



**Volume 1:
Change and
Stagnation**

Foreword

Something and Nothing. These are two states that are separate yet co-existing. Much like life and death, or Schrodinger's Cat, it is only possible to observe one at a set time, but the question remains. What would happen if we lifted the lid? If we push past the veil of something, will we find nothing? Similarly, how do we even quantify or describe nothing if we ourselves must not exist to experience it?

There is no way for anyone to answer these questions with definitive certainty. However, Sci-Fi and Fantasy can act as the keys to a multitude of gateways. Sometimes they are ancient arches leading to lessons that have been eroded by modern progression. Others are portals that can transport you to a plethora of realities, swirling with what ifs and could be's.

Change and stagnation are the corridors in between and it' is up to us to navigate both phases. Sometimes this is easier said than done, but by looking back, forward and within, we can grow and evolve, as individuals, and as a collective consciousness. These genres are integral to the human experience and this magazine seeks to unlock hidden truths within the hearts, souls, and minds of all its readers.

ABTS started out as a tribute to A Call to the Stars. The audio series that inspired us walks the fine line between everyday experience and peculiar circumstance. For our first edition, we have curated an eclectic mix of writing that mirrors the mysteries of life and beyond.

- The Editor R.M.D



A Call to the Stars: Something Matters

A short sci-fi story about love, lemons, and otherworldly mysteries

ROSE MARIE DRABBLE



Something Matters is what happens when you blend office life bants with an existential crisis and a universe sized dilemma. Get ready for a tale of love, lemons and otherworldly mysteries. The prologue takes place before the events in 'A Call to the Stars' but can also be enjoyed separately from the series and no prior context is necessary. **Put on your headphones, tune out of reality, and let us transport you!** You can also download and read the kindle version [here](#).

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A Miracle by Rose Marie Drabble



I am a creative soul
on an Earth-bound stroll
the flesh that binds me
doesn't equal the whole
materialism always fails
to fill the gaping holes
the question dangles,
what is the point of it all?

~~life offers no stability~~

change is a constant

in death lies eternity
unknown XXXXXXXXXX
my heart yearns
a longing for clarity

I fainted once
time went slow
remember thinking

without actual thought

where did my body go?

I lost physical sensation

de-tached

I became...

d i s o r i e n t a t i o n

pulsing

fractals

of energy

pushed

me

through

a sea

of pure

ecstasy

I was scared

but just as I found *quiet acceptance*

i sNaPpEd BaCk

kicking

flailing

HEAVY

fought my way to clarity

So, when it comes

the final night

will I step into the light?

Or did the lights exist at all?

i can't imagine that final call

what if the answer lies in us all?



only in the deepest sleep can it be awoken

Becoming Mortal



I open my eyes.

Father-sun shines. Sister-wind whispers.

My candlewax feathers spread out from my body

Like the halo of the moon.

My arms hang limp, knuckles grazing the ground

On which I rest.

My knee sinks into a dark cool cushion of dirt, staining my robes.

I shrug them off.

Air breathes gentle over my body.

My back is sore.

I twist my arm around and feel empty space

Where a pair of wings once stood proud.

A pang of grief stabs through me, soon reverberating

Into remembrance of what once simply was.

I stand up, too fast, stumbling.

I have never been so light.

I yank a handful of hair out.
My honey-gold locks have dulled, and muddied.

Suddenly, a small gasp penetrates.
Turning, I see a family dressed in puffy coats,
Hands over their children's eyes.
I become aware of my nakedness.

The father stammers:

“Um...are you okay?”

The son:

“Would...would you like some clothes?”

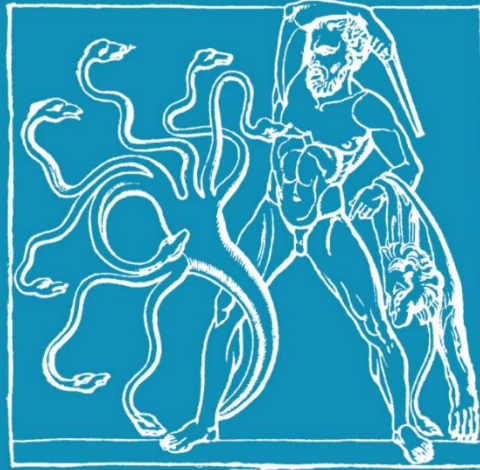
Me:

“...Yes.”

And as the mother hurriedly unzips her coat and offers it to me,
I realise how, every day, we find the everyday in a universe we barely
understand.

Remember me. Stay.

Call: Five by Five Matter and Psyches Collide by Kole Bird



there are five by five when matter and the psyche collide, it is synchronicity, you can see. five heads grow and form five more, it's a fractal reality, you can see.

there are five by five when matter and the psyche collide, it is synchronicity, you see. you deep dive down and swim with the tricksters, and geist. the rumble ghost is ready to push you. but they are all you, you'll see:

- hello, I got your number from your shadow.
- I'm sorry but you will have to stop calling this number.
- I only ever call when the floods are on – I dialled 9, nine times over.
- I'm sorry but that is not my number, you must have misdialled, you have the wrong number.
- oh, but it is you, and I need to speak to you now.
- why do you keep calling, what do you want from me?
- I only ever call when the floods are on. We need your help, I want... need for you to reach your full potentiality.

- what potentiality?
- to fulfil your genomic destiny.
- what on earth are you talking about?
- they've got it wrong, it's bad water, nature-nurture; nurture is nothing without the nature, it's not wise, and we're flooded with bad water.
- bad water?
- a choking poison in your outlook.
- I don't understand, what you say is not clear.
- bad water.
- I can't talk in riddles anymore, please.
- controlling principles are impossible to erase, they are in born.
- but what about the blank slate proposition?
- know it. when you suckled you knew what to do. ask your mother.
- all animals know what to do.
- all animals know what to do.
- but what about order, the truth, and civilization?
- controlling principles are impossible to erase, I see chaos.
- I don't like this conversation, I'm terrified. I'm thinking of hanging up.
- good, good, that's very good.
- who the hell are you?
- geist, trickster, hydra, take your pick.
- why are you doing this?
- you must reach full potential.

- but why? why must I?
- it's deeper than you know.
- you never explain, that's what's so frustratingly vague. I need specifics.
- it's your urge, your eternal voyage, there is no stopping it. bad water poisons, chokes, blocked pipes block microtubules.
- microtubules?
- the Penrose interpretation is a speculation by Nobel prize winner Roger Penrose.
- what's this got to do with me?
- about the relationship between quantum mechanics and general relativity.
- I don't want to know about it.
- Penrose proposes that a quantum state remains in superposition until the difference of space-time curvature attains a significant level. am I making myself clear?
- no, no, that is so much worse. much worse.
- Penrose proposes that there are quantum computations in microtubules inside brain neurons. do you realise what this means?
- I have absolutely no idea, and I don't care about it either.
- but you must, the quantum world... don't you realise what that is?
- could you just put it a nutshell please? I really need to get on.
- the quantum world is like a gateway to the multiverse, the realm of infinite possibility. our minds are constantly dipping into the quantum foam, and realising bits of it through a narrow lens called human consciousness, don't you see?
- I'm afraid not.

- MAGIC!
- oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, you'll have me riding a pink kangaroo around the alien pyramids of an interstellar purple moon, next.
- it's a possibility. have you never asked yourself where consciousness comes from?
- well, I did once, as a matter of fact. I asked a number of random people what they thought consciousness was outside a library in Worcestershire.
- what did they say?
- there was nothing new, nobody knew anything.
- you must understand that the human being has grown to become a version of reality, but it is only a version, a point of view.
- why are you telling me this?
- because I know you want to know. the powers that are, intend to go much, much further.
- a version further?
- this homo-sapien version, is an organic interpretation of a small part of the whole, randomly manifested by nature to survive in a particular kind of way. however, it has reached a turning point, accelerated by the 20th century; the nuclear bomb, the world-wars, the psy-wars, the breakdown of beliefs, the homogenisation of cultures, the race wars, the collapsing eco-system, the divisions and precisions, the total fragmentation: it's all about the elite's urge to survive at any cost, they have made it necessary to extend yourselves beyond the organic.
- you mean technology, and AI, and that sort of thing?

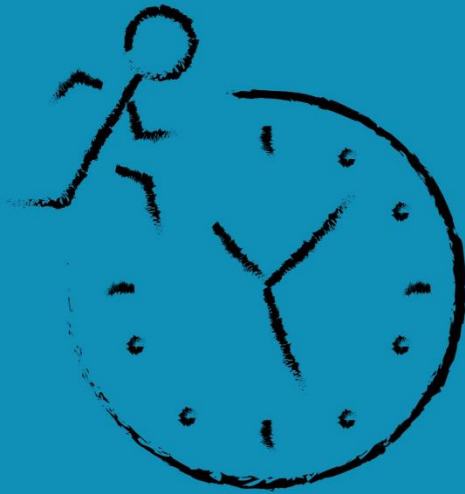
- yes, that is precisely what I mean. the organic and things of natural evolution are too slow for them now, they need, they insist, that you catch up.
- so, we are to be augmented to serve them better?
- precisely.
- we could just stop, it strikes me that nature gets its wrong, anyway. they talk about order, truth, and civilization, but all I see is chaos.
- I told you there is no stopping until it's perfect, they've been at it for centuries, they even control things down here.
- and the bad seeds fail.
- you have it.
- what shall I do?
- you know what to do, it's in born.
- am I to become perfect?
- yes.
- and what if I don't.
- their hydra will come and eat you, with my nine heads, nine times over.
- what is the point of it all?
- I don't have time for any existential meanderings, that was all done centuries ago. no, the flood is here and it's my job to warn you, more are coming, it's my job to mould you.
- but I don't believe in perfect, it's not what I' am about at all. I like the oddly sha-pen, the misprints on eternity, ugly fruit and rejected ones mean so much more to me. so, I' am sorry, I won't be carrying on, I' am hanging up right now.
- oh, don't worry, I'll be back.

- I shan't answer.

you can't stop me, ha, ha, ha. I am the irresistible monster, the queer deep dark under, in your dreams, in your days, the drip, drip consciousness. I am there when you can't sleep, I am the one you seek, the unavoidable attractor. I walk among queer shadows, and once ignored, am made supreme. I'm what you do and what you don't want to know, the absence of your gnosis, and gather in the ins and the outs, right there beside you. I am the ignore-rants.

hang up.

Free by Regina Kassel-Key



This day be mine
As I slip from the grip
Of the trembling hands of time
And walk beyond horizons
And wonder
Even beyonder

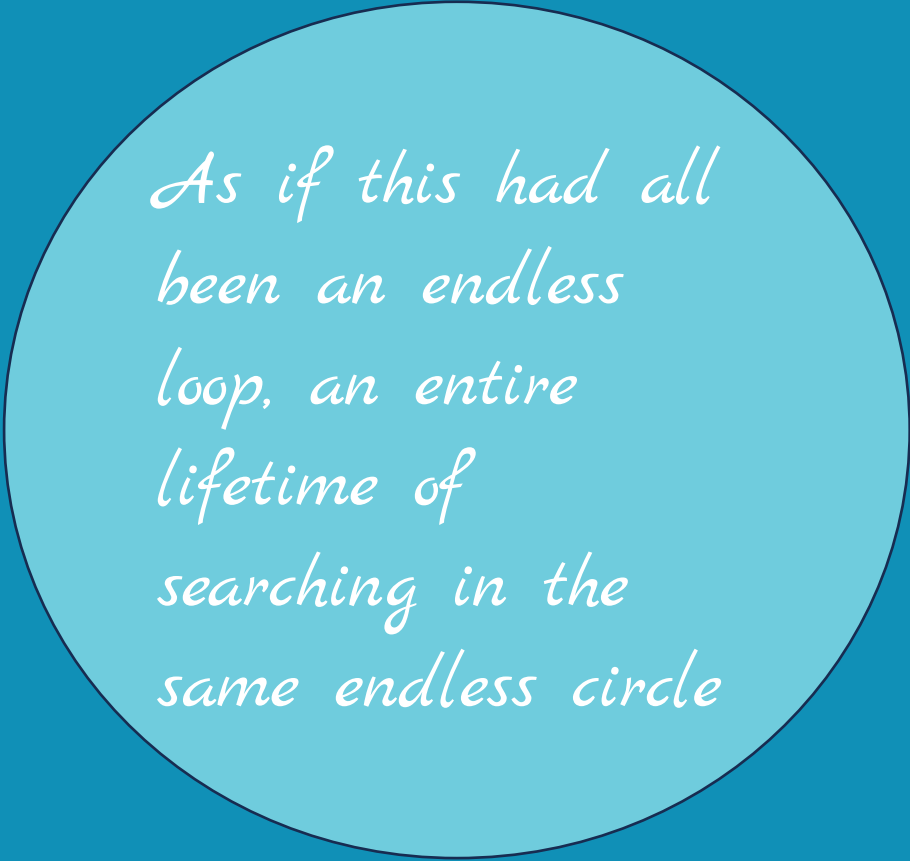
Infinite by J.F Drayton

In a state of disarray, Mr. Jones searched frantically.

He had pieced together almost everything but something was missing.

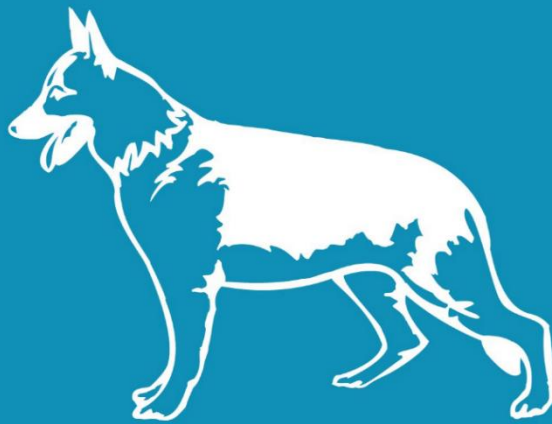
He felt almost as if he knew what it was, the final puzzle piece.

Almost as if he had been in this situation before.



*As if this had all
been an endless
loop, an entire
lifetime of
searching in the
same endless circle*

Mercy Dog by Annabelle Franklin



He never knew exactly what injuries he'd received. The pain had been monstrous, immense, involving most of his body; now it had passed, leaving him in a state of dreamlike calm.

He could no longer hear guns or shells; an unearthly quiet had settled around him. He felt as if his churned-up flesh had become one with the churned-up muck on which it lay. The night sky seemed very close, and he could still see the stars when he closed his eyes.

"Am I dreaming?" he said, not sure if he'd spoken aloud.

"No," said a soft, gravelly voice on his left.

Unable to move for the past few hours, he now found he could turn his head. Next to him crouched a dark shape. A ripple of anxiety invaded his calm.

"I thought I was alone," he said.

"You're never alone," the shape replied.

"Who are you?"

"Open your eyes."

"They are open. I just can't see you properly."

“Believe me, your eyes are closed.”

The voice carried a quiet conviction. An unbidden memory came to him of home, of his mother waking him up on a spring morning, urging him to walk the dog before he went to school. He could see the sun shining redly through his eyelids, feel the soft embrace of warm blankets seducing him back to sleep, sense the patient presence of Shep beside his bed, waiting to welcome him to wakefulness.

He obeyed, half-expecting to see his sunlit boyhood bedroom, only to find himself still out here in the dark, miles from hope or help. But the darkness was no longer total. A gentle golden light shone from somewhere behind him, revealing the shape on his left to be a dog – a Border collie, with Red Cross saddlebags strapped to its back.

“Mercy dog,” he whispered.

“Yes.” The dog’s mouth hadn’t moved, but the voice had come from its direction.

“You can speak,” he said.

“Yes,” the dog replied.

“And I’m not dreaming.”

“No.”

He felt a stab of fear. “Then I must be dead.”

“Not yet,” said the dog. “Not quite.”

“But soon?”

“Yes.”

He kept his eyes fixed on the dog. The wisdom in its eyes allayed his panic.

“Did you take away the pain?” he asked.

“I did,” the dog replied. “It’s what we’re for.”

He remembered it was the Germans who had first trained dogs to carry medical supplies on the battlefield.

“They’re not all bad,” said the dog.

“What?”

“Germans. They’re not all bad.”

“I know.”

The numbness was seeping away. He still felt no pain, just very cold. ‘How is it,’ he asked, voicing a thought that had troubled him since schooldays, ‘that a handful of bullies can get so many other people to do their dirty work?’

“They have help,” said the dog.

“Help? Where from?”

“From behind the scenes of this world.”

“From the Devil, you mean? I’ am not sure I believe in all that tosh.”

“Believe me, it’s real. Maybe not in the way people think, but there are spiritual forces behind the workings of this world. Whether they know it or not, bullies and warmongers align themselves with titanic forces of darkness that give them the power to achieve things they could never manage on their own.”

An icy chill crept through his shattered bones. Damp vapours drifted upwards, swirling lazily in the night air. “I don’t want to die,” he said, his eyes pleading with the dog’s gentle gaze. “Can’t you save me?”

“There is no need for fear,” said the dog.

He felt his life shrinking around him, his memories fading, until it seemed he had never been anything but this patch of mud and mangled flesh. “Is there an afterlife, then?” he asked.

“There is no before or after,” came the answer; “simply life. Consciousness never dies.”

His vision misted over and the dog’s form became hazy; only its eyes remained clear. “Are you here to take me to...?” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

“No – I have other work to do. But there’s no need for fear. Dying is as natural as waking up in the morning.”

Warmth entered his heart. He thought maybe the golden light was coming from a fire – he saw sparks rising into the sky and felt his lungs fill with smoke. Each breath was a conscious effort.

“Is it time?”

“It is time.”

With one last long outbreath, he felt himself expand outwards and upwards, filling the night, effortlessly shedding his personality along with his ruined body. The vague sense of inferiority that had plagued him for most of his life, the attachment to home and family, the secret and forbidden love for his Captain, the resentment at being sent into danger and death to fight a war he didn’t understand for a country that abhorred and vilified people like him – all those things that had mattered so much were wiped out as if they had never been. And yet he still existed. He was the earth and the trees, the stars and the sky – and himself. In that eternal moment of profound peace, he was more himself than he had ever been in his short, sad life.

Consciousness never dies.

The Ballad of The Immortal By J. F. Drayton



It's been a long time since I was born, and honestly, I've begun to lose track. I've watched societies rise and fall. I fought in many wars, tasted the metal of both blades and bullets more times than I'd care to remember. I had watched as my lovers; our children and generations of our families aged and lived their lives. Sometimes I would come to them, a smiling face, a comforting touch. I'd never tell them, how could I? Instead, I stayed with them, offering them peace.

There was something to be said about a quick death, no time for people to wonder what's happening. But the lucky ones, those who lived a full life, there was a distinct sweetness to how they accepted death and met their fate with a smile on their face. However, they are just memories now. The Earth had long turned cold, the Universe herself reached its final breaking point and snapped back in on itself, it boiled for a while, bubbling nothingness, somehow wildly alive.

Then without a sound, or even a flash, there was a beginning again. Small dark circles spread vastly across a white open sheet of endlessness. Slowly beginning to grow, reaching out for their brothers and sisters, spreading across the vast crystal-like blanket. As

I awaited what I'd see next, where this would lead, I questioned if I was still here, what could possibly have brought me to this point? Was there a god somehow torturing me, had I committed some sin so horrendous that the only appropriate torture was an endless loneliness? Did God leave me in the slums for something I had done? Or was I just forgotten when he decided to start again?

Those Eyebrows by Kole Bird



the eyebrow.

all that you are is a set of eyebrows. you wake up early in St Petersburg. you have never been to St Petersburg and were not expecting to wake up there. you knew you were somewhere you shouldn't be because you didn't recognise the room you woke up in. as soon as you open the curtains, the very first thing you always do every morning, and the obvious thing to do when you wake up in a strange place is it not, they reveal right there in front of you, the very same clock tower depicted on your favourite fridge magnet at home: St Petersburg is emblazoned vertically, in a bold white times new roman looking font, down the entire side of this odd, classical revival, pseudo Mediterranean, modernist clock tower: ST. PETERSBURG FLORIDA WELCOMES YOU, it's surrounded by palm trees so it must be Florida.

oh, I'm so sorry did you think I meant Russia? so, here's the thing: you're in St Pete. Florida, not Russia, you don't know how you got there, and you are not yourself, not yourself at all. indeed, in fact, you are barely anything, because as soon as you move to the mirror, the very second thing you always do every morning, like an automaton, a mecca, a clockwork on autopilot, is check you still exist. but there in the mirror, right in front of you is no human, no body,

not even a face. put simply, all that is there is a set of levitating eyebrows. all that you are is a set of eyebrows. not only that, but they are also a very heavy drag queen version of Bettie Davis's eyebrows. you have absolutely no memory of being Bettie Davis or a drag queen, though you did do a little drag once, but it isn't the same eyebrow, not the same at all. the thing is you don't really have much memory of anything; a house, a kitchen, a set of fridge magnets, a vague memory of doing drag, and that's about it. all very blurry. perhaps that's normal for a set of disarticulated eyebrows, a vague recollection of a something before now, a set of fridge magnets in a kitchen somewhere, and that's it:

- not to worry it'll all come flooding back, like amnesia in a Hollywood movie.
- I just needed to find the right trigger and I'd be myself again
- if I could just get my movies right, I bet I could find the rest of my face!

so, without further ado, and being wholly committed to the power of positive thought you set off, in an instant.

- I'm off out to look for me!

I mean what can you do when you awaken as a set of eyebrows displaced from a face? and apart from anything else, eyebrows ordering breakfast in a hotel restaurant is a complete no, no. all that wiggle and rise. without lips you can't perform the vowels and consonants you were so fond of in a vague and blurry past.

- come on eyebrows let's swoop and find some lips!

So off you trot, well not exactly trot, you are eyebrows. one eyebrow takes the initiative and raises itself up and bursts through an open window, plunging into life. the other, being quantum entangled, does the same but as a mirror image. bird-swoops in mirrored simulation.

at first, clear water below, fresh utter endless blue, Florida. you vaguely remember a lot of other fridge magnets depicting hot, semi-tropical blue-sky places, like paradise islands in aquamarine oceans, lakeside Chicago cityscapes blazing at noon, and all the chocolate bounty-bar beaches: you gotta hit those hot-blue beaches, then you've made it, the dream comes true. but it's not hot, because you're so cool. as cool as mountains, Jack Kerouac-Easy Rider-cool

-Bettie Davis eyes, he's got Bettie Davis eyes

- you eyebrows, you swoopers.

- white doves that are books to birds on Dali days.

so, to the lips. how could anyone find a pair of lonesome lips? and what kind of lips, for that matter? pink lips, reds lips or hot lips? they had to be lipstick-lips, at least. and now that you mention it, you can remember you and your café and your cross-dressing husband, on your pig farm in Thailand. he was very particular about pink lipstick; his name was Nam which means water. when you opened that café, he asked you to choose a name, so you chose pink lips, and he, being an artist, painted huge pink lips all down the side of the café for all to see. nobody cared how weird you were in Ban Chot, a remote village, miles from anywhere, cut off from western civilisation, cut off from reality, with no TV, plunged into a Buddhist dream world, swooping through life as you were in your own story. how dare you control the narrative, how selfish, how wonderful. the café sat in front of a resplendent mountain called weary mother, and those were the happiest days of your life. so, pink lips they would have to be. and not only free-floating pink lips, but lips that would willingly join you in pursuit of a face. It is rather narrowing the choices, so the odds are stacking up.

You swooped on over the city, as eyebrows do when they seek a face. Down below the gridded golden garden city, where everyone had already forgotten how to be human, you spy a golden garden park, a

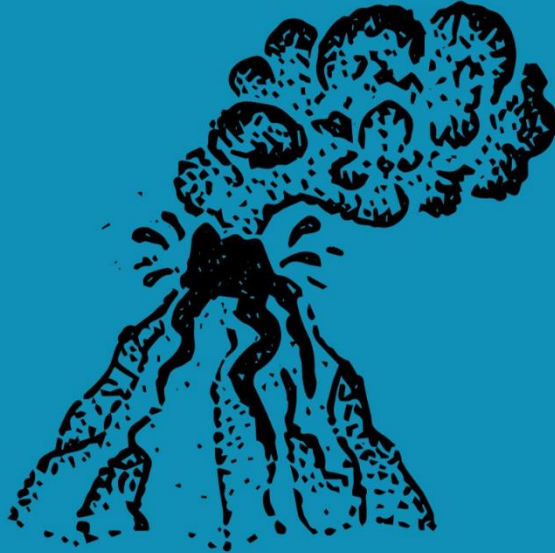
good place to watch people going by, and with a bit of luck, and a sort of knitting together, maybe some other detached facial parts, rarely seen, will stop by. Maybe even pink lips.

A park bench, yes, a park bench, you find a lovely bench opposite a huge fountain, and as there is no plaque commemorating it to a dead person, you imprint yourself right in the middle of the back rest. And settle down to your new existence on the bench, a kind of imprinted, incognito eyebrow tattoo. Nobody will notice you; they'll mistake you for a simulacrum in the wood knotting.

You get on social media immediately and leave a message on the trending social media platform: facile ~ where glib is the new profound ~ it's a must. You put a put out a general appeal: - have water supply. Incognito eyebrow tattoo vaguely imprinted on a park bench back rest seeks pink lips. Would like to make a long-term face of it – come and see if I am real or a simulacrum in the wood grain – you decide. Perfect.

It'll be a long time coming but it will come, you have eternity on your side.

The Legend by Katrina Green



The earth shifted; her silent, slumbering sleep shattered by a bumping, bouncing, banging beat in her broken bowels. The sizzling snake opened its fierce fiery eyes, twisting, twining and turning through long deserted, discharged dykes. Pressure and passion pouring through its vigorous, vehement veins. Seeking and striving for release redemption and restoration.

With a reverberating rumbling roar, it is liberated: let loose on a languid, lounging landscape. Ferocious, flaming fire, flies from the moaning, mountainous mouth. For a brief, bright, burning molten moment, the silent star-studded sky becomes a fireball flashlight illuminating its inky illustrations. A burning, blazing, blasting, corrosive, combusting conflagration erupting and enfolding; energised and exuberant in its flame fuelled freedom. Tantalising tainted, tortured tongues licking and lashing as they consume and combust.

Then deep dank darkness as the rolling relentless rancid choking, churning, clinging cloud, stretched and swirled its way to the

stratosphere. The air shrank; suffering, suffocating and scorching under the, smouldering, sulphurous, smoke as the earth exhumes, exhales and ejects; belching bad breath as its bellows blow beneath its burrow. Acid, acrid atmosphere falling, filling and fouling. Land, lakes and livestock devastated and destroyed.

The once frozen frigid forbidding water whimpers and weeps. Its torrid tears turn to a fluid, flooding force. Rampant, ranting and racing, it flows fearlessly beyond its bosom boundaries; swelling spilling, splurging. Overflowing, outpouring and outraged, it cries as it contemptuously cuts and crushes. Streams selfishly surge and rivers rise and rebel. Free from the frost and its icy internment; escaping earth's enslavement, it desperately, deliberately drives downhill, seeking and shamelessly soul-searching until it's sought sanctuary in the sea.

Wild, wailing, whipping wind; breezing, brewing, blasting. Adding, aiding and abetting, a partner in purgatory. Carrying, clasping and cleaving as it surges and storms. Hollering, howling and hissing. Squalling, shrieking, squealing. Powerfully proud in its purpose. Deafening and defeating in its discourse...But in hamlets, and homes below, its benevolent brother breathes life and lasting love. Pentecostal praise projected heavenward, its holy hymns hurrying home.

Earth, Water, Wind and Fire; forever forging, forever fracturing, forever fairest friends, forever formidable foes.

The Sacrifice at Toledo by Simon Bovey



The air of the Monasterio de San Juan de Los Reyes is cool and still. The sound of the fountain soothing and gentle. Sebastian Maldonado de Arriola thinks that this is the most comfortable he has been for many days.

One of the priests had brought him water with a little lemon juice added and the sharp taste is still fresh on his tongue. Bees hum as loud as cicadas in the blossom above his head. Birds squabble. But it seems like he has been sitting here for many minutes, the shadows have noticeably traversed the garden. Though it is undoubtedly good to relax here, he is impatient to report to Antonio de Sotomayor, Royal Confessor to King Felipe IV and Grand Inquisitor of Spain. He has speculated often on the cause of his urgent recall during his three-day journey and now he craves to know what his eminence requires of him. He has much work of his own, of course, the Inquisition having only recently commenced in Valencia, and he has many cases to hear and much evidence to assess, so it must, he thinks, be a matter of great import. It has to be said too that it is ill advised for any member of the Church to keep an Inquisitors Provincial waiting like this.

However, it suddenly occurs to him, as he sits in the peace and the shade, that the monastery is unnervingly quiet. Perhaps it is after the noise of the road and the journey that he is unused to silence,

but he has only seen one priest so far. He has heard no prayers, no Mass, no divine service, no doors closing, no feet on stones, nothing of the usual business a monastery of this size daily undertakes.

Sebastian stands and walks around the garden and the cloisters, ears attuned for any sound. Shortly, he hears a door hinge creek, feet rushing down the night stairs and then a priest dashes into the garden. He looks around, sees Sebastian and comes quickly over to him. Breathless, he blurts out, “My apologies Inquisitor de Arriola, we...we were expecting you, of course. We have quarters prepared. I am...I am sorry for the delay, I...I...”

Sebastian takes in the man’s appearance. He is short, the hair around his tonsure grey and thinning. He is flustered, if not upset, his eyes red from crying, and in those eyes a trace of alarm; all things Sebastian sees often in his work but that he is surprised to see here. “My name is Augustino,” he continues, “I am coadjutor to the Bishop, please do not hesitate to call upon me if I can be of service in any way.”

“I was expecting to see the Bishop himself.” Sebastian replies.

“I know Inquisitor. I’m afraid...” Augustino trails off, lowers his head, and starts to tremble. Moved by this, Sebastian thinks to place his hand on the man’s shoulder in comfort, but before he can do so, a dam breaks within Augustino. Tears stream down his face and his breath comes in heaving sobs. Sebastian is at a loss to know what to do other than to stand there while the priest regains his composure.

“I am sorry,” he says. “I am afraid the Bishop cannot see you.”

Sebastian bristles. “I have come a long way and at the request of great authority.”

Augustino shakes his head. “You don’t understand Inquisitor de Arriola. I don’t know how to say this, or how it can be explained, but...his Eminence is dead.”

Sebastian is momentarily taken aback but he knows life is fragile and there are so many ways in which men can lose their grip on it. "I am very sorry to hear this. How did he die?"

The priest swallows and convulses yet again. "I am most grieved to have to tell you that his Eminence..." Augustino looks around as if worried that there are others who might overhear. "He took his own life!"

This stuns Sebastian, what could possibly have motivated the Bishop to commit his soul to eternal damnation? He above all knew that his life was the property of God, and to destroy that life is to wrongfully assert dominion over God's creation. It is the gravest of sins and means he will be denied a funeral mass and burial.

"When did this happen?" He asks.

"Sometime after Matins, I think. He was found this morning by a novice sent to raise him when he did not appear for First Hour prayers.

"And the manner of it?" Sebastian asks, his instincts to question always present.

"He had placed a rope around his neck and then, then...to the beams of his cell."

"Who else knows?" Sebastian starts to appraise how the situation can be controlled and contained.

Augustino sadly shakes his head. "Everyone I'm afraid. In a small community like this, secrets do not last long."

"Why? Why did he do this? Was he ill, in pain, was the man suffering?" For Sebastian has seen men injured in battle beg for the knife to release them from the torture of some injury or dreadful disfigurement.

“Not that I am aware of. He was called to the offices of Senor Antonio de Sotomayor yesterday, after that he seemed...pensive, absorbed. But I know that the responsibilities of office are great.”

Sebastian steps away, space to think and consider next steps. This will be a devastating blow to the city with the potential to cause a lack of confidence in the Church. Might it be related to his recall from Valencia, some sickness of doubt running through the priesthood? Is the Inquisition in jeopardy? No, if this happened this morning then it must be a coincidence. But he does not believe in serendipity. He cannot speculate further, it is a dangerous pastime, and one he is indulging in too readily of late. He must report to the Grand Inquisitor without more delay. He turns back to the priest.

“Has the Grand Inquisitor been informed?”

“Not yet.”

“I will tell him myself. This will not be spoken of outside of these walls, anyone who does so will answer to me. Do I make myself clear?”

“Of course, Inquisitor.”

“I entrust you to see to what must be done for the Bishop. He will have a mass. You will say that he died in his sleep. Yes?”

“But I cannot. It is against everything that we...”

“You will. Unless de Sotomayor has other directions, you will proceed along the lines I have outlined. Do you understand?”

“It will be done.”

Sebastian can hear the reluctance in the priests’ voice but he also hears compliance.

Having changed into more formal clothes Sebastian hurries to the Alcázar of Toledo, a huge stone fortress that dominates the town and the surrounding area with an imposing appearance of white

stone and tall towers. He presents himself to the guard at the main gate, he notices that there are a considerable number of heavily armed Tercio in attendance, a company at least, and also a number of arquebusiers. The interior of the Alcázar is breath-taking, to see so much space bounded is a marvel that makes Sebastian's head spin.

The captain of the guard doesn't pause, he sweeps Sebastian up the vast main stairs to the first floor. Their boots ring out down a long hallway that terminates in a pair of grand doors, he knocks then opens them for Sebastian to enter. The room is a spacious well-furnished salon with large windows that look down onto the Targus River. Sitting at a large table, writing with great speed, is Grand Inquisitor Antonio de Sotomayor. His face is gaunt and his nose hooked, or the more generously disposed might describe it as aquiline. He has a neatly trimmed beard and his hair is grey veering towards the white. He wears deep red vestments and cope with a simple black biretta on his head. The clothes are unostentatious but they are of the best quality silk and velvet. As he writes he squints through narrow spectacles. He looks up and sees Sebastian, smiles warmly.

"My dear de Arriola, it is good to see you. You made haste indeed; I wasn't expecting you for another two days. How was your journey?"

He removes his spectacles, stands, and walks with a slight stoop as though observing something on the ground.

"Dry, hot, and long, your eminence." Sebastian replies.

De Sotomayor gives an ironic chuckle. "I imagine it was, forgive me my friend for putting you through that trial but I would not have called you here if I did not have need of your counsel. Please, sit. First, what news from Valencia?"

“It is much as you remember it. The inquisition there goes well, I think. We have many cases to hear. Inquisitor before we go on, I’m afraid I have some grave news I need to share with you. The Bishop here is dead!”

“Killed himself. Yes, I know.”

“Ah, I thought you had not yet been informed.”

De Sotomayor shakes his head. “I haven’t, I had him watched. I thought he might do something...desperate, judging from his demeanour the last time I saw him. Turns out I was correct.”

“You thought he might kill himself!”

“Indeed.”

The bluntness, the calmness of de Sotomayor confuses Sebastian. This was not at all the reaction he was expecting. “Do you know why he did it?”

“Loss of faith, of divine purpose, and the hope of life beyond death, and I very much fear that it will spread.”

Sebastian feels a shiver run through him, a flush in the face. “I don’t understand.”

De Sotomayor sits back down, a weariness descends on the man and he almost seems to diminish in stature in front of Sebastian.

“There are moments in life when a man is confronted with questions about what he believes and what he stands for. Fundamental questions that make us, form us, guide us. We might say that the strong, the true believers, are unwavering. They know in their hearts what is right and what is expected of them. Their faith cannot be broken. Is that not so Sebastian?”

“I believe it is, yes, Grand Inquisitor,” Sebastian answered, increasingly unsure where this was leading.

“But what if the evidence of our own eyes tells us that everything, we stood for is wrong,” de Sotomayor continued. “Worse, those things are lies. What do we do then? Is the perseverance of our belief a virtue or is it the work of the devil?”

Sebastian feels totally out of depth with this conversation and hesitant as to how to answer. “I think all things are sent by God. Some to test us, some to show us the immensity of His work. It is our faith that enables us to tell them apart and to share in His wisdom.”

“Uhm, and what of science Sebastian, what of ideas that are older than our very kingdom.”

Here, Sebastian felt he was on firmer ground. “Your Eminence, many of these things have been investigated and condemned as heresy. In all my time hearing testimony at court I have never come across anything that has made me doubt the Holy Office or the edicts of the Church.”

De Sotomayor nods, “Of course.” He tries to smile but Sebastian can see a great weight lies on the man.

“Inquisitor what is taking place here? Please, let me be a counsel and a staff in this time. Is that not why you sent for me?”

“My dear Sebastian, you are a good friend and I fear you won’t thank me for bringing you here. But please, come with me?”

De Sotomayor takes Sebastian to a doorway in the corner of the room. It leads off to a narrow stairway that seems to turn many times before opening into the rear of a chapel. It’s dark, the windows covered with heavy drapes, sun bleeding round the edges, and the air is heavy with the smell of incense. It takes a few moments for their eyes to adjust to the gloom. De Sotomayor turns to Sebastian, “How you react my friend is between you and God. I will not judge you and my observations shall not leave this place.”

“I don’t understand, what is...”

“Dónde estás.” De Sotomayor calls out.

From a plinth in the centre of the chapel, that Sebastian only now notices, a ball suddenly rises of its own accord. He involuntarily gives out a cry and steps back. The ball seems to be made of metal and slightly smaller than a marion helmet of the Tercio. It emits a low hum like there’s a cicada inside.

“This is witchcraft?” Sebastian cries.

“There is no evil here my friend.” De Sotomayor replies.

Suddenly, light bursts from the ball. Sebastian shields his eyes but when he looks back, suspended above him is a highly detailed map projected from the ball. For a moment he doesn’t realise what he is looking at and then he sees trees, buildings, the curve of the River Tagus, the tower of the Santa Iglesia Catedral Primada de Toledo and the Alcázar.

“But that, that is here!” Sebastian states with incredulity. “Is this a window?”

“I suppose, in a way it is.” Says de Sotomayor. “But like no window before it. El Mundo.” He calls out.

The view quickly pulls out into a spinning globe of blue and green. Sebastian recognises the shape of Spain from maps, and there the coast line of the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples. He stares with awe now; the fear has passed. He steps up to the globe and reaches out to touch it but finds that it is just light and his hand passes through it.

“But this is the whole world,” he whispers.

“Indeed so,” de Sotomayor replies. “Land we didn’t even know existed, passages and routes we thought were just legend.”

“It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen.”

“That is not all, Sistema Solar.” De Sotomayor calls.

The globe of the earth diminishes rapidly and is joined by images of seven other globes spinning around the sun in concentric circles. Sebastian gasps, astonished to see that all of these planets, including his own, circle the sun. Whether it is the beauty of it all, the perfection, or the confounding of all that he believes in and protects, is unknown to Sebastian at this time, but he is suddenly aware that his face is wet with tears. De Sotomayor walks up behind him.

“You see where we are Sebastian. We are not even the largest planet around our sun.”

“But where is the sun, where are these planets, in what firmament do we abide?” he asks, a tone of panic in his voice.

De Sotomayor calls out “Galaxia.”

The chapel is suddenly filled with stars, boundless clusters and clouds, tiny planets spin around those closest to Sebastian. Before he can get his bearings, de Sotomayor says, “Universo.”

The stars give way to whole galaxies, some spirals some S shaped, great dark nebulas and swirling discs of dust that go on forever, and ever, and ever. Sebastian’s breath comes in gasps, it’s all too much to take in and he falls to his knees. De Sotomayor shouts, “Stop!”

The chapel goes dark. The globe slowly descends back to the plinth. All is quiet except for Sebastian’s ragged breathing.

Sebastian lifts the brandy to his mouth with shaking hands and throws it back in one gulp. De Sotomayor refills his glass.

“What was that?” Sebastian asks.

“In truth I don’t know.” De Sotomayor replies.

“What did it show me?”

“It showed us everything, don’t you think.”

“How did it do that?”

“It is a device beyond my comprehension. I wonder if even a mind like da Vinci would struggle to make sense of it.”

“Did the Bishop see it?”

“He did.”

“Uhm, well that at least I now understand. And where did it come from?”

“Ah, that is the question,” de Sotomayor says. “It was a gift from our visitors.”

“Visitors? Visitors from where?”

“From the stars I think.”

Incredulous, Sebastian splutters, “What do you mean?”

De Sotomayor sighs heavily. “About a week ago lights were seen above Toledo. Not stars, this was something solid, hanging as if from a ceiling. The Captain of course called out the guard but as they were mustering a ship, a craft, landed behind the east wall of the Alcázar. A ship from the sky.” De Sotomayor gestures for Sebastian to come to the window. He looks out and his breath catches. Below is an object of the purest white, in shape it reminds Sebastian of the coiled pastry called an Ensaïmada Mallorquina, but this is easily thirty feet across. There are no doors, no windows, no joins or lines or holes in it at all, that he can see. The guard have shrouded it from observation with banners and branches cut from the woods along the river bank.

“I find it hard to believe the evidence of my own eyes today,” he says.

“It is a lot to comprehend I know.” De Sotomayor agrees.

“Why have they come, do you know?” Sebastian asks, and in reply, a voice booms from behind him.

“We don’t, but you can be damn sure we’re going to find out.”

Sebastian turns to see a tall and imposing man shut the doors and stride forward. He has a high forehead framed with shoulder length dark brown hair, a thick handlebar moustache and circle beard. This is Gaspar de Guzmán y Pimental, Count-Duke de Olivares, the First Minister, or Valido to King Felipe IV. Sebastian bows, “Valido, I didn’t realise you were here.”

“As you were please Inquisitor. I go where the King goes.”

“The King is here?” Sebastian exclaims in surprise.

“Arrived this morning,” Olivares continues. “The visitors have been tight lipped so far, preferring to wait until he got here.”

“They’ve come all this way just to speak to him?” Asks Sebastian in what he hopes isn’t too much surprise. The King, after all, is still the King.

“King Felipe governs the largest part of the globe so they believe he is the man with the power to muster others,” de Sotomayor answers. “They’ve come to give us knowledge for the benefit of all mankind.”

Olivares pours himself a brandy, snorts in derision. “To the benefit of all is to the benefit of none.”

“Forgive my presumption to ask a question?” Sebastian asks, somewhat cowed by the company and the events.

“No, no, speak up, that’s why you’re here.” Olivares assures him.

“What do these visitors seek to gain from this in return?”

“Ah, I see why you asked for him here de Sotomayor, shrewd and to the point.”

“Sebastian is one of my most trusted Inquisitors,” de Sotomayor flatters him. “And in answer to your question they allege that they want nothing.”

“But I don’t believe them.” Olivares states vehemently. “Everybody wants something.”

“Have they offered us anything yet?”

“Just that trinket in the chapel. I assume de Sotomayor has shown you.”

“He has.”

“Quite a thing isn’t it.” And Sebastian can hear even the Valido is impressed.

“It is, as you say, quite a thing.” Though Sebastian would like to say it’s the most wondrous and beautiful thing he has ever seen and his life, he is sure, he has been forever changed for seeing it. Instead, he asks “Have they said where they are from?”

“Somewhere called Centaurus,” answers de Sotomayor. “They say they are the closest stars to Earth, but, apparently, or conveniently, they are only visible from the southern hemisphere. We have an astrologer coming from Madrid to help us validate their claim. You will see him tonight, along with the King and the visitors.”

“Me!” Sebastian exclaims, excited but also a little alarmed at the augustness of the occasion.

“That is why I sent for you. We want as many trusted eyes and minds as possible here to help us decide.”

“Decide what?” asks Sebastian.

“Why, isn’t it obvious?” says Olivares. “Whether to kill them or not.”

That night Sebastian finds himself grateful for his spartan lodgings at the monastery. His cell is spectacularly unadorned and no expense has been given for any form of comfort, it is a denial of stimulus that his senses and his thoughts desperately need. Following his orders that the bishop should be afforded all burial rites, he has heard night prayers and vigil has just finished. They were comforting to hear but he found that his mind was full of questions. Are these visitors' men and women like him, created by God, or are they what we think of as angels, sent by the very same God to bring new boons? Or, he fears, is this some kind of test? For the first time he understands the meaning of dark night of the soul. Something he knows he had made others endure in his role as Inquisitor.

His first impulse was always to pray for guidance, for strength, for answers to questions, but now, all he had was confusion. Yes. That was it, he had lost certainty. For all of his life, the edicts of the church had been his rock but what he saw today was contrary to what they preach. Galileo was right, yet only last year he was tried for heresy and almost put to death for holding the doctrine that the sun is the centre of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, but that the earth moves. The Church decreed that this was false, and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures, and proclaimed as an absolute fact of scripture that the sun moves around the Earth and that could not be disputed. For centuries many had observed that the Earth was not the centre of the universe and they had suffered for it, even died. Some, he thought with bitter anguish, at his command. But now he had seen with his own eyes the truth of it! It was beautiful and it seemed to him to be of all things Godly. But was it the truth, or was it a trick of the devil? Could the Grand Inquisitor be so easily fooled? He understands now how the Bishop felt and what broke him. There is no firm ground anymore. Finally, exhausted by his ride from Valencia, sometime before matins, he falls asleep.

The next day Sebastian is shown up to the royal apartments of the Alcázar by two tercio that are the most formidable looking and well-armed soldiers he thinks he has ever seen. He assumes they must be of the King's personal guard. They offer no greeting or conversation, merely escort him through the Alcázar, unlock the door to allow him entrance, then lock it behind him. The room has a high ceiling with drapes down the wall making it surprisingly quiet and still. At the top, by the window, is a group of chairs that Sebastian assumes is where the Visitors will be received. There is one other man in the room, availing himself of the sherry laid out on a side table, he is a nervous and fidgety fellow in a black felt hat and heavy red cape. Sebastian walks up and introduces himself.

"Ah, I have heard of you Inquisitor, I am Diego Salvador Arias de Sanabria, astrologer and physician to King Felipe."

"So, you are here to determine if the visitors are who they say they are?" asks Sebastian.

"Oh, I have no doubt of that, you have seen the ship, yes?" Sanabria enthusiastically asks. "It is highly likely that they come from the constellation of Centaurus as they claim. It is one of the closest and Ptolemy talked about it, don't you know, but it was also mentioned earlier by Eudoxus and the poet Aratus."

"I didn't know that," though Sebastian had lost the thread of the man's reasoning.

"Oh yes, but I warn you the auspices are not good," he continues. "Ovid claimed he represents Chiron, a centaur who was in great pain having been struck by one of Heracles arrows that was..." Sebastian lets his mind wander, astrology is an arcane and unknowable art to him and it held little interest. Confirmation that where the visitors claim to come from exists is all he wanted to know.

Then the door is suddenly unlocked and sprung wide by the tercio and Olivares strides in. He sees Sebastian and nods, behind him the tall, pale, and solemn figure of King Felipe steps purposefully towards the chairs. He has a high forehead, elaborate curled moustache, and mismatched, quite drooping, eyes. It is the first time he has seen the King and Sebastian realises he is staring and quickly bows. He and Olivares take up their seats at the top of the room. Sebastian's attention is taken by five other men who enter, of whom Sebastian only recognises de Sotomayor, he assumes they are courtiers and advisors. The Tercio then close the doors and they are again locked, leaving an expectant stillness in the room, a tension, everyone looking up towards the King.

Sebastian only now notices a second door in the seated area and set behind a heavy drape. Seconds pass, the King coughs, Olivares whispers something to him and he nods in agreement. Then a key rattles in that door, a tercio opens it, pulls the drape aside, and steps inside, he holds the door open as three figures enter. And there they are, the visitors. Sebastian is aware that his heart is racing and his face flushed, he takes an involuntary step back but immediately stops himself. These are not beings of great stature like the Tercio, indeed they are not fearsome in any way.

They are in all ways very much like us, he thinks, their eyes are wider to be sure, the placement of the features of the face is perhaps similarly larger. They have hair but it is very closely cropped, or perhaps that is the limit of its growth. He cannot tell if they are man or woman. They seem to have the qualities of both genders, grace and delicacy but also strength and solidity. They are all surprisingly tall and slender, perhaps eight or nine feet tall, with long limbs that sway as they walk and give Sebastian the impression of crane flies, a thought that fills him with a sudden revulsion. They wear what seems to be a one-piece item of clothing of a white material with blue side panels.

They sit opposite the King and Olivares and yet still seem to tower over them. One of them places a small round device on the table that glows and hums benignly. He, or it, starts to speak, their voice low, bassy, and so quiet Sebastian can barely hear it but he gathers enough to know that it is not a language he recognises. It pops and clicks gutturally like an African tongue. However, from the device comes a soft monotone Spanish, “We are pleased to meet you... “

Sebastian marvels at this machine’s ability to translate, truly this is more magic. But from where he’s standing, he can’t hear the conversation. De Sotomayor gestures for Sebastian to move closer. He doesn’t catch Olivares’ question, only the start of the visitor’s reply.

“We come from a much larger ship that is travelling through your solar system, it is too large and going too fast to stop but we have smaller vessels, like the one we arrived in, which we use to visit planets.”

“Has the journey taken long?” Olivares asks.

“We have been travelling for many years, the visitor answers. “So long in fact that we on the ship have never seen our home planet. We left when our forebears were young.”

This is a revelation that strikes Sebastian as extraordinary, he knows that mariners from Algeciras, Barcelona or Bilbao can often expect to be away for two or three years but to never see your home strikes him as a dedication to one’s task that is profound.

“Our life and our purpose is to look for civilizations across the universe,” the visitor continues. “We show them that they are not alone in the darkness, that there are others out there and to share some of our and their knowledge. But I must stress to you, this knowledge is for all on your planet.”

“Even those who wish us harm?” Olivares asks.

“Our mission is a peaceful one and we do not wish to benefit any one group over another. Indeed, what we share can bring factions together, make them realise that by working together they can achieve so much more to improve the quality and capacity of their lives than they can alone. “The visitor’s words touch Sebastian deeply, more than he would have thought possible, even this time yesterday.

The King whispers to Olivares, who asks the visitors “Are we the most civilized people you have met?”

Another of the visitors’ answers, “You are undoubtedly civilized, you have government and laws, but you are still a people who wage wars and there are very few civilized planets that do that, or who survive long. We have come across many dead planets, ravaged by war.”

De Sotomayor steps forward, “Forgive my question my Lord but what of God, does he exist, are you sent from him?”

The visitors look at each other, then the third one to speak answers. “No, we are not from what you think of as God. There is no entity that fits that etymological description. We have found, however, a religious belief on many planets and it seems to be an archaic evolutionary stage that many civilisations pass through, and indeed must pass through, to develop to the next level. It is a function of certain regions of the brain that are incompatible with societal development and will inevitably only lead to decline and finally self-destruction.”

It appears to Sebastian that de Sotomayor slinks back like a man whipped.

“And you have visited many?” Olivares asks.

“Our ship has visited many worlds in the time we have been exploring. Peoples who have created just and equitable societies where disease and infirmity are rare, races that have already spread to other planets in their solar system, even those who have built structures around their sun. All things are possible.”

It seems that Olivares has reached the end of his patience and, it seems to Sebastian, there is an edge of anger in his voice as he asks “What is this knowledge you claim to bring, is it about machines, something tangible? What of the ship you came in, will you tell us how to build our own?”

One of the visitors says again that “The knowledge is for all and will be shared when many can be convened. And, as for the ship we came in, the development of a machine like that takes many centuries of learning, both technically and as a society. But we can start you on that journey.”

Olivares is clearly frustrated; he pouts and puffs in an undiplomatic manner. On some silent cue, the visitors suddenly stand, bow slightly to the King, then file out though the door from which they had entered. The audience is over.

A few minutes later Sebastian, de Sotomayor and Olivares convene to discuss the meeting. De Sotomayor is quiet, subdued even. Olivares though is full of his usual bullish directness. “Well?” he asks, aggression clearly in his tone.

“They are much like us.” Sebastian replies, he knows it is an inadequate response but there is much to be in awe of here and it is all he can think of for the moment.

Olivares hands him a brandy. “I want an assessment of our position with them, not an opinion on their appearance.”

“Our position?” Stutters Sebastian. “I’m not sure I understand what...”

“You are a senior Inquisitor!” Olivares barks. “And the sole purpose of the Inquisition is to consolidate power in the monarchy and preserve the kingdom. Anything that runs counter to those aims must be considered a threat.”

“A threat. Of course.” Sebastian whispers it so quietly it is more to himself.

“What’s to be done, eh, eh?”

De Sotomayor, staring out of the window quietly says, “Perhaps we should tell the Holy Father? Ask for his guidance.”

“We are not Rome.” Olivares snaps.

“He will find out anyway,” de Sotomayor concedes. “I’m sure he has spies here.”

“My men are loyal to me only,” Olivares insists. “And so far, they are the only ones that know about these meetings.”

“Perhaps our questioning of the visitors should be more direct,” ventures Sebastian.

“Good, yes, yes, said like a true Inquisitor,” agrees Olivares. “In what way?”

“I would like to know more about the worlds they speak of. How they achieved those great things they mentioned and how long it took them.”

“Dammit man, we need to focus on this world!” Olivares declares. “Look at their machines, their tools, look at how they got here. If we could get hold of but a fraction of that power, we would have something we could use to finally smash the French and the Dutch once and for all time.”

“But you heard how they regard war.” Sebastian reminds him.

“They have the luxury of pacifism that we do not. We are at war, right now, and the King wants to win it.”

“I think this is bigger than one war Valido. There is much to consider here and we might not be the best people to see all the consequences of our actions. We know now that Galileo was right but the Church almost had him put to death for saying what he knew to be provably true.”

“It may be true, but it doesn’t make him right,” Olivares snaps.

“But surely it does now,” suggests Sebastian.

“That could be considered heresy, Inquisitor. They are heresy.”

“I’m not sure I know what a heretical statement is anymore,” Sebastian concedes. “Did you know Aristarchus of Samos placed the Sun at the centre of the universe two hundred years before our Christ died? What he called the central fire. Do you ever wonder what happened to that knowledge? Where we might be as a society if we had pursued the science? Why did it die, why was it suppressed?”

“For the greater good of man and government of course.” Olivares is shouting now.

“So, we tell no one?” Sebastian shouts back.

“They will be the end of everything, do you understand that. No power of Church or monarchy anymore. The people will have no centre and the world will spin out of our control.”

And there it is, there is the real truth of this moment for Sebastian. Nothing must shake the foundations of the society that man has built, no matter that the foundations are a lie.

“The Valido is of course correct,” de Sotomayor says, moving away from the window. “And if they share what they bring to everyone then Spain will lose its place as the greatest country of the world.”

“But they are clearly here as friends,” Sebastian argues incredulous at what he’s hearing. “Their knowledge, their power, it could herald a new golden age for us all.”

“Are you so naïve!” Olivares spits, his voice low. “A hundred years ago Pizarro and Almagro and just a hundred and eighty men made contact with the Incas, a people who could forge metal and build great pyramids. Inside a hundred years, by disease or by sword, we have all but eradicated them from the continent. We were stronger than them, better armed, better trained. Do you think our fate will be any different?”

I had not considered it that way,” Sebastian reluctantly concedes. “But that doesn’t mean that it will be that way. They are not us; they are...”

“What Sebastian?” de Sotomayor asks, a grave edge to his voice. “Enlightened!”

“I did not mean it like that.”

“Do you want to put it to chance?” Olivares asks. “We know nothing of these visitors other than what they tell us. Perhaps they have already done a deal with the Dutch and we are being led to our doom.”

“I suppose, we could be.” Sebastian says.

“Then we are agreed?” Olivares looks from man to man.

“What if this is a test?” Sebastian asks, one last appeal to reason. “A test from God.”

“Equally it could be a test from Satan.” Olivares counters.

“God tests us by asking us to trust Him and obey the form of teaching to which we were entrusted. Like Abraham and Moses, we must have faith in him or we repeat the failures of the garden.”

“Is this not like the tree of knowledge that the serpent tempted us with?” Olivares’ eyes bore into Sebastian. “The beginning of the mixture of good and evil together started at that point. This is like that holy fruit. The knowledge they bring could destroy us all. Perhaps that is the test? Eh, eh?”

Sebastian can no longer think. The arguments are many and conflicting. He sighs, then says, “I believe God asks us questions so we will learn something about ourselves. I worry what we will learn from this.”

Olivares turns to de Sotomayor, “De Sotomayor? De Sotomayor what say you?”

“I think you are both missing the most important thing here, there is no God. You heard them. At first, I thought maybe these new arrivals meant a sign or there was some meaning to the divine we could take from them. But the Lord Bishop, here in Toledo, understood what they meant from the very beginning. I do not know if what you propose, Lord Valido, is the right thing to do, I do not think it is the just thing to do, but I reluctantly agree that it is the correct and most prudent course.”

“Have you considered that they will be missed,” Sebastian warns Olivares. “There will surely be repercussions, reprisals.”

“You heard them, their ship is large, it cannot stop and it is moving away at a high speed. By the time they are missed it will be too late to do anything.” Olivares downs his drink, slams the glass down. “I will tell the King what we have advised.”

He strides from the room leaving an uneasy silence between Sebastian and de Sotomayor. Finally, he turns to Sebastian.

“You do not approve of the decision?”

“I am terrified of it.”

“Olivares is correct, they will soon be far away.”

“I don’t doubt it. But that isn’t what I fear.”

“What then?”

“That we are condemning ourselves to the dark for centuries. That we are refusing an opportunity of such magnitude that I don’t have the words to speak of it. Also, that everything I know is wrong. That my life has no centre or balance anymore.”

Sebastian stands, bows, and walks to the door.

“Sebastian. Be careful. The Valido will ensure silence, one way or another.”

...

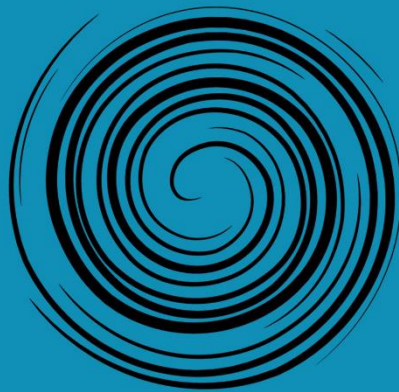
Sebastian returned to the monastery to recover his belongings and to secure a horse. Sometime before dawn, a runner was sent to recall him to the Alcázar. Sebastian told him to relay the message that he would return forthwith. He did not. He fled Toledo almost immediately and headed west. He did not know, but he assumed, that that day Olivares would execute his plan for the visitors. The salon was prepared but instead of the King waiting for them, the room was full of Olivares’s personal guard, tercio of the highest calibre and formidably armed. When the Visitors entered, the soldiers attacked. One visitor was cleaved in two immediately, but then of course the element of surprise was lost. Of the fifteen tercio that attacked seven were, it was later recalled, rendered to mere fluid by some device the visitors held.

The second visitor was finally cut down only after the continued assault of the remaining soldiers. The rest of the guard and a further contingent of the Alcázar's resident force, with arquebusiers and archers, were called out to deal with the third. Of these a further thirty-three soldiers died before the visitor was stopped just metres from his ship and escape. Olivares recovered all the tools and devices

but not one of his astrologers and alchemists could make them work. All of these things along with the ship itself was dragged and buried underneath the east wall of the Alcázar. All those who buried it and the Alcázar's guard were then tried for sedition and summarily executed. So too were any survivors of Olivares personal guard. Anyone who had seen or might have been spoken to about it was killed. Olivares claimed there was a viper's nest of conspirators against the King in Toledo that had to be cut out and put down as a lesson to all. De Sotomayor was right, silence would be found.

No one is really sure what became of Sebastian Maldonado de Arriola Inquisitors Provincial to Antonio de Sotomayor, Grand Inquisitor of Spain and Royal Confessor to King Felipe IV. There was a rumour of a man who could draw maps of unknown lands living in the Cantabrian Mountains in Galicia. There were many who sought him out. Whether or not they found him is unknown by this recorder. To this day no one has dug beneath the Alcázar of Toledo.

The Shape of Water by Cog Smith



Imagine, if it is possible, nothing. Maybe you are thinking of a deep dark black, but this is a time outside of colours, even the blandest of primary colours do not exist. This is a time, way into the future or way in to the past, when there is no yardstick of scale or depth. No perception of shape, no form, nothing.

The typist pauses for a minute and reflects if that last statement should say “no perception of shape, no form, literally nothing!” but despising the over-familiarity of the need to include the word ‘literally,’ as if it is mere punctuation, opts to refrain on this occasion. The keyboard, unsettled by the pause, waits restlessly for further instructions.

Imagine that the planet starts to form, from somewhere, from nowhere, literally starts to form. There is still no perceptible shape, no perceivable form, just a gap between up here and down there.

The typist pauses to study the glass of water on the desk in front of her and ponders that if released from the glass it would literally be without shape, form, measurable size or even its own colour.

Imagine a planet so new that the architect is yet to give it shape or size or depth of dimension like pouring out water from a glass into

nothing and then scooping it up like wet sticky modelling clay and between cupped hands gently rolling it into a ball, empowering it with the ability to overcome darkness, enabling it to sustain itself, populating it with habitation and inhabitants tasked with supervising their new alien domicile. Sentient yet sadly lacking the ability to see the unobtrusive truth.

“There must be a way,” murmurs the typist before typing...

Globule like modules slowly descend, landing imperceptibly. Where they encounter water, they bob and float, while invisible steam momentarily evaporates with a silent hiss. For these are warm to touch, as if sensing all that is within is living, moving, evolving.

The Guardian, The Orchestrator, The Designer, all pause for a moment. Inhaling and then exhaling over the surface of the planet. Tiny eddies merge into whirlpools. Currents drift, mingling with each other. More breathes and tsunamis rise, flushing the modules onto Terra Firma, where these seed pods, for that is what they are, sit warming and drying themselves in the warmth of the sun. One by one they start to split open and spitting seeds high into the air their precious cargo carries on the wind. Some seeds fall on rocky shores, others land in dense and tangled undergrowth while others, neutrino like, pass through unaffected flesh and lodge in minds and hearts, spirits and souls, germinating ideas, sprouting up through creativity and individuality. Pods burst open and as more and more people ingest these tiny spores, seeds smaller than a grain of mustard germinate, generating both uniqueness of thought and a collective common conscience.

Having finished typing, she raises the glass to her lips and slowly sips, the shape of water continually changing as it fills the empty spaces deep within her and the keyboard once again returns to its silence.

Tides of light by Regina Kassel-Key



wind and clouds
in playful motion
sweep a mild pink
between fleeting blues
and soft grays
into the late summer evening/ Permeable floating change
in form and direction
induces the transparent transition
at the flowing boundary of day
into the approaching night
which will be gazing
over us
and all in quiet dark
with countless timeless eyes
Tomorrow is still

at a fathomless distance
Tomorrow is a wispy promise
in the tides of light

Komodo Kaleidoscope by Rose Marie Drabble



I glimpse
Komodo
Kaleidoscope

feminine fractals
emerging masculinity
dragon dripping venom
disparaging binaries
reducing diversity
unbalancing viability

I feel

delicate balance dangling dangerously
chromosomes unwinding unceremoniously
deceptively durable armour shedding scales
vulnerability seeping
gender gap gaping
cavernous crack

I am

sharp serrated teeth

hidden in soft curves

puncturing carotid artery

feared

fearful

fading

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About Our Contributors

Rose Marie Drabble: Rose is creative soul on a scripty stroll, exploring existence through the written word. Her short film 'Without a Map' screened at the London Film Festival, she created the sci-fi comedy series 'A Call to The Stars,' and she also founded ABTS magazine to try and support and showcase the work of her fellow word slingers. Her Instagram handle is [Scripty.Rose](#).

Samuel Glyn is writer from London, currently residing in Norwich. He has previously been published in the Desperate Literature anthology and has not shut up about it since, nor shall he about this. Take the time to offer your sympathies to his peers while checking out more of his work on the Instagram handle [@quote_unquote_poetry](#) or at any open mic in Norwich.

Kole Bird: Occupying roles as a writer, artist, teacher, and dramaturg across both Western and Eastern Hemispheres, Kole Bird recently earned a distinction in Creative Writing for their MA. Crafting a dissertation proved a challenge, encapsulating its essence even more so. In their view, life, akin to an onion, warrants satisfaction only when its layers are meticulously peeled away, unveiling the absurdity of its empty core. Currently immersed in content creation, Kole directs creative energy towards four zines, contributes to the Podcast Collective at podcastcollective.co.uk, and collaborates with

QueerEarProductions.com

J.F. Drayton: Joel is a self-proclaimed raconteur and modern day story teller. Inspired at a young age by the attractive appeal of a bohemian lifestyle, he found himself comfortable travelling and meeting likeminded creative people. He learned to make art of his own from something as simple as a jumble of letters and punctuation. His Instagram handle is [wordswithjoel](https://www.instagram.com/wordswithjoel).

Annabelle Franklin: Annabelle is the author of two children's books, Gateway to Magic and The Slapstyx. Her short story Mercy Dog appears in award-winning anthology Unforgotten: The Great War 1914-1918 (Accent Press) and her horror story Haunted by the Future appears in Dark Gatherings, an anthology published by Swansea and District Writers' Circle. Her monologue Bloody Offal was shortlisted in a BBC screenwriting competition. Her Amazon page can be found [here](#).

Cog Smith: Cog Smith is a welder of words, a fabricator of phrases, comfortable in the non-conformity of prosetry, plays with poetry and accepts the challenges of prose. Soon to retire for the second time in their life they choose carefully craft concepts forging them with hammer and anvil in the fires of lived life experience.

Regina Kassel-Key: Regina was born in the beautiful town of Cologne. She grew up with a love for wildlife, nature and a playful joy of language, a severe disinterest in money-making and growing spiritual independence. Regina hit the age of 60 wondering how much there is still to know and understand about the true nature of time, the meaning of colour and the significance of communication throughout the universe and beyond. And poetry just happens in between.

Catrina Green: Catrina Green takes her inspiration from the power and majesty of nature. Her dreams of living a peaceful life by a beautiful bay with her pen as a constant and closest companion became a reality and she hasn't looked back since then.

Simon Bovey: Simon Bovey writes a lot, for film, for radio, theatre, and animation. He's written a significant body of original drama for the BBC; twenty plus hours he thinks. His first love is science-fiction

and he's explored the genre in both radio and film. He teaches
sometimes too.

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