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Humor

The Nation's Highest Honor
James Gaitis
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With Pestilence, War, Famine, and Death galloping around the planet (and Pollution keeping up in his Hummer), public discourse today seems to have no place for humor except in movies about the pranks of adolescents of all ages. Satire? Hardly anyone recognizes it. How many people understand that Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert are doing satire every night? What would happen if Jonathan Swift were reincarnated and set his Modest Proposal in, say, Darfur or Pakistan?

Although James Gaitis is no Swift, he manufactures a brave new world that runs with Marxian competence-it makes one wonder if he is a Libertarian. An unnamed nation that is presumably a reconstituted United States is going to present its highest honor, the Nolebody Medal, to Dadaist poet and maker of found art, Leonard Bentwood. The medal is named for Philip Nolebody, a monster robber baron who acquired just about everything and who invented a vaccine "which brought an instant and permanent end not only to warÉbut to virtually every other manifestation of mass violence, whether in the form of organized rebellion or protest, or in the guide of spontaneous eruptions in the form of riots or panic- or greed-driven stampede."

Plot demands complications. First, Bentwood thinks the government functionary who brings him news of his honor is just trying to sell him something. Bentwood, who lives in the desert (which Gaitis illustrates with Mahleresque descriptions of the flora, fauna, and monsoons) is, like Chance the Gardener, pretty much *non compos mentis*. So is the President. World governments, having purchased the Nolebody Vaccine, have all disbanded their military and police and remaindered the matriel. Governments are now, in fact, manifesting the Peter Principle: in which everyone rises to the level of his or her incompetence. Finally, the military having been abolished, there are apparently no more guns.

But wait, suddenly the government learns that the Nolebody Vaccine has a half-life of thirty years and its effects will expire on the day of the Nolebody ceremony. Aggression and

competition will inevitably resurface. Now what? The government turns to Leonard Bentwood as their last best hope, the plotting continues with flim-flammery on the part of both the government and private citizens, and the *verboten* Nobody Movement comes back to life. Run for the hills!

Barbara Ardinger