, as if playfully. One moment it was pink, with dots of gold and shimmering edges, the next it was turquoise or emerald green, joyfully swirling in and out of itself. This was a cloud so different from any other. It seemed to be happily gurgling, almost giggling. Its contours formed altering figures, and the shifting colors made strange patterns, always changing.

This cloud obviously enjoyed being whatever it was, continuously entertaining itself with its own amazing talent. Maybe it was not a cloud at all, but something pretending to be one.

It was in this direction the little black ball happened to be heading.

The cloud shone brighter, and bubbled even more pleasurably, as the ball approached. It thickened and blushed, eagerly stretching itself out toward the ball.

It was as if time itself slowed down when the cloud and the ball touched. Space was twisted inside out. Light and colors sparkled furiously. Something incomprehensible happened to the little ball. A metamorphosis had started.