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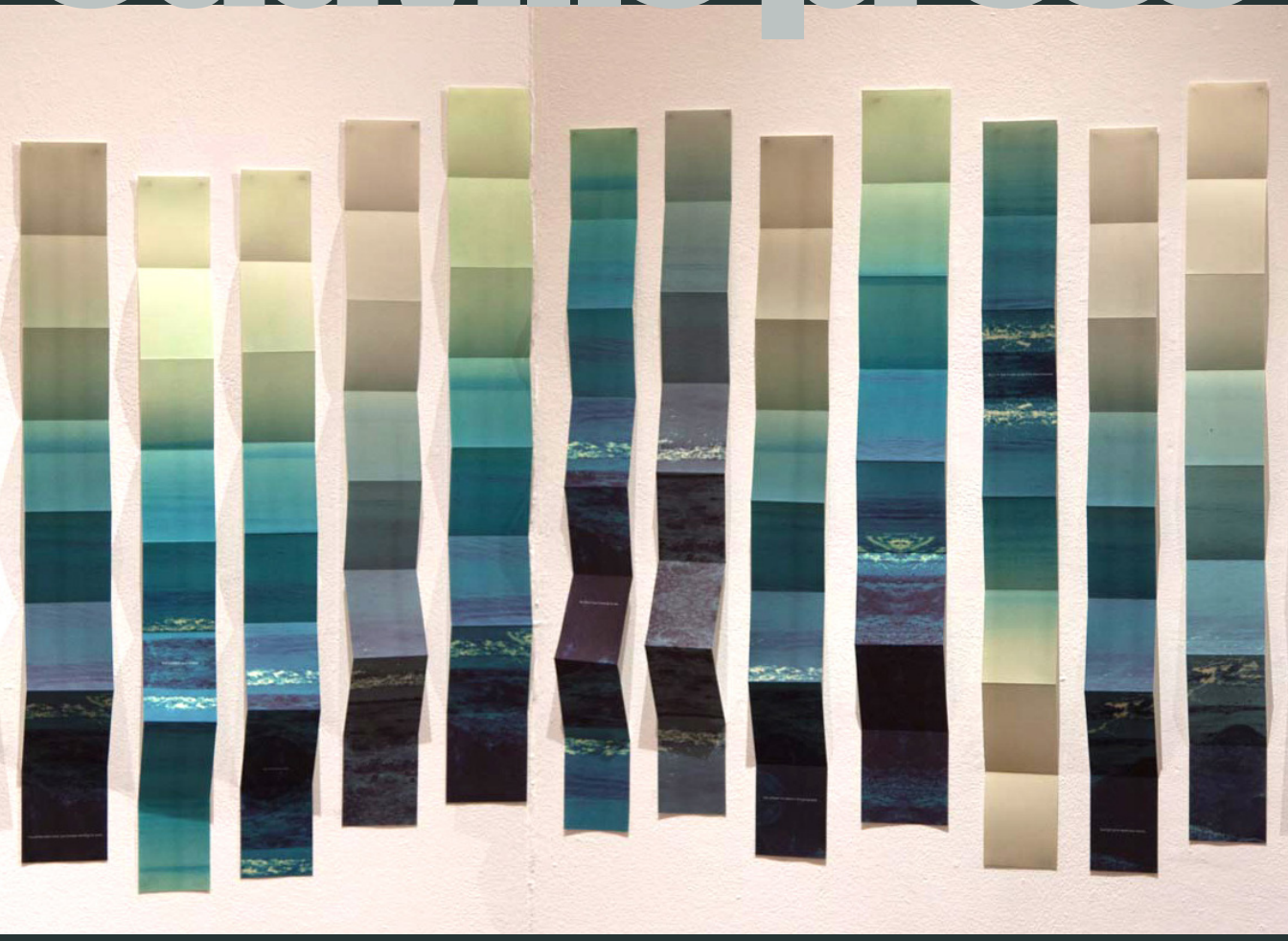

SPRING 2019

COVER

What You Saw is Not The Sea

Nicole Pietrantoni

Nicole Pietrantoni's artwork explores the complex relationship between human beings and nature via installations, artists' books, and works on paper. She is the recipient of numerous awards and residencies including a Fulbright to Iceland, a Leifur Eiríksson Foundation Grant, an Artist Trust Fellowship, the Manifest Prize, and the Graves Award for excellence in Humanities teaching and research. Her work has been in over 100 national and international exhibitions.

Nicole received her MFA and MA in Printmaking from the University of Iowa and her BS in Human and Organizational Development and Art History from Vanderbilt University. Nicole recently finished a two-year term as the President of SGC International, North America's largest professional organization dedicated to education and scholarship in the field of printmaking.

Nicole regards both her professional practice and pedagogy as powerful sites for intellectual, artistic, and ethical transformation. She is committed to arts education and has been a visiting artist at colleges around the country to give workshops and speak about her work. Since 2012, Nicole has been a professor at Whitman College where she teaches printmaking and book arts.

Nicole's work can be found at **nicole-pietrantoni.com**

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DISCLAIMER

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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The Burning of Jackson High

Arya-Mehr Oveissi

IN LIFE, IT IS RARE that an entire body of people all remember the same event vividly. Usually for that to occur, a tragedy or a miracle must happen. Rarely does something beneath those qualifications stand still in time in such a way. To be in awe like that, even if it's only for a brief second, a chord must be struck within. Not just a chord, but all the damn chords one has jammed inside them. And for all those in attendance at Jackson High on the day of May 18th, 1998 that's exactly what happened when principal Lewis went on the intercom, cleared his tired throat, and said, "Go fuck yourself, Jackson High."

As soon as the flammable words left the now "Mr. Lewis'" lips, a chemical reaction occurred within the brains of everyone who heard him. All preexisting rules and social standards were set ablaze as exhibited through the sudden de-evolution of both students and teachers alike. After everyone processed what they just heard, utter bedlam began to ravage the halls of the self-destructing high school.

"Go fuck yourself," said freshman Boris Bernstein to his history teacher, Ms. Plerkins.

"No, Boris. On the contrary, Why don't you go fuck yourself?" asked Ms. Plerkins.

The classroom erupted. Annie Vance punched Jane Gregory square in the face, but only once, which was nothing compared to what Mikey Tupnikki was doing to Aiden Murry in the music room; banging his head between two massive drum cymbals. In the hallways, students and teachers joined forces in a moment of frustrated rage to tear everything they could off the walls: works of art, sex education posters, first aid signs, flyers, anything at all. Some of these materials were used to set small fires in waste bins. The same smell of rebellion described throughout the tattered history books filled the school like mustard gas. Naturally, more fighting ensued during this ordeal. Hell, even coach Tibs and first baseman, Brock Coleman, started fighting in the locker room. If it were not for the interjection of Brock's girlfriend, Sandy McConel, the star player would have likely swung his bat so violently at coach Tib's head that no one would ever ask him for "more aggression" as long as he lived.

It would be correct to say that Mr. Lewis' profane address to his school served as the proverbial straw which broke the camel's back, but it would be just as incorrect to say that that was the sole reason why the camel was now paralyzed. Depending on who was asked, a different answer would have been given. Alexia Ramirez, a senior in all advanced

honors classes, would say her disdain started two years ago when she had to read Frankenstein for the second year in a row—but that things intensified at the start of this year when students were told there were not enough books for everyone, so they'd have to share with one another. For junior Ashton Jones, his anger came last year when the chess team was told that it would no longer receive funding and would thus cease to exist. Unlike her selfish students, Mrs. Turkeybun was fed up with the lack of respect from the children. For two decades she dealt with snide remarks, rude jokes, and inappropriate questions.

"Hey, Mrs. Turkeybun," said sophomore Tony Chang once.

"Are you saying that in "Fall of the House of Usher," incest is what caused the house to split in half?"

"Ultimately, yes," said Mr. Turkeybun.

"So then can you tell us what was it like growing up in a house that was divided in two?"

The class laughed. The class always laughed. Now, in quite the reversal of roles, it was Mrs. Turkeybun who was laughing. Yes, laughing maniacally as she threw heavy books at the students who caused her the most pain. Sadly, Gilbert, the innocent goldfish swimming in the back of the room, did not stand much of a chance against the heavy barrage. Freshman Jacob Gollyson was never one to let food go to waste, so he quickly shoved the floundering Gilbert into his mouth and swallowed him without chewing. After this, Jacob wondered if anyone had gotten to the lizards in Mr. Gordon's room.

On the first floor near the main entrance, members of the football team, led by quarterback Terrance Jones, gathered around the boisterous trophy case. How it mocked them daily. Championship trophies from different decades filled the case: seven trophies from the 70s, four trophies from the 80s, but none from the 90s. From the moment each player on the team declared to go to Jackson High, they were told that they'd be the ones to bring pride back to the school's name. What they were not told was that they'd be playing under Coach Kelly, whose head was so far up his own ass that the players were often unsure if he was calling a play or passing gas. To make matters worse, the team had won three games total in four years. The seniors on the team never received any praise, were told over and over that they were worthless (in a failed attempt to motivate them), and felt like any chances they had of getting recruited to a top school (or any school for that matter) were blown due to their coach's stupidity. As with all good stories though, there are two sides. From Coach Kelly's perspective, his players were lazy and did not have the discipline or passion to play football at a high level. His frustration with his players was real, but not as intense as his hatred for the athletic director, Mr. Tony, who Coach Kelly thought did a piss poor job of finding actual talent for his team.

"On the count of three," said Terrance Jones as he put his helmet on. "One…two…" the biggest men from his team stood at his side, helmets strapped on, head facing forward. "Three." Like a group of angry bulls charging at their tormentors, the team ran head first into the wall-long trophy case. With a shattering boom, the team broke the glass and began to destroy the accomplishments of Jackson High past. Trophies were smashed, pissed in, and thrown around like footballs. The pictures of the former champions were torn to shreds, pissed on, and then subsequently slipped on by other students who were running wildly through the halls.

Walking silently through the madness

was Mr. Lewis. He did not have the same savage look on his face that transfixed itself on the rest of the people in the building. He strolled through the halls, hands held behind his back, taking in the works of his students. Shy children who used to come to his office to report incidents of bullying were now banding together to beat up their former oppressors. Dimwitted students worked with one another to figure out how to break into locked faculty rooms as if they were solving a math problem. Although his world was crumbling around him, there was an overwhelming sense of peace that guided him through the chaos. What Mr. Lewis found most comical about this whole ordeal was that today was the most relaxed he'd been at work in three decades.

For 30 years Mr. Lewis dedicated his life to turning Jackson High into a school that he and his students could be proud of. Almost immediately, he saw rapid success. The school's collective test scores blew the rival school's scores out of the water. Every athletic team won a championship within the first four years of their inception. But most importantly, the school was a happy place to be. Students did not eye one another with the look of wild animals. Teachers did not have a constant look of resentment plastered over their faces. And parents were not calling non-stop to complain about this or that. It was a simpler time. But somewhere along the line things began to change. Budget cuts within the district needed to be made, and what better school to take from that the school that had everything.

At first, these budget cuts did not seem to matter. Test scores stayed high, the sports teams stayed within championship contention, and the moral of the students remained high. That being said, these first budget cuts placed a massive crack in the base of the school that would grow over time. See, the money had to come from somewhere, and the teachers were the ones to suffer. Initially, Jackson High had the highest payroll for teachers in the district, but with this initial budget cut, they fell to eighth. This was the first of many complaints that Mr. Lewis faced. No matter though, Mr. Lewis thought, if everything else at the school ran well, he'd be able to keep the teachers happy.

He wasn't. There are few things in life that can change one's demeanor more than money. Mr. Lewis began to promise his teachers things that he couldn't give, though he tried. Days off, extended lunches, and classroom assistants were a few things promised to the teachers. However, each time he'd get closer to actually getting his staff one of these things, the school board would issue a new demand, which left him unable to do so. To make matters worse, every seven years or so, another pay decrease would hit the school, and the teachers would be the first to feel the pain. So for over two decades, despite surface level happiness, Mr. Lewis felt the grounding of his school shake.

With the bubbling resentment of the teachers came the eventual apathy of the students, who did not appreciate being taught by a visibly unhappy staff. The students could tell that the teachers were no longer caring about them as individuals. And how could they? They were underpaid and overworked. It would take at least $2,000 more a year for Mr. Salamone to step in and break up a fight in the hallway. Since the students could not take their anger out on the teachers, they would often take it out on themselves. To be fair to Mr. Lewis, he did try everything in his power to fight off the school board's requests, but over time they became too much. Before he knew what happened, Crest Oak Academy was regarded as the best school in the district,

and Jackson High was more of an afterthought.

The chain of hatred was easy to understand: the students hated the teachers for being lousy at their jobs, the teachers disregarded the students and hated Mr. Lewis for underpaying them, Mr. Lewis cared for the students and teachers, but hated the school board and spent his time fighting with them, and the school board did not care about anybody, so long as they were making money. Although this dynamic was easy to understand, it was impossible to stop. As Mr. Lewis found himself about to exit his school for the last time, he took a look back and wondered how things would have been different if the school board cared about education the same way he did. Instead, he saw his school, his lifework, crumbling to the ground.

According to the school board, a maintenance check up was only required once every four years. Because of this, a working sprinkler system was just another luxury that Jackson High did not have. Unfortunately, one of the waste bin fires on the third floor had grown so fierce that smoke was now flowing out of every open window. Like insects scurrying out from beneath a rock, the rest of the school ran outside.

Once everyone made it through the front doors, the curse cast on the school was broken—all the fighting and arguing came to a halt as everyone examined the embarrassing damage they put on their school. Friends searched for one another, checking to make sure the people they loved were okay. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured, though there were many cuts and bruises accounted for. Teachers took control of the situation, guiding their students away from the building. And similar to how everyone in the school would remember Mr. Lewis' morning announcement, both students and faculty would also remember how they rallied together for first time in decades, all to watch of the burning of Jackson High.

Through his writing, Arya-Mehr Oveissi shines a light on the often ironic juxtaposition of joy and sorrow that appears in everyday life. He believes that it is important for literature to show a wide range of perspective, which grants the reader room to interpret the work however they see truest to their inner self. In doing this, he hopes to breed discussion that will analyze the social discourse that takes place today. Although Arya bases his work in relatively modern settings, he attempts to have his stories narrated with the same distant eloquence found in classic literature. When he is not reading or writing, he enjoys going to the beach, hiking, playing basketball, and paddleboarding.

Wood Between Teeth

Ashley Dailey

1.
Carpenter bees
drill tunnels
through wood
through trees
up to six
feet deep
damaging
the structural
integrity
of the wood.

2.
Porch eaves hum through spring
as shiny-backed carpenters drill
peepholes the shape of my fingertips.
They freckle the pine of the garage,
the grind of a thousand working
mandibles perceptible & imperceptible
as radio waves. The female sweeps splinters away
with her powerful forelegs. In May she registers
for diapers, teething rings, bibs, burp cloths.
She buries her burdens & prays for rain all season long.

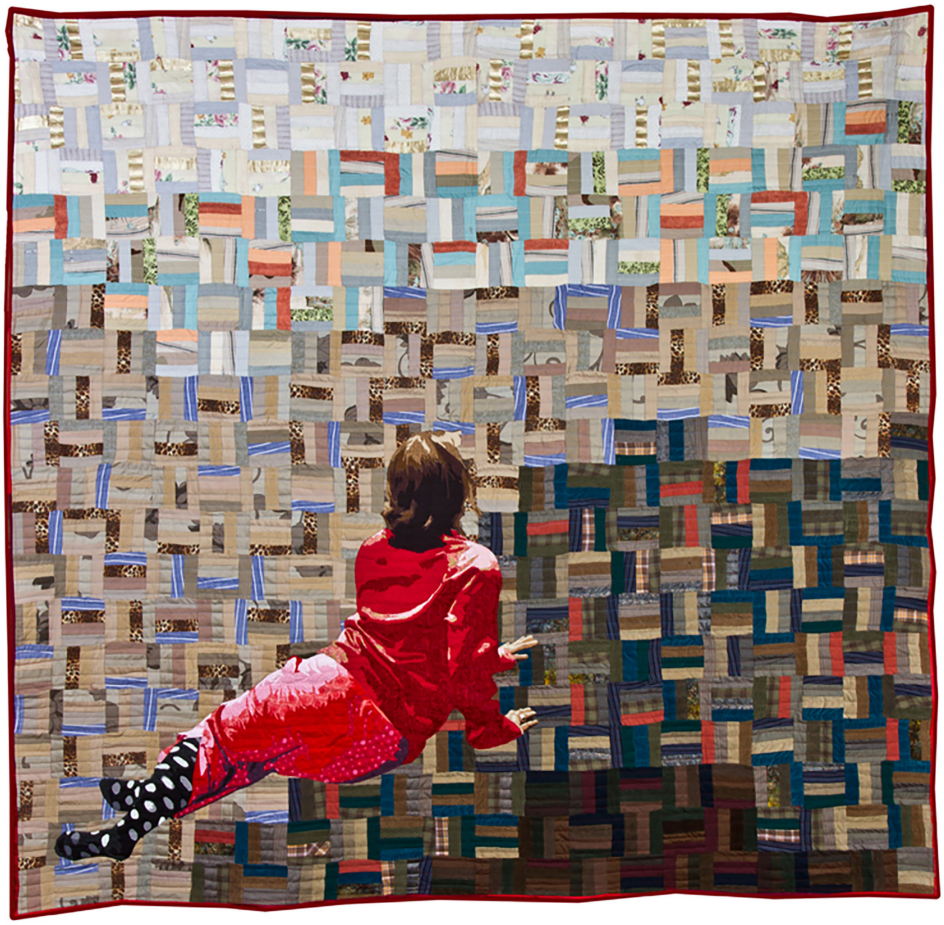
3.
The air erupts from her
blooms in the kitchen
wraps around my father
pushes through the vent
barrels through the walls
finds my ear pressed to the cold metal
wet hair, tangy chlorine
bathing suit bleeding on the carpet.
Dissecting buzz.
Uncovering meat.
I hear the table legs dance

the mouths at the joists groan.
Later—
face dry, shiny, pink
I find the table dismembered
& no longer a table.

4.
They aren't romantic like honey bees
whose jowls drip liquid sugar,
nectar passed mouth to mouth.
My blue collar bees chew wood,
chips flexing between crooked teeth.
Day's end, they fall asleep beneath the Bronco,
fingers hugging a wrench, nose sucking
against the beast/machine.

5.
Waiting in the car, windows fallen open
Georgia's breath heaves
with the dank smell of rotted summer,
muscadines, & mildew.
Like gutted flour
CO2 dusts the emptied garage
hugs the unfinished walls
licks frayed wires & wilting insulation.
Fire extinguisher sputtered WHORE
across the door. Besides 'n' & 'm'
my father always uses caps.
In the quiet aftermath, the red body lies spent
neck buried in grease rags.
My mother—kitten heels clicking—
coaxes the garden hose
twists the stubborn valve.
She lifts the water to her lips like it's July
& she is washing the car, then spits
at the garage door.
The water carries away dozens of carpenter bees
dusted legs curled to their chests.

Ashley Dailey is a high school literature teacher with a bachelor's degree in English and creative writing. She is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Award and the former Managing Editor of Valdosta State University's literary journal *The Odradek*. She likes writing about places—Southern mill villages, Northwestern vineyards, Portuguese alleyways, and desolate Midwestern plains—and the people who give her directions along the way.



The American Context #16

Luke Haynes

Subverting the traditional quilting form by integrating modern concepts, his art transforms the comfortably familiar into the visually evocative. Luke Haynes was born and raised across the American South. With a formal training in art and architecture at Cooper Union, New York, Haynes continues to experiment with quilting art while exploring art and architecture across the globe. Haynes work can be found at **lukehaynes.com**

The Frozen River Dream

Mark Jacobs

WHEN MARK ANTONY was still quite a young boy Momma Grace began reading to him aloud each night from *An Amateur's History of the World.* It was a massive volume with a cracked green leather cover, which she kept on a dictionary stand and did not neglect to have Olive dust. Some evenings, opening the big book with a shiver of anticipation that communicated itself to her son, she challenged him. *Now sit up straight and do your best to imagine me as a woman of noble ancestry trapped in a horrid white tower, surviving on her wits and a bit of charm.* Lacking a social context—his education was conducted at home at Tall Oaks; he had no friends of his own age and few acquaintances—Mark Antony assumed this was how the majority of mothers addressed the majority of their sons.

Because they had a close and comfortable relationship, he naturally asked his mother why she wished him so to imagine her. Her answer was typical of the way she expressed herself, but that did not make it any easier for a young boy to make sense of. *Because,* she explained, her voice patient as creek water smoothing stones, *people will do their best to convince you how plain everything is, how simple and explicable, when really it's not, it's not like that at all. Learn to see the richness, my lovely boy, perceive the complexity.* What was it about her heartfelt declaration that caused tears to cloud the clarity of her dark eyes? A mystery neither plain nor simple.

Grace Longstreet had passed years ago, but her admonition came back to Mark Antony as bouncy-bottomed Lucy Withers descended the grand central staircase, mule heels slapping, grunting with exertion. In her smoothly efficient way, Olive saw her out the front door.

How do you do it? Lucy Withers had demanded to know, sitting in the burgundy Queen Anne chair that was always stationed at the head of his bed, where Mark Antony sat propped by pillows, a pot of jasmine tea on the table alongside. He was long past the point at which admiration occasioned either pride or discomfort. The gift. It simply was. But to people like Lucy Withers, and the population was largely made up of people like Lucy Withers, the gift of prophecy partook of the miraculous.

At her request, he had summoned her situation five years hence. No easy task even for him, even now, at the height of his powers. *Happily,* he was able to confirm, *you are likely to remarry. I see a barn, quite a large one. Swallows fly in and out of the haymow. A view of the Blue Ridge. All this suggests something quite pleasant, but I am reluctant to say what. I urge you, Mrs. Withers, to be just as cautious yourself.*

It's too easy to read what you wish for, what comes easily, into these… pictures. Don't set yourself up for heartbreak.

But how do you do it? she insisted.

He'd had no answer, just the memory of his momma exhorting him to picture her as a noblewoman in a problematic tower. Naturally he did not share that with Lucy Withers, and when she made snuffing noises to the effect that she would be glad to make a contribution to whatever cause he indicated, he was unnecessarily cool, telling her that would not be necessary. The gift was not for sale.

He rang the silver bell on his bedside table, whereupon Olive appeared.

"There's no one else on the schedule," he told her. "Feel free to go home early. Just bring me a sandwich, something light. I may feel like eating later on."

Olive Applebee had been at Tall Oaks since Momma Grace hired her decades back. She stayed on after her employer's death out of loyalty to the family who had rescued her from what the social scientists called trailer park anxiety syndrome. She was bony and gray, a single mother with a highly inked ne'-er-do-well son. Also, she had a mouth on her, which the vicissitudes of time had taught her to keep shut as often as she opened it.

"I thought," she began.

"Thought what?"

"April's here. The redbuds are out, but they won't last long. We could take a drive. I had the Cadillac serviced last week."

The Cadillac was fifty years old now, the same age as Mark Antony. General Longstreet had bought it to celebrate a business acquisition and promptly died. He wasn't a general, of course, not even of the honorific Confederate variety. But he had hated his given name. Lambeau Longstreet sounded like vaudeville. 'The General' had started as a joke and evolved into an identity, no less real for being manufactured.

"Ah!" Mark Antony exclaimed. "Spring in the Piedmont. You remember what the General used to say."

"Save your Dixie cups, the South will rise again."

"Thank you for the invitation, Olive. You are generous with your time. But I'm not feeling up to the logistics just now."

Since becoming bedridden — such a nasty word — Mark Antony found getting dressed, getting downstairs and out of the house an ordeal. As time went by he was less and less inclined to submit to the indignity of the process. Fortunately he had the means to bring the needful to him. Upon command, his banker sat in the Queen Anne chair with statements, investment suggestions, happy prognostications. So did his doctor, although there was the occasional need for tests at the hospital, and these he endured. A barber from Briery was willing to make the trip to Tall Oaks for what used to be known as a consideration.

Olive frowned.

"Is something wrong?" Mark Antony asked her.

"It's just…"

The woman half-believed he was malingering. Not exactly faking his illness so much as milking it, or failing to block its inroads by an effort of will. How could he explain to her what was going on inside him? That way lay the madness of sanity.

"Maybe tomorrow," he told her gently. He really did value her loyalty, and the decorous affection that came with it.

"Whatever you say, sir."

She went away disappointed.

He should not have taken the call. He recog-

nized the number in the display and shuddered. Why, then, pick it up? Even dead, Momma Grace was right. Plain and simple were two big fat mutually reinforcing lies. Pick it up he did.

"Mark Antony."

"It's eleven thirty."

"I did not call to inquire hour."

Elizaveta Ivanovna. Russian by birth, exiled by grim circumstance. She lived in Richmond, a good two-hour drive away, where she plied a bygone trade, rebinding and repairing old books. She had come to see him six months back. Word of mouth was still the best form of advertisement. Not that he lacked for or wanted clients. He had no interest in flaunting the gift, scarcely of exercising it. It was a case, rather, of not saying no to legitimate requests from perplexed citizens of the surrounding counties. To do so would be sinful, if you could conceive of sin as a civic failing.

"I have been beset," she told him, "by another Russian dream."

"My advice now is the same as it was the last time."

"I do not wish to consult a doctor of the head, or a doctor of the heart. I wish to consult you. Now listen to my dream. Last night, when it woke me, I wrote down the particulars. I have purchased notebook suitable for the purpose. The pages have no lines."

She scared him. That was the unvarnished truth of the matter. There was something about this woman, something in her, something she exhaled the way other people exhaled spent air, that threatened the hard-won equilibrium he enjoyed, on the cusp of his sixth decade.

"I'm going to hang up, Elizaveta Ivanovna."

"Please. Only listen. If you cannot respond, that is fine, that is okay. But I shall feel better simply by telling you what came to me in the night."

"Prophecy and the interpretation of dreams are two separate disciplines, you know that."

"Yes, but this is America."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even now, with all that has happened, wonderful things are possible in country of your birth."

If he hung up on her she would call back. Repeatedly. He might as well hear her out. "Go ahead."

"I am in droshky."

"You're where?"

"Horse-before-cart. A peasant drives. In dream it is still the time of peasants, you see."

Mark Antony did not see, but she had managed to hook him. Surreptitiously he took a bite of the ham and cheese sandwich Olive had brought up earlier that evening. Quietly he chewed.

"Go on."

"We are on the steppe. It is winter. Snow and wolves and silver moon. Driver is surly, and I suddenly understand he is afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Ahah! How quickly you arrive at heart of this matter. Why I require your counsel, Mark Antony, you have unmistaking instinct for this sort of thing. Well, so, peasant's fear communicates itself to dreaming Elizaveta. Fear becomes dread, which I think must be worse. It is not howling wolves which cause me to shake and shiver, it is thought of our destination."

"What is your destination?"

"If I knew that, I might perhaps find peace. I shall drive westward to see you tomorrow, and we discuss."

"No. Don't come."

"And if another dream comes tonight when I lay my head on pillow?"

"Take notes. Call a doctor. Goodnight."

He hung up. He disliked being brusque. It went against his Southern grain, in which a whorl of courtesy was patent. But his fear of the Russian émigré was strong. It was irrational. It overmastered him, sending him plunging into sleep as into a chasm.

Next morning two visitors trudged separately up the circular staircase — it was oak, harvested a hundred years ago from Longstreet woods, shining with its own woody consciousness of history — and solicited his help.

The first was a nervous man with a mustache that needed attention. *I've heard certain things,* Mr. Longstreet, he told Mark Antony, sitting as bidden in the burgundy chair, twisting his hands into pretzels. *Things about you*, if you don't mind my saying. He had put money from an insurance settlement into a Laundromat, which for undisclosed reasons went belly up. The poor man's future wore the face of the sort of wolf that had figured in Elizaveta Ivanovna's dream of the steppe. Concentrating, Mark Antony saw a railroad train, a deserted siding on which a thickset black man carrying a bulls-eye lantern ambled with obscure purpose. This was an anachronism, given the diminished role played by railroads in American culture and society. But after an unhurried conversation, carried out within strict parameters set by Mark Antony, they came to the conclusion that it meant renewal, if not escape. Which meant a second chance was coming his way. What luck.

The second visitor was an African American woman of middle age from the town of Briery. Her cousin had come to Mark Antony a year ago. *You had it dead to rights,* she told him, assuming incorrectly that he desired praise for a job well done. *Her girl dropped that bad boy she was hanging with, signed up for classes at the community college. Her future is bright.*

"Sometimes what I see turns out to be reflected in events," Mark Antony told her. "Sometimes it doesn't. Please understand that I make no promises."

"I do understand that, I do."

It pained him to explore the recurring dream she had been undergoing over a period of months. Fire and falling were in it, accompanied by a profound feeling of alarm. In the deepest distance there was always a quiescent lake. The lake beckoned.

Clearly the dream involved sex and death, and clearly she knew that, or sensed it. Out of respect, out of a sense of propriety, Mark Antony spoke in euphemisms, for which tact the woman was grateful and went down the staircase better prepared to face her future than she had been when she knocked on the massive front door of Tall Oaks. The house faced east, and even in springtime the morning sun beat a silent tattoo of heat on that door.

Olive brought dinner on a tray. She had become quite a cook over the years. As she lifted the silver cover to reveal an artful arrangement of delicacies from several food groups, the telephone rang. Mark Antony glanced at the display. Elizaveta Ivanovna.

"Shall I pick it up?" Olive wanted to know.

He shook his head. Glumness fell down on him. She would call back. She did not mind calling back ten, a dozen times. Sooner or later, she correctly guessed, he would answer.

"Ricky's downstairs," Olive said when the ringing finally stopped. "In the kitchen."

Ricky was her son. He was out on parole from the penitentiary following a conviction for kiting checks. He was a source of endless suffering for his law-abiding mother.

"Make sure he gets something substantial to eat," Mark Antony told her. "Make him one of your black walnut pies."

"He says he don't mind a bit carrying you.

If you'll go for a drive, that is."

Ricky had done that before. If it was true that everybody but Hitler and Stalin and Pol Pot had a redeeming quality, however trivial, Ricky's showed itself in the gentle restraint with which he handled the infirm master of Tall Oaks. In recent years, as his condition worsened, Ricky — when not incarcerated — had carried him down the circular staircase the times it was absolutely necessary to go out. Mark Antony was about to turn down the offer of a drive when the telephone rang again.

Which was how he found himself in the back seat of a vintage Cadillac with nineteen thousand miles on the odometer. The car was yellow. Not a tawdry yellow, a loud yellow, a yellow that screamed for attention. Rather it was a seemly shade, a yellow somehow suggesting self-control. Momma Grace used to say that the color choice of the last automobile her husband purchased in his all too brief lifetime was a reflection of the General's amiable soul.

The evening was fine. The scenery did its best to bring tears to Mark Antony's eyes, and accomplished its goal. The low hills, the pastures, the woods were greening up as if tentatively, contemplating the change of season with understandable reluctance. Stiff-legged newborn Angus calves tottered, adjusting to their new reality. On country roads Amish carts traveled smartly, horse hooves clopping, thin wheels registering contact with the pavement in a sound that was not quite a clatter. Wonderful, all of it was wonderful. He hadn't been out in ages.

On the other hand, it was irksome to sit in the back seat having to observe close up the graceless profusion of tattoos climbing Ricky Applebee's neck as he drove, his mother next to him riding shotgun.

As the shadows of evening lengthened they stopped at a pull-off by a low bridge over Condensery Creek. The air was cooling. Against his better judgment Mark Antony allowed Ricky to lift him out of the car and carry him to a portable chair that Olive placed on the creek bank. A kingfisher was racing up and down the creek making a racket, possibly seeking to distract them from a nest.

Ricky was in a talkative mood. For once, Olive let him go on.

"You know you're famous around the damn whole county, Mr. L."

Ricky was the only person in the world who called him Mr. L. It could not be helped.

"I don't wish to be famous. In fact I wish not to be famous."

Ricky shrugged. His mother's boss was a known screwball even if he was rich. He cracked his knuckles, all ten of which featured a letter in red ink. When he put his hands together they spelled Hell Raiser. Had he been unable to come up with two appropriate words of five letters each?

"People say," Ricky began. He stopped. His mother tended to edit his conversation in Mark Antony's presence. Being allowed the floor made him uncertain, but he found his footing, making the most of whatever novel thing was going on that April evening. "People say, I mean everybody has their own opinion a course. It's some as says you are blessed by God, and some that believes your power comes from the Devil hisself. I been hearing arguments about your powers a long time, Mr. L. But I'll tell you one thing, they all respect you. And I never heard nobody say you got the future wrong on their behalf."

"Don't wear out Mr. Longstreet's ears," Olive told her son.

"No, it's all right, Olive. I would like to hear what he has to say."

She looked doubtfully at both of them, like

a referee judging the fitness of two boxers to finish their match. She nodded at Ricky. On the margins of Mark Antony's consciousness the kingfisher skittered.

"It's some too as says your power has to do with your… your condition."

"My illness."

"Yes, sir. Your illness."

"Elaborate."

"Sir?"

Mark Antony felt his heart pound. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. "Tell me, Ricky, what is the connection between the gift of prophecy and my illness?"

Another shrug. Ricky was suddenly self-conscious. "It's this one lady, she lives over to Pamplin, she swears up and down the power that lets you see the future runs off your bodily strength. The more you see, she claims, the weaker you'll get."

"That's enough," Olive snapped.

Ricky understood that he had gone too far, and he zipped it. An uncomfortable silence fell over the three of them, broken only by the sound of the creek. Even the bird was momentarily still. Then Mark Antony said quietly, "Take me home."

Nobody spoke a word as they drove back to Tall Oaks. Ricky assumed he had messed up again, even if he was not sure how. So the hundred-dollar bill Mark Antony folded into his hand after the young man carried him back up the circular staircase to his bedroom was an authentic gratuity.

Something had changed. What? That night Mark Antony did not hesitate to answer Elizaveta Ivanovna's call on the first ring.

"I beg you," she began.

"Don't beg."

"A figure of speech. I had another dream. Last night."

"Tell me about it."

"Really?"

Her surprise was as genuine as the delight she took in recounting the details. No steppe, this time. Rather it was a grand river, a sublime river, frozen in majestic stillness under an archetypal winter sun. In the distance, the sound of skaters' blades and tinkly laughter. On the bank, a man in a black greatcoat and high boots paces. He has a temper, and his boots trample the snow. A black dog loping, tongue out. The man raises a gloved fist to the steely sky as elsewhere in the dreamer's consciousness a woman weeps into a pillow, making little effort to stifle her sobs.

"What does it mean?" Elizaveta Ivanovna asked him when she finished.

A kingfisher had taken up residence in the dark forest of Mark Antony's consciousness. Its incessant chatter was maddening. He felt his strength draining away as he contemplated the bookbinder's dream. For all practical purposes he was stuck inside it. No exit. The cold of a Russian winter assaulted his senses. He felt a bond of kinship with the angry pacing man, and unworthy impatience with the woman crying in her pillow. It took all his self-control not to snap at the dream woman, *Pull yourself together.*

"I can't say," he told Elizaveta Ivanovna.

"Why not?"

Sun glinted on the frozen river, blinding and confusing him. He was able, by concentrating, to eke out a single word. "Tomorrow."

He heard the brushy rush of air taken in. She hung up. Being the woman she was, Elizaveta Ivanovna understood.

One of Olive Applebee's many strengths was superintendence. She made sure Tall Oaks

stayed as close to pristine as was humanly possible. She commanded plumbers and squads of lawn care personnel, carpenters and tree surgeons and nearby farmers with tractors who knew all there was to know about bushhogging fields. If Momma Grace or the General were miraculously to appear on their home ground, returning from beyond the grave for a look-see, neither would have anything to complain of. The Longstreet acres sailed proud across the ocean of time, all credit due to Olive. Perhaps she lived vicariously as the mistress of all that expensive real estate, who knew? It didn't matter. She discharged her duty with élan.

The morning after Elizaveta Ivanovna's call, when she narrated what Mark Antony had begun to think of as the frozen river dream, he surprised himself, and Olive, and the no-account son whom she immediately called to come by.

"I want to go outside."

With his trademark gentleness Ricky carried Mark Antony down the stairs, out the front door and down the wide steps between two shining white pillars, across the damp grass to the grounds out back where Olive had recently overseen the sprucing up of the gazebo. It still smelled of fresh white paint, and Ricky deposited him there in a chaise lounge, tucking a light blanket around him in case he felt a chill.

"Momma says I should apologize," he said. "For what I said the other night."

"On the contrary," Mark Antony told him. "Ye shall know the truth, and the odds are pretty good it will set you free."

Ricky did not catch the reference and went away puzzled, to be replaced by Olive carrying an heirloom tray on which rested a pitcher of iced tea and a plate of macaroons.

"I expect company," Mark Antony informed her.

"That Russian," said Olive, who was suspicious of foreigners in general and women with accents in particular. She gestured to the tray, which contained two glasses.

"When she arrives, show her back here, please."

Olive nodded with resignation.

Then, for a while, Mark Antony had the morning to himself. And such a morning. Down the road, W.D. Carwiller was ploughing a field with his old John Deere. Closer to hand, goldfinches and white-throated sparrows deployed from the edge of the woods to the grass and back in orchestrated movements that were beyond a human ability to plan. The sun climbed the east sky at a reassuring rate, spreading optimism. Once, a red fox came out of the woods onto the lawn where it paused, warily registering Mark Antony's presence. It flicked its brush once, then disappeared. Just as things were meant to be. If there was a God—Mark Antony was an old-fashioned free thinker of the traditional sort that was gradually dying out in America—he certainly had a terrific imagination.

The sun was approaching its zenith when Elizaveta Ivanovna made her way across the grass, now dry, and out to the gazebo.

"I told that woman of yours I did not require assistance," she said, having picked up on Olive's disapproval, which the latter would take little trouble to hide.

He would have known her to be Russian, just seeing her on the street. She was fiftyish and bulky, although she aimed for fashionable nonchalance in snug black pants, a black sweater, and a long purple vest that ran to her knees. Her eyes were blackly Asian. Her hair, thankfully, she had allowed to go silver. Only a woman who looked like Elizaveta Ivanovna was capable of the frozen river dream.

"Forgive me for not getting up," he said from the chaise.

She shook her head, amused by his antique courtesy, and it hit him. Why he was afraid of her. Out of the mouths of ex-cons. If he succumbed to the temptation of her presence, drawing him on, drawing him in, drawing him out, he would lose the gift. The simple stark fact appalled him.

He invited her to a chair Ricky had placed next to the chaise, which oddly replicated the situation of his bedroom, where the Queen Anne chair sat at the head of his bed.

"I needed to see you," he began. "Face to face."

She poured herself a glass of tea and issued a command. "You must now say why."

He drew in his breath and said it. "We can no longer be in contact. No more telephone calls, no more visits. This is the last time we shall speak."

"You implore me to drive two hours simply in order to communicate this hostile message?"

"You would not have believed me, over the phone."

"I see."

"What do you see?"

"You are afraid of me."

"No, I'm not."

"Of course. I see it now. You desire being with me."

"No, I don't."

"Prophets make terrible liars. This is known fact."

"My gift," he mumbled.

She must have guessed what was going on. She placed her untasted tea on the little round wicker table that separated them. She stood up. She moved several steps away as if from contagion, folding her arms on her chest.

"In time of Stalin, my grandmother enjoyed friendship of man like you. Enemy of the people, government declared him. Only Soviet leadership permitted to analyze dreams, not recalcitrant selfish comrade. He died in Gulag. I recall Grandma's red eyes from too much crying."

Something irresistible was happening. Events and their inevitable conclusions were racing pell mell at him. Elizaveta Ivanovna's dream of the frozen river came back to him with etched intensity, and with a stab of insight he understood that it had been intended for him. It was a sign, or a signal, informing him that the gift was being withdrawn. This was singular, it was without precedent. In all the reading he had done about prophecy, about dreams and the gift, he had not come across a single instance of a dream's being vouchsafed by proxy.

His power to resist the bitter truth was risible. He knew this woman was dangerous. He knew he could not escape her. And he knew in his bones—it was the secret corollary of all this unwanted knowing—that he would die.

"The question," he said. Stopped, began again. "The question is whether I shall die without having lived."

Possibly because she was Russian, she understood the statement, which common or garden variety Americans might find enigmatic.

He stood, wobbling slightly, making a friend of vertigo.

"This is first time I see you on your feet," she said, keeping the triumph she must feel out of her voice.

"It's over," he said, meaning the gift. "It's gone."

She shook her head. "Only beginning. Other things."

It was less difficult than he would have thought, standing upright.

"I wish I had never met you."

Again she shook her head. "Lovely day. We go for drive in country. Many cows and other pleasing rural spectacles. Can you walk to my car?"

He shook his head no, meaning he guessed he thought he could manage.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 130 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic, Playboy, The Baffler,* and *The Kenyon Review.* He has stories forthcoming in several magazines including The Hudson Review. His five books include *A Handful of Kings,* published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy,* by Soho Press. Stories of Jacobs' have won The Iowa Review Fiction Prize and the Kafka Award. His website can be found at **markjacobsauthor.com**.

Precipitous

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Fallen Flowers

Kurt Baumeister

Your dresses of pale rose and budding sunflower,
carnation, marigold, and tulip made time slow,
made me dream there was nothing wrong with the
cheap wines, Louisiana nights, streetlights, the mists
and fogs, the closing specters of war and truth and
dawn. In the evenings, I'd find you waiting as your
flower of the day, the dress an excuse for conversation,
a way to forget the waiting world. It never took long
for the words to die, for the silk to gather, flowers
fallen at our feet. And on that last night, as I left,
as you slept, I saw the flowers as they were, truth cut,
cunning symbols, coming realization that he would
return from the war he'd chosen over you, that you
would forgive him as you always had. That the
flowers meant nothing, or were, at best, lies; the
only thing we'd shared withered on the ground.

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Dorothy Gale

James A. Bird

THE EMERALD CITY lacked joie de vivre after the Wizard left. Everyone still dressed in green, of course, and sang spontaneously—the work schedule remained marvelously pointless:

We get up at noon
And go to work by one,
Take an hour for lunch
And then by two we're done …

But the pointlessness now seemed a bit too pointless. The Omaha State Fair hot air balloon that had brought the Wizard in the first place, and now had taken Him away again, came to be an all-too-potent reminder for the citizens of their whole inflated lifestyle. Where was the truth in a life that mandated both leisure and industriousness—that left its citizens manically smiling while pretending to work? Did they really need an hour for lunch, for instance, when they had all morning for nothing but breakfast? With no Wizard, the questions had grown prodigiously large—and the answers—dangerously fragile.

Though no Emerald citizen had the green gall to say it aloud, even to himself—frankly, they missed the Witch. Granted, she had no jurisdiction in the City limits, still, just her signature in black smoke against the sky was enough to create a hugely satisfying panic, everyone gathering like jittery green molecules. "There'll be no hour for lunch today, that's for sure!"

But now—thanks to Dorothy—the Witch and the delicious panic were gone.

And Dorothy wasn't.

Glinda, that Bubble-Hopping Self-Help Therapist who had opened shop with nothing but a wand and her Heel-Clicking Cure had proved worthless, too. She had nothing. So much for good witches. Turned out Good had no more jurisdiction in E.C. than Wicked. All the Emerald citizens had stood around the platform waiting that afternoon at two, just after getting off work—waiting for the girl to disappear—to blow back to the Black-n-White Nowhere she called home. Nothing. Glinda was all smiles. "She has to learn it for herself!" Nothing. Glinda insisted on the heel-clicking again. Dorothy squeezed her eyes closed, clicking her heels together…clicking her heels… while the citizens stared at her—as if they were trying to erase a mistake with their eyes. Nothing.

That's when Dorothy—rather than disappearing—had snapped. Something came loose. Her eyes popped open. Suddenly, she turned to the Lion and the others. "And you were there!" she pointed to one, "and you!"

and pointed to another, "and you!" Then, she grimaced and pulled at her hair. "Oh, but that couldn't be, could it?"

Glinda, shrugging pinkly, said she had to go. There would be no charge. Six months later, everyone hears she has a book out. THINKING OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE: Knowing When The Magic Is Gone.

She got a book deal.

The Emerald City got Dorothy.

The Tinman put his face in his hands. There was a metallic creaking as he rocked it back and forth. "What am I supposed to do?" His voice was gently metro, the urban man—and yet as tired as canned goods. "I've got a clock for a heart. It's that incessant ticking!" He looked up. "What was that bastard thinking?"

Dorothy didn't bother to brush her hair anymore, and it was often in her face, as it was now. She was draped over the art deco curves of a green plastic overstuffed chair. "God, Tinny—for the last time—throw the goddamn thing away!"

"It's the only heart I've got, okay?" He pushed his face, screeching, back into his hands.

"It's a clock! Please, Jesus, just pitch it. The Wizard warned you. He said you were lucky not to have a heart. All you've done since you got that thing is cry." Dorothy pulled herself upright in the chair. "We used to sing and dance all the time before you got it. Don't you remember?" She sang a little, "We're out of the woods, we're out of the woods—we're into the li-ight!" Her voice cracked. "Christ. I'm going to the poppy fields."

"Oh, sure. It's always the poppies!"

"Fuck you."

"It's the truth," Lion's soprano presence swished through the green archway. "Our stern Kansas girl has turned into a frazzle-haired poppy-head. You have a bit of pollen by your nose, dear."

Dorothy nodded hard, and nodded some more, unable to get the words out. "Yes—oh yes, okay. Listen—Queen of the Forest—and how many of the Emerald City boys out there have lion pollen around their ass!"

Lion cast a long feline gaze at Dorothy, blinked once, then twice. "The Wizard gave me the courage to be myself. I don't intend to be shamed back in cowardice."

Dorothy pushed herself out of her chair. "The Wizard gave you a medal, pussycat, that's all. The fact that you now go around threatening any green boy that won't drop his lederhosen doesn't make you courageous. It just makes you—an animal."

Lion blinked again. "Careful, darling—a bitch is an animal, too."

"Someone has to run this place." Dorothy looked back and forth between them. "And it turns out I'm the only man around here. When that fucking tornado took me out of the heartland—"

"Don't say heart!" Tinman moaned.

"Oh, shut up—when I left Kansas, okay? Solid, dusty—solid Kansas—I never knew how much I'd miss a place where people work for a living. And, yes—I'm a bitch—because no one does anything here! No one does anything—in all of Oz!" Dorothy's eyes were twitchy, and she was nodding again. "How 'bout Munchkinland—The Lullaby League! What the hell is a Lullaby League? Nothing gets done here! So who's left holding the bitch-bag? Me!"

The Tinman's face was out of his hands. A smile creased his red-painted lips. Dorothy's voice had drowned the ticking of his heart.

"What are you smiling at? Quit smiling!"

He did.

"I want to go home—you can have this idiocy. Oh, sure, it's very nice here—very easy—very modern." Dorothy looked around at the polished surfaces. "It's The American Dream. Look—no dust. No rust. No fucking anything!" Dorothy used new words here, powerful words. She didn't know where they came from. Fucking? It was a word inspired by the ironic, modern beauty of Oz. It brought something hard out in her. "And, on top of everything else," she added, "I hate fucking green!"

"Odd, isn't it?" Lion purred. "I love fucking green."

The Emerald City was an alluring place from a distance. The verdant radiance of its walls and spires were the precious architecture of Hope. Still, it sang its crisp, urban melody in the gothic shadow of the Witch's castle—an imposing, craggy grayness, as hard as Conscience itself. That modern hope that was the Emerald City had been realized in the person of the Wizard. It was commonly observed by the citizens during his tenure: If there had been no Wizard—it would have been necessary to invent one.

Once the Wizard had arrived, it was virtually impossible to imagine the city without Him. Now He was gone. In the timeless wake that followed His ascension, it had become something of a ritual for a handful, then a few dozens of citizens to gather during the lunch hour by the platform from which His balloon had departed. They would whisper His words to each other. "I can't come back," they would sigh to one another. "I can't come back." Or sometimes they would say, "I don't know how it works." Those were His last words. And then together, they would stare at the sky.

Others had eventually followed Dorothy to the poppy fields—discovering in that golden pollen a dream within a dream that allowed them to both lose and find themselves on the same sunny afternoon. And some two or three, each day, followed Lion through the back gate of the City which now, in the absence of the Witch, had been left unguarded. They came limping back a long while later, having lost and found themselves, too.

If it was not exactly pastoral—at least it had the advantage of routine.

And all of it was about to change.

"Look at this!"

Scarecrow charged into the room, gangly and officious, straw poking imperiously out from his cuffs and boot tops. He had himself re-stuffed every three days. Appearance was everything for Scarecrow because authority was appearance. And—as he reminded everyone constantly—he was the one the Wizard had designated to rule in His stead.

"Look at this!" he shouted again, none of the three in the room having, at all, bothered to look the first time. He was waving something in his gloved hand.

Dorothy and Lion were both pawing at their hair. Lion was primping in a mirror, while Dorothy was biting off split ends. She turned slowly, scowling. The Wizard had given that Scarecrow nothing but a diploma—no brains. But now he believed he could think things he'd never thunk before.

"So, Scarecrow," Dorothy's eyes were dark, "what do you have?"

Scarecrow was nodding manically, his

straw rustling around his collar. "Toto had this in his mouth!" He cocked a painted eyebrow at Dorothy, and held it up again. "A lollipop."

Tinman looked up now.

Lion turned from the mirror.

They looked at each other, then at Scarecrow.

"They're here," he said.

The Munchkins had come to the Emerald City. Dorothy had crushed their Witch, too, and their Glinda was out on her book tour. They'd grown restless and—like doll-sized repressed memories—had set out on the Yellow Brick Road. Now they were collecting at the gates.

As they gathered in camps, they had but one mantra that they repeated throughout the journey:

"Follow the Yellow Brick Road!"

They said it in greeting and farewell and blessing:

"Follow the Yellow Brick Road!"

They said it even in their tiny sleeps:

"Follow the Yellow Brick Road!" It was all they knew of Truth, and all they need know.

It was—

"A bitch—that's what it is!" Dorothy stood on the green parapet of a green wall above the green gates of the City. She turned to Scarecrow, who was still holding the lollipop. Her face was whitewashed with astonishment. "They're all over my poppy field!"

Tinman and Lion joined them.

"Oh, God!" Tinman looked down. "They're so pathetic. So little—so—"

"So irritating." Dorothy followed his teary gaze. "They sing like squirrels."

"They're sad, that's all—and lonely. Like homeless children." His tin fingers nervously, absently wound and wound the stem of his clock heart. "God, my heart is breaking!"

"Stop playing with it!" Dorothy turned on him and grabbed his clock. "Does everything have to be a goddamn melodrama?"

"I can't help it. It's like the Wizard gave me nothing but a sense of Time running out."

"Jesus—that's more than I got." She held his clock heart in one hand, then let it drop back against his echoing chest. "If you're so goddamn suicidal—just do it."

The Tinman's pathos turned pissy. "I'm a tin man, Dorothy. I can't just do it! How? I can't do much of anything."

"Well, I can," Lion broke in, leaning out to look. "The appetizers look lovely!"

"Lion!" Scarecrow was almost beyond words. He shook the lollipop as Lion turned from the wall to face him. "I am in charge! And there will be no more beeches bitched—I mean—bridges birthed—damn it, I mean—britches breached around here!"

"Ah, Strawman," Lion shook his curls sadly, "and you were trying to be so clever. The whole brain thing didn't work out, did it? You should've asked for some balls."

"Oh, shut-up!" Scarecrow handed the lollipop to Dorothy. "See if you can find its owner."

"That would be the spastic Lollipop Guild boys."

"Yes, well, I hope Toto hasn't done much damage, that's all. That mutt had a little blood around his mouth." He began to pace, the rustling of his straw articulating his empty thoughts. "What would the Wizard do?"

"Leave, most likely." The sucker hung limply at Dorothy's side as her hollow eyes drifted back toward the poppy fields. "There's no place home."

Behind them, below in the courtyard, a chanting had begun. It was percolating up from around the platform. Slowly, it became clear.

The Scarecrow ceased his pacing, and the four of them turned to listen.

"Who do we want? The Wizard! When do we want him? Now!"

In the Emerald City, all work was pretense. Consequently, words had assumed the importance of actions. The Wizard had inspired a faith in words, a reliance on them. Singing along was the closest thing to labor. So, the shouting of words from below now, with no melody, was something like storming the Bastille. The chanting was more than protest. It was revolution.

Dorothy, her hair caught in a warm breeze, stood framed against the blue sky. With Lion, Tinman, and Scarecrow frozen in fear and wonder around her, it was all a mocking tableau of Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People." Valiant Dorothy was Liberty stranded amidst waves of chaos, finding herself drum major to the three misfits she'd just led up the barricades.

On either side of the wall were forces irresistibly poised for collision. She knew, suddenly, that it was all a dream. She knew just as suddenly that simply knowing it was a dream wasn't enough. Whether one is the man dreaming he is a butterfly—or the butterfly dreaming he is a man—the fact that, in either case, he is about to be hit by a bus trumps everything.

"Open the gates!" Dorothy commanded, pointing with her lollipop. "Let the Munchkins in!"

A noisy, dissonant confluence of green citizens and short invaders bled through the streets of the Emerald City as Dorothy and her companions watched from the wall. Pockets of Emerald City citizens faced off against knots of Munchkins, not so much physically attacking one another—they seemed incapable—but chanting snatches of songs at each other—angrily chanting.

The Munchkins taunted: "Follow the Yellow Brick Road! Follow the Yellow Brick Road! Follow—follow—follow—follow—" etc. It was a petulant, childish substitute for "go fuck yourself"—which they would have sung if they'd known the words.

And the Emerald City citizens, with more choral sophistication, but also more wide-eyed uncertainty, looked down on the taunting Munchkins and repeated their work schedule: "We get up at noon and go to work by one…"

Other citizens had climbed up on the platform from which The Wizard's Balloon had departed so long ago, surrounded by foot-clutching dwarves. These Wizardites (so they had come to call themselves) were simply crying out to the Wizard—to return—to save them!

The Emerald City, having never known purpose, found itself swamped by it. The Munchkins had followed the Yellow Brick Road and now wanted—something—anything. They sang, cried, giggled, ranted through the avenues of a City that was so tautly ordered, so fragilely pointless, that this explosion of arduous passion threatened to collapse it altogether.

There among them all—yipping and nipping—was the self-deputized Toto.

In dreams, our core natures don vaguely familiar masks and surface around us.

Dorothy, in the midst of the tumult, found herself shadowed by the childish characters she had collected on this journey—or rather, the primordial selves with which she imagined her childhood had long ago dispensed.

Lion fearfully clutched his own twitching tail. The Tinman was frozen with pity. The Scarecrow pointed in three directions at once but didn't take a step in any of them.

Her hair unbound and frizzy, blue-check jumper stained with poppy pollen—Dorothy stood quite still, eyes no longer twitching. Seeing past the poppies at last, she remembered Kansas. But it was not the dust and tornado the child in her once so grimly remembered. Now—and more clearly—she remembered Mrs. Gulch.

Dorothy turned on her companions. "Hey, you! Flying monkeys!" she shouted.

The three looked at Dorothy only from the corners of their eyes at first.

"Yes, you! The ones who flew out of my butt! Now, first—Scarecrow!" His ankles flared outward as he turned. "Scarecrow, there is a New Order in town. It is us!" She hesitated. "No! Correction." Her eyes nearly set his straw on fire. "It is me! I am the New Order! I am The Dream! You will explain that to all of them there below, Scarecrow!" Even as he was nodding, she fastened her intense gaze on Lion, "And Lion!"

Lion dropped his tail.

"Lion—follow him. Your job is to scare the fuck out of citizens who think they know different. And Tinman—" She paused, as had everyone below—citizen and Munchkin, alike—her voice permeating the City. The only sound that could be heard was the ticking of the Tinman's heart. "Put that axe to work. Bring me the heads of those fucking Wizardites." She looked slowly above them all, at the Witch's gray castle. "And someone," she added, "get me that broomstick!"

Scarecrow, Lion, and Tinman did, indeed, set about to evangelize. As if touched by a Pentecostal flame, Scarecrow found his tongue. To be convincing, he discovered, did not require a brain. With Lion's snarl and Tinman's axe behind him, it turned out he had all the brains he needed.

Within an hour, a mute crowd, both the short and the green, had gathered around the platform. Upon the corner posts were the heads of the most inflexible of the Wizardites. The crowd parted as Dorothy made her way from the Wizard's palace to the platform. Each step was preceded by the tap of the Witch's broomstick (still topped with singed straw), held in Dorothy's outstretched right hand like a bishop's crosier.

Standing on the platform, her three companions in a line behind her, Dorothy let the silence penetrate. Then she spoke.

"There is no Wizard."

She didn't shout. She didn't have to. The words alone fell like a sledgehammer.

"The wizard that was—was no wizard. That's why he left you. That's why Glinda left you—all of them. There is no magic." Then, she said, "It's time to grow up."

Of course, she was, indeed, talking to herself. All great oratory begins there, and she was beginning to sense, for the first time since landing in Oz, her own greatness. If there was no place like home—perhaps Dorothy was home, at last.

"We're stuck in a dream—you—me—all of us. Together we are the dream—and the dreamer. And in a dream, you can wait around to wake up—or you can try to figure out how

it works! You can own the dream! Emerald City citizens—quit mourning for a wizard who didn't know how it works! Let him go! This is our dream. So—you know what—quit pretending to have jobs, for christ-sake! It's making you nervous and making me crazy. Actually do something—build something, tear something down—invent something! The dream will be gone before you know it—that's the way of dreams. So, do something real now. And, Jesus, let up on the singing. It's simply irritating. Do that, at least, please—or I'll kill you. I mean it." Her fingers kneaded the grain of the broomstick. "I'll kill you." Her eyes sorted through the crowd. "Now, Munchkins." They murmured and shuffled. "Shut-up. Please. You shouldn't be here. This was my road, not yours. You are children. You're what I intended to leave behind. Your job—your job is back there—and your job is to be afraid. Yes—that's a job." She stared hard at them until they were all staring back. "Fear is where it all begins. Fear is the only way we learn. It is the way we grow up. It all begins there. Remember that. So, drag your pals out of the poppies and march yourselves back to Munchkinland—back to childhood. Then, stay there—and be afraid. It's the most important part of being children. Get home now."

The Munchkins turned and bumped and crowded toward the gate. Dorothy leaned back toward Scarecrow who leaned in. "It seems if there were not a witch," she said, a certain sadness in her voice, "it would be necessary to invent one."

The four of them climbed the rocky path toward the Witch's Castle, Dorothy leading, using the broomstick to pull herself along.

"If this fucking dream lasts long enough, I'm going to learn to ride this thing." She looked back. No one had much to say. "God," she said mostly to herself, "look who I'm talking to."

She felt suddenly lonely, and it was that loneliness one feels when standing between senseless childhood and the equally pointless world of adulthood. Imaginary friends fall silent. With her free hand, she picked up Toto who was struggling up the stone ledges beside her.

"I thought it was the Emerald City I'd been looking for," she whispered to her dog, "but maybe it was this goddamn castle." She looked out over a landscape laced with fields of flowers and shadowy forests. Through it all was a golden road. Munchkins hurried home along it, while things even smaller and more vulnerable ducked into crevices around them. Just below her, the Emerald City's gates were locked up tight. Dorothy had managed to return a familiar anxiety to the world of Oz.

"I guess I am Mrs. Gulch," she said.

She wiped a wet cheek against her shoulder. Then, beneath her soiled blue jumper as she climbed, she felt the warm flow of her own blood down her thigh. For a long moment, it took her breath away, and she held tightly to her dog.

Seamless weeks later, Dorothy stood alone in the tower, on the very spot where the Witch had melted.

"What a world—what a world…" She whispered the Witch's last words to herself.

Sooner or later, she knew she would melt, too. The dream would be over. She would wake up—not a witch, but a grown-up. When the awakening came though, she decided, she would keep the harsh words

she'd found here. She'd wake up goddamn cursing. Yes. That would be some compensation for having to become Mrs. Gulch.

In the distance, Dorothy could hear the singing again, a mix of throaty green and nasally small voices. Maybe it wasn't so unpleasant altogether. It reminded Dorothy of springtime in Kansas somehow. Still, they needed more than singing. She knew they counted on her. She knew they needed the Witch.

Dorothy Gale swung a leg over the newly-strawed broomstick, pulling it up hard between her thighs. She imagined she would like to keep this, too, after the awakening, this feel of the broomstick—and that soaring, terrible power of being a woman.

For thirty three years he was the man behind the curtain—working the levers in a high English classroom--in a small town in Idaho. He published a few stories here and there. There was one you might have heard of—though probably not. His wife speaks French. His daughter is a doctor in Philadelphia. He champions a stylistic movement he calls *Free Prose*. This is it. He's the only adherent.

I fill my own vials

Savannah Slone

caress me in the syllabic lamplight
our hollow peach pits for coronary cavities have skeletons on the inside
we have our own little lung languages
this is the electric blue of the smoky autumnal sun-up
this is my smile, note the bark for teeth
consider my paper trees for limbs
peel away my outer bits
this is the shift click we feel and know
across a room, our eyes shift click, we are
pop up characters in a fourth graders' diorama on what love looks like
or maybe sin
this is my pointer
this is my pie chart
these are our statistics
unravel me from my ribboned self
bare bent backs unzip
millipedes needle their way out
let me be your conditional coroner
I am your magnified radiation
you are my initiation,
my finch song, but
you, my phlebotomist,
you can't find my veins

Savannah Slone is a writer, editor, and English professor who currently dwells in the Pacific Northwest. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in or will soon appear in *Paper Darts, The Indianapolis Review, Glass: A Poetry Journal, Crab Creek Review, FIVE:2:ONE, Pidgeonholes, decomP magazinE, Crab Fat Magazine, Pithead Chapel, Hobart Pulp,* and elsewhere. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Homology Lit* and the author of *Hearing the Underwater* (Finishing Line Press, 2019). She enjoys reading, knitting, hiking, and discussing intersectional feminism. You can read more of her work at **savannahslonewriter.com**.

Clothes Portrait #6

Luke Haynes

The Oddville Press • **oddvillepress@gmail.com** • Spring 2019

Absolute Zero

Richard Dinges, Jr.

Cold measured by
glass tubes misses
the point of icicle
stares that melt souls.
Hands freeze in
mid-air.
Words evaporate
between moist lips.
Dry tongues cleave
to a sticky, molten
mass that once
pretended to have
a face, two eyes,
and the grace to
speak
words to bless
and forgive, now
lost in a mist
spread across
a pane of glass.

Richard Dinges, Jr. has an MA in literary studies from University of Iowa, and manages information systems risk at an insurance company. *North Dakota Quarterly, Old Red Kimono, Writer's Bloc, Neologism,* and *Ship of Fools* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

He Belongs to the Carrion Bird Now

Scott Parson

"ARE YOU INTO BIRDS?"

Not in the slightest. "Sorry. Missed what you said." The truth was, Richard might prefer birds to people. What he was 'not into' was having strangers chat him up during his lunch break.

For as long as he'd worked in the East Seventies, Richard took his midday meal in the gloomiest, off-trail parts of the Ramble in Central Park specifically to avoid people. It made for a long walk and a short lunch, but he wanted that solitude to refresh his disgruntled spirit.

"I thought you might be, the way you're out by yourself here."

As you may have noticed, you idiot, I am no longer 'out by myself.' "Not that into birds."

"Great spot for it."

Do the math, you moron. "I'm sure it is." *Crowd minus people equals solitude.* "Thanks anyway." *Please minus yourself, you numbskull.*

Richard needed these few precious moments of isolation to make it through the second half of his work day. Otherwise, the brainless fartwads back in the office get the win.

"I can see why birds find it appealing."

Not interested.

"Gives them a break flying over the city."

All right, you pain in the ass. "Who?" Make him dig for it if he's not going to stop talking.

"The birds. This spot. Great for bird watching."

"Ah. Hadn't noticed."

"Too bad. It's quite remarkable."

Richard had not yet bothered to look up from the lunch he'd spread out over the wax paper on his lap. He hitched up the corners of his mouth in a charitable smile and turned his face to the newcomer, but the newcomer stared at the treetops.

"I'm surprised there aren't more bird-watchers hanging out here. Because it's really phenomenal."

Nothing I'd like more.

"It's always like that, isn't it?" the newcomer continued. "You stumble across something awesome, and there's no one to appreciate it."

"Take a picture," *asshole,* "and put it on Facebook or Instagram or whatever."

"Social media wouldn't do it justice."

"Too bad," said Richard, shrugging, and puckering his face into a sphincter-like smile.

Most normal people would take the hint and find a more cordial spot. They wouldn't sit next to him on the shaped log he used for his bench. And they certainly would not keep speaking to him.

"Because if you were into birds, this would really make your day."

Not a chance. "I'm sure it would. If, as you say, I were into birds."

"Maybe you know someone who is? Bet

they'd get a kick out of it."

"Can't say that I do." *Wouldn't if I did.*

"Because I don't think I've ever seen so many vultures in the Park."

Richard, primed to give out with another chill-inducing conversation killer, stopped. "You see vultures?"

"Sure. I said it was amazing."

"I got that part. Where do you see them?"

Richard stood up and looked where the newcomer pointed.

"They're all over the tops of the trees. You can't see them?"

Of course Richard saw them. "Are you sure?" He'd been aware of them all week. He wanted to make sure this lamebrain saw them, too.

"They're up there. Big as life. Amazing because, you know, they're not something you find in Manhattan. They look lost."

Richard began laughing, hard, doubling over, then whipping back. He broke into a jigging kind of dance, trying to get control of himself.

"Buddy, are you okay?"

Richard pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his forehead, coughed, and wheezed out, "Yes, yes, yes!"

He paced for a moment, eyes fixed on the vultures, then stopped, his hands thrust into his hip pockets and canted slightly as he studied the birds.

"Those miserable pests have been staring down at me the last five days I've been coming here for my lunch. I was sure the whole thing was turning into a cheesy metaphor."

"You mean hallucination?"

"No. I mean a metaphor." Richard wheezed another laughing burst into his handkerchief.

"Since Monday, coming here, I had this awful feeling I was being eaten from the inside out. My guts plucked at, pulled out, and digested by vultures. I'd never felt this way before, and it had me wondering if this is what regret, true regret, feels like. I couldn't think what else it might be. Something was eating me up, and I was convinced those birds were a manifestation of my misery. Until you told me you saw them, too."

"Why? If you don't mind my asking."

"Usually I would mind. But, since you put my mind to rest, I'll tell you."

Richard sat down on the log, pinching his pants at the knees, giving a tug to loosen the tension on the fabric.

"Last Friday I had to get some financials out the door. You know how it is. End of the week, people trying to slip away a few minutes early, not being careful. They will, without fail, screw up your work. I make them wait until I check it over. Sure enough. One whole page was wrong. The books were already copied and bound. I made the woman who'd screwed it up wait while someone else fixed the page. She offered to do it, but I wasn't about to let her. I did make her wait until it was done. She sure as hell wasn't going to start her weekend while I had to stand there waiting for the books to be re-copied and re-bound. She needed to feel just how much her stupidity was costing everybody."

"That why you thought you were seeing vultures? Being rough on her?"

"Not at all. You stay on top of people or they won't take you seriously when it really counts."

"Makes sense, I guess," said the newcomer. "So, why the vulture metaphor?"

"I can learn a lot about a person's weaknesses from their mistakes. If I figure out how they managed to screw something up, I know exactly what to look out for next time. I went back to my original spreadsheets. What

could have been so difficult about copying and pasting some numbers into a presentation?" Richard blew out a long breath. "Turned out I'd given them an old page to work with. But—if she'd bothered to spot check, she'd have seen the numbers didn't foot and could have let me know. I guess she doesn't do math."

"Ah. Wasn't her fault."

"That was Monday. Those fucking birds have been up there since then. They didn't shit, they didn't fly off, they didn't hunt."

"Vultures don't hunt. They're scavengers. They eat dead things."

"Exactly. They didn't move. There hasn't been at least one dead rat, pigeon, or squirrel this entire week? I tried throwing rocks, but they're too high. You get why I thought I was seeing things? I admit. It shook me. If they weren't real, what did it mean? That's when I started thinking they might be a metaphor."

"Not a hallucination."

"Was there something I was supposed to do, something I was supposed to say?"

"To the woman?"

"I did try working out how I might bring it up to her. But everything came out so weak-assed. Like—like—like—"

"Capitulation."

"Exactly. What's to keep her or anyone else from thinking that's exactly what it is? The harder I worked on finding the right words, the worse it got." Richard rubbed his fists over his midsection as if grappling with great, intestinal pain. "Then you said you saw the vultures. It was like the talons let go their grip." Richard's hands opened like flowers in relief. "I don't have to tell some idiot that, 'I'm soooo sorry, I must've made a mistake, and you can go back to thinking so highly of your piddling skills.'"

"Something along those lines probably wouldn't hurt."

"They get paid to take the heat. Otherwise, we're walking on eggshells, watching every word out of our mouths. 'Ooooh, I guess I can't point out someone is a bonehead because of the one time I slipped up, and what if they remember that?' No thank you."

"So, you're not going to say anything?"

"It's better if she goes on thinking she let us down. I'm doing a favor for the next person she does any work for."

Richard relaxed against the rough slats of the make-shift back to the log bench. He stretched his arm out to check his watch.

"I'm going to be late back from lunch. But you know what, I'm feeling pretty good."

"Glad to help," said the newcomer, "I guess."

"I should probably see a doctor, though," said Richard. "I hate doctors."

"Why see a doctor?"

"Get this looked at." Richard unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it open.

"Holy shit! Everything's eaten away."

"You see why I'm glad those bastards up there are real? I was so afraid it was all a metaphor, being totally dead inside. I dreaded the idea I'd have to make up with every cretin, imbecile, and pinhead that ever thought I offended them."

"*That* is a metaphor," said the newcomer, staring at Richard's chest.

"You told me you see the vultures, too."

"I do, but that's a metaphor. You wouldn't be walking around."

"Are you a doctor?"

"No."

"Then you could be wrong."

"There's nothing there! No liver, heart, lungs. Just a few pieces of intestine. Even the sternum's gone."

"All the more reason to ask a doctor."

"Whatever it was you planned to do about

that woman back at work, you better do it right now. Don't wait."

"I'd rather see a specialist first, if you don't mind."

"Suit yourself, buddy. But you need to get it straightened out."

Richard reached into the empty cavity of his chest and ran his fingernails along the inside of his ribcage, making a sound like a child's mistuned xylophone.

Richard's good mood evaporated. On top of that, he still had to go back to the office.

Scott Parson's short stories have appeared previously in *P.S. I Love You,* on Medium, in *Dual Coast Magazine, Spank the Carp,* and *Digital Americana.* His novel, *Bozophobia,* is available on Amazon. He lives with his wife and daughter in New York, sends fruit baskets to his son in grad school, and earns his living in big city offices where his juggling and fire-eating skills are an unwelcome diversion. Find out more at **scottparson.com**.

check my vital signs

Savannah Slone

with skipping stones and seaweed
trace the outlines of my mothered teeth, stained tea green

mountain laurel hypnotism
tomato rust splatter, dove oysters:

this is fog

thickening with molten permanence
bruised shins, my blood, metallic and thick

honey wax filling in the cracks in my molding,
blurred ballerina, upturned eyelids, dried fruit for skin

I am the mold stench
laundry sopping, forgotten,
I am the aftermath of putting myself last

a science experiment
disrobe my scalpel seared chest
an open casket
autopsy, check
an exploration of dust mites and garden orb weavers
morning dew on the grimy cages and wardrobes of my innards

I fill a mason jar with apple cider vinegar and dish soap
and the fruit flies fly on in through the holes I poked with care
with a dull secondhand knife, just like I wanted them to.

I go inside, too.

What You Saw is Not The Sea

Nicole Pietrantoni

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Control

Thomas Bulen Jacobs

DR. ONI MEETS ME at the docking apparatus. She smiles and takes my arm to steady me. I vomit on her slippers.

"Is this your first time in space?" She removes her feet from the slippers and pushes them aside with her foot. Her toenails are red, bright as candy cherries.

I nod.

She wears the al-amira. Blue as the first darkness of our night's sky.

"One never quite gets used to it. Come, I'll show you to your quarters."

The scent of the vomit lingers. My stomach turns.

"What about—"

"I'll alert a robot."

I pick up my traveling bag—light as a feather, even in the station's artificial gravity—and we ascend to the main station by a long vertical ladder. Almost halfway up, the tube gives a tremendous shudder. I cry out and tilt my head to my inverted Virgil.

"It's only the shuttle uncorking."

"I'm—"

"Please don't apologize. The station takes some getting used to. Here we are."

She pulls me brusquely up onto the landing beside her. The space is circular, with four white fluorescent corridors at right angles to one another. Each corridor is labeled: North, South, East, West. It's a conceit I'd read about in my preliminary research. The corridor we ascended is known as the Inferno. That above, Paradiso.

The station's design is simple enough. It is shaped like a child's toy. A single axle extends from the docking station to the laboratory. From it, the cardinal spokes attach to the main station, which extends in a continuous loop at a radius of several dozen meters from the center. The scientists aboard call it downstairs; so much for Dante.

My quarters are small, tidy.

Dr. Oni—she has instructed me to call her Bolavive—presses a panel just inside the door and the far wall evanesces, revealing the sparkling vastness of space. It is glorious, majestic. Terrifying. I sit abruptly on the bed.

Bolavive presses the panel again, and the illusion of the wall intervenes.

"I'll leave you to make yourself at home. We'll eat in an hour or so. I can stop by for you. We can do a tour of the place after."

"It all sounds lovely."

"Very well, then. Welcome, Mr. Khorrasani."

"Dr. O—Bolavive. One question. When will I meet him?"

She purses her lips with a smile and gives a shrug. "When he descends. They believe they

are nearing a breakthrough."

"Do you doubt it?"

"I'll see you in an hour."

My room is just off the Western corridor. Where is Earth? I've no idea. I turn to the door, towards the East. It will have to do.

I unzip my bag, remove the rug which is rolled up within, bound with string. I lay it on the spongy floor.

I perform 'Asr; this will be my afternoon prayer. I begin with Takbir; I stand and raise my open hands to my shoulders. *Allahu Akbar.*

When I have moved through the prayer's steps to the Tashahhud, I begin again.

When my prayer is ended, I roll up and store my rug. There is a small closet along the wall. I remove my things from my bag: the digital recorder, my laptop. Underwear and socks. I hang my clothes in the closet. There is a pair of slippers waiting for me. I put them on. They fit perfectly.

I lie for a few minutes on my bed. The head is by the outward-facing wall. I stand and re-arrange the bedding so that I lie facing outward. The whiteness of the wall feels now like an illusion. I rise and press the panel, revealing once again the infinite blackness of space. It may be that with familiarity the beauty and the terror of what my heart knows can be lessened.

Is this what I wish?

Allahu Akbar.

Verily, God is great. He has brought me safely to the edge of humanity, and I have seen the first cusp of His magnificent creation.

It is at the meal that I am introduced to several of the others. There are some two dozen of them. I sit with Bolavive. For the first few minutes we are alone. We are joined shortly thereafter by two men.

Dr. Yimin Lee is mostly silent. He is Chinese, he explains, and his English is not very good. Dr. Lee is a computer scientist. He wrote the computer code that allows the station's physics experiments to work.

Dr. Deepak Chatterjee is his complement. He is charming, loquacious. Born in India, he was educated on scholarship in the UK when it was discovered in first grade that the scribblings in his notebook were equations of calculus.

"I am Otero's Grossmann," he informs me. There is a sparkle in his black eyes. He is young, only twenty-two. Long-limbed, lean, he is rather preppy in aspect. He wears stylish glasses.

"I'm afraid I don't understand the reference."

They know why I am here. For the most part they are excited, eager to shape my story, though they are the bit-players in it.

"Grossmann was the mathematician that helped Einstein to finalize the mathematics of relativity." Bolavive.

Chatterjee is grinning.

I tap the recorder which I have set on the table. It will be my constant companion, and they understand this fact.

"Make no mistake: Sébas is the visionary. But he couldn't do it without me."

"I see."

Bolavive is mostly silent, focused, apparently, on the meal, which is quite good. I suppose I had been expecting utilitarian space paste. There is poached fish in lemon, mashed potatoes fluffy as a nebula. Chocolate cake. Some of the staff have embraced cooking as a fruitful hobby for the long hours.

Dr. Lee has finished his meal. He rises and bids us goodnight with a smile.

"I'm not long behind him. We've been

awake for, what—thirty-six hours? I don't remember the last time I ate."

"I presume Dr. Otero is asleep?"

"He was still in the lab when we left, but that was the plan."

"I imagine, then, I'll meet him in the morning?"

Bolavive nods.

Dr. Chatterjee, too, excuses himself, and we are left once again as two.

Some years ago—twenty now, my God—I took a sabbatical to write a brief history of early twenty-first century physics. It was a passion project; I'd trained as a science journalist, but my beat was politics. The domains were surprisingly complementary. The book was a success; there were prizes, a few months on the best-selling lists. Matthew and I bought a beach house.

I am here now on a species of follow up: to record in real time the achievement of a man widely heralded as the heir to Einstein, the man who sees deeply enough into the fabric of things to knit together the incompatibilities of quantum physics and special relativity.

For it to work, they must be here, miles from the earth, at the threshold of the tether of ability to return.

They are here to escape the pull of Earth. To control for it, in their parlance.

Rare enough for one of our species to go to space. Rarer still for a journalist. The price is steep, the preparation arduous.

It is an act of incredible generosity from my editor. We both know it is my swansong.

He—the physicist Sebastián Miguel Otero Guzman, revolutionary, visionary—is first to admit that he stands not only on the shoulders of history's giants but on those of his team.

Dr. Oni (for the purposes of my work, she remains Dr. Oni) plays a unique role in his hand-picked coterie. Chatterjee, Lee, a dozen or so others—all are acolytes of Dr. Otero's vision. Dr. Oni is the skeptic. I seem to be the only person to understand this. She fascinates me.

Born in Queens to Nigerian immigrant parents, she attended the prestigious Bronx Science High School. She had the small notoriety of being accepted to all eight of the Ivy League colleges and Stanford. She chose Princeton, and later the University of Chicago for her PhD, which she took in astrophysics.

We have moved from the cafeteria to the lounge. There is a full bar, which neither of us touches. Snacks, games. Chess. I run my finger along the board.

"Do you play?" she asks.

"Not for many years." A dodge.

Bolavive smiles.

"Teach me."

I arrange the board. White. Black. King. Queen. "You understand each piece's movement?"

"I know the game well. Teach me what I cannot see."

She too has done her research. I was a child prodigy, briefly competitive at the highest levels. Sometimes one learns how not to love one's gifts.

We begin a game. Her opening is technical, strong.

"How did you come to be a part of this endeavor?"

Bolavive is quiet for a long time.

"I am not sure what you are asking."

"You do not believe Otero. The experiment. All this."

She places a finger on her bishop, where it lingers.

"I was recommended to him at the last minute. A colleague was diagnosed with leukemia. He could no longer make the trip."

"And Otero accepted you."

"He welcomed me."

"You were surprised?"

"He has become a legend in his own time. In many ways, he plays the part. That is, in public. For the interviews, the think-pieces, the hagiographies. Privately, he accepts the legitimacy of my position."

"Which is?"

"That just because something is beautiful does not mean it is true."

In fact, this is news to me. I try not to betray it. "What does he say?"

"He takes a more expansive view."

"Is it … legitimate?"

The bishop only glides to e3.

The following evening in the canteen there is champagne. I hold a glass in the spirit of the evening.

They are celebrating the completion of the first phase of the experiment. There has been a signal. There are data.

"When will you begin the necessary calculations?"

Chatterjee is quite drunk. Or perhaps only loopy from the lack of sleep. His cheeks are as red as his eyes.

"We'll start crunching tomorrow."

To my surprise, he leans down and kisses Dr. Oni where her cheek meets her throat. She accepts with a smile. She places a hand against his chin and gently strokes it. Chatterjee whirls into the crowd, a mad gangly dervish. She meets my querying gaze.

"Deep is a brilliant scientist."

"You needn't justify yourself to me."

"There is neither less nor more there than you saw."

I understand that she is not saying these things to me.

At that moment, Dr. Otero himself enters the canteen. There is a tremor in the hubbub of voices, and then a thunder of applause.

Otero grins and raises a hand for quiet.

He evokes nothing so much as a new age guru. He is small, thin; his clothes hang elegantly on his frame. His hair is long, free, laced with silver. It trembles as he talks. His cheeks are coated in a trim black beard. The hair on his chin is white. He is mestizo, descended of an Italian father and an Oaxaca mother. He wears a white open-front tunic, revealing a small medallion on a leather cord. His sleeves are pushed up. On his right forearm is the golden eagle perched on a cactus, serpent in its beak. On the left, the blue-and-yellow logo of Club America.

He removes his glasses and perches them on the crest of his forehead.

He gives a brief, gracious speech, thanking the team for their efforts to date and urging them to gird themselves for the more arduous work to come.

Then he is gone.

I move through the crowd, but he is gone by the time I arrive at the door to the canteen.

Dr. Oni has followed me to the door.

"He will speak to you tomorrow, after breakfast."

I glance at my watch. If I tarry, I shall be late for Isha. There is no time in space, so I keep my own. Really, though, they tell me, time is space, space-time, and we inhabitants of this strange purgatory hurl through it at thousands of miles an hour. There is a syllogism buried in this revelation; either

no moment is set aside for prayer or all are.

Otero welcomes me into his private offices, which comprise a second cell accessible only through his quarters. It is not spacious, but his room is spare, and the open wall of space leaves one (me) almost queasy with the sense of roominess.

He sits at a small desk that can retract up into the wall. A computer monitor glows faintly, though it faces away from me. Every room has one. They are wired directly into a central network, so that work can be done from anywhere in the station.

"Does the wall bother you?" Otero settles into his chair. I sit in another and place my recorder on the desk between us.

"No, thank you. I am learning to appreciate it."

"I trust that you have found your visit satisfactory so far? I apologize for not being able to meet you sooner, but obviously, my focus has been on the experiment."

"Quite, doctor. I am profoundly grateful for the time I have."

"Well, I'm afraid that there is little I can say about the experiment that my colleagues have not already told you. Little, indeed, that I could add to what you must already have read."

"Oh, someone else will write the technical part of the piece. A scientist, or at least, someone with a sharper scientific mind than I. I am here to understand Otero, the man."

"Then you, too, must call me Sébas."

"I shall try."

"No. Mehmet. I wished to invite you into the mystery of our undertaking because I believed that you could write me as the man I am. We on the station are a family. One calls one's family by their first names, do they not?"

"Yes. Sebas."

He laughs at this. "Not 'Sea Bass.' Sébas."

"Permit me, then, to go directly to the heart of the matter. How did you conceive of this experiment? We are all familiar with the clichés—scientists do their best work as graduate students, when their brains are still young. Plastic, to borrow a phrase. You are almost sixty, and here you are, breaking new ground. An insight, if what I have read is to be believed, that you came to just a few years ago. Your reputation for ground-breaking work already secure in the history books."

Otero smiled with thin lips. His head was slightly bowed, his eyes dark-rimmed. Whether the smile was being tired or polite, I can not tell.

"I have spent almost every waking moment of my life thinking about physics since I can remember. I have thought physics first in Spanish, then in English, and later the language of mathematics. Physics—there are problems, complex equations with solutions," he taps a sheaf of loose papers on the desk. "I know brilliant mathematicians who can do the math, do the calculations from the symbols themselves. For many years, this is the approach I took. I can do it, I can move the numbers, the symbols, I … The honest answer is, there was no apple falling from the tree.

"What happened is that I began to see behind the symbols to the nature of reality itself. It was a revelation. Better than drugs, LSD. It was Platonic, contemplative. The Real Thing. I was blacking out for days on end, but the memory of the physics remained, though I could not remember eating, teaching.

"I lost the ability to think as once I had thought. I require Deepak, now. At his age, I could have done this myself, the mathematics. But then, I could not see. Do you understand?

This language of mathematics—I'm certain it is insufficient. It felt as though I were creating the David, the Michelangelo, from that, how is the word? Playdough. Yes? The material is not sufficient to the task, to the vision. I am not sure any of the others can see. Perhaps Bolavive."

"Why her?"

He is silent for a moment.

"You are religious."

"I am."

"Muslim?"

"Yes."

"She too."

"And you?"

Otero raises an eyebrow, but he is interrogating some interlocutor within himself.

"I graduated from college when I was fourteen. I took a master's degree in Mexico, and then eight years later I went to the United States for my PhD. I was still young, or young enough that the lost years did not seem to matter."

"It's not often remarked upon. But now that you mention it, yes, there's the gap."

"I was in seminary."

I am startled, and it shows. Otero's smile broadens.

"I would not have told you this, were we still on Earth. I have told no one, ever."

"Why tell me now?"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"Perhaps I am only exhausted, and I will regret it when you are gone."

"If you'd rather I not mention it, I won't." I glance at the recorder.

"No, no, it is part of this. One cannot be surrounded by this," he turns in his seat to face the infinite, turns back quickly, "and seek still to remain hidden from his brothers and sisters."

"Why did you leave?"

"I was told by my superiors that I did not have the vocation."

"You accepted their verdict?"

"I was still young. It may have been a test. One I failed. Or passed. I like to think that they saw better than I what I needed to be doing. I was no parish priest."

"Why not theology? Teaching?"

"Because I was not sure that I had faith."

"Now?"

Otero is silent for a long time. "What do you believe, Mehmet?"

"I take your point."

"I am not trying to be rhetorical. What do you believe?"

"I believe there is no god but God. That Mohammed is his prophet."

"It is not so easy for me to say this, as a Catholic. I believe that I believe in God." A cryptic smile. "The religion of my birth… can I say Jesus is God, the Christ? Once, I could."

We are silent together.

"I believe in beauty. I believe that the truth is beautiful."

"That the beautiful must be true?"

"I'm glad you have been speaking to Bolavive. Perhaps I should just say it. Yes. Yes. I'll be damned if what I see, what I hope to see in the results of this experiment aren't so beautiful as to make me weep. And if they are so beautiful, how can they be anything but true?"

"I'm afraid I don't share your commitment."

"You needn't. I only ask that you try to see it as I do.

"At any rate, we will know much more in just a few days. Mehmet, I must pause our interview here. But, I invite you to observe as much of our work in the laboratory as you wish. So long as you exercise discretion, I welcome your presence. We will begin to process the data after lunch."

"I'm honored."

"It is nothing of the sort," Otero waves my

words away. "Come as my brother, to report to all of our brothers and sisters the magnificence of this endeavor as it truly is."

I ascend Paradiso. Though the station's staff are hand-picked by Otero himself, still entry to the laboratory requires a special encrypted access code. I believe only six of the station's inhabitants are allowed access. The rest comprise the station's support staff, as it were. Engineers, mechanics, astronauts; their job is to ensure the continuous operation of the station.

Only three have unrestricted access: Otero, Chaterjee and Lee.

Ah, yes. Dr. Oni, too.

Those on the station represent just a fraction of the intellectual and logistical heft behind the experiment. A dozen telescope arrays on Earth are co-participants, as well as perhaps eighty or a hundred physicists and mathematicians across a range of specializations. Perhaps a dozen of them are capable of following Chatterjee's mathematics, to say nothing of verifying it. Billions of dollars have been invested directly in the experiment, by governments, universities, on top of the hidden billions undergirding its support.

Dr. Chatterjee is smiling as he taps the small glass porthole—what else to call it?—to signal that he is about to let me in. He says something over his shoulder, and as the door's airlock destabilizes, the hiss is blurred by the sounds of staccato chatter from within.

I step into the sanctum sanctorum. The air is slightly acrid, but I have read that the laboratory's air purification system is peerless. The equipment, shielded from view, requires an artificial vacuum.

The laboratory is round, cornerless. Each scientist has a workstation. There is a conference room across from the entry door, its walls lined with whiteboard, now nearly obscured by mathematical scribblings.

Dr. Lee and his colleague, another Chinese named Dr. Fung, occupy the workstations nearest to the door on the left. They acknowledge my arrival but return quickly to their work.

Dr. Oni sits to my right, her legs crossed, the stem of a pair of glasses in her teeth. At first, I think she is smiling at me, but she does not even see me, so deeply is she lost in thought.

She is the only one. The others, like Chatterjee, who only happened to see me approach, are standing and moving restlessly about. Otero, to my pleasant surprise, is watching a football match on his computer monitor. I recall with some pleasure that Mexico's young and vibrant team has advanced to the semifinal stage of the World Cup. I wonder whether the match is live, or close enough to live to matter.

At that precise moment, Mexico score and Otero bangs his desk with a grunt of satisfaction. He swivels around to face me, his tongue out in a pantomime of celebration.

"Mehmet! Your arrival is auspicious."

He rises to shake my hand. Then he introduces me to the remaining members of the team, whom I've met only in passing.

The first is a Swede, Caj Eriksson, after Otero (and myself) the eldest of the team, and another physicist. He is thirty, short, round-faced and bespectacled. His hairstyle is rather intentionally dated. He reminds me, in his aspect, of Bonhoffer. He teaches at Columbia. We exchange a few brief words about Morningside Heights. I lived there once, long ago, and was curious whether an Ethiopian restaurant, even then several generations old, remained. I was glad to learn that it did.

Last is Otero's countryman, Luis Ortega. Like Chatterjee, he is a mathematician. He is the on-board methodologist, though I am given to understand the formal role is performed by a committee on Earth. Dr. Ortega, it would appear, lacks either Otero's patriotism or his sporting spirit. He is doodling along the margins of a notebook.

There is so little urgency in the room, I am forced to ask what is happening.

Otero indicates Drs. Lee and Fung.

"They are running a series of diagnostics on the computer code. If they find an error, then we must run the experiment again."

"It's pro forma," Chatterjee assures me. "We've run the tests a hundred times. The experimental design is flawless."

"So, they are—"

"Making sure that the computers are communicating properly with the equipment, and that they were at the time we received our signal."

"How long will this take?"

"Several hours. They started first thing this morning, and they're communicating with the team in Beijing, now. We lack the server power to run the necessary operations on the station, so the work is done by relay with Beijing."

"Fascinating."

Otero is about to speak, but there is a burst of noise from his workstation and his attention is drawn back to the match. Eriksson and Chatterjee join him.

"Mr. Khorrasani," Ortega's accent is thick. "Perhaps you could help me with something?"

"Yes, of course."

He beckons me to his workstation where he has twin monitors set up. They are running the proprietary software developed for the experiment. For now, the program is inert, awaiting the data that they will use to unlock one of the fundamental secrets of the universe.

He toggles a few windows on his screen and lands on a chess board. The game has already started. I glance at his player avatar. His FIDE ranking is quite good.

"Dr. Oni—she say you perhaps can help me." He grins.

I glance over my shoulder. She sees me and comes over.

"Luis and I play from time to time. Right now, we're playing as a team against a Russian grandmaster, but he is much stronger than we are."

"You know I'm out of practice."

Dr. Oni rolls her eyes.

"There's no time for false modesty. Help us out, would you?"

Ortega offers me his seat, and so I accept. I open the match log, take note of the moves to date. They are in the middle phase of the match.

The game is accomplished by correspondence, so it takes some time for the signals from the station to reach Earth, and for our opponent's moves to return to us. Between moves we strategize, and slowly we turn the match to their advantage.

Then, suddenly, there is a burst of chatter from Dr. Fung. I turn towards him. Dr. Lee is nodding animatedly while Fung speaks. They are speaking Mandarin. After a minute, Dr. Lee informs the team that Beijing gives the go-ahead.

It is as if we have been seated at the start of a regatta, and now suddenly the judge has called for the oarsmen to take their positions. We stiffen in our seats, make the microscopic adjustments to our oars, attune ourselves to the bodies of our comrades, bend our ears to hear the retort of the revolver firing its blank. We know it will happen in mere moments, and then there it is, almost unheard for the

expectation. We are moving through the water; we will not rest until all is either won or lost.

The team return quickly to their work stations and begin to download the data that they will be working with.

All save Dr. Oni. There is a spare seat beside her workstation, and she suggests that I observe the goings on beside her.

For a few minutes we sit in silence.

"If I may? What are we expecting to see?"

"They will download the data and then Dr. Chatterjee will run his analysis. If the experiment has been successful, the data should match the curve."

"I beg pardon."

Dr. Oni takes a notebook from her workstation. She sketches a vertex, then adds a curved line, which soars and dips under the horizontal axis. "We will plot the data and check the shape against the hypothesis." She smiles. "You were expecting something more dramatic?"

"I had no idea it would be so… simple."

"The experiment is elegant. The best ones are."

"When will they know?"

"It'll take a few hours for the computers to crunch the data." Dr. Chatterjee shouts this at us from across the room. He is seated at his workstation. Otero, Eriksson and Ortega stand behind him. Otero's hand is pressed into his hairline, the other against his lower back. He is like a statue.

"If you'd like, we can get something to eat, come back later."

"No, no. I wish to be here for every moment."

There is a small commotion at Chatterjee's workstation. He swirls in his chair and grins.

"It's running."

There are cheers. I admit that I have to stifle a clap.

The Chinese are standing now. They perform some light calisthenics to loosen their knees, their backs. They too are grinning.

Chatterjee comes over to where we are sitting. He bends at the waist, kisses Bolavive on the nose. She blushes and gently pushes his face away. He stands at his full height and reaches for the ceiling.

For a few minutes they watch Dr. Chatterjee's monitor as it estimates its progress in calculations. I rise at one point and check it myself, a small black bar slowly filling with pixels.

Progress is slow, and we drift back to what we were doing. I sit with Ortega and Bolavive and puzzle over the endgame. Some half hour later, Mexico secures a spot in the World Cup final. Otero collapses in his chair. He may be weeping.

"An auspicious sign," Ortega remarks. Bolavive only raises an eyebrow.

When the calculation is complete, Chatterjee's computer dings. The room is instantly silent. My heart is racing. For a long moment nobody moves. Then slowly Chatterjee sits and clicks his mouse to activate the screen. Dr. Otero stands behind him. They are like priests at the altar. No one else dares move.

For a minute they are silent.

"I don't understand it," Chatterjee says.

"Take a breath. We will review the code. We can run it again."

"You're right. You're right you're right you're right." It becomes a mantra, the words slurring together.

Dr. Otero beckons for his countryman. Dr. Ortega draws up a chair beside Chatterjee. I approach obliquely. They open a page of code

and begin to review their mathematical model, line by line.

Dr. Otero turns. "This may take some time."

I shake my head.

"I'll get us something to eat," Bolavive offers.

"I'll go with you." Eriksson.

They are gone I don't know how long. Time has collapsed into silence. When they return, bearing a tray of sandwiches and fruit, it remains on Bolavive's side of the room, untouched.

Some adjustments are made. A line here, a symbol there. I gather. It runs again. The model. Now the wait is different, like the squeeze of tension in the abdomen that prefigures deeper nausea. Now there is only silence.

When again the monitor pings, I jump. Chatterjee scrambles to find the right window on the computer.

"Fuck!"

"What now? It's even worse? I thought it was corrected? What the fuck is this mess?"

Dr. Otero's eyes are flashing.

"Séba—" Ortega begins.

"None of that shit. Did you correct the model or not?"

Ortega is still as a stone. "Yes. The model is sound."

Chatterjee is scrolling madly through the code. "I spent two fucking years on this, man."

"Then make it work."

Chatterjee turns up towards his mentor. "I can't."

"What."

"I can't just make the data fit the model. Face it, Sébas. We were fucking wrong."

Otero slaps him hard across the face.

I start. I cannot believe what I have just seen.

Chatterjee slowly raises a hand to his cheek. Otero turns first to Bolavive. Ortega. Me.

"You can put that in your fucking book."

Then he is gone.

He does not expect me to follow him.

Yet I do.

His quarters are locked, but I pound on the door until he relents. He has pulled himself together. I invite myself into his room. He acquiesces.

"Mr. Khorrasani. I beg your forgiveness."

"It is not mine you need."

"No. Of course not. I'll prostrate myself before him. I've… I've been a fool."

"I am sorry to push, but I need to understand."

My recorder is in my pocket.

"The experiment is a failure."

"You can't—"

Otero waves away my platitudinous offering.

"One forgets that a hypothesis is… only that. Until it isn't."

We are standing in his living quarters. He sinks onto his bed. I wonder whether he will weep. I hope not.

"When I was in seminary, we spoke often of mystery. It has a particular Catholic connotation. The mystery of faith."

"I'm afraid I'm unaware."

"No. It never satisfied me. It's something like, how would you say—the secrets of the universe. We believe that deep truths are

hidden from us unless God's grace allows us to see."

"I see."

"Do you?" He almost spits the words. Clenches his jaw. "I'm sorry. You take my meaning. I have seen the mystery of the universe."

"But you said it yourself, the experiment failed."

Otero shakes his head. "Our instruments are imperfect. Only God can draw a perfect circle. In physics, this experiment—our circles are like a child's drawing. Hardly an approximation."

"Perhaps someday—another physicist…"

"There will never be another like myself."

Otero rises to face the wall. Untold trillions of stars gazed back at him.

I too gazed upon him. I saw now the kind of man he truly was.

Many years ago, drunk on wine, Matthew, in one of his polemics against my faith described a zealot: one who, having lost sight of his goals, nevertheless redoubles his efforts to get there.

Matthew had it wrong. It's the fanatic who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim.

And if he has not forgotten his aim?

My bags are packed. Dr. Oni meets me at the entrance to the Inferno. The shuttle will be arriving soon. I've seen little of her. Since.

"How is Deepak?"

"He has accepted Dr. Otero's apology. He may even understand it." She pauses. "The hurt will not quickly heal."

"How are you?"

It is as if she is surprised by the question. I am delighted to see a smile. Her eyes flit upwards, towards Paradiso.

"The universe has spoken to us. It is up to me, now, to see what she is trying to tell us."

I laugh. It is cut short by the shudder of the shuttle docking.

"I wish you the best of luck. Look me up if you're ever in D.C."

"I have a conference there next April."

"We'll get a drink."

It is her turn to laugh.

I hear the hiss of the airlock below. I begin my descent.

I recall suddenly that Dante's paradise comprised a rose, a perfect circle, hierarchically arranged, with the triune God at the center. A beautiful, troubling image, even for the poet. The petals of a rose are interstitial; all must be pared back to reveal the center.

There is no center to the universe; so the physicists tell us. Every part is expanding away from every other equally, at unimaginable speeds. Another syllogism. If there is no center of the universe, then perhaps every point is also its center.

When I reach the dock, I glance up. My Virgil has begun her ascent. She does not look back.

Thomas Bulen Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America. His fiction can be found in *The Nassau Review, MAYDAY Magazine, Glassworks Magazine, the gyara journal,* and *The Oakland Review.*

Bell (Notre Dame)

Edward Lee

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen and Smiths Knoll. He is currently working on two photography collections: 'Lying Down With The Dead' and 'There Is A Beauty In Broken Things'. He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy. His blog/website can be found at **edwardmlee.wordpress.com**

Slices

James Croal Jackson

a legacy
of sharp edges:
run your fingers
along the desk
until it bleeds.
your tattoo:
love is all
you need.
I whistle the
theme to Requiem
for a Dream
and pop pills
until my hands
smell of
peanut
butter and rum
splashes
into me
hungry eyes
feed me something
new

James Croal Jackson (he/him) has a chapbook, *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017), and poems in *Columbia Journal, Rattle,* and *Reservoir*. He edits *The Mantle*—**themantlepoetry.com**. Currently, he works in the film industry in Pittsburgh, PA.
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