

The Tales That the Universe Told

an

Original Manuscript of Poetry

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At First

You too will awake on the shores of the sea.  
Though the when and the where will be different for you,  
I ask you, beloved, will you follow me?

All the stories ahead are written to be  
gentle dreams, for as you sleep, the sky will grow blue,  
you too will awake on the shores of the sea

and as you watch the morning dark flee  
from the dawn, and the ocean waves keep crashing anew,  
I ask you, beloved, will you follow me

through it all, even when we aren't free  
to love without cost, when small sustenance must do?  
You too will awake on the shores of the sea

and decide yourself. I can make no decree.  
Though joining me means being on the side of the few  
I ask you, beloved, will you follow me?

At the end of it all, I believe you will see  
the same growing light that has pulled me through.  
You too will awake on the shores of the sea.  
I ask you, beloved, will you follow me?

## An Account of My Actions

“It’s the golden rule: do unto the mystery  
as you would have the mystery do unto you.” – Ben

I walk to school in a stream every day,  
and this stream floods out to wherever I decide to go.  
A clockwork of water, the tide rises in and out on the hour,  
honking horns and screeching tires in the deeps,  
while leaves weave quickly around me like bicyclists.  
I listen to the stream, full of the inconsequential sounds  
of hydrogen and oxygen, sociably murmuring  
about how much carbon they drank last night.

Of course, this isn’t as interesting as what you see, and the things that you made.

I remember watching you build it,  
a figure made of colored construction paper scraps,  
the odd shapes and thin slits that others throw away.  
I laugh to see the complexity in the widget life you created,  
rebellion against becoming a square stacking block,  
ignoring the rat race towards being the highest brick in Babel.

*Away from the tower, into the wild*, you cried:  
few listened, gawking at you from their perches  
as you danced out the shapes in your dreams.  
I asked, and you danced some more: showed me something  
of an industrial wasteland, trash heaps and oil derricks,  
two colors: not black and white, but black and brown,  
stains flooding from the earth to the water and sky.

Yet you spoke five words of power, and the thunderous sound  
of a thousand bongo drums sent out earthquakes  
that distorted the air, twisted the colors, inverting them,  
‘til the few were made into many.  
Oil drills became Mastodons, trash heaps were huge turtles,  
the smoke in the air became streams of visible, colorful music notes.

Five words: *It’s all your perception, man*, and I knew  
that the world was ever changing, but not on it’s own,  
and that what some see as psychosis is actually  
the wielding of a strange, inexplicable power.

I use it each morning to walk to my school in a stream.

## The Mariner's Dream

The air is salted by whips of sea winds,  
brothers and sisters to the misty foam of waves  
splitting along port and starboard, dashing, rhythmically fluctuating  
darker and lighter, yet all in aquamarine,  
that color of enigmatic deeps and unexplored frontiers.

Here the brine soaked winds are caught straining  
against the thick canvas of sails pulled tight,  
creaking among masts and crossbeams  
while at the helm I stand in surety,  
squinting and bronzed by the sun in the open sky;  
and the grand sailing craft surges on.

The horizon is a smooth azure on all sides,  
yet I know this vessel's course is true,  
bearing always west, along the blazing daystar's trail,  
'til some far, unknown corner of the world is reached  
where the anchor may settle, and rust,  
where the sailors may settle, and give up the sea.

I have had confidence in my voyage,  
and look! white gulls come circling and calling,  
their voices crying high in the ocean's choir,  
signaling and welcoming mariners to a land  
that I have heard of, but never seen before,  
whose peaks even now emerge on the edge of sight.

I reach out my hand to this land, feeling wells  
of peace mixed with adrenaline, like the joyful desperation  
of seeing, from beneath, the ocean's surface glinting  
in bright light. And rising, that first breath, I feel it,  
that song of inhalation for the first time in too long.

There, as I stand on the bow of my ship,  
the horizon begins to glow in myriad dreamlike colors.  
The scent of salt leaves the air,  
the crashing of waves falls muted.  
I inhale once more, deeply, and exhale,  
as a grey fog curtain rolls in over the sky.

I blink, and I sit, writing in my room in the dark,  
and my head droops beneath the shade.

## Flesh to Blood

I only see you when you pass,  
leaving your manifold internal tunnels  
to interact with the exterior blue,  
but it is all contrast to your red.  
I only see you when you pass away.

How is it, that you, always touching me,  
are glimpsed only with pained nerves,  
the mistaken splitting and splintering of cells  
that leave you to a shade-changing death  
like white skin, darkening in the noon sun.

But then, I can *feel* you  
when you flood, a swift moving  
swelling in my veined skin, I fear bursting,  
and more nerve pain, with no healing,  
because you take the life with you when you leave.  
I am sweaty and paralyzed when you leave.

And yet sometimes...  
sometimes you *ache* inside me.

And I run to the largest mirror I can find  
and it's like I *do* see you there, I see  
an intricate entwining of blood vessels and bones,  
and they move together:  
the bones flowing with the bloodstreams,  
the blood dancing on the bones.  
My skeleton blanches, grows lightheaded,  
for this sight is a wonderful thing.

When you ache, I realize  
I won't have you forever.  
But I ask you  
tell me  
when you are leaving  
so I can be there  
to watch you go.

## In the Absence of Humility

Atop a rolling hill among rolling hills,  
I find a collection  
of facts to be true:

My legs flicker in the wind, and I can walk no further.  
My head is wet, and I have no shelter.  
I have a sack-full of handles and faucets  
with no place to go.

I recall where I found each one:

The smalltown tyrant I killed, bursting  
into his parlor and burning him with fire  
until it was all on fire  
and I found the smoked doorknobs in the ruin.

The half naked, tanned and filthy street child,  
smiling up at me with uneven white teeth  
trading me a light-switch  
for a single cup of tenderly chilled water.

Or when I danced with her, slowly  
spinning in the glow of candles and stars.  
She gave me a showerhead  
as a token of many future dances in the night.

and so on and so on they flood back,  
until I am clinging tightly to the relics  
promising to myself and whoever is listening  
to use them well.

Brink...

*I've been following him*, he said,  
which seemed strange to say, seeing as  
at least two dozen other soldiers stood by.

Some strode along like ramshackle castles,  
waists girded in layered metallic plates, veterans  
in the eternal war, whose great intimidation  
lay in the length of all their scars. Others  
seemed winded by the weight of their flesh  
wrapped about with unfurled banners.

*The king, I am going to find him*, he clarified,  
and then he was gone, and my last memory of him  
the smile he flashed as he and his band marched  
from the cool of the morning 'til the settling twilight  
and came to the gates of the nearest conquered city.

\*\*\*

The Sabbath day passed, uncelebrated, six times.

On the seventh he returned, alone, and I wept  
to see his slack-armed stumble, and the vacant  
scythe-struck eyes, and the sword frozen in  
the fierce grip of his right hand.  
I wondered if he would ever be feared for  
length of scars, whose fevered bloody beginnings  
were still exhaling with shuddering breaths.

He wouldn't, or couldn't, meet my eyes,  
and for the next two months I don't think  
he truly saw anything but visions of the stars and sea  
ceasing to exist as he was enveloped in the endless dark.

He wailed in his delirium, *Freedom, freedom!*  
and then, softly, like the sound of reflected echoes,

*it's gone,*  
*it's gone,*  
*it's gone...*

With the last he sank into a place halfway  
between sleep and death, while I stroked his forehead  
and held the ruin of his right hand.

Intercession (The Fever Dreams)

I've gone deeper than you know  
in the still times when all was quiet but me,  
when you were resting under the fig tree.  
And I'm sorry, I was sleeping  
when you marched. When you prophesied  
I missed the tale, but I dreamed about you.

I have never understood you,  
because you said you wanted to know me,  
but your zeal faded just like my dreams.  
I watched while you fell asleep,  
and I was cold when I left you among roots.  
I kept watch outside, while the night lasted.

*Are you awake now? I am. My nerves are shot through with lightning,  
and I can't see for the demons in my eyes. And I'm afraid that I'll fail you.  
Mists and will-o-the-wisps flood into my mind, and scream. They coagulate  
on my head, like a yoke dragging me down, and I feel sickly waiting for my neck to  
crack! Did you know that it's for you? (Please, just listen, help me to stay awake.)  
I can see back through time, for my every wound has dragged me. Those too are  
scorching red, with disease or heat, I cannot tell, but my blood is boiling, pressure is  
building, and I thirst beneath the gaze of burning spirits. My wounds have cauterized,  
and can you see the pattern in all of my scars? (Please, just listen, just listen.)  
I chose your dreams and lost my own, my conscience wrenching them out of my head,  
and a Spirit setting both of us on fire. I choose you now before the heavens,  
though my spirit gasps at the deep freeze, for the replacement for the stars is dark space,  
and there are no gentle breezes here. I am lost in some black hole of the cosmos, and my  
body is frozen stiff and pelted with meteors. My eye sockets have fossilized, and I cannot  
draw in the warmth or the breath to keep up the beating of my heart. Like a meteor or  
lightning bolt I fall, impacting with a crater that leaves me buried beneath a thousand  
miles of stone. Did you know that it hurts? Not you, (I was tormented long before you)  
but all the boulders I have cast aside. How long have I been digging?  
All I know is that I...*

No, it doesn't matter now.

The cracks in all my bones, and every suffering,  
I see that they are not important anymore,  
and they fall away like leaves in the wind.

Because I saw you.

You awakening from underneath the fig tree,  
stepping into the lightbeams of the new day.

To know that you are here,  
that from every wrong and every right,  
you emerged just as you are, and you  
are more beautiful than I,  
now I can hardly catch my breath for  
the sight that is before my eyes,

and I wonder if  
there ought be anything else  
but this moment right now

and I,  
I wonder if

(forgive me  
speaking  
through  
delirium)

I could just  
watch you  
for a while.

...And Back

He walked on his own for the first time  
since he returned three months ago.  
No further than across the cottage, to the door.

Then he saw, propped in the corner, his armor  
and his blade, gouged and useless,  
and his legs, still so weak, gave way beneath him.  
I brought him some water and held him, and in my ear  
he whispered: *Then it was real... and I never-*  
his right hand tightened around its' bandages  
and he gasped at the shock. I lay him down  
on the floor as the pain faded.  
*I never found the king.* He averted his eyes.

\*\*\*

Today he removed the bandages from his hand.  
The flesh was still torn. I put them back.

\*\*\*

It has been almost one year since the city,  
and he is packing his satchel.  
He is not ready. He won't listen.

*Come with me,* he says, quietly, and I pause,  
setting down the pestle I have used to grind up  
all the herbs his hand has required.

*I can't stop. I can't ever stop looking for him.*

And then he tells me the story of it all:

*I was a shadow once, and I lived in the shadows,  
and one day I slipped, I was caught and chained  
for all of the things I- he pauses, closes his eyes,  
clenching his teeth so that the words hiss out,  
he spits the testament of all his sins, and goes on.  
Then I was chained in the shadows of prison walls,  
remembering only the fleeting glimpses of those faces  
who came to mock and to scourge, but worse than that  
were the stagnant nights, when it seemed that the air  
ceased to flow and I understood that this life  
was to be just so until I fell from the edge of eternity.*

*I was haunted by this knowledge, and it drew closer,  
slow and silent, a vast wraith to consume me,  
calling out and tormenting with a hollow sound  
that is like the memory of happiness to one  
who will never be happy again, wrenching my heart  
out of me while my arms were chained to the wall.*

*The torch in the prison sputtered one day, and went out.  
There in the dark, I comprehended the end of the stars.*

Tears stream where we have both fallen to our knees,  
and I hold his face in my hands as he looks at the floor.  
Then he looks up, straight into my eyes,  
for the first time in one year.

He begins again, his body shaking:

*“No.”*

*That was the first thing I heard after the torch went dark.  
Then, the door was thrown open, and to unused eyes and ears  
it seemed the brightest and loudest thing I had ever heard.  
He stood between me and the great soulless wraith,  
and he cast a shadow made all out of light...*

*And I have scarcely seen a stranger thing,  
for although he was near me, kneeling to my level  
and close enough to touch, I couldn't see his face.  
And though I couldn't see his face, yet it seemed  
as if I could read his expression, and that it said, “All is well,”  
as purple stars encircled my vision, and I slept  
without dreams or nightmares.*

His eyes trail off, and his voice  
becomes tender as he goes on.

*I awoke outside the city wall, alone,  
and a note, simply saying “Follow me,”  
marked with the seal of the king.  
So I have to find him.  
Will you come with me?*

Looking to his hand, which is still broken,  
and his eyes, which no longer are,  
I smile, and reply.

## The Sherpa Leaves by Night

He reached the mountain trail.  
Not the pass paved by the outsiders  
on the way to Chomolungma,  
or the common road into our town,  
where they stop to take photographs  
and whatever guidance can be bought for Yuan.  
No, he takes the trail that we know,  
where the outsiders do not go. They  
are uncomfortable with dead things,  
so he is climbing alone past the plateau  
we use for sky burial.

Who knows, maybe he will join the bones there.  
Few are fool enough to go there alone,  
and he leaves with so little on his back,  
and treads on icy stones  
while it is still dark. And yet  
look at what he does carry: a strong back,  
and a pack that fits him well. Both have been  
pounded and scoured to bear the weight  
of those who dreamed  
of seeing the horizon laid out around them  
like a flat hoop upon the earth.

He still carries the tanners' stink,  
though he doesn't notice it anymore.  
Out there in the great cities, where everything  
has a stink to it, he will not be out of place.  
He will carry their burdens too,  
pulling them in rickshaws, back and forth  
through Gyantse, Chamdo, Shigatse, and even Lhasa.  
There will be a thousand things to do,  
a thousand dreams to bear.  
Will he forget us, do you think,  
back here in Sakya?

## Gypsy Philosophy

Look back to days long buried in the sand  
when the manifold forms life took were cast  
in blazing firelight, not plastic molds, and  
tales grew by cubits, building on the past  
with bricks no wider than the longest reach  
of storytellers elevated hands  
opened wide to receive heavens gift each  
time the rains bloomed over the desert lands  
where they walked, back when stories of The Fall  
were eclipsed by the Code of Chivalry,  
and tyrants of all size were yet too small  
to redirect the arc of history.  
Gypsies wrote their philosophies by red  
light. Who chose to come to a stop instead?

## Hellfire Mentality

Make preparations for the day sirens  
ring. When that shrieking noise begins to make  
bodies clench frozen with adrenaline  
and sweat. Then, as self preservation breaks  
apart society and both lose their  
footing, and you scabble your survival  
off the dying, remember: if you dare  
succeed, you must hide from mirrors at all  
cost. If they find you, they will first ask how  
*you* managed to escape, and then ask why  
you *still* trample the dead, and even now  
you *continue* looking up to the sky  
while heaven, ignoring what you require,  
sends down nothing but airplanes full of fire.

## Railway Odyssey

The sun is now rising in the distance,  
while within the train we play the recluse  
and watch the glow. We haven't been here since  
we were very small. Memories excuse  
themselves quietly and leave, like small pebbles  
carried downstream into the sea. And now  
contemplate, through the open door, through lulls  
and bounces, the next car: do you see how  
another one has gone along before  
us, but is attached to ours with a grip  
irrevocable as steel? And somewhere  
ahead is the engine that will outstrip  
us both, yet it is bringing us to our  
destiny and exodus from this car.

Brethren in the Wastes

“I kissed mine first  
and shamelessly”

or so I imagine,  
in your heart of hearts,  
you say.

But I have wandered  
along the dusty wreckage of humanity  
where men in tattered regal coats  
take your anger  
and your voice.

Mine is only the hiss of dry grass now,  
carried on a locust wind,  
whispering: “her lips are full of thistles”

“I can escape this world  
at my whim”

I read in your eyes,  
glazed and shallow from staring at screens  
I once stared at.

There is nothing there either  
only bramble gardens growing slowly  
with each drop of blood  
taken anesthetically, almost painlessly  
but purposefully.

My veins have been emptied,  
my blood sprinkled as an offering  
to gods I never knew,  
upon altars I wish I had never seen.

“My revolution will win the day  
without mercy”

is where you have thrown down  
your rock foundations  
to face every tempest and storm,  
but idols are hewn of stone,  
and rocks will be your only cradle  
in the end.

I know. I have no place left  
to rest my head.

“I will not listen closely”

I have little more to say, or give.  
Most of my thorny parts have broken off  
in the hands of men in tattered coats.

But use this one:  
I, at least, will love you,  
even when her lips reject you,  
even when the lights have left you,  
when all those stones are broken into sand,  
and I will set upon the earthly kings  
with these horrid thorns  
until we have left for a place  
where there are no more tatters  
and, for that matter, no more coats.

So let the bloody work begin.

## The Edge of the World

It wasn't easy to find you.

You were hidden, but I discovered you in the place  
where the wind cascades up mountainsides of rock  
and never-cut grass, a stampeding of invisible fingertips  
run through the emerald fleece.

I saw those mountains tinged in white like light reflected off waters,  
with midnight purple like the remnants of dark skies,  
with gold like a sprinkling of self contained wildfire.

I can hear you whispering in all that wind,  
and in the bloom, I hear the echoes of your question,  
"Do you think I am beautiful? Am I beautiful to you?"  
If I were of cosmic size, I would answer,  
with my heart beating out the coursing of solar flares,  
pushing the hair out of your eyes every season,  
watching you pirouette for four and a half billion years.  
But what can I say, whose life is less  
than a fingertip trailed gently along your face?

Standing at the edge of that high ridge and gazing down,  
I will pretend that there are not fences two miles away.  
I will drop my backpack and my guard, and with all  
the celestuality I can borrow, whisper, "Hush,  
I will stay with you through the night," and then  
we will dream that we are enough for each other.

## The Resurrection of the Dead

I bring up my lighter and watch it  
sputter once or twice in  
the predawn wind, which even now  
carries the first bubbles of warm air  
from somewhere I won't see again.  
The wind comes across a plain  
I have been walking  
for nearly seven revolutions of the world.

Continual flicks bring only the crick  
of sparks. I rub the lighter with my  
thumb and feel the resolute engraving:  
"1<sup>st</sup> Cor. 15:17-19"<sup>1</sup>  
I wonder if there is anyone else who has held  
this lighter dear, and whether they died  
with an unlit cigarette between their lips,  
as I am about to do.  
Behind me, the firing squad continues to ready their guns.

I read somewhere that the devil can use men  
like bullets, and perhaps this is the day  
that I have been preparing for.  
To catch each one.

The wind dies. In unison and silence  
the squad lifts their rifles  
as I turn and I give the lighter  
one last go. I wonder,  
in the split second  
that their bullets  
tear shrieking  
across the plain  
whether my glowing cigarette  
will outlast  
the retina burning  
of their muzzle flash.

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:17-19: "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

## Ribbons

“A happy life is just a string of happy moments. But most people don't allow the happy moment because they are so busy trying to have a happy life.” –Claire

Up on the stage is a ribbon dancer, and she is dancing swiftly, cresting the waves that burst from bongo drums. Red strips flare and twist into fantastic shapes, composed of nothing more than fabric and dye and the terminal velocity of her arms sifting through air.

The speed at which ribbons float is not so quick. She is their imagination, the muse with kinetic energy for their potential, speaking with her synaptics and the burn of lactic acid through pin-wheeling arms until they are chasing each others dragon-tails and resonating with the force of the adrenaline rushing through her circulation.

And there, in the center, is her face. Flickering in and out from sight behind those red trails, glistening with sweat and for the joy of it, her eyes following as everything spins, every path, each moment, for the joy of it, for she is held in the embrace of ribbons.

## The Tone I Would Leave With

This is all that I have for you here, my dear friend.  
These are all of the tales that the universe told.  
Press on, press on, for you come to the end

of the words I have written, of the words I might lend  
in times when they will at least leave you consoled.  
This is all that I have for you here, my dear friend.

But there are yet battles which words will not mend  
for the poor, for the weak, for the meek, for the old.  
Press on, press on, for you come to the end

of their strength. They will be crushed unless you bend  
your knee and your back to lift the crushing Stronghold.  
“This is all that I have for you here, my dear friend,”

It speaks, and gives them pittances, and it will soon send  
them to ruinous homes. Is it any wonder they fold?  
Press on, press on, for you come to the end,

and lift! for the sake of the beloved, and defend  
them, and earn something more sacred than gold.  
This is all that I have for you here, my dear friend:  
Press on, press on, for you come to

The End!