

Let Us Now Speak of Extinction

By Michael C. Keith

MadHat Press

www.madhat-press.com

ISBN: 978-1-941196-70-0

231 Pages

\$21.95

Review by Dennis Daly

Not one to be trifled with, Michael C. Keith, upon entering an alien spacecraft at the invitation of its owners, notices the lack of seating accommodations. His response to this clearly troubling development he unveils as the title of the aforementioned paraphrase of his well-wrought micro account, *Fuck Them!* Keith's new book, *Let Us Now Speak of Extinction*, is chalk full of such witty commentaries, dark cautionary tales, and disquieting considerations.

Like a modern day Michel de Montaigne, Keith's ruminations cut a wide swathe through the established conventions and civilized pretensions of our time. But, unlike Montaigne's rather heavy use of classical allusions, Keith draws the inspirations that buttress his anecdotes from Main Street. In one succinct tale entitled *Mrs. Johnson Is Ready to Greet the Future* the wifely protagonist approaches her reclining husband gently whispering his name. A few feet from him she conjures up a vision darkly, the possibility, although remote, of her life-partner's death. Keith ends his ditty with the now grieving, now fantasizing widow entertaining a most comforting image,

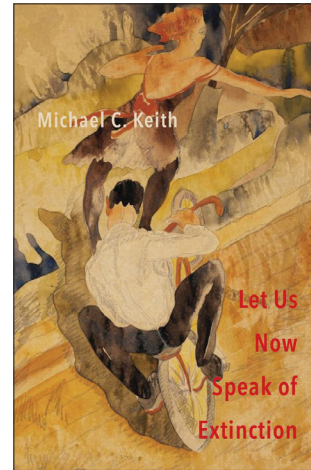
... I'll book the penthouse suite in the Ritz at Dorado Beach, she thought, her pulse quickening.

At first (and second) glance many of Keith's pieces smack of nihilism. Often he counters or supplements his own nihilism with a wicked humor, either in the same piece or a nearby one. In his story *Forced Learning* Keith builds up his theme (concisely of course) of those who share too many particulars with their captive audiences. Then, as one's mind adjusts to his oh-so-rational reaction, Keith drops in an ironic twist that is laugh-out-loud funny. Here is how the narrative ends,

Another time, Clark explained that what makes Denver the Mile-High City is the 13th step on the west side of the State Capitol Building. Again it was information I didn't need.

I figure it's important for him to share what he knows with me, so I don't say anything. Besides, you need to get along with your cellmate, especially if he's a pathological didactic.

Keith never flinches from chiding the shortcomings of human reasoning. Consider this parable entitled *Falling Stars*, quoted in its entirety,



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Margaret stared up at the sky and tried to find the constellations she'd learned as a child, like Orion, Ursa Minor, and Cassiopeia. It was a clear night, but she could not locate them. Well, things do change, she reasoned.

Seventeenth century nobleman and writer of maxims Francois de la Rochefoucauld would be amused but perhaps a little distressed at Keith's adept use of adages in his shorter writings. Here are two of Keith's tiny offerings. Notice that the titles are inseparable from the pieces themselves. Each title carries more than a tinge of explanatory irony,

A Statement That Failed to Comfort a Reluctant Flyer
"There's not a thing in the world that doesn't carry with it some risk."

And

Cliques

Unknown writers aspire to join the ranks of well-known writers. Well known writers are indifferent to the aspirations of unknown writers.

Many of Keith narratives appear to be jolly good fun, when in fact they deliver edginess and Kierkegaardian consternation. In the title piece, Let Us Now Speak of Extinction, one of Keith's less than heartwarming dialogs, a young daughter asks her father to explain the concept of death. Her father attempts to elucidate the subject in an unthreatening way. He explains that death is what happens to old people, thus, he thinks, removing the immediate burden from his young child. His daughter, however, persists, asking, "And what's it like?" Here is the concluding dialogue,

After a long, awkward pause, the girl's father replied, "Plato said that death is a state of nothingness and utter unconsciousness."

Oh, I like Play-Doh. So, death is like Play-Doh, Daddy?

Yes... yes, honey, death is exactly like Play-Doh.

The daughter not only turns the table on her father, but shows her innate, albeit a bit unsettling, appreciation of human mortality.

The conventions of heaven (think angels and harps) and hell (eternal scorching fire) are mightily important to religious folk because they reward the good guys and punish the bad. In this way the faithful are able to overlook the annoying reality of life's overall injustice. Sometimes it's the very small examples of these outrages that needle the most. Keith, employing unvarnished nihilism, rubs it in, delivering a perfect illustration in his piece entitled Timeless Justice. After detailing the sadistic actions of a cyber bully, in which he posts "Now versus Then" photos of woman acquaintances on Facebook, cruelly showing how much they have aged, Keith then sets up the moment of the perpetrator's comeuppance... well, not so much,

Then one day someone posted a "Now versus Then" photo of him, and he was delighted by how well he'd been treated by time.

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Toward the end of his collection Keith sets his tale *It's Good When God Favors You* in which he seems to tempt destiny. A ne'er-do-well woman, living in a trailer park somewhere in west Texas prays to God for protection against a wind storm, a calamity that often threatens such people. Keith's twisted denouement of this salvation tale, calling up the regularity of perilous dangers facing mankind is absolutely wicked,

Like the last time, she prayed that the force of the wind would not destroy her home. It had flipped her neighbor's Winnebago, and she had felt blessed that the Lord had chosen to honor her request.

If you intend to read this wonderfully wry and provocative collection do it quickly. I have no doubt that even now the Lord of all literature is aiming multiple thunderbolts at this iniquitous author and his rapidly selling cache of books, located on the grounds of the notoriously sulfurous Madhat Press.