

The Inestimable Nicholas Crisp: Reimagined Mythology and Environmental Renewal in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*

SEAN RHOADS

THOMAS KING'S ACCLAIMED 2014 novel *The Back of the Turtle* is imbued with a sense of the fantastic and the mythological. The title references the name of the human realm as derived from the Anishinaabe creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky." In the intricate narrative of his novel, King alludes to a wide variety of mythological and supernatural characters, including a range of figures from Judeo-Christian teachings, Islam, Nordic lore, literature, East Asian traditions, Hinduism, and classical Greek and Roman mythology. The novel's characters reveal these allusions through their names, actions, possessions, physical traits, personal history, and dialogue. Of all the characters in *The Back of the Turtle*, perhaps the most enigmatic and intriguing is Nicholas Crisp, "a man of substantial talents" (King 494). In this essay, I argue that Crisp, a non-Indigenous character, serves as an analogue for several mythic figures, most predominantly the classical Roman deity Neptune (or Poseidon in Greece), the god of freshwater and the seas. Crisp's central role ties the novel's other characters together, and his recurring connection to water (a source of vitality but also destruction), informs both a mythical and environmental reading of *The Back of the Turtle*. Through allusions to multitudinous oral traditions, legends, and supernatural figures, King weaves an elaborate tapestry of a diverse yet unified community that must work together to confront an ecological catastrophe. In this way, he demonstrates the importance of acting as a global society — despite our historical and present-day differences — to ward off impending environmental devastation. Despite humanity's deeply divergent past, which must be acknowledged, our species is nevertheless linked by our shared need for a vibrant natural environment and livable world. King's novel suggests

that only by reconciling our differences and coming together can we avoid ruination.

Nicholas Crisp is a complex and intriguing character with a mysterious past. Although he is not *The Back of the Turtle*'s primary protagonist, the role he plays is vital nonetheless. I will examine three particular scenes involving Crisp in order to illustrate his role as a reimagination of the god Neptune, highlighting his importance as a symbol of both legend and resilience following the novel's water-based ecological calamity. These scenes not only reveal Crisp's strong connection to the classical water god, but also illuminate other mythological allusions from varied traditions and stories embodied in his character and throughout the novel. To begin, I will consider Crisp's initial appearance in the narrative, which exposes how he personifies not only a Neptune-like figure, but also the Judeo-Christian Adam of Genesis. This examination will explore Crisp's physical characteristics and other supernatural features that will inform a later analysis of his character and role in King's text. Next, I will offer a close reading of Crisp's moonlight birthday celebration at Samaritan Bay's hot springs, looking closely in this surreal scene at his connection to water and power over it. Furthermore, the retelling of the Anishinaabe Skywoman story recounted in this scene will reveal Crisp's multilayered mythic persona, as it becomes clear that he not only embodies the Neptune of antiquity (and Adam), but the left-handed twin of the Indigenous creation story as well. Finally, I will close with an analysis of the novel's dramatic conclusion featuring the arrival of the *Anguis*, the appropriately named derelict cargo ship, on the shores of the aptly named Samaritan Bay. The events of this scene buttress Crisp's multi-mythic parallels, as well as contribute to an assessment of *The Back of the Turtle*'s thematic emphasis on community and cooperation as a way forward for combatting environmental and ecological crises.

While on its surface *The Back of the Turtle* depicts the return of an Anishinaabe scientist to the town he accidentally helped destroy, many other themes and allusions percolate in the depths of the novel's text. In his review, "Dangerous Stories," Alec Follett notes, "King argues that stories have the power to lead us toward or away from environmental destruction" (61). This tendency is further emphasized by King's allusion to creation myths like Genesis and Skywoman as well as primordial figures like Neptune, wherein stories about the beginning of the world work to draw the reader to its impending devastation. By serving as a

stand-in for Neptune and other legendary figures, Crisp's role underscores the importance of water in both the text and the world today. Water is fluid — as both substance and symbol — and in the novel it is both a source of life and a carrier of death. The narrative's ecological catastrophe begins at Kali Creek (appropriately named after the Hindu goddess of death and liberation), traverses to the Smoke River (perhaps alluding to the importance of offering tobacco to the Creator in many Indigenous traditions), and then pours into Samaritan Bay (referencing the Christian parable of "The Good Samaritan"), linking a diverse range of religious and cultural traditions through both water and the trauma of "The Ruin." Furthermore, the environmental tragedies depicted in *The Back of the Turtle* are not exaggerated, but remain eerily reminiscent of those occurring around the world today, contributing to the novel's immediate relevance. At the same time, the text's beginning and conclusion on the shores of Samaritan Bay reinforce the importance of water as a source of regeneration. The novel's primary protagonist, the Indigenous scientist Gabriel Quinn, arrives in the town with plans to drown himself in the bay he unintentionally ruined, and the narrative concludes with most of the novel's characters joining together on its shores in a motley community to ward off yet another environmental nightmare. Through multivalent stories and allusions surrounding disparate characters in *The Back of the Turtle*, King utilizes the power of mythic and traditional stories and legends to promulgate an allegorical message about environmental renewal: only by coming together can the diverse characters of the novel rebuild their damaged lives and rejuvenate their shattered world.

"Did ye know that a fortune may be read on a face and a fate found in a query?"

The Back of the Turtle features two main settings: the town of Samaritan Bay and its environs (including the Smoke River Reserve), located somewhere on the West Coast of British Columbia, and the Domidion Corporation's headquarters in downtown Toronto. While the novel portrays Toronto in realist fashion, Samaritan Bay represents a more liminal, otherworldly locale. It is in this supernatural coastal town where Nicholas Crisp lives as a reimagined mythological figure. Although many of the novel's scenes take place at Domidion's headquarters and other places in Toronto, the three pivotal scenes I will discuss here all

occur in and around Samaritan Bay, revealing the importance of the place to the novel as a whole. Samaritan Bay's existence on the threshold between the real world and the fantastic comes into focus in the novel's opening scene, on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, following an ecologically devastating event called "The Ruin" that has turned the small town into an abandoned wasteland.

Three characters appear in the novel's prologue: Crisp, his companion Soldier the dog (whom Crisp refers to as "Master Dog"), and the aforementioned Gabriel Quinn. The novel's opening lines contribute to an interpretation of Samaritan Bay and *The Back of the Turtle* as a place and narrative informed by mythology: "First light. The shore in shadows, the fog banked on the horizon. Water, land, and the line of the tide. So it would begin" (1). King mimics the storytelling of both Christian and Indigenous creation stories, like the Genesis tale and the Skywoman story, two very different accounts that describe the world's origins. Crisp does not utter, "Let there be light," but with the arrival of dawn he and Soldier do sit on a rise overlooking the waters of the bay sharing an apple — the forbidden fruit. This prologue also underscores the importance of water (in the form of fog, seawater, and the tide) to the narrative. In his article "Pipelines, Mines, and Dams," William Huggins argues that King repeatedly uses water in his published works to represent life, vitality, and nature: "This liquid resonance plays itself out again in Thomas King's (Cherokee) body of work. Of his published oeuvre, five books include water in their titles, reinforcing the vitality of this unique substance to all life" (59). This sentiment informs an analysis of Crisp, who in this initial scene is immediately connected to both water (and through it nature) and the fantastic, as he sits on a hill conversing with a dog, watching the sun rise over his watery domain. Crisp's importance here bookends the novel, as he is both the first and last character to speak, despite his secondary status to characters like Gabriel, Mara, and Dorian.

In this opening scene, Crisp and Soldier reflect various elements that are part of a pointed revisioning of Genesis. The duo share breakfast as they watch Gabriel descend onto the beach: "Crisp pulled an apple from his back pocket, split it with his knife, held out the fatter half for the dog. 'Tis the stuff of creation,' he said, 'and a remedy for the bowels'" (1). This is no traditional account of the Judeo-Christian creation story. Crisp, a figure with supernatural resonances, and Soldier, an immortal

dog (a character that was presumed dead in King's 1999 novel *Truth and Bright Water*), sit on the ecologically devastated Samaritan Bay coast sharing the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. However, Samaritan Bay is not the Garden of Eden, even if it is a supernatural space — it has already been spoiled and ruined by human machinations. Robin Ridington reinforces this assessment in his article "Got Any Grapes?": "No prohibition here about eating forbidden fruit. The God who issued that decree hasn't been seen for a long time" (165). On the shores of Samaritan Bay, the apple is not a danger to be avoided, but a healthful cure. Crisp is no traditional Adam, Soldier certainly no Eve, and the only serpent in the garden will not appear until the novel's conclusion (the *Anguis* is named after a genus of snakelike, legless lizards). Moreover, Crisp himself may even represent a personified forbidden fruit — his name mimics several varieties of apple like the Honeycrisp and Cosmic Crisp (or, of course, apple crisp dessert), he loves the colour red, and he speaks in enigmatic though knowledgeable truths throughout the text. Through Crisp and other characters, King wraps his tale in multilayered mythologies and creation stories, cultivating a curious synthesis of varied traditions. As Ridington notes, "The human characters have mythic resonances in the same way that mythic characters have human attributes" (164). This opening scene informs the reader that the novel is not set in an entirely real world, but on some surreal borderland between reality and the supernatural informed by a variety of mythologies and traditional stories.

Initially King does not provide a physical description of Nicholas Crisp, but does so shortly thereafter when Gabriel meets Crisp in the town: "He imagined that Nicholas Crisp would be short and thin, with translucent skin and a soft chin, but the man who walked into the Tin Turtle was tall and lanky with a bald head, sharp blue eyes, and a red beard that floated about his face like a cloud on fire" (31). Throughout the novel, Crisp shuns clothing and frequently appears nude. On one such occasion other aspects of Crisp's physical characteristics are described: "The man looked to have been put together from unrelated parts. Bald head, flaming beard, smooth muscular chest and stomach, trim waist, and thin, sinewy legs that were covered with hair that reminded Gabriel of a goat" (220). Crisp's physical description borders on the fantastic. His features hint at the supernatural — his facial hair mimics the bearded countenance of Neptune, while his caprine

legs allude to the satyrs and fauns of legend as well as the classical deity Pan or Faunus. Moreover, Crisp's penchant for nudity visually mimics the statues and renderings of Neptune, as well as Greco-Roman sensibilities of modesty (or lack thereof). Crisp, then, an exhibitionist who lives at Samaritan Bay's hot springs, and who sports a flaming red beard and goat-like legs, clearly embodies an updated iteration of the classical Neptune, including his affinity for water.

Shortly after their initial meeting, Crisp and Gabriel begin a discussion of names. This conversation buttresses an assessment of Crisp as a supernatural figure, blurring the boundaries and splicing the elements of a multitude of varied traditions, while also gesturing to various mythological corollaries for other characters. The duo discusses their names: "Nicholas is a fine name.' It covers the territory, it does. St. Nick. Old Nick. Christmas and hell. And all the bleeding nicks of life in between" (35). Crisp directly compares himself to two prominent legendary figures sharing his name, Santa Claus and Satan, running the gamut from the most beloved to the most reviled. Although Crisp fails to serve as a devil character in the novel (but could be classified as trickster), he does mimic the traits of Santa Claus, as he constantly provides gifts in the form of food and sustenance (and free tickets to his hot springs) to the other characters. Furthermore, his Neptunesque beard also mirrors Santa Claus's own facial hair, and Crisp's love of red (the entire interior of his trailer is decorated in red) hints at Santa's similar fondness for the colour. Even Crisp's surname reminds the reader of another nickname for Santa Claus: Kris Kringle.

Gabriel next provides his own name to a delighted Crisp: "Gabriel! Crisp's voice rushed through the trees like a truck in a tunnel. 'Now there's thunder and storm. The best-loved of the four angels.¹ The one chosen to announce the birth of John the Baptist and to reveal the Qur'an to Muhammad. It's Gabriel what tells Mary about the road ahead'" (35). Interestingly, here King reveals the Indigenous character Gabriel's connection to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, while the White character Crisp, in addition to being well-versed in these traditions, is connected to classical antiquity and, later, the Anishinaabe creation story. In this way, *The Back of the Turtle* communicates to the reader that the characters' names and their mythic resonances are worth noting. Moreover, the characters' backgrounds and ethnicities do not align neatly with their fantastic references, pre-

senting a far more complex and varied set of possible interpretations. Aside from Crisp and Gabriel, the novel's other characters also possess discernable references to a multiplicity of supernatural and traditional figures. Mara, aside from being reminiscent of the Virgin Mary just mentioned by Crisp, is also the name of the demon of death and desire that tempted the Buddha on his path to Nirvana, in much the same way that she also tempts and teases Gabriel on his path to redemption. Dorian Asher, the novel's antagonist, metatextually evokes the notorious narcissism of Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray through his disregard for the environment and habit of soothing himself with extravagant purchases. Finally, even Winter Lee, Dorian's assistant and a relatively minor character, personifies the coldness of the season itself through her calculating and emotionless presence. These characters, like Crisp, reveal the elaborate web of contradictory and competing traditions and references synthesized in King's text.

"I endure eternal!"

The Back of the Turtle is a novel replete with compelling moments and scenes. However, there is perhaps no scene as pivotal as Crisp's birthday party on the night of the full moon. Crisp invites Samaritan Bay's remaining denizens to his planned Bacchanalia — perhaps in this case a Neptunalia as well — at the natural hot springs where he makes his home. Aside from connecting Crisp even more directly with water, this scene also introduces other mythological and supernatural elements to the novel's narrative, including the Anishinaabe story from which the novel derives its name. Crisp adds an otherworldly spectre to the event when presenting an invitation to Gabriel: "Crisp stepped off the deck and gave his pants a quick brush. 'No, no, stay here. Enjoy your day. Come by the pools at the full moon, for the waters will be in riot with insomnia and lycanthropy'" (64). Crisp not only anthropomorphizes water in his invitation, he also gestures to werewolf folklore, hinting at the possibility of a supernatural transformation at his celebration. Crisp's repeated connections to water throughout the novel, from the opening scene on the beach, to his birthday at the hot springs, to a later miracle he will work on the shore, reinforce his position as a Neptune figure with a power over the substance.

Like any mythic character, Nicholas Crisp is an ageless figure. When he invites Gabriel, Mara, and the other residents of the town to his

festivities, he remains enigmatic regarding his actual age. Aside from Crisp's own coyness, the novel itself hints that Crisp is not merely older than he appears, he is preternaturally ancient. On more than one occasion, Mara queries Crisp about his age: "And just how old are you Mr. Crisp?' 'Old.' Crisp laughed and rubbed the side of his nose. 'Old and worn to an edge, if it's the truth ye wish'" (107). Later, Mara continues to playfully goad Crisp about his advanced years: "And you're not as young as you used to be, Mr. Crisp.' 'Indeed, Mistress Mara,' said Crisp, 'Not by an eternity'" (495). Finally, King also references the character's longevity as he soaks in the hot springs waiting for his guests to arrive: "For the first time in a very long while, Crisp felt alive. They were all here now. Mara, Soldier, and this Gabriel. So, it had begun. At last, it had begun" (85). Not only has Crisp been waiting a very long while — maybe even an eternity — for a specific event, but he portends the importance of the other characters arriving on the scene and carrying out whatever assigned roles they have in the narrative. Crisp, then, represents a metatextual awareness of his own place in the novel — he knows what will occur, and what each character's role will be. Crisp exists, therefore, not only as a mythic figure, but as a self-reflexive, postmodern one. He is not only ageless, but seems aware that he is participating in a story, and that the narrative itself has reached a tipping point with the arrival of the other major characters.

The novel's confluence of myth and reality continues as Gabriel and Mara arrive at the pools for Crisp's celebration. The dreamlike nature of Crisp's hot springs also reverberates into the literary realm — the locale comprises nine interconnected descending pools, alluding to Dante's *Inferno* while also contributing to an estimation of Samaritan Bay as a kind of purgatory. However, as with the other references peppered throughout King's text, the allusions do not neatly align but paint a more complex picture. Moreover, Crisp — like any good Roman deity — demonstrates an affinity for Latin, reiterating his connection to the water god of antiquity. As Gabriel and Mara arrive at Crisp's hot springs, they cross a boundary from Samaritan Bay into an even more liminal and surreal space:

Beatrice Hot Springs was marked by dark pillars of dry-fit stones, with a heavy header of rough timbers. Even with the light from the lanterns, the entrance looked like the mouth of a cave. . . .

Someone had carved words into the face of the timbers that spanned the pillars. Gabriel had to stand at an angle and fight the shadows to read them.

Aeterna Sustineo.

“It’s Latin,” said Gabriel.

“Of course it’s Latin,” said Mara. “Come on. I smell food.” (219)

Because Crisp manages the hot springs, and utilizes Latin at other points in the novel, the reader can assume that he is the one who has carved “I endure eternal” into the timbers at the entrance of his dominion. This understanding is reinforced later in the scene, when Crisp reiterates this phrase in English, confirming his own existence as an immortal Neptune-like figure: “Crisp rubbed his belly and let loose a tremendous belch that buried itself in the night. ‘I endure eternal!’ And then he cast himself off the rock and slid smoothly into the water, without leaving so much as a bubble or a ripple to mark his passing” (246). Crisp’s evocation of a water deity emerges. Not only does he declare his immortality to the reader (for all the guests have departed when he bellows that line), but he also melts into the waters of the hot springs without a trace, highlighting his ethereal nature. Furthermore, Crisp’s understanding of himself as a literary figure can be further clarified here: as long as copies of *The Back of the Turtle* continue to exist, so will Nicholas Crisp, giving him a longevity far surpassing any mortal.

As Crisp waits for his guests to arrive earlier in the evening, his point of view establishes not only his abiding affection for water but also his potential ability to control the life-giving liquid itself. Crisp stands as a compelling figure possessing supernatural abilities, even if they are muted and restrained, rather than a direct embodiment of the classical deity:

Crisp cocked his head. There were voices in the woods.

Excellent.

He clapped his hands, and the lanterns brightened. The fog had spread over the springs like a blanket, thick and cozy, and tucked itself around the trees. But Crisp wasn’t concerned. When the time was right, he’d pull the gloom back to reveal the stars and the heavens in all their majesty and splendour, for the pleasure and entertainment of his guests. (202)

If the reader discounts the mundane possibility that the lanterns festooned around the pools are connected to a Clapper™ and that Crisp

is merely delusional about his ability to control the elements, only a supernatural explanation remains. On its surface, the mundane accounting may be plausible, but it would require that the reader ignore the novel's many other supernatural allusions and events. The second possible interpretation, more likely considering the weight of the evidence, is that Crisp is indeed a mythic figure with the ability to control the water particles in the fog as well as other elements like the light in the lanterns. The novel's use of allegory and mythology throughout its narrative, including during the all-important recounting of the Anishinaabe creation story at Crisp's birthday party, imply that the second understanding is closer to the truth.

As noted earlier, the title of *The Back of the Turtle* is derived from the Anishinaabe story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky." The novel retells this Indigenous origin story at the hot springs during Crisp's celebration, creating a direct connection between mythology and the supernatural, the watery hot springs of Crisp's domain, and the various characters of the novel itself. Interestingly, despite both Gabriel's and Mara's Indigenous ethnic backgrounds, they both demur and encourage Crisp to recount the Anishinaabe story. Crisp delights in telling the Skywoman account, bombastically splashing and diving throughout the pools as he recounts it. The novel directly alludes to Genesis — first broached in the prologue — immediately before Crisp begins his performance. Floating in the surreal pools surrounded by mist and fog, Mara asserts: "I wonder . . . if this is what Eden was like" (224). Here, the novel presents an interesting contradiction. Despite their similarities as creation stories, the Judeo-Christian legend of Eden and the Anishinaabe Skywoman story nevertheless have little in common: they present competing views of nature and humanity's place in the world. Given *The Back of the Turtle's* use of intertwined myths, this informs an understanding of the novel as a whole. Although Skywoman stands paramount in the novel, Eve lurks in the background. After recounting "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," Crisp himself comments on the relationship between the two origin stories:

Crisp slid into the water, exhausted. "'Tis a hard story," he said.
 "It's long," said Gabriel. "That's for sure."
 "Not the length," cried Crisp. "But the sadness of the thing."
 Gabriel nodded. "Sort of like the Garden of Eden."

“Nothing like it,” roared Crisp. “For in that story we starts with a gated estate and are thrown into suburbia, because we preferred knowledge to ignorance. In our story, we begins with an empty acreage, and, together, the woman, the animals, and the twins creates a paradise what gets pissed away.” (236-37)

Despite his non-Indigenous background, Crisp aligns himself with Skywoman rather than Genesis. Robin Wall Kimmerer shares Crisp’s assessment of the two creation stories in her collection of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. She compares the two divergent origin myths:

Same species, same earth, different stories. . . . One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the good green world that would be home to her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven.

And then they met — the offspring of Skywoman and the children of Eve — and the land around us bears the scars of that meeting, the echoes of our stories. (7)

Despite their similarities as creation stories, the Adam and Eve myth and Skywoman story stand apart. Whereas Genesis provides one understanding of living within the natural world, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” offers an entirely different worldview. Despite these extensive differences, however, King juxtaposes the stories in *The Back of the Turtle* in both its narrative and its characters, when he mixes stories, myths, tales, and legends from a range of traditions and backgrounds. Despite our monumental differences and backgrounds, King’s text implies, we must nevertheless reconcile our histories to build a new future together. A future that does not forget our pasts, but does not hold us in thrall to them either. King himself bolstered this understanding of his novel in a 2014 interview at The Banff Centre, when he discussed the importance of reconciliation, rebuilding, resilience, and renewal:

What I can see are two different kinds of communities. One community is the kind that is in Samaritan Bay where everybody is trying to get together again and rebuild that town and rebuild that community. And one that is typified by Dorian Asher who is the CEO of Domidion, which is a community of one where that one individual believes himself to be omnipotent and moves through the world as though no one else is there and no one else counts.

. . . You never know how important community is to you until you lose it, I think, and in Samaritan Bay they've lost that and more. . . . Samaritan Bay is, I suppose, a kind of latter-day, potential Garden of Eden. Mara and Gabriel are possibly a new Adam and Eve. . . . If that's true or any part of that is true, how do you go about reestablishing a community? How do you go about reinventing a community? (Banff Centre)

Humanity's dark past and its conflicted legacy cannot be ignored, but only by working together in a shared, diverse community can we ward off environmental destruction like "The Ruin" that devastated Samaritan Bay.

In his enthusiastic retelling of the Anishinaabe story, Nicholas Crisp reveals two important points. First, he contrasts the Eden legend and the Skywoman story in a way that critiques Genesis while foregrounding the Indigenous tradition. Second, Crisp refers to "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" as *our* story. Crisp is not Indigenous. How can it be *his* story? This adds another potential dimension to both King's implied audience and Crisp's mythic status. In Crisp's performance of Skywoman, he only proceeds after both Mara and Gabriel demur. Moreover, although Crisp is himself at least superficially non-Indigenous, his character is informed by the left-handed twin of the tale, making the story part his own as well. In this way, King brings readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, into the Skywoman mythos — for Indigenous readers it represents their own oral traditions, and for non-Indigenous a lesson which they can also now associate with and benefit from. In order for this analogy to work, then, Crisp cannot be wholly Neptune or wholly non-Indigenous. Thankfully, King's complex web of legendary references provides an alternate persona to Crisp. Not only does Crisp stand in for Neptune and share a connection to Adam, he also represents one of the twins mentioned in the Skywoman tale in this reading. Like his twin brother Dad (character Sonny's father), Crisp was born of Skywoman. As the first-born, he is the older sibling, and therefore the left-handed one who complicates and perfects the works of his more rigid, right-handed brother, completing the world as an intricate and complex place. Crisp recounts what may be his own part in the story:

Crisp forged on ahead. "As for the rivers and the streams, the right-handed twin made them languid and running in both directions

at the same time. Then that rascal of a brother came along and turned them to one ways only, tossed rocks in, and conjured up rapids and falls. . . .

And on they went. The right-handed twin creating a world of ease and convenience, the left-handed twin complicating the parts, until the world were complete and perfect.” (236)

Ridington confirms this assessment of Crisp’s status: “Dad and Crisp, a previous generation of twins, had their own moment of creation. . . . The right-handed twin made things straight and the left-handed brother made them twisted. Dad seems to have disappeared long ago, but Crisp is very much alive, being the fixer-upper” (166-67). A query from Mara leads Crisp to divulge more of his own connection to the story and his immense age:

“Brother?” Mara set her plate on the table.

“Did ye not know?” Crisp suddenly slapped the side of his head. “But of course ye wouldn’t, would ye? Before your time. Not even your grandmother would carry that tale.”

“Sonny’s dad is your brother?”

“Twins we were,” said Crisp. “Just like in the story. I was the oldest, but nought by more than a breath and a bellow. Me feeling my way along and him pushing from behind.”

. . . Mara stepped into the light of the lanterns so she could look into Crisp’s face. “I can see a story.”

“Ye has a raptor’s eye,” said Crisp. “We weren’t always from the Bay, ye know. In another time, Dad and me were loose in the world, astride the universe with grand designs, him with his assurances and admonishments, me with my appetites and adventures. We believed we was elemental and everlasting.” (238-39)

Crisp’s assertion can be read as hyperbolic, in the way Mara and Gabriel seem to take it, but perhaps Crisp is being matter-of-fact. He may be revealing his true history, but the story seems so outlandish that in his telling of truth, its reality is nevertheless obscured. The weight of the evidence favours taking Crisp at his word. He is not quite Adam, not quite Neptune, and not quite the left-handed twin. He is, however, an amalgamation of all three mythic figures (and others as well). Crisp’s relationships boast even more supernatural connections. His departed twin brother, Dad, is not only the right-handed twin, but perhaps also the Judeo-Christian deity. The God of the Old Testament could cer-

tainly be described as one of “assurances and admonishments,” and his many commandments for Sonny underscore this understanding (239). Sonny, meanwhile, is also a multilayered figure — as the offspring of Dad, he is a Christ-like figure who brings salvation to the beach with his tower while he also “wields Thor’s hammer” (Ridington 164). Moreover, Sonny also bears responsibility for constructing a sort of anti-Tower of Babel on the beach of Samaritan Bay out of the animal remains and detritus left in the wake of “The Ruin.” Unlike the original edifice, Sonny’s brings diverse people together for a common cause, rather than tearing them apart. When Sonny lights the beacon atop his tower, he brings the events of *The Back of the Turtle* to a crescendo. This understanding of Sonny, Dad, Crisp and other characters reveals how King’s text draws from and amends an expansive array of stories from disparate backgrounds and cultures to present a message of reconciliation and shared community in the face of disaster.

“So, the boy’s done it. The beacon lit. Is not my word like fire?”

Throughout King’s novel, an ominous spectre of environmental destruction hangs over the narrative. Before the novel begins, the residents of Samaritan Bay had experienced a cataclysmic ecological event when the Domidion Corporation’s genetically engineered defoliant GreenSweep was improperly used at an oil pipeline site near the town. Referred to by Crisp as “The Ruin,” the herbicide not only razed a wide swath of vegetation along Kali Creek and the Smoke River, but obliterated animal life along its course and into Samaritan Bay when it reached the sea. King’s use of an oil pipeline as the locus of Indigenous trauma remains both poignant and relevant throughout North America, as present-day projects like Trans Mountain in Canada or Dakota Access in the United States continue to garner opposition from Indigenous rights activists and environmentalists alike. The potential for environmental devastation caused by such projects is emphasized in King’s text by the death left in GreenSweep’s wake, where the only reminder of the turtles that once migrated to the Samaritan Bay shore in droves are their sun-bleached skeletons.

King’s novel embodies the ever-present environmental threat in the form of the *Anguis*, a derelict vessel containing a horrifying quantity of the remaining GreenSweep and other deadly chemicals adrift on the world’s oceans. *The Back of the Turtle* concludes with a pivotal, climac-

tic scene when the *Anguis*, like a ghost ship of legend, washes ashore at Samaritan Bay. Having sailed from Montreal months earlier, the *Anguis* was wrecked in a squall and disappeared. Somehow, the unpowered ship makes its way from the Gulf of St. Lawrence to the coast of British Columbia, an amazing feat and one that ocean currents alone cannot explain.² The *Anguis* itself acts as an ominous and ghostly supernatural figure, imbued with a power and sinister purpose that no normal ship can possess. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the reptilian origins of the ship's name give the vessel a demonic aspect. The *Anguis* is the snake in the garden, but it is an environmental demon created by humans. Although the shadow of the *Anguis* haunts the reader throughout the novel through Dorian's and Winter's musing about the vessel's fate, the ship does not enter the narrative in a physical form until King's conclusion.

As the novel's characters stand on the beach admiring Sonny's tower and sharing a meal, the *Anguis* emerges out of nowhere from an unearthly fog bank. Crisp detects the ship before it appears:

Gabriel hadn't believed anyone could move that fast. One moment, Crisp was standing by the blanket, the next he had caught Sonny, snatched him up, and was racing back up the beach, Soldier at their heels, as the scream came slicing through the fog.

A long, terrible, scraping screech that ran out along the shore as though the world had been ripped open. . . .

And then something dark and impossibly large pushed its way through the fog, rose up and slammed into the beach like an axe into flesh. . . .

It was the prow of a ship, a huge and dented hulk, corroded and blackened, with fresh, bright tears on its side where it had smashed into the rocks on its way to shore. Half in the fog. Half out. . . .

Crisp was the first to move. He walked down the beach, circled the bow, stroked the metal flank of the monster, as though he thought it was in need of affection. (497)

The supernatural features of this passage are extensive. Crisp displays a variety of unearthly abilities as the *Anguis* arrives. First, he predicts the arrival of the derelict before it emerges from the fog, perhaps due to his Neptunesque connection to the sea. In order to save Sonny, Crisp proceeds with superhuman speed to rescue the boy from the surf before he is crushed by the ship. Soldier, too, the immortal dog, warns the

crowd of the approaching terror. Finally, the *Anguis* itself, like some nightmare spawn, plows into the shore unannounced, holding the secret of its deadly cargo. King's physical description of the battered vessel bolsters this interpretation: "The hull was cold and hollow, and great rivers of rust ran down its sides, as though the beast had been wounded and bled" (498). Dented, corroded, blackened, torn, rusting, wounded, and bleeding: the *Anguis*, like its name implies, is the embodiment of anguish, and with a will of its own it seems alive — or, at the very least, undead. By all rights, the derelict hulk should not even be afloat, let alone able to sail the ocean to arrive precisely at the exact time and place of the novel's pivotal conclusion.

If the *Anguis* itself is a supernatural force, only another mythic character can drive the nautical demon back into the sea. In order to slay the monstrous Chimera, the characters of King's novel need their own Bellerophon. Thankfully for the text's characters, the people of Samaritan Bay have such a hero in the form of Nicholas Crisp. Here, more than anywhere else in *The Back of the Turtle*, does Crisp reveal himself as a supernatural figure and reimagined Neptune. Crisp demands help from Gabriel, Mara, Sonny, and others as he attempts to push the vessel back into the sea. Crisp orchestrates a community effort to ward off the environmental destruction contained in the derelict's hold. He uses his superhuman strength, Gabriel leads the group in a traditional Anishinaabe song, and Sonny adds his mythic hammer to the effort. Then, something miraculous happens:

Sonny's hammer rang against the hull, and slowly, by degrees, the sound of the strikes and the voices came together, until Gabriel could feel the vibrations running through the steel, could feel the song in the ship itself.

But now there was something else. Not a voice. More a tremor that Gabriel could feel in his feet. Thunder perhaps. . . . Spring thunder.

"Away!" Crisp moved through the singers, pushing them away from the ship. "For the high ground," he shouted. . . .

"Higher," shouted Crisp, as he drove everyone out of the sand and onto the face of the slope. "There be the push and the shove what's needed."

The first wave smashed into the ship's flank and sent a shiver through the structure. And, as Gabriel watched, the *Anguis* moved.

“Again!” cried Crisp.

The second wave was larger. It lifted the vessel by the stern and slammed the bow down into the sand.

“Again!”

The next four waves came in a rush, welled up under the *Anguis*, and broke the ship’s hold on the shore.

“There she be!”

The seventh wave was enormous, taller and more massive than anything Gabriel had ever seen. It slammed into the hull, set the *Anguis* afloat on the tide, and sucked the ship into the fog. (499-500)

This exhilarating scene is central to understanding both Crisp’s character and King’s novel as a whole. Not only does it underscore the mythological features of the text, the town of Samaritan Bay, and Nicholas Crisp, it also demonstrates the notion that “King’s novel is a timely and necessary story of hope and resilience in the face of perpetual disaster” (Follett 61). Crisp, after utilizing superhuman speed and premonition to rescue the other characters from impending doom, organizes them to work together to save not only the town, but perhaps the world. As he orchestrates Gabriel and Mara in their singing, Sonny in his hammering, and the other characters in their pushing, he summons nature itself to free the *Anguis* from the sands of the beach. Before the arrival of the colossal waves that dislodge the vessel, Crisp recalls everyone from the surf to the safety of the slope. As the waves and tide batter the derelict, Crisp shouts encouragement, leading the waters in their charge against the death ship, and guiding the characters of Samaritan Bay on their journey to renewal.

The Back of the Turtle succeeds as a multilayered and complex allegory of hope and rebirth in a world threatened by perpetual environmental crises. In telling his tale, King draws from and mingles supernatural and mythic figures and tales from an array of contrasting traditions, crafting them into a complex yet complementary whole. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nicholas Crisp, who serves as a reimagined and re-embodied incarnation of not only the classical deity Neptune, but other mythological and traditional figures as well. As the novel reveals, Crisp not only retains features and abilities traditionally ascribed to the water god, but his personal history and familial background also link him to other supernatural figures like the Adam

of Genesis and the left-handed twin of the Anishinaabe Skywoman creation story. Moreover, through his links to his brother Dad, both the right-handed twin and the Judeo-Christian deity, and his Christ-like nephew Sonny, who nevertheless wields the instruments of Nordic legend, the multilayered nature of both Crisp and the novel itself become apparent.

Although we live in a varied and contradictory global system of beliefs and traditions, King demonstrates that humanity must strive to reconcile our differences and come together to prevent the planet's environmental degradation. If the diverse people of the world can do so, like the heterogeneous community of Samaritan Bay in their shared efforts against "The Ruin" and the *Anguis*, then there is yet hope. However, although *The Back of the Turtle* ends on an optimistic note, all is not well. The *Anguis* continues to drift at sea, hinting at a continual and persisting ecological threat.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Petra Fachinger, Molly Wallace, and Jordana Mendicino, of Queen's University, as well as my anonymous reviewers, for their invaluable advice, expertise, and comments during the process of editing and revising this essay.

NOTES

¹ Crisp refers to Gabriel as one of the "four angels," presumably meaning the four archangels (although that number can vary depending on religious denomination). Most commonly the four archangels are considered to be Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel. The fact that Gabriel bears the name of the "best-loved" of the four chief angels gestures to his importance in the story.

² Hydrological maps of the world's ocean currents reveal that the most likely path of a ship adrift in the Gulf of St. Lawrence would be a circular route around the North Atlantic. There is no reasonable way for a ship without power to drift from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, especially in the timeframe involved in the novel. Such a route would involve crossing the Arctic ice cap, or drifting against the prevailing current around Cape Horn in the Southern Ocean, or proceeding south of Africa, through the Indian Ocean, and across the entirety of the Pacific. Only a supernatural force can explain the *Anguis's* journey.

WORKS CITED

- Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity. "Thomas King, Master Storyteller." *YouTube*, 3 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63HFC4MUQek>.
- Follett, Alec. "Dangerous Stories: *The Back of the Turtle*." *Alternatives*, vol. 3, no. 41, 2015, p. 61.
- Glover, Jeffrey. "Going to War on the Back of a Turtle: Creation Stories and the Laws of War in John Norton's *Journal*." *Early American Literature*, vol. 51, no. 3, Fall 2016, pp. 599-622.
- Huggins, William. "Pipelines, Mines, and Dams: Indigenous Literary Water Ecologies and the Fight for a Sustainable Future." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2017, pp. 54-67.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions, 2015.
- King, Thomas. *The Back of the Turtle*. HarperCollins, 2014.
- . "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1990, pp. 10-16.
- Ridington, Robin. "Got Any Grapes?: Reading Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*." *Canadian Literature*, no. 224, Spring 2015, pp. 163-68, 170.
- Wakeham, Pauline. "Beyond Comparison: Reading Relations between Indigenous Nations." *Canadian Literature*, no. 230/231, Autumn 2016, pp. 124-42.