

Cheremoya

HIGH-RISE

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UNIVERSE 25

On the top floor of the newly renovated Mortality Inhibiting Environment, the angels (aka the “beautiful ones”) pissed freely. Unlike the previous iterations of The Kingdom Heaven (of which there were only whispers), Universe 25 represented a revolution in post-mortal technology. A new air conditioning unit had been installed, along with a rooftop water fountain. The pearly gates looked pearlier than ever.

Our colony had it all. The grapes were peeled and abundant. The clouds, hypoallergenic. The sunlight fell evenly across the surface of the afterlife, flooding every shadow and crevice until the world gleamed with the merciless geometry of a lab-grown diamond, settling over the enrichment areas and pellet troughs with a methodological exactitude whose perfection spoke of God.

There were only a few angels to begin with. Gimlet eyes. Whip tail. She Whose Fur Shines Like Sunlight on Ripened Grain. Not that any of us had ever seen grain, ripened or otherwise. Our names were handed down by anonymous forefathers who had lived short and brutish lives in the mouldering cellars and abandoned barns of antiquity.

We were happy together in the Mortality Inhibiting Environment. Great vaulted windows contoured the sky. Chandeliers throbbed in their sockets, like hives teeming with glass stars. Despite the abundance of available real estate, we built our nests close together, from spit and paper. Our destiny was manifest in every sense of the world. We thought little of our previous lives.

Sure, the incessant harp music got a little cloying from time to time, and despite the daily replenishment of sawdust, there was the ever-present fug of sour urine which never quite faded. But we soon forgot what it was like to go hungry, to feel cold. The abundance of nourishment and freedom from predation meant there was little to do but indulge in idle copulation. We begat one another, and soon began to multiply. The corridors of the Mortality Inhibiting Environment echoed with fresh data points jostling one another in their haste to ride The Great Wheel, and gleefully nipping at one another's tails.

It wasn't long until the Big Names began to arrive. We'd already had a few itinerant monks and repentant sinners. But everything changed when the philosophers began to establish

themselves. First came Socrates, followed closely by Plato and Aristotle. Florence Nightingale arrived one day, with her puffy hat and overlarge candle. Soon, you couldn't turn a corner without knocking over Newton, or stepping on Martin Luther's frankly gargantuan tail. Bach had a nasty falling out with Princess Di, who bit him viciously, raising a welt on his tail, which turned septic and had to be amputated. Thomas Aquinas took a virulent dislike to Gandhi, and the two of them fought tooth and nail over Joan of Arc, who retreated deep into her nest and refused to emerge. A pack of troubadours banded together and began to roam the corridors in search of female companionship. Mother Theresa birthed a litter of seven, and ate all but one of them, who took to pacing the corridors, crying vain entreaties to God, asking why he had forsaken us. God took notes and entered the relevant data into his spreadsheet.

Eventually, our population began to dwindle. Fighting broke out in the upper stories. Shakespeare and his gang of thugs took control of the water fountain. Mothers abandoned their young, and the few who survived formed roving theological packs, squabbling incoherently over vague points of religious dogma. The remaining angels turned celibate and cloistered themselves in private quarters, growing thin on beauty and sunlight, while the floors below descended into chaos and squalor. We retreated to the ground floor, taking turns to guard the door. She Whose Fur Shines Like Sunlight on Ripened Grain grows wearier with every passing day, and Gimlet Eye has a permanent limp, from where Da Vinci bit him savagely on the ankle.

Our sawdust is replenished daily, and our water troughs are regularly sanitised. But despite our abundance of material wealth, God seems more remote than ever. Occasionally, he takes one of us away to weigh us and record our measurements. But he no longer intervenes, not even when Helen Keller's head was crushed beneath The Great Wheel in a mechanical malfunction.

I do not know what is worse. To feel as if we have disappointed God, and he has turned his back on us in anger. Or that his experiment could be considered a success.

—Hera Lindsay Bird

Ursula Bradley (b. 1997 in Auckland, Aotearoa) lives and works in London. She gained her BFA from the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, in 2021. Solo exhibitions: "High-Rise," Cheremoya, Los Angeles (2025); "Working," Envy, Wellington (2025); "Down and Out in Paris and London," Heart Galerie, Paris (2024); "Hoarders," Satchi & Satchi & Satchi, Auckland (2022). Group exhibitions: "The Dowse Art Museum," Lower Hutt, Wellington; "Three new artists," Ivan Anthony Gallery, Auckland; "Lindy walks to Countdown Mt Eden," Envy, Wellington (2022).