

# Sweeney Atomic

from *When The Streams Dried Up*  
by Marty Marquis

Mad major Sweeney wandered in cloud far above the archipelago, careering back and forth over Honshu, Shikoku, green Kyushu. He was pilot of a magical Boxcar, steel feathers sprouted from its aluminum skin and in its war-gaunt belly a jack-o-lantern blazing with a light of indeterminate color, a leaden pumpkin packed tight with killsilver dug from a witchcraft mine, a perilous candleflame that spilled gamma from voids carved in the lead gourd's flesh, the face of a reaper. Nearby flew The Great Artiste, freightless, its skin bristling with wands and rods and gauges and optics, from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth giving shape to the unseen, the shapes of graphs and charts and images on film, composing symphonies of data, endlessly assembling majestic, impossibly intricate collages of detached observation.

Now Sweeney was an Army man, and quick to anger. So when he heard the tolling of churchbells in the Nagasaki valley far below, like an echo of the awful voice at Trinity it drove him to a fury. In a rage he flung his poison pumpkin down on the cathedral of the city, and the prayers of the people gathered within were annihilated by the intense heat of the blast. Faint shadows left on the stonework marked how far each prayer had ascended at the exact moment the clock struck doom.

In the shadow of a blossoming mushroom cloud, drenched with a sudden black rain, a skeleton monk running down tangled streetcar tracks shook a fist of charcoal at the magic Boxcar where it wheeled overhead, his skin black and flapping from his bones like rags. Skyward he hurled a baleful malediction on Sweeney, telling dismelodious staves into the swirling ashes of the firestorm:

Just as I was eating some little

clams there came a flash;  
in that instant the house broke apart.  
The city translated to a ruined castle.

Everybody's face was black  
with soot and with surprised looks  
they were asking,  
*What in the world is this?*

My brother's ears were fused,  
and as for little sister—under the  
roof-tiles that squashed her brains.  
Strangers put them in a cart.

I can't explain the feeling I had,  
the poison-breathing. What an  
asshole! and now St Xavier's psalter  
is lost in the flames; cruelly

melted is the ancient bell.  
A curse on Sweeney—  
his guilt against us is immense,  
fat like his sorcerer's gourd.

The Great Artiste scanned, parsed, and dutifully set down the grey cinders of the staves, which had been consumed by the firestorm on their way up into the sky, and then began designing experiments to validate the objective reality of certain details of the monk's anguished hex, agonizing over its authorship and authenticity. But Sweeney was already mad; the curse was unnecessary; and the Boxcar swung out of control back out over the Pacific. As his fuel gauge dropped precipitously to zero, the mad major descried for the first time the terrible angels of the archipelago, stretching away to the north where the mountaintops broke the cloud, bellowing in dismal mourning for the killsilver loosed on the world.

When the mines had all been emptied and the maps were all re-pleted, the alchemists and theurgists repaired to a certain grove at Berkeley on the shores of the shining sea, to discover some way to the realm of the dead, and there to rob Pluto of his gold.

Of course they did it: They cracked open the very gates of Hell and brought back a dustmote of hot heavy metal as token and promise.

It is 1941. The fogs of winter and of war hazily on the horizon turn the setting sun to blood. An otter floats in the chill waters of the bay off Berkeley pier, watching the lights of the metallurgy lab burn behind orange-white shades. The cyclotrons whirl all through the night. Tragedy spells itself out in the gathering days.

Manhattan Engineer District is established: colonels and generals scour the country looking for somewhere to fix the rich poison placer they had in mind. Ultimately, in the dead center of the Columbia country some six hundred square miles of sage-studded flood plain are seized for the Hanford works; and there in 1943, under a cloak of duststorm, the gates of Hades again were broached and soldiers and wizards and priests descended into the underworld for the dead's gold. The Columbia boiled and churned over ingots that burned like the sun, and a vast mining camp like an anthill sprang up from the ghost town at the river's edge. The miners swole in, the West's last great rush, for an invisible metal that didn't exist.

The tunnel to Hell was widened by these men, paved with numbers scrawled on chalkboards and devilish machinery and the finest chemicals in all the land. Production was increased. The weird gold bathed in riverwater steamed furiously, a glory of decay, striving to become its own daughters and granddaughters, each more hideous and venomous in procession. After the space of a moon sorcerers frocked in lead moved the refined killsilver from cooling pools to the vaults in Gable mountain with reverence and full military pomp, but there were none to see it. For the towns-people and farmers had all been evicted and died of broken hearts

far from their homes. None but the owls and dying Caiote saw the parades, and the penitentiary inmates brought in from Walla Walla to work the fields and orchards, and the ghosts and the Dreamers and rattlesnakes.

Finally a black convoy went out of Hanford to the south. In a limousine six canisters sparkled darkly on the black leather upholstery. Two thousand miles away stood an empty lichen-frosted ranch house in a scorched valley. When the convoy arrived a man with enormous eyes quoted hindu scripture and carefully weighed out 6.1 kilograms of the stuff, half of all the killsilver in the mortal world, and he packed it into his gadget, which was really only a spore. For when it exploded a mushroom of cloud grew up over the valley and in it were lightnings and violet and green storms; and this mushroom is the sign by which we know that its source and sustenance is death and rot; and the real nature of this spore, which they had called Trinity, is brought out into the light for all to know.

But now there are little bits of the end of the world scattered everywhere.

On the outskirts of the Pacific rim, on the edges of the future, Sara and Ibrahim sailed languorously to a witch's house, young and beautiful, full of wonder at each other, the breeze of a sudden love at their backs. But in the treetops overhead a gibbering murder of crows followed after them, moving from elm to birch along their path, skirling like hollow-boned bagpipes.

Numbered among the murder was mad major Sweeney, lost and sad, numb from cold even in the summer day, a few sable feathers duct-taped to his cheeks, lacerated skin, beleaguered by an angry darkness. He'd been chased from isle to isle around the Ring of Fire by jack-o-lantern shadows, his instruments awry, hemorrhaging fuel, chastised by the rumors and groans of the angels that kept watch like lighthouses upon the peak of each volcano.

Flitting to and fro the telephone wires and trees above the new lovers, in a tall ivy-grown hawthorn that pricked his ragged skin he

heard the girl Sara reading from a book like the bellowing of an angel. So he fashioned a brood of hateful staves and screamed them from a corn-yellow maw:

This bleating angel  
like musicians at my wake!  
I would prefer a shriek of bombs  
to seraphim.

Perfectly aloof, belling and braying—  
from every peak the angels shout,  
antlered in ice, watchful.  
Imagine them,

angel of high Hakken san,  
angel of the symmetry of Fuji,  
the angels of Tazawa Ko and Kogen,  
the fierce angel of Jo-Shin-Etsu.

Angel of Mauna Loa, of Huascaran,  
Mt Shasta's angel,  
the angels of the thrice-peaked Sisters  
the angel of Shuksan and Baker.

The hoary mother of this herd is just;  
a voice more fell than Trinity  
commands the hornéd host.  
Branchy, many-tined with woe,

judgments sprout in mazy flames  
from the hooded angels' skulls—  
they seek to impale me, to tear  
my flesh like the prickly hawthorn.

This might have gone on for many pages more except that Ibrahim looked up from the sidewalk below and thought the bird

an ill omen. He picked up a pinecone and hurled it at Sweeney, who screeched at him and flew off into the past. The girl stopped and said:

—That was mean.

—That bird was evil. It was the crow of our own dusk screech-ing. You gotta chase that kind off.

—Birds can't be evil.

—That one was. Ibrahim broke into a smile and shrugged his shoulders, looking at the ground. It *was*! It wouldn't shut up. You just said yourself that everything brings destruction, so who cares?

She had been telling him about her book as they walked along, she in sun, unmindful of the birds, and he in shadow.

—Everything *does* bring destruction, she replied. We have a civilization now where every discovery and invention, every wish and prayer and good intention, every item for sale on the shelves of every Grocer Du Bois in the country, every whim and fart, all of it brings death. She paused breathless with joy. Or at least it's complicit with it.

—Complicit with it, huh? Um, I agree with some parts, but that's really a very black look at the world. Because then the bird is evil, my pinecone is evil, and I am evil too—

—Yeah but it's not necessarily *evil*, she said. Just a sec—okay listen, listen to what the book says: *Hooray! We will kill you all, everybody, everywhere. Hooray for Death! Hooray! Hooray!* She stopped reading and looked up at him, a smile glittering in her eyes like the waters of a fabulous archipelago. We just have to be colossal. We *have* to be.

On the far side of Lacostum, called Saddle mountain by the maps, over the Wahluke slope and beyond Caiote rapid, standing in the hot sun atop Gable mountain, or Nookshay, the Otter, general Leslie Groves of the Manhattan Engineer District tried to make sense of his situation. He couldn't remember how he'd got here, but decided that it had something to do with the Project. So top secret that even *he* didn't know all the details. He looked down at

the hibakusha looking over the Columbia rolling over its plain. Ah, yes—the Army must have this land. The river. The desolation. It's perfect. I'm here to negotiate. Of course.

He slicked the edges of his Hitler mustache and addressed himself to Kamiakan, last hero of the Plateau tribes, who stood nearby with his dead nephew Qualchan:

—Chief, with all due respect, intransigence is unwarranted in this matter. I assure you—and numerous other generals, colonels, joint chiefs-of-staff, housewives, senators, trash collectors, pin-up girls, town aldermen, sheriffs, and Hollywood celebrities can corroborate this information—that the project at Gable mountain—*this* mountain, if my intelligence is correct—is the Number One Priority of the War. Top secret, naturally, so you'll need the proper security clearances before we can discuss it in any detail.

The chief said nothing. Qualchan asked in a robot voice for a cigarette, and Kamiakan took one from his pack and lit it.

—Don't you understand, continued Groves, that unless we pursue the Gable mountain project with all the energy and forcefulness of beavers, the enemy will be first to build their way to the netherworld? There are weapons of endless death there, chief, he said, his voice slipping into a hiss. We don't dare let the Germans get them first!

Kamiakan handed the cigarette to Qualchan, sitting in a sliver of shade, who held it up to a plastic tube protruding from his throat. The cherry glowed as he filled his lungs with smoke.

—My nephew, said the chief, now speaks with the voice of Stephen Hawking. They hung him, you know. Crushed his larynx. While his young wife watched. Said he'd killed some miners. Who knows if it's true?

—We mustn't let the enemy get those weapons before we do! shouted the general. They are straining their necks and clenching their mastoids and bungs, you understand, in their evil quest to destroy the free world. Forgive my language, but surely, chief, you *do* understand.

—You greedy, greedy generals, answered Kamiakan, always the same. You all talk about all kind of things but really you just

want the gold. He smirked and lit another cigarette. Greedies. That's what I call you people.

—Chief Kamiakan, said Groves, exasperated, this nation is on a wartime schedule, you understand. I hereby withdraw 617 square miles of the desolate and barren land before us so that the Man-hat-tan Engineer District—with the aid and expertise of the DuPont chemical corporation, cheap, copious electricity from the new dam at Grand Coulee, and the abundant cold water of the river there—can undertake a vitally important and very possibly deadly project in relative seclusion from prying eyes. Duty binds me to brook no opposition.

Groves puffed himself up and imagined he looked imposing. Kamiakan and Qualchan sniggered behind their hands.

—I'm in deadly earnest! spluttered the general. Duty binds me to brook no opposition! In the name of the Great White Father in Washington, if you refuse the Corps' very generous offer of compensation for this land, I will be forced to use coercive might in order to compel you in this matter. It is my right as agent of a sovereign state.

—Bravo, said the chief, and clapped politely. Nice. Look, if you want my X on some document, you go ahead and put it there yourself, okay? And if you want to start another war with the Indi-an, you go right ahead. We know your greedy ways now, and we've been Dreaming of the future all this time while you're out prospecting in the past for armageddon, for what's already gone.

—Quit calling us greedy, said Groves, the gold stars on his collar flashing. It's the enemy you should be worrying about. Bloodthirsty! They make white people look like cute cuddly little teddy bears. If we don't stop them now they will slaughter your people, too, just as soon as they like. He hunched over and pantomimed a bloodthirsty enemy, making fangs with his fingers.

Kamiakan gestured at the hibakusha, the last survivors of the apocalypse at Nagasaki, milling about in the parking lot below them, sending wounded voices out into the desert and the verdant sky.

—Yeah, look pretty vicious, don't they?

Qualchan gave a robotic guffaw. Rafts of memories, filled as though with boat-people by Japanese voices, floated up the cliff on a just palpable wind.

—*That evening fell ill on the hill, said one voice. The town was the sky with a red lantern moon.*

—*I came to the crying of the river, said another. I waited there, how long, how long I waited! Dead people shape the water. She didn't come back.*

—*Thunderbeams and severed cables and burnt people lost in the street and mad, blood seeping from their eyes.*

—*Suddenly, Crack! there was my body and yours bewildered in black smoke bewildered.*

Groves ignored the voices and pressed on:

—It is the duty of every star-spangled American to galvanize behind the current threat and to do each their own part to build these engineer works so we can sink a shaft to the spirit land where dull crystalline woe glitters in the caves! The general was eloquent but looked tired; there were bags under his eyes.

—Listen! cried Kamiakan. Listen on the wind. It already hap-pened, man. I told you, you're living in the past. It's already all gone down.

The chief flicked his cigarette and where it lay the smoke drifted upward in eddies and spirals, blue in the sun like the memories and echoes of the big bang percolating up from below:

—*From no particular place there was a bright smell of flesh. The flash of a baby's dirge, wobbly with terror.*

Groves suddenly wondered what all the noise was about. Seemingly out of nowhere a crowd of protesters had gathered to the hibakusha on the mountainside. Photographers arrived, too, their white hot bulbs flashing like the flash of the fireball. This will never do. We can't have press out here.

—*In the enemy sky planes fly low.*

—*There was a very cold wind and a flashing pale or pinkish light.*

—*And we found some bones though we didn't know whose.*

—*Friendly ouija said Death, Death and I felt killed in my heart when I heard that word.*

—Say, why aren't those Japs down there interned yet? the

general wondered aloud. And then it all came back to him:

He *had* done it. He had built Hanford, just as he had built X-10 at Oak ridge, and the Pentagon before that; and there had been bombs, marvelous bombs the likes of which no one could believe. Three of them, to be exact; and the War was won.

Afterwards, in the giddiness of victory, the heroic, patriotic atom sparked a craze, and he was the man who'd built it. Women paid Gee-Gee at the Flamingo seventy-five bucks for their hair teased over a mushroom-shaped frame with silver glitter. At the Desert Inn Sky Room in Vegas the Atomic Bombers played every night, *rock'n'roll detonators of devastating rhythm*. After the show maybe the gang would all head out to the Test Zone, sip cocktails as the sun rose over Doomtown, where the Army boys staged their mannequin holocausts. Lying scattered across the dawn-kissed desert were tots blown from cribs, pincushioned with glass shards and darning needles, mothers blown to bits in the act of nursing tots. Penny's dummies dressed up by hollywood flits. Those were the days.

*—Then father said Look inside that box and I opened it and looked and there were mother's ashes in it. When I saw that I felt that I had fallen into the bottom of the sea. In the smoke of brother's cremation fire his face and mother's appeared and disappeared, appeared and disappeared.*

*—From no particular place there was an eerie green light.*

From no particular place the face of the president appeared and disappeared in Groves' memory. There were congratulations for work well done, him shaking hands with congressmen, more stars for his epaulets, directorships on corporate boards, hunting trips, best-selling memoirs. He mopped his forehead and Hitler mustache with a drab handkerchief. Dark halfcircles of sweat spread from his armpits, staining his uniform jacket. On the right shoulder of the jacket a patch was stitched signifying the Manhattan Project: the world struck by a lightning bolt issuing from a pentagram inside a chrysanthemum inside a cloud. And blood slowly seeping from the wound.

*—Again, said a hibakishu voice, one notices especially people who are digging out the bones of the dead and putting them in urns.*

Groves smiled and habitually slicked back his hair. What am I doing here? he thought.

—*The withered fig tree and the burnt skeleton of the machine were the only reminders of our home.*

—*We who experienced the fact of war with our bodies.*

From the cold limbs of a cottonwood at dusk the day after the massacre of missionaries at Wailatpu, Sweeney watched the gravedigging with a semblance of reason; but the priest's prayers and the bell's tolls and the winds' winter canticles were as the bray-ing of many asses in his ears, increasing his frenzy until he could take no more.

He flew off into the ghostly night, westward, the direction of Hanford. A headwind blew over the mountains from the lonely grey Pacific, turned the weather hard and vicious. Sleet coated his wings and rimes of ice limned each feather. Then strange rain--drops poured from heaven, that struck Sweeney's slender body most cruelly, like stones; and sparks fell continually upon his head.

The final flight of mad major Sweeney lasted more than seven-score years, and when at last he reached the Hanford works, winter-gaunt and woe-bit, he composed a plurality of villainous staves, and howled them into the deaf-eared blizzard:

Beside a murdered horse a dead soldier lay,  
and near a dead mother some dead baby parts.  
On every pool there rained  
an absinthe frost.

I report the angels' words,  
who bellow and bleat in the gale—  
theirs are the voices  
of white-wracked seas:

*Cheerless is existence, abode of snowy winds,  
and the smiles of scarecrows in the killsilver fields*

*while cold concrete sickles  
cut lakes from the stream.*

This terrible Möbius flight of mine,  
the endlessness, the wintry night;  
altitude sickness, frost-black conscience—  
by dying Caiote it is my due.

Falling from withered pinnacles,  
stumbling on ashy turf—it is truth—  
sage-cock for company, woman-shunned,  
running red angel through the frozen canals.

Ululation, I am Sweeney,  
a steel bird's corpse;  
sleep nor torpedo juice nevermore now—  
only the sougning of the atonal storms.

And the sky-vault peeled grey, the bells of the tempest. And the Army's vault in the belly of Otter mountain shivered, and the vol-canoes, grim and stately, vessels and urns to those who have perished in fires and War, shook and poured out steam and ash. And the incinerated schoolgirls and priests and parishioners and secretaries and grandmothers and mechanics of Nagasaki scattered themselves over the high desert with the tiny sounds of shattered glass.

A bit of bone plummeted earthward and struck Sweeney in the head, knocking him silly; and then a gold tooth fell and made a hole in his bird's skull, and sunk deep into the diseased grey matter there; and at long last his spirit shook free from its aluminum skin.

—For the sake of Peace, sang the voices of protesters, soft from far off across the poisoned plain. For the sake of Peace, *we said, and cheerfully made our way to Hell.* For the sake of *Peace.*

The voices of the hibakusha and the dead parishioners of Nagasaki and the hippies and Indian ghosts and assassinated rattlesnakes and kings of Salmon and folksingers and all the martyrs

of nuclearism joined together in the refrain:

*—Our sisters! Dyed with bright red suns of blood, and there's worms in the wounds, in the raw of the wound! In sister's sunset bright-dyed wounds are worms—*

The sound of the protest traveled forlornly over the desert, over the death-rattles of the mad Army major, under the delicate plumes of ash, the bellowing of exploding angels and the swift descent of night.