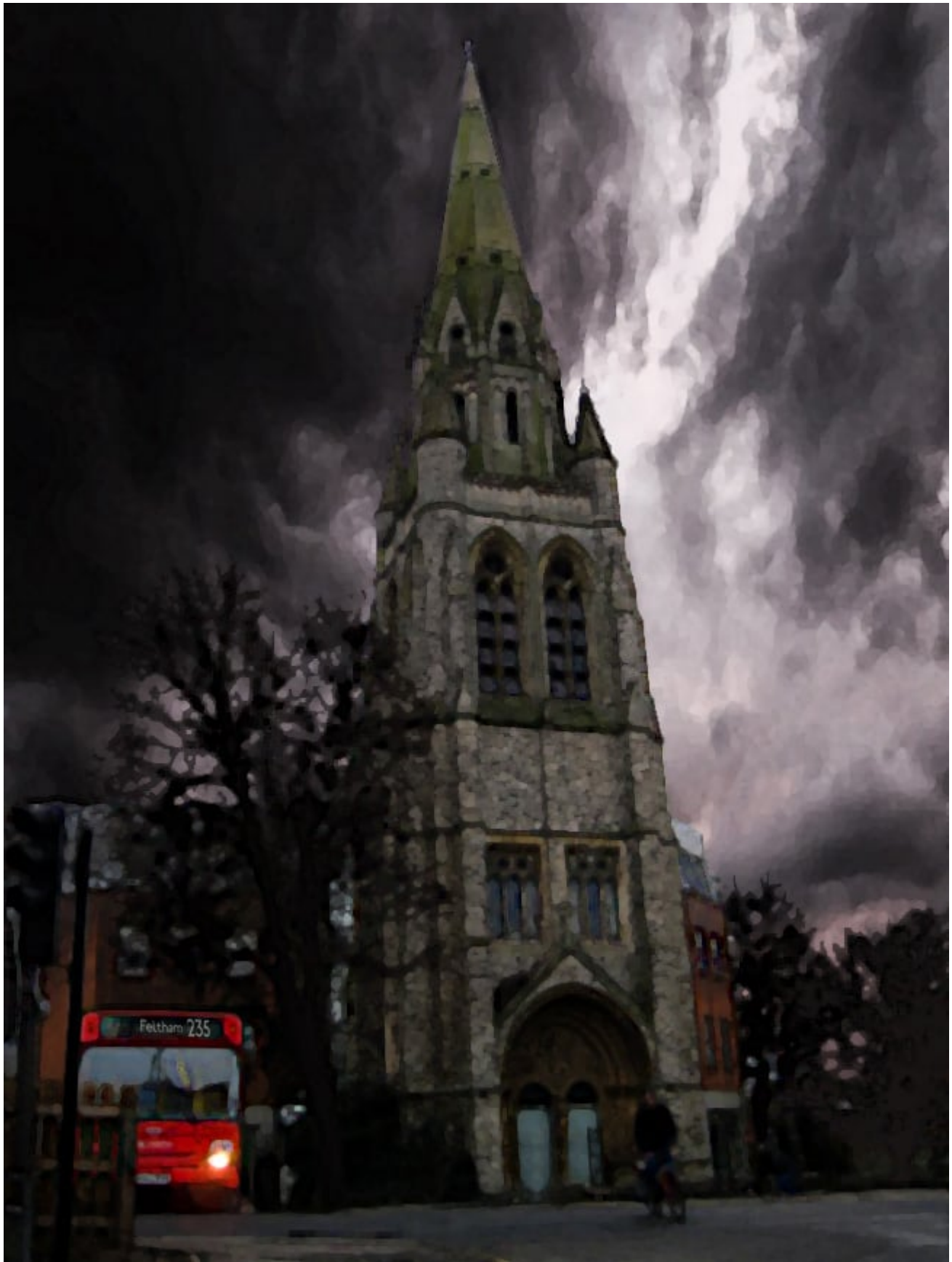


The Number 235: The Fall

Sludge in extremis

by [Paul Martin Freeman](#) (September 2023)



'Twas on the 235 at Feltham Station,

It happened in the very recent past,
That Sludge began to think about salvation
And how he really ought to find it fast.

While gazing blankly at the floor below him
A figure in the dark had caught his eye.
This alien humanoid appeared to know him,
Or so its actions seemed to now imply.

The humanoid had blown a kiss in greeting
As if the two were lovers on a date.
It pouted like an amorous boyfriend teasing,
Though Sludge himself was very proudly straight.

Now, Sludge was not a man with whom to trifle:
For fun he hunted adult grizzly bears.
He liked it best to club them with his rifle
By stealing up behind them unawares.

And so in fury at being thus accosted
And suffering the attentions of a gay,
Determined that by such he'd not be worsted,
He now resolved to make the other pay.

He started stomping up and down the aisleway
To crush the odious creature in the floor,
While others stared in horror at this horseplay,
Or else withdrew in fear towards the door.

But suddenly the floor collapsed beneath him,
And Sludge was somersaulting through the air.
With nothing but a vacuum underneath him
He plummeted without a hope or prayer.

It seemed he fell through all eternity,
His sense of what he was in disarray.
And down and down he went eternally

Tormented by the creature all the way.

He passed through clouds of sulphur as he tumbled
And furnaces of black Satanic fire,
And as he tumbled all inside him crumbled
As Sludge perceived his situation dire.

Yet still he fell with nothing there to stop him,
And down he dropped in terror and despair.
And other creatures now arrived to mock him
As faster still he travelled through the air.

Yet even while he plummeted he pondered,
Recalling all his many wasted years.
He thought of opportunities he'd squandered
And suddenly was overcome with tears.

His life appears now stretched in space before him.
He sees a forest where he's lost his way.
He calls to friends and others who ignore him
And family who coldly walk away.

And there he spies his earliest recollection:
A quiet voice he'd heard when very small.
He'd somewhere lost that numinous connection
And so, like Adam once, had had a Fall.

Oh, how he longs to be that little child
And have again what long ago he lost!
He sees that being detested and reviled
Of falling then from grace is now the cost.

Eternal justice reigns, he sees, supreme,
And everywhere he looks he finds its face.
It's always there however things may seem,
And nothing ever can its laws displace.

And as he grasps this truth he feels a lightness,
Enabling Sludge to meet his dismal fate.
In all there is he sees a perfect rightness
Where love alone exists, no pride nor hate.

Then suddenly he sees the bus as usual,
With mums and dads and little ones as well.
He's had a dream, perhaps, or been delusional,
And yet it seems he's had a taste of Hell.

And Sludge alights at sleepy Feltham Station,
So glad to be alive and full of hope!
He looks about with unalloyed elation
And climbs towards the church upon the slope.

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Paul Martin Freeman is an art dealer in London. The poem is from the story of Sludge in *The Bus Poems: Tales Sacred and Profane*, currently in preparation. His book, *A Chocolate Box Menagerie*, is published by New English Review Press and is available [here](#).

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